

DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

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An experimental jazz fusion double with controversial cover art and epic historical themes: critics and fans alike were invited to ask, Was Don Juan a folly or genius?





IN APRIL 2024, the sleeve of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was changed to an image from the cover shoot for 1985's *Dog Eat Dog*. This was understandable. The original cover (inset left) featured a portrait of the singer doing blackface, adopting, she said, the persona of an African-American pimp she named Art Nouveau. Whatever her reasons, this was as unpalatable in 2024 as any entertainer's racial role-playing from the far-off 1970s.

Some commentators have also written off the album housed in that infamous sleeve, calling it unfocused, lacking in songs, and too beholden to Joni the jazzster to stand beside her best work: on release, *People* magazine balked at "tedious and morose melodies – conveyed by poetic histrionics... a downer."

Approach all four sides of this double set as a complete work, though, and the rewards are considerable (Björk, for one, is a devotee). With players including Chaka Khan, Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira and jazz fusionists supreme Weather Report – bassist Jaco Pastorius's fretless boinging is a signature sound of the record – it wedges jazz fusion and rock with bold experimentation and acute personal meditations.

Those personal meditations centre on the native American and the black experience, filtered through the realities of the US in the '70s: it's a border zone she's drawn to, as edge-softened opener Overture – Cotton

Avenue admits. "If you got a place like that to go/You just have to go there."

Inevitably for such preoccupations, demands are made on the listener. Taking up all of Side 2, the 16-minute Paprika Plains bookends orchestral sound-painting with voice and piano, and depicts her younger self and indigenous Canadians in a bar, envisioning (on its lyric sheet at least) atom bomb tests on ancestral land. The Tenth World, a near-seven-minute drum trance-out in Spanish, can also perplex the unwitting.

Even when the going sounds easier, it's no less rife with ambiguities and questions: honeyed samba Dreamland, which was covered by Roger McGuinn in 1976, reflects on Walter Raleigh and Columbus and the predicament of existing in a coloured world. It also finds time for more personal matters. Off Night Backstreet questions love itself as Pastorius bass-wangs a variation on the Satisfaction riff, while Talk To Me, featuring Joni impersonating a chicken and recalling a drunken leak in a carpark, concerns how she tried and failed to have a genuine conversation with Dylan when they toured on the Rolling Thunder Revue.

It was Mitchell's last gold US LP. Having completed her first decade as a solo artist, her next move was to unite with jazz bass legend Charles Mingus, leaving listeners to chew over if *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was folly – or some kind of masterpiece. ●

TRACKS



Side 1

Overture - Cotton Avenue
Talk To Me
Jericho



Side 2

Paprika Plains



Side 3

Otis And Marlena
The Tenth World
Dreamland



Side 4

Don Juan's Reckless Daughter
Off Night Backstreet
The Silky Veils Of Ardor

Reckless:
(opposite)
Mitchell at the Boston Music Hall, Boston, February 19, 1976.