

GENTLE WOMAN Pop music reviewed by Geoffrey Cannon

JONI MITCHELL has written songs for Tom Rush, and the Fairport Convention have used her songs on both their albums. In each case, I'd had the idea of an intricate delicacy, but tiny intonations in both interpretations indicated that the singers didn't own the songs they'd chosen. Rush is one of those singers whose songs lose tautness through missing; and Judy Dyble, the original Fairport singer, although she feels her songs, falls to charge them. An English girl singing "All alone in Carolina, and talking to you," for example, loses a crucial sense of place. Fairport Convention, however, are a beautiful band, with a light, tactful thoughtfulness that is good for moments of waking or drowsiness.

All the songs on *Clouds*, Joni Mitchell's album, are her own. Her voice is pure, and she sings with spare acoustic guitar accompaniment. When I say that her songs are her own, I don't merely mean that she wrote them. She owns them, because each of them, different from the

others, concerns herself, and paints—in a different part of the mind of a valuable person, unique in place and time, who affects us and enters us precisely because she will tell only her own story.

She is Canadian, from Alberta. Her background is placed into her songs by means of names and nouns used because of what they mean to her. "Valentines and maple leaves/tucked into a paper-back"; "bitterscotch; rain on shingles, rooftops round the harbour. "There's a sun show every second/Now the curtain opens on a portrait of today."

Without wishing to be alone, she has become accustomed to herself. She has the absorption of childhood, and, with self-consciousness informing her emotional traceries, an ability to look at herself, and the other person, which makes truth mandatory, even at the cost of loss. "What will happen if I try to put another heart in him?" "Picked up a pencil and wrote 'I love you' in my finest hand/Wanted to send it, but I don't know where I

stand." "It's love's illusions I recall/I really don't know love at all."

She can't grab, and so may appear passive. Because she can describe herself as well as others she can be a spectator of herself. Now, she's in another land, the contacts that once she made face to face are available to her by long-distance communication. "Telephone, even the sound of your voice is still new/All alone in California and talking to you."

Life seems a gallery of mementoes, infecting her and her landscape. She has songs which have a Carson McCullers flavour: she gazes at objects so long and avidly that they become more charged with meaning than the people who are now gone who placed them where they are. Her mind resembles that of the American South, is fed intently upon itself. Nevertheless, she is young. She'll not find love by seeking it out, but by it embracing her with an entirely personal magic.

Because she thinks and feels and means

every item in her good songs ("The fiddle and the drum" is her only failure, because its metaphors don't have her living in them), her faintest inflexion of voice or guitar can clearly indicate miles and years of particular emotion. Coarsening her voice with "Reflections of love's memories" shows many failed offers. The high guitar, held that way, with her voice singing above and below it, in "Chelsea Morning" has the mood of one single day held pure and joyful. She refers to Dionne Warwick, delicately, in "I don't know where I stand," giving the song a poignancy not in the words. The odd slang word in "Roses blue," concerning a lady lost in mysticism, makes the song clearly about a real person, and not just a pretty story.

"It's love's illusions I recall/I really don't know life at all." But she knows herself, and fills the images of her illusion with herself. Joni Mitchell is extraordinarily talented and moving, because she is herself, and her self is beautiful.