Joni Mitchell: 'Preaching Platitudes to the Converted'

By Henry Pleasants

LONDON.—In no other city, probably, is it so rash to speak of "the public," or even of "the musical public." London has "publics" for every musical category, distinct from one another in appearance, decorum and taste. And there are many musical categories these days.

The public that jammed the Royal Festival Hall and overflowed onto the stage for Joni Mitchell, Saturday night, was a new one for me, a university crowd, obviously, intellectually several cuts above the turnout for a hard rock concert; and with what cascaded from the young ladies' heads and sprouted from the cheeks and chins of the young men, the hairiest I have ever seen. The attire was predominantly American frontier, or Grant Wood, with the females covered to the ankles and the young men favoring buckskin jackets, fringed, and leather vests. The hall, during the interval, might have been the extras' canteen on a John Ford movie set.

Joni Mitchell, 26, and thus, I would guess, a year or so older than most of her listeners, is the latest of a new style of youth folk goddess, or priestess, whose prototype was Joan Baez. Joni is a Canadian, born and raised in Saskatoon, but now living, like everybody else, apparently, in Los Angeles. She writes all her own songs, appears without any backing group, accompanying herself on acoustic guitar and piano, holds forth prettily and wistfully against war, pollution and oppression, and extends her sympathy to the neglected, the lonely and the outcast, "preaching platitudes to the converted," as one English writer has put it.

She had an enormous success, and it baffled me. Her singing is that of the vocally untutored—pleasant enough within an octave but elsewhere unfocused, with nothing below the middle at all and nothing above but a tenuous, shrill and sometimes wobbly falsetto. Her enunciation, while not slovenly, suffers from non-professional disregard of the microphone, with words getting lost at phrase endings. Her playing, whether of piano or guitar, hardly goes beyond strumming. And yet, on this large and far from illiterate audience, it worked.

The songs themselves had a lot to do with it. As a writer, both of homely lyrics and folkish, fashionably modal melodies, she has a real gift, although others make more of her songs than she does. It was Judy Collins, after all, who showed what could be done with "Both Sides Now." And there is no doubt that her minstrelsy mirrors the anxious hearts and troubled spirits of her contemporaries. She is one of them, even in appearance—a pretty, friendly girl, blond, of Irish, Scottish and Norwegian descent, wearing the same long hair and long dresses as the girls in her audience, distinguishable from them, indeed, only by the isolation of the spotlight.

And this may, I suspect, explain her communicative success. Her trump is her utter and unwitting artlessness. For a generation suspicious of the professionalism and practiced showmanship demanded and expected by its elders, and hostile to competitive excellence, there is something appealing and reassuring about this girl who writes and sings and plays just about as the girl friend would if she had the will and the nerve. It is a generation that chooses its idols from among its own; and it is curious—or possibly not—that in a time when the watchword is permissiveness, its idols should appear as incarnations of innocence—including artistic innocence.

I got away before the last encore, while the house lights were still down, aware as I have never been before, that my age gap was showing.

The New York Herald Tribune – London Edition – Thought you might be interested