

Running on Empty: Jackson Browne: Warner.
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter: Joni Mitchell: Asylum.

When popular music is finally accepted as a culturally respectable art form for a democratic age (a status already reached by the cinema) one of its recognised achievements will be the popularising of poetry in a musical setting—a feature, incidentally, of previous (fairly) culturally homogenous societies, like Iomeric Greece and Bardic Wales. In other words Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell will come into their own.

Neither might have Bob Dylan's skill in scattering images, a desperate, uncontrollable, richness—the hit-and-miss outpourings of an under-educated genius. Both Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell are over-educated—their songs cannot avoid an art feel because they have always been conscious of Art. So it is hardly surprising that while Dylan was able to break through to a mass market, Browne and Mitchell have remained something of a college cult.

There are new albums now available from both. Jackson Browne is as musically impressive as ever but has become lazy of ideas; Joni Mitchell has produced a significant double album which is as far removed from the conventional Radio One idea of popular music as Isiah was from Irving Berlin.

It is a pity that Jackson Browne's *Running on Empty* is not quite as good as his previous work, *The Pretender*. The new album was recorded on tour, sometimes during concerts, sometimes in hotel rooms and backstage, once on the travelling bus which transported artists and ad crew around the U.S. Invariably live recordings of songs are a disaster—old material emerging battered from poorly corded instruments and owned in sycophantic applause. That is not the problem here: the sound is good, the

musicians excellent, especially the guitar of Danny Kortchmar, and there is a powerful feel of what it must be like to tour, constantly on the move, the long hours on the road and hanging around hotel rooms, the few minutes of excitement on the stage—and then on again. This feeling is enhanced because many of the lyrics are about touring—the roadies; the groupies; the tedium; the routine; the loneliness. And, of course, they are perceptive: not Oxford Dictionary of Quotations standard but very good.

"Highways and dancehalls/A good song takes you far/You write about the moon/And you

dream about the stars/Blues in old motel rooms/Girls in daddy's cars/You sing about the nights/And you laugh about the scars/Coffee in the morning, cocaine afternoons/You talk about the weather/And you grin about the rooms/Phone calls long distance/To tell you how you've been/Forget about the losses, you exaggerate the wins/And when you stop to let 'em know/You've got it down/It's just another town along the road."

So starts *The Road*; it sums it all up, and, as an evocation of a working artist, it is commendable; it is just that it is a limiting experience. In *The Pretender* Jackson Browne was

obsessed with loneliness: the old alienation syndrome, but achingly affecting because his wife was just dead and he had a young son to tell it all to. Some of the songs were maudlin, but they were genuine. *Run on Easy* is a fine documentary after an emotional masterpiece.

In contrast Joni Mitchell seems to be getting over her hang-ups. Her recent work was also dominated by what it was like to be a rich and successful, but far from content, lady super-star. Now there are still lots of love songs but written in a more detached and cynical style.

The familiar Mitchell rhythms and the familiar Mitchell melody (can there really be only one?) are there, made even more austere and mesmeric by the use of Latin and African backing instruments. Like all her work *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is not immediately accessible, and it is too easy to dismiss some songs as just pastiche, but eventually the spell starts to work. It finds the common ground between ethnic music, free-form jazz, and contemporary classical, with rhythms rather than tunes dominant, but it is high quality, and there are, of course, the lyrics, as in the title song.

"You're a coward against the altitude/You're a coward against the flesh/Coward—caught between yes and no/Reckless on the line this time for yes, yes yes!/Reckless brazen in the play/Of your changing traffic lights/Coward—slinking down the hall/To another restless night." Joni Mitchell somehow manages to avoid pretentiousness and artificiality. However strong the images, there is a feeling that she has lived the event: she has certainly had the opportunities. Too often in the pop world the money cramps the creativity; it is easy to run out of ideas, experiences, and the need, when living on Malibu Beach, Joni Mitchell has gained a second imaginative wind in these songs of travel, memory, friends and lovers, and that is nice for everyone.



Joni Mitchell