

## A performer who's not satisfied with a safe niche

# Joni Mitchell returns to a more pop-oriented mode

**F**OR ALMOST a decade-and-a-half Canadian-born singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell has established a reputation as one of rock 'n' roll's most literate performers — and one of its most unpredictable.

After years of folk-based music Mitchell decided some years back to investigate the world of jazz.

Since *Mingus*, an album inspired by and recorded with jazz legend Charlie Mingus, Mitchell's records have had the air of being made by a performer who's not satisfied with a safe niche in the recording industry.

That's an admirable move, given that after the enormous success of her *Court and Spark* album in 1974 (one of this writer's favourite records ever) Mitchell could have safely stayed in that vein for the rest of her career.

On Mitchell's new album, *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*, we find her returning to a more pop-oriented format.

But don't get me wrong — Mitchell's performance here rates as one of her best albums. It's consistent with the life's work of an artist who rarely, if ever, thinks about the potential economic outcome from her creations.

"I'm a composer, not a pop star that can be decorated into fashion," Mitchell said in a recent interview.

"I was never comfortable with the attention I received as a result of the success of *Court And Spark*.

"I'm a loner by nature and the kind of attention the Beatles received would be a nightmare for me.

"I never courted that kind of fame because I'm a back-bush Canadian and was raised to believe that if you stick your head up, it will probably get knocked off."

Nevertheless, Mitchell has frequently stuck her head up with her recordings over past years — and critics have consistently tried to knock it off.

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tried to knock it off.

"I don't dare indulge in hope for this record," she says of *Chalk Mark In A Rain*

*Storm*. "They hated my last two albums and ate me alive on the Mingus record. *Rolling Stone* voted *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* the worst album of 1975 — I mean, the list goes on!

"Of course, I'd love people to hear this record, but I seem to be out of synch with the times in this decade. Am I early or late? I don't know.

"In 1983, I released *Wild Things Run Fast*, which was an album of love songs celebrating marriage.

"It came out during the most anti-romantic period in pop music I can ever remember, and the general response was, 'Yucckk, love songs'.

"From that, we segued into a period of rah-rah Reaganism, at which time I released *Dog Eat Dog*, which espoused an almost evangelical humanism.

"At that time, people didn't seem to want to think about the things we were bringing down upon ourselves, and I was accused of being immature for having the opinions I was expressing.

"Obviously these things are frustrating, but I've come to accept that I must write what I feel when I feel it, and I can only do what is given me."

**O**NE OF the things that stands out most about *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* is that it's the first album in Mitchell's career where she writes about love from an optimistic viewpoint.

"I can't think of any theme that's expired for me except the search for love," she says.

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"I found someone with the values I was looking for in a man and I'm happily married now.

"I've discovered that with our focus no longer on finding a mate, you get a heightened sense of community, and I've become a bit more political — not too political, though."

Thematically Mitchell's new album looks at the significance of spirituality when compared with more material pursuits, and a long-term Mitchell obsession about the questions of ambition and success.

There's also ruminations about the possibility of nuclear war and its effect on the world.

"*Chalk Mark* is essentially a series of

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characters commenting on different times," Mitchell says.

"The female narrator in *The Tea Leaf Prophecy* comments on life in the '40s after the bombing of Hiroshima. The central character in *The Bearing Of Black Wings* is a kid who's been to Vietnam and he talks about the war.

"*Dancing Clown* is a couple of guys standing on a corner watching a beautiful girl go by.

"The song I identify with the most is the narrator of *Number One*. I like the spirit of that song and loved the fact that I was singing it at the Amnesty International benefit when people were throwing things at me.

"The song has the line, 'Will they shower you with flowers or will they shun you when the race is run?', and I thought the irony was perfect."

Odd though it may seem, that wasn't the first time that people had thrown things at Mitchell while she was performing.

"My last few performing experiences haven't been too pleasant," she says.

"The audience for benefits comes to party and I don't do well in that setting, because my music is fragile and requires a more thoughtful setting.

"My audience is relatively small and

"My audience is relatively small and when I do benefits I'm sandwiched between acts whose audience is much bigger, so when I go on they use the time to talk. It's left me feeling a bit shy about performing."

So what does Joni Mitchell expect from *Chalk Marks In A Rain Storm*?

"Popular music is going through a period of specialisation created by middlemen right now," she says.

"No matter what station you turn on, you hear the first song and know that if you listen for six hours you'll only hear more of that one song.

I don't fit into that scheme of things anywhere, and while I think there are four singles on this record, it remains to be seen whether they'll find their audience."

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