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Ambitious Is Not the Word for Joni Mitchell's *Don Juan*

Don Juan's Reckless Daughter
Joni Mitchell
Asylum BB-701

By Ken Ney

HER BEST MUSIC is built of large, drifting spaces that seem quieter and larger as her lyrics settle in. She is the smoker's head leaning back and the last drag of the cigarette sailing forth. Whatever her action, there remains a long stillness beneath it all, where she casually walks from one album to the next; eventually rising to rehearse the role of the much-traveled and forever lover. In her strolls between folk and jazz she seemingly crosses rock; never staying to actually play in it, but always she changes it. *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter?*

Joni Mitchell has never received the credit for her music as she has for her

a major jazz group.

But Joni Mitchell didn't record with Weather Report—true, Jaco's all over it, and there's Saxophonist Wayne Shorter with a solo or two. Not to mention Acuna and Badrena, the group's rhythm section, heating up side three. But Joe Zawinul, the group's leader and force, is nowhere in sight. And Weather Report without Zawinul is like the Who without you-know-Who, or Led Zeppelin without the head Zeppelin. No, no collaboration here. Joni's left to her own compositions and devices, and as awesome as they are, they're the same she produced on *Hejira*. To the point where every cut but the feature-length "Paprika Plains" and the heady "The Tenth World/Dreamland" could have come off that album, and made it the double set instead. The lack of chances taken is the lack of interest received.



Asylum Records

verse. While many flash the floodlights on Steely Dan for pulling the jazz into rock, Mitchell was there four years ago recording *Court and Spark* with a jazz quintet named the L.A. Express. When she decided to un-pop her sound even more, she plucked bassist Jaco Pastorius from Weather Report, and teamed him with guitarist Larry Carlton and percussionist Bobbye Hall to form the best American band of 1976 (though it was only a studio arrangement). Read a review of her work, however, and what one invariably gets is an analysis of the neatly printed lyrics, and nary a mention of what accompanies it. Like Paul Simon and Tom Waits, she is cheated praise of what may be her better part.

That part has, for the moment, stabilized, fracturing very little to advance the progression that has become her trait. For this reason alone, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is a disappointment. *Miles of Aisles* aside, Mitchell's last three albums—*Court and Spark*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, and *Hejira*—all matched a drive for sophistication and discovery that pushed each record that much further along into Mitchell's move toward Jazz. One had hoped, in light of reports that "Joni Mitchell is recording with Weather Report," that something unprecedented was within reach—that of a major "rock" artist in collaboration with

Safety, then, is in numbers, and size. The largeness of "Paprika Plains" is just short of DeMille, as Mitchell labors on the piano and the stirring of meaningful strings inflate the premises. That this homage to the concerto slowly turns itself around to a more comfortable jazz needn't be a statement on Mitchell's part. It's this grand scale she chooses to compose in, magnifying short, impressionistic notes into cries of high drama. Her search for the epic has led her to this, to the same mistake others have made in equating importance with size. Ambitious isn't the word here—pretentious is. Were it not for the fact that everything she touches turns a glossy shade of beauty, "Paprika Plains" would only matter for the album's cover art.

running exercise in one or so Caribbean rhythms accentuated by the Weather Report firehouse of Acuna and Badrena. The album seems abruptly intercepted by the pair, a cutaway to the islands that lasts for a good (?) seven minutes, and leaves one wandering around the room looking for the Joni Mitchell record that was just on the turntable. She pops back up in "Dreamland," and it becomes apparent that the previous track was more or less a prelude to this. It's enjoyable, in

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came extremely popular and influential in Memphis, where he performed live with singers like Elvis, Wanda Jackson, and Johnny Cash.

Fellow rockabilly, Malcolm Yelvington, once said, "Charlie's style could have caught on in a big way, but he didn't have Elvis' stage appeal." Few did, and most rockabillys, including Feathers, drifted into obscurity in the 60's. However, in 1968, Feathers came back to life with an excellent new single, "Stutterin' Cindy/Tear It Up," and began performing live in Memphis again. Since then Feathers has recorded two albums for Barrelhouse Records that show he hasn't lost a single nervous yelp. Feathers' live show is built on an array of country, R&B, rockabilly, and rock'n'roll material, original and covers, that is almost a history of everything good about the 50's.

