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Records

The many phases of Ms. Joni Mitchell



Joni Mitchell

JONI MITCHELL: "Chalkmark in a Rainstorm," Geffen Records — There have been so many periods in Joni Mitchell's career, only one or two of which many listeners may have made it through, that it's difficult to write about her and know that you're making sense to anyone.

So, let's define terms, if only for later reference.

First came Joni the Warbler, who performed simply-structured folk tunes on open-tuned guitar, her work primarily defined by superb couplet lyrics and extreme arpeggiation on every melody; water-color paintings from her own hand appeared on each LP during this era.

Next came Joni of a Thousand Voices, several LP's with stranger folk tunes which vigorously stretched time and place, and in which whole chori of her voice would suddenly appear and disappear.

Then, Joni the Lovelorn; dark photos accompanied these LP's (like "Blue") and structures began to veer and curve; lyrics grew more freeform.

Followed by Joni the Modern Fusion Artist, a lighter period encompassing LP's "Court and Spark" and "Hejira," in which Jaco Pastorius' oozing bass and a lot of cheerful hihat cymbals danced through everything.

Succeeded by Joni the Deadly Serious Jazz Artist, maybe including "Hissing of Summer Lawns" and definitely including "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," in which everything varied all the time and finding melodies became a search only attempted by the very patient and very trained.

Which led to a fallow period, broken by 1985's "Dog Eat Dog," co-produced by Thomas Dolby and showcasing a wooden techno-Joni with a lot of special effects and very little of anything else.

That era has been effectively ended by this 1988 release, "Chalkmark in a Rainstorm," which is so different from any of the last half-dozen LPs that it undoubtedly, to Mitchell-ologists, will begin a new period.

Whether you will like this current work or not depends to great degree on which former Joni you like. For the impatient, here's the rundown: Fans of the Warbler, the Deadly Serious Jazz Artist, and the Techno-Joni will not want this LP. It has no unbridled emotionality, constructs no deliberately inaccessible structures, and is remarkably free of technical gimmicks.

Those who followed Joni of a Thousand Voices will have to, and may be glad to, settle for Joni With a Thousand Voices, some of which are Billy Idol, Tom Petty, Willie Nelson, and Wendy & Lisa, Prince's former accompanists.

It's the folks who were most happy during Mitchell's formerly most commercially successful period, we suspect, who followed and wept during the Lovelorn and Fusion periods, who will be most happy with this new LP, for a simple reason: "Chalkmark" is

most like those periods' works.

It features the same kinds of playful melodies. "Dancin' Clown" virtually leaps, jig-like, from the grooves, feeling more like a European festival theme than a modern tune, its modernity kept at the fore by the croaking parts sung by Billy Idol. "Special Place," a gentle, jazzy soul tune sung by Mitchell and Peter Gabriel, segues and slaloms like Curtis Mayfield tunes used to, and with as much charm.

"Chalkmark" also features the other best characteristic from those times — the trance-tracks (think of "Song for Sharon" or "Amelia") in which surging grooves are set up at the beginnings of songs, and never let up, while Mitchell mourns in the foreground. The most remarkable song on the LP, and perhaps one of the most remarkable cuts Mitchell has ever recorded, is "The Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms)," in which Wendy & Lisa set up a constant, highly melodic chant, and the song simply reels out in its wartime, anti-war story.

There are, it should be said, several of those flat, endless, motionless cuts which every Mitchell LP features, but which some people hear as tunes and others don't, so we won't be specific.

The most significant thing about "Chalkmark in the Rain" to this reviewer is that both in its tunes (which also include a remake of "Cool Water" and several others) and in its texture, it's the most melodic, accessible and comprehensible Joni Mitchell LP in quite some time, while giving up none of the quality and subtlety that her best work contains.

Recommended for: everyone who wants something musically intelligent, adventurous and haunting.

— PAUL WAGNER

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