



Joni: It's a labyrinthine affair

JONI MITCHELL: 'THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWN'S' (ASYLUM SYLA 8763)

First base.

'they can never get that close guesses at most guesses posed in what each set of time and change is touching' from 'Sweet Bird,' the second to last song here.

Second base.

'This record is a total work conceived graphically, musically, lyrically and accidentally — as a whole ... the whole unfolded like a mystery. It is not my intention to unravel that mystery for anyone, but rather to offer some additional clues ...'

from the sleeve notes.

Third base.

Henri Rousseau (1844-1910): a French painter, a post-Impressionist. Celebrated for his exotic jungle canvasses. These and their diminished perspectives (very observational), bright with colour, thick, glossy foliage and luminescent flora and fauna.

Fourth base.

'La Chameuse de Serpents (the snake enchantress): a painting by Rousseau.

Rousseau walks on trumpet paths ... paints a jungle flower behind her car

... there's a poppy snake in the dressing room'

from 'Jungle Line,' the second song here.

And that's only the beginning.

Joni Mitchell has curtailed her Laurel Canyon living. For almost two years now she's been living in LA Express drummer John Guerin — "I would especially like to thank ... John Guerin for showing me the root of the chord and where I was." So what to do when a not-so-private domestic life, previously the main source of subject matter for songs, is relatively stable and well-regulated? What to do with an incisive gift for telling observations, both introspective and otherwise? Look around, catch what's going up or down roundabouts.

'Hissing Of Summer Lawns' Ms. Mitchell's first studio record for two years, does just that. It's a socio-cultural overview, a many-layered and fascinating behavioural model. Rather like a prism, refracting different streams of light and colour as it's angled differently towards the sun. Or a slow-opening lotus flower, with pervasive scent, dream-inspiring and sensual.

There are any number of petals here. From the cover (designed by Ms. Mitchell) inwards. This depicts a group

of tribesmen (Amazonian, by the looks of them) dragging an anaconda across a moss green expanse. The surge of green threatens to overwhelm a horizon of skyscrapers, suburban maisonettes and garages, a church ... and westward, apart in a valley, there's a villa with courtyard and pool. Some kind of retreat. Lyrics, credits, details and dedications are all splashed across the inner sleeve, a pic of Joni in bikini swimming, lazing.

From then on in, things get a little complicated. What follows is a tentative interpretation of what's going on here. It's a pretty labyrinthine affair altogether, and entertains any number of possibilities.

However it seems the cover's pictorial metaphor of lush, tropical vegetation represents (?) the terminal effects of collective social atrophy. Letting it all be — just tuning in to the Middle American Dream. And if you let everything go ... what was initially a cautious strand of weed pushing up between the neatly laid patio tiles will end up a dense, choking carpet of creeper tendrils, wrapping themselves around buildings (and, figuratively, people), crushing them. And so, despite all the leisure time, the sophistication, the technology that's meant to have 'improved' the quality of life, the result in final analysis is no better, no worse than jungle primitivism. A feast of flowers, a feast of excess — there's little or no difference. All any kind of 'progress' has done is to create complacency, indolence ... or something like that. The jungle rush is an extreme development of reckoning that if you ignore something, it'll just go away.

Instead, the Dream acts like an opiate — 'poppy poison — poppy tourniquet' ('Jungle Line') — dampening and dimming sensibilities. Its throttling normality both causes and conceals any amount of pain and suffering (as in 'Harry's House—Centre-piece'). There are small town agonies ('Edith and the Kingpin'), every level of society is equally myopic, dream-orientated — whether hip, underground, Bohemian, cocktail groovy or whatever ('Boho Dance'). Archetypes on all sides: Church, bright lights and achievement fantasy, neon / movie plasticity ('Shades of Scarlet Conquering'). And so on, the themes interlock on so many levels, it's impossible to identify every connection. They just unravel as you listen to the record again and again. Big city jungle (concrete) and no opportunity for any expression of individuality.

Which is where Ms. Mitchell takes /

makes her stand. Because the effect of progressive immunisation against any 'reality' is like a sort of gentle soothing wash — oil (suntan?) over troubled waters. Hence the inside cover pic. Joni looking on, allowing herself to remain passive ('Hissing Of Summer Lawns' and 'Sweet Bird') — just an observer, a painter. The pool and water like a restless womb. Or, the other option — to attempt to cleave a way through the undergrowth, to question roles, as in 'Anima rising / queen of queens / ... she's a vengeful little goddess / with an ancient crown to fight' from 'Don't Interrupt The Sorrow'. And the snake corollary fits in here as well — from the same song and he chains me with that serpent to that Ethiopian wall'. Instinct versus (Maier's) daemon of techno-progress.

Anyway, that's only the start of it. 'Hissing Of Summer Lawns' is a shimmering, evanescent windscreen ... and she's a painter, she should know. The music is effortlessly complementary: support from the Crusaders and all of the LA Express save for Tom Scott, who's replaced by Chuck Findley (horns) and Bud Shank (saxes and flute). Guitarists Larry Carlton and Robben Ford provide crystalline accompaniment, with a rich mix of electric pianos (Joe Sample and Vic Feldman), rippled over bass (Wilton Felder and Max Bennett) and drums (John Guerin himself). Careful solos, deft arrangements, all re-emphasising the cover motif in their depth and luxuriance.

As do the three songs without ensemble playing. There's 'Sweet Bird,' with piano, electric and acoustic guitars, 'Jungle Line' and 'Shadows And Light.' 'Line' has African (Burundi) drums swelling under moog — played by Joni and imitating a to sax fills, whilst 'Light' has a call and response litany refrain, very cathedralic, spread over ARP-Farfisa synthesiser — also Ms. Mitchell. More interweaving of themes.

Music, words, images, evocations ... all these elements gracefully emerging. And Joni's singing as adventurous and unexpected as ever, with elastic phrasing, almost free-form.

*'Out on some borderline
some mark of in between
I lay down golden — in time
and woke up vanishing'
from 'Sweet Bird.'*

The qualities of 'Summer Lawns' remain provocatively elusive. Savour them.

Angus Mackinnon