

PLACES UP

Joni still to be found at the very top

JONI Mitchell is one of the great originals of contemporary music. Her work has evolved from folk, through jazz and blues into a unique form while at the same time retaining a consistency of quality. Although recent albums have been over-produced, the sincerity of the songs and performance still shined through. Along with her restless investigation into relationships she has a social conscience that remains unwavering. Both have shaped her songwriting and made her one of the most interesting of the late night brigade of balladeers.

Her latest album, *Taming The Tiger* (Reprise) is probably her best work since the much undervalued *Dog Eat Dog*. There's a jazzy feel to most of the arrangements, and some fine musicianship, but it's the lyrical content of the songs that makes the album so enjoyable. There's a freshness to her lyrics that sets her apart from most. Take the opening line of *Man From Mars* where she revisits the oldest theme in the world, lost love, with refreshing clarity and a resilient humour: "Since I Lost You, I can't get through the day without at least one big boo hoo."

The title track may exhibit a touch more bitterness than we've known from Joni in the past, but in a music business stuffed full of over-hyped female singers her assessment of radio playlists is particularly pertinent: "Every song just a one-night stand. Formulaic music. Girlie galle. Genuine junkfood for juveniles." Okay, so when did you last hear Joni Mitchell on the radio. Hasn't she a right to be bitter?

Like Joni, when you hear P J Harvey you immediately know that it can't be anyone else. For those unfamiliar with her work such uniqueness doesn't help reviewers, although there is the obvious point to be made here that if a review could really paint a word-picture of an album, or describe the sound, there'd be no point in the artist making the record in the first place.

Apart from her earlier album, *To Bring You My Love*, there are few points of reference when defining the sound or the bleakness of Polly's lyrical content. Like a punk Annie Lennox meeting Live Through This period Courtney Love, Harvey's delivery is nagging and insistent yet uncompromising in its intensity. The albums are hard to take in one sitting but that doesn't mean they don't deserve perseverance. Slowly but surely colours appear through the gloom.

Polly's relationship and subsequent break-up with Australian rock musician Nick Cave was a rich source of material on his magnificent '97 album *The Boatman's Call*. The same split has obviously influenced much of Polly's new album, *Is This Desire?* (Island). While Cave cloaked his thoughts in rich imagery and some of the finest rock poetry since Cohen's early works, Harvey is more direct and angry. At times the pain is so intense it's like primal scream therapy. It doesn't make for easy listening but for those who don't want to hear about sweet romance under June moons there is a reward in terms of sincerity and passion. The sort of inspirations that Celine Dion audiences will never begin to understand.

Cher has jumped on several different bandwagons since her folksy rock pairing with husband Sonny. The latest incarnation sees her stealing some of Madonna's best tricks, emerging as a mix of strong woman, earth mother and disco diva. She may substitute Italian for Madonna's Spanish influence but there's little doubting her primary influence. If you can accept that she's a copyist rather than a creator, then her new album, *I Believe* (WEA), is an enjoyable work with plenty of jaunty tunes bolstered into slick dance grooves by some of the best remixers and producers in the business.

KENWRIGHT



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