

Joni Mitchell's Moderation

Joni comes full circle in an album reflecting fifteen years

"Nothing lasts for long," sings Joni Mitchell on her latest album *Wild Things Run Fast*, from the song "Chinese Cafe," and that perhaps, is the statement that is most interesting on Joni's newest portrait of life in a love-obsessed world. I say interesting, because Mitchell, who has been recording now for over fifteen years, has not only lasted for ages and ages, but has created works of near genius in not only the genres of folk (*Ladies Of The Canyon* and *Blue*), and pop (*Court and Spark*) but in jazz as well (*Mingus and her live*, breathtakingly beautiful *Shadows and Light*). Interesting because it seems the eternally love-lorn poetess of the past has shed her ballad-like bravado and adapted an acceptance of love even Donna Summer could admire.

Debbie Millman

Roberta Joan Anderson has come along way since the days she was singing in the little nightclubs of Saskatchewan, Canada. Intending to go into the graphic arts, she decided after one year of art college that she preferred to play guitar and sing. An intuitive and fresh talent from the day she entered the life of musician, she attracted the attentions of guitarist Chuck Mitchell in the early sixties while she was singing the rounds in Canada. Married after only a brief courtship, their marriage was ill-fated as soon as Joni began intensely pursuing her musical rather than romantic instincts (ironically enough). Although the mid-sixties folk music scene had already exploded and had begun to dissipate by the time Mitchell arrived in New York, she quickly attracted the likes of Tom Rush and Judy Collins with such songs as "The Circle Game" and "Both Sides Now." The rumor went around the music circles about this brutally honest woman who sang songs about herself, a woman, in a completely new, startlingly sensitive, and innovative way. They were right. *Song To A Seagull*, Mitchell's first album, produced by David Crosby, was explosive in a subtle way; songs like "Sistotowbell Lane" were not only songs revealing touching confes-

sions of a person's psyche, they painted portraits of completely unabashed honesty. There were touches of Laura Nyro here, as well as Joan Baez, but the poetic imagery as well as melodic beauty were unprecedented.

A beautiful and talented woman is hard to ignore, but one that is successful is impossible. Such was the case for Joni after the release of *Clouds* and *Ladies Of The Canyon*. Friends with Neil Young since her early days in Canada (they lived in the same neighborhood and used to joke about becoming famous) she became immersed in the folk/art/hippie scene with CSN & Young, plunged into a relationship with Graham Nash, and moved in with him and two cats on Laurel Canyon in California. Though that relationship was also ill-fated (as most love-affairs with Joni seem to be), it produced some of the prettiest songs in folk music that year. From Joni: "Willie", the sentimental appraisal of her everlasting love (Willie is Graham's nickname): "Willie is my child, he is my father ... I would be his lady all my life" and from Nash: "Our House": "Staring at the fire for hours and hours while I listen to you play your love songs all night long for me, only for me."

Well, for some reason Nash couldn't handle her dedication, and they split up. Mitchell went into seclusion, then travelled to Greece, where she lamented her lost love, and wrote songs. She couldn't stay away too long, and though still depressed, produced what some believe was her actual breakthrough album, *Blue*. The emotional intensity of this album was formidable, her lyrics were dark, almost majestic and her melodies, though still not overly complex, were unusual. At this particular time of her career, her voice was at the forefront rather than the instruments behind it. Nevertheless, Crosby had taught her a method of tuning her guitar that was unique and her songs had a 'Joni' quality that she alone possessed.

During the preparation of the album *For The Roses*, Joni met Tom Scott, horn player of the L.A. Express (who has played with everyone from Stevie Wonder to

Rickie Lee Jones). *For The Roses* had some minor accompaniment, but it wasn't until she teamed up with the entire L.A. Express in 1974 that she achieved totally full, purely unadulterated, pop. It wasn't hokey-pokey trash pop, mind you, but an elusive, introspective, fast-paced pop. *Court and Spark* was a successful album, commercially, as well as critically, and her place in the music business was firmly established.

Her next studio album, *Hejira* was also well received, at this point in Joni's life she began to concern herself with settling down and kept threatening her manager Eliot Roberts that this tour was the last tour, but somehow, she kept moving. Each love affair seemed to be a 'false-alarm' as she confessed her broken heart in the touching classic "Amelia". Her own existence, and the reason for it was plaguing her relentlessly; "Hejira" put it best: "I look at the granite marker/those tributes to eternity, to finality/then I look at myself here/chicken scratching for my immortality."

panies Joni in a way that enhances her vocals in a way that challenges the perfection of the vocal duets of Billie Holiday and Al Hibber. *Shadows and Light* is a sincere album, it reflects the growth Mitchell made down the long road of introspection, imperfection, and fame. The haunting remakes of "Woodstock" and "Furry Sings The Blues" prove her ability to really sing the blues. The remake of her own "Woodstock" is almost frightening, and gives the 'Woodstock' era a chillingly, near apocalyptic feeling. On first listening to the cut, I was struck by the transformation she had made since her first days as 'spokeswomen' for the time.

