

ACME

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CRAWDADDY



Paul Williams

thewayweare today



Very small pieces of paper, not allowing a great many words, but perhaps the right ones. "Yesterday's a song without a name/Now both our tomorrows are the same." Sometimes just the smell of things remains. Memory of a year is recollection of the way the air felt one day on Beacon Hill; and the distance between 1962 and 1965 has nothing to do with the distance between 1965 and the present. *Babes in Toyland*. Unless we can hear the background music, we don't really have a good perspective on what's going on. Earth Opera. Background music for the present. Joni Mitchell. Remembrance of the way we are today.

Babes in Toyland? Well, because it's been running through my head, and it might really be nice to do a newsreel, roundup of the week's events, with *Babes in Toyland* as theme music. See how they run, as the Beatles are hung up on. And Earth Opera send familiar Stephen Vincent Benet chills down my spine as they look in on the temporally local world scene ("the weather is strange/no summer this year/in the days of the war/but the Red Sox are winning") with crisp and calm awareness and the incredible and true unspoken implication that this awareness is not shared, not on an emotional level. What should the texture of this 1968 year be?

Certainly the music is confusing us. We like, perhaps, Cream (none for me, thanks), Traffic, Blood Sweat & Tears, Randy Newman, Love, the Byrds, certainly *John Wesley Harding*, maybe even Simon & Garfunkel or the U.S.A. How can we integrate this stuff? Textures, back in the days when "Mr. Tambourine Man," "I Can't Help Myself" and "Satisfaction" were the number one song, were complicated; today, when you find yourself liking "Cry Like a Baby," things really seem confused. I mean it's tough to keep your "rock" records all on the same shelf, and impossible to find reasonable categories to separate them off into.

And the political or emotional content of the world is worse. What's really important? McCarthy, riots in Germany, spy ships in Korea, the demise of the *L.A. Oracle*, an auto accident in Kansas, looting and fires in Chicago, new evidence on who the assassin of Kennedy or King might really have been, a report on the price of milk in Britain? It's impossible to guess what really matters, and you can't avoid the dull suspicion that it's really none of the above. And when you get into such items as who's in love with whom or what's a good book to read or what should I do in the summer, it's hard to remember what anything feels like at all. In times of transition, whole dictionaries lose their meaning and there's a different face in every mirror. Where do we look for the truth?

Joni Mitchell (Reprise 6293) and *Earth Opera* (Elektra 74016) are recently released record albums, and it may be important that they are extremely textured, soft and rich albeit specific and even abrasive at places (last cuts

EARTH OPERA

JONI MITCHELL

on the first sides), comfortable, they fill the air, you can relax and bury your face in what they have to sing. They don't bring up other problems; they are self-contained and indeed obscure other matters, smoothing them over in your mind, consciously directing you towards concerns of their own.

Joni Mitchell is a young lady from Saskatchewan, simply an adventurer, off to seek her fortune in the States and meeting all these people and living in these places and having things happen to her. She is very much a peer, of the young, of you or me who did or didn't go to college but anyway were looking for something and also finding things out at the same time, "I came to the city and lived like old Crusoe" and bumping up against people, which is the part that seemed to make a difference. I describe her as a peer and will do the same for Pete Rowan of Earth Opera, not because I think I know who you are but because it is unusual these days that "rock" people actually sing about themselves, and particularly unusual that they do it in a manner so mixing the general and the specific that it is comfortable and natural to "identify" with them in their songs. It is easy to see what and why Pete Rowan sees in the world he encounters in his album; it seems natural to feel how and what Joni feels of the things that happen in her songs. The very best music can be related to as an immediate reflection of the listener's life (just as the *I Ching* is the most personal of books), and even better music is that which reflects you and yet tells you of me.

