

# Joni Mitchell had her hands full musically

## Virtue applies to current touring band

By DEBBI SNOOK

In one of her closing and most telling numbers Tuesday night at Tanglewood in Lenox, Mass., Joni Mitchell offered her current version of "Woodstock" as if she were patting an old friend on the back.

What was once a distinctively haunting anthem, a colorful musical cloak for an explosive era, became a thin, ghostly veil as the singer-songwriter stood solo at centerstage and swept subtly through the old guitar arrangements.

The spunk was all in her voice. "We are stardust, we are golden," she sang, alternating expressions between wide-eyed assurance and a victorious sneer. "And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

As they had done more than a half-dozen times during the show, the crowd of more than 12,000 (Tanglewood's largest this summer) erupted with applause and cheers that would rise and fall throughout the song. It was a noticeably older congregation than most popular music concerts (including television's mustachioed film critic Gene Shalit), one which had been around long enough to follow her earlier folk-rock years and now, her passage into experimental forms and jazz.

Not all of her early fans have been so faithful. Mitchell's past three albums and her latest, *Mingus*, have, in their mostly structureless interpretations, resulted in mixed reactions.

But in her two-hour show at Tanglewood, Mitchell returned to a local hall for the first time in more than three years with a more vibrant sense of music, a performance which handily upstaged her recent recording with both a stunning intuitive sense and democratic sensibility.

The latter virtue applies to her current touring band. Bassist Jaco Pastorius, guitarist Pat Metheny, saxophonist Michael Brecker, drummer Don Alias and keyboardist Lyle Mays are a potent team of artists, a rare package considering the strength of their individual careers.

Individually and collectively, Mitchell's band

was as important to the show as the headliner herself and highly reminiscent of the musical freedom bands had in the 1960s. The dance created when Metheny's delicate fingering was exchanged with Pastorius' full, round notes, was among the best collective moments. Yet the solos sprinkled throughout the show were the most satisfying.

It became a revue of some of the contemporary best-jazz fusion as each took their turn. Metheny's luxurious rainfall of notes, woven deftly with the left hand as well as the right, started it off. Then came Pastorius' Jimi Hendrix-like wall of vibration and the taunting melody he played against it. Alias was crisp and bouyant backing Mitchell's calypso joy in "Black Crow." Brecker was his usual slick, hot licks and the list goes on.

Toward the end of the show, Mitchell pulled all the stops out, inviting back the Persuasions, a black cappella group which opened the show and launched into a rendition of "Darkness and Light."

With Mays swelling a church-like organ behind them for emphasis, Mitchell and her fellow performers sang a gospel hymn that would fill any cathedral full of sound. And a few numbers later, the Persuasions helped Mitchell into a swinging Motown rendition of Frankie Lyman's "Why Do Fools Fall In Love."

While rarely talking to the audience, save for a short thank you near the end of the show, Mitchell had her hands full musically. Her first four opening songs, jazzed-up renditions of sweet old favorites like "Big Yellow Taxi," and "In France They Kiss On Main Street," were left helpless by a sound system that took too long to separate properly.

But soon afterward, her guitar playing came into focus with all the brilliant drive and elusiveness for which she is known. The guitar work ultimately was a supporting connection to her own material, overtaken easily by her voice.

Mitchell has always been an elastic, expressive and chameleon-like vocalist, in many ways the most free spirited of our time. In her Tanglewood show,

she took her natural instrument on all those courses and then some.

The best of them was in "Pork Pie Hat," when Mitchell left the already difficult feat of scat-singing behind and proceeded to sing with the spurts, stops and wails of a living, breathing saxophone. It was as if her own idea of music no longer needed an accessory. It all came from within.

And that, complete with the nurturing she gave a stellar line-up of musicians, is as close to home as an artist can get.

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