

The Latest From Folk's First Ladies



Joan Baez

Honest Lullaby, Joan Baez. Portrait Records, 1979.

by Susan Bencuya

Joan Baez has been back in the news lately, with her Open Letter to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam stirring up a small furor in intellectual circles. Granted, it can be difficult to fuse the North Vietnamese and Childe Harold, but Baez has mixed politics and music for so long and with so much success that I was doubly interested in the contents of her new album on Portrait Records, *Honest Lullaby*.

I was doomed to disappointment. For someone who accepts controversy so easily, Joan Baez is more daring politically than musically. The key word for this album is "safe." Paul Simon, who produced *Honest Lullaby*, has done a beautiful job, so much so that the album lacks any spontaneity it might have had: it's too slick. On the other hand, he didn't have much to work with, songwise. Simon writes interesting, unconventional melodies, and produces them in conventional forms, which works for him. But the songs Baez has chosen for this album are for the most part very conventional and very unsurprising, melodically speaking. Where Simon could have perked them up with an unexpected instrument, or an interesting solo, he has only made them more predictable. Baez shines most when she tries something new. For instance, the torchy, breathy "For All We Know," a gem from the 1930's, is a success. This song is straight out of *Casablanca*, in the low, sexy style of a Lauren Bacall, and Baez does a very competent rendition, with a spare and classy piano accompaniment.

"For All We Know" is, unfortunately, one of the few high points of the album. It's not that there are so many low points, it's just that the music is bland. A lot of it has been

done already. "Light A Light," by Janis Ian, and "Before the Deluge" by Jackson Browne, are good examples. "Light A Light" is from that album everyone had in their apartment two years ago. "Between the Lines," Baez' version is pretty, too, but it's almost exactly like Ian's, and one gets the feeling that it's been said before. Of course, we've heard "Before the Deluge" too, and even with the same Jackson Browne/Eagles/West Coast guitar sound.

The title cut, "Honest Lullaby," is Janis Ian's "At Seventeen" revisited, only more smug. It begins: "Early, early in the game/I taught myself to sing and play/And use a little trickery/on those who never favored me...." Not only do we get to hear how hard it's been being Joan Baez, but we also get to help pat her on the back. Witness: "I took what I could get/And did the things that I might do/For those less fortunate...." Take that, Jane Fonda!

"Michael," another Baez-penned tune, fares better. It's not only beautiful, it's tongue-in-cheek. (And on this album, we could use a little subtlety.) The song celebrates a modern-day lover who compares herself to Barb'ry Allen and other maids of constant sorrow. "Michael" is Joan Baez reminding you of where she came from. It's a private joke, and I like it.

To give credit where credit is due, Joan Baez' voice is still quite capable of sending shivers down my spine. However, most of this album made my feet fall asleep.

★★★★★

Touch the Sky, Carole King. Capitol Records, 1979.

by Holly Cara

Carole King's voice and pen expressed the angst of the early seventies; her album *Tapestry* was nearly biblical

for many of my friends when we were in tenth grade. For some reason, I found her vision hollow then, and subsequently it seems ten times as empty now. With the end of this decade looming in a truly frightening way (Three Mile Island, Skylab, Studio 54) it doesn't comfort me to know that Carole King still lives in the country and writes about the same things she dealt with ten years ago. The sleeve of *Touch the Sky* assures us that King still wears her beat up overalls and continues to look upward for answers. Yawn. Most of these songs will be forgotten once the needle returns to its cradle.

The album opens with a look at Seventies cynicism, "Time Gone By." Here, as on many of the songs, King's minor toned melody and overdone lyrics are instantly recognizable. "I remember time gone by/ when peace and hope and dreams were high," mourns Carole. Now, I'm no disco reptile or anything, but King's assessment of past and present is simply too vague for me. Anyone who thinks that the Sixties were a fairyland of peace, love and long hair couldn't have been there. Carole King should know better. The remainder of the album contains songs about self therapy, being good to yourself ("Move Lightly"), giving up patterns to find joie de vivre ("Crazy"), and the glory of country life ("Good Mountain People"). The lyrics are forced and uninspired, even trite, and King's voice wears thin on the high notes. Her attitude may be seen as ambitious, but it rings false. For instance, the folksy "Passing of the Days" could have been embroidered on a sampler in the kitchen of a commune. The final song, "Seeing Red," falls flat as well. The double entendre title refers to her anger at the treatment given American Indians in this country, but she doesn't come to any conclusion except "we got to make it right."

