

Still searching in Jazzland

By DENNIS HARVEY

Five years ago, *The Hissing of the Summer Lawns* heralded a new direction for Joni Mitchell, and to most critics and fans it looked like a misstep. Ambitious, lurchingly experimental, unfocused, definitely trying to get at something but vaguely unpleasant in the attempt, *Hissing* was an intellectual outsider's probing reach for jazz—a query and an appreciation, awfully serious, mysteriously but very noticeably lacking the intuitive grasp of the genre that could have removed its strain. Joni didn't give up after that first stumbling probe, abandoning the delicate reflection of her earlier folk-based music for more curiously distanced, intelligent explorations into jazz as musical form, myth and mystery. Through four albums, chilly critical and dwindling public response, she's stayed interesting—even noble—on her constant "safaris to the heart of all that jazz." But she remains outside looking in—a very smart white lady trying too studiously, too abstractly, for something that continues to elude her.

SHADOWS AND LIGHT, her two-album live set, condenses Chapter One of jazzy Joni just as Miles of Aisles in 1974 provided the last (albeit uneven) word on Joni as an acoustic observer before the complex pop bridge of *Court and Spark*. As a result, it has a thematic charge, a sense of wholeness, that none of her post-'74 albums (possibly excepting *Hejira*) have had. The clutter of studio effects, all desperately trying to evoke some lost chord of primitivism, is gone, and the relative relaxation of the stage show relieves the material somewhat. The songs still smack of arty pretentiousness at times, but the live setting and the general tautness of her current band help to deflate the rhetoric.

NOT COMPLETELY, though. The ominous rumble of Joni's jazz sound keeps things all too earthbound, alas, still shackled to the struggle to be something when you just want it all to take off. *Shadow and Light* works better than any of Mitchell's other jazz experiments—in other words, the taste of vague failure goes down more easily than ever before.

As a lyricist, Joni has become steadily more impressionistic and playful, if less compelling. In fact, it's all too easy to ignore what she's saying most of the time now, though the subtlety and visual charge of her imagery is still intriguing on further scrutiny. She'll probably never be as emotionally

direct as she was during the golden period of Blue and *For the Roses* articulateness is now directed toward being something of a jazz historian, with some traces of the old reflectiveness. She recycles and tries to reinterpret the mythos of urban glamour in 1940's visions of the city's exotic underside ("Edith and the Kingpin") and the musicians she worships ("Goodbye Porkpie Hat," "Furry Sings the Blues" and "God Must Be a Boogie Man," all off the failed Mingus collaboration). These are, usually, her least appealing (and now most common) compositions, interesting on one level as rambling musical explorations but uninteresting as songs.

FEW OF MITCHELL'S jazz songs really stand out from the others lyrically or musically, and that's a major problem—"Coyote" is the only one that's won any kind of wide recognition, and typically, that's the only song here to get more than a fairly subdued audience response. "Hejira," with its slowly mounting musical tension (which doesn't really go anywhere) and

encore, and still in search of a definitive version), but her delivery—low, cool, methodical—calculatedly drains whatever life there is left in it.

There are, still, moments of real success here. "In France They Kiss on Main Street" loses a few flourishes that it had on *Hissing of the Summer Lawns*, but it remains a rhapsodic surrender to romantic conversation, a rush of ecstatic images, and Mitchell's phrasing grabs its every possibility. "Shadows and Light," a murky farewell mass on the same album, has developed enough grandeur to be acceptable as a sort of before-and-after anthem—by now, its lyrics seem like a dignified answer of self-defense toward the "critics of all expression" Mitchell has dealt with since *Hissing's* bewildered reception.

The *Persuasions'* guest spot is a bit too conspicuous on that reprise, but perfect on "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" turned into a doo-wop riot—it's more fun than anything else on the set, and fun is what Mitchell has desperately needed in most of her jazz experimenting.

Joni Mitchell hasn't gone stale or just faded away—how many other circa-1971 folkies could claim that?—and her efforts to grow and change, to get it right (even if she never goes) remains admirable. I'll always like her for what she has done and what she, conceivably, could do in the future, though hard as I try, I can't really like the music she's creating now. *Shadows and Light*, more than any of her other jazz works, can be appreciated, but it's still only halfway to being really enjoyable.



Weather Report's same new thing

By JERRY BRABENEC

Some records are calculated to take the world by storm, some to capitalize on earlier successes, and some are subdued efforts, intended simply to continue a style and please established fans. Some new releases in the latter category would include Steely Dan's *Gaucho*, Neil Young's new one, and our subject, Weather Report's *Night Passage*.

Weather Report functions these days in a well defined style that combines superfast electronic pop, big band pop, and moody, exotic ballads. This approach has won the group a larger following than they've ever enjoyed, and the new album continues in the same vein. The title tune is a relaxed midtempo number, while "Fast City" and "Port of Call" are ultrahigh velocity. "Rockin' in Rhythm" is an Ellington tune, with Shorter's tenor and Zawinul's keyboards simulating a big band's sax section. Milhaud, Gershwin, and Ellington all influenced the slow tunes, which, though a little dull and

(quoting Whitman by way of Bradbury) was ambitious and heavy, but still very successful—one side of trippy studio pieces, and the other, excerpts from a brilliant live recording released in Japan as a two-record set. Conflicts between Zawinul and bassist Miroslav Vituouos became evident on the next album, *Sweetnighter*. Zawinul brought in a studio electric bassist to double Miroslav's acoustic lines and recorded the band's first "hit," "The Boogie Woogie Waltz." The move toward a more popular, funky sound continued on the next two albums. Mysterious *Traveller* is a wonderful space album, named after the astronomical flop of modern times, the comet Kahoutek. *Tale Spinnin'* had a Caribbean flavor and lengthy, thoroughly-composed arrangements by Zawinul that seemed quite antithetical to the band's earlier emphasis on group improvisation. Then, with *Black Market*, came the big break—the arrival of Jaco Pastorius, the bassist of Zawinul's dreams, equally adept at feedback Hendrix-style lead solos and pop lines like Donna Lee. Jaco's presence cemented Zawinul's control of the band, and Shorter receded into the background, playing note by note lines that Zawinul had composed earlier on his keyboards.

Columbia had done everything they could for the band from the start, and Shorter and Zawinul had credentials that commanded respect, but now the band took off. "Birdland," off *Heavy Weather*, is one of the great jazz hits of recent years, a big band tune harkening back to Zawinul's early days with Maynard Ferguson's big band at the famous New York night club that bore Charlie Parker's name. Maynard even recorded his own version, every bit as exciting as the original.

That brings us to the present, but the band's popular gains represent the losses of the cognoscenti, for the band has lost its sense of adventure. Weather Report is becoming the Steely Dan of jazz—competent and popular but rather dry. For really prime Weather, check out the early releases, and particularly the Japanese live set.

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pretentious, still create a pleasant ambience through their pacing and sonorities. All in all, this is very intelligent, state-of-the-art stuff.

MILES DAVIS' and John McLaughlin's fusion developed virtuosic instrumentals, sophisticated composition and eclectic influences that later bands have been challenged to equal. Shorter and Zawinul left Miles to form Weather Report, and their first four albums were strong contenders. The first album, *Weather Report*, dating from around 1972, achieved a quite ethereal effect, at once rhythmically exciting and free, acoustic and electronic, tightly arranged and improvisational. This is a chamber jazz that owes more than a little to the Modern Jazz Quartet. The second album, *I Sing The Body Electric*

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