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Carly's rock flies, Joni's jazz fizzles

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At one time, Carly Simon and Joni Mitchell were among the premier singer-songwriters of popular music.

On new albums, Ms. Simon edges into rock while Ms. Mitchell embraces jazz wholeheartedly in a complex, challenging project.

Ms. Mitchell's record is the more daring and the more disappointing of the two. Titled "Mingus" (Asylum 5E-505), it is comprised of collaborations between Ms. Mitchell and the late jazz great Charles Mingus, who wrote the music to which Ms. Mitchell has set her lyrics.

The album completes a cycle Ms. Mitchell began in 1974 with her album, "Court and Spark." At that time, she wedded her romantic vision to the upbeat studio jazz strains of Tom Scott and his L.A. Express; since then she has experimented with progressively more dissonant and diffuse jazz forms, least satisfyingly on her self-conscious 1977 release, "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter."

Ms. Mitchell is no less reckless on "Mingus"; it's just that she's traveling in faster company here. Mingus, who died in January, was a musical pioneer, experimenting with rhythm and melody in all his work.

It's not a new practice to take a jazz solo and put words to it. But most of these Mingus compositions are better left as instrumentals. While the words can convey an interesting interpretation of the composer's intent, they seem to anchor and hinder what should be a free-flowing musical form.

The languorous, exploratory tempi and tunes of most of these songs simply don't lend themselves to vocal interpretation. There will probably be those also who question Ms. Mitchell's credentials in presuming to add something to the art

of Charles Mingus.

The latter question is particularly pertinent to the point-of-view she expresses in the songs. Numbers like "God Must Be a Boogie Man" (one of two for which she wrote both lyrics and melody on this album) and "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" are written from the viewpoint of a black musician and seem almost condescending in their stereotypical depiction of that milieu.

The opening of the latter song, a tribute to saxman Lester Young, seems overstated and presumptuous, as though Ms. Mitchell is lecturing an audience that is unaware of Mingus or the bebop era:

*When Charlie speaks of Lester
You know someone great has gone
The sweetest swinging music man
Had a Porkie Pig hat on
A bright star
In a dark age*

And do we really need Joni Mitchell to tell us that the black jazz musicians of the 1940s and 1950s suffered discrimination? She does so on "Pork Pie Hat," making this classic jazz soliloquy into a trite recollection of injustices past:

*When the bandstands had a thousand ways
Of refusing a black man admission
Black musician
In those days they put him in an underdog position*

As if they don't today.

The only song on this album that moves with the spirit of Mingus is "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines," a funny, bouncy tune about one man's luck and another's lack of it.

Ms. Mitchell has able assistance from her backup musicians: Jaco Pastorius and Wayne Shorter of Weather Report, electric pianist Herbie Hancock and even a chorus



Carly Simon



Joni Mitchell

of wolves. But her voice always seems extraneous to the song, an addition that has not merged with the music. "Mingus" is an interesting idea, but one that never comes to true fruition on this record.

Carly Simon's intents are simpler. While she continues to explore the themes of marriage and fidelity in her songs, she has added a rockier feeling, thanks to producer Arif Mardin.

The album is called "Spy" (Elektra 5E-506) and it opens with Ms. Simon's disco entry, "Vengeance," a sweet little number about a healthy give-and-take of acidic feelings in a relationship.

Ms. Simon's sense of romantic irony, too, is intact. A new song, "We're So Close," recalls the twists of her first hit, "That's The Way I Always Heard It Should Be." It describes a couple who drift farther apart, claiming that each lost intimacy was unnecessary to begin with:

*He says: we're beyond flowers
He says: we're beyond compliments—
We're so close we can dispense with love
We don't need love at all.*

There's nothing surprising or unusual about this album lyrically. Musically, Ms. Simon rocks harder under Mardin's guiding hand, whether it's the loping beat of "Just Like You Do," the independence expressed in the growl of "Pure Sin" or the undercover lover of the album's title tune.

Like Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Simon employs a brace of studio jazz players,

though she takes them into the mainstream. Guitarist David Spinozza, saxophonist David Sanborn, flutist Hubert Laws, vibraphonist Mike Mainieri and pianist Richard Tee all put in stellar appearances on the album.

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