Worth a mention, however, are two songs that I could even play again. The C&W flavored "Dreamlike I Wander" features a delicate piano (played by Reese Williams) which renders it quite lovely. "You Still Want Her" is notable lyrically, though the melody is boringly repetitious. Carole sings here of a friend she deeply cares for, though their lifestyles differ dramatically. The other woman is involved in drugs and destructive fast living, whereas Carole is cool "in the shelter of (her) solitude." Still, "You've always thought your love for her could save her/ and that's how you get taken in." Though King is removed and lucid, she admits that her love for her friend would make her leave her own security in an instant. It is a rare solid moment in Carole King's work, and it is beautiful.

Yet, most of this album is rehashed Sixties sentiment with the added jaundiced eye of the Seventies. If Carole King really expects to provide answers for the world's problems, she should come down off her mountain and walk for awhile on the street. Two songs here prove she can touch the ground as well as the sky.

★★★★★

Spy, Carly Simon. Elektra Records, 1979.

by Joyce Millman

The title of Carly Simon's latest album, *Spy*, refers to a quote from Anais Nin: "I am an international spy in the house of love."

Those words suit Simon to perfection. In her seven previous albums she has peeked through the keyhole at love in its various incarnations, and has made at least two classic observations on the subject, "That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be" and "You're So Vain."

The trouble, then, arises not from Carly's desire to concentrate on content she knows well, but from her unwillingness or inability to vary the form. Since 1972's *No Secrets*, her efforts have veered increasingly toward Carly Simon Albums, designer records for fashionable ears.

Spy sticks to the same format as its predecessors: some rock, some pop, some ballads, some sexual politics, some starry-eyed romance. The result finds Simon touching all the bases in a predictable manner. Yet *Spy* is not without its intriguing qualities.

Simon's singing, for instance, is still irresistible. She is one of the very best. And once again, she is surrounded by the cream of studio musicians.

"Vengeance" and "Pure Sin" are two of the better cuts, both infectious rockers featuring lowdown vocals and sardonic lyrics à la "You're So Vain." Carly's "I'm no lady" act is honed to perfection here. Her obvious delight in slumming as a street tough carries these tunes.

As for the other songs, only the soft-rock "Love You By Heart" and a ballad called "Never Been Gone" really sound fresh, due mainly to Simon's talent for creating lovely, lush melodies.

Simon closes the album with "Memorial Day," a Very Serious suite depicting a surrealistic Armageddon between the sexes. This is a well-intended attempt at a final statement but, unfortunately, Simon cannot restrain her lyrics from lapsing into the pretentiousness that has dogged her writing throughout her career.

No doubt, Carly's fans will be pleased. But all in all, *Spy* provides evidence that for the time being at least,

Carly Simon has no more secrets.

★★★★★

Mingus, Joni Mitchell. Elektra/Asylum Records, 1979.

by Cathy Lee

The expressions of female sensibility in the poetry/music/visual art of Joni Mitchell's albums over the past decade have appealed to me as much as the works of admitted feminist artists. With unflinching accuracy, Mitchell has articulated the dilemma of a new breed of common woman: career-oriented, better-educated, in control of her own direction, but living in a society that permits women only two roles—self-denial in favor of a lifelong mate or loveless solitude.

In Mitchell's earlier albums, the "confessional" ones, she gave us painful glimpses of her attempts and inability to shackle her free will in order to keep a man. But rather than endure a lonely and guilty life sentence, Joni Mitchell set her own spirit free. Her albums since 1972 show us a woman who scrutinizes her emotional and conceptual boundaries and creates a visual/musical map of that multi-dimensional terrain. Leaving society's roles for others to play, Mitchell has refined and sustained herself.

