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Joni Mitchell's new album proves she's still willing to take chances

By Ann Ryan

From the wistful vulnerability of "Blue" to the cool, cool jazz of "Mingus," Joni Mitchell has never been afraid of taking chances; nor has she been afraid of laying all her cards on the table.

"Wild Things Run Fast," her latest album on Geffen Records, has a maturity and perspective that is both its blessing and its curse. It is tight and consistent, without major failures; yet its equanimity is unsettling. In only a handful of songs does she reach the emotional pitch that has made her required listening in the past for all those suffering from broken hearts or the intense pangs felt at the start of a new affair.

The overall effect is one of hope and good music, and, as usual, Mitchell has assembled the creme de la creme of Los Angeles session musicians to back her up.

Her 1979 album, "Mingus," was a journey into jazz with the great Charles Mingus. Jazz had influenced Mitchell since Tom Scott appeared on "Ladies of the Canyon," but this was hard-core stuff, and hard for many of her folk-rock fans to swallow.

On "Wild Things Run Fast," there is a heavy jazz flavor, but Mitchell has tempered it with pop and rock 'n roll. The song "Moon at the Window," is worthy of the repertoire of Nina Simone.

Wayne Shorter's soprano sax accompaniment on "Be Cool" is excellent — sneaky and sophisticated with just a touch of Ellington's "Satin Doll," bringing a silky insinuation to Mitchell's singing.

"Man to Man," with James Taylor singing harmony, is one of the more heartfelt songs on this album. It has a smooth arrangement surrounding a relaxed ballad about love. Mitchell sings "How come he can care/I sure hope I can care." The game doesn't change, the players just get older.

The title track, "Underneath the Streetlight," and "You Dream Flat Tires" (featuring Lionel Ritchie) all move into an area of rock that she has ignored since "Court and Spark," and all succeed, although Pat Benatar needn't fear that Mitchell will be competing with her as a flat-out rock 'n roller.

Especially on "You're So Square," a cover of the old Elvis tune, her voice sounds strained and forced; it is more comfortable with quieter songs.

Mitchell is almost 40, and the lyrics on "Wild Things Run Fast" lack the poignant and complex images of her earlier songs. She seems to be putting more of her energy into her music. The images on this album are sparser, more streamlined: "Winter beat the pines about/he heard the

heater/cutting in and out/while she dreamed away," or "Oh, but sometimes the light/can be so hard to find/at least the moon at the window/the thieves left behind."

Mitchell really shines, though, both lyrically and musically, on "Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody." This is the only song that has Mitchell on acoustic piano, and the piano gives the song an anchor around which the melody is spun. "Unchained Melody" is used to great effect here as a sentimental counterpoint to her lyrics about the losses that accumulate as one enters middle age. "Nothing lasts for long," not the "dreaming on our dimes" of adolescence, not home when uranium money creates a boom, not love.

The last lines from "Unchained Melody" ("I need your love, I need your love/ God speed your love to me") end the song on an almost ironic note, for they are words of a faith that do not always stand the test of time. "Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody" is powerful because it combines the perspective that Mitchell has gained with the intense emotion she has, largely, left behind.

"Wild Things Run Fast" should appeal to those who have, in the past, considered Mitchell a weepy chic singer. By reigning in her sentimentality, she moves the attention to her musicianship, and her ability there has never been questioned. It is a solid effort and well worth the purchase price when not many albums are.



JONI MITCHELL'S Wild Things Run Fast is a consistent album, despite its unsettling equanimity.

Museum honors resident

The staff of the Roswell Museum and Art Center is especially pleased to announce an exhibition of the photographs of area resident, Walt Wiggins. The public is invited to a reception honoring Wiggins from 3:30 to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

The approximately 60 photographs will span his 40-year career as a photo-journalist. While his reputation was established in the world of photo-journalism, the range of Wiggins' work reaches beyond such subjects of obvious appeal. Museum curator Wesley

Rusnell states, "Good photography such as Walt's gives the effect of permanence to what is transient and ephemeral; it can intensify our perceptions of life as it steps up our visual awareness. Walt Wiggins' photographs clarify the objects of this world, returning them to us in a new form."

The exhibition may be seen in the Horgan Gallery of the Roswell Museum through Jan. 16. There will be a gallery talk by Wiggins at 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 16.