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# John Guerin: Joni, L.A. Express

BY BRAD BALFOUR

John Guerin is like a bridge between Joni Mitchell and the L.A. Express. His tight involvement with both, as drummer of the L.A. Express and as Joni Mitchell's companions, allows him to speak with authority about the relationship between the band and Joni.

The band is a distinct entity in itself; witness the L.A. Express' set that opened the Mitchell concert. And the group has a new album on a new label, Caribou Records. The music played in that set at the Mitchell concert is on this album.

The L.A. Express and Mitchell came together because of the jazz expertise of the musicians.

"When she started 'Court and Spark,'" Guerin said, speaking of Mitchell's previous studio album, "she needed more sophisticated jazz players to handle the musical part. She needed the broad musical background that jazz musicians are capable of today. I feel being a jazz musician makes me more open. A rock musician doesn't have the intricacies of syncopation or musicality that jazz musicians have learned. So those two influences have come together and straightened out the music.

"Nowadays I can still play jazz and not be in the minority. I use the term 'jazz' for the want of a better label. Jazz doesn't mean what it used to mean years ago.

"Whatever you call it, our music really defies labels. It's just that this industry is built on labels.

"Henry Lewy, Joni's engineer, told her about the band when we were playing The Baked Potato in Studio City, California. By the time she came to hear us, we had decided the band wasn't just for kicks, but that we wanted to do something. She felt this was the band that could interpret her music.

"In a trial date, it was magic together. None of us knew her but Tom Scott (he had brought the band together and on the two previous A&M Records releases the band was known as Tom Scott and the L.A. Express). I had done an over-dub on one track of 'For The Roses' but had never met her. From then on 'Court and Spark' was a highly integrated album.



JOHN GUERIN

"I am as proud of that album as any album I have ever done. I am as proud of it as any L.A. Express album. There are very few albums I have done that I listen to over and over. I'm just as proud of the 'Threshold' album I did with Pat Williams.

"We discuss the bottom line of a song together. We discuss the feeling of how hard we should approach it, whether there should be a middle part, or instrumental interludes. But the basic approach is dictated by Joan (as he calls her). She has the form down on a new song. It won't require changes, just embellishment.

"Some singer-songwriters are so involved with lyrics—Dylan, Leonard Cohen—that their music is not as sophisticated, but with Joan, her music is as sophisticated as her lyrics.

"Our roles (Joni and Guerin) are so strong in what we do that we don't develop competition with each other. Otherwise no two people could stand each other. It would be impossible for us to cohabitate.

"The competition aspect is played down by all of us. The band treats her as another player. All of us in the band, Joan, are excellent, some of the best in the country. For her to play with us there is no condescension on our part.

"Her songs are in a basic form. Then we get together. It's not necessarily one of us that adds embellishment. It's like six heads together.

"Joan's ideas are complete when we

begin. The ground work is set in no uncertain terms in the beginning. She is open to change. That's obviously so for we are the first band to work with her. Look at the musical development of 'Court and Spark' and since then. It's opened her up.

"I never interfere with the lyrics, she never interferes with the bottom. We mutually open up each other's ears.

"It's like having a third ear. It takes in not only, playing or singing but what goes on around you.

Just as all this goes for the band working with Joni Mitchell so it goes when the group is producing it's own music.

"Someone will bring in tune, say like Victor's 'Western Horizon', and we'll change it sideways. There's is not that much of an ego trip on the whole. If someone brings in a song and it holds up with validity then we're thankful for the contribution.

"The press wrote a lot about Tom Scott being the leader of the band, creating a sideman atmosphere for the rest of us. In fact, no one was the leader, then as now.

"We intend to be successful as a band now. We have the formula we enjoy playing without selling out. The time is right, the record company is right for us to attain our goals."

With the track record of such group members as: Victor Feldman, keyboards, synthesizer vibes and congas; David Luell, reeds and flute; Max Bennett, electric bass; Robben Ford, electric and acoustic guitar; and finally, Guerin on drums, it shouldn't be hard for the L.A. Express' time to come. They have given Joni the confidence to venture forth with new musical ideas and have gained a certain confidence from Joni themselves. This new album gives a satisfying taste of the L.A. Express' talent.

## Coliseum change

Little Feat has canceled the rest of their tour dates with Electric Light Orchestra, including the March 5 date in Cincinnati. Elvin Bishop has replaced Little Feat as the second act, and Journey remains the opening act.