



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Joni Mitchell at Gene Autry Museum: The power of her artistic vision is undimmed.

Joni Mitchell Proves She's No Museum Piece

POP BEAT

By ROBERT HILBURN
TIMES POP MUSIC CRITIC

How many times have you heard pop music fans from the '60s and '70s cite a master songwriter like Joni Mitchell and complain that no one writes like that anymore?

It is nonsense, of course.

Though some of those same fans may not have noticed, Mitchell is still here and still writing marvelous songs about love and longing, honor and corruption.

The beauty of Mitchell's live, hourlong performance Thursday at the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum isn't just that it was a rare chance to hear in concert a singer-songwriter who hasn't toured in more than a decade.

The performance, at the museum's intimate Wells Fargo Theater (broadcast live on KSCA-FM and carried by about 100 stations around the country) should also have been a revelation for anyone who thinks Mitchell's creative life ended shortly after 1974's "Court and Spark," her last consensus critical and commercial smash.

Relying almost exclusively on material written after that celebrated dividing line,

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Mitchell demonstrated her continuing excellence both as a singer with exquisite instincts for phrasing and as songwriter with the originality and command of a poet.

Wearing a long, brown velvet dress, Mitchell opened with a song from "Hejira," an album whose somewhat cold, experimental musical textures caused a major defection among the ranks of the Mitchell faithful when it was released in 1976.

The song, "Refuge of the Roads," is the story of a restless spirit, set against a romantic backdrop, but it seemed in Thursday's context to be equally a reflection of Mitchell's own restless artistry.

Later, in the title song from the same album, she touched on life's complications and confusions with all the graceful imagery of her 1968 classic "Both Sides Now," but with added seasoning that comes from years of added experience: *In the church they light the candles / And the wax rolls down like tears / There is the hope and the hopelessness / I've witnessed 30 years.*

Mitchell was in her 30s when she wrote that song. She's now past 50, but the power of her vision remains—a point underscored when she turned to several songs from

her last two albums, both of which are set in the gentler folk cushioning of her early collections.

"Sex Kills," from last year's "Turbulent Indigo" album, speaks with passion and bite about a society characterized by confused values and distorted social priorities.

The song starts off with the narrator spotting a license plate that reads "Just Ice." It leads to this reflection: *Is justice just ice? / Governed by greed and lust? / Just the strong doing what they can? / And the weak suffering what they must?*

Equally disarming between songs, Mitchell took advantage of the Atry Museum setting to acknowledge her love as a child for singing cowboys—a point she illustrated with an enlarged photo of her from those days in a Roy Rogers outfit, complete with cap pistol.

Mitchell good-naturedly spoke

of all the times she wanted to play Roy in neighborhood kid games and how the boys always refused her the role because she was a girl.

In the '60s, the young Canadian no doubt faced some of the same stereotypes when she entered a folk music world dominated by male songwriters. But she put together a body of work in the '60s and '70s that was rivaled only perhaps by Bob Dylan.

Oddly, another stereotype may be responsible for her being passed over twice now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame balloting. Voters may think of Mitchell as too much a folk artist to picture her alongside Jimi Hendrix and Elvis Presley. But that's absurd.

Along with Dylan, Mitchell brought a literary sensibility and fearless eye to contemporary pop music that influenced generations of rock musicians. Thursday's concert showed that Mitchell remains in glorious possession of both gifts.

Samuel Goldwyn

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