

RECORDS

Joni Mitchell, *Hejira* (Asylum)

The world's premier singer and songwriter has just released a monster. Joni Mitchell certainly hasn't let anyone down with *Hejira*, an album which may well be remembered as the top album of 1976. As good as Jackson Browne or even Bob Dylan may be, when compared with Ms. Mitchell they're both mere amateurs. She's that good. Her songwriting remains as vivid and expressive as ever. Whether she's singing about the life of a bird in "Song To A Seagull" from her first album, her experience in Greece, in "Carey," or being involved with a movie executive in "The Arrangement," Joni is able to communicate her feelings to the listener as sincerely as if she were pouring out her feelings and beliefs to an analyst. She has the lyrical power to make her listeners feel as if they've known her for years, while her vocal prowess is simply astonishing. In an age when just about anyone can walk into a recording studio sounding like a Phoebe Snow and walk out knowing that, through the use of modern technology and gimmickry, their vocals will turn out respectably, voices like Mitchell's should be regarded as authentic natural resources.

Ever since the first album, her breathy soprano was magically able to soar up and down through the most complex of melodies, to shift effortlessly lowest of low notes, with consistent spontaneity. In a nutshell, as a singer, and also a songwriter, Joni Mitchell's a perfectionist



in the truest sense of the word. As I previously mentioned, *Hejira*, her newest release, should easily be recognized as the album of the year.

For starters, *Hejira* is over fifty-one minutes in length, unusually long for a single record. Joni has a lot to say on this disk. Her personal life may have prompted the normally strictly present-minded Joni to be more reflective of her past, putting just about her entire life, from childhood in Maidstone, Canada to coronation as musical goddess of L.A. in its proper perspective. Joni sounds confused and puzzled, as if she doesn't know what she should be doing next. In the eight minute epic "Song for Sharon," the options of marriage, having children, getting involved in politics are all mentioned as alternatives that people have thrown at Joni. Though Joni says, "All I really want to do right now is find another lover," the impression one gets is that Joni is looking for something more than just another lover.

The message that seems to be discretely implied throughout this album is that whatever Joni is desperately

searching for, she hasn't found. Her life has been a travelogue, flying all over the world and never really staying in any one place long enough to really call it home. As the title implies, *Hejira* is an exodus, an escape from reality. Maybe the whole superstar syndrome is becoming too burdensome for her and she wants to just forget about her responsibilities as Joni Mitchell-superstar and become Joni Mitchell, commoner once again. Her lyrics reflect a longing for this escape, *hejira*, continually. In the album's prettiest song, "Amelia," Joni sings:

*"A ghost of aviation
She was swallowed by the sky
Or by the sea, like me she had a dream to fly
Like Icarus ascending
On beautiful foolish arms
Amelia, it was a false alarm.
Maybe I've never really loved
I guess that is the truth
I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes
And looking down on everything
I crashed into his arms
Amelia, it was a false alarm."*

The lyrics of "Amelia," as beautiful as they are, must be heard to fully be appreciated. The song was put together exquisitely; Larry Carlton on lead guitar and Victor Feldman on vibes provide a dream-like backing to the angelic vocal performance Joni gives.

I could go on forever about this album, one of the rare albums which leaves you in such shock after a listening that you begin to seriously wonder whether Joni Mitchell is really human, or if she was blessed with some magical power that gives her the ability to put out such incredibly great music. She's put out *Blue*, *For the Roses*, (which in this reviewer's opinion has to be the best album ever recorded) *Ladies Of The Canyon*, and now *Hejira*. The empress of music reigns on.

—Steven Bireff

Jackson Browne, *The Pretender* (Asylum)

The Pretender offers a passionate view inside the mind of America's premier Heartbreak kid, Jackson Browne, and is his most professional work to date. It is a blend of melodic artistry, balanced by lyrics that read beautifully alone and without music.

It is a cyclical album, containing completions of series begun years ago. But it is a story in itself. "The Fuse" opens and sets the mood with the theme of time, or lack thereof. Browne's preoccupation with being unable to fulfill his self-determined destiny is evidenced quite strongly here in lines like "The years that I spent lost in the mystery . . . Time runs like a fuse . . . the fear of living for nothing strangles the will . . . How long will their needs go unfilled?" The song ends in a prolonged fade-out, prolonging the indefinite continuation of the thought long after the sounds have ended.

