

RECORDS



Wild Things Run Fast
Joni Mitchell

Geffen

By J.D. Considine

Perhaps the ultimate challenge of growing up is coming to terms—with yourself, with your friends and lovers, with your family, with your work. Rock and roll has traditionally been a part of that process by amplifying the struggle involved, be it as simple as overcoming the distance between what you've got and what you want through hard work (as in Eddie Cochran's "Something Else") or as maddeningly complex as trying to live with the contradiction between who you are and who you want to be (as in the Who's *Quadrophenia*).

Because so much rock is (or hopes to be) adolescent music, it strives to identify with the conflict. A more adult approach would be to distance oneself from the action in order to gain some perspective on what all the sound and fury actually amounts to. This is no easy task for any artist to pull off, much less one entrenched in rock and roll, yet that is exactly what Joni Mitchell manages with *Wild Things Run Fast*.

For an artist whose work at times seemed to epitomize the self-absorption of the singer-songwriter, this is no mean feat. Although the subject matter remains fairly standard—mostly love anxiety, with the focus flitting from her own fears to the problems of flighty lovers and demanding children—the treatment of these themes has shifted dramatically. Mitchell has shifted from confessing so much as telling stories, and telling them in such a way that as much gets told about the narrator as about her subjects.

To this end, Mitchell has made careful use of ambiguity throughout *Wild Things Run Fast*. In the song, "Chinese Cafe," for example, her protagonist is talking to another woman about the estrangement she feels from her child, dropping the line "I bore her" and then pausing just long enough to imply one meaning before continuing, "But, I could not raise her." Elsewhere, her wordplay becomes less obvious. In "Man to Man," Mitchell's perspective is that of a woman who has flitted from pleasure to pleasure until she came upon a man to whom she wanted to make a commitment—only to find herself freezing up with fear at what such a commitment would mean. Ostensibly, the title of the song comes from her weariness of moving from man to man, but considering how "Man to Man" plays off against the song it follows, "You Dream Flat Tires," a rant against a noncommittal lover, the title takes on new resonance. Taken in terms of context, Mitchell's title has the distinct ring of *mea culpa*, that in hesitating herself she is speaking "man to man."

Mitchell seems to have put a lot of effort into arranging the album so that context becomes as important as text. Sometimes this takes the form of astute sequencing, such as following "Be Cool" with Leiber & Stoller's "You're So Square" (and thereby calling the earnest advice of the former into doubt); other times it's through a musical device, as in the way the title track contrasts the beefy distortion guitar of



PHOTO: NORMAN SEEFF

Joni Mitchell Makes Sense Of Youth's Sound And Fury

Steve Lukather against the careful, jazzy textures of Mitchell's acoustic guitar to underscore the difference between our heroine and her wild thing.

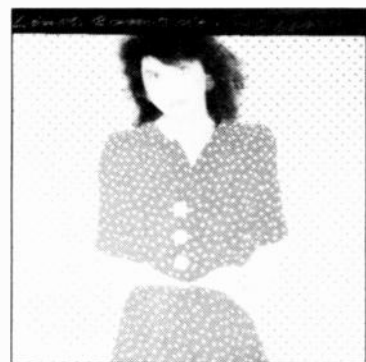
The logic behind these carefully juggled statements and hints lies in the way they allow Mitchell to preserve her illusions while dealing with reality. That's why, after setting up a classic "taming of the wild lover" scenario in "Wild Things Run Fast," Mitchell strikes at the essential ridiculousness of the situation by tagging the song with the lines, "Wild thing/I thought I loved you"—an obvious and rather whimsical allusion to the Troggs' "Wild Thing." "Underneath the Streetlight" gently lampoons declarations of undying love in swearing "by the stars above," and then going on to also swear by a passing plane and "The truck at the stoplight/With his airbrakes moaning." Perhaps the subtlest text of all comes in "Chinese Cafe," where Mitchell's refrain, "Nothing lasts for long," is applied to the burst of

exploitative growth following the discovery of uranium in her town. As a description of the abuse of quick money and greedy businessmen, her refrain is accurate enough, but when the notion of radioactive half-lives is applied to "Nothing lasts for long," the irony is chilling.

That Joni Mitchell could create songs of such depth after wallowing in the pretensions of *Mingus* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is heartening; that she should also manage to do so on an album that's even more melodically accessible than *Court and Spark* is positively astounding. Here, too, her success is simply a matter of coming to terms, this time with the various musical directions she has taken over the years. The basic textures of *Wild Things Run Fast* are similar to those of *Hejira*, except that Mitchell now projects warmth and a popish fullness where once she went after lonely spaciousness. She has come to terms with her jazz impulses by making the most of them

when they surface, as she does with Wayne Shorter's tart counterpoint throughout "Moon At the Window." More interesting, though, is the way she deals with rock and roll. Rather than try to push her rock influences in some strange new direction, Mitchell instead uses them as a sort of subtext, either in the joking manner of "Wild Things Run Fast" or to underscore a particular emotional/intellectual point, as with the interpolator of "Unchained Melody" in "Chinese Cafe." In both cases, she has not tried to make these songs over, but has made them a part of herself.

Ultimately, that's why *Wild Things Run Fast* succeeds so well. Its melodies and meanings resonate with a wholeness that's all too rare in pop music these days. Granted, this album lacks the factious energy that has given a lot of rock and roll its vitality, but if growing up can lead to this degree of depth and consistency, I certainly wouldn't mind seeing a few more wild things run slower.



Get Closer
Linda Ronstadt

Asylum

By Geoffrey Himes

No one has ever accused Linda Ronstadt of having less than a splendid natural voice. In fact, the complaint has been that this gift allowed her to be a lazy singer who stuck to the safe, middle-ground of a melody. She would fill out songs with her big voice instead of interpreting them. Moreover, she chose