

**Mingus**  
**Joni Mitchell**  
**Asylum SE-505**

It's been in the works for a long time, Joni Mitchell's magnetism for black and jazz. Because you see, basically, (listen)—she just wanted things to work out well, nicely and right. Up through *Court and Spark*, in every cut of every album, you can hear her yearning for what's simply good and true. And something more, almost meekly asked for—a touch of heroism, a flash of glory (real revelations, fame), and perhaps, finally, love that lasts. Lots of people have these dreams, and in their pre-fabricated form they are the fluff that Pop is made of. But what made Joni Mitchell so movingly different, the most compelling female focus for the Generation, was her courage and candor in telling the whole harrowing truth of how these wishes *didn't* come true, how all the goodness and rightness eluded her (deluded her) again and again—terrible disillusionments conveyed with fine intimacy and grace. So from the very beginning, hers has been a case of white wishes and dark consequences—a tension of conceptual extremes.

It was a tension that peaked with *For The Roses* (sacrifices to a concept of beauty), was suspended inconclusively through *Court and Spark*, her last "popular" album, and finally broke for good with *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (niceness has a serpent in it). Even in the titles there is a graphic display of a shift from romanticism to expressionism—she had finally implicated herself in the split between light and shadow, and began to acknowledge not only dark consequences for innocence in this world, but dark desires in herself, darkness at the root, and the special fearful

those imprisoning wishes for goodness and rightness and permanence. Because jazz is the illumination of the shadowland; the dark and glistening jungle animal land of spirits. And the point became not to make distinctions as a moralist, or to make a display of the noble wishes and disappointments of a romantic, but to dissolve distinctions as a mystic, to go through the door into the room where energy is pure delight, and arguments end. That's jazz too: when you get down to that elemental energy level, things *sing* simply because they *are*. Beauty isn't something to be basted for and built—it's there to be received, transformed, and transmitted.

There are many indications that this has not been an easy conversion for her. She has lost or confused the majority of her popular following, and she has not gained much acceptance by the jazz people. Hers is yet a hybrid breed of music that has neither the easy accessibility the masses demand, nor a history of dedicated purity which would please the jazz devotees. Her lyrics, one of her greatest strengths, don't go well with jazz. The pure jazz voice is scat—a non-verbal vocal. Lyrics are intended to be listened to, and in her case, seriously and carefully considered. These are intellectual processes, while jazz is more automatically visceral and spiritual. It is not surprising then, and perhaps it is intentional, that the lyrics for the *Mingus* album are the least demanding, and, in the literary sense, the palest she has ever recorded. But even in this there is a certain relief involved—these lyrics are almost entirely free of the "poetically" self-conscious character that has bedeviled much of her more recent writing. It is less pointed, but more relaxed; less provocative, but more quietly appreciative. The shift is symbolic of

citizenship rights of darkness in this Christian realm of enforced light. Twilight is a condition of the human heart.

Try this for pure vertigo of values, from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*:

*Every picture has its shadows  
And it has some source of light  
Blindness, blindness and sight  
The perils of benefactors  
The blessings of parasites  
Blindness, blindness and sight  
Threatened by all things  
Devil of cruelty  
Drawn to all things  
Devil of delight  
Mythical devil of the ever-present laws  
Governing blindness, blindness and sight*

And then an animal cry:  
*Anima rising  
Queen of Queens  
Wash my guilt of Eden  
Wash and balance me*

This is where the jazz comes in, as a willing and willful immersion in the oneness of all

the turn her career has taken, and fitting in light of the fact that she is primarily honoring another's music before she is proclaiming her own.

Which brings me to my final point. Music is a medium. Mingus saw himself as a medium between the Holy Unknown and the followers that wanted to hear about it. Clearly that's where Joni would love to be, to be done with this neurotic nonsense of being tragically, "poetically" stuck between heaven and earth. With this album she had established herself as a medium for a medium, with righteous results. Perhaps the next time out she'll make it all the way across all on her own.

Robert Tobey

Lyrics from "Shadows and Light" and "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow," ©1975 by Crazy Crow Music. (BMI)

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Above, one of Joni Mitchell's paintings of the great Mingus.