

singing any louder would give Mojique away. A stunning composition and a performance to match.

The punk movement, rebelling against the sterility of music, brought enthusiasm back to rock. The Talking Heads were new, different, exciting. With *Remain In Light*, despite their imagination, the Heads are running the risk of a passionless, studio-created sterility. They are a step away from becoming their own enemy.

—FRAN COOMBS

Springsteen Almost Live

Bruce Springsteen
The River
Columbia

Bruce Springsteen's new double album *The River* is out, and it's damn good. There are flaws, of course, but who's counting?

It's Springsteen backed by the tightest bar band in town, tossing off musical tributes to rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and any other influence that comes to mind. The street poet surfaces occasionally, but most of the time he's on hold; this time out, the music does the talking.

Springsteen has always written songs too powerful to be captured on vinyl. Even his best recorded work is pale compared to his live shows.

With *The River*, two years in the making, Springsteen tries to remedy that, choosing a studio effect heavy on

the echo to approach his in-concert sound. The result is the closest thing to a live album he's ever recorded. The arrangements are tight (the songs nearly all clock in under four minutes) and the melodies are the strongest and most varied of his career.

But there's a trade-off. Springsteen has always been a poet of our darker side, one of the few songwriters unafraid to take us face-to-face with the most depressing parts of our existence and then let in a little light. It's a world populated by lonely kids, hot cars, sweat and grime, where only the highway goes on forever. Now, the music is on top and the words too often get lost.

Like most double albums, *The River*, with 20 songs, is a bit too much. Yet when the album hits its stride, it challenges Springsteen's greatest moments. The new rockers are simpler in content and impossible to harness, electric guitar on the verge of meltdown. "You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)" and "Ramrod" take the rockabilly pretensions of Nick Lowe and Dave Edmunds and blow them away. Add to the list "Cadillac Ranch," the beach - music - gone - Bowery "Sherry Darling" and "I'm A Rocker," a confrontation between TV heroes and heartbreak.

Still the most chilling works are the slow, concise songs that close the album's last three sides; the lyrics surface here and hold on. The title track revolves around Springsteen's harmonica and one of his most memorable choruses. The story is a familiar one ("Then I got Mary pregnant/And, man, that was all she wrote/And for my 19th birthday, I got a union card and a wedding coat/We went down to the



Joni Mitchell

courthouse/And the judge put it all to rest/No wedding day smiles, no walk down the aisle/No flowers, no wedding dress").

The River ends with the oddest—and perhaps most moving—Springsteen song on record, "Wreck On The Highway." It's the abbreviated tale of someone discovering a car crash in the middle of the night. The final verse captures in a handful of words the selfish, possessive fear aroused by a brush with death: "Sometimes I sit up in the bed and I watch my baby as she sleeps/Then I climb in bed and I hold her tight/I just lay there awake in the middle of the night/Thinking 'bout the wreck on the highway."

Maybe this isn't the future of rock and roll, but it's certainly a departure point.

—FRAN COOMBS

Shadows and Light, recorded in September 1979 at the Santa Barbara County Bowl, features material mostly culled from *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*.

Mitchell is supported by as breathtaking a line-up as she has ever assembled: Jaco Pastorius holds fort on bass; Pat Metheny's guitar soars in and out like an ethereal third grace; Michael Brecker plays a smoky sax that makes one think of camelias and the Cotton Club; Don Alias' percussion is inspiring; and Lyle Mays is crystalline on keyboards.

All this instrumental harmony overshadows Mitchell's erratic vocal performance. She fluctuates between absolute control and sounding just plain tired. Her work on the oldest cut on the album, "Free Man in Paris" from the 1974 *Court and Spark*, underscores the dilemma. Moreover, this version of "Coyote" doesn't pack the wallop of her live performance in *The Last Waltz*.

But when Mitchell is in control of her voice, many of the most inaccessible songs from *Don Juan* and *Mingus* are very effective. She infuses them with an incandescence not apparent in their studio counterparts.

"Pork Pie Hat" is a superb composition. Done live, Mitchell's heartfelt portrait makes you feel the grime of the subway and her runaway joy at discovering the two little boys dancing under the awning of the Pork Pie Hat Bar. Lester Young done proud once more.

She is in magnificent form on Side 4. Brecker's bobby sox sax almost steals the show on "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?", and Mitchell rediscovers her soprano. She and the Persuasions, her backup singers, deliver a commanding capella on the title cut. Unlike a true jazz singer, Mitchell cannot "make" a note in the fashion of Sarah Vaughn or take a standard and make it hers; her later songs are practically impossible to cover.

Shadows and Light concludes with "Woodstock." "We are stardust/we are golden" peals clearly, sweetly, the flat oval prairie o's encircling the anthem of a generation. The second reading of the refrain is tentative with "some semblance of a garden" now the song's keynote.

Caught up in her own tough-minded bargain—not the devil's nor her record company's, nor that of her critics—Joni Mitchell moves forward with grace and passion. No regrets.

—SUSAN HALIGAN

Joni Mitchell: Undying Rebel

Joni Mitchell
Shadows and Light
Elektra-Asylum

Shadows and Light, Joni Mitchell's new live album, opens with a few bars of the title song followed by dialogue from "Rebel without a Cause."

The recorded scene comes at the end of the film where James Dean confronts his parents with his participation in the famous "chicken" incident. Jim Backus, as faceless grey flannel fifties daddy, says to his son, "You can't be idealistic all your life. No one pays you for being idealistic." Dean simmers. "Accept yourself," Backus says. "Accept yourself."

It is not clear where Mitchell sides in the Backus/Dean conflict, and it is not meant to be. Conflict has always been the central motif in Mitchell's best work. No artist of her reputation, with the possible exception of Eric Clapton, has so radically altered her public's comfortable perceptions by fiercely refusing a prescribed mantle.

Since the appearance of the experimental "Hissing of Summer Lawns" in 1975, Mitchell has, in the opinion of many, overreached her grasp and herself become a rebel without a cause. The high priestess of the confessional who plaintively sat in a bar drawing maps of Canada on placemats had shed her mantle.

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