

## Mitchell's jazz plaintively mimes arc of modern love: DISC OF THE WEEK

Mitchell, Joni

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### BOTH SIDES NOW

Joni Mitchell

Reprise

Rating: ★★★½

**J**oni Mitchell made her sympathies for jazz known early in her career when she began to employ jazz musicians as accompanists, beginning in 1973 with Tom Scott and the L.A. Express on the LP *Court and Spark*.

They played on her terms though, not she on theirs. She confronted jazz more directly when she collaborated in 1978 with Charles Mingus on *Mingus* — still her album, not his. It wasn't until 1998 when she sang *The Man I Love* and *Summertime* on Herbie Hancock's *Gershwin's World*, that she gave herself over entirely to the tradition.

*Both Sides Now* is the next step, and a successful, if subtly inconsistent one at that — 10 standards, as well as two of Mitchell's older songs, with full orchestral accom-

paniment arranged and conducted by Vince Mendoza. The material is ordered to mirror "the arc of a modern romantic relationship," from the early infatuation of *You're My Thrill* to the reflection of *Both Sides Now*. That's a very Joni-like thing for Mitchell to have done, of course, even if producer Larry Klein calls the concept "innovative" — and even if the late Trudy Desmond made an album, *R.S.V.P.*, along the exactly the same lines back in 1988.

Mitchell doesn't always sound like Mitchell in this new and transformative context; she comes across instead like someone who has listened a lot to Billie Holiday and at least a little to Sarah Vaughan. The strongest of her borrow-

ings can seem studied and sometimes rather strangulated (the untoward mannerisms of *You're My Thrill* for example) but, these specific points of style aside, Mitchell's singing is remarkable for its absolute certainty of pitch and phrasing.

When she has everything in balance and under control — and when Mendoza doesn't overcook the violins and violas — the performances are simply ravishing. *You've Changed* and *Answer Me, My Love* are especially moving, with saxophonist Wayne Shorter, a Mitchell stalwart since 1977, adding plaintive solos to each. Mendoza's understated writing on Mitchell's *A Case of You* and *Both Sides Now* is transcendent; Mitchell may handle them both a shade too dramatically, but it's not hard — indeed it's rather enticing — to imagine her doing an entire album of her own songs in this same, classic setting.

— Mark Miller



Joni Mitchell: dramatic tones.

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