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New Albums: Joni Mitchell, Lightfoot, Slick

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These past couple of months haven't exactly been the best ever in record company history. There was a little splash here, some spark there, but by and large, the past couple of months haven't been much.

Until now. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, there's a whole stack of good things. Superior things.

Like singer, songwriter Joni Mitchell's new one for starters. It's "Spark and Court" (Asylum), and it's almost sure to be one of '74's best. We can say that even

though it comes only a month into the new year.

As is the case with all Joni Mitchell albums, it's a warmly personal, deeply introspective collection of music, all dealing with the search for love and satisfaction. And the highs, lows, joys and woes encountered therein.

The themes are all pretty similar to those of "Blue," "Ladies of the Canyon" and "For the Roses." Loves won and loves lost. No surprises there. The surprise comes with the realization that Mitchell, after all the emotion and insight of the previous three, is still capable of dipping inside herself

for even more visions. Surprising, but true.

In "Spark and Court" we find Joni in moods of hope, as in "Car on the Hill," in moods filled with apprehension, as in "Down to You," in daring, reckless—but still perceptive—moods, as in "Help Me."

We also find her toying successfully with humor, as in the lively rocking "Raised on Robbery," all about a hotel lobby pick-up, or a completely uncontrolled version of "Twisted," the album's only non-Mitchell song.

The Mitchell lyrics throughout are brilliant. At times a bit obscure, but always showing careful discipline and a great sense of style. The strong point in every number is the honesty. Mitchell has a perception about herself and then sings about it. No filters, no hedging, no watering it down. Purely honest.

Musically, it would seem Mitchell is moving more into jazz and rock than ever before. Not of the loud, steely variety, but definitely a jazzy rock and roll.

It's a strong, nearly flawless album. Could even call it her strongest to date. And that's saying quite a lot.

Another singer, songwriter, the venerable Gordon Lightfoot, also has a new offering. Its name is "Sundown" and it's available on the Reprise label.

Lightfoot, Canadian like Mitchell, has pretty much been a fixture on the American scene for the past couple of years. Always on the fringe, always just beneath the surface, but always there. Never a giant star of anything, but consistently good enough to be

able to hold onto a devout, if somewhat small, audience.

Lightfoot's background is mainly folk, though in recent years he's been laboring to expand his frame of reference. Still, and you can get the message on "Sundown," his essentially simple compositions and generally acoustic approach are forever harkening back to those pure folk days.

Which is just fine. There's no rule that says you have to follow the pack. Especially when you write songs like Lightfoot. "Sundown" has 10 new ones, each more dynamic than the next.

And even if they weren't good songs, he sings them in such a fine voice, backed by

such simple, uncluttered yet totally effective arrangements, that it would be enough to fool most people.

Like Mitchell, Lightfoot deals with the delicacies of emotion. He's a bit more blunt about it—no poetic obscurities for this lad—and more willing to deal with it on what would appear to be—but which ultimately is not—a more superficial level.

Unlike Mitchell, Lightfoot periodically strays far from the love feeling bit to investigate other facets of his existence. Not often, but frequently enough to give the album some variety. As well as a sense of balance and perspective.

On all counts, a fine album. Recommended for everyone and anyone.

In a completely different area, Grace Slick, she of Jefferson Airplane fame, also has another new album out. The Grunt effort is "Manhole." Supposedly it's a movie soundtrack. We'll see.

Anyway, it's pretty much a new Grace Slick. One that has finally realized acid rock is a thing of the past. One that has finally realized she really can sing and she'll quit playing around.

The album is Slick in a softer mood, Spanish at

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times, American at others, than we've ever seen her. She's backed by a fairly large band—Paul Kantner and David Crosby are the most notable—and using her considerable vocal gifts—the strength, the tremendous range, the clear, even tone—more as a musical instrument than as a voice.

Side one is all one song—the "Manhole" theme—incorporating a wide range of styles and motifs. Side two has four cuts with the same diversity.

The chief joy of the album, besides the fact that

it's just good music, lies in the fact that we have Grace Slick, a giant talent with a beautiful voice, back from a bad trip. Very good news.

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