

ROBERT HURWITZ

# Joni's Private World Gets Lost in the Stadium

**T**hrough her first six exquisite recordings, Joni Mitchell revealed herself as essentially a private performer whose poetic/musical style seemed perfectly suited for the intimacy that the medium of recording offers. The songs on these records are largely personal: self-doubting, contradictory, intelligent, telling, and raw—characterized by the type of honesty that one generally reserves for a lover or a very close friend.

Early last year, after two years away from the concert stage, Joni Mitchell performed in public again. She played 72 concerts—on at least two occasions, the one-to-one relationship that seemed so essential to her music was bloated to 100,000-to-one (at London's Wembley Stadium and Long Island's Roosevelt Raceway). Her new two-record set, "Miles of Aisles," with the L. A. Express, is drawn from a half-dozen of these concerts, featuring at least one song from each of her previous records (including five from "Blue" and "Ladies of the Canyon"), and two previously unrecorded compositions, "Jericho" and "Love or Money."

Mitchell's early albums were closely related to a folk-music tradition of public performances before small audiences; indeed, "Joni Mitchell" and "Clouds" seemed to be "records" (in the sense of documents) of her live performances. With her third LP, "Ladies of the Canyon," she began to create an intimate ambience that, one might argue, could be separate and wholly independent from the live performing experience.

It is, then, somewhat ironic that now, when her music seems to be getting progressively more and more dependent on the intimacy and permanence that recording provides, she should release a live concert album. Miss Mitchell even confronts this question, in part, at one point on "Miles of Aisles," when she responds to some shouted audience suggestions about which song they'd like to hear next. She says: "There's one thing that's always been a difference between the performing arts and being a painter. A painter does a painting, and it hangs on a wall somewhere, and that's it. . . . Nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint a "Starry Night" again, man! . . .'"

In comparing each selection on the live album



with the original version, I found no instances where Joni substantially added a new dimension or degree of understanding to any of the earlier studio recordings. The performances on sides 2 and 3 of the songs "Cactus Tree," "Blue," "All I Want" and "A Case of You," where she accompanies herself on piano, dulcimer or guitar, are copies, almost identical to the originals; what small differences there might be—her voice may be stronger or more assured, there may be variations in vocal coloration, phrasing or emphasis—are minimal.

On the first and fourth sides, where there is a musical addition or deviation, Mitchell's music suffers, not necessarily because the musicianship of her back-up group is inept (Tom Scott and the L. A. Express is a talented pop group), but because the arrangements are so riddled with clichés—bluesy guitar licks, trite drum fills, tired bass lines. Additionally, the dominant instrumentation of soprano saxophone and electric piano is very sweet, giving the music more of a pop sound where the musical or lyrical content may not warrant it.

The performance of "The Last Time I Saw Richard" on "Miles of Aisles," for example, may be tighter and more controlled—certainly more "musical"—than the original, which was confused, jagged, at times rambling. But while the new version is certainly more pleasant to the ear, its basic theatrical qualities, the confusion that underlies the lyrical content of the song, is smoothed over, the effect is lost. At other times, the arrangements sound like a fake or a bad copy, almost a pretense; on "Miles of Aisles," the arrangements for "Big Yellow Taxi" or "Carey" are of a level one might expect from a middle-of-the-road nightclub singer.

The music on her six studio LP's, however naive or sparse it might have been, always sounded fresh and heartfelt; it expressed the lyrical content of her songs without losing its striking originality. Her uniqueness seems to be lost on the new record where a rather banal back-up turns the original into the ordinary, taking the pure and simple qualities in her music and making them sound simplistic.

In spite of my reservations, I don't want to leave the impression that "Miles of Aisles" is a totally inferior album to be immediately ignored or forgotten. If there had not been such a wealth of musical goods on the first six Joni Mitchell recordings, this album might have had its own special value. Unfortunately, "Miles of Aisles" does not add anything new—it fails to teach us in any of the ways her studio records did so successfully.

Perhaps, Miss Mitchell has reached a point where she intentionally wants to sweeten, to lighten, to romanticize those events that might have been more painful when she first wrote and recorded them. It is a courtesy of perspective that any artist is certainly entitled to, although one winces at the irony of that memorable line in "The Last Time I Saw Richard": "Richard, you haven't changed," I said, "it's just that now you're romanticizing some pain that's in your head."

Joni Mitchell: Sweetening painful events.

Drawings by Mona Mark

Joni Mitchell: "Miles of Aisles." Asylum AB 202, two disks.

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