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New Joni Mitchell disc continues tradition of obscurity

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Staff Writer

Joni Mitchell has changed — has grown, one might say, as a musical artist should — but she may be leaving most of her audience behind. The ambitious **Don Juan's Reckless Daughter**, a two-record Elektra-Aylum album (BB 701), indicates she might have reached a crossroads in her career.

Always more the poet than conventional folk-rock lyricist and singer, she nonetheless achieved a big helping of commercial success in the late '60s with her song "Clouds" (retitled "Both Sides Now"), recorded by everyone from Judy Collins to Frank Sinatra.

She hasn't had a hit tune since, and album sales have slumped here of late — the result of increasingly complex material. Yet this Canadian lady (nee Roberta Joan Anderson), is so



Joni Mitchell

adventuresome and perceptive in her lyrics, and so given to experimentation in arrangements, a longtime fan would hate to see her stuff turn so esoteric only a tiny cult would buy it. For more than a decade, she's been a major performer — right up there next to Baez and Collins, and a better, more prolific composer than either of them.

Off the record

Don Juan's Reckless Daughter is as digressive — and even more cerebral and obscure — than her last two rather mystical albums, "Hejira" and "The Hissing of Summer Lawns." To try to "follow" the songs in a customary narrative sense is nearly an impossible task. Other than the title song and "Talk to Me," there are no melodies as commercially obvious as many of those in her last conventional album, "Court and Spark."

Pervasive wistfulness is the album's mood, but it's a tough wistfulness. There is a touch of militant feminism about the album. She's letting nobody push her around. Joni's big theme is, as usual, the transitory nature of any sort of love rela-

tionship. The title tune is a long and dreamy meditation on the subject.

Get this murderous description of Miami: "In her ballrooms heads of state / In her bedrooms rented girls / Always the grand parades of cellulite / Jiggling to her golden pools." Or this invitation to talk a bit: "Are you really exclusive or just miserly? / You spend every sentence as if it was marked currency!"

Joni, as is customary, plays both piano and guitar herself. But the records feature more orchestral arrangements than usual. Side 2, "Paprika Plains," is a 17-minute piano concerto performed with orchestra but also including an abstract lyric sung by the artist. Some of this

music is exquisite in its opulence, some awfully tedious.

For the most part, the album's music is a fusion of folk, rock, jazz and classical orchestrations. On some numbers she uses percussion effects as a way of punctuating her musing.

She has dumped her Eleanor Roosevelt, high-register soprano and replaced it with a warm, lower-octave voice.

It is hard to imagine any of this music being played on radio, except by some of the more adventurous FM programmers, since it is

closer to a poetry reading than music. There is much merit in the album — beauty, imagery, originality — but it is often inaccessible. So Miss Mitchell is going to have to decide one of these days whether to continue to pursue these increasingly obscure inclinations, and

lose her popular audience, or come back down to earth and toss some cotton candy "Clouds" to her rock followers.

Somebody said that if I would play this album at 45 rpm it would sound like Dolly Parton. You know, it does. Try it.

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