

Hits*Joni Mitchell (Reprise)***Misses***Joni Mitchell (Reprise)*

While she's had a circuitous and celebrated career spanning an incredible 28 years, Joni Mitchell has never really been a hit maker. The Canadian singer/songwriter was always a critical darling, but a sales disappointment, a pop star praised, but not purchased.

Mitchell was a chameleon. She heeded her muse, and it took her from folk to pop to jazz to avant-garde jazz to a dozen variations of everything. She

could be staunch or quaint, sexy or serious. She sang road songs on one album, drinking songs on the next. But as soon as she developed a following for one musical style, she abandoned it for another, leaving her audience confused.

It's easy to understand why she resisted issuing a greatest hits album for so long. Aside from 1974's "Help Me" from "Court and Spark," there's no obvious choices for inclusion, and a collection of "hits" would — and does — serve to point out how the public never responded to her music the way it did to lesser talents.

For that reason, "Hits" is a conceptual disappointment from the get-go. Ironically, it contains some of the best pop songs ever written, the tart, smart "Big Yellow Taxi," the wise and still fresh "The Circle Game," the playful "You Turn Me On I'm A Radio." Mitchell was a free-form feminist, publicly and lyrically liberated, writing and producing her own work long before other women did it, and few of her songs or sentiments feel dated.

But this album doesn't hold together as a collection. It's not Mitchell's best work, and there's no discernible thread. Awkwardly, the music jumps from style to style; no one could be in the mood for both the groovy "Woodstock" and the frilly "Chelsea Morning" in one sitting.

Why Mitchell released "Hits" now is a mystery that perhaps "Misses" helps solve. One can only imagine her bartering with her record company, agreeing to "Hits," but demanding, at the same time, the release of her own personal "best of."

Now 53, health-challenged and slowing down, Mitchell assembled these songs presumably so that they'd get a second listen. Like all artists of a certain age, she is nearing a point where she must give over the definition of her art to music historians and she wants to make sure history doesn't record her as just a high-pitched hippie, author of the fluffy "Both Sides Now."

She's loaded "Misses" up with her more important songs; the real politics, the true poetry. Songs like "Dog Eat Dog" and "Sex Kills" are potent warnings of the age's evils — misguided evangelists, greed and the author's biggest pet peeve, advertising.

This is powerful stuff, and it does deserve more attention. No Mitchell work is better than the existential "Hejira" or the anti-war "The Beat of Black Wings."

While the collection covers plenty, key things do seem overlooked. Where are the world-flavored tunes (Nothing from "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter")? Mitchell's better insights into male-female power brokering ("Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" would have been a better choice than "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsay," though that would have left nothing from the great "Mingus" album).

But with a 14-song limit, cuts obviously had to be made. Mitchell succeeds in highlighting her deeper, darker sides, especially those that surfaced in her later albums. Critics and followers who wrote her off as an anachronism should treat themselves to a listen.

— Ray Mark Rinaldi

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