

RECORDS

COURT AND SPARK



JONI MITCHELL

Court and Spark (Joni Mitchell). Asylum 7E-1001.

Joni Mitchell stands peerless in this era of the female singer-songwriter. Her closest competitor, Laura Nyro, has been silent for over two years; Carole King's music is mired in banality and bubblegum, and Carly Simon has been doting too long on Sweet Baby James.

Only Joni has continued to expand artistically, and musical flowerings such as *Blue* and *For the Roses* are among the loveliest in pop music.

However, Joni did not cultivate the twin bouquet of *Blue* and *For the Roses* without an initial indulgence in an almost obligatory period of preciousness and misty garden verse. Her early albums, despite the felicitous touches that are in everything she does, are mostly exercises in schoolgirl lyricism, candy-colored celebrations of things like clouds, painted ponies, feathered canyons, dragonflies and ice cream castles.

Then, in late 1971, there was *Blue*, a staggeringly good album that, for me, ranks with Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* as a milestone in the pantheon of pop poetry. Here Joni abandons the vocal pyrotechnics and sunny gambols that disfigured her previous work and settles into the role of a globe-visiting gypsy at once optimistic and tristful over the possibilities of love.

Court and Spark, the third panel in the triptych beginning with *Blue* and *For the Roses*, is only an equivocal success (though this is a relative statement when considering an artist of Mitchell's stature).

First, the album suffers from a lack of fresh insight. Most of the songs are heavy-handed reworkings of themes that Mitchell has rendered sprightlier and more accessible in the past. "Free Man In Paris" is an anti-show-biz tune on the order of "For the Roses," but without the latter's wit and forgiving irony.

The title song, "Court and Spark," invokes a recurrent theme, Joni's love-hate romance with California and especially Los Angeles, but the lyrics get bogged down in arty references to stigmata and Christian symbolism that sent me fleeing for the lucidity and verve of "California."

The second, and most damaging, flaw of this album is the intrusion of a self-

depreciation that is almost unduly harsh, loaded as it is with fatalism, panic and feelings of inadequacy.

"People's Parties" is probably the most self-critical song here, with Joni excoriating herself for her shyness and social gauchery. The lyrics abound in stinging self-reproaches like "I feel like I'm sleeping / With a weak and lazy mind / Coming to people's parties / Fumbling deaf, dumb and blind."

The contradiction of yearning for the limelight and then retreating from the hot light of fame when success arrives must have surely yielded caustic lyrics like "I wish I had more sense of humor / Keeping the sadness at bay / Throwing lightness on all these things / Laughing it all away."

"Help Me," an AM-flavored tune and one of the album's better cuts, echoes the paradoxes of love and freedom from *Blue*, the proud right of independence in the exigencies of a relationship. It's a lovely little lament and, like most of Mitchell's love songs, it's up to its chorus in passionate fatalism.

"Car on a Hill" is throwaway filler, though it does contain another of Joni's withering self-

references as she compares herself to a lover: "He makes friends easy / He's not like me."

The infectious rocker "Raised on Robbery" stands as my favorite cut and is, I think, illustrative of the way Joni's art has improved since "Ladies of the Canyon" and of the delightful way she has accepted the realities of rock without crippling her poetry. "Robbery," with its mixture of aggressiveness and abashed raunch, ranks with "All I Want," "Carey," "This Flight Tonight" and "You Turn Me On (I'm a Radio)" as one of the best things Mitchell has recorded.

Her version of that enduring jazz number "Twisted," which is, incidentally, far superior to the yammering exhibitionism of Bette Midler's recent interpretation, ends the album on a note of ambivalent humor and underscores the metronomic uncertainties of Mitchell's sentiments that weaken *Court and Spark*.

This time Joni's fretful obsession with the complications and intricacies of love has resulted in confusion, quiet panic and dividedness, and this dreamy chaos is the undoing of this album, which represents an impasse in her career.

— Mark Smith

PIANO SOLOS / GEORGE WINSTON



Piano Solos (George Winston). Produced by John Fahey and Doug Decker. Takoma R-9016.

What do you say when someone comes along and plays "folk piano"?

We've all heard solo pianists — Scott Joplin, Eubie Blake, etc., clear up through Art Tatum, Bill Evans and Cecil Taylor. But who ever heard of somebody coming along and, well... not copying anyone, but sort of *reminiscing*?

Technically, George Winston is nowhere near the heights of the giants and innovators, nor does he pretend to be. His left hand generally plays simple little patterns, whether boogie-woogie, stride, or arpeggios; his harmonies are basic; his melodies are nearly always singable; and his overall approach is general that of a folk musician playing for his friends.

As a matter of fact, with the exception of "Theme For A Futuristic Movie" and "Untitled," both of which took me back to the late 19th century salons of Paris, a la Erik Satie, the prevailing mood I received was that of sitting in a log cabin near an

open fire somewhere in upper Montana in 1880.

