

Discography: Joni Mitchell: Don Juan's Reckless Daughter

SC spectrumculture.com/2018/09/12/discography-joni-mitchell-don-juans-reckless-daughter

Daniel Bromfield

September 12, 2018



Don Juan's Reckless Daughter is an album of unbridled auteurism, and its miles-wide baroque sweep acts as easy confirmation of Joni Mitchell as a progressive pop visionary worthy of mentioning in the same breath as Brian Wilson. But it's as exhilarating for its freedom as it is frustrating in the way it chooses to express it, and listeners are required to grapple with its racism, Mitchell's infantilizing and colonial mindset, and her desire to leech legitimacy from elsewhere besides her own whiteness and femininity.

It was and remains exceedingly difficult for a female pop genius to be taken seriously, and though Mitchell had a few masterworks under her belt by the mid-'70s, she was frustrated to find herself valued mostly for her gender. Obscene advertising that declared her "90% virgin," a model of pristine white femininity, might have been the final straw. She began to identify deeply with "black classical music," as she termed it—particularly the art of Miles Davis, deep in his electric fusion period at the time.

Her response was to create a blackface persona termed “Art Nouveau” and hide under it as a cover for legitimacy; we can see him on the cover art as an undisguised Mitchell looks on in the background (the back cover portrays her as a Native American chief). The record’s not sung in character as a black pimp, but her dalliances in jazz throughout the ‘70s and early ‘80s could be seen as an extension of that desire to wrap herself in blackness, reaping its artistic cool without the legal and societal oppressions that come along with it.

Mitchell might have seen the “ethnic references” throughout *Don Juan* as a shortcut to the canon adulation she desired and of which she still sadly falls a hair short. But they’re the fly in the ointment of what might have been one of her greatest works. World music might have been novel in 1977, but “The Tenth World” sounds like nothing so much as Mitchell sitting in on a community Latin drum class. “Dreamland,” likewise pillaged from global odds and ends, has us longing for some semblance of an average pop production.

“*It’s a long way from Canada,*” Mitchell whispers as “Dreamland” commences, but it’s not nearly as good a thesis statement for the album as the one that starts the next verse. On vacation in an unnamed Caribbean island, she imagines Columbus and Raleigh sailing to shore to claim the land. “*I wrapped that flag around me/ Like a Dorothy Lamour sarong,*” she sings, embracing what she has the luxury of seeing as the romance of the age of exploration. She still has the flag around her as she reclines her seat on the plane home.

If you don’t know who Dorothy Lamour is, she was the star of a series of *Road to...* pictures, tongue-in-cheek travel comedies from the ‘40s and ‘50s that invariably infantilized the natives of whatever places Lamour chose to plant her feet. Just like here. “Paprika Plains” laments the Native Americans’ loss of their “*connection with nature,*” as if that’s all they had to lose. These are natives made of feathers, braids and war drums—the kind of image Mitchell must have had in mind when she posed for the back cover.

The great irony of “Paprika Plains” is that it succeeds for reasons that would endear it to the white canon, the same reason *Sgt. Pepper* changed the conversation on pop as high art. It’s a marvel of aesthetics, a grandiose fusion of pop and classical music, 16-minutes long and sprawling placidly all the while. *Don Juan*’s distinction within the Mitchell catalog has little to do with the Dionysian clichés of “ethnic” music and every bit to do with the Apollonian tradition of the self-indulgent studio wizard.

This is a marvelously produced album. So was *Court and Spark*, of course. But while that album existed in the weary little world of three-minute pop songs, this one’s anything but subtle, appealing to the part of our brain that craves grandiosity, the school of thought that associates 10-minute odysseys with artistic bravery. It’s not the first album most Mitchell neophytes will be drawn to. Instead, it’s a crossroads for fans—both a confirmation of her stature as an auteur and a revelation of the ugliest aspects of her art.