

TAILPIECE

Ian Gulley offers some thoughts in appreciation of Joni Mitchell's song *Tin Angel*

THROUGH the changes in my musical tastes over the years and somewhat contrary to my current predominant interest in traditional songs, the song that endures as my favourite is *Tin Angel* by Joni Mitchell. I find it exceptionally appealing and meritable in its words and its music and in the way these elements work together.

The appeal of songs for me has always tended to be more in the music than the words and my present interest in traditional songs is mainly in their melodies and in imaginative musical arrangements or accompaniments that enhance them. Occasionally, however, the words of a song appeal to me just as strongly and this is the case with *Tin Angel*. The words are wonderfully evocative, concisely expressive and poetic. Treasured, but faded, memories of past loves are eclipsed by the finding of a new love, who has been encountered that day in a café. The joy is tinged with anxiety and the optimism with uncertainty, but it's the joyful element that wins through. The fragility of a new love affair is portrayed to perfection.

Much of the beauty of the melody is in its pure and simple form. The verse tentatively climbs to a high point and then falls back to the origin note of the musical scale. The chorus then rises above the high point of the verse and ends with a distinctly brighter and more positive conclusion. The sequence of verse followed by chorus is like a play between dark and light in which the light prevails. It is a fine melody, distinctive in its own right and seeming to share something of the character of particularly distinctive traditional songs.

Joni Mitchell's guitar accompaniment, which is an important part of this song's overall make-up, is full of musical sensitivity and expressiveness. It is delicately applied, finely detailed, highly imaginative and always directly relevant and complementary to the content of the song. Subtle variations in timing are also used to great effect.

It is the effective interaction between

words, melody and accompaniment that I find especially impressive and appealing in *Tin Angel*. The different sections of its musical content complement the words through changing moods as the song progresses. More than being merely appropriate, the music often gives the impression of endeavouring to express, in its own terms, what is being expressed in the words. Such close affinity between music and words is, I believe, quite rare in both traditional and contemporary songs.

It was difficult to assess the qualities of the melody in isolation because, in thinking about it, I was always aware of its character being significantly influenced by the accompaniment. Hidden aspects of the melody are revealed as, in a similar way, the meaning behind the words is made more evident when combined with particularly relevant music. All the elements work together to form a single entity and something greater than the sum of the separate parts is attained.

Looking more closely at parts of the song will, I hope, help to illustrate these points about interaction.

The tentative and wistful character of the melody and accompaniment carrying the verses seems ideally suited both to the nostalgic content of the first and second and to the anxious uncertainty expressed in the third and fourth. As well as being appropriate in general, the music of the verses is full of subtle, expressive detail.

A delicate, uplifting transition in the accompaniment leads into the more assertive, ascending melody of the chorus. The words of this opening line vary, but the closing line is always "I found someone to love today" carried by confident and joyful melody and harmony, which is verified by ending with a rise from minor to major key for the next verse with "Dark with darker moods is he" (third verse) or "There's a sorrow in his eyes" (fourth verse).

There is a final hint of fragility and uncertainty in the penultimate line of the song, when the accompaniment fails to provide its usual confirmation (the rise from minor to major key) until "I found someone to love today" is repeated. In

succeeding, after unexpectedly faltering, the joyful confirmation is appreciated all the more.

Joni Mitchell sings *Tin Angel* beautifully and from the heart and her gently sustained emphasis of the last note of the concluding phrase give the final touch of indefinable magic to this exquisite song.



TIN ANGEL *Joni Mitchell*

*Varnished weeds in window jars
Tarnished beads on tapestries
Kept in satin boxes are
Reflections of love's memories*

*Letters from across the seas
Roses dipped in sealing wax
Valentines and maple leaves
Tucked into a paperback*

*Guess I'll throw them all away
I found someone to love today*

*Dark with darker moods is he
Not a golden prince who's come
Through columbines and wizardry
To talk of castles in the sun*

*Still I'll take a chance and say
I found someone to love today*

*There's a sorrow in his eyes
Like the angel made of tin
What will happen if I try
To place another heart in him?*

*In a Bleeker Street café
I found someone to love today
I found someone to love today*

● *Tin Angel* is from Joni Mitchell's 1969 album *Clouds* (Reprise Records K44070)