

Navigator Of the Deep

Joni Mitchell finds the way to her best record in a decade

By JAY COCKS

“Look,” she says, entirely untroubled on the subject, “I don’t have a very good education. I’m musically ignorant. I’m intuitive. All I am is a freshness freak.”

If you buy this quick conversational



NICOLA DILL—VISAGES

Says she: “I’m a vampire, full fledged.”

Keeping out of reach, but never out of touch.

self-portrait of the artist as an inspector of milk-carton dates, even for a second, the impression is immediately erased when Joni Mitchell’s new album, *Night Ride Home*, kicks in with the title cut. The instrumentation is spare, the melody light and tight as a fresh-spun web, the lyrics casual, conversational and smooth as a stone in a Zen garden. It takes a good deal of practical education to make something as intricate as her music seem so simple. And—yes, all right—so fresh.

Night Ride Home is Mitchell’s first album in almost three years, her best in 10. It’s easy to like and hard to forget, and it shows that Mitchell—for all her restless musical experimentation—has an undiminished skill in navigating some of the deeper estuaries of the mainstream. The album summons fond memories of Mitchell’s formative years—the times of *Woodstock* and *Court and Spark*—but it’s not an exercise in nostalgia.

Night Ride Home follows Mitchell’s 1988 *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* and comes on the heels, or paws, of her 1985 *Dog Eat Dog*, an intensely inward effort full of dank social speculation whose lack of wide acceptance is still a bit irksome to the singer-composer. “It was mistimed,” she speculates. “It was viewed as negative and preacherly at the time of its release. It was an angry album.” Mitchell seems heartened by the warm, early interest accorded the new record, and a little suspicious, as if she has produced something so attractive that it must be superficial. “It’s not shallow,” she says. “But it’s not making you look at hard facts as much as *Dog Eat Dog*.”

If music is, as Mitchell defines it, “a diagram of emotion,” then *Night Ride Home* is a sort of filling-station road map of the heart. The 10 songs, including an adaptation of Yeats’ *The Second Coming* called *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, represent alternate routes to the kind of altered state some people call romance, and others irresolution. “I want things that match my emotional inner life,” Mitchell says. “I like dissonance running through things because our lives are full of ongoing dissonances. Why not put a terrible tension running even through your pretty chords?”

All the musicians on the record—including Mitchell’s husband of eight years, bass player Larry Klein—have some jazz background. They know, as Mitchell puts it, “how to see around corners.” They can lend her delicate rhythms a strong foundation without blowing them away. Mitchell’s own prominent acoustic guitar gives the whole album a kind of casual, off-hand luster. “Initially, I was taken for a folk singer,” Mitchell reflects. “Then folk singing was out of vogue and folk rock was in. Then for a while I was considered to be a country musician. My music [now] is not jazz. I’m a bit of an explorer.”

Not just in music either. Mitchell, 47, has an exhibition of paintings traveling in Europe, and her photographs adorn the cover of *Night Ride Home*. She prefers to stay off the road—it’s been eight years since her last tour—and likes to work in the deep night because she craves the quiet. “I’m a vampire now, full fledged,” she says. When she speaks her mind, she has the unguarded passion of someone talking to herself late at night. Her thoughts on everything from photography to the gulf conflict are spoken as her songs are written and sung: in a tone of quiet asperity, but with public emphasis. “If this is a holy war,” she muses about the gulf, taking a drag on one of her frequent cigarettes, “God is pissed at us, and damn right.” Just goes to show: a little dissonance does no harm. And it can certainly make a fine *Night Ride Home*.

—Reported by Elizabeth L. Bland/
Los Angeles