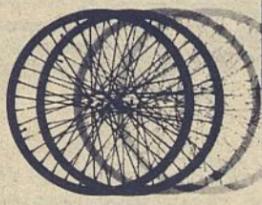
Every one of Mitchell's recent albums exhibits the woman's knack for mixing media: perfectly matching lyrical poetry with different kinds of modern music, using visual and tonal colors to evoke various moods from playful to doubtful. Like jazz—which has increasingly influenced her music in the past few years—Mitchell's works appeal to an intelligent minority of inquisitive souls who remain unaffected by categorical dichotomies.

One such inquisitive soul was Charles Mingus, the generally acknowledged genius of jazz composition, arrangement and bass playing. When someone played some of Mitchell's albums for him, Mingus decided he'd like to collaborate with her. His original project was to be a textural collage illuminating T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* with several kinds of music and Mitchell's singing her own translation of the poet's lyrics. Though she found the idea fascinating, Joni felt she couldn't handle such an ambitious project, and respectfully declined.

Some time later, Mingus contacted her again with six songs he'd written for which he wanted her to compose the words. "Two of them I never could really get into," Mitchell says. "They were too idiomatic for me." The others appear on Joni's latest and most daring album yet—*Mingus*, released in memory of the jazz great who died before the work was completed.

"Mingus" is the document—*continued on page 22*

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MUSIC

continued from page 16

tion of a revolution in Mitchell's work. The full and equal artistic collaboration with a man of stature in a different musical domain has affected her output more deeply than all the lovers of her past efforts. She is no longer entirely in control. In "A Chair in the Sky," for example, she literally puts herself in Mingus' place as she shapes the words to fit his tune.

But Mitchell also maintains a respectful distance between them. Brief excerpts from taped interviews let Mingus speak for himself in all his cranky, funky, opinionated, obnoxious, warm and responsive glory. In her own composition, "God Must Be a Boogie Man," Joni observes and reports her insights more in the manner of her former self, but with abrupt (Mingusian) time changes. Mitchell felt a correspondence between Charles' difficult musical concepts and the cacophony of the wolf calls in a song she had been writing before she met him. On the album, "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey" appears to represent the parts of the man she could never meet or understand.

Mitchell's recognition of the similarity between artistic collaboration and romantic involvement appears even more vividly on Side 2. Charles and Joni sing a duet to introduce "Sweet Sucker Dance," in which Mitchell's recurrent insecurity threatens to spoil another relationship. By this time, though, Joni has learned not to take her own blues so seriously. The idea that "it's only a dance" segues into "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines," a lighthearted Mingus composition with infectious, subtly assonant lyrics that reveal just a shade of the insightful humor common to Afro-Americans. Describing a man playing a slot machine, Joni sings: "He got 3 oranges, 3 lemons, 3 cherries, 3 plums/I'm losing my taste for fruit/watching the dry cleaner do it/like Midas in a polyester suit."

The controversial but indisputably classic collaboration on this album is the well-known "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat." Charles originally wrote the music in tribute to Lester Young. Mitchell's lyrics—which partially follow the changes and partially improvise—move from parallels between the lives and music of Prez and Mingus in the past, to her own present interracial involvement, to a street scene where black children are dancing. The root cause of racism appears with shocking clarity, but Mitchell foretells a brighter future.

Vocally, as well as compositionally, *Mingus* foretells a brighter future for Joni Mitchell. She has finally entered the ranks of those jazz singers who play their vocal instrument cooperatively with others in the band. Mitchell takes chances with her voice now, and sometimes she gets a bit lost and has to depend on Herbie Hancock or Wayne Shorter or Jaco Pastorius to bail her out. Mitchell has sacrificed total control to gain the more challenging spon-

taney of a mature artist.

Joni Mitchell has demanded cooperation and respect in exchange for her self-sacrifice ever since she first started singing her mind. Charles Mingus gave Ms. Mitchell what she wanted. Joni's been through a lot of love affairs, but *Mingus* is her first marriage.

