

JONI MITCHELL PROJECT / *Creators of the show sifted through 15 albums to arrive at 24 songs performed with simple staging and no linking — and distorting — narrative*

Singer is given her due as librettist of love, pain

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IT was just a matter of time before the baby-boom generation really got its hooks into **Joni Mitchell**. It wasn't enough to buy her albums when there was a need for a new cultural icon. Edith Piaf and Jacques Brel just would not do.

So now, Mitchell, the Alberta native who has lived in the United States for more than two decades, has become a capital-T Troubadour, and her songs of self-discovery the metaphor for a generation that has gone from protest to Pernod.

The evidence is partly in **The Joni Mitchell Project**, a two-hour evening of the singer-composer's songs, which is nearing the end of a six-week run at the Los Angeles Theater Center. It is also in the attendance at a recent performance of the cast of *thirtysomething*, the television show built on yuppie angst.

The Joni Mitchell Project is more than just a compilation of Mitchell's hits sung by five talented performers. Its creators, David Schweizer and Henry Edwards, have tried instead to give Mitchell her due as the librettist of love, pain and the whole damn thing.

The project began when Schweizer met Mitchell's agent, Barry Krost, who told him: "There's this catalogue of songs — is there a theatre evening in it?"

"I knew it would be a wonderful time to hear the material again and to hear it interpreted by artists who in no way resemble her," Schweizer, who also directs the show, said in an interview.

It was a trail-blazing effort. Mitchell has been a major recording artist for more than 20 years, but few of her songs have been recorded by other singers, perhaps because they are seen to be too personal or too difficult to sing.

But Schweizer, a 40-year-old graduate of the Yale University theatre school, saw only challenge. "I felt strongly that if I could pull off a



Hinton Battle and Ren Woods perform a duet from the project.

kind of song cycle that achieved a kind of emotional journey, it would have a kind of mystery and intelligence."

Schweizer and Edwards sifted through Mitchell's 15 albums, whittling a list of about 200 songs first to 50 and then to 24, which are performed with simple staging and no linking — and distorting — narrative.

Schweizer said it is mostly coincidence that 22 of those songs came from Mitchell's first decade — seven from the 1971 album *Blue* — and that her later, jazz-oriented repertoire is underrepresented.

He said he wanted to select songs that bolstered what he believes is Mitchell's main theme: "I think she basically says if you take the full rush and make yourself completely vulnerable, ultimately it will be worth it and you'll learn from it."

The song uses a song from *Blue*, *All I Want* ("I am on a lonely road and I am travelling. Looking for something, what can it be?"), as a leitmotif that runs through the evening.

Hearing Mitchell's songs sung without her distinctive warbling and phrasing is a mixed blessing. Some come off flat; it isn't terribly illuminating to hear new versions of the two Mitchell songs that are most often covered — *Both Sides Now*

and *The Circle Game*. But when the laconic ballad *Case of You* is recast in a heated gospel style, it becomes almost a new song.

In all cases, however, the words take on an increased prominence.

"My admiration for her as a writer grew and grew," Schweizer said. "You don't have that intoxicating, dreamy **Joni Mitchell** sound and mood to send you spinning, and you listen more overtly to every word."

Mitchell herself was not involved in the project but gave it very public approval when she attended an early performance and came up on stage afterward to hug the performers and sing a new song a cappella.

Schweizer said he is not insulted — and apparently neither is Mitchell — by media critics' references to the show as the 1990s version of *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*. "I don't feel condescended to because that, too, was the discovery of a songwriter as poet that had something incredible to say."

And Schweizer is clearly hoping the Mitchell revue will endure, although he would not say if there are plans to mount the show in New York or elsewhere.

"It's a little premature to say that now, but there is a lot of interest in it and there is a lot of talk of its future," he said. "I would be very surprised if something doesn't happen."