



Joni Mitchell, who once spoke of hope, now conveys feelings of disillusionment.

# Mitchell, Young and the Decade of Despair

BY ROBERT HILBURN

*Total confusion . . . / Disillusion . . . / New things I'm knowin'.*

—Lyrics by Neil Young

● The new Joni Mitchell and Neil Young albums are the most dramatic steps yet in the continuing retreat from Woodstock, a retreat that suggests rock music may not have so much lost its momentum in the 1970s as simply changed its direction and attitudes. John Lennon told us in 1970 that the dream was over, but many are just beginning to understand what he meant.

In the recent debate over whether Neil Young's stark, despondent "Tonight's the Night" album was an artistic breakthrough or just an unguarded look at someone's depression, many skipped over the lines in one of the songs that underscored rock's prevailing mood at this mid-point in the 1970s.

In a song that contrasted his despair over the deaths of two friends with the memory of the happier, more optimistic moments of his appearance with Crosby, Stills and Nash at Woodstock, Young noted sardonically:

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Despair, albeit artistically and emotionally controlled, remains the underlying theme of Young's "Zuma."

## Pop Music

# The Decade of Despair

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*I'm not goin' back to Woodstock for a while/Though I long to hear that lonesome hippie . . . smile*

*I'm a million miles away from that helicopter day/No, I don't believe I'll be goin' back that way*

Those lines—coming from one of the artists most closely identified with the spirit and celebration of Woodstock—were little short of revolutionary in their tone. But they are far from isolated in today's rock music framework.

In fact, there is much in the works of some of rock's major artists—Young, Mitchell, the Who, the Eagles, Jackson Browne, the Band, David Bowie, John Prine—to suggest that rock has moved from the rebellion of the 1950s through the protest/optimism of the 1960s to the disillusionment of the mid-1970s. The concern is not so much trying to reshape society, but simply grappling with individual, emotional survival and peace of mind.

It's difficult in the context of rock these days to imagine Joni Mitchell ever writing, Neil Young ever singing and pop audiences ever taking seriously the bubbly enthusiasm of her "Woodstock": "We are stardust, we are golden." It seems far easier today to identify with the cynicism of these lines from Mitchell's new "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" album: "Golden in time/Cities under sand/Power, ideals and beauty/Fading in everyone's hands."

When "Tonight's the Night" was released earlier this year, Young explained the album's depressing tone simply reflected his despair following his friends' deaths. He suggested the next album—the new "Zuma"—would mark a return to a more conventional balance.

But "Tonight's the Night" was simply the emotional (though not creative) low point in a continuing thread of disillusionment that has dominated Young's post-"Harvest" work. The significant thing about "Zuma" (Warner Bros. MS 2242) is that the disillusionment is handled with more artistic control than in the earlier albums. It is, on balance, Young's finest effort since "After the Gold Rush" in 1970.

In the opening track of "Zuma," Young demonstrates a stronger stance—both artistically and emotionally—than in the compelling but sometimes sloppy and self-pitying "Tonight's the Night." Here, he tempers his disappointment over the breakup of a longtime love affair with a dash of artist's pride. Besides, he acknowledges, self-pity or sympathy won't help ease the pain.

Against an immensely infectious, upbeat, guitar-

dominated backing, Young sings: "Don't cry no tears around me/Cause when all the water's gone/The feeling lingers on/Old true love ain't too hard to see/Don't cry no tears around me."

"Dangerbird," one of six tracks on the album in which Young is backed by Crazy Horse, and "Through My Sails," a selection that reunites CSNY, Young speaks about starting over after the disillusionment—the need to regain balance and perspective. In "Dangerbird," Young sings in the gentle, fragile "After the Gold Rush" style: "Dangerbird, he flies alone/And rides the wind back to his home/Although his wings have turned to stone."

"Cortez the Killer" is the most overtly ambitious track and the only time he comes close to the sociological stance of such early Young songs as "Southern Man" and "Ohio." Despite the stinging opening tone of the song, it suddenly reverts to the album's overall theme and laments the broken romance. It's the same kind of mixture of elements and moods that Young achieved so well in "Borrowed Tune" on "Tonight's the Night."

While "Lookin' for a Love" is an interesting admission of his own contributions to the unwinding of the relationship, "Stupid Girl" is a less substantial song that is saved by an appealing arrangement, and "Drive Back" is a filler track that isn't saved by anything.

Far better is "Barstool Blues," the kind of rare, haunting pop work that simply explores emotional strains rather than attempting to draw conclusions: "And I saw you in my nightmares/But I'll see you in my dreams/And I might live a thousand years/Before I know what that means."

The writing is as strong and the vocals as convincing in "Zuma" as anything Young has ever done. The instrumentation is loose but well focused and appropriate. The guitar work, in fact, is so effective in its punctuation of Young's lyrics and mood that the guitar and voice sometimes seem to merge as if in a duet.

Despite its bleakness, then, "Zuma" is far more accessible than anything Young has done since "Harvest." By contrast, Joni Mitchell's new album—despite some continued, jazz-tinged instrumental progression with members of both the L.A. Express and the Crusaders—may well be her least accessible work. But that is not to say it is her least work. She continues to be an artist with an arresting and revealing sense of emotional discovery and insights. This may be her most daring look at those emotions. It is a moody, unsettling work.

After listening, in fact, to her new "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" (Asylum 7E-1051), it's interesting, in retrospect, to see that many of Mitchell's tender, fragile early songs were actually rather optimistic, joyful works. There was an innocence and hope in "Both Sides Now" and "The Circle Game," for instance, that greatly cushioned the moments of concern. Happiness/success/romance always seemed possible, if just a bit out of immediate reach.

Similarly, the most noteworthy moments of "Blue," "For the Roses" and "Court and Spark"—Mitchell's brilliant trilogy—dealt with moments of joy, even if the joy had sometimes faded with broken relationships and left insecurity in its place. Again, time always seemed to be on her side. Things would, it always appeared, get better.

In the heart of "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," however, Mitchell is dealing with some portraits that seem less hopeful than before. The chances of success seem less bright. The failures of the past seem to have recurred with too much consistency to be simply wrong turns or unfortunate twists of fate. Time is suddenly growing more precious. The optimism of youth has faded.

Thus, there is none of the overt charm of "Help Me," the confidence of "Just Like This Train," the celebration of "Carey" or the humor of "Raised on Robbery" in "Hissing . . ." The spark has begun to wane. Even the melodies seem less open.

Part of the album's concern is directed at the unrealistic expectations that are programmed into the young; the happy-ever-after endings that are cheerfully offered in story books. The disillusionment is in the discovery that the endings are misleading; the real life epilogues are rarely that cheerful.

In "Sweet Bird," Mitchell deals with the loss of illusions, the realization that happiness is not pre-ordained after all:

*Sweet bird you are  
Brighter than a falling star  
All these vain promises on beauty jaws  
Somewhere in your wings on time  
You must be laughing . . .*

Thematically, the album revolves around "Centerpiece," an old Lambert, Hendricks & Ross tune from the 1950s that spoke about an idyllic relationship: "The more I'm with you, pretty baby/The more I feel my love increase/I'm building all my dreams around you/Our happiness will never cease."

Mitchell assaults the "Centerpiece" notion by mixing it with her own tale ("Harry's House") of a woman's rejection of the emptiness of a stagnant relationship. What once seemed so promising (e.g., "Centerpiece") has given way to a "House and Gardens" despair.

The album's title song deals with an equally incomplete relationship, but this time the woman accepts the comforts of it: "He bought a diamond for her throat/He put her in a ranch house on a hill/She could see the Valley bar-b-ques/From her window sill . . . It's the lady's choice."

Between the acceptance and rejection, the album touches on what seem to be various degrees of chips in the idyllic armor: the passionless seduction of "Edith and the Kingpin," the vanity and calculation of "Shades of Scarlet Conquering," the false glamor of "The Boho Dance."

Appropriately, the album ends on a somber, unfiltered look at the crumbling ideals. Accompanied only by her own vocal overdubs and a coolly impersonal synthesizer, Mitchell explores the gap between what has been taught and what has materialized: "Critics of all expression/Judges in black and white/Saying it's wrong/Saying it's right/Compelled by standards/Of some ideals we fight."

But there is in "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" the roots of starting again—the hope offered through the development of self-reliance and independence, including that fostered by such movements as women's liberation. The album's subtitle, in fact, could well be "Anima Rising."

The challenge facing rock in the remaining years of the 1970s may well be the matter of finding a way out of the current disillusionment. Maybe Young, Mitchell and the other veteran rock stars—most of whom have reached or are past the once dreaded 30-year-old mark—will be able to find some balance between the idealism of the 1960s and the darkness of 1970s. The irony is that the balance may well be viewed as simple "acceptance" by younger rock musicians who then may bring rebellion back to the music. Perhaps it's all a circle game after all.