

In **Back**
beat

Recording Carly Simon * Todd Rundgren: Runt Redux

HIGH FIDELITY

MARCH 1978 \$1.25

ICD © 08398

Tape and the Shape of Things to Come

The Best Recordings Yet

Digital Tape

High-Ticket Hype or Home-Entertainment Revolution?

Video Cassette Recorders

Special At-a-Glance Fact Sheet
VCR Formats Compared
Deck Prices, Maximum Tape Timings,
Per-Hour Tape Costs, and More!

HF BCH9H000100990C1 78 1 03
DAVID S BUCHANAN
APT 26 UNIV APTS
HOODLAND AVE
ASHLAND KY

41101



TODD EVERETT JOHN STORM ROBERTS
TOBY GOLDSTEIN HAL RODGERS
SAM GRAHAM SAM SUTHERLAND
DON HECKMAN NICK TOSCHES
JOHN S. WILSON

Joni Mitchell: She Soars, She Orbits, She Never Lands

by Don Heckman

Joni Mitchell: Don Juan's Reckless Daughter. Joni Mitchell, producer. *Asylum*: BB 701, \$12.98. *Tape*: BC5 701, BT8 701, \$12.98.

More than almost any performer I can think of who operates in what might be called the commercial venue, Joni Mitchell has produced a body of work—call it her *oeuvre*—which demands evaluation beyond the simple questions of whether the hooks work or the rhythms make the feet tap. “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter” is described in *Asylum*’s newspaper ads as Joni Mitchell’s latest “work.” The description—with its not-so-veiled implication that Mitchell should no longer be viewed merely as a singer/songwriter or, God forbid, an un-reconstructed folkie—may be apt, but it’s unnecessary. Real creative work speaks for itself, without benefit of flackery.

Mitchell’s singing, her words, and her music have each shown remarkable change and growth in the last decade or so, with a consistency that is virtually unmatched by any of her contemporaries. Start with her singing. Compare the rich, dark colors of her present sound with the piping head tones of *Song to a Seagull*. A shaky performer in her early years (I watched her take her first tentative steps toward maturity during her debut concert at Carnegie Hall), she now moves across the concert platform—and the recording studio—with the confidence of a master. She is largely untouched by the rhythm & blues/country influence that infect the work of most name performers these days, and she has cast off most of her earlier folk mannerisms. If any influence reveals itself—especially in recent years—it comes from the free and



Mitchell—truly a master

easy impromptu inventiveness of the jazz players she has listened to and worked with. Yet this, as with most elements of her art, has been thoroughly filtered through Mitchell’s eye-on-the-world perspective. As a result, *Off Night Backstreet* and *Cotton Avenue*, like *Rainy Day Night* on “Miles of Aisles,” come as close to the sudden, sparkling spontaneity of true jazz singing as one could ask for.

Mitchell’s lyrics, her word-picture characterizations, have attracted the greatest attention over the years—some favorable and some not, but most of it intense. That she has a poetic sensibility of the first order seems transparently obvious to me. Like many listeners I find her frequent need to use her work as a purgative for sundry love affairs a bit tawdry. I am equally put off by the relentless impressionism of her imagery and—more so—by the too-frequent use of rhyming couplets that make little or no use of rhythm patterns that might provide her with a more meaningful creative challenge. But beyond all this, past the personal interludes and the silly political and ecological messages, she is a first-class storyteller and the creator of superb characters.

Mitchell’s music has been the least understood and the least appreciated of her arts. An autodidact, she has never been content to stick with the obvious solutions. The folk-based harmonies of her earliest songs were spiced with unorthodox guitar tunings and chords piquant with overlapping fourths and fifths. In more recent years, she has responded to her expanding experience with a range of music that is at the same time personal, intimate, complex, and sophisticated. If snobbism toward pop music was not still rampant in the halls of academe, I’m sure Mitchell would be rightfully acknowledged as one of the most significant creative musical talents of this generation.

Her recordings always are a bit mysterious, especially for an audience accustomed either to the rudimentary messages of most pop music or to the “sure-I’ll-be-happy-to-explain-it” attitude of many of the more “serious” pop com-

posers. Her work stands on its own, sans explanations, sans interviews in *Rolling Stone*, sans performances of her latest "hits" on the Johnny Carson show. That puts the burden on the listener to understand, to respond, to vibrate with the performance or—if that's the way the flow goes—reject it. And Lord knows it ain't easy, either way. Very few other artists make such intense demands upon such a large audience: Dylan does, of course, even though the rudimentary qualities of his composing skills make his music both more obvious and more accessible; Van Dyke Parks comes to mind, as well, even though Parks never considered himself an ongoing performer in the way Mitchell views herself; late Beatles music, surely, but the complexity in their music usually came from the trappings that surrounded it rather than from any implicit creative density. Others—Paul Simon, Randy Newman, Janis Ian, Steely Dan—touch, in their own ways, some of the bases, and, as with Mitchell, their audiences usually gravitate toward the more accessible, lightweight cuts than the acute, penetrating ones. Newman, after all, is more closely identified with *I Think It's Going to Rain* than with *Davey the Fat Boy* or *So Long, Dad*, or *Sail Away*. So, too, is Mitchell better known for *Both Sides Now*, *Circle Dance*, and *Woodstock* than she is for *Blue, For Free*, *Rainy Day Night*, or *In France They Kiss on Main Street*.

