

The Pop Life

Joni Mitchell and Neil Young Disks

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Both Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, who have new albums out this week, have won large and fanatical followings by the very way they overcome and exploit their natural vocal limitations.

Miss Mitchell's basic vocal color is schoolgirlish and dull. But she has worked on her phrasing and on certain tricks of vocal coloration—particularly a vibrato that she can stretch and control at will—that have lent her singing a distinctive style.

Mr. Young's tenor has a far more evocative basic sound, at least for those of us who respond to it at all. But his method of vocal production is so (deliberately?) perilous that he threatens to lapse into strangulated hoarseness any second. And so he has forged his style by translating his vocal limitations into a metaphor for the tense, desperate, angry persona that has filled his last few records.

The new Mitchell album's very title will annoy those who think of her already as a shallow and self-indulgent mannerist—it's called "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," and includes a narcissistic photo of the singer on the inside, floating embryonically in a swimming pool, surrounded by saccharine prose.

Musically, too, the new record will annoy those who felt that Miss Mitchell overdid the piano-bar jazz idiom on her previous studio album "Court and Spark." Tom Scott is now out of the picture, but most of the L.A. Express, his old band, is still with Miss Mitchell, as are three members of the Jazz Crusaders.

And along with the same brittle, rhythmically displaced music is the same humorless self-absorption that has always marked Miss Mitchell's work, the same periodic blunt sermonizing (a song called "Harry's House" especially) and the same vocal mannerisms—she really ought to cast whole-note slides up to principal notes out of her arsenal of tricks forever.

That said, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" is a fascinating piece of work. The poetic interconnections, the musical idioms, the ways Miss Mitchell expands her past styles (African drums, more synthesizer than ever)—all fuse into something unique in pop music. This really is the "total work" she tells us it is, and if that means she shows her warts, her warts are slicker, more glamorous and more interesting than almost anybody else's.

Mr. Young's disk, "Zuma," amounts to a return to his

brand of twanging, open-fifths, inexorably simple rock after some musically sparser albums. This is really "head music" in the old-fashioned, 1960's sense—plodding and bleary, with insights popping into one's consciousness like bubbles in sludge. And yet it grows on one, and powerfully. Perhaps it isn't quite the extreme personal document of "Tonight's the Night" (his previous record, although recorded a couple of years ago). But in a song like "Cortez the Killer," Mr. Young reaches very close to the quintessence of his strangely compelling art.

Bob Dylan's benefit concert Dec. 8 at Madison Square Garden for Rubin (Hurricane) Carter may or may not be his only New York appearance. A Dylan spokesman hinted that it would be, adding, "I think they've had it for awhile."

On the other hand, there have been persistent rumors about appearances at the Beacon Theater and The Other End, the Greenwich Village nightclub that was the center of the informal jamming that led to the Rolling Thunder Revue tour in the first place. Nobody will confirm or flatly deny those rumors. The tour plays Montreal on Thursday, then has nothing on its known schedule except the Carter benefit. And the same Dylan spokesman who suggested that Dec. 8 would be the only date here also suggested that the tour would end Thursday.

David Bowie, having finished his first film and a new album to be released in January, announces a worldwide tour today on a popular British television show. The North American portion begins Feb. 2 in Vancouver, British Columbia, and ends March 26 at Madison Square Garden.

The New York Times

Published: November 28, 1975

Copyright © The New York Times