

Good Words for Joni

GOD BLESS Mr. Kratzman. He taught Joni Mitchell to love words.

Miss Mitchell, the 23-year-old Canadian who has been acclaimed as the year's most exciting songwriter, dedicated her first album (on Reprise) to her former English teacher. He has reason to be proud.

Produced by ex-Byrd David Crosby, the album illustrates that Miss Mitchell is not only a talented lyricist and composer but an accomplished musician, a powerful singer, and a gifted artist (she even designed the cover).

It's a beautiful LP, as carefully put together as each of the individual songs in it.

PART ONE, the first side, is called "I Came to the City" and tells, in five songs, about the loneliness, the excitement, and the indifference of New York.

Okay, so every singer of contemporary songs has at least one alienation-in-the-big-city thing in his repertoire.

But Miss Mitchell seems incapable of using a cliché (while, at the same time, never falling into the opposite trap of forcing images for the sole purpose of avoiding triteness.) Her work has a clarity that is almost startling at times.

And while she writes of loneliness, she never allows her vision to be clouded by self-pity. Her songs are personal, but never inner-directed. She's writing for other people.

SHE SINGS of the end of love in "I Had a King."

**I had a king in a tenement castle
Lately he's taken to painting the pastel walls brown . . .
I can't go back there anymore
You know my keys won't fit the door
You know my thoughts don't fit the man
They never can, they never can**

And of new love in "Michael from Mountains," and a girl someone left behind in "Marcie" and the perennial love affair with New York itself in "Night in the City."

Then, in "Nathan Le Franeer," she tells us about the cab driver who took her to La Guardia airport, where she boarded a plane to Canada. Nathan is in some ways like the city she is leaving behind.

**He asked me for a dollar more
He cursed me to my face
He hated everyone who paid to ride
And share his common space**

IN THE SECOND PART of the album, "Out of the City and Down to the Seaside," she sings of country things—muffin buns and berries, seagulls and wheat fields and pirate legends and lazy days in the sun.

Miss Mitchell's vocal range is remarkable. The three overdubbed songs, in which she sings two parts, sound as if they are performed by two persons.

She also plays piano, guitar and something called a banshee.

But it is her talent for capturing a fleeting moment, for describing an elusive feeling in words, that has led some critics to describe her as "enchanted."

OTHER ARTISTS, recognizing this, have paid her the tribute of recording her songs—artists like Dave Van Ronk, Judy Collins, Tom Rush and Gordon Lightfoot.

Her songs are simple and sensual, carefully constructed but seemingly uncontrived. She appeals to all the senses, splashing her lyrics with brilliant colors, with tastes bitter and sour and sweet, with pleasant scents and harsh odors.

Perhaps the clarity of her lyrics derives from the fact that she is first of all a story-teller, preferring the description of situations and characters to philosophical contemplation of their causes or motives.

Her people tell their own stories—Marcie, who "dusts her tables with his shirt;" Nathan, with his grumbling manner; the lady in the city who has many lovers but is "busy being free."

THE MOST COMPLEX story is told in "The Pirate of Penance." It's the story of a love triangle—a swashbuckling, unfaithful pirate, a dancehall girl and a genteel lady. The story unfolds and a mystery emerges—but Miss Mitchell leaves the conclusions to the listener.

And because she has such great control of her material — she knows what to leave out as well as what to put in—her images just seem to happen by themselves: "I saw an aging cripple selling Superman balloons."

In an age when people seem bent at times on destroying language with bureaucratic directives, obtuse political statements and adjectival advertising copy, Miss Mitchell's respect for words is a joy.