

**JONI MITCHELL'S 'COURT AND SPARK' on record**

by Robin Deñselow

FROM BEING the folksy best friend of anyone who was anything in the West Coast music scene, Joni Mitchell has gradually and unevenly developed into a songwriter of considerable stature. Her sixth and best album to date, "Court and Spark" (Asylum), is currently the top seller in America, which is mildly surprising: it is both too solemn and too good for that.

Like the rest of her West Coast singer-songwriter mates (from Graham Nash through to Jackson Browne) she bases her songs around herself, her worries and experiences. What sets her work aside from the egocentric tedium that such a style can produce

is both the sheer quality of her writing and performing, and her ability to deal with private thoughts in a public way, make personal experiences of general significance.

The album shows how rock is growing up, gracefully, maturely, and a little sadly, dealing with the concern of a now slightly ageing generation. The songs are of indecision, the inability to act or get away, tension and unease at a party, or just waiting for a friend who doesn't turn up. Trivial experiences, many of them, but always with a hint of something seriously wrong behind them, whether alienation, loneliness or plain world-weariness.

Her writing is sometimes shatteringly honest, imaginative and with an underlying desperation. "Down To You" starts with the observation that "everything comes and goes, marked by lovers and styles of clothes" and moves off into a stark and evocatively understated impression of brief midnight passion followed by equally bleak non-communication with the world in general the next morning. "The Same Situation" is even more revealing and sad, with thoughts on yet another highly experienced lover and his problems ("like the church, like a cop, like a mother, you want me to be truthful"), and her own situation "caught in my struggle for higher achievement

and my search for love that doesn't seem to cease."

Another song deals with the problems of fame. The title track hints back to "for free" (on the "Ladies of the Canyon" album) in its concern for the ideals of a street musician who has the freedom that she has lost, stuck in Los Angeles "the city of the fallen angels."

Miss Mitchell leads the kind of liberated, rich, glamorous life that many mere mortals would envy. Her hangups are worthy of our note not because of any insight they give to her life style, but because of the way she treats them. Her musicianship is

as fine as her lyrics; her voice has lightness as well as intensity and copes admirably with the musical gymnastics of her writing. Her piano playing backs it up well, as do the predictably famous session musicians (everyone from Robbie Robertson to Jose Feliciano).

Most of what they have to play is slow and melodic, with two exceptions right at the end of the album. "Raised on Robbery" is a successful all-out rocker (with witty but still bleak lyrics), while the old Annie Ross hit "Twisted" is the only disappointment. Joni Mitchell can't sing jazz, and this ~~curious track~~ sounds all the more wrong after her own major songs.