Adventurous Alix In Word & Song

Adventures In Women's Music
by Alix Dobkin, Tomato Publications, Ltd., 1979, \$8.50.

by Holly Cara

When *Lavender Jane Loves Women* was released over five years ago, it was a landmark event: the first record created and produced by and for lesbians. At that time, Alix Dobkin was one of a very few pioneers in the musical expression of lesbian feminist politics and emotions. Her book *Adventures in Women's Music* will serve to clarify her work and life, though certainly Alix has never been inaccessible. To her credit, she has always made herself available for discussions and sharing when she visits women's communities.

The book is divided into sections, which include an autobiography, details behind the recording of both Dobkin's albums (*Lavender Jane Loves Women* and *Living With Lesbians*), notes on the songs themselves, a chapter on Balkan singing by Ellen Chantarelle, and music and lyrics of many of Dobkin's songs.

Dobkin's autobiography section is well-written and interesting. Her account of joining the Communist Party at the age of seventeen is quite amazing, when one considers the political climate of the late fifties. This action clearly presages the strength and commitment Dobkin was to bring to lesbian feminism.

After an attempt at a folk-singing career in Greenwich Village and her marriage, Alix became pregnant with her daughter, Adrian. It was then that she began to see her alienation from heterosexuality more painfully than ever. Soon after, in 1972, she met Liza Cowan on Cowan's radio show and left her husband.

Alix began writing strong, political, personable songs of her own experiences coming out. The women's community was more than eager for her music. It's difficult now to remember back to the time when we had no musicians and songwriters articulating our new and splendid joys and fears.

Lavender Jane Loves Women was released in early 1974, and for the first time lesbian feminist thoughts and dreams reached the medium of vinyl. The second album, *Living With Lesbians*, came out in 1976, by which time there was a huge demand for women's music. It didn't do as well as *Lavender Jane*, perhaps because of its

blatant and uncompromising separatism.

Alix's story can be found in the songs, of course, and I'm sure these classics will be sung across the country. If I have anything disparaging to say about this book, it is first and foremost the fact that Dobkin cannot or will not write of the conflicts she has had with women since coming out. Since she is so forthright both artistically and in person, I found this surprising. We aren't told how these conflicts happened, or even if they were resolved. This kind of information is important to women today as we confront the peculiar problems caused by the insularity of our community. If we would examine the difficulties in dealing with each other as well as we speak of our struggles with the patriarchy, we might really break the grip of these patterns. Another inconsistency of the book is the extremely steep cover price. Those friends of mine who would otherwise enjoy this book perhaps will not be able to due to the cost. Still and all, if you love Dobkin's music and you can spare the green, this is a book you will want to own.

Rachel, Rachel: Sweet R & R

Rachel Sweet, Paradise Theater, July 25, 1979.

by Holly Cara

After six months of curiosity and anticipation on the part of the American public, Rachel Sweet toured her native land this summer for the first time. Sweet is one of the most compelling new artists of 1979, bringing us a tasty mixture of country/western, pop and vintage rock and roll. Her extraordinary voice has been compared to Tanya Tucker, Brenda Lee, and Dolly Parton. What is perhaps simultaneously most and least important, Rachel Sweet recently turned seventeen years old. She's been an entertainer since the age of five, starting with talent shows, summer stock productions, and television commercials. Last year, she signed to England's rather bizarre label, Stiff Records, and her album *Fool Around* was released there last fall.

As an import, *Fool Around* received heavy airplay in America, and Columbia Records brought it out domestically in July. Besides introducing Rachel, it is also undoubtedly the start of an amazing songwriting career for Liam Sternberg. It was Sternberg, a friend of Rachel's family, who sent her tapes to Stiff Records, prior to her signing.

Watching Rachel perform brings to mind her emphatic desire to be Bruce Springsteen, rather than emulating a female role-model like Linda Ronstadt. She wants to be taken seriously, and after seeing her