The snows outside have settled, while inside close to the fire we sip red wine and listen to George play tunes that recall Sweet Rosie of the Red Dog Saloon, the sunny mountain days when the gold panned out fine for us, and the laughing brothers and sisters we left back home on the farm in West Virginia. I swear to God, I felt like a sentimental fur-trapper.

And I like it. Simplistic piano playing, as Winston does it, has the same agrarian relaxed quality as folk guitar playing. Nobody puts Doc Watson down because he's not John McLaughlin.

I know nothing about George Winston, but judging from his music I would guess he's young, maybe 19-24, white, self-taught and musically very innocent.

All of that is part of his charm, but it is also the source of my reservation about the album. On the whole, George ignores the fact that we live in the 20th century, — which is indeed his prerogative. Looking backwards musically places *Piano Solos* in the escape-to-nostalgia bag, and not to a nostalgia of our own age, but to a nostalgia of a century we didn't even live in. Folk music.

Nevertheless, *Piano Solos* creates a mood of poignant innocence, captivating, sentimental, intimate, light-hearted, pleasant to listen to.

Innocence is always a rare and refreshing quality. But I also want to hear what George Winston has to say after he crosses over the line.

— Lee Underwood



Saints & Sinners (Johnny Winter). Produced by Rick Derringer. Columbia KC 32715.

In Denver's Mile High baseball stadium back in 1967, everybody showed up for the rock concert, some 40,000 acid heads and all the big bands, including Janis, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Tim Buckley and, at the top of his form, Johnny Winter.

The cops shot tear gas at the kids who were trying to crash the gate, and the gas blew into the stands, and everybody ran down on the baseball diamond and lay face down on the grass and felt very righteous and political and sick and full of adventure and social relevance — not to mention scared and stoned.

When the gas blew off, everybody climbed back into the stands, and the concert rolled on with Tim Buckley facing the adrenalized mob and turning the show into a masterpiece of concentrated energy as he united the hearts and minds of all.

Then Johnny Winter strode on stage, his white hair blowing in the wind, his freaky crossed eyes rolling across the crowd, and slam! bam! he whipped out that raunchy boogie beat he made so famous, and the crowd fell all over itself relating to the gut-bucket rhythms and the acid-loud wail of his Texas stomp band.

But like so many others, Johnny became a casualty of the peace-and-beads "revolution."

The smack got him, and he vanished into the depths, only to return with new records of old concepts. When you lose two or three years, the rest of the world changes — it grows up — but you're still two or three years behind if you're not careful.

And so it is with *Saints and Sinners*. You might think that out of the chaos of his particular night Johnny Winter would have emerged with a broader point of view, that his music might truly portray the depths and heights and paradoxes of his Genet-Mingus theme, *Saints and Sinners*.

But alas...

By now you might feel that the massive rock sounds of your highest acid trips are the opposite of *release*. That they trap you and hammer you with energetic clichés rather than reaching back behind your eyes with the knowledge of just how far it's possible to go before

crossing the line of madness, leading you right to the edge before guiding you back to clarity, a la John McLaughlin rock 'n' roll.

Perhaps not. But I for one have come to suspect that if a spasm band doesn't change, if it forgets or is unable to sense the subtle shifts of consciousness of its audience-context, then it simply remains a spasm band vying for the nearest shelf in the Rolling Stone museum.

And so it goes. Johnny is still in there churning out old country-blues lines and talking about 15-year-old groupies and Southern-black hard times, enclosing these venerable commonplaces in 1967 rock contexts, which are now the opposite of intimate: they've come to be impersonal, isolating, anachronistic.

Saints and Sinners may be fine for the new batch of pubescents presently emerging. But for those who have followed Johnny Winter throughout his career, *Saints* is just a relic, a nostalgic howl left over from yesterday's dreams of glory.

— Lee Underwood



AMAR CABALLERO (Babe Ruth). Produced by Alan Shacklock. Capitol/Harvest ST-11275.

You'd think that after the thousands of bizarre names that bands have come up with over the past few years that it wouldn't matter to people anymore what a group calls itself. Not so. Whenever I've asked somebody if they've heard the new Babe Ruth album, all I've gotten is quizzical expressions and snide remarks.

Until they hear the music, that is. Then they find out that Babe Ruth is a British rock band with a sound all its own.

The man most responsible for that sound is Alan Shacklock, guitarist, arranger and producer for the group. Shacklock is unique in that he doesn't use his training at the Royal Academy of Music to force rock-classical fusions. About the only classical borrowings heard on this album come out of the Spanish tradition, and they are most effective when the contexts are of Shacklock's making; the midsection of the title suite, which features Spanish guitar over a Latin-jazz rhythmic figure, comes off better than the direct use of Llobet.

Perhaps the most impressive