

# The Friday After Ash Wednesday

Reverend Robert Griffin

Last week, the Friday after Ash Wednesday, a part of me that I loved very much was separated from me and set ahead of me into an early grave. Some teeth (not all, but only some) were set upon by a dentist with an angry forceps, grappled with as though they were the powers of darkness, and pulled out of my head as painfully as though they had roots that grew down to my heart. Afterwards, I mourned the loss of those teeth as though I had betrayed them. In a very real sense, blameless little fellows that they were, I feel that I did betray them.

Oh, how detached Mister Modern Dentist seems when he looks over your mouth and says of life-long molars, "Well, Father, I guess those teeth there can come out."

"Come out," you want to scream at him, "Why that's part of me that you're talking about. I've put a million hours into brushing those teeth. I've sat up with them nights when they weren't feeling well, bringing them cups of cold water and aspirin. Those are the teeth I graduated from high school with; the teeth that gave me a stiff upper lip when I kissed my first girl friend. What to hell is this 'Come out' crap you are handing me?"

But you don't speak that way to Mister Detached Modern Dentist. Instead you suggest practically: "Couldn't we just take out the nerve and wax them with Glcoat? Couldn't we enjoy them with diamonds and

advertise for Tiffany's? Couldn't we call in Dr. DeBaKey and transplant them to my navel?" Oh, God, I don't want to lose those teeth. I don't want to admit that a part of me is dying. I don't want them to precede me into eternal life.

In the end, Mister Detached Modern Dentist has his selfish way, jabbing you jaw with novocaine. You think: "If those teeth had eyes, they would look at me now like Darby O'Gill, pleading to be kept and not sent to the used puppy farm." You remember the filet mignons those teeth have bitten into, the gallons of Manhattan that have washed over them. You sing them snatches of a popular song: "I've been true to you, darlings in my fashion. I've been true to you, darlings, in my way." In the end, nothing takes away the pain; nothing diminishes the guilt.

Afterwards, the teeth lay side by side, like fallen marines, on the dentist's table. The nurse says: "Would you like to keep them?"

"What for?" you snarl. "The tooth Fairy will never find her way into my bedroom. The Tooth Fairy discriminates against me on account of age."

You look at them stretched out as little corpses, and you want to cry. "Go not gentle into that good night," you whisper.

That same day, Mister Detached Modern Dentist replaced my natural teeth with chompers of his own. Did you ever have

strange chompers pushed into your face, mismanaging themselves, behaving badly, like the Irish moving into Protestant neighborhoods? I find it hard to imagine, if I were ever married and then divorced, that I could risk it with a second wife; but I think it would be easier to do that than to get along with alien teeth.

On Wednesday of last week, ashes were placed on my head, and I was reminded that, as man, I came from dust, and into dust I will return. The liturgy has no ritual as stern as the dentist's chair to warn us that in our bodies, we have no lasting city, and day after day, the Enemy is pounding down the walls. But if for days now, I have had the blues stabbing at my mind like the regret for a lost love, it has not been death that is depressing me, nor the torture from teeth that didn't come with the mouth.

Last week, when I first felt with my tongue the spaces left by the removal of teeth that I loved, I honestly panicked. Irreversible, unchangeable decision! Oh, horror inflicted against pearls of great price! Sin against the body's wholeness: crime against the mouth that suckled at my mother's breast!

I admit: I get nervous at a hair cut; I store toe nail clippings in a jar. There is none of me that I like to lose; maybe it's because we never had much when I was a child. I have had friends I could say goodbye to more easily than to those teeth, friends I

would willingly lay down my life for. I wanted those teeth buried with full military honors: there was so much of the good fight we had fought together.

The teeth I have left are now being pampered like spoiled children. I'm just afraid they are going to start distrusting me. "You got rid of them," they could say. "Maybe someday, you'll get rid of us."

"Honestly," I want to explain, "that's not the way it happened. You see, there was this detached modern dentist..." I can imagine those remaining teeth turning up their noses at my excuses.

The body, they say, is merely an instrument to be used by the soul; at death, we will give up our bodies, at least until the Resurrection. Maybe the reason God lets us fall apart is so that we can begin early, hoping for the Resurrection. Maybe He takes back our bodies gradually, bit by bit, moment by moment, permitting us to begin to die from the instant of our birth, sometimes even snatching back-through the angry tools of Mister Detached Modern Dentist--parts of the body the soul hasn't even finished with.

There is comfort on the far side of anguish as we watch our bodies die: "These dry bones will live again."

Even Mister Detached Modern Dentist can't tell me that the best part of my smile will not live forever.

## Joni Mitchell's Don Juan

by Jim Hayes

Joni Mitchell's new album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, is unusual in many ways, but the fact that it is unusual is not, in itself, unusual. Her albums have tended toward the idiosyncratic since her live *Miles of Aisles* summed up and thereby capped off her career as popular-accessible-singer-songwriter. With *The Hissing of Summer Laws*, then *Hejira*, and now *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, she has, depending on one's perspective, either weirded out or pretty much bitten the dust as a major talent, or gone on to pursue her interests and develop her talents by creatively experimenting and expanding her style. From both perspectives Joni Mitchell has been unusual; the difference between the two perspectives lies in the connotations they give this word: "unusual" would mean "strange" from the first perspective and "ambitious" from the second. (The reason for the two perspectives is, I feel, a misunderstanding on the part of those with the first perspective. Many of those who reject Joni Mitchell's newer material judge it in terms of her older, very good and very accessible style, and because of this they are unable to appreciate the newer stuff on its own level.)

