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Joni Mitchell—a star with staying power

By Lynde McCormick

"Miles of Aisles," By Joni Mitchell
(Asylum AB 202)

Through the past few years, Joni Mitchell has always been reliable. Rock and folk music has whirled in countless cycles, some were semi-permanent, most lay buried at the bottom of record collections.

But Miss Mitchell can be counted on to stay away from all the hoopla. She writes personal, intimate songs, and

Records

she is one of the few in this business who can sell records doing it — the only one with a staying power.

"Miles of Aisles," her newest release, is a two-record set of last summer's concert tour, although most of it was recorded in Los Angeles. Along with her previous album, "Court and Spark," Miss Mitchell has scored two of the best for last year with it. She managed to

maintain her original style and unique eloquence, but has also emerged with a new musical self, one with a bit more spark.

"Miles . . ." carries the listener from the early days of her career — with songs like "Circle Game" sung pretty much the way it was originally recorded — to some new material coupled with old songs sung new ways.

For instance, "Woodstock," "Carey," and "Big Yellow Taxi" — along with the two new cuts "Jericho" and "Love or Money" — come high-stepping out of their original folk costumes into some marvelous new rock 'n' roll get-ups. They and three others on one of the two records sparkle to the backup of Tom Scott's L.A. Express. Miss Mitchell and the L.A. Express have arranged her songs extremely well.

They are tight and bring a sense of rhythm to Miss Mitchell that seldom found its way into her vocals until "Court and Spark." She also sings with an improvisation and precision

normally associated with jazz singers while charming the listener with a kind of "gut" warmth fundamental to rock.

L.A. Express

The L.A. Express, easily one of the best session groups around, shares the spotlight — but doesn't block it out. The backup is always innovative, but the show is always Miss Mitchell. Members of the band recently toured with George Harrison, and, unfortunately for Harrison, provided most of the good music in the show. Guitarist Robben Ford's riffs are sometimes brilliant and always excellently phrased. He and Miss Mitchell take a double solo on "You Turn Me On I'm a Radio" (her voice and Ford's guitar) that stands out as one of the album's highlights.

The other record consists of Miss Mitchell singing with her own accompaniment, and it's typical of her other recorded material. Typically good, that is

But the half of the album with the

L.A. Express is my favorite. After at least 20 listenings, I still hear new things, and those already heard continue to fascinate. The contrast of material sums up Joni Mitchell: from an unbelievably upbeat, calypso-like "Carey" to a haunting "Rainy Night House" to a sad "The Last Time I Saw Richard."

Miss Mitchell is one of those rare artists who has achieved completeness in her style, but continues to find channels for growth within it. She writes and sings about her own feelings, but at the same time your feelings. And she does so without pretense or melodrama. She sings her lyrics as if they were prose, but invests them with wonderful, unshamed poetry.

She seems to be telling us that with all the "heavy" music and issues whirling frantically about in their glorious complexity, love and disappointment, laughter and sadness, in their neglected simplicity — are legitimate and worthwhile.