

# Neil's rough, Joni's remote

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In the liner notes to his greatest-hits collection, *Decade*, Neil Young says that the "middle of the road soon became a bore so I head for the ditch, A rougher ride, but I saw more interesting people there."

One of his contemporaries, and some might still say compatriots, was also troubled traveling in the middle. But instead of heading for the ditch, Joni Mitchell went straight for higher ground — the nearest ivory tower, to be precise. There, above us all, she now sits, meditates, and looks pretty just in case a photographer happens by.

Neil Young and Joni Mitchell have at least one thing in common in addition to their being former Canadians now living in California: They both see themselves as artists working in a medium that doesn't encourage art. And both have recently released albums clearly intended to reaffirm their status as artists.

Young's *Decade* is a three-record set covering the most fruitful years of his career. Joni Mitchell's two-record set, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, is the most ambitious album she has attempted, with one piece, *Paprika Plains*, stretching out to more than 16 minutes.

Beyond the common intention, however, there is no similarity between the two. Young has risked more and more for his music; Mitchell has risked less and less.

## *His new album breathes dignity hers just panders and sneers*

Knowing he could easily repeat the success of planned, crafted studio albums like *After The Goldrush*, Young aimed for a music that was more spontaneous and personal. The results were Tonight's *The Night*, and the more recent *American Stars 'N' Bars*, blunt, often bleak and not at all polished efforts. On those records Young wanted to reduce the distance between himself and his audience, to record in a way that was equivalent to cinema verité.

Joni Mitchell, on the other hand, has been increasing that distance. The music and the lyrics on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* tell you why — she distrusts, if not outright despises, her audience.

Young too has lashed out at an audience, or at least a potential audience. In *Southern Man*, for instance, he roundly condemned the Southern redneck stereotype. It was a mistake on Young's part, but not a mistake coming out of sensitivities. Young was wrong simply because he had the facts wrong.

Joni Mitchell's mistakes arise out of sensitivities — despite her constant and unabashed parading of her own famous sensitivity.

In one song, *Otis And Marlena*, she

draws yet another stereotyped picture of numbskull vacationers in Miami, "the celebrated dump/Sleazing by the sea." There they are, she sings, dreaming "of golden beauty," lost in their tawdry dreamland while "Muslims stick up Washington" (a reference, no doubt, to the Hanafi Muslim hostage drama in Washington last March). The piece is followed directly by an instrumental called *The 10th World*, an almost seven-minute-long percussion piece with its roots in West Indian rhythm, which is there to tell you that Ms Mitchell is far more sensitive to the Muslims in Washington than she is to the schnooks in Miami.

There's dignity in Neil Young's *Decade*, a pride sometimes hurt, fragile and self-centred that nevertheless gives the album a unity. There's no dignity in Mitchell's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. At best, it panders to those who might be looking for insight. At worst, it's arrogant, preening and sneering.

The pandering and the sneering has been there for quite a while in her albums. But I've always been able to ignore it because of the inventiveness of the music — the notes, the phrases, the imaginative use of free rhythm. It was-

n't difficult to dislike the singer but like the songs, especially those on *Blue* and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*.

There's little on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* to like for even musical reasons. She uses several members of *Weather Report* on some of the cuts, but only bassist Jaco Pastorius has anything solid to offer. Michael Gibbs' orchestrations, particularly on *Paprika Plains*, are sensitive and appropriately atmospheric to correspond with the singer's word-painting. Other than that, even the music is self-indulgent.

In *Decade*, we have evidence of Neil Young's form of exploration, from the more tightly structured earlier pieces to those that came later and were almost deliberately unorganized. But the base of Young's music never changes, only the way it's realized changes. The more Joni Mitchell seems self-absorbed, though, the more her music stops making musical sense.

The appeal of Young's *Decade* is that it allows you to be a part of the process that went into making it: You hear his strengths, weaknesses and, end up feeling this is a musical life that's still going on. *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is anything but reckless; it's a pat statement by someone who thinks she has the answers but doesn't.

Neil Young was right; there are more interesting people in his ditch.

*Decade*, Neil Young. Reprise 3RS 2257.

*Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, Joni Mitchell. Asylum BB-701.



JONI MITCHELL MEDITATES  
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NEIL YOUNG EXPLORES  
His musical life is still going on