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MUSIC

Joni Mitchell
pitches fast
in her latest

ERIC SCHAFER

Dog Eat Dog by Joni Mitchell
(Geffen Records)

If Joni Mitchell were a baseball pitcher, she'd be what hitters call "Sneaky fast." Those type of pitchers are the subtle guys, the ones who don't look big or strong or fast from the sidelines. Step into the batter's box, however, and the pitches seem to hop right past you before you know it.

Joni Mitchell's talent comes at you like one of those fastballs. Her abilities are vast and varied, and yet she is able to display them in such a relaxed, nonchalant, almost careless manner that you don't know what you've just heard or seen until it's past you. The intensity of Mitchell's songs belie this apparent nonchalance, though. One listen of her new album, *Dog Eat Dog*, will tell you that the woman is anything but laid back.

As usual, Mitchell is refreshingly up to date and evocative in both her lyrics and music. Her poetic writing, ranging in topics from Ethiopia to America's huckster evangelists, is as pointed and poignant as ever. She doesn't fail, either, to toss in her regular quota of incisive observations on love.

The music is once again new in style, sort of a rough mix of Mitchell's jazz leanings and the influence of co-producer synthesizer wiz Thomas Dolby. The music is not, however, as successful as the lyrics.

Mitchell opens and closes *Dog Eat Dog* with love songs which symbolically and stylistically sum up the entire album. The first track, *Good Friends*, has Mitchell tantalizingly holding onto her words until the last second, then tossing them by the listener with an effortless flick of her tongue. Her love is random here, infrequent ("I have come to see you

*Dog Eat Dog* by Joni Mitchell

— maybe once or twice a year") yet it is anything but casual or inconsistent: "No hearts of gold, no nerves of steel/No blame for what we can and cannot feel/No nerves of steel, no hearts of gold/No blame for what we can and cannot control."

One of the verses seems to beautifully encapsulate Mitchell's approach to her entire career: "Sometimes change comes at you like a broadside accident/There is chaos to the order, random things you can't prevent/There could be trouble around the corner/There could be beauty down the street..."

Lucky Girl is a wonderful autobiography, as it shows that despite everything she's been through, Mitchell is still innocent and can make herself vulnerable: "I'm a lucky girl/I found my friend/I been all around the world/Mission impossible/Chasing the rainbow's end/Wise guys/boobie-prize-guys/And sly lover boys with big bad bedroom eyes.../I never loved a man I trusted/As far as I could pitch my shoe/'til I loved you."

Mitchell's social and political observations are just as percep-

tive and powerful as her love songs. *Fiction* details the confusion of today's society; *Smokin' (Empty, Try Another)*, with its scream of "Nicotine attack!" details everyday little frustrations. The title track and *Tax Free* (the latter featuring an evangelist speech from actor Rod Steiger) don't let us forget that the con man is unfortunately still alive and thriving in America.

Ethiopia is a cry nearly as loud as that from those who are dying there: "Hot winds and hunger cries — Ethiopia/Flies in your babies' eyes--Ethiopia/Walking sticks on burning plains/Betrayed by politics/Abandoned by the rains/On and on — the human need/On and on — the human greed profanes Ethiopia."

It is unfortunate that the rather sparse, occasionally cold music and arrangements of *Dog Eat Dog* pull the album down somewhat. They do not do justice to Mitchell's lyrics, and because of their confining nature, they rarely allow her to stretch out with her beautiful voice. This turns out to be a small, if important complaint, however. The power of Mitchell's poems and her performance more than carry her to success on this album.