

16 The Windsor Star Friday, July 13, 1979



Jazz

# Mitchell copes well with switch to jazz

By Peter Stevens

Just before he died last January, Charles Mingus composed six songs for — or with — Joni Mitchell. What she makes of some of them you can hear on the simply titled Mitchell Mingus (Asylum XSE-505).

A jazz iconoclast and a pop-folk singer might seem mismatched but Joni Mitchell has winged unorthodoxy recently and Mingus has experimented with songs before. Two earlier ones on other albums, *Eclipse* and *Weird Nightmare*, leap with unpredictable intervals, yet find their own shapely contours.

Joni Mitchell's voice copes well with these difficult and different songs. Ungraspable at first, they make better sense on re-hearings. That clear voice uses jazz inflections around her own brand of melismatic sliding.

She says she was putting just her big toe into the vast lake of jazz here. Mingus urged her to sink or swim. Generally she swims. Occasionally swamped, she loses the current of a song but often rescues herself with beautifully melodic wordless intrusions into the song.

The songs feel improvisatory, with wandering lines into byways and odd corners. It's difficult to know how much Mitchell is adding or how much Mingus wrote, but that tells that the pairing is not a mismatch. They come out as lovingly spontaneous shapings.

Mingus' old song about Lester Young, *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, here gets words from Mitchell, taking the Jon Hendricks approach by fitting them to the tune and the original tenor sax solo by John Handy.

Mitchell acknowledges the help of some jazz musicians — I wish she had used more in the accompaniment, which strains for a floating, ethereal quality with Herbie Hancock's electric piano and Wayne Shorter's brief bleeps and swirls on soprano.

The songs are anchored by Jaco Pastorius' bass. He plays superbly — but why electric bass? The Mingus feel would have been enhanced by acoustic bass and piano. Pastorius also adds brass scoring on *Dry Cleaner From Des Moines*, catching some of that sloppy-tough Mingus earthiness.

Although the teaming of Mingus music and Mitchell words and voice works well, the album is not entirely successful. There's the problem of the accompaniment, the album is padded out by old

tapings of talk from Mingus and friends, and contrary to expectations, there are only three new songs. Two songs by Mitchell don't add much, though *God Must Be A Boogie Man* has some Mingus atmosphere.

Two former Mingus musicians, Jaki Byard and Charles MacPherson, are giving a program of Mingus compositions at the Detroit Institute of Arts July 19. So we'll be reminded of his unique musical personality then, something that Joni Mitchell manages without her losing her own. I wonder if the Mingus aura will remain with her — will she sing these songs on her present tour? We'll discover that when she comes to Pine Knob Aug. 11 and 12.

The Detroit Art Institute's concerts have been some of the best this summer. Last week Gary Burton brought his refashioning of the vibraphone's place in jazz, playing compositions by such people as Carla Bley, Chick Corea and his former bassist, Steve Swallow. Always interesting, the music tilted into extensions of odd forms.

Burton's mellow tones were meshed with Tiger Okoshi's brittle-bright trumpet, deepened at times by short but tasteful electronics.

Straight swinging on vibes fashioned by Milt Jackson out of Lionel Hampton crops up with Milt in mixed groupings on a re-release of Milt Jackson in the Quintessence Jazz Series (QJ 25391), good, rollicking stuff, with some of Jackson's fine ballad playing.

Cal Tjader is another uncomplicated vibist, usually in a Latin vein, as on *Here* (Galaxy 9366-5121) — nothing extraordinary but nicely relaxed 'live' playing, a bit more venturesome on Tjader's loping waltz *Liz Anne* and on Gary's *Theme*.



Joni Mitchell

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