

One good turn deserves another in this week's

ALBUMS

A JONI



LEDGE

WAY OF KNOW-

JONI MITCHELL

Don Juan's Reckless Daughter (Asylum)

DON JUAN the celebrated seducer from fourteenth century Spanish Seville? Don Juan the Yaqui Indian sorcerer encountered or invented by Carlos Castaneda? Both? Either? Neither?

Joni Mitchell isn't telling. The mind games start here and end — where? All the same, I'll flip the coin in favour of Castaneda's man. And why? Partly instinct, partly the still barely assimilated evidence before me.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter", sprung on us so suddenly just this side of Christmas, is four short sides of studio material. Eight new and two old songs. Yet another set of clothes for the uncrowned empress of the popular song, the fit and the cut of them as daunting initially as the layered innuendo of the bejewelled mirror flower that was "The Hissing Of Summer Lawns", the previous apogee of Ms. Mitchell's latterday fondness for everywhichway enchantment.

The Mitchellian Muse must be a harsh mistress. I mean, just how many other well respected songwriters have so persistently refined their art or, come to that, even taken the first, tentative steps in that general direction?

Time was I found Ms. Mitchell's open book bedsit egocentricity indigestible — something to do with the company she kept and the way she seemed to keep it; all that West Coast star 'n' stud jive — I've never been that hung up on Steve Stills' braces, have you? But past will be past.

If "Blue" marked the first dramatic sharpening of her lyrical knife and "For The Roses" the equally unexpected widening of musical horizons, then each subsequent album has revealed new sensibility and maturity in her singing, playing, writing and overall grasp of her medium.

Last year's "Hejira" may have indicated partial seizure of Ms. Mitchell's creative arteries (the songs consolidated musical and lyrical themes rather than opened out new veins), but at least half of "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" confirms that she has no intention of stooping in any one place for any length of time.

Besides Ms. Mitchell herself, the main players are bassist Jaco Pastorius, saxist Wayne Shorter and percussionists Manolo Badrena and Alejandro Acuna from the peerless Weather Report.

drummer John Guerin from the LA Express and a further two percussionists in the shape of Airtio and one Don Alias, who was featured prominently on Pastorius' own solo record.

It seems best to take the more (all things are relative) straightforward songs first. Thus "Overture" opens, Ms. Mitchell's disembodied wordless vocals adrift over her jagged acoustic guitar and Pastorius' resonant phrasing. A small snatch of space.

"Cotton Avenue" follows, ebb and flow around humpback chords, Pastorius somehow extracting a Glenn Miller horn tone from his axe on the coda. "Talk To Me" is classic "Big Yellow Taxi" through "Free Man In Paris" strum, its profusion of lyrical punning ("Is your silence that golden?") rather unwieldy at times.

"Jericho" avoids the slickness of the "Miles Of Aisles" prototype, shifts down a gear, cool and serene with Shorter's soprano slipping hazily by, seems to make new sense out of old words.

Side four's "Off Night Backstreet" is again measurably standard fare, a jealous mind (and body) song, Pastorius on lush harmonies, J. D. Souther and Glen Frey on unlikely harmonies, Mike Gibbs on tacitly forceful orchestration. Cut to "The Silky Veils Of Ardor", just voice and guitar, an almost traditional piece ("Come all you fair and tender shoos girls/Take warning now when you court young men."), it's mannered vocal somehow lacking the stark edge the words and setting demand.

Side three's "Otis And Marlana" is the only song to feature electric guitarist Larry

Carlton. The clutter of pictorial images is a little too dense perhaps, as in "Always the grand parades of cellulite/Jiggling to her golden pools/Through flock and cupid colonnades/They jiggle into surgery/Hopefully beneath the blade/They dream of golden beauty..."

Ho hum, Joni, baroque by any other name. Just don't ask me what the Black Muslim occupations in Washington earlier this year have to do with a dream date in Miami for two.

And still no major surprises. Nothing so far that "Court And Spark" or "Miles Of Aisles" didn't somehow anticipate. Main gains so far: the opportune presence of Pastorius, the perfect rhythmic and melodic foil to Ms. Mitchell's tunessmithing and vocalising; the unblemished

craftsmanship of the arrangements; the strong liquidity of texture and timbre.

Ms. Mitchell's own crisp electric guitar keeps the title piece on course in swirling "Hejira" stream, her voice flexing as easily as the eagle feathers that are one of the dominant lyrical images. Jazz, baby, jive.

And here, friends, the track twists right out of sight. Don Juan the Yaqui Indian shaman, eh? Well, as some benign fate would have it, the Mexican and North American Indians share many articles of tribal (magical) lore and faith.

Take my world for it anyway and then check some lyrics, as in "The eagle and the serpent are at war in me/The serpent fighting for blind desire, the eagle for clarity/What strange prizes these battles bring" or "The spirit talks in spec-

trums/He talks mother earth to father sky/Self indulgence to self denial / Man to woman / Scales to feathers".

Ms. Mitchell has neatly (magically) fused her own preoccupations — she's always describing her divided self — with the totemism of (Red) Indian peoples. And she makes the cross-reference stick; her ability to embed such a swell of imagery into a song narrative is still unsurpassed (pace, Mr. Dylan).

Snake equals train. Eagle equals plane. Culture clash. Which brings us to The Big One, "Paprika Plains", a whole side of a song. More embedding. A dream of childhood, of dressing up like an Indian (see back cover pic), of watching the Indians come to town to trade, of watching them adapt uncomfortably to the white man's ways and his religion.

Whereupon the lyrical axis swings up and away, encompassing (and I kid you not) helicopter flights over windswept plains, nuclear explosions, death and rebirth, 2001: A Space Odyssey embryo views of earth from space, creation myths...

Stranger still, this section isn't actually sung at all. Instead you have to read it off the cover as Ms. Mitchell's piano plus Gibb's strings and horns explore a very formal symphonic sweep. "Plains" is an ambitious piece, its music and words not always successful; they're sometimes improbably melodramatic, sometimes simply, starkly moving.

Eventually the main theme returns for more vocals and a brief (Weather Report) group section before closedown. Yeah well, the side needs time, time I haven't got. At present, I'm suspending judgement...

There are other departures from precedent that stem from the use of African drummers on "Jungle Line" (from "Lawns"), though here the accent is unmistakably South/Latin American. "The Tenth Tribe" pits all five percussionists against one another with Badrena as lead vocalist. Carnal, equatorial impressionism. A revised "Dreamland" follows, Airtio's bass drum keeping the (non-existent) guitar rhythm as Ms. Mitchell and Rufus' Chaka Khan sing over an entirely percussive backdrop. Interesting, impressive, certainly unusual.

"Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" is half dependable and immediately enjoyable, half empirical and as yet largely unfathomable. Me? I want to learn to love it.

But why, someone's hissing in my ear, why's she wearing drag on the front cover? Search me, mate. Why do whales let men kill them?

Angus MacKinnon