

Inside Track

Joni Mitchell: a modern sound

BY GLENN RAUCHER

Joni Mitchell's newest LP, *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* completes a cycle of three records that started with the promising *Wild Things Run Fast* and drooped a bit with the over-fussy *Dog Eat Dog*. *Chalk Mark...* retains the musical foci of the previous releases; it has the same shimmering pop surface, Larry Klein's Jaco-oriented fretless bass work, and literal herds of "special guests."

This record, as with many records of the past year-and-a-half, bears the unmistakable influence of Daniel Lanois' and Peter Gabriel's work on the *So* album. Credit that to the monster drumming of Frenchman Manu Katche, whose subtle cymbal work and tastefully articulated drumming stands out even among the myriad of keyboards that flock this release.

To Joni's credit, she is not overwhelmed by any of her guests; on *Dog Eat Dog*, it seemed that there were too many helping hands, and all that served to do was clutter the picture, winding up with embarrassments like "Fiction," and Tax-Free," which was as unsubtle as any of the televangelists she was critiquing. Here, Mitchell seems to have pieced together a much more supportive cast, who act as characters rather than mere voices or instruments.

Billy Idol, for instance, is perfectly cast as "Rowdy Yates," whom Joni describes as "...bold as Jove/He's all chide and snide and bluff..." That's a perfect description of the annoying Idol character, and it's funny how Joni uses his style to prove her point. In the song, he is all bluster and pose, with little substance underneath. Therefore, his character is convincing and well-drawn.

Don Henley's cameo in "Snakes & Ladders" is much more clever and cunning; Henley only appears on a few key lines, and sings them with the proper air-headedness that the part in the song calls for: Henley probably isn't dumb, and this isn't type-casting in the way she uses Idol; but Henley's character is as well thought out and presented as the Idol character, and plays as important a part in the song with much less to say.

The aforementioned Gabriel is typically brilliant and strangely compatible in a simple vocal interplay in the lead track, and most likely "hit" called "My Secret Place." At times it's hard to tell who is singing which line, since they both seem to gravitate rather nicely to each other's sound and style.

The only guest who fails to add to his or her piece is Willie Nelson, who sounds raw and subdued on the adaptive cover of "Cool Water." Nelson doesn't really sound like he's being a character here; he just sounds dead.

Musically, the album is much more varied than the last two records, which either alternated upbeat and reflective

tunes (*Wild Things...*) or blended all that tunes into an unattractive metallic sheen (*Dog Eat Dog*). On *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*, Joni and Larry Klein serve the individual songs better so that a snatch of acoustic guitar on "My Secret Place," adds to the piece rather than sounding like an anomaly on the whole.

"Lakota's" propulsive beat out of an Indian chant by Iron Eyes Cody underscores the tragedy in the lyrics rather than undercutting the intent. The repetition toward the end of the song works, providing a chant-like coda to the piece. "Dancin' Clown" is Idol-aggressive, meaning that it never quite gets mean, but does run along nicely. "Snakes and Ladders" also is streamlined and pop-oriented, but it doesn't sound as forced as some of Joni's previous "modern" efforts.

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The rest of the tracks are an odd lot. "Number One," a track that she performed at her disastrous Amnesty showing is basically a rhythm-box type piece, that remains largely horizontal. "The Teal Leaf Prophecy" is elegiac and well-paced, with Klein's bass-work particularly interesting and emotive. The last two pieces are the strangest. "The Recurring Dream" actually abandons the song-form altogether, replacing it with repetitive lyrics and cut in vocal fragments that indict the "material Vogue" that plagues capitalist society. "A Bird That Whistles," a reworking of the traditional "Corrina, Corrina," features Wayne Shorter on sax, and Joni playing acoustic guitar with no electronic overlay. It's startling, in a way, to hear her with such sparse accompaniment, and rewarding to hear how she still can summon up some of her old gentleness and grace.

