

# Albums

Reviewers: Michael Watts, Michael Oldfield, Colin Irwin, Robin Grayden, Bob Gallagher

**JONI MITCHELL:** "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" (Asylum BB701, Import). Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, piano); Jaco Pastorius (bass and percussion); John Guerin (drums); Don Alias (bongos, congas, clavé, snaredrum, sandpaper blocks and shaker); Wayne Shorter (soprano sax); Larry Carlton (electric guitar on "Otis And Marlana"); Michael Colombier (piano on "Otis And Marlana"); Manolo Badrena (congas, coffee cans, vocals on "The Tenth World"); Alejandro Acuna (congas, cowbell, shakers, ankle bells); Akto (surdo bass drum); Chaka Khan (vocals on "The Tenth World" and "Dreamland"); J. D. Souther and Glenn Fray (vocals on "Off Night Backstreet"); Michael Gibbs (orchestrator and arranger on "Paprika Plains" and "Off Night Backstreet"). Recorded and mixed at A&M Studios in Hollywood by Henry Lewy and Steve Katz.

**WHY HAS** Joni Mitchell blacked up and dressed like a man on the cover of her new album? What is the significance of printing lyrics on the sleeve that remain unsung on the record? And why are the four sides of this double album not in continuity? Answers, please, Ms. Mitchell, in a long interview at this address.

Once again it's chiming Christmas and Joni Mitchell is making her traditional present of illusions and disillusionment (although the album is not officially released in Britain until the first week in January).

The mysteries, too, are as profound as ever. There are enough symbols and metaphors here — in the constant reference to dreams, for example, or snake images — to provide a field day for a Structuralist critic.

And, of course, there are the familiar songs of crushed hopes, though Joni seems to be growing tougher and more ironic with age. But "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" (now that has to be irony) is, if not a failure, then certainly not a conspicuous success.

The reason, I feel, concerns the form of her music in recent years. On her previous two albums she patently stopped building wongs upon attractive hooks and became more interested in textures and rhythms, to the point where "Hejira," her last record, was recitative in tone.

But the delicate, sombre music of "Hejira," an album about her flight from relationships, quite brilliantly sustained the mood of her lyrics; and on "The Hissing Of Summer Lawns" she constructed a remarkably successful bridge between this new sophistication and the more obvious pop song format of her earlier career.

This adoption of a more implied melody has thrust greater emphasis upon her lyrics and the readily apparent view of herself as a poetess, to which she has responded with her most deeply poetical language. But, since she is still working in a musical medium, it has also demanded of her music a great degree of tension and range of careful nuance to ensure that her songs do not become elegant Muzak, best suited to dinner parties.

On "Don Juan" she has fallen from the tightrope, and, although she always climbs back up, her performance is distinctly patchy. Too often here her custom of displaying, as though for textual analysis, her song lyrics seems to be an end in itself. One admires the quality, the figurative landscapes, of her writing, but also requires that a song-sheet be not indispensable.

Highly ambitious, she has devoted a whole side to a long musical poem ("Paprika Plains") that is couched in several movements, ranging from classy pop song to orchestral piece (actually, more like "Dream Of Olwen") and finally to the kind of cool jazz sound that has preoccupied her since she began using the Crusaders on "Court And Spark."

It sounds pleasing — above all, it is sophisticated, like the rest of this album — but, most telling, for the lyrics to the long orchestral section (where she plays piano on Mike Gibbs' arrangement) she obliges us to consult the printed sleeve.

To use this parenthesis is to play games with the listener: it's an irritating artifice, not unlike the equivalent in literary techniques of "discreetly drawing a veil" over the action, except that the heart of the poem is precisely in these lines.

But it could also indicate that she's having difficulties reconciling music and lyric. Having forsaken sheer tunefulness, how does she extend her musical ambitions and continue to refine her sort of poetry, especially as she's working in a mass medium?

Unlike Steely Dan, her closest rivals as writers of literate rock music, she has no background in jazz to supply her with more musical possibilities; and anyway, she's openly romantic, with a style that retains strong traces of her monologic folk-song roots.

Her singing, for example, though it has completely lost the shrillness that makes "Big Yellow Taxi," say, so hard for me to bear, is not that of a jazz artist, since she can't really swing and she is not the mistress of verbal felicities; rather, it can be cool and jazzy, in imitation of the West Coast jazzmen she obviously likes — and, indeed, her voice has rarely sounded more assured than on "Paprika Plains."

