

What she started on last year's unsatisfying "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," Joni Mitchell has realized on "Hejira" (Asylum 1087), her most deeply personal and painfully introspective album. It's unquestionably powerful, but so powerful that the album is perhaps too difficult for the masses.

On "Hejira," which is Arabic for a journey—in this case into self-knowledge, Mitchell bares her psyche and soul. Uninitiated Mitchell listeners might find the songs indulgently confessional. Worshipful fans, however, likely will find the dissection of this complex person fascinating and full of revelations.

Since her "Both Sides Now" folkie days, Mitchell has matured and become sophisticated. Yet she still is tormented by identity crises. She remains torn between the security of settling down and the desire to be free, and now she also struggles between accepting the richness of sophistication and the loss of youthful innocence.

The musical style complements the striking candor of the lyrics. The songs are not very melodious, certainly less accessible than Mitchell's early folk music or her contagious, jazz-tinged work on "Court and Spark," her landmark 1975 album. The structures here are basic and the instrumentation is spare. The songs seem droningly repetitive yet strangely hypnotic. It's a bizarre beauty.

If "Court and Spark" is Mitchell's most ambitious effort, then "Hejira" is certainly her boldest.