Rushing ahead to the present, 1982 and *Wild Things Run Fast*. I admit it - I have mixed emotions about the album. In many, many ways it is very beautiful. First the exceptional: the musicianship. Over the past fifteen years Joni Mitchell has become one hell of a musician. Both her guitar and piano playing are really good. Her voice has changed a lot over the years, also. Back in the days of *Song To A Seagull* her

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In the interim she was becoming a better musician and started becoming more and more involved with jazz rhythms. Her first attempts at this new-found art went unappreciated, nevertheless both *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* were serious attempts exhibiting a lot of potential. "In France They Kiss On Main Street" and "Dreamland" were extremely promising, in fact it wasn't until the 1979 release of *Shadows and Light* that they realized their full potential.

1979 was an important year for Joni. Charles Mingus (jazz bass player) wrote six songs for Joni to put lyrics to. He presented to her a thoroughly new world of music; in her own words, "I was curious! It was as if I had been standing by a river-one toe in the water-feeling it out-and Charlie came by and pushed me in-sink or swim"-him laughing at me dog paddling around in currents of black classical music." In any case, the experiences Joni had with Mingus heavily influenced her music, and suddenly her music was not simply tailored with a jazzy undertone, Mingus, the album was jazz, pure and complex. The musicians playing on the album are impressive: Eddie Gomez on bass, John McLaughlin on guitar, Jan Hammer on mini moog, Stanley Clark on bass, and others. Unfortunately Joni's record buying public didn't seem to approve of this eclectic, artsy music, and, once again, it didn't fare well on the record stands. Fortunately for her die-hard fans, (who might not have fully understood what she was doing but remained respectfully aware) the public opinion did not seem to taint her artistic convictions, and she once again teamed up with some phenomenal musicians to accompany her on her next tour.

What can one say about her band on *Shadows and Light*? The names of these men almost speak for themselves: Jaco Pastorius on bass, Pat Metheny on lead guitar, Lyle Mays on keyboards, and Michael Brecker on sax. Pastorius and Metheny go way back to their days at Miami University, their playing together is masterful. Mays, who played on Metheny's first album after Pat's debut with Gary Burton, and has now joined Eberhard Weber on his latest, *Later That Evening*, accom-

voice trailed and shrilled, soared and fell, only to peak again, then to drop down an octave or two, all seemingly effortlessly. Now Joni is more subtle, time has mellowed "the chirp" out a bit; her voice is deep, full, almost mysterious. Once and a while she'll still surprise you, though, as in "Ladies Man". Again, she is accompanied by the best: Wayne Shorter (of Weather Report fame), Larry Williams, John Guerin (L.A. Express), Larry Carlton, an old familiar face, James Taylor, and a new addition, Lionel Ritchie, who sings vocals with Joni on "You Dream Flat Tires".

The album opens with an absolute masterpiece: "Chinese Cafe". The song is interspersed with lines from the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" through her own tune. The song seems to relate Joni's new stance in life-"Caught in the middle/Carol, we're middle class/we're middle aged/We were wild in the old days/Birth of rock 'n roll days/Now your kids are coming up straight/and my child's a stranger." But the brilliant lyrics signify what is wrong with the album. Joni has grown up, and she's so straight. Gone are the heart-wrenching love-lamenting lyrics (for the most part), in its place are the acceptances of love, attachments, corny, heart-warming responsibilities. Oh Joni! When you spoke of your "false alarms" and "people's parties" you spoke for all of us. When you were in despair, we could relate, we could understand. I can't understand how you can sing "Baby, you're so square, darlin' I don't care"- you used to care. I can't understand how you can say "We got a chance, hot dog darlin', we got a chance" (*Hot dog, darlin'??*)

Regardless of my personal opinion, I'm glad she's happy. It's very obvious from this album, Joni has found her man, she's secure, she's being loved for who she is, etc, etc. It is a lovely album. The songs are soft and warm; "Love", "Moon At The Window", and "Solid Love" are very beautiful songs. (The word love, by the way, is mentioned 57 times on this album). In a sense, Joni has come a full circle. She's always been obsessed by love, when she started singing it nearly gave her a nervous breakdown, now it is "the greatest beauty in her life". It is still vintage Joni, but like the woman says herself, "Nothing lasts for long."

