

E4

The Pittsburgh Press

Sunday, March 24, 1991

RECORDINGS

At 47, Joni Mitchell takes a look back

By Peter B. King

The Pittsburgh Press

"Night Ride Home," Joni Mitchell. *Geffen*

On her 16th album, Joni Mitchell shuns much of the high-tech production she embraced on her past two recordings. With Mitchell playing more guitar than keyboard, and with husband Larry Klein playing bass in a style that recalls Jaco Pastorius, the album sounds somewhat like 1976's "Hejira."

Some reviewers are calling "Night Ride Home" a return to top form for Mitchell, but that's a little much. Some '70s efforts like "Blue," "Court and Spark" and "Hejira" are hard to top.

Since then, Mitchell's voice has lost some of its range and sweetness. What's more, she no longer musters endless, effortless musical and lyrical invention. Rather than pushing boundaries, "Night Ride Home" reprises some of her earlier musical and verbal themes. But if Mitchell can no longer surpass herself, she still beats most of the current pop pack.

Accompanied by what sounds like electronically sampled crickets, the album's unassuming title track tells of a woman and the man she loves returning home one night. But the "Night Ride Home" title also speaks to the album's preoccupation with Mitchell's youth in Saskatchewan, Canada.

One of the album's highlights is a swing tune called "Ray's Dad's Cadillac." The teenage narrator coos about her romance with the son of the math teacher out by the blue lights on the airport road, and small-town life in the '50s comes alive.

Just as vivid but bleaker, "Cherokee Louise" tells of an Indian child who runs away from abusive parents.

"Night Ride Home's" darkest moment comes in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Based on a W.B. Yeats poem, this compelling, unsettling tune evokes the re-awakening of the Biblical leviathan.

A few other bleak songs don't do as much for me. I'm not sure what Mitchell is going on about in "Passion Play (When All the Slaves Are Free)" or "The Windfall (Everything for Nothing)."

On the sweet side, "The Only Joy in Town" tells of a free-spirited lady-killer in Rome. Make that bittersweet. "In my youth I would have followed him/All through this terra-cotta town," sings the 47-year-old Mitchell. The song brings to mind tunes like "Carey" and "California," in which a much-younger narrator romanced her way across Europe. And it sums up the generally engaging, clear-eyed backward glance of "Night Ride Home."

"Vodou Adjae," Boukman Eksperyans. *Mango/Antilles*

Superstars in their native Haiti, Boukman Eksperyans makes heavy use of traditional rhythms and melodies from the Vodou religion and from *rara*, a spring festival.

They mix them with high-tech production and current Caribbean pop. A synthesizer mimics the hooting of a bamboo trumpet. Traditional Vodou drums mesh with slap-and-pop electric bass.

The band's rootsy approach has helped steer Haiti's pop music scene away from the *compas* and rock-*compas* bands that had dominated for 30 years. Boukman's success reflects a new,

post-dictatorship pride in Haitian peasant culture and the country's African heritage. The Creole-language lyrics (translated into English) relate that pride, as well as the country's appalling poverty.

"Vodou Adjae" has one anomalous, disappointing moment — a ballad called "Tribilasyon" that sounds like an outtake from Chicago 21. Other than that, the album sizzles with rich harmonies and powerful rhythms.

"Brazil Classics 3: Forro etc.," various artists. *Luaka Bop/Warner Bros.*

David Byrne's latest Brazilian compilation turns to the backlands of the arid, impoverished northeast. He describes the beat of the *forro* style (pronounced fa-hoe) as a mix between polka and ska. Actually, this record contains a number of rhythms, as *forro* has cross-pollinated with everything from samba to reggae.

What links all these songs is accordion playing as fiery as anything in zydeco or townshp *live*. There also are elements found in other Afro-Brazilian music, such as intoxicating, multi-layered percussion and radiant vocal choirs.

Forro was popularized by Luiz Gonzaga, who dressed in cowboy clothes and sang hymns to outlaws — not unlike American country singers. The album contains four Gonzaga tunes, as well as a strong cover version of Gonzaga's classic "Asa Branca (White Wing)."

Also represented is Dominginhos, considered Gonzaga's major disciple; Gai Costa, a Brazilian superstar more known for samba-based material; and Jackson do Pandeiro, whose "Chiclete com Banana (Chewing Gum With Bananas)" is a witty comment on the invasion of American mass culture. Translations of the Portuguese are included.

(Peter B. King is The Pittsburgh Press pop music critic.)



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