"Your Bright Baby Blues," the oldest track on the album, is a song I heard years ago, when Jackson had only one album out. It was performed in sequence with "Looking Into You" on Don Kirschner's show, *Rock Concert*. It is really third in the sequence, though, with "Farther On" from *Late For the Sky* being the middle piece. Jackson's journey continues here, that ongoing search for love and inner peace. He's "been up and down this highway/Far as my eyes can see." But the harder he tries, he "can never seem to get away from me." That phrase rings especially true, another testimony to the universality of Browne's lyrics. When Jackson asks to be

pulled through that hole in the garden wall, that need for release is truly genuine.

The inclusion of the Calypso "Linda Paloma," a dreamlike ballad, was an unexpected pleasure. The disguised description of a woman's infatuation with musician, Linda Paloma could be any female ever wanting her personal dream:

*Though its not the kind
Of love you might hope to find
If tears could release the heart
from the shadows preferred by the mind*

The tune is lilting, with a very successful attempt falsetto that would ordinarily be way out of Jackson range.

Side one closes with "Here Comes Those Tears Again," a fine rocker with Bonnie Raitt and Rosemar Butler providing an excellent female chorus. Browne vocals here are equally emotional, as he sings "I'm going back inside and turning out the light/And I'll be in the dark but you'll be out of sight." The thought is brilliantly expressed.

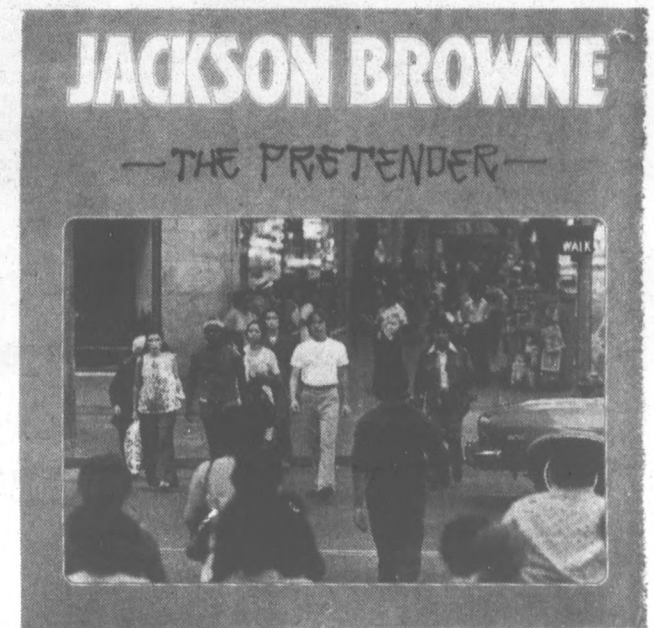
Side two is more of a vivid exploration of the bigger human influences in his work: his son, his father, his wife and himself. The strength Jackson draws from his son Ethan is blatant in "The Only Child," a stirring prayerful ballad of living advice. The whole song should be quoted but suffice it to say that the general idea becomes an uplifting chorus, echoed throughout the song: "Take good care of your mother . . . take good care of your brother . . . take good care of each other." It is instruction well taken by all, not only Ethan.

"Daddy's Tune" is a reconciliation, verbalizing the thoughts that one has when time passes and all is forgiven between parent and child. Once again, Browne's thoughts are applicable to many other than himself:

*But Daddy I want to let you know somehow
The things you said are so much clearer now
And I would turn the pages back
But time will not allow*

The highway returns in "Sleep's Dark and Silent Gate" a song with such raw emotion that it's amazing it was even committed to vinyl. You want to cry with Jackson for his loss, when he sings "Oh, God, this is some shape I'm in/When the only thing that makes me cry is the kindness in my baby's eyes." It's another of Browne's high points; the ability and the strength to bare his soul and innermost emotions.

Jackson himself is the primary figure in the album close. "The Pretender" is about man's struggle for "the legal tender," when in actuality "true love could have been a contender." "Say a prayer for the pretender," Jackson urges, "who started out so young and strong, only to surrender." The amount of appropriate rhymes in the song



is truly an achievement. Are you prepared for "The Pretender"? Make sure you are before you listen — it's the best song on the record.

Producer Jon Landau, who "did it" for Bruce Springsteen, has released Jackson from worrying about the technicalities he dealt with on other albums. By employing the musicians for backup with whom Browne was most familiar, he enabled the singer to concentrate on his main chore. Russ Kunkel, Lee Sklar, and Craig Doerge are all here, and so are John David Souther and Don Henley of Harmonies. Lowell George lent a strong hand through the whole album, and, of course, David Lindley supplies his personal brand of violin.

The last thank you on the liner credits goes to David Geffen, who was first responsible for signing Jackson to Asylum. The thanks is also given by me: without his perception, we may never have had the pleasure to hear this masterpiece. Be aware of *The Pretender* — another glimpse into Jackson Browne's private thoughts.

—Barbara Komanski