

The Pop Life

Robert Palmer

Sound tracks are peppering the Top 10 list.

THE year 1980 may be remembered by pop-music chroniclers as the Year of the Sound Track. At present, three of the nation's Top 10 albums are sound tracks from films — "Xanadu," "Urban Cowboy" and "Honeysuckle Rose." With more and more music moguls making films and with the sound tracks from "Fame" and Paul Simon's "One-Trick Pony" apparently headed for the Top 10, the trend is likely to continue. Which brings us to "Times Square," a curious two-record sound-track album from the very film of the same name.

"Times Square" bears the imprimatur of the producer Robert Stigwood, who started the latest sound-track boom with his phenomenally successful "Saturday Night Fever." It's been widely touted as the film that will do for new wave rock what "Saturday Night Fever" did for disco.

In any case, the sound track album is available on Mr. Stigwood's RSO Records. Several creative new wave performers (XTC, the Cure, Joe Jackson, the Ruts) are represented, but by songs that are among their most forgettable. There also are some decidedly old wave performances (by Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees, among others) and several appalling attempts to manufacture punk rock, the most appalling of which boasts this chorus: "Spic, Nigger, Faggot, Bum, Your daughter is one." Which one?

The sound track includes some first rate songs and performances, too. Roxy Music's "Same Old Scene" makes a powerful theme under the film's credits. "Talk of the Town," by the Pretenders, an English single not yet released in the United States, is one of that band's most durable creations. "Life During Wartime," by the Talking Heads, is already a classic of sorts, but

the movie manages to ridicule it by using it as an improbable accompaniment to the rhythmic cavorting of a gang of young blacks carrying portable radios. XTC's Andy Partridge compared "Times Square" to "a first form production" — a school play — in a recent issue of Britain's *New Musical Express*. "But anything to get our songs across to more people," he added. He may live to regret those words.

Joni Mitchell's new album "Shadows and Light" (Elektra) is a two-record set, recorded live with a jazz-fusion band that includes the exceptional young guitarist Pat Metheny. Mr. Metheny, who's bound to acquire some new fans as a result of his work with Miss Mitchell, is following her album with a two-record set of his own. It's called "80/81" (ECM), and while it isn't as overtly commercial as his tightly arranged quartet LP "American Garage," it does indicate he's still taking himself seriously as a musician.

In a sense, Mr. Metheny has taken the same sort of chance on "80/81" that Miss Mitchell took when she began working with jazz-oriented musicians for her collaboration with the late Charles Mingus. Both projects represent a broadening of horizons, and both have entailed working without most of the structural props that helped make Miss Mitchell's and Mr. Metheny's earlier music so immediately accessible. Both artists foreshadowed their present departures, Miss Mitchell in the increasingly free flowing, open ended songs on her last few albums, Mr. Metheny on his first ECM album, "Bright Size Life," a more open affair than his subsequent LP's. But "80/81" and Miss Mitchell's "Mingus" and "Shadows and Light" were fresh, risky undertakings nevertheless.

"Shadows and Light" isn't as risky as it might have been, however. Three of the songs are repeated from "Mingus," Miss Mitchell's previous album, and the jazz-fusion stars who toured with her late last year (Mr. Metheny; the pianist Lyle Mays from his quartet; Michael Brecker on tenor saxophone; Don Alias on drums, and Jaco Pastorius on bass) generally subordinated their egos to the demands of her music.

But by now, Miss Mitchell's musical range is pretty broad, and in fact her eclecticism emerges as the new album's most winning feature. The new

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Joel Bernstein

Joni Mitchell, whose new album is titled "Shadows of Light."

performances of her recent songs don't add much to the earlier versions, but there's a sweet remake of Frankie Lyman's 1950's classic "Why Do Fools Fall in Love." with Mr. Brecker playing some convincingly gritty rock-and-roll saxophone and Mr. Alias imitating the drummer on the Lyman original.

Here and on several other numbers, the Persuasions sing vocal backgrounds and blend interestingly with the musicians, several of whom are given relatively extensive solo space.

Mr. Metheny's "80/81" is riskier but more uneven. Dewey Redman and Charlie Haden, the saxophonist and bassist who are celebrated for their work with Ornette Coleman and Keith Jarrett, are in the backing group, along with the formidable drummer Jack DeJohnette and Michael Brecker. It's an interesting but odd grouping, and Mr. Metheny has given the players only the flimsiest structures on which to build their improvisations. "Open," a free-form piece that's essentially a string of solos, tends to ramble, and so do the two "Folk Songs" (one composed by Mr. Metheny, the other by Mr. Haden) that take up the album's first side. But it's interesting to hear Mr. Metheny tackle Ornette Coleman's "Turnaround," and the free-wheeling contexts offered by most of the other pieces suit his playing just fine.

Robert Jr. Lockwood and Johnny Shines, who are making one of their infrequent New York appearances at Tramp's, 125 East 15th Street, on Sunday night, play and sing Mississippi Delta blues. But unlike many blues artists with traditional backgrounds, they've continued to evolve. "Hangin' On," their new Rounder album, includes band numbers that verge on contemporary funk and jazz styles as well as several gripping duets in a more familiar Delta vein. Hard-core blues fans won't be happy with the entire album, but they'll be ecstatic over "Dust My Broom," a reissue album of some of the finest Lockwood and Shines performances from the 1950's on the English Flyright label. Most of Mr. Shines's performances feature the harmonica virtuoso Walter Horton at the peak of his powers, and Mr. Lockwood's four numbers are superb, rocking band blues.