

women in music

RECORD REVIEW

by Beverley Ross

Court and Spark: Joni Mitchell, Asylum: 7E-1001.

Sandy: Sandy Denny, A. & M.: SP 4371.

Joni Mitchell has never needed much more than her guitar or piano and her voice to complete the sound of her songs. However, on her most recent album, *Court and Spark*, she is backed by a rhythm section on every track and many of the songs are rounded out by horns or strings and in some cases, by full orchestration. This new fullness of sound is so well matched to the songs that it is almost impossible to imagine any of the cuts on the album presented

in the artist's original, more fragile style. The secret is, I think, that Ms. Mitchell and her co-arranger, Tom Scott have drawn their sounds from the center of the songs themselves, thus managing to avoid the "tacked-on" quality that is so often heard on an orchestrated "folk" album.

Happily, this new musical completeness is supported by a return to thematic strength. On her two previous recordings, Ms. Mitchell was rather heavily into a self-indulgent pre-occupation with her reactions to the "star complex" which was becoming monotonous. On *Court and Spark* her precisely focused lyrics are as ruthlessly self-examining as ever, but as she reveals the personalities and experiences of her life,

I find myself identifying once again with the feelings expressed (such as the emptiness of "Down To You") rather than trying to identify (James Taylor or Graham Nash?) the personalities involved.

The weakest cut on the album is "Raised on Robbery" which was obviously hammered out for the AM radio market and is redeemed only by the completeness of the character in the song - a brash broad trying to make a pick-up in a bar. This song is also the only interruption in the superb flow of the album which ends with "Twisted", an old Annie Ross tune about analysis. It is added as a delightfully crazy encore and Joni Mitchell sings it like she wrote it herself.

Sandy Denny, a British singer-songwriter, finds her roots in a blend of rock music and traditional British folk songs. She was one of the founding members of Fairport Convention, one of the first (and still popular) groups to experiment with that combination of sounds. *Sandy*, her second solo album, is as warm and as intimate in quality as its title implies. Joni Mitchell's honesty lies in the aptness of her images but the complexity of her music and her clear almost cold voice keep her somehow distant. The openness of Sandy Denny's music arises from its honest simplicity and the dusky closeness of her voice.

The weightier feeling of drums and bass have always been a part of Ms. Denny's sound but on *Sandy* she has extended the instrumentation so that each track is colored with an individual mood. On "Sweet Rosemary" Dave Swarbrick's fiddle adds a sweet nostalgia to the traditional sound. "Bushes and Briars (Thistles and Thorns)" includes the Western flavour of a pedal steel guitar supplying a light insolence to this comment on the convenience of religion. Strings on "The Lady" elegantly portray a sunrise. The technique is least successful on "For Nobody to Hear" which is an attempt at "soul" sound complete with a brass section and reverb on Ms. Denny's voice. The result doesn't match the otherwise unmasked feel of the album.

Peopled with gypsies, Ladies, hobos and fortune-tellers, *Sandy* is in some ways like a collection of folk-tales, reality inlaid with legend. My favourite track is a Richard Farina song, "The Quiet Joys of Brotherhood" which begins as an unaccompanied vocal solo and adds layer after layer of vocal over-dubs. The song is a radiant mixture of traditional and modern sound, which is characteristic of this album at its best.

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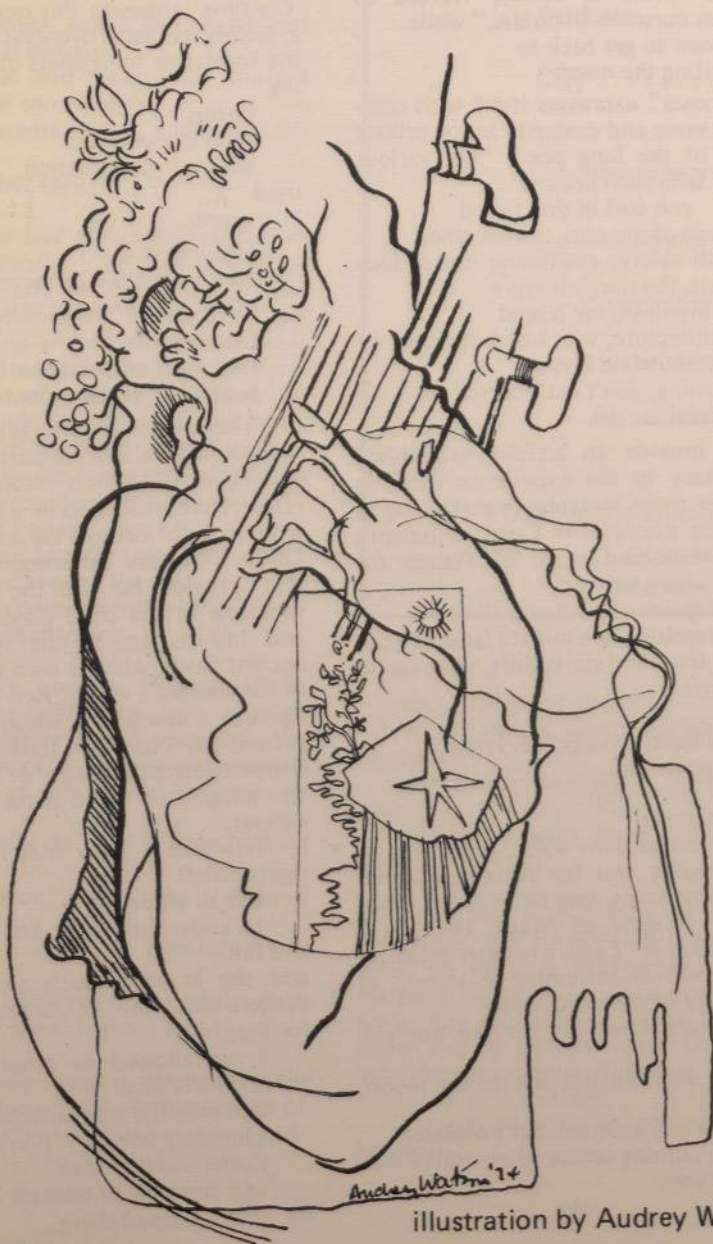


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