

The Pop Life

John Rockwell

Joni Mitchell is still going her own way.

JONI MITCHELL'S new two-disk album, "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," is not likely to appeal to the "You Light Up My Life" crowd. It may not even appeal to the broader critical and public audience that enjoyed Miss Mitchell's "Court and Spark" and "Hejira" albums. But these are still a fascinating pair of records.

The reasons some people may hesitate is that Miss Mitchell seems even less concerned here with commercial obviousness and even more self-involved than usual. In that respect the new set is more like her "Hissing of Summer Lawns"—which seems in retrospect to have been seriously undervalued when it came out two years ago—than her other recent disks. But it is still mightily interesting. The interest starts with the cover and inner-sleeve art, designed as usual by Miss Mitchell. The art work contains several motifs: basically flat horizon, doves, a young boy, cartoon balloons

and Miss Mitchell in three guises: as a black dandy, a Stevie Nicksish blonde and a small girl in Indian costume.

Most of these themes are picked up in the verse. As ever, her principal concerns are love and her own painful efforts to reach deeply into others. Mixed in are memories of her childhood and her continued fascination for black people, with several of the songs skating back and forth between a smoky, sophisticated present and her innocent, dreaming past.

The musical idiom finds Miss Mitchell once again pursuing her interest in jazz and third-world rhythms. On "Summer Lawns" there is some African drumming and here there is a Latin percussion jam. The jazz is more clever and admirable than that which she used to get from Tom Scott, et al., and makes use of several members of Weather Report—above all Jaco Pastorius, who was on "Hejira." There is also a long song called "Paprika Plains," which takes up a whole side and uses a full symphony orchestra in effectively Coplandesque fashion.

Perhaps extensive critical acclaim and chart-topping sales will result from all of this, but what makes it interesting and honorable is that that doesn't really matter. Miss Mitchell has so much force of artistic personality that she brings her musical collaborators into her own style of what might be called folk-jazz. And "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" falls neatly into place as part of her process of self-exploration through records. It's nice that the records sell (even if this should be a relative failure it will still make money for her and her record company). But what's nicer is that she has found a way to make serious musical art and

propagate it through the often maligned "music business."

Rick Danko was the first member of the Band to sign a solo record contract and, along with Levon Helm, the first to put out a solo disk. Mr. Helm will be at the Palladium on New Year's Eve with his new band, and Mr. Danko has been booked into the Bottom Line next Tuesday and Wednesday.

All the songs on Mr. Danko's album were written entirely or in part by him, and he explained the other day from Nashville that that meant he had composed all the music and that his collaborators had helped him with the words. The same relationship prevailed, he added, on his earlier collaborations with Bob Dylan (e.g., "This Wheel's on Fire").

A few Danko songs cropped up on early Band albums, but in recent years they've all been by Robbie Robertson, and Mr. Robertson will provide the material for the coming new Band studio album that the old group will record after the first of the year.

"I've been writing songs all my life, but I've never tried to force them on anyone," Mr. Danko said. "Bob Dylan and Bobby Charles were the first people to like my material, and make me feel confident about it. The Band went through a lot of changes in its music after the 'Big Pink' album. I thought I did more writing than I got credit for, so I just stopped, totally, and figured out how to make some other kind of contribution.

"The Band really is five people. It's not just one person, which is what most people don't understand. When I put my music together and bring people in to play it, it goes down twice as quick, because we're not dealing with five different egos. With the Band, everybody makes a contribution to the writing and the arrangements."

The Sex Pistols won't be appearing on the "Saturday Night Live" television show tomorrow, after all, and feathers are still ruffled over at NBC. Both sides agree that there was nothing more than a verbal agreement for the British band to appear. Lorne Michaels, producer of the show, says he's annoyed because he fought with NBC to allow the controversial band to perform live and because the cancellation occurred only on Monday, after the commitment had been confirmed "10 times." Rory Johnston, the band's American representative, suggests the agreement was never quite so firm as Mr. Michaels seemed to believe. Mr. Johnston explains that after more than a year of the group's being unable to perform with any frequency in Britain, a coherent tour was finally arranged, and "the band just felt that the most important thing at this time was to play for the fans in England, who have been incredibly loyal."

Mr. Michaels counters that he doesn't really believe the tour wasn't being seriously contemplated before the final confirmation last Saturday, and that he wishes Malcolm McLaren, the Pistols's manager, Mr. Johnston and Warner Brothers Records had taken the agreement more seriously, and had dealt more courteously with him. "We were told they wouldn't show, and I feel like a fool because I believed the band," he said. Elvis Costello will now provide the musical entertainment for "Saturday Night Live" while the Pistols are scheduled to begin a monthlong American tour Dec. 28 in Pittsburgh.

Hilly Kristal of CBGB's will open a new punk theater Dec. 27. The facility, which he has purchased, used to be called the Anderson Theater, and is



Joni Mitchell: Blending childhood memories into today's smoky sophistication.

at 66 Second Avenue at Fourth Street. It will now be called "The CBGB Second Avenue Theater," and the opening bill will be headlined by Talking Heads. The Dictators and the Dead Boys follow on Dec. 28, with Patti Smith moving in for Dec. 29-31.

The theater used to seat 1,650, but Mr. Kristal is removing some of the seats to make a free-flowing space. The plans call for shows three to five nights a week, with some reggae to leaven the punk norm. Beer and probably wine will be served, along with light food, and there will be a record store and

punk boutiques on the premises—not all of which will be ready by Dec. 27.

The new theater is designed to take some of the pressure off the original CBGB's club, at 315 the Bowery, which will now revert to its original purpose of being a showcase for newer bands.

"It had gotten a little bit hysterical," said Mr. Kristal of the club which has often been jammed claustrophobically when popular bands tried to play there. "The club should be a place where bands start and grow. A lot of people got turned off when it got too crowded. I know I did."