



Pop star Joni Mitchell isn't back; she never left.

Joni Mitchell's Right On The Mark Again

By Steve Pick

THE NEW ALBUM by Joni Mitchell, "Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm," has the potential to be her most successful record since the mid-'70s, but it is not a return to form. One cannot return to something one never left.

Mitchell is best known for either her early folk singer-songwriter period ("Clouds") or for her classic '70s adult pop albums ("Blue" and "Court and Spark"). Although her album sales dropped considerably after that, Mitchell's talents were still sharp. She went through a period of jazz experiments that culminated in her tribute LP to the great composer Charles Mingus and has, in recent years, turned again to contemporary pop music.

Her last three albums — "Wild Things Run Fast," "Dog Eat Dog" and this one — are reminiscent of her previous pop phase, yet removed from it. Mitchell's ear for unusual hooks has long been a trademark, as have her jazz-inflected senses of melody and harmony. But the technology available to make records has changed considerably since the era of "Court and Spark," and Mitchell, especially on this album, is running wild in the new playground.

Because Mitchell has been making good records for (gulp!) nearly 20 years now, she has a leg up on some of the younger musicians experimenting with digital technology. She understands that the song is more important than the machines producing it, which means that for her, keyboard samplers and other sounds are used to add to the music rather than to create it.

She has assembled a solid band of herself on keyboards and guitar, Michael Landau on guitar, Larry Klein (Mitchell's husband) on bass and keyboards, and Manu Katche on drums and percussion. There are a number of famous guest stars: Peter Gabriel, Benjamin Orr of the Cars,

Don Henley, Wendy and Lisa, Billy Idol, Tom Petty, Willie Nelson and Wayne Shorter. But this is clearly Mitchell's show; even on duets, she dominates.

"Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm" is the best collection of songs Mitchell has come up with in years. The last two albums had very good songs, but this one achieves a remarkable consistency.

"My Secret Place," "Dancin' Clown" and "Cool Water" (a beautiful updating of the Sons of the Pioneers tune) all sound like potential hit singles to me; they could easily fit into several contemporary radio formats. Even with this accessible sound, these songs have more depth than most modern hits. Other songs, such as "Lakota," "The Beat of Black Wings" and "Snakes and Ladders" are equally memorable, if a bit odd for radio.

Lyrically, Mitchell jumps from wonderful serious insights to hilarious ones. As an example of the former, "The Tea Leaf Prophecy" places "ordinary" life in juxtaposition with war. The bridge to this song is Mitchell at her most penetrating: "Sleep little darlin'/This is your happy home/Hiroshima cannot be pardoned/Don't have kids when you get grown/Because this world is shattered/The wise are mourning/The fools are joking/Oh, what does it matter?/The wash needs ironing/And the fire needs stoking."

As for comedy, "Snakes And Ladders" is a funny examination of love and yuppiedom, concerning a perfect couple who met in a shopping mall. "He gave up happy hour for her" is a sign of true love, indeed.

Once again, Joni Mitchell has made intelligent, well-constructed pop music for adults seem more than just a theoretical possibility. This "Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm" will not wash away.