Lyricaly, Joni has balanced her concerns over politics in the world and politics in relationships. *Dog Eat Dog* leaned perilously close to moral self-righteousness and sanctimony; it's a problem that the more subtle tack of *Chalk Mark...* avoids. On the passionate "Lakota," Joni writes "Lay down the reeking Ore/Don't you hear the shrieking in the trees?/Everywhere you touch the earth/She's sore/Everytime you skin her all things weep."

Although other lines in "Lakota" miss their target (some by quite a bit), this early verse states enough of the case eloquently to get a positive message across. "The Tea Leaf Pro-

phesy," about a woman during wartime who laments the absence of marriageable men from her town is simply-put and strong. "Newsreels rattle the Nazi dread/The able-bodied have shipped away/Molly McGee gets her tea-leaves read/You'll be married in a month they say." Although Molly doubts it, the arrival of a soldier, "Just passin' through..." completes the prophecy. Although on the surface the lyric is hopeful, there is an undercurrent of dread that reveals itself through the boring acts of watching Johnny Carson together on late night TV, and the repetition of "Gardens in the spring, shovelling in

the winter."

The most impressive and image-filled lyric is the song which gives the album its title. "The Beat of Black Wings" is the tale of another soldier who has been beaten up inside by killing, and who can no longer feel or just feels that life has given him nothing but bad luck. "There's a war-zone inside me/I can feel things exploding/I can't even hear the f-ing music playing/For the beat of black wings." His girlfriend aborts their unborn child, the old hate the young, and finally he sums it up; "There's a man drawing pictures/On the sidewalk with chalk/Just as fast as he draws

'em/Rain come down and wash 'em off/Keep the drinks comin' girl/'Till I can't feel anything/I'm just a chalk mark in a rain storm/I'm just the beat of black wings." Like many characters from Springsteen's *Nebraska* album, this character has lost all hope, all understanding, and faces a void where his future used to be. The lyric is sad and moving.

Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm will not bring back the fans who abdicated from Joni's musical path after the *Minus* album. What it does do is present a modern Mitchell that sounds more comfortable being just where she is.



JOE VEGA: took the stage last Thursday evening, March 24 and gave IC a good hour-and-a-half worth of comedy. He is an M.C. at the Comic Strip, and performs regularly at Dangerfields, Village Gate and Catch-A-Rising-Star.

Comedy, Joe Vega style

BY CHRIS LEE

"Michelangelo was gay—he did most of his best work on his back!!" Okay, now this one I laughed at! So did the crowded pub last Thursday night when Joe Vega took the stage.

This guy seems to have been around. He is an M.C. at the Comic Strip and performs regularly at Dangerfields, Village Gate and Catch-A-Rising-Star. In addition to appearing at showcase clubs, Joe Vega performs in other pubs like ours at many northeast colleges and universities.

Vega performs the usual routines typical to New York comics on sex, New York drivers, and the "tough

neighborhood" bit. However, Vega would throw in a few one liners and play on the audience reactions to create a unique style.

Beer is a usual topic for a comedian to discuss at a college. Vega discusses it and then throws in, "Ever have Moosehead? One leg on each antler!" to break up the routine. Comedy within comedy, I would call it. Not bad, it works, and the audience roars...

It was the Michael Jackson impressions which got the largest laughs, as did his imitations of homosexuals. I must mention, however, that I found some of his humour a little too cruel. He started out with jokes about

Walter Hudson (the guy who weighs about 1000lbs) that were kind of funny, but took them a little too far. Also, he did have a problem with jumping back to previous material already covered, such as, "I hate it when women go to the bathroom together. Ever notice that?" Well, I sure noticed that because he said it twice in the same show!

The audience laughed and that's what counts. He gave Ithaca College a good hour and a half worth of comedy. I hope next year the NYC Comedy show series will continue. Until then, I think I will try that Moosehead, Joe!

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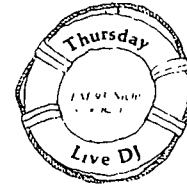
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