

The Column



The Hissing of Summer Laws: Joni Mitchell

Asylum 7E-1051, stereo, \$6.98.

Prisoner in Disguise: Linda Ronstadt

Asylum 7E-1045, stereo, \$6.98.

If we are to believe what we read in the newspapers, then the next musical trend will most surely be the rise of the female popstar. I don't. I like women as much as the next guy (maybe more than most), but I find it difficult to conceive of women coming into their own in rock 'n' roll, given that it is a musical form whose energies are derived primarily from sexual sources.

Unfortunately, most pop/rock women are still hung up in trying to prove something about their own

abilities to be able to immerse themselves in the anti-selfconscious ethic which rock is grounded in. There are few exceptions—The Ronnettes were uninhibited musical innovators, as were the Crystals and a new band out of Los Angeles called The Runaways (five 16- and 17-year-old girls whose main roots are in British rock)—but most rock women are too condescending toward non-intellectual music to come up with something gutsy.

Asylum Records has their share of female popstars. Both Linda Ronstadt and Joni Mitchell sell a lot of records and are fairly well respected. But both fall very short of the mark which separates the rock singer from the rock

artist, although Joni seems to be getting closer. Her latest, *The Hissing of Summer Laws*, indicates a mild amount of artistic growth, but there is more development lyrically than musically. There's a moment or two when Joni actually explores new territory—"The Jungle Line" is probably the best example of this, a neat song and interestingly orchestrated—but most of the time she's covering the same turf, musically speaking. She develops as a lyricist, but such is not the mark of a great musical artist. And her singing is the same as ever—you like it or you don't. I do, but not for extended periods of time.

Linda has always gotten by on (a) her country leanings and (b) her

looks, not necessarily in that order, but she only achieved hits under her own name when she stooped to incorporate r&b music into her repertoire. I say "stooped" because this is the easy way to sell out; she finally gave up trying to make it on the basis of her favorite music and started playing the dance music that seems to go over well in 1976, and with her voice it seemed a natural hit (it was). So she sells a few records. So what.

So what indeed. Her new album is even more vacuous than the last—she sings without the looseness of her last recordings, and sounds like she's reading the words off a lyric sheet. She might as well be—Linda doesn't write any of her own material, so she's forced to rely upon her Asylum/Warners clique to come up with suitable songs (Neil Young, James Taylor, Lowell George, J.D. Souther) which are mostly their rejects. Or she covers Motown faves (all inferior to the originals, not to mention lifeless), a reggae standard (*Many Rivers to Cross*—not very good, especially when the Nilsson/Lennon version is the definitive one), and a few country songs on which Ms. Ronstadt finally sounds at home. Even the guitar of Andrew Gold can't save this album from sounding like it was recorded at a morgue.

So until women rockers start sounding like they've got some energy, some viscera, and some identity other than what's expected, I'm going to pass. I'm waiting for the Runaways (who sound like The Sweet and look like teenage rock femme fatales should look) myself—just as I passed on Bobby Vinton and waited for The Who to come along. *Jon Tiven*

Sound: B- Performance: C

The Hissing of Summer Lawns: Joni Mitchell
Asylum 7E-1051, stereo, \$6.98.

It's tempting and intimidating to try to dissect **The Hissing of Summer Lawns**. In her notes Joni Mitchell calls it "a total work conceived graphically, musically, lyrically, and accidentally—as a whole." The gauntlet is thrown at reviewers everywhere.

Her previous studio album, **Court and Spark**, had been a milestone, a commercial as well as an artistic breakthrough. With that album's sophistication of melody and jazzy fingerpoppin' playing, she had left the simplicity of her "folkie" days far be-

hind. It was the lyric themes that made **Court and Spark** a dead end. The blatantly autobiographical musings, soarings, and pityings were basically the same ones she had explored from the beginning, finally made as pretty and seductive as they were ever likely to be.

The **Hissing** album deftly sidesteps the predicament, bursting into completely unexpected areas. *In France They Kiss on Main Street* is a deceptive opening gambit. Musically very much like **Court and Spark's** *Free Man in Paris*, it is a flashing neon slice of disco and pinball society, and a slinky, soothing number. By comparison *The Jungle Line* which follows is a slap in the face with cold water. It opens sharply with the **Warrior Drums of Burundi** (taken from the Nonesuch Explorer album H-72057) which is the tune's rhythm track. The drums blend with acoustic guitar rhythm and surprising Moog accents as the song overlays imagery from Henri Rousseau jungle scenes on top of the Manhattan skyline. It is at once challenging and exhilarating. After *Jungle Line* it is almost dangerous to listen lightly.

Edith and the Kingpin and *Don't Interrupt the Sorrow* glide by, seeming almost effortless. Actually they just sound so good that it is easy to push the lyrics' meanings to the back of the mind. Yet the words hold up when they finally receive full attention. The encounter of Edith, the available dancer, and the powerful gangster-type Kingpin are carefully chosen cinematic stills, conveying the whole story. *Don't Interrupt the Sorrow* and *Shades of Scarlet Conquering* end side 1 with two portraits of mounting desperation, one of a decaying marriage, one of a strong and willful single woman, "cast iron and frail."

Suburban misery set against inner city life again dominates the second side. The title piece and the *Harry's House/Centerpiece* medley form a scathing indictment of the golden illusion of affluence and commuter marital bliss. The wife in *Hissing* opts to maintain the creature comforts despite barren spirit. *Harry's House* depicts the sharp "rising executive" picking up a classy gift for the wife amidst the lights of Manhattan, drifting off to memories of his younger wife some summer ago, and muses the old Jon Hendricks jazz song *Centerpiece*, a corny old thing about how "our happiness will never cease." *Centerpiece* dissolves with a collage of wifely sniping, climaxed with "Nothing's any good—When you gonna be home, Harry?—Nothing's

any good" into a return of the *Harry's House* theme implying the final breakdown of the whole relationship.

Between *Hissing* and *Harry* is *The Boho Dance*. It's about the old, scuffling coffeehouse days "when I was working cheap." She encounters an old compatriot who never really graduated to her own glamour scene and who chides her for the sham of it. The song's final words are perhaps Joni's most personal on the album:

"Nothing is capsulized in me
On either side of town

The streets were never really mine
Not mine, these glamour gowns."

The finale *Shadows and Light* is another departure from the predictable. It is an overdub tour-de-force of layered voices and Arp-Farfisa.

As the album's last word, it resolves none of its themes, instead summing the many dualities into a more abstract thought, "threatened by all things/man of cruelty . . . drawn to all things/man of delight."

For Joni Mitchell **The Hissing of Summer Lawns** is a triumph on all levels. The music works on the superficial level of muzak, in that it sounds great paying no attention to the words at all, yet when scrutiny is applied, it takes on depth and subtlety. Her writing seems turned outward as if she's not writing primarily of herself for herself, but about other things. Her growth in the face of challenge is astounding. With **Hissing** Joni Mitchell shows most importantly the confidence to take serious artistic risks, and her artistry in pulling it all off.

Michael Tearson

Sound: A Performance: A+

Ommadawn: Mike Oldfield
Virgin PZ 33913, stereo, \$6.98.



The man who brought *Tubular Bells* to us is back again, and although it is unlikely that he will be the musical phenomenon that the sales on his first