

In Her House, Love

By SUSAN GORDON LYDON

HOLLYWOOD.

JONI MITCHELL lives in Laurel Canyon, in a small, pine-paneled house lovingly cluttered with two cats, a stuffed elk's head, stained glass windows, a grandfather clock given her by Leonard Cohen, a king's head with a jeweled crown sticking out from the brick fireplace, votive candles, blooming azaleas, a turkey made of pine cones, dried flowers, old dolls, Victorian shadow boxes, colored glass, an ornamental plate from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where she grew up, an art nouveau lamp in the shape of a frog holding a lily pad, a collection of cloisonné boxes, bowls and ashtrays, patchwork quilts, Maxfield Parrish pictures, various musical instruments, and Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash.

It's a lovely house, sunny and friendly and filled with the easygoing good spirits of the Laurel Canyon music scene. There's a lot going on there: Joni is in the midst of recording her second album, and Graham, who used to be with the British group, The Hollies, has just finished

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a super-group album with David Crosby, formerly of The Byrds, and Steve Stills, formerly of the Buffalo Springfield. There are new tapes being played and album details being worked out. During the day, a friend came by to show Graham the photograph for his album cover, and Joni's manager dropped in to talk about her progress on the album.

With her long blonde hair in braids, and wearing a peasant blouse and sailor pants, Joni looks younger and less mysterious than one might expect from hearing her songs. Her face, lacking the forcefulness and luminescent quality it takes on when she performs, looks like a forthright farm girl's, with freckled pale skin, watery blue eyes, and prominent teeth and cheekbones. She speaks softly and gently, with great earnestness.

The night before, she had completed two cuts for the new album, an almost unheard-of feat for her, and both she and Graham were elated by the result. "She's the only one who can sing this song," Graham said, putting on one of the tapes, "Both Sides Now." Her version, mellowed by the experience of having written it and having sung it many times, and by the meanings added to it by Dave Van Ronk and Judy Collins, sounded infinitely rich, and definitive. "That was magnificent, Babe. I'm gonna kiss you for that," said Graham. "You would've kissed her, man, if she would've spit," said Joni's manager. "There sure is a lot of love in this house."

Though she's only become famous in the last year and a half—since Judy Collins included some of her songs on her album, "Wildflowers," and her own excellent album, "Song to a Seagull," was released — Joni Mitchell, who is now 25, has been performing for a long time. During the folk boom, she was singing in small coffee houses in Toronto. In 1965 she married Chuck Mitchell (the short marriage she describes in "I Had a King") and went with him to live in Detroit, where Tom Rush heard her sing and included one of her songs, "Urge for Going," in his repertory. Her reputation was high with other folk singers, but she had a hard time getting work. "The year Dylan went electric," she said, "the folk clubs started closing all over the country. It was like an epidemic. The only peo-

ple being hired were people who had records out. I was always bringing up the rear. In those days, if you only played acoustical guitar, club owners treated you as though you were a dinosaur.

"Now everybody's branching out and there's room for all styles. People are playing where they feel their music. I feel my music with a solitary voice and a solitary guitar." Her music has a haunting, unearthly quality produced by the strangeness of the imagery in her lyrics, the unexpected shifts in her voice, and the unusual guitar tunings she uses. She is one of the most original and profoundly talented of all the contemporary composer-performers — Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, Tim Hardin and Buffy Sainte-Marie, many others — who have evolved folk music into art-rock.

It's more than mere coincidence that she and Leonard Cohen are both native Canadians. "We Canadians are a bit more nosegay, more Old-Fashioned Bouquet than Americans," she said. "We're poets because we're such reminiscent kind of people. I love Leonard's sentiments, so I've been strongly influenced by him. My poetry is urbanized and Americanized, but my music is influenced

by the prairies. When I was a kid, my mother used to take me out to the fields to teach me bird calls. There was a lot of space behind individual sounds. People in the city are so accustomed to hearing a jumble of different sounds that when they come to making music, they fill it up with all sorts of different things."

Joni is quite a gifted painter, too. She did the paintings for both her album covers, and the imagery in her song lyrics is that of a person whose orientation is more visual than verbal: "Colors go waltzing in time," from "Night in the City," for example, or "The sun poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses," from "Chelsea Morning." "I hardly read anything at all," she said. "I would rather paint or play the piano or write a song. I'm taking four months off at the end of the summer, because I haven't had much time to write new songs. A lot of the songs on the new album are old ones. I want to do more songs for the piano; that's where I'm moving now. The piano gives me a new melodic sense, as the guitar tunings used to.

"I'm more prolific with melodies than with words, but quite often I write poems and then set them to music.

I guess I'm primarily an artist; what I like best is making new music. It's like going into a trance; I sit down with a melody and reminisce. I find it easier to think about my feelings in retrospect. The way I'd like to work from now on is to go into a studio as soon as a song is finished, when the feeling of the song is most intense. You should record songs when you believe them the most.

"Most of my songs are about myself, songs of personal experience. It's very important to me how I sing them. I just played in Saskatoon, my home town, and it was a tremendously emotional experience. When I sang 'Both Sides Now,' it was like singing the words for the first time. But it's funny—after a song's been written, it becomes a whole different thing; you don't own it any more. I love to hear men sing my songs, because they're written from a feminine point of view, and men bring totally different things to them."

Joni has been working on the new album since December, but she decided only recently to take over the production of it herself. "I was working with a producer, and we were pulling each other in opposite directions," she

said. "I was working within this framework of sound equipment, and the sound was fantastic, but I felt stifled. Now the sound isn't so good, but at least I know I'm doing what I want to do."

There isn't much any outsider could do to produce a Joni Mitchell record. It's as though she conceived each of her songs as a perfect entity, and only she knows whether or not the way she performs it measures up to her ideal of how it should be. She worked intensely at a recording session that night, trying a song over and over, not varying her singing or accompaniment, and breaking it off when the feeling didn't seem right to her. Graham, who is thin and funny and ebullient and looks a bit like George Harrison, offered loving encouragement, pep talks and jokes when things seemed to be going badly. "She bakes better pies than Myrtle," he joked, the Myrtle coming out in indescrib-

ably Manchester glottal stops. Her co-producer stood over the dials, turned down the lights in the studio and made small suggestions in the softest voice imaginable.

Joni was trying "That Song About the Midway" and "Chelsea Morning." They'll probably be the last two cuts for the album. "I can't make it cook," she said about "Chelsea Morning." "I can't get any life into it." Working, she looked very serious and womanly, an artist intent on creating perfection from visual images made into words, guitar chords providing a vessel to hold them, and a voice to carry them as deep and as far as they'll go. She is essentially alone with her music.

"Do you want to pack it in, Luv?" Graham asked helpfully, after she'd broken off take eight. "Just sit there and look groovy," she said with a smile in the gentlest way possible, and went on to try it again.