

Middle ear

Ms. Joni Mitchell's gettin' slicker—but not that Slick

By DANE YOUNG
Sunday staff writer

Joni Mitchell never took driver's education.

She never needed it. She drives with her foot on the brake and her soul in a streetcar named desire.

It makes for fewer accidents that way, and more freedom in her sentimental journey.

The vehicle for this trip is Ms. Mitchell's newest release, "Court and Spark." It's an album with just two scheduled stops, love and freedom. Get off at one and you may never make it to the other.

F. Scott Fitzgerald did a good job of summarizing before the album was ever conceived. "... for a moment I thought I loved her. But I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules which act as brakes on my desires ..." wrote Fitzgerald in "The Great Gatsby."

Joni Mitchell has a few rules of her own. But there's nothing interior about them, unless one considers an album cover confining. Ms. Mitchell certainly doesn't. She supports herself throughout the album on piano, driving across each song with the power and pause of Laura Nyro. The similarity doesn't end there. The words and thoughts of "Court and Spark" are as haunting and introspective as some of Ms. Nyro's best.

The album opens with the title cut, "Court and Spark."

A knock on the door finds no opportunity, only love.

**"Love came to my door
With a sleeping roll
And a madman's soul
..."**

It's not your everyday, all-conquering type of love, but one which has been purged of a constant companion, the blues.

**"All the guilty people,
he said
They've all seen the stain—
On their daily bread
And their Christian names**

**I cleared myself
I sacrificed my blues
And you could complete me
I'd complete you..."**

But love makes its first exit as an incompleteness. It's the first stop for Joni Mitchell's streetcar. Love gets off, but Ms. Mitchell rides to the end of the line.

**"But I couldn't let go of
L.A.
City of the fallen angels"**

There's a sadness involved in this and most of the album's other songs, but the sadness is one of the direction which life must take, not of the ego which must take it. The theme boils down to a misfortune of priority; will it be love or freedom?

But at the same time "Court and Spark" is a celebration of the choice, a salute to the availability of both.

Joni Mitchell makes it quite clear that she "loves her lovin'," but not like she loves her freedom."

**"Help me I think I'm falling
In love too fast
It's got me hoping for the future
And worrying about the past
Cause I've seen some hot hot blazes
Come down to smoke and ash
We love our loving'
But not like we love our freedom."**

That verse, from the album's second cut, "Help Me," speaks in no uncertain terms about Ms. Mitchell's choice, a one-way ticket to freedom.

"Down to You" speaks in no uncertain terms about the price of that freedom ride.

**"In the morning there are lovers in the street
They look so high
You brush against a stranger and you both apologize
Old friends seem indifferent, you must have brought that on
Old bonds are broken down, Love is gone..."**

Joni Mitchell gets away from her haunting theme twice on side two, though not completely away in "Raised on Robbery," the story of a woman who pays the price of love and accepts the cost of affection.

**"I'm a pretty good cook
I'm sitting on my groceries**

**Come up to my kitchen
I'll show you my best recipe**

**I try and I try but I can't save a cent
I'm up after midnight,
cooking trying to make my rent
I'm rough but I'm pleasing
I was raised on robbery."**

"Twisted," the album's only cut not written by Ms. Mitchell, can't help but get away from the love vs. freedom motif. After all, Cheech and Chong don't emulate cupid, and they serve as backup vocals for the tune.

Artists making their contributions to the album are David Crosby and Graham Nash, Jose Feliciano, and Robbie Robertson of The Band among many others.

"Court and Spark" signals a new route for Joni Mitchell, one where she is writing entirely for herself, singing entirely for her own compositions and doing both with a slickness which can slide only upward. But don't overrate that newfound slickness.

"Sing White Rabbit," yelled one misguided music fan at a Joni Mitchell concert in Chicago a few weeks back. "White Rabbit" is a Grace Slick song, always has been, and as far as Ms. Mitchell is concerned, probably always will be. Joni's never had the hare to record it.

"I may be getting slicker," smiled Ms. Mitchell from the stage. "But I'm not that Slick."