

'Dog Eat Dog' gives the best of Joni Mitchell's timeless talents

By Julian Fleisher

It may be rather silly, if not completely absurd, to hope to expand upon the wealth of comments concerning an artist as insightful as Joni Mitchell. For her latest album, *Dog Eat Dog*, she has proven once again, with her usual amounts of clarity and coherence, that she is one of the most perceptive singer/songwriters in the music industry.

As each of her new albums has been released, critics have invariably, and most often with remorse, called them "departures" from what is loosely considered her standard style; constantly she is typified as the melancholy coffee-house-confessionalist with guitar in one hand and cigarette in the other, singing depressing odes about her own inability to commit to a man in any serious relationship. This is not to say that that is not, in fact what she was (and may still be), but in criticism Joni Mitchell for not sticking to her original format is akin to telling Mozart to stick to playing at court banquets.

Interestingly enough, *Dog Eat Dog* is Mitchell's most optimistic album since the release of her embarrasing *Blue*. The bulk of this, her thirteenth album, is a solemn testimony to such issues as the ludicrous yet all too dangerous evil of "snakebite evangelists and racketeers." The horrific ironies of the Ethiopian crisis are bracketed by two extremely uplifting songs, "Good Friends" and "Lucky Girl," which joyously illustrate a newfound happiness — probably attributable to Mitchell's marriage to the

record's bassist, co-writer and co-producer, Larry Kline.

"Good Friends," in which she is backed up by the vocal talent of Michael McDonald, is a cerebral, realistic tribute to platonic bliss. Mixed in with the duo's part on the back are choruses of "No hearts of gold/ No nerves of steel/ No blame for what we can and cannot feel." Such self-deprecating remarks are commonplace for the pragmatist Mitchell, who is never one to let herself or her audience off easy.

The album's final work, "Lucky Girl" is a Madonna-esque declaration that Mitchell has finally found that relationship for which she has been searching for several decades and more than a few albums. Putting aside all previous attempts at loving a man, she sings with a surprising, undeniable sensuous in her voice "I never loved a man I traded/ As far as I could pitch my shoe/ 'Til I loved you." The album ends on this upbeat note as a chorus of her own voice slowly fades out singing, "I'm a lucky girl."

It is really to wonder that many critics are shocked by *Dog Eat Dog*. In their wildest dreams only few could have imagined Joni Mitchell allowing an album to include, let alone end on such a clearly optimistic note.

This is not to say that *Dog Eat Dog* does not come complete with Mitchell's usual stock of angry, earnest and frighteningly eloquent discussions of her own shortcomings and, in this album more than any other, those of the world around us. Most of the indictments in *Dog Eat Dog* are focused at the profit-seeking and unscrupulous media men

who go to any lengths and tell any lie for the sake of a buck. Whether it be the self-effacing, venomous "Immediately tax-free" evangelist in "Tax Free," or the "T.V. star with a P.R. smile" who "calls your baby a while strolling through your tragic trials" in "Ethiopia."

There has been much "departure" hallelaloo concerning Mitchell's having taken to electric guitars and computer-programmed percussion lines in *Dog Eat Dog*. While this, of course, is not the stuff of her earlier "guitar and dulcimer" albums, Joni Mitchell is probably one of the few artists who is gifted enough to use these new technological advances to her own advantage without disturbing her sound or her intention.

Her use of these elements in *Dog Eat Dog* is, in fact, quite remarkable. In "Tax Free," for example, Mitchell employs musical variations with a truly cutting sense of timing and drama. After Mitchell's evangelist has railed against the devil he pretenses in rock and roll music, her song — not without some probability — suddenly cracks out its own vicious guitar licks to the tune of Mitchell's angriest and most forceful singing to date: "Tonight I'm going dancing/ With the drag queens and the punks/ Big beat deliver me from this sanctimonious stunk."

There are problems with *Dog Eat Dog*, however. In an obvious attempt to employ the finest innovators in the field of modern "techno-music," Thomas Dolby and Michael Fisher, Mitchell has relinquished a good deal of the control which she is famous for, and which has made previous albums so deeply per-



sonal and touching. This is not to say that her album's contributors detract from the quality of the sound. On the contrary, they are quite indispensable. For example, the music on one of the album's most careful and drives songs, "Friction," was written by her husband/colleague Kline. But on occasion, as in the rather silly tribute to materialism "Shiny Toys," Dolby's bizarre speak-overs are a little hard to swallow. Even if such effects are attempts at humor, Mitchell's incomparable abilities as a lyricist have always been sufficient to satisfy her listeners.

To truly love Joni Mitchell, however, is to revel in her growth. Her music is no longer the whimsical and poetic confessionalism that put her at the forefront of that same movement twenty years ago. And neither should it be. Always avoiding the mainstream in popular music, Joni Mitchell is now a cosmopolitan, slightly cynical urban-ecque woman in her forties and *Dog Eat Dog* should and does reflect just that. As her life has developed, so has her music. The simple, yet eloquent style of her early work would never be able to bear the weight of the powerful and far less personal insights which she is now capable of expressing.