"Reckless Daughter" provides no real surprises for those who have heard her most recent recordings. If there is a thread connecting the pieces of its four sides it is not immediately apparent, although "dreams"—the one word that recurs most often and that outlines a crucial episode in the *pièce de résistance*, *Paprika Plains*—probably best defines the album's thrust.

Coursing through most of the songs are allusions to a kind of astral, dreamlike soaring: "I'm floating into dreams/I'm floating back" (*Paprika*); "I'm going to lay down someplace shady/With dreamland coming/Dreamland, dreamland/dreamland . . ." (*Dreamland*); "Dream on/Dream on/Dream on/Dream on" (*Otis and Marlena*); and, in the album's final tune and final line—"It's just in my dreams we fly/In my dreams we fly!" (*The Silky Veils of Ardor*). It surely is no coincidence that each of these songs represents a different facet of the Mitchell history—overlapping palimpsests of her journey from the past. Add the title track for a complete (and highly personal) account of that journey. Though overly intimate at times, I find these pieces vastly preferable to the coy, Dory Previn-esque glibness of *Talk to Me* and the bathetic sentiments of *Off Night Backstreet* (although even here she out-

lines them with one of her most seductively chromatic melodies). *Cotton Avenue* and *Otis and Marlena* are spun off from Mitchell's growing fascination with black music/black culture; they come dangerously close to parody, saved on the first song by her sly humor and the raunchy bass lines of Jaco Pastorius, and in *Otis* by her gift for characterization.

There are three fairly extended non-verbal sections. I hesitate to say "instrumental" since one, the middle section of *Paprika Plains*, has a specific written text reference, and another, *Overture*, employs extensively overdubbed wordless vocal meanderings. *Overture* is the kind of let's-see-what-we-can-do-next studio funmaking that is a joy to do, feels impressive as hell when it's finished, and ultimately winds up sounding just a bit self-indulgent six months later when it's released on an album. I suspect the artist/producer is considerably less charmed with it now than she was when she finished her mixdown. *The Tenth World* is only a little less self-indulgent. Obviously an improvisation, it really belongs to Airtó Moreira and the other Latin percussionists who bring it to life here. Mitchell's after-the-fact sung accompaniment can only be called unnecessary and intrusive.

The extended orchestral interlude in *Paprika Plains* is another matter. That the entire piece is extremely significant to Mitchell is apparent from its length (more than sixteen minutes) and its elaborate production: a full orchestra playing dense, complex arrangements by gifted English composer Michael Gibbs. The interlude serves as counterpoint to a lengthy, dreamlike passage. She leads into it from a childhood reminiscence of *Paprika Plains* that uses familiar devices such as astral floating, sudden episodic shifts of place, bursts of violence, childhood flashbacks, and characters (in this case, Indians). Significantly, she chooses not to set the words to music; they are printed in the album liner, presumably for listeners to read as they hear the instrumental interlude.

It's all a provocative idea, though I'd wager few will bother to make the effort. The problem here is with the music. The starting point must have been Mitchell's dark, declamatory piano. Gibbs has constructed a setting for it that ranges from Mantovani-like string blendings to avant-gardish squeaks and squirts, with a few moments of genuine beauty in between. In fairness, he can't be blamed completely. His subject's music tends to use a lot of repeated pedal patterns that sound just fine on piano, but expanded to full orchestra are ground into a morass of immobility.

A few words of praise are in order for

her accompanists, notably bassist Jaco Pastorius, drummer John Guerin, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and assorted percussionists and singers. Much will be made of the presence of Pastorius and Shorter from Weather Report. The truth is that Mitchell pretty much knows what she wants and is now mature enough to choose the musicians who will give it to her. The game, in short, is all hers, regardless of who she selects to play with her.

A record with the size, scope, and ambitiousness of "Reckless Daughter" obviously can't be written off with the praise of a simple bravo or the damnation of an easy expletive. Much of what Mitchell has tried here doesn't work at all. A lot more works very well indeed. Credit her, at least, with aiming for the sun, even if she only has managed to wind up in an eccentric solar orbit. That's still higher than most of us will ever get. ■

Jackson Browne: Running on Empty. Jackson Browne, producer. *Asylum 6E 113*, \$7.98. Tape: *TC5 113*, *ET8 113*, \$7.98.

Jackson Browne's first live album constitutes a dramatic departure from the usual conventions of pop and rock concert recordings. First, instead of stage versions of familiar songs, there are ten new performances comprising Browne originals and—in a break from the format of his four studio LPs—collaborations and outside material. Secondly, he has taken a *cinéma vérité* approach by



Browne—a vinyl documentary