



Joni Mitchell: 'I've always painted. Music is really my second thing'

Now Joni Mitchell's more at ease at her easel, reports Adam Sweeting

They paint paradise

I WANT to paint a picture, Botticelli-style," sings Joni Mitchell in *The Only Joy In Town*, a song from her rather impressive new album, *Night Ride Home*. Experienced Mitchell-watchers will know that she has habitually painted her own album sleeves, and she managed to name-drop Van Gogh on her 1974 live album *Miles Of Asiles* ("nobody ever said to Van Gogh 'paint A Starry Night again, man,'" she scolded fans yelling out requests). But lately, she's been pushing her visual talents further.

"I've always painted," she says, describing a circle in the air with her cigarette, "and music is really my second thing. I've had the luxury of not having to earn my livelihood at it, of keeping it as pure as my heroes' work."

Mitchell is in town to discuss her new LP, but Art keeps rearing its exquisitely-proportioned head. Last September, Mitchell put her money where her turps-and-sables were, and visited London to oversee an exhibition of her art at the Rotunda gallery, at the Broadgate Arena. In December, the show travelled north to Edinburgh's City Art Centre, where it stayed until January 12.

Anyone who'd been tempted to dismiss her paintings as the indulgences of a Bohemian folkie from Alberta, transplanted to the lotus-eating me-cul-ture of the West Coast, would do well to bear in mind that an original Mitchell can fetch upwards of £20,000.

"The Scotland hang was more orthodox," she recalls. "You could isolate and create a certain intimacy, whereas the hang in London was quite grand and had to be done like a string of beads. You were hanging on curved walls, so the squares actually became straight lines on three sides and then curved on the bottom. Everything had to be arranged kind of like a mural."

Coming from the capital-intensive glitz of the rock industry, had she encountered any hostility from the fine-art bri-

gade, who perhaps saw her as an interloping dilettante?

Mitchell's eyebrows shoot upwards in alarm. "Gee, I didn't see any problem with it. I've decided to view it as fun, because if I was to take it too seriously I could probably get hurt. It's difficult for women to be taken seriously as artists anyway — they want to jump you in as 'a celebrity painter'."

She won't permit the stereotype forced on popular musicians to cramp her style. "They try to make you stay nicely in place, in a format. My taste is eclectic in all things, and I like that liberty. I think Van Gogh painted out of personal enthusiasm, you can tell by his letters to his brother, whereas Liechtenstein or the more cerebral American stars... I wouldn't want to get into the pigeon-holing that occurs there, I think for the sake of commerce."

"I have friends who paint comes. God, I can't imagine getting up and saying 'ooh, I've just got to paint some comes today'." Mitchell emits one of her conversation-punctuating laughs, a sort of smokey cackle laced with hysteria.

Perhaps the switch of media has revitalised her, because her new album, *Night Ride Home*, sounds fresher and rings truer than anything she's done in a decade. Turning away from the over-arranged complexities of 1988's *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*, and the tortuous global and ideological issues of 1985's *Dog Eat Dog*, the songs are lucid and insightful.

The music sounds like a return to an earlier style, and her straw-blond hair is back to late-sixties length, except it now frames an older and stronger face, frequently illuminated by humour. Her latest songs seem simple, except maybe a musical reworking of Yeats' *The Second Coming* called *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, but they're the sum total of several decades, finely ground.

Now 47, Mitchell has been through the jungle-rock of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, the jazz-blues of *Hejira* and the full-scale orchestrations of *Mingus*. She seems to have come full

circle, rediscovering a sublime melodic touch on songs like *Come In From The Cold* and *Two Grey Rooms*. You sense this is Joni stepping out of those carefully-posed Gap commercials and taking stock of an eventful life.

"It's pared down a little," she agrees. "There's still a lot of orchestration, but the main difference, I think, is in the mix. I brought the guitar level up a lot. A lot of people had been saying to me that they couldn't hear enough of the guitar if they wanted to try and learn a piece, so I brought the guitar forward and dried the voice out."

This speaks volumes about her audience. Ordinary rock stars have fans, or draw crowds. Joni Mitchell's people "learn" her "pieces", no doubt in the hope of transfusing a morsel of the artist's soul into themselves.

But it's indelible evidence that, to the discerning listener, Joni Mitchell remains definitive and best. Whippersnappers like Suzanne Vega or Tracy Chapman have been proposed by critics as "new Joni Mitchells", but the original won't stand for it.

"We could take Karen Peris of *Innocence Mission*," she says (whose album happened to be produced by Mitchell's husband, Larry Klein). "There is a girl with an original gift of melody. But none of these new Joni Mitchells had this ability. They had no musical talent. Poetically, they had nothing that bordered on literature."

She won't shy away from words like "literature", even if she'll admit that her efforts to

write short stories have ended in frustration. "Poetry is more diaphanous, and the form of a song is so deliciously compact. I like the brevity. Like *Cherokee Louise*, from *Night Ride Home* — I could write that as a short story or as a song, but the beauty of the short form is that you don't have to go into more detail. When you're singing it and colouring it with your voice, you can eliminate a lot of text. But maybe I'm not a good short story writer."

Mitchell's problem, if it is a problem, has been the breadth of her ambitions. Critics like things to be clearly labelled and accompanied by a press kit, and Mitchell has frequently been too much for them.

"For a while they said I was a folk musician, but by the time I started recording I wouldn't say I was a folk musician. My process was exactly the same as Crosby Stills Nash & Young, we all composed on acoustic instruments, yet they were considered rock."

When she joined fellow-Canadians Jane Siberry and Leonard Cohen in a charity auction in their homeland, the catalogue described Cohen as a poet, Siberry as a pop composer, and Mitchell as a folk singer. Yet she's also been dubbed "the Queen of rock'n'roll", and once took her jazz band, the *LA Express*, to Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*.

Is there anything she hasn't tried? Mitchell sucks on her cigarette thoughtfully, and says: "Classical?"

● *Night Ride Home* is released by Geffen Records on February 25.

Stop the elevator

Rock/pop

Adam Sweeting

WHERE THE PYRAMID MEETS

Nearer the beginning, there are sundry treats in store. Only *The Ones We Love*, featuring Jennifer Warnes, enlists a string section in the service of its gentle lilting motion.

The influence of Ms Warnes would appear to be benign,