

MUSIC REVIEW / Those who came for a stroll down memory lane were in for a surprise. Joni Mitchell's set was dominated by new material, its dark vision puncturing the gentle flow of words and music

Bleakness and sweetness

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If you took a peek at the wish list of most folk festival artistic directors, you'd probably find Joni Mitchell's name somewhere near the top. It's easy to understand why. She's Canadian, enormously talented and equally influential. And she almost never performs: she's probably played fewer than a half-dozen concerts in the past five years.

On Thursday night, the wish came true for Terry Wickham, artistic director of the Edmonton Folk Music Festival, as Mitchell opened the four-day event with a luminous, adventurous performance in front of a crowd of about 7,000.

Those who came expecting a wander down memory lane were in for something of a surprise. Mitchell, who appeared without a backup band, opened with *Night Ride Home*, the title track from a 1991 album, but from there on her set was dominated by new, unreleased material.

If the sampling Mitchell offered is any indication, she has continued to head away from the introspective, melancholy style of songwriting with which she has been most closely identified over the years. Songs such as *Magdalene Laundries*, *Sex Kills* and *Cherokee Louise* venture into the dark, rotten corners of society — parish workhouses in Ireland, urban and social decay in Los Angeles, bigotry in Saskatoon — and speak of the horrors there in a manner that is long on detail and short on sentimentality. It's a path that Mitchell has been following for the past three or four records, but, at least on first listen, these songs seem more substantial, full of bleak images that explode like little bombs set amid the gentle flow of words and music.

If Mitchell's songs offered a darker vision than in the past, her performance offered some reassurance that Joni was still Joni. Her guitar playing remains unique, jabbing and dancing behind the words, skipping back and forth between jazz and folk. And hearing her sing is like eating honey straight from the hive; her voice is cool, clear, sweet and flowing, but there's a sting there that sometimes catches you by surprise as she soars up an octave or drops to a soft rumble.

And like honey, the crowd ate it up, interrupting Mitchell's song introductions with calls of "We love Joni" and pleas that she abandon her home in L.A. for Edmonton. Mitchell smiled graciously and, after ignoring requests for hits from the past, finally relented, closing the show with jazzy versions of *Woodstock* and *Big Yellow Taxi*.

Mitchell's closing set may have been Thursday's highlight, but it was hardly the only memorable performance on the festival's mainstage. She was preceded onstage by The Bucks, a band that features Celtic guitar whiz Ron Kavana and



Joni Mitchell at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival: her voice is cool, clear, sweet and flowing, but there's a sting there that sometimes catches you by surprise.

(ROBERT TAYLOR/Canadian Press)

Terry Woods of The Pogues and that rocks (in a folky way, of course) like nobody's business. The set ran from original material about the Irish coming to America to a completely warped version of the old Elvis hit *All Shook Up*. It's a measure of The Bucks' virtuosity that the performers' hospitality tent, normally the scene of backstage schmoozing, emptied out as the set unfolded.

The Bucks were joined onstage by Terry

Clarke and Henry McCullough, who earlier in the evening forged an intriguing blend of Celtic folk and Texas roots music. Clarke, born in Ireland and based in Austin, sang richly detailed stories of the Irish diaspora, and McCullough, a former sideman with performers such as Joe Cocker and Paul McCartney, offered concise but fierce backing.

Murray McLauchlan turned in an eclectic and entertaining set that encompassed old chestnuts such as *The Farmer's*

Song and new material such as *The Second Half of Life*, a Hoagy Carmichael-inspired reflection on the joys of middle age, as well as new collaborations with Ron Hines and Barney Bentall. After years on the CBC and the folk circuit, McLauchlan may be suffering the backlash that comes from overexposure, but there's a sly wit and solid craft in his new material that makes up for the edge he lost with his long-overdue abdication of his reign as Canada's folk *enfant terrible*.