

POP

Chalk Marks in a Rainstorm

Joni Mitchell

Geffen XGHS 24172

Mitchell's first album in three years is an eclectic and generally satisfying return to form after 1985's lacklustre *Dog Eat Dog*.

The albums are not dissimilar: the synthesizer seems to be Mitchell's instrument of choice these days and, like *Dog Eat Dog*, *Chalk Marks* is topical, touching on war, consumerism, Indian land claims and the achiever society.

But where *Dog Eat Dog* buzzed and thumped like a cross between a video game and an electrofunk record, *Chalk Marks* demonstrates a more delicate touch. Rather than thudding basslines and treated voices, Mitchell has relied on gentle washes of keyboards, more complex rhythms and a bevy of familiar voices — including Billy Idol, Willie Nelson and Peter Gabriel — which provide counterpoint to her high, distinctive voice on songs such as Mitchell's *My Secret Place* and the old chestnut *Cool Water*.

But if Mitchell has found her feet (and her voice) in the muddle of new technology, her attempts at topicality are still occasionally awkward and heavy-handed.

Lakota, a song for the Hopi Indians, walks a tightrope between tribute and caricature, and her audio collage on *The Reoccurring Dream*, a satire of advertising culture, is clever. But like her portrayal of yuppiedom in songs such as

Number One and Snakes and Ladders, her dismissal of advertising comes off a little like shooting fish in a barrel — the target is more appropriate to the schtick of a third-rate stand-up comic than someone of Mitchell's considerable talent and stature.

There's nothing wrong with being timely, but Mitchell's superficial treatment of some of these shopworn topics often leaves one wondering if the album's title — with its suggestion of the ephemeral — might not be applied to the record itself.

Taming the Power Inside Michel Lemieux

Vertigo 835 543

Listening to Michel Lemieux's earlier debut mini-LP, one was left with the feeling that he was promising pie and delivering crust — that the whole exercise might make more sense if we could see the inventive staging that accompanied the songs. *Taming the Power Inside*, the Quebec performance artist's first full-length album, is more fully realized, offering a bit of everything: lushly orchestrated ballads and show tunes, hard electrofunk and diddly electro-pop, even an AOR rocker.

The real surprise is that much of it stands on its own musically. His funk is quirky and hard-hitting and his ballads suitably grand. And while Lemieux's English lyrics are still awkward at times, this record is a giant step forward.

Chris Dafoe