

# Joni looks at love from a different side now

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Joni Mitchell has become a black sheep lately.

Once the patron saint of myriad neurotic schoolgirls, Mitchell chose to keep moving and chart a truer course through her personal and artistic maturation.

From some of the first experiments with African rhythms in Western pop to flirtations with unstructured jazz, Mitchell's recorded output over the last few years has been daring, inconsistent and occasionally brilliant.

It's lost many of her fans. Yet for all the dismay, no one has doubted the sincerity of her quest, and many old fans still give a listen to see what Joni's up to.

Some may return to the fold after hearing her latest album, "Wild Things Run Fast."

Musically bright and lyrically self-examining, "Wild Things" shows Mitchell again embracing her favorite subject — love.

Her approach, accessible as it is, has changed from the other touchstones in her career — the achingly pure acoustic treatment of "Blue," the slick, urbane jazz-pop of "Court and Spark" and the

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loose, traveling narrative of "Hejira."

"Chinese Cafe, (Unchained Melody)," the opening song and a conversation with an old friend, provides context by linking the present to the past, a new song with an old melody, and memory to hope and fear in life and romance.

"Caught in the middle, Carol/We're middle class/We're middle-aged/we were wild in the old days/Birth of rock'n'roll days/Nothing lasts for long ...."

The love Mitchell talks of now is more experienced, and the participants in her life are wary of surrendering to love's power and its accompanying charms and pitfalls.

Her world is peopled with "bandits" and "thieves" out to rob love from those courageous enough to leave themselves vulnerable. She talks of indifferent ladies, men and everly cautious prospective lovers who "dream flat tires" and fear

heartbreak after the first flash of love passes.

But she refuses to be self-righteous. "Can I care?/Will I let me?" is a common theme for Mitchell on "Wild Things." And when, in "Man to Man," she admits "A lotta good guys have gone through my door," she admits that she doesn't have all the answers.

With such torment and worry expended on the specter of failed romance, the album's moments of release leap and laugh. "We've got a chance!/Hot dog, darling!" she sings in "Solid Love," and "he joy there is undeniable.

Similarly, when in "Underneath the Streetlight" she sings "Yes I do I love you! I wear by the stars above that I do!", you can't help but believe her.

Mitchell's forays into more esoteric musics have broadened the available colors on her musical palette. On "Wild Things," she deftly uses them to create a rich background for this epic, endless search for love. She again has surrounded herself with inspired, sympathetic musicians able to provide added depth and subtlety to her songs.

The bass, often described along with saxophone as the most sensual instrument, has been a musical foil for Mitchell's singing on every album since "Hejira." Here, Larry Klein, who helped

mix the record, supplies an easy groove suited to Mitchell's loose vocal phrasing.

Wayne Shorter's tenor saxophone playing, featured on several tracks, releases much underlying emotion. And the pure sound of the instruments as captured in recording is sparkling and state of the art.

For all its beauty, "Wild Things" isn't flawless. On some of the numbers featuring a hard guitar line, like the title track, Mitchell's voice seems on the verge of being overwhelmed, although it never is. Also, the arrangement of "You're So Square," with its stop-time segments, is too stiff for her vocals.

The album's final song, "Love," the text of which is a slightly altered version of Paul's II Corinthians 13, moves her quest onto higher ground. From most pop artists, such a move would be unbearably pretentious, but when Mitchell sings "I'm nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbals without love," it sounds as if she wrote the words herself. And her delivery of "Love's the greatest beauty" reveals why the struggle and pain is worthwhile.

And you can be sure Joni Mitchell will keep up the search. We can only hope she'll continue to share so purely what she finds.