

Joni Mitchell Recaptures Her Gift

By JOHN ROCKWELL

It's easy to get testy about Joni Mitchell. Originally yet another strumming folkie from the Village, she moved out to Southern California and steadily transformed herself into a mythological, icy glamour princess. Her album covers were testimonials to a grandiose narcissism, and her poetry and her music evolved inexorably into nervously self-absorbed introspection. Not that she didn't produce great recent work to go along with her haunting earlier albums—"Court and Spark" from 1974 in particular.

But since then her delicate balance between art and artifice has tipped disturbingly toward mannerism and hollowness. Part of the problem was that the huge critical and commercial success of "Court and Spark" made her a more marketable performer than ever before, and she wound up touring constantly in huge arenas that were totally unsuited to the intimacy of her style. In a basketball arena or an outdoor stadium, what might sound subtly varied on record becomes bland and monotonous. Another problem was her professional and personal liaisons with a group of studio musicians whose jazzy backings enlivened "Court and Spark" but who seemed on repeated exposure to be simply facile.

Her double live album, "Miles of Aisles," which came out just two years ago, embalmed both of these tendencies. A year later her first studio album after "Court and Spark," freighted with the title "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," found Miss Mitchell thrashing about experimentally, and the record was greeted with guarded disappointment by her admirers and outright scorn by her detractors.

Her new album, "Hejira," looks at first glance to be a further wallow into self-indulgence, starting with the portentous title and continuing with the artier-than-ever jacket design, which blends Magritte, Vogue and feathery bird images in a melange of skilled but stilted photography. But as soon as one starts listening, one realizes that Miss Mitchell has in fact swung forthrightly back over the line into art. "Hejira" marks nothing less than a triumphant return for her. It is a masterly piece of work, right up there with "Court and Spark," and it reestablishes her claim as the artist best able to link folk-rock with the older Western tradition of the art song.

The word "hejira," or hegira, refers to Mohammad's flight from persecution in Mecca in 622 A.D. to Medina, where his successful ministry began, and more generally it refers to any long travel with overtones of flight and purpose. The title is appropriate for this album, since this is probably the ultimate "road" record so far. Rock stars have turned with boring insistence to the image of themselves on tour as a metaphor for loneliness and alienation. But the poetry in "Hejira" freshens the familiar into something meaningful once again. For Miss Mitchell, her incessant touring of the past two years has crystallized into a superb series of songs in which the road becomes a metaphor not only for loneliness, but for growth and for life itself.

As ever, her main concern is love in general and her own loves especially. But the thematic range of the songs here is wide, full of narrative bits more or less fictionalized from her travels that are interwoven with broader intimations. Time and time again the words shake one evocatively. A song called "A Strange Boy," for instance, drops the following lines into the middle of the tale:

*What a strange, strange boy
He sees the cars as sets of waves
Sequences of mass and space*

He sees the damage in my face

Or take these, from "Refuge of the Roads":

And I sat before his sanity

I was holding back from crying

He saw my complications

And he mirrored me back simplified

The finest song on the album is called "Amelia," which effortlessly fuses the images of Amelia Earhart, love, flight, falling, Icarus, travel and day-to-day detail into one of the best songs of the entire folk-rock era:

A ghost of aviation

She was swallowed by the sky

Or by the sea, like me she had a dream to fly

Like Icarus ascending

On beautiful foolish arms

Amelia, it was just a false alarm.

Maybe I've never really loved

I guess that is the truth

I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes

And looking down on everything

I crashed into his arms

Amelia, it was just a false alarm.

*I pulled into the Cactus Tree Motel
To shower off the dust*

*And I slept on the strange pillows
of my wanderlust*

I dreamed of 747's

Over geometric farms

*Dreams, Amelia, dreams and false alarms.**

The open yet complex imagery of those lines, their blend of simple, declarative naivety and connotative resonance, recalls Neil Young's song, "Cor-

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tez the Killer," and there are more reminiscences of Young here—not least that he himself plays harmonica on one song. For without really altering the essence of her musical style, "Hejira" represents a return for Miss Mitchell to her folk-rock roots after her increasingly mannered dalliance with jazz-rock and jazz singing. There are still references to jazz here, most notably in a languorous, sexy song called "Blue Motel Room." But now the jazz is just that—a reference—and the singing, too, has dispensed with the mannered half-and-whole note slides that used to crop up persistently.

Instead we have the most subtly impassioned singing Miss Mitchell has given us yet, direct yet complexly inflected. And the instrumental backing is remarkably austere yet telling. There are strumming rhythm guitar tracks from Miss Mitchell, full of Young-esque twanging thirds and fifths, flanked

below by a sparse, strong electric bass line and on top by eerie lead guitar, and sometimes augmented by discreet drums, vibes, harmonica, percussion or distance background vocalizing (all over-dubbed by Miss Mitchell herself). At first hearing the songs sound much the same, all floating and dissociated, a Los Angeles version of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn." But soon amidst the lilting flow of most of the songs one senses variety: the driving urgency of "Black Crow," the sinuous teasing energy of "Refuge of the Roads," and the layered complexity of "Song for Sharon."

Like all of Miss Mitchell's best work, "Hejira" is not for comfortable background listening. This is no boogie album, no soothing collection of pop tunes with handy hooks. Instead it is a series of personal statements couched in the idiom of sophisticated Los Angeles folk rock, but assembled with all the care of a lied by Hugo Wolf. As such it is something not to be sampled casually and put aside, but to be savored seriously over the years. ■

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