When Feathers comes to the Delly, don't expect a relic. As Peter Guralnick told it in the *Rolling Stone History*; "Recently I went to see Charlie Feathers at a little club on Lamar Avenue in Memphis . . . Charlie Feathers' hair is silver now, and his band consists of his daughter, son, son-in-law, and a friend of the son-in-law on drums. The music that he is playing, though, is no different than what he has always played—powerful, vigorous, *crazy* music that animates the audience . . . The remembered gestures are letter-perfect, the mood is good-natured and self-deprecating, as he tosses the microphone from hand to hand and flings himself about with wild, hip-swiveling abandon." ●

(Feathers will appear at the *Psyche Delly* on Jan. 27 and 28; shows at 8:30 and 11:00.)

Joni Mitchell

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a silly way, and if Joni's tale of a winter hiatus to the warm and balmy beaches of the Caribbean is a bit dizzy, look closer. Something's behind the melodious rhythm, and taken as a whole, "The Tenth World/Dreamland" makes for a minor appeal for such a diverse inclusion.

In the bands of sides one and four, in the very excellence of the album, Joni surges forth with Jaco by her side; and once again employs the sharp stretches of guitar and bass that made *Hejira* her most audibly beautiful work. Pastorius is on the end of heavier riffs this time, and a track like "Cotton Avenue" simply drops and curls at the feet of this young master. He is the Orson Welles, the Boy Wonder of bass, let loose by Mitchell to run among the electric trains of his four strings and play away across the passing songs she has built for him. He is her heavy rock, and when he is absent, as on "Otis and Marlina" and "The Silky Veils of Ardor," it's Joni herself who curves and bends the pieces in a way she hasn't done before. Only she does it with her voice, singing a deep physicalness that catches her in a low, quiet setting.

Oh, this woman can wail when she wants to. She rides out of "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" shaking her fist, high atop Jaco's bulging beat, a straight stream of music never slacking. She's a monster, a furious sashayer, spilling a vision of this country just as she would have a lovers' quarrel in the past.

Her epic lies here, at least the start of it, and not on those paprika plains. Her resolution to more-or-less stay within the same musical boundaries is discouraging, but knowing that she moves with a greater zest and aggressiveness is a sign that she moves, period. Sooner or later, she'll take that walk deeper into jazz, and carry on in her most progressive way. ●

Filling in the Blanks of Women's Jazz History

By Mark Schaffer

IN THE END, it will be the indies who will count. Now that the majors have discovered jazz, small labels like Bernard Brightman's Stash Records, out of Brooklyn, are setting the pace for the serious enthusiast with provocative collections of early jazz and blues. Brightman's first releases concentrated on the rich dope song tradition in jazz and, while entertaining as joyful celebrations of the "gettin' high" life, these sides contain some of the finest jazz and jazz vocals by the best of the 30's and 40's organizations, from the early Ellington and Calloway bands to the impeccable small swing machines of the late 30's and 40's, featuring Buster Bailey, Bechet, Chu Berry and tons more. The first rate music adds an extra dimension to these reffer tunes, one usually absent from similar collections. Brightman knows his game.

Now Stash has extended its scope with the release of *Jazz Women—A Feminist Retrospective*, (ST-109), a two record anthology, perhaps the first, of women playing jazz, from the 20's to the 60's, and virtually every idiom is here—traditional to soul. If this album does anything, it will further the argument that jazz not only defies racial definitions, but sexual ones as well. Yet, while the lp is subtitled "feminist retrospective," don't assert ideological or social overtones. What we have here is another attempt by women to rewrite aspects of popular music, ones in which their contribution rarely reached the recording stage. The musicians gathered here, some well-known, some long forgotten, played jazz in a man's game and Brightman deserves credit for helping fill in some of the blanks in jazz history.

The piano has been kindest to the jazz-women, so it's no wonder that the majority of artists here are pianists, the most visible being the phenomenal Mary Lou Williams, still going strong in the 70's. Mary Lou, whose name is always trotted out whenever the whole women-in-jazz can of worms is opened, wrote the very personal liner notes on the album, and is featured on four sides, the most interesting being "Nitelife," her first record with Andy Kirk, and "Scratchin' the Gravel." On "Nitelife" she plays a beautifully constructed solo, unravelling one fertile idea after another, and on "Scratchin' the Gravel," her admiration for Teddy Wilson and Tatum's piano is nicely integrated in an economical solo.

Before Williams' impact in the 30's, there were several piano leaders of note; Lovie Austin, an early vaudeville and blues singer, is heard leading her own Blues Serenaders on "Frog Tongue Stomp"; from the 20's, and plays nice blues piano fills behind Ida Cox on "Blue Monday Blues." Four sides feature Louis' wife, Lil' Hardin Armstrong, a strong leader and pianist, not to mention singer. Listen to her take-charge piano and effortless swing on "It's Murder," a strange vaudeville number. Dig her perfect Armstrong scat ending. "Suzie Q" features her bouncy Ethel Waters-like delivery and superb tenor by Chu Berry, a key 30's sax man.

