

TALKING to Joni Mitchell about her songs is rather like talking to someone you just met about the most intimate secrets of her life. Like peeping in a window on someone and then discussing with her what you have seen. Her songs are so personal.

They're honest, too. The girl in the songs on her Reprise album isn't all sweetness and light, and she doesn't seem to win the whole-hearted approval of the writer, herself.

"Her heart is full and hollow like a cactus tree while she's so busy being free," she sings, in a full round voice that has a lot of Judy Collins in it — which is interesting, since Judy has recorded two of her songs and is putting more on her next album.

"I've always admired Judy ever since I first started singing in Saskatoon, Canada, where I come from. Now we are close friends. But in those days I think I sounded more like Joan Baez.

"Since I started writing songs, the range of my voice has extended downwards something like two octaves, which gives me a lot more freedom in the sort of melodies I'm writing."

She certainly uses that freedom with long, free-ranging tunes that swoop down and soar up in ways that few singers except perhaps Mesdames Baez and Collins could handle.

In this they are unlike the deadpan, almost banal melodies used by her fellow Canadian, Leonard Cohen.

"My lyrics are influenced by Leonard," she admits. "We never knew each other in Canada, but after we met at Newport last year we saw a lot of each other. My song 'Marcie' has a lot of him in it, and some of Leonard's religious imagery, which comes from being a Jew in a predominantly Catholic part of Canada, seems to have rubbed off on me, too."

'Marcie' is about a girl waiting for a letter that never comes, who walks out of the last verse to go west again. Is Marcie Joni?

JONI, THE SEAGULL FROM SASKATOON



JONI MITCHELL: girl in the songs

"I suppose so, really. Marcie is a real girl, she lives in London. I used her name because I wanted a two-syllable name. But I'm the girl in all these songs.

"And the first song in the album, 'I Had A King,' is about the break-up of my marriage."

The album is one of the few I can think of — the others that spring to mind are "Sgt. Pepper" and the

Mothers of Invention LPs — which successfully hangs together as a complete whole.

The title, written so subtly by the wings of flying seagulls on the cover that few people notice it, is "Song To A Seagull." The first side is called "I Came To The City" and the second side is called "Out of the City and Down to the Seaside." Both are lines from songs on the second side.

"The album does tell a story, though not necessarily in chronological order. Certainly the songs aren't placed in the chronological order that I wrote them. As we were working on it, songs came up that would fit in. And since it was finished, I've written others that could go into the sequence, too."

Joni is not doing too much writing at the moment. "I'm too hung up about what's going on in America politically. I keep thinking, how can I sing night in the city looks pretty to me, when I know it's not pretty at all, with people living in slums and being beaten up by police?"

"It was what happened in Chicago during the Democratic Convention that really got me thinking. All those kids being clubbed. If I'd been wearing these Levis, they'd have clubbed me, not for doing anything but because this is the uniform of the enemy. That's what they are beginning to call the kids today, the enemy."

CONSCIOUS

"I keep trying to put what I feel into words but it's all been said so much better by other people. Strangely enough, a song I wrote at the end of last year, 'The Fiddler and the Drum' expresses what I feel now, though I wasn't conscious of feeling that way then."

Because Joni Mitchell was originally a painter — she designed the sleeve for her own album — the things that stick in the mind from her songs are all visual. The king she lost, painting the pastel walls of her home brown thinking of ladies in gingham while she is a girl dressed in leather.

Michael, stirring puddles with a stick to change the taffeta patterns of an oil slick.

Neon sign colours in the city "waltzing in time."

Traffic lights that are red for anger and green for envy.

And all through this album, the seagull that wheels above you cries, and then is suddenly gone.

I think Joni Mitchell is that seagull.

KARL DALLAS