

Music

Joni Mitchell is still mad as ever

Still around: At 54, Joni proves she can keep up with popular female singer-songwriters half her age on "Taming the Tiger"

By MIKE JOYCE
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While female singer-songwriters half her age and with half her talent continue to be touted as "the new Joni Mitchell," the current Joni Mitchell, now 54, continues to make extraordinary pop music, creating albums full of poetry, passion and opinion.

If her new release, "Taming the Tiger" (Reprise), illustrates one thing, it's that Mitchell's great craft and defiant spirit remain undiminished by decades of recording and acclaim. Rather than mellowing over the years, Mitchell seems more determined than ever to express herself candidly in a pop world she believes is almost entirely driven by hype and profits. She vents her contempt for the record industry's starmaker machinery on the album's title track, declaring, "I'm a runaway from the the record biz / from the hoods in the hood and the whiny white boys. / Boring!"

Say what you will about "Taming the Tiger," boring it's not. Mitchell explores a wide range of themes on the album, addressing both social and personal issues, and in so doing reveals anew her special gift for composing artful, thought-provoking ballads laced with airy jazz harmonies. Two of the most memorable songs have a reveal-

ing autobiographical slant. "Harlem in Havana" concerns a young white girl who becomes entranced by the sound of black music, a tale inspired by Mitchell's childhood encounter with a traveling burlesque show. "Auntie Ruthie would have cried / if she knew / we were on the inside," she sings. Another chapter of her life apparently inspired "Face Lift," which involves a mother and daughter trying to square their irreconcilable views of sexuality.

Other songs take a metaphoric shape, a literary device Mitchell mastered a long time ago. And yet for all her deft wordplay, there are times when she doesn't ask the listener to readbetween the lines. Anger and anguish are clearly evident in her searing verse and in the sound of her voice, which has grown darker and more expressive. On "No Apologies," she does nothing to conceal the outrage she felt upon hearing how the military dealt with a recent inci-

dent of rape involving American servicemen in Okinawa: "The general offered no apologies / He said, 'The soldiers erred in judgment / They should have hired a hooker! / No apologies / To the outraged Japanese / No 'Sorry little girl! / The pigs just took her.'"

Mitchell often relies on unusual guitar and keyboard harmonies to create an atmospheric glow. Several of the sparse arrangements are further enhanced by the soulful contributions of her longtime collaborator, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and the nimble jazz drummer Brian Blade. The most surprising performance, though, finds Mitchell reprising the Sons of the Pioneers' sentimental hit "My Best to You," with the help of pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz. The old cowboy song evokes a world brimming with good cheer, an old-fashioned notion that helps bring this frequently disquieting album to a comforting close.