Joni Mitchell's particular triumph is that girl singers or girl artists of any kind who have really gotten at what it is to be a woman can be counted on the fingers of one hand (if you're generous, use some fingers twice); and this record is a profound expression of I, a woman—I have yet to meet a girl who doesn't feel that Joni speaks for her. Most girls think and speak on a fairly simple level, but feel on a deeply complex one; a song

like "Cactus Tree" may say what anyone would be clever enough to say of themselves ("but she's so busy being free") but in its entirety—the mounting impact of the verses and the change in that line as it is repeated, the way the vocal struts and fumbles the defensiveness and pride, the sound of all those notes and thoughts (have you ever noticed how much more important is the sound of a woman's voice than what she says with it?)—"Cactus Tree" holds all the fullness and complexity of "this is where I am now," this is what I feel I know, a feeling one achieves in an afternoon alone and might not be able to begin to express in a month of conversations.

Peter Rowan is a person as complex, more elusive, more direct, frequently as successful and beautiful in his music as Joni; his focus, rather than people and places, is feelings—not that there aren't just as many feelings in Joni's songs in the long run, and even people in Peter's, but each approaches a song with a different concept of what a song is for. At their closest, Peter uses a situation to express a certain mood, and Joni reflects a particular feeling directly out of a situation she's describing. What a songwriter thinks he's doing is only the starting point for the nature and direction of the world his finished recording holds in the listener's mind. That both these persons sound like they feel what we're feeling is ultimately what brings them, and us, close together.

And, close together, what do we hear in their minds? Peter Rowan, lead singer and songwriter of Earth Opera, seems sensitive, uncertain, willing to explore but not eager to rush too blindly, quite deliberate, very very conscious and perhaps a little bitter as a result; but both bitterness and joy are luxuries he seems slightly ashamed of enjoying. The word "seems" is important here—I do not think Pete Rowan is uncertain, his music is more controlled and more together than that of almost anyone composing in rock, but it is an important part of the music's impact that it seems hesitant, exploratory, filled with awe and humility—there is a sense of footsteps taken cautiously and yet deliberately in the new-fallen snow. There! I have made that statement, yes, I shall leave another print right here; the footprints, if they are sacrilege, are final and most incriminating—one is willing to take responsibility for them, but does not want it to seem that he has clambered thoughtlessly through the unbroken landscape. The appearance of caution is the radical humanist's uncompromising way of showing respect.

More on Pete Rowan: his world is sparse and rich. He has a true economy of style, perceives only that which is relevant or perhaps is able to make all that he perceives relevant to his view. Whichever, the word "sensitive" is essential to a man who writes like this: "I used to sit and listen to the slowly falling rain/And draw my knees up to my chin and see your face again." And it seems only natural that one with such control of

such familiar words would also, if he had a head full of melodies, know precisely the one to apply to his song and, were he a singer, would be completely comfortable at rationing, through his voice, the music's flow of time. Everything is both precise and natural, this album breathes an air unburdened by asbestos and soot. Evil is absolute ("... the priest laughs/And lets the wine drip down his vest/He calls and caresses his lover who laughs/As he wipes his mouth on his chest."), bitterness is raucous ("Home of the Brave"), people ("I can see you combing sleep from your hair/As you choose what to wear and you whisper 'Who's there?'/To the mirror that stares from the wall.") are amusing at best. Nothing is condemned, though the desire to condemn is always present; Rowan's efforts are to make us inescapably aware of what we attempt to be blind to. By using few words and tunes and the right ones, he makes his perception accessible. And with the richness of those words and that music, he draws us as the flame the moth. Joni Mitchell says of herself, "She has brought them to her senses." Peter Rowan, like some character in a Hawthorne short story, presents us with a world-view we cannot misconstrue, nor turn away from, nor ever forget. Like all good artists, he has linked us with the Overmind.

And Joni, well, she's a thousand different people, and knows it; she understands everything just up to here and knows nothing at all beyond this point, which is just as it should be. She disclaims nothing, demands no credit, spends her present walking unswervingly into the future, in harmony with her world because she has accepted nothing without first understanding it and has never rejected that of herself that she did understand, what I'm getting at is she hasn't tried to choose who she is or who she will be. So she writes songs that are simple and straightforward and enormously perceptive, she makes no presumptions, she really likes people and is quite cautious—careful not to like them for the wrong reasons. In "Michael From Mountains" she really conveys how and sort of why a woman could love a man, and desire a man, and that's no everyday achievement. A great many ladies have their heads so full of all they've read and heard and seen about why a man loves a woman they can think of little save how lovable they are. But Joni even knows that a woman can have a will ("know that I will know you") without being unfeminine or unyielding herself. She is also most sensitive to other women ("Marcie" is not a song about herself; but you can see her seeing herself in her friend—empathy. Wonderful.) and she even knows that there's no one to blame. No one to name as a traitor here. Harmony. Peace & beauty. Five stars for good vibrations.

Earth Opera/Joni Mitchell are an aspect of experience, as well as the product of same; what we are today and soon is shaped by what we hear of them. And we are you and me. Our understanding of the world is daily added to, crossed out, erased, struck over, pasted to-

gether by various cyclones and breezes that blow through. If we do not listen to music, if we fail to read books or talk with each other, if we seldom look on human beauty or deep-felt expression or accidental creation, we diminish ourselves. Which somehow means there is a life-energy passed through art, through communication that is also expression (which indicates a kind of moreness or fullness) ... don't we feel the need to fill our world with us, and ourselves with the world, not in the sense of three billion different people all producing until they suffocate in the stuff but in the sense of three billion who are one sharing their perception, reducing the experiential distance between themselves?

"Tie your hands and spin in circles close your eyes and shut the door/You won't see me like you used to do the way you did before/The blind men making faces as you spin and walk away/They stagger staring at the nothingness of what you used to say/And love is blushing madly searching for a place to be alone/To make account of what you've taken and what really is your own." "Sisotowbell Lane/Anywhere else now would seem very strange/The seasons are changing/Everyday in everyway/Sometimes it is spring/Sometimes it is not anything/A poet can sing/Sometimes we try/Yes we always try."

Joni and Peter are aided and abetted by everyone from their studio engineer to the guy who sold you the record; let's mention the producers. Both are new to the task and brilliant; David Crosby, once (and hence always) a Byrd, has succeeded in giving the listener to Joni Mitchell's album one of the best front row center seats ever available on record. Peter Siegel has somehow put Earth Opera's music on stage, in the sense of theater; distance is, on this album, very subtle, very palpable, the music moves among the instruments as in a ballet—this is a function of the music, and the way the group plays, but also very much a result of the producer's concept of what it is he's trying to capture on plastic. Crosby's achievements are the restraint and perfection of Joni's album, the expressiveness of her voice and (particularly) her guitar-playing, which requires great attention and much producerly love, and the resonance of the album's sound (achieved at least partly by standing Joni beside a grand piano and miking the strings as she sang—an invention of David's that gave him great joy last January). Siegel's triumphs are as subtle—and in a way harder to measure, since we know what Joni sounds like as she sings and plays guitar, but no one can know what Earth Opera would have sounded like in a recording studio with a less competent and imaginative guru. Suffice it to say that both Peter and David have carried the good news from Aix to Ghent, and should be considered among our leading producers.

Joni Mitchell's album (which has a name, *Song To A Seagull*) is divided in two parts—I Came to the City &

Out of the City and Down to the Seaside—and ten parts—her songs. Each song has a consciousness, each has its clockwork, its secrets, its soul. "I Had a King" tells of a particular old man, a particular event in the history of a life and also a general state in the relationship between men and women: "You know my keys won't fit the door/You know my thoughts won't fit the man"—and aren't those words clever, and charming, and right? "He lives in another time." She really perceives things; her words are a delight to be hit over the head with. And the games are played so unobtrusively . . . "the queen's in the [Cocoanut] grove till the end of the year" . . . everything you want is there, and more, and seldom too much, and for all the words you're still most impressed by the music.

The songs are singable. The melodies are so specific, you know she knew just what she wanted, and found it every time, and was delighted. Everything is a whole, a painting in which paints and colors and subject matter and movement and forms and paintress all are one in the act of creation, united through clarity of vision and will. Phrases return, are altered, sing across each other, simple patterns move their quiet movements and leave the touch of fingers on guitar to make announcements. Embellishment is the work of the performer; the composer has done the jobs of framework, and appeal. Joni-as-performer appreciates and makes full use of the achievements of her composing self; as a team, these Jonies are as efficient and effective as any playwright/actor team could be.

She plays guitar like someone smiling at you; she knows the communicating impact of every movement each speaking finger makes. Her singing is not quite so clarion; it is harder to listen to your own voice, it takes more years to know; she is learning; she explores and oh so often she succeeds. And she is trying, and knows how to try; where to make the effort, which means half the battle won. The listener can hear that, cannot help but be pleased, cannot help feeling more-than-content.

And she is pretty, which means her words and voice and face and music, and she's alive, which means the album; it is something you should welcome in your world.

Earth Opera is not exactly pretty, although its beauty takes the breath away; it is an album of omen, of perception and fear or not-quite-fear and understanding. There is a great deal of exploration, presentation of a feeling and then unrestrained musical exploration of that feeling—the lyrical guitar and keyboard solos in the middle of "As It Is Before" or "Dreamless." And yet, at the same time that it is exploration, excited and free, the music is absolutely planned and conscious, part of a grand structure so flawless and specific that a single wrong moment would stand out like an explosion.

You get the feeling that the album is a score, performed by an orchestra long experienced at playing this



piece of music and throwing themselves into it because that's their thing, the unleashing of the exact is their expression of passion. Everything feels predetermined, but absolutely liberated; the medieval concept of freedom. It's a joyous form for contemporary music—the Doors use it, in a different way—because it allows the studio and the tedious exactness of electronics and repeat-until-correct to become as much a part of the moment as the Grateful Dead jamming in the park. The ending of "Home of the Brave" is like Pete Townshend's stage act with the Who, where you know he's going to destroy that guitar, and it's kind of a drag that you know, in fact it even makes the whole thing kind of anticlimactic, and then Peter uses that expectation of anticlimax in you, drawn out unbearably, as straight man for the real climax, wow! he can't possibly be getting into it but somehow he is, great passion is unleashed on stage in the unexpected attempt to transcend anticipated anticlimax, and since little was expected, it works overwhelmingly. . . .

Earth Opera reminds one of Brecht, reminds one of the Doors and Procol Harum, reminds one really of no one else at all and therefore of everyone—their music is as thoroughly fresh as anything that's happened to us in years. It's one of those albums where the songs play continually in my mind, they can't be turned off and it's a different one every few days, the music has become fully a part of my experience and is as expressive to me as thinking. At that point I can scarcely write about the music; I wander about inside it, certain that there is enough here to explore for months, if only I can stand back far enough to describe to someone else what I'm exploring.

Music is a staple in my section of the world. It's something I breathe, something I live with, something I cannot live without producing (though for me it takes the form of words on paper; music could really be described as any dance of form-experiences—sounds, shape-textures—in time), something that is very much a part of the guise the life-energy wears on this planet. If I talk of the structure of Pete Rowan's songs—they mesh, they have great freedom because they flow back on themselves so well—I do it because I care about my world, and want to bring it to our consciousness. If I carry on about the way Joni Mitchell's words touch the feelings of the people who hear them, I do it to hear myself say it and see if it's true, and let you turn it into truth in your mind, and let you know I also feel that way. Music is just a form of something, writing about music is just another form of that same thing, listening and reading are as inseparable a part of singing and writing as one side of a piece of paper is of the other side. Art is animate, when it is attached to people. Sensations, concepts, forms and feelings; these are things to exchange with each other. We provide ourselves with knowledge of the way we are today. ●

