

Joni Mitchell has daringly come of age

By MARCI McDONALD
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STRATFORD — "I'm from the Sunday school," Joni Mitchell sang last night in her pure haunting soprano. "I sing soprano in the upstairs choir. . ."

A year ago, weaving her spell of magic words at a coffeehouse here, dressed in her flowered schoolgirl frocks, white stockings and buckled Mary-Jane shoes, Joni Mitchell might actually have convinced you she was the child-woman of her song—the angelic spell-casting soprano strayed briefly from the choir loft.

But as she sat there last night on the Avon Theatre stage, picking out the complex melody to a Tale of

Two Houses on a black grand piano, the blonde little-girl bangs grown out, the flowered frock replaced by a long slinky gown of crushed forest-green velvet, cut to deep décolletage, the words seemed oddly incongruous.

Joni Mitchell wasn't playing the little girl any more.

TV FAME

In the year since she rocketed from Saskatchewan folksinger to a 25-year-old singing superstar of the folk world—her face on every TV variety show, her songs recorded by everybody, from Judy Collins to Frank Sinatra—she's left behind the flower-girl im-

age for a woman come-of-age.

There is something worldly wiser, surer, about her. She doesn't lower her eyes, little-girl angelic, so much any more. Now her neckline is lowered instead, dipping daringly to almost her waist.

The piano, too, is part of the new look—instrumental in every show since its debut in her Carnegie Hall concert last February. Sitting at it, singing into a keyboard microphone like some cocktail pianist in slinky green velvet, the homespun wholesomeness of her guitar temporarily put aside, she hardly calls to mind your schoolgirl soprano.

FLUBBED NOTE

For misty-eyed young men who still treasure her as the soft-eyed syphid, there is still the meadow-maid freshness and glow of scrubbed Saskatchewan beauty. But with the décolletage and grand piano, has also come a new stage