

Pop critic Paul McGrath and jazz critic Mark Miller take a look at both sides now.

BY PAUL McGRATH

Joni Mitchell's Mingus album reveals, more than any other previous recording, the limits to her vocal talent. Because Charles Mingus wrote the prominent melodies for it, and could only make stabs at tailoring them to her vocal peculiarities, she had to stretch herself for this one, and the stretching is not always pretty. Never has she sounded so unconfident.

Face it, Joni's no jazz singer. She has never before had to sing standard jazz melodies, with intervals and harmonies so unlike her own, and while she's slipping and sliding around the tones in songs like *A Chair In The Sky* and *Sweet Sucker Dance*, she seems at every turn terrified of the possibilities and hungry for the stability her own melodies would give her. In only one spot, *The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines*, did Mingus pen something she was truly comfortable with, but it ends up mimicking songs from her last two albums. Her own image of this situation, of Mingus pushing her into "the river", "laughing at me paddling around in the currents of black classical music," is at least her admission of the fear, but perhaps that's not good enough. If the water's too cold, get out and come back when you can handle the chills.

In the pieces for which she wrote both music and lyrics, she's attempting to bridge the gap between the two styles, and she's partially successful.

God Must Be A Boogie Man has a peculiar charm, quite unlike any poem she's written before. But here Mingus must again be credited — the lyrics were inspired by the first four pages of

Mingus Joni Mitchell

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his autobiography. The prettiest, most unassuming piece is *The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey*; it stands out because it takes her full circle back to recognizable sounds from her first album.

Here too, the silky Jaco Pastorius bass is beginning to wear a little thin. As immersed as she is in Mingus' personality this time, her sound is also still dominated by this virtuoso, who is completely incapable of sinking into the background. He's competition for her now, and as much as she respects his distinct talent, she has to understand that she will sound pretty much the same as long as he's around, no matter what she writes. There is the usual fine work from Pastorius, Wayne Shorter on soprano sax, pianist Herbie Hancock and her percussion trio. But the singer's fear has infected them — their work during the instrumental passages is sensitive, but rather tame. A great man has died, and I expected a little more weeping and gnashing of teeth.