

MUSIC

JONI MITCHELL

Hissing of summer lawns

by K.P. Ivanov

Is it heresy now to say that very little "new" rock and roll excites me these days? Between wonderings about just exactly what rock and roll might be, I find myself chasing after other sorts of music that only a few short years ago I never knew existed. Perhaps rock and roll has become everything, but I'm suspicious. Perhaps rock and roll is nothing.

Joni Mitchell just might be a case in point if only she hadn't arisen from such humble circumstances. She never sang rock, if you think about it. "Chelsea Morning" and "Big Yellow Taxi" were asides, "You Turn Me On" and "Help Me" simple whimsy: she's a folk-singer first of all, pure of voice and free of static-electricity.

Unfortunately, Ms. Mitchell's latest offerings have pretty much destroyed this image of her musical niche, leaving us where, I wonder? Her new record is a long way from "Sisotowbell Lane" but it's not all that close to "Help Me" either. It's hard to locate, even though that fancy embossed jungle-green/gray cover replete with snake-bearing black men certainly stands out in the record racks. A self-described "total work" that unfolded "like a mystery in the making",

Hissing of Summer Lawns is one slick package. As for material quality, it's as clean a record as you're likely to hear in these days of adulterated vinyl and super-thin discs. And inside — delicious. Though most of the songs come off pretty flat the first time around, patience pays off: the record is almost overwhelmingly together and controlled. It's hard to find any gap between conception and execution -- this really feels like Joni Mitchell's album, and depending on where you sit in terms of musical taste, that can be an asset or a liability. Lovers of the studio and other cerebral arts will support the texture she achieves here, but a few, who still remember those free-wheeling sessions with Kunkle, Taylor et al. will long for a bit more spontaneity. It would be nice to hear Joni perform with musicians of higher caliber, but this is nice too. There aren't many instrumental highlights — but enough to keep things moving along after you get used to it. Strangely, even the clever-word play that marks her other albums is down-played.

These observations raise a number of questions, like what's so good about a controlled record lacking instrumental pyrotechnics and vocal brilliance? I'm convinced that there are lots of reasons why this is a good record, some three of which are the competence of the performance, the quality of the production and the fact that I liked her previous six (or seven) albums, but none of this adds up to a rave review or even, necessarily, a good record in any case.

Still, there's greatness and wonder here that no one has ever produced before. No one makes records like this now: roots reach back to jazz vocals from the 50's, rock from the 60's and the quiet desperation of today. I'm inclined to give more weight to desperation than anything else. The album is full of it, full in a way that is all the more striking because the record seems so incredibly calculated. Old camp-followers will quickly identify familiar themes from albums past, but Joni slips in a few new ones that are, to say the least, frightening. Most of the loved-and-lost songs have gone, replaced by a solitude and subjectivity that is all the more stark for being expressed in the third-person. As usual, women lie at the heart of her songs,

but on many of the numbers there's an enormous gulf between the singer and the sung. Both the title cut and "Harry's House" revolve around women so estranged from other people that there doesn't seem to be anyway that anyone can reach them. Remoteness and the problem of authenticity also show up on several of the other cuts, most notably "Shades of Scarlet Conquering" where personal gestures and feelings take their meaning from cinematic images. In fact, the record contains numerous references to film, at times going so far as to suggest camera angles for the filming of particular "scenes". The songs' characters are always playing at roles other than their own, always looking on at spectacles beyond their control, always trying to find others and disclose themselves, always "fading in everyone's hands."

From this, it's pretty clear that all is not well with the beautiful people. Life in the exclusive suburbs and townhouses is exposed as a fraud, as a false happiness based on useless goods that no one needs and hardly anyone uses. Warm and well-fed, the heroine of "Hissing of Summer Lawns" is still a virtual prisoner in her antiseptic ranch house on the hill, living in a world of "no color, no contrast." "Scarlet" goes to the movies and imitates the sentimentality on the silver screen. Others take drugs and read magazines. Heroin figures predominantly in several songs as the drug of choice, and finally suggests the most satisfying solution to the album's "mystery," even if it isn't the happiest alternative. As a testimonial of decadence, both moral and physical, this record is more frightening than needle songs of old because of the class of people it describes. At the very least, the forging of a link between the American Dream run amok and smack, the most beloved and feared drug of all, is symbolically mind-boggling, suggesting shattered dreams and shattered lives beyond redemption. Stifled selves turned towards self-destruction morbidly echoes the tried- and- true American folklore of the Old West with its rugged individualism. It makes tragic but appropriate sentiment for our bicentennial year.

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