Another well-known leader, Marian McPartland, a charter member of the Bix contingent, plays the cornetist's adventurous "In a Mist," a tune she has practically made her own. Dorothy Donegan, a popular night-club performer really boogies out like Pete Johnson on "Dorothy's Boogie Woogie." Two lesser known pianists are represented; Jewel Paige plays a fine Basie on "Beaumont Street

Blues" and Dardenelle Breckinridge exchanges tasty post-bop phrases with an unknown guitarist on "After You Get It." Sings nice as well. No lack of talent at the keyboard.

Things change with the wind instruments, though. Mary Lou Williams has said that one reason so few women succeed at jazz is the reluctance of women to have their faces distorted by the effort of blowing brass and reeds. Be that as it may, Brightman has managed to unearth

paid her dues. Another fine all woman organization, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, perform a well arranged "Tuxedo Junction," Nice Ellington muted trumpets and more aggressive tenor by Viola Burnside. All in all, a few well chosen statements about female big band jazz.

A highly vocal defender of jazzwomen, Mary Osborne plays on three tracks, and shows the guitar musicianship that has



Photo: [unreadable]

some excellent trumpet and sax sides by women, one of the high points of the set. Dotty Jones plays a great Oliver cornet on "That Creole Band," and Valaida Snow (where is she now?) blows a beautifully controlled trumpet on "St. Louis Blues" with Fletcher Henderson, embellishing the tango section with interesting middle-Eastern figures. She sings ala Jimmy Rushing on the number as well. A fine performer.

It goes on and on. Viola Burnside shows that even the big tenor sax can be mastered as she tears through chorus after chorus of "Sweet Georgia Brown," playing both statement and response. In a more reflective vein, Kathy Stobert's reverie on Don Redman's "Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good to You" recalls the big tenor sound of Don Byas from the 40's. The trombone is also heard from. Billie Rogers offers a playful off-the-wall muted trombone with Woodie Herman, and Melba Liston shows why she plays for Dizzy on her mellow arrangement of "My Reverie." Let's have more of this.

One of the best things Stash has done here is bring back the all-woman orchestra, long the subject of thousands of comics' bits ("From high atop the Hotel Feswick in downtown Spokane, we bring you the music of Ina Rae Hutton and her Melodears for your dancing and listening pleasure"). Yes, Ina Rae and her Melodears live and they don't sound too bad. "Wild Party," a pulsing rhythm number from the early 30's, has a Henderson-like drive and features a nicely contrasted muted trumpet over the ensemble riffing. "Witch Doctor" is right out of that strange jungle era of early big band jazz, with weird chords, cartoony effects and odd structure. Play this one at your next party. Ina Rae, who went on to lead a big male band, really

earned her colleagues respect. Osborn was an early Charlie Christian disciple and her long fluid lines and momentum show his influence, although she is the more aggressive swinger. Listen to the rocking rideout chorus on "Rose Room." She is also heard as part of a female quintet on "Conversation," with Mary Lou Williams, Rose Gottesman, drums, June Rotenberg, bass, and Margie Hyams, a George Shearing alumna, on vibes. Hyams has a sparkling solo and Mary Lou plays subtle harmonies. On "Mambules," five women get together with five top post-bop jazzmen, among them Tal Farlow, Clark Terry, and Horace Silver. Terry Pillard, a respected vibist heard all too seldom, has a nice funky Silverish effort. The vibes also have been generous to the ladies. The kicker is a swinging "Anything You Can Do," in which the same group play battle of the sexes with their axes. After the ensemble intro, Mary Osborne and the legendary Tal Farlow trade eighth and fourths, Norma Carson on trumpet shows lots of talent in her duet with Clark Terry, who plays his usual musical jokes as commentary behind her. Carson's ideas are good and she executes them beautifully. Lastly, Beryl Booker shows Horace Silver that she's attended his sermons with her piano. A delight, and Leonard Feather should do a blindfold test with this.

Jazz nuts who follow things like this will disagree with some of Brightman's selections and offer other examples. Maybe he has started something here. Let's hope so. As for feminist points gained here, why not leave the question of "women's jazz" to the academics and just listen to the music. As Mary Lou Williams says on the album, "Thanks, Bernie." ●