

FOLK: Bridget Hughes

Joni — life of roses

JONI Mitchell is artist, writer, composer, singer, superstar and woman of heart and mind.

So reads the Press release accompanying a (relatively) new biography, "Joni Mitchell," by Leonore Feischer published by Omnibus Press at £1.99.

There doesn't seem to be much to add to that definition but the book tries to give a real insight into Joni Mitchell's life and music.

In my league table of female singers, Joni ties as runner-up with Janis Joplin, coming second only to that other Joanie, that lady of ladies, Joan Baez.

The book covers her life from the days of obscurity when she began singing "real good, for free" in the local coffee houses in Calgary, Alberta, right up until her last album, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns."

It is divided into three sections — "Her Life," "Her Loves" and "Her Music."

The first section is rather romanticised and a little scanty on dates and details of the important milestones in Joni's career.

In the section about her loves, the author does not really tell us anything Joni Mitchell fans do not already know.

It talks about her well-publicised relationship with Graham Nash (the Manchester connection of CSN&Y) and their life together at their home in Laurel Canyon.

(One thing I didn't know was that Graham Nash wrote the song "Our House" about that very same house — did you know that?)

The book tells of the endless speculation about Joni's famous lovers — among them were rumoured to be Stephen Stills, Neil Young, Leonard Cohen, James Taylor



and Warren Beatty, as well as Nash, again and again.

Her fans are about as bored with all these guesses and gossip as Joni was herself, but if this section had not been included, then it would not be a true record of her life.

The section on her music is the most interesting and without reading the book you cannot get the details of the songs and the meaning behind them from this review.

A few classics are mentioned such as "Chelsea Morning" and "Woodstock," which was recorded by CSN&Y and Matthews Southern Comfort and became the anthem of the flower child generation, and many more songs up to

"The Hissing of Summer Lawns."

I can bring you a little further up to date because I've just discovered Joni's latest album, "Hejira" (Asylum K53053).

It takes much longer than just a week to absorb a Joni Mitchell album fully, but I've discovered that the central and recurring theme is travel and movement.

This reflects the title, "Hejira," which literally means the flight of Mohammed from Mecca, but which is used these days to mean any sort of running away.

Thus on "Coyote" she is a "prisoner of the white lines of the freeway" and there are many more examples of travel and flight.

It's quite a change from "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" in several ways. It's a personal album, reminiscent of her work in an earlier period, and musically it is different, with very little instrumentation.

What instrumentation there is is used to great effect, particularly Neil Young's harp contribution on "Furry Sings the Blues" and vibes by Victor Feldman on "Amelia," a song about Amelia Earhart, the female pilot who disappeared mysteriously in the Twenties.

I could go on for ever, giving details of all the songs, but I'll leave it by saying that it is another Joni Mitchell masterpiece of poetry and music; the lady's in fine voice and the sleeve photography is excellent — it's a splendid package.

Back to the book, the photography there is excellent, too, and my husband says that for male Joni Mitchell fans the book is worth buying for the photographs alone.

VISUAL ARTS: John Avison

Through the window

THE KEY to the familiarity I feel with Tom Henderson Smith's paintings and drawings lies deeply hidden.

The clues to its recovery are in the fact that Tom and I grew up together and on one occasion, after our ways of life had parted, went sketching together.

Tom is now an established painter with a studio in Bath. His exhibitions to date include shows in Florence, Newcastle, New York, Plymouth, Bristol and several in his home town.

Or rather, his adopted town, for Tom is a native of Lindley and his father is, among very many other things, a controversialist familiar to most of this newspaper's readers.

Tom brings nearly thirty works — oils, watercolours, drawings and a rather fine etching — home for Christmas. His show is at the George Hotel's reception room until January 26.

The windows, perhaps, are an expression of self-confidence ("I can see — understand — what is going on outside me") but also, on a lighter level, a way of saying "I'm very much here, safely, and all the rest is out there, fending for itself."

The sunflowers bring in a touch of the exotic, the abnormal, the extravagant, maybe. Tom is a very calm, collected, domestic sort of painter, and bringing a ridiculous piece of nature into your studio may well provoke good and new reactions. Essentially a realist, Tom is not averse to bending the facts before him. His great weakness is, I think, composition: almost perversely he will cancel all attempts at perspective, or to draw the eye into a picture, or even to satisfy the eye's desire for balance.

The fact that many of his works point to some symbol of Tom's own introspection does not completely counterbalance what has been lost on the "surface" of the picture.

He is a skilful and gentle user of colour: greens, faded browns and blues dominate (if dominate is the right word).

The architecture of John Wood's Bath — square, solid, sunlit Portland stone the colour of parchment and the Cotswolds, is evinced admirably in Tom's unusually angled scenes of the city.