This is an ambitious album. Ms. Mitchell takes a lot of risks, sticks her neck out quite a bit. Even before listening to it, you (as an average record buyer) might observe from the notes that she sings one song accompanied only by percussion instruments, sings another song backed only by an acoustic guitar (somewhat of a return to her "folk" days) includes an "Overture" (what is that?), fills one whole side with one song (something that is unheard of from a major song writer-singer since Bob Dylan's "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" eleven years ago), and even includes a seven minute percussion instrumental. Also, if you were familiar with the group, you might notice that all but one of the members of Weather Report play on the album, not surprising considering Joni's similar use of the L.A. Express a few years ago, except that what she uses here are not horn players but percussionists and a bass player, Jaco Pastorius. Finally, you would notice that it is a double album, indicating a physical as well as stylistic expansion of her music. (You might wonder about the justification behind expansion, however, because at 60 minutes this album is only about ten minutes longer than her last, yet almost twice as expensive.) Having observed all of this, regardless of whatever else you might say, you would not say she wasn't ambitious.

When the record finally does reach the turntable, the average record buyer-turned listener will find it a very fine album. The "Overture," a strangely pretty interplay between guitar, bass, and vocal parts, pulls the listener in almost hypnotically.

At the same time it is an excellent lead-in to "Cotton Avenue, the most catchy and upbeat song on the album. This is a funny yet sympathetic song about night-life in a small town, and it is the first of many references to younger days. The next song, "Talk to Me," is on a more serious note. It is an earnest sometimes desperate appeal to a gentleman for conversation.

then returns to the basic song for its conclusion, and finally ends with a string instrumental, "Into the Sunset" fadeout which might conceivably have been found on a Weather Report album except for Ms. Mitchell's distinctive piano. The song is one of Joni Mitchell's biggest gambles on the album, and though the piece is not flawless, it works. Since it is a gamble,



("Are you really exclusive or just miserly? You spend every sentence as if were marked currency! Come and spend some on me.") Ms. Mitchell's voice and guitar are accompanied only by Jaco Pastorius' bass, and this arrangement is very effective in highlighting the intensity of her plea. The side ends with "Jericho," a song about dealing with a disintegrated romance. The song appeared for the first time on *Miles of Aisles* in a snappier, happier version, but this version is more appropriate to the message being conveyed.

Side two is "Paprika Plains," a sixteen minute song dealing with Joni Mitchell's childhood, Indians, and dreams, all three of which are themes that recur throughout the album. It begins with the basic song (lyrics set to the melody), then moves into an interlude with piano and strings dominating - nice but perhaps a bit long --

something new and out of the ordinary, it is that much more satisfying when it does work. This is the high point of the album. Side three, in contrast, is a bit disappointing. It opens with "Otis and Marlina," a scathingly sarcastic song about old people who go to Florida for the comfortable, artificial existence the area offers them. ("They've come for fun and sun/while Muslims stick up Washington...") Such treatment seems unnecessary; any ridicule of old people seems cruel. An attack on the privilege of wealth might be justifiable, but this is not what she strikes at in this song. Following this is "The Tenth World," a seven-minute percussion instrumental, featuring eight different types of percussion instruments, and including various unintelligible chants thrown in from time to time. I don't know what Ms. Mitchell's intentions were in including this when she made her album,

but they certainly did not match my expectations of enjoying it when I bought it. It seems to have no reason for existence but them again, what, or who, does. The last song on the side is "Dreamland," the apparent conclusion to "The Tenth World" in that the percussion instruments dominate, though they use a bit more restraint here. In "Dreamland" they serve as accompaniment for Joni Mitchell's sing-songy, almost childlike vocal, which deals again with dreams. The contrast of her innocent-sounding voice with the primal drumbeats offers a contrast which might strike many as being too eclectic, too unharmonious, but I find it interesting. The lack of instrumentation is so glaring that I find myself filling in harmonies and other background sounds, and I do not think it is improbable that she intended something like this.

With side four comes a return to normalcy, relatively speaking of course, songs being offered in a more familiar form. This side is the most emotionally revealing of all. It begins with "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," a song describing a short-term affair--the type of which seems most common for her--using American Indian metaphors and terse, Indian-stereotype language, occasionally throwing pieces of the American national anthem for effective contrast. She realizes the drawbacks involved in such encounters, but expresses confidence that in the end more good comes from them than bad. She sings about the less glamorous type of short-term affair in the next song, where she describes the pains of being an abused lover, an "Off Night Backstreet" who "he" comes to see only when he wants to cheat on his girlfriend. Both of these songs address a person ("you") directly, and so would seem to be rather immediate reactions to these relationships. She observes her lifestyle in a more reflective light (and in first-person) in the final song, "The Veils of Ardor." In this song, in which she utilizes only voice and guitar, returning to her most basic musical as well as spiritual level, Joni Mitchell expresses regret for her loss of innocence--thereby explaining her pre-occupation with her childhood--and voices a desire for an ideal love, thus clarifying the importance of her dreams, since "It's just in dreams we fly" ("we" meaning she and her lover).

Beyond being impressed by her voice, which has never sounded better, and by her lyrics, which continue in their general level of excellence, and by her general musical talents, which are awesome, one is moved by her honest and authentic emotion to the point where one feels with her. It is the ability to accomplish this last effect that makes Joni Mitchell an outstanding rather than merely proficient artist. It is the accomplishment itself that makes this album such a pleasure to listen to.