

Songs for the New Woman

By LORAIN ALTERMAN

THE medium, even more than the message, may have made women's lib hard to swallow. Revolutionary literature has rarely been noted for its wit or style, and while Germaine Greer and Kate Millet made the best-seller lists, excessive pedantry and zeal does put people off. Just as in the past novelists and poets made dogma digestible, today it is the singer-songwriter who affects the mass audience by presenting the message in a medium, music, that immediately hits both the heart and the mind.

Helen Reddy's slick "I Am Woman" served notice that some female singer-songwriters are concerned with raising consciousness, but it is really three mature artists whose current and past work reflects the special awareness of the new woman. We know Joni Mitchell, Dory Previn and Yoko Ono as flesh and blood women—their career and love lives are public knowledge. They are not flounders for the movement but independent, intelligent talented women who have realized their own creative potentials. It's natural that their songs should communicate their understanding of what it is to be a woman and a human being.

Of the latest albums by the three, Yoko Ono's *Approximately Infinite Universe* (Apple SVBB 3399, two disks) is the least successful musically. Backed by the excellent rock band, Elephant Memory, Ono sings her



Singer Joni Mitchell

"She proves that women can create masterpieces"

songs straightforwardly rather than piercingly probing the limits of unintelligible screams as she's done in the past. But her melodies become mired in monotony and her voice, though often swathed in echo effect, lacks real color or interest.

Lyrical, Ono has a tendency to let polemics overtake poetry. While a song like "I Want My Love to Rest Tonight" makes the important point that men, as much as women, suffer from traditional role-playing, the words don't always fit the rhythm and it comes off more as a tract than a song. One need only listen to Dory Previn's "Don't Push Him Down," which carries essentially the same me-

sage, to see how Previn's subtle, witty and economical use of words makes a stirring song with so much more impact. But Ono can write controlled, charming lyrics as in "Have You Seen a Horizon Lately," which recommends us to hold on to beauty because it easily slips away.

This two-record set underlines one of Ono's basic problems — self-indulgence. She would have been better off with a single record, particularly since the songs are unrelieved by any meditative interest. By not editing herself, Ono waters down the punch of such a powerful and harrowing song as "Looking Over from My Hotel Window," a statement of her feelings at age 39. Yet despite my reservations about her work, Ono merits attention because she freely reveals herself to us in a way that makes us grasp what thoughtful men and women face.

On her fourth and newest album, *Mary C. Brown and the Hollywood Sign* (United Artists UAS 5657), Dory Previn once again proves herself to be a songwriter of extraordinary sensitivity and sophistication. Actually the score from a musical she wrote of the same name (the title song was on her second album, "Mythical Kings and Iguanas"), this album stands as a concept album which takes the self from specific problems to an ultimate spiritual identification with a universe that encompasses all the variety, all the maleness and femaleness, that is in the world.

Of course, any brief summary is bound to make this album sound highfalutin, but Previn's images and stories are so concrete that she always keeps in touch with reality. Furthermore, although she has been branded a lady of sorrow, most of

her songs are fashioned with a wit and irony that underlines their truths even more. For example, in "The Midget's Lament," a midget wishes he were black in order to stand out from his fellows. Laughter makes us see how any minority, whether it be midget, black or female, gets lumped under a label rather than treated as individuals. Previn's voice caresses

"When a Man Wants a Woman" while Laurindo Almeida's romantic acoustic guitar sighs in the background. But instead of cooing about love as you might expect, the lyrics point out that "when a man wants a woman/He says it's a compliment . . . but when a woman wants a man/He says she's threatening him." Again irony scores the point.

Throughout the album, although her voice is only fair, Previn dips into a wide variety of musical styles to fit the content of her lyrics.

Trooping out a pack of outcasts and misfits of one kind or another, Previn's songs relate poignantly to women. Women are outcasts in this male dominated society and those who have

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struggled for self-fulfillment outside the accepted wife-mother norm have too often been viewed as misfits. Without ever lapsing into shrill rhetoric, Previn's album conveys all this with dazzling brilliance and style.

Joni Mitchell is the most accomplished musician of these three women so that every element—music, voice and lyric — merge to create an intensely moving experience on her current LP, *For The Roses* (Asylum SD 5057). Much of this breathtaking collection of songs catalogues the trials of love with the wisdom and realism that comes from experience wrapped in an exquisite sensibility. Mitchell is not a girl basking in impossibly romantic dreams, but a woman who has gained the strength and understanding to see that love doesn't require a victim or a victimizer. Just listen to her pungent "Woman of Heart and Mind" asserting her awareness of her own needs as openly as the inside photo reveals her standing naked on a rock in the sea.

Like Previn's album, this one follows a philosophical progression from the opening cut, "Banquet," laying

down the basic inequities of life to the closing "Judgement of the Moon and Stars (Ludwig's Tune)," which so beautifully uses the image of Beethoven's deafness to say that we must defy the unjust universe by living and creating. Certainly this does not pertain to just one sex, but Beethoven's deafness does relate to being a woman. Despite his handicap, Beethoven composed great music. Despite the pressures of society, women—as Mitchell's work proves—can create masterpieces.

Each of Mitchell's songs is a gem glistening with her elegant way with language, her pointed splashes of irony and her perfect shaping of images. Never does Mitchell voice a thought or feeling commonly. She's a songwriter and singer of genius who can't help but make us feel we are not alone.

As Mitchell writes in "Lesson in Survival," "When you dig down deep/you lose good sleep"; but none of these women fears to explore her soul. By giving us gifts of themselves, Joni Mitchell, Dory Previn and Yoko Ono help us to understand ourselves and so are liberating to both women and men.

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