

# ON RECORD

## Don Juan's Reckless Daughter

Joni Mitchell

By Michael Frisbie

Joe Rosenberg and I once interviewed the redoubtable Captain Beefheart, and, amid the pleasantries, asked the good Captain what he thought of the Great Midwest. "Chlorophyll," he responded. It took us a second to understand him — seeing America through the tinted windows of the tour bus made it all look green. Much of Joni Mitchell's imagery is equally plain after a second of thought, and she deserves your time if you accept the conceit of literate rock music; nobody does it better, as Carly Simon recently mentioned somewhere.

*Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, its both flawed and brilliant — Mitchell's best album in years contains enough lapses to sink the work of a lesser artist, enough musical genius to redeem the lapses. It is a difficult, unapproachable double set that demands attention, causes the head to shake in condescending boredom, lulls and kills. I do not recommend it to the casual listener, but then I do not plan to file it away for a time, either.

Joni's killer instinct is rather subtly introduced: the album's first tune praises a neck of the woods where the fun never stops, and "Cotton Avenue" seems to be the place to go for a rousing weekend night. After a bit it's apparent that the narrator's never been down there, that the whole damn song's rodomantade. This isn't in the lyrics at all — the realization seeps through Mitchell's superb actor's voice; she sings it bluesy and wispy at the same time. Joni's "Cotton Avenue" isn't too far removed from Van Morrison's *Cyprus*, though hers ends in isolation and his in madness. Take your pick.

"Talk to Me" includes one rather vulgar line I found superfluous on first listening and magnificently apropos upon second — in fact, its inclusion in the song well nigh makes the record for me: such correctness of expression is staggering. "Talk to Me" also ushers back upon the stage the old shat-upon Joni Mitchell, who makes her vulnerability an almost aggressive trait. Underneath the tune is a scream, a cat-claw yowl of sex and terror and obsession.

Much of *Don Juan's* . . . in



superfluous: "Otis and Marlena" escapes cruelty only by plunging into unfair polemics, and the title song is too manic and personal to fathom. "The Tenth World," instrumental and banal, merely links the Florida vacation of "Otis and Marlena" to the Caribbean horrors of "Dreamland," a superb and ominous song that Roger McGuinn covered two years ago in completely different style. The side-long "Paprika Plains" evokes Mitchell's Canada too long and too uninterestingly (though the bass of Jaco Pastorius rings as it does throughout the album — it's the dominating sound over all four sides and it is fine).

But just as the record's about to be accused of indulgence come "Off Night Back Street" and "The Silky Veils of Ardor," and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* ends with wrenching, aching bitterness. Joni Mitchell differs from her fellow Canadian Neil Young in style — she explores folk and jazz while he concerns himself with country and rock — but both are driven to explore the dilemma of man and woman versus the survival of self. "Silly Love Songs" or *Heaven on the Seventh Floor* doesn't cover it — neither does *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, but it covers enough. This is the big league, kids, and Joni's a starter.



## Running on Empty Jackson Browne



I've taken my share of cheap shots at old Jackson (mainly for the simple, sadistic joy of offending his fanatic devotees), so I want to begin by saying that *Running on Empty* is a charming, moving and very good record. The idea of *The Road* is such a mythic part of rock's cosmology (and that of the country as a whole, for that matter) that it's surprising no one's ever done an album about it before. I only hope that Asylum Records and the above-mentioned Brownes don't make too big a deal of this understated tribute to that concrete icon, the super slab: *Running on Empty*, nice and small and wry, is a postcard from the bus.

Part of it was recorded on a bus, in fact — "Nothing But Time" features the background hum of a Continental Silver Eagle and the tasty cardboard-box percussion of Russ Kunkel. The rest of the album was taped onstage, backstage and offstage (in various motel rooms) and the sound quality, making allowances for Asylum's notorious vinyl surface noise, is surprisingly consistent.

Like Phil Ochs and Neil Young, Browne here presents a live album of new material, nine songs ("Stay" is incorporated quite appropriately but doesn't count as a new song) he hasn't recorded previously. I like that — it

demonstrates a respect for the record-buyer and an integrity not too common in the business. I also like to hear Jackson this loose; he has never sung so well as on *Running on Empty* — maybe he needs to get away from the arid sterility of the studio more often. Admittedly, much of the material lacks the import of that on *For Everyman*, *Late for the Sky*, *The Pretender*, and the first album, *Saturate Before Using*, but the camaraderie and humor and chops make this fifth album just as good as its predecessors.

A major reason for the album's success is the band — it's *The Section*, really, with violinist David Lindley and singers Rosemary Butler and Doug Haywood. Danny Kortchmar, Lee Sklar, Russ Kunkel and Craig George have played with everybody by now and it's obvious that Browne's one of their favorite people to play with. He rocks more with *The Section* driving him, with Lindley filling all over the place, with two strong harmony singers surging behind him.

The songs all relate to touring, groupies and roadies and motels and new towns and the loved ones waiting at four's end. The Rev. Gary Davis "Cocaine" receives an amusing delivery, Danny O'Keefe's "The Road" nearly becomes the album's anthem — early. The best of the songs is the last — Browne's tribute to his crew and audience ("The Load-out") hurts and assuages simultaneously, slides smoothly into "Stay" and closes out a fine set on a positive, intelligent note.

Jackson Browne is (and always has been) the best of the Southern Californians, a group whose collective curse is a whining passivity that disguises the formula-music they make. Browne towers above his cohorts (and I include the Eagles) because his joys aren't vindictive and his pains aren't reproachful; he is a shy, good, decent man who writes honest and well-intentioned songs. It is fitting that he and Joni begin the year together — in the months to come it will be pleasant to retreat into the taste and professionalism *Running on Empty* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* afford.

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