The limitations of her writing are most exposed on the three songs which constitute the first side: "Cotton Avenue," "Talk To Me" and "Jericho." These songs deal with familiar themes — "Cotton Avenue" is about a young girl's enthusiasm for the bright city lights, and, like several other first songs on



## Joni: a fallible magician

her albums, it especially celebrates the urge to dance; on "Talk To Me" she is playful, teasing a response from her lover; and "Jericho" shows another Mitchell preoccupation — her need for, but fears of, emotional commitment.

Their lyrics, if far from her best, contain some good lines, particularly the lightly ironic "Talk To Me." But the music, which relies heavily upon her strumming rhythm lines and Jaco Pastorius' sliding, booming bass, falls flat; it is never as interesting as the lyrics, which clearly take precedence.

The musical ideas, which on

"Don Juan" one is forced to look for good bits. True, there are many moments to savour. "Otis And Marlana" is a very barbed song about enervated Florida sun-seekers, whose unreal world she contrasts with the violence of world events; "Paprika Plains" miraculously summons forth a childhood memory of doomed Indians in her homeland of Canada; and "Dreamland," which has Airo's hypnotic bass drum underpinning the rhythm, supports that mood of reverie.

But it's time for Joni Mitchell to take stock of her music. With commendable ad-

venture she has spread herself over four sides of this album, but she has neither moved forward nor consolidated the success of "Hejira" and "Summer Lawns." She is a magician, but a fallible one. — M.W.

### MAN: "All's Well That Ends Well" (MCA).

IT was a sad day for many a rocker when this Welsh band split up. In all, there were 13 line-ups and the last of these, comprising Deke Leonard, Phil Ryan, John McKenzie, Terry Williams and Mickey Jones, is the one featured on this live album. It's their last three shows at London's Roundhouse, recorded last December, and the atmosphere is just right for the band's rocking exit from the scene.

It's a well-recorded set, nicely balanced and engineered, so that all the vocals and instruments come over crystal clear. There are no surprises as far as the numbers are concerned — Man rock out all the old favourites like "Hard Way To Live," "Romaine" and "Born With A Future". They only come unstuck on the opening track, the oldie, "Let The Good Times Roll", which somehow lacks the fire the celebratory song deserves.

But this is more than compensated for by the rest of the numbers. It's powerhouse rock all the way, with some strong vocals and some wild extended instrumental passages where the band really cuts the groove. "The Ride And The View", with its echo-laden dual-guitar intro, is one of the best cuts, and should have been the opening number for its sheer devastating impact. "Hard Way To Live" is a simple pounding rocker with gritty vocals cutting through the atmosphere like a scythe through corn.

"Born With A Future" opens with some throbbing

guitar and jagged organ, develops into a gale force nine storm then subsides to a slow, passionate, soul-type number before raging into a wild instrumental section that builds to a crescendo before thump. The end. A fitting memento to a rocking band. — R.G.

### FANTASTIC FOUR: "Got To Have Your Love" (Atlantic).

THE Fantastic Four are one of those outfits who've seemingly always been there but never quite there, never quite an enduring image on the retina of the record-buying public's eye. That state of affairs, however, may be about to change.

Although this, the quartet's third set for Westbound, is at the moment languishing at the foot of the US album chart, it has already given up one hit single — the disco-zippin' title track — and seems to have a second up its sleeve in the shape of "There's Fire Down Below". It's another impeccably arranged disco cut full of the ubiquitous Tom Moulton's mix mischief (Moulton appears to have a special affection for Detroit vocal groups; he also slides the knobs for the Fantastic Four's stablemates, the Detroit Emeralds).

That said, "Got To Have Your Love" is no full-tilt charge at the discotheque. In fact, for every bass-race dance track there's a soul ballad featuring the leathery voice of veteran James Epps and the sweet, easy harmonies of his fellows ("Ain't I Been Good To You", for instance, keenly evokes the Persuaders' "Thin Line Between Love And Hate").

In these days of disco saturation, it makes a distinctly pleasant change to come across a record that both intelligently exploits dance demand and celebrates soul's roots. — B.G.

## Browne on the road

### JACKSON BROWNE: "Running On Empty" (Asylum Import).

AS A fully-paid up life member of the Jackson Browne is A Great Bloke And His Songs Sometimes Nearly Move Me To Tears Society, this record, greedily snapped up, has been whirling round my turntable in the desperate hope that it improves with hearing, and will thus save me from expressing my initial disappointment. I'm still trying, but that hope is steadily receding.

It's a concept album of sorts — though not in the accepted sense. The original plan was to make this a live album, but it has been pruned to a single LP, recorded during Browne's tour through the States in August and September.

Yet only a few of the tracks were actually recorded in front of an audience, the rest were done on the tour in intriguing spots like Room 124 at the Holiday Inn, Edwardsville, Illinois ("Shaky Town") and on "A Continental Silver Eagle bus somewhere in New Jersey" ("Nothing But Time"), with the sound of the bus's engine offering extra percussion.

The album as a whole, then, represents a montage of life on the road. Some of the songs deal directly with the traumas and disorientation of living out of a suitcase, like "Running On Empty" and "The Road," while incidental companions of band life, like groupies and drugs, are represented respectively with "Rosie" and the old Gary Davis song, "Cocaine," which comes with additional, more personalised lyrics from Browne.

This, interspersed with live cuts, recreates the mood of a band on the road, on stage and off, and as a concept for an album the idea of a musical diary or song documentary of a tour isn't without appeal or originality.

In this context we can perhaps excuse, or even welcome, the rough recording quality of "Running On Empty," the opening track and potentially the best. But Browne's brilliance (and don't doubt him at his best) tends to be in catching, often subtly, the vagaries of the human condition.

His character portraits and straight observations of hotel and backstage situations are less convincing. Life on the road is for the main part humdrum, and Browne fails to extract the colour that's needed to liven up a record of this curious existence. Instead, the images he gives us are largely trite — a criticism I never thought I'd be hurling his way.

It's certainly true of "Rosie" — two lost souls at a gig — and it's true of "The Load-Out," which is an embarrassingly verbose tribute to his team of roadies, though it does have an attractive tune. Only occasionally do we get the imagination and unexpected twists needed to carry off such a project. "Cocaine," sounding well-stoned, with a snatch of hysterical conversation at the end, is effective; and the "bus" track, "Nothing But Time," ably captures the mayhem of a band en route from Portland to New Jersey with just a load of booze and their instruments to entertain them.

"Love Needs A Heart," written by Browne with Lowell George and Valerie Carter, has a strong country vein and is passable, while the best cut is a non-Browne song, "Shaky Town," written by Daniel Kortchmar.

In fact, it's Kortchmar, with his guitar work, and the superb David Lindley on fiddle and steel, who are the album's main saving graces in a band which gells beautifully at all times and which lets rip in stimulating fashion on the closing number — an adaptation of the old classic "Stay." — C.I.

## Icy Emmylou

### EMMYLOU HARRIS: "Quarter Moon In A Ten Cent Town" (Warner Bros).

IN NO other field of popular music at the moment are there such outstanding women singers as in country. Jessi Colter, Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton, Tanya Tucker and Tammy Wynette are at the very top of the tree, but their position is ever under assault from such outstanding newcomers as Crystal Gayle.

Even more surprising than the fact that so many great singers should be around at the same time is that each is distinctively different in style and approach to the music. Yet there is one important difference that divides them: four of them are country singers trying to gain rock or pop credibility; only Emmylou Harris is a rock singer trying to gain country credibility.

That may seem like a subtle distinction, especially as these days any one of those singers is as likely to meet another in both the American pop and country charts, but it does take on significance when it comes to making albums.

For while the country singers produce warm sets that abound with humanity, blunders and joie de vivre, Emmylou has always sounded too stiff, too isolated from the characters she sings about (country being a music that is supposed to be about people,

even if they do step out of TV soap operas) and too damn perfect. Halfway through any of her albums and I want to shout back into the speakers, "Have some fun!"

Perhaps it's something to do with that beautiful, crystal-clear voice, which is pure enough to make any red-blooded male ski naked down Everest with a caratation up his nose, which makes her sound so icy; perhaps it's the excellence of her Hot Band that prevents anyone from letting their hair down and producing anything less than perfection, but moments when Emmylou thaws out are few and far between — the rollicking "C'est La Vie" on her last album, "Luxury Liner" being one of those to treasure.

There are no changes from the norm on "Quarter Moon In A Ten Cent Town," though there are a couple of mistakes: the choice of Jesse Winchester's "My Song-bird" and "Defying Gravity," which are dull and not worthy of her talent. There's a fine example of her chilliness, when she takes Dolly Parton's syrupy story of a long-suffering woman, "To Daddy," and turns it into a bitter condemnation of an unfeeling and uncaring man. And there are two gorgeous Rodney Crowell songs, "Leaving Louisiana In The Broad Daylight," which lopes along in typical cajun fashion, and "I Ain't Living Long Like This," a relentless rocker, with Emmylou's voice in heavy echo.

The others are pretty much standard Emmylou fare, though that's not intended as a criticism: "standard" in Emmylou Harris terms means outstanding in anyone else's. All too outstanding for me. — M.O.