



JONI MITCHELL
Hejira
(Asylum)

Such insularity. Within the slow pace of *Hejira* is a road album, a collection of Joni Mitchell's musings on travel, but listening to the music alone you'd doubt she could traverse the living room in less than a week. However, as befits Mitchell's willful obfuscation, her way of avoiding in her music the portrayal of, as she terms it in "Song for

Brad Elterman

Lou Reed. Still, *Hejira* is a rather cold, distancing record.

What is initially most distancing is the hardness of its sound. The music on many cuts consists only of a lead and a rhythm guitar, and some sort of percussion. The tempos are uniformly slow, lulling in their smoothness; even Mitchell's singing, always her most evocative and elaborately used instrument, seems held back by a resigned, weary tenseness.

On other albums, she sets down her thoughts: "Help me/I think I'm falling/in love again." *Hejira* displays a Mitchell tired of spelling it out, "taking refuge in the roads" for a respite from the confessional. Instead, she tells stories, and spends a lot of time getting them across; emotion is grafted onto narrative in the form of expressive detail: "Black Crow" is the most obvious example of this, the title creature an image of Mitchell as a lonely narcissist. Inevitably the tales concern men: a coarse boy named Coyote; "A



Joni Bony's new LP is named *Hejira*, which means "traveling" in some language none of your continental caption writers are conversant with. See Joni travel. She is getting out of a car with her eyes closed.

Sharon," "Love's...repetitious danger," it took me almost two weeks of steady listening to decide that this is a good album. I knew from the first that *Hejira* contained her most audacious lyrics—the preciseness of her imagery is extraordinary and unobtrusive, the latter no small part of her achievement—but I sure didn't hear any catchy melodies, and I figured that if there weren't any of those, the album had to be too arty, too "literary," not aimed at enough of the population to be popular music. But that was simple-minded. To take the last objection first, I was just plain wrong: *Hejira* is selling like hotcakes. As I write, it's more popular than either Abba or

Strange Boy" who, ultimate oddity for old free-spirit Joni, "still lives with his family."

More significantly, there are two song-stories Mitchell tells to other women, "Amelia" and "Song for Sharon." This is yet another example of distancing the audience—placing a third person between her and us—but more interesting is the attention she directs toward Amelia and Sharon: even as she tells them about her man-troubles it's clear that it's *them* she cares about at the moment. The way Mitchell coos the name of "Amelia" and "Song for Sharon" are the most convincing and affecting songs on *Hejira*.

Ken Tucker