

the lighter side

reviewed by

MORGAN AMES

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* symbol denotes
an exceptional recording



✓ **JONI MITCHELL: Ladies of the Canyon.** Joni Mitchell, vocals, guitar, keyboards, and arr. (Willy; Blue Boy; Conversation; nine more.) Reprise 6376, \$4.98. Tape: 8 4RA 6376, \$5.98.

It is a peculiar fact of today's music that those who perform best also tend to write the best songs. Witness the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Crosby/Stills/Nash/Young, Laura Nyro. Today's product is intensely personal, wedded to itself. Of the many remarkable self-contained talents, Miss Joni Mitchell soars highest. While all of her gifts are superb, I suspect that no one part would work without the others.

There is no producer listed on the album because Miss Mitchell has produced it herself. I once wandered into one of her recording sessions by mistake. No one was there but Miss Mitchell and her sympathetic engineer-adviser, Henry Lewy. She even painted the album cover, which includes a simple, accurate, line-drawn self-portrait.

The music is also all Joni Mitchell—melodies, lyrics, voice, guitar, keyboard, arrangements. A few tracks include a touch of the outside world—a clarinet here (and I wish he'd listen to the lyrics instead of jazzing up his moment), a cello there, and one tune that uses a few friends as a background chorus.

This is Miss Mitchell's third album, and the first on which she plays piano. By some mysterious process, she makes it sound like a guitar. Her playing is equally dramatic, strange, and uniquely harmonic on both instruments.

In the interest of balance, a few inconsequential imperfections may be noted. Miss Mitchell's otherwise crystal voice wobbles a bit on high notes, and a couple of songs—*Morning Morgantown* and *Circle Game*—must have been written some time ago, before full flower. But then, early Mitchell suffers only when compared to prime Mitchell.

This young lady has never been more in her prime than when she wrote the incredible *Woodstock*, in which she plays a Fender-Rhodes electric piano. The song captures all the dreamlike beauty one likes to think must have existed in that quite real weekend in the country last summer. Another song, unmistakably autobiographical, tells of Miss Mitchell as she comes upon a street-corner musician playing his clarinet, ignored by passers-by. "Now me I play for fortune and those velvet curtain calls. . . . And I play if you have the money or if you're a friend to me. But the one-man band by the quick lunch stand, he was playing real good, for free." Other gems: *The Arrangement*, *Big Yellow Taxi*, *The Priest*.

Miss Mitchell is available, unfettered, on Reprise. I can't recommend anyone more highly. M.A.



✓ **RUTH BROWN: Black Is Brown and Brown Is Beautiful.** Ruth Brown, vocals; rhythm accompaniment. (Yesterday; Looking Back; My Prayer; This Bitter Earth; four more). Skye SK 13, \$4.98. Tape: 8 813, \$6.95; 8 513, \$6.95. **ARETHA FRANKLIN: This Girl's in Love with You.** Aretha Franklin, vocals; instrumental accompaniment. (Son of a Preacher Man; Let It Be; It Ain't Fair; The Weight; Call Me; five more). Atlantic SD 8248, \$4.98. Tape: 8 8248, 3 3/4 ips, \$5.95; 8 48248, \$5.95; 8 88248, \$6.95; 8 58248, \$6.95.

The new albums by Aretha Franklin and Ruth Brown provide a study in contrasts. Franklin, of course, is the reigning queen of soul; but back in the '50s Ruth Brown was one of the most important and one of the best female r & b vocalists. Yet it is "This Girl's in Love With You" that sounds tired and old-fashioned and "Black Is Brown and Brown Is Beautiful" that is fresh and immediate.

Franklin's thing is gospel power, and she often can bring a new dimension to a song just by the application of her by now familiar formula. For example, a tune as emotionally neutral and musically vapid as *This Girl's in Love with You* comes alive here. And with material that is easily adapted to a gospel context—like the Beatles' *Let It Be*, she is a powerful and expressive performer, though it is surprising how little she adds to *Son of a Preacher Man* which should be a natural for her. Conversely, she can be appallingly insensitive to material—especially lyrics—that doesn't suit her: she all but destroys the subtle, romantic *Dark End Of the Street* here.

Ruth Brown made her name in the harsh scrambling world of '50s' r & b. Known then as Miss Rhythm, she demonstrates on her new album that she has lost none of her rhythmic skill in the intervening decade. With her original format mercifully forgotten—'50s' r & b was pretty stark—she is able to choose the setting that she wants: Herbie Lovelle, drums; Eric Gayle and Billy Butler, guitars; Chuck Rainey, Fender bass; Richard Tee, organ; with arrangements by Gary McFarland. And she has chosen a wide variety of the songs she likes: *This Bitter Earth*, *Please Send Me Someone to Love*, the Platters' *My Prayer*, a blues of her own based on *Hey Schoolgirl* and *Going Down Slow*, and on up to the Beatles' *Yesterday*. Her approach puts her somewhere between Billie Holiday's sardonic bitterness and LaVern Baker's exuberance—in spirit she reminds me most of Dinah Washington, but almost any comparison is unfair because her approach is really her own. More than any other soul-oriented vocalist I have heard lately, she pays careful attention to every nuance of the lyrics. The program is heavy in blues and blues-ballads, but a rousing,