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Mitchell performance pleasantly surprising

by Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

Because the music of Joni Mitchell thrives on specifics — the right melodic twist, the apt metaphor — it lends itself more to the craft of the recording studio than to the adventure of live performance.

Then, too, Mitchell has been a notoriously shy performer in the past, given to murmuring songs that on records she trills with passion.

Thus, last night's show at the Mann Music Center was a pleasant surprise. After a full decade of prominence, Joni Mitchell has come to terms with her stardom. She drifted onto the Mann stage in a loose-fitting white dress, her hair a limp puff of blond curls — a victim of the evening's oppressive humidity.

Strumming an electric rhythm guitar and rubbing her hips against the beat, she sang with fluid strength and skipped all over the various periods of her career, backed by a jazzy four-piece band.

As frequently was suggested last night, Mitchell embodies the best aspects of the 1970s singer-songwriter trend. Amid colleagues in varied as James Taylor, Paul Simon and Laura Nyro, Mitchell took the biggest chances; her music consistently has been among the most radical in form and idea.

For all of her obsessive self-absorption, Mitchell has an eye for the precise detail that illuminates a lyric, and an ear for the kind of off-balance, quirky rhythms that express the mixed emotions that fill so many of her songs.

Review

Joni Mitchell
Comes to terms with fame

On early 1970s albums such as "Blue," "For the Roses" and "Court and Spark," she proved that she had both a questing artist's spirit and an enormous popular appeal. The low point of her career came later in the decade, when her fondness for jazz's radical possibilities made her fuzzy self-conscious about technique and experimentalism.

At the Mann Music Center last night, all of those qualities filtered through Mitchell's show. One minute she would be tumbling through an agonizingly dissonant tune like "God Must Be a Boogie Man," from the doomed "Mingus" album. A few minutes later, she would perform a lovely, simple version of "A Case of You."

Whatever happened to...

Pinky Lee

Pinky Lee
Left network TV in 1956

Started at 5 in vaudeville and burlesque, where he changed his name from Pincus Leff to Pinky Lee.

Famous for his black-and-white checkered hat with the upturned brim, his lisp and the kidding he took from adult performers about his antics.

Last seen on network TV in 1956, when NBC canceled "The Pinky Lee Show."

Since then, Lee moved to Arizona, mostly to relieve a sinus condition. (He says NBC didn't cancel his show, but that he quit because he was too sick to continue. He once collapsed on the show.) Popped up again in Las Vegas in 1958, this time with an act for adults. In 1967, he moved to Los Angeles and did kid shows again. Recently, he's been talking TV to California college classes. His age? Well, Lee won't say. The birthdate has been given as any time from 1901 to 1916.

— Benjamin Petersen

U.S. musicians win top honors

Associated Press

VIENNA, Austria — A St. Louis orchestra and choirs from Tennessee and California have captured first-place honors at the 12th International Youth and Music Festival.

Members of the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra "were ecstatic, really thrilled" Thursday about winning in their category, said Betty Ann Logan, an orchestra chaperone. The ensemble's 105 members range in age from 14 to 22.

The Clarksville High School Mattigalants of Clarksville, Tenn., and the Pershing Junior High Bell Chant Ensemble of San Diego shared first prize in the choir competition, festival organizers said.

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