

Record Reviews

Shadows and Light

Joni Mitchell

Asylum

by Van Ault

"Shadows And Light" is Joni Mitchell's latest release, and the two record album may come to be regarded as one of the greatest live albums in ages. The lp was recorded in 1979, during Joni Mitchell's summer concert tour. It proves to be a gratifying synthesis of her compositions from the last five years.

As the title indicates, "Shadows And Light" is a work of contrasts. Joyous and sullen, humorous and tragic, certain and confused, it conveys the conflicting elements of the human condition. If Mitchell's work was ever mystifying to listeners before, "Shadows And Light" should provide the ultimate clarification. When she veered away from mainstream rock and roll in the mid seventies, to develop the strands of jazz intonations found throughout "Shadows And Light", many fans were alienated. This live set places in perspective Mitchell's musical evolution, and should win her new legions of admirers.

The set kicks off with "In France They Kiss On Main Street," which finds Mitchell's vocalizing far more radiant than on her studio recordings. "Edith And The Kingpin" has been revised somewhat. Its sinister narrative of corruption is more seductive than ever. "Coyote", one of Mitchell's favorite concert pieces, is presented with its original arrangement intact, though its rhythmic cadences have been tightened. The unabashedly upbeat "Free Man In Paris" is here also, and serves as the nod towards her mainstream success.

Most of the lp's best musical moments come from the "Hejira" album. "Black Crow" is raised to a frenzy that reveals the singer's relentless search for contentment. And there is the wonderful guitar solo that bridges "Amelia" and "Hejira". Pat Metheny's light and lyrical treatment segues the two songs exquisitely. A drum solo, however, by Don Alias, fails to make its intended impact, as it leads into "Dreamland", the album's only clinker. The interpretation is more sparse than on "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter". Though the lyrics are still incisive, they fall flat against this drab arrangement.



This is really Joni Mitchell.

Joni Mitchell's vocal performance of "Furry Sings The Blues" is her most intense singing on the album. Half spoken and half sung, it brings out the lyrical juxtaposition very well. And lest we forget that Mitchell has a healthy sense of humor, she offers us a tongue in cheek repartee of "Why Do Fools Fall In Love", an old Frankie Lymon tune.

"Shadows And Light", the title song, follows. Mitchell is dispassionate in her contemplation of human duality:

*Suntans in reservation dining rooms
Pale miners in their lantern rays
Night, night and day
Yostage smiles on presidents
Freedom scribbled in the subway
It's like night, night and day*

Written for 1975's "Hissing of Summer Lawns" lp, "Shadows And Light" has been virtually ignored until now. Its poetic commentary seems especially appropriate at this moment in history. The Persuasions provide the backup vocals, tinging it with subtle gospel invocation. "Shadows And Light" is Mitchell's hymn to the plight of humankind.

"Woodstock", fittingly, concludes the album. The arrangement has been dramatically altered. The slower tempo allows the words to stand unencumbered by the idealistic emotionalism previously linked to the song. "Woodstock" now comes as a calm, rational call for sanity in an insane world: "We've got to get ourselves back to the garden." It is more prolific now than in its original conception.

This is the artistry of Joni Mitchell. She refuses to stand still or stagnate, always opting for further expansion in her creative realm. It has been captured magnificently on "Shadows And Light."