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JONI MITCHELL

THE BENIGN DICTATOR

BY PERRY STERN



Joni Mitchell has a special, almost exalted place in the imaginations of Canadians. If all she had done was write "Both Sides Now" and "Circle Game" she'd still be as highly regarded as, say, Gordon Lightfoot or Leonard Cohen. But she went much farther than that. If she had moved on from folk music to pop and stopped there, she'd share the kind of cross-over success that Anne Murray has basked in. She'd be a perennial on award shows and we'd feel like a rich cousin had come home for a visit twice a year. But she went farther still. Having grown past commercial success in the late seventies she experimented with jazz and stretched the limits of "popular" music. That put Joni and Neil Young at the summit of our contribution to modern music. And still she hasn't stepped back. While good ol' boy Neil has retreated into right-wing politics and country music, Joni has stepped forward, again, leaving her most popular convention - the love song - behind, taking a hard look at the social issues of the day.

The first record I ever bought with my own money was *Blue*. While my father never seemed to mind my brother's Allman Brothers or my sister's Monkees, there was something about Joni's high notes that drove him wild. He forbid me playing it while he was home and my love affair with her began clandestinely and passionately. When I finally saw her, performing *Court and Spark* with Tom Scott's LA Express at Massey Hall, she had already developed a harder, more independent jazz sound. It was around the time *Rolling Stone* labelled her "Old Lady of The Year" and, as a teen-ager, I felt intimidated by the love songs she

wrote. They seemed to involve a lot of betrayal and disappointment and I wasn't prepared to be that cynical yet.

Dog Eat Dog is Mitchell's fourteenth album since 1968. She has run the gamut from folk to pop to jazz and is now making music that, put simply, contains elements of each style but is confined to none. It was a hard album to make — "one of the hardest," she explained — at least partly because technology has just about caught up with her imagination. It meant sharing production chores for the first time and it meant relying strongly on other peoples' ability to translate thought into sound, something she's been "messin' around with for years."

"I'm a painter by predilection," Mitchell explained, and she often relied on her artist's vocabulary to describe her musical situation. She'll "colour" a song with sound effects and "flesh out" a spot that lacks depth. As we talked she'd sing a line here and there, or imitate a sound to "flesh out" a description. Words didn't fail her, it's just that sometimes they were inadequate.

We talked about three particular aspects of *Dog Eat Dog* in the short time we had: The production team the project required; how songs were constructed in the studio; and, the effect that technology, particularly the Fairlight CMI, has had on her recording. I interrupted her infrequently with questions, she seemed to know where each one led and answered fully. The first thing I asked was how she managed to get anything done with three co-producers?

"I've always produced my own records so I'm used to being a benign dictator, or a free-school teacher. I'll bring players in and give them as much verbal instruction as I can. I don't know what I'm looking for so it's more or less letting them go and waiting until I discover what it is I'm looking for. A lot of my process is intuitive.

"There was some pressure from management and the record company.

They tried to sick a producer on me. Having never had one, I met with some of these 'Golden Boys' they suggested, but I wouldn't give it over. We felt secure that Larry (Klein, her husband, bassist and co-writer of two songs), Mike Shipley (the engineer) and I were capable of bringing about the music we wanted. I don't even like the word 'producer'. I think it slipped onto the last album but I never called for it to be used. It makes me feel like a head of lettuce. Like 'pro-duce'.

"Thomas (Dolby) had kind of a bid in to produce me, and, of course the record company was kind of intrigued by that idea. We felt we needed a technician who could help speed us up. In the studio we were still slow at simply getting our sounds out and manipulating the equipment. We needed someone who could type faster (she laughs), someone who could move around on the thing and give us a display of possibilities rapidly.

"We called Thomas and I explained to him what we needed was really a more menial position than the one he had vied for — to take a backseat on the project and to be more supportive than a producer who has the last say. He said that would be fine with him, it would be lovely, and that he was tired of people looking to him for all the answers. While he said that, I thought: Wait a minute — this guy's had three or four years of being in the foreground and it's almost like *A Chorus Line*. Can a person who's used to having control do that? If you can do that you're a better man than I am Gunga Din! It's very hard to restrain the joy and compulsion of the creative process.

"We did have some difficulties because Thomas would get a roll going. He'd get a sound set up and instead of turning it



JONI MITCHELL

have a player with a muted trumpet play a note as long as he could hold it out. Then I gave him another note, and I did that with several tracks. It's a very dissonant chord. Then we took that piece of tape and that harmony — with the equipment back then it was a real three-handed effort — and we dialed it down with a pitch modulator. So you get this sound (she makes the sound) that sets up the beginning of the song.

"That's the kind of illustrative music we're doing now, only the equipment has made that thinking appear more frequently. More people are doing that kind of thing now, quite simply because the machine itself has all the sounds built into it. When they're running through the files they find a sound and maybe they find a place for it. But I've been messin' around with that for a lot of years, now. It's just that the equipment opens up the possibilities to a greater degree.

"Sometimes there are flaws in the programming of the machine and it's the flaws that I think I like best. A bad loop will show up someplace on the programming, maybe like on F. You'll hear a pulse beat along with the chord. You'll hear 'whoa... whoa... whoa... whoa...', but if you move it up a key it will go 'whoa. whoa. whoa. whoa.' The tempo picks up with the pitch. So you find a key where the pulse will be a tempo that you like the groove of. You hold down the chord so that it's droning. It has a limited amount of voicing, it doesn't have any modulation, and you hold it for four minutes and you build your track off that. That, for me, would be a discipline of monochromatic harmony. It would be an intriguing task to take and something I intend to do.

"Music is funny and so trendy. It always has blind spots. For instance: In the sixties I had a heck of a time. The style then was for bass players to play with dead strings and for drummers to have the snare heads really tight and a pillow stuffed in the kick. A tight little sound. I was always craving rounder tones off the bass and slacker drum heads. Well, that came around in the late seventies and early eighties. Trend shifted and suddenly there were a lot of people who played that way. That's heavenly for me because I always heard sound that way. You're always bucking a trend that's so followed that if you told a bass player: 'Look, can you change your strings...?' First of all he'd think you've got no taste!

"Sometimes the things I want are so out of synch with fashion, and it appeared that this was happening again. I've been in this business long enough to have bucked these things before. The difficulty is in holding your ground and maintain-

ing confidence in your own ideas against unanimous expertise."

JONI MITCHELL DISCOGRAPHY

"Both Sides Now" (covered by Judy Collins) and "The Circle Game" (covered by Tom Rush) are picked up before she ever records.

1968 - *Song To A Seagull*, produced by David Crosby.

1969 - *Clouds*, includes "Woodstock".

1970 - *Ladies of the Canyon*

She moves away from folk towards "pop" sounds.

1971 - *Blue*

1972 - *For The Roses*

Moving towards jazz, Tom Scott and the LA Express become her back-up band.

1974 - *Court and Spark; Miles of Aisles*, a double live album.

Well past pop, she moves deeper into jazz using members of Weather Report.

1975 - *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*

1976 - *Hejira*

1977 - *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, double studio album. On the cover she poses as a black man.

1979 - *Mingus*, only record, besides her first, to not reach "Gold" status.

1980 - *Shadows and Light*, live album with members of the Pat Metheny Group and the Persuasions.

She moves beyond jazz towards a more contemporary sound.

1982 - *Wild Things Run Fast*

1985 - *Dog Eat Dog*



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