

## Pop: Joni Mitchell

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"MILES OF AISLES." Joni Mitchell (Asylum): In the past, Joni Mitchell has presented herself as the classically pristine, angelic American female folk singer. She was never as arch as Joan Baez, but neither was she as low down and bluesy as Bonnie Raitt or Ellen MacIlwane.

Now, though, she has loosened up and become attractively devilish. The welcome change has breathed some new life into her better-known songs.

When Bob Dylan ventured into rock in the mid-60s, his early admirers were revolted by his departure from folk music and turned their collective back on him almost overnight.

Ms. Mitchell's fans aren't likely to find her alterations anywhere nearly as jolting, for two reasons. Her new treatment of some of her classics has not destroyed their basic appeal. And she has not turned her back completely on her old style.

Rather, she has offered an album that provides both the "new" Joni Mitchell as well as the Joni Mitchell that her followers love. "Miles of Aisles," recorded live in California last winter, is her most entertaining album to date.

In the middle of the two-record set, Ms. Mitchell mentions offhandedly that no one ever asked Van Gogh to paint the same picture twice. It was her way of gently telling her fans that she cannot be contained by her past.

The first side of the album presents four of her most familiar works, "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio," "Big Yellow Taxi," "Rainy Night House" and "Woodstock."

"Woodstock" in particular exemplifies the stylistic changes she has made. It opens not with the prayerful and almost sanctimonious beginning that it had on "Ladies of the Canyon," an earlier album, but on a much more upbeat, more business-like note.

Perhaps a more mature Ms. Mitchell has recognized that the Woodstock dream has become somewhat trite during the intervening years. The new version is less a tribute to the flower child of the last decade than it is just a delightful tune evoking some pleasant memories. By not reaching as often for high notes, she has taken "Woodstock" out of church and put it on the street where it belongs.

Ms. Mitchell's back-up group, the L.A. Express, deserves special credit for keeping the mood light and for making its presence known without upstaging the star. It is a group that can walk a fine line between rock and folk, with some jazz overtones, and ought to be heard from more often.

Sides two and three provide more traditional presentations; Ms. Mitchell has lost none of her quiet sensitivity, either in her voice or her guitar work. But she does seem to stress the line "They tell me that I've changed/Yes, I have" when she eventually gets around to "Both Sides Now," and even her classics in the middle of the album indicate a movement away from a certain dirge-like quality that made some of her songs a touch too melancholy.

Side Four opens with "Carey," which

is more easy-going than it was on her "Blue" album and suffers not at all from the absence of Steve Sills, who played guitar and bass on the earlier version. It is followed by a less fragile rendition of "The Last Time I Saw Richard," with Ms. Mitchell even imitating the voice of a tough-sounding bar waitress to tell the story with humor that was lacking previously.

The last two songs on this exceptionally well-produced album are the only new works offered here. They are both love songs — one hopeful, the other a "portrait of disappointment, my favorite theme," as the author describes it.

Neither song, "Jerico" or "Love or Money," is particularly noteworthy, except perhaps when compared with each other. For they are examples of this album's critical success — Ms. Mitchell's refreshing ability to maintain two moderately different styles without compromising either. "Jerico" is typical of her earlier, more contained mood, while "Love or Money" is more down-to-earth and joyous.

At one point in "Miles of Aisles," an audience member shouts, "Joni, you've got more style than Mick Jagger, Richard Nixon and Gomer Pyle put together." More style and now more funk.

"NIGHTMARES and Other Tales From the Vinyl Jungle," J. Geils (Asylum): The title and the album cover, picturing a bed with only the head, hands, knees and one set of toes protruding from the covers, gives rise to eerie expectations. But inside is the same old J. Geils Band, a Boston hard-driving blues outfit that has never allowed anything meaningful to get in the way of a good beat.

J. Geils is to be complimented for that. The group never overreaches itself, never dabbles in the often trite attempts of too many groups to find deep meaning. J. Geils sticks with what it does best — rocking good tunes that will exorcize the miseries from any listener. They are out for the fun of it, satisfied with momentary popularity.

And few groups are better at communicating their message-less message to audiences. J. Geils rarely fails to achieve a high level of good-humored (though occasionally evil) frenzy.

They have never quite lived up to expectations created by early albums that they would develop into an extra-special group of musicians, but they are thorough-going professionals whose hirsute, greasy image doesn't get in the way of well-polished performances.

J. Geils is clearly a band meant to be heard live and to be danced to until exhaustion takes over, but they come off rather well on albums, managing not to sound too contained by the restrictions of a recording studio.

The group has always shown a punkish disregard for authority and prevailing morality, and "The Funky Judge," in the tradition of the farcical "order in the court" records, is this album's best example of their adolescent innocence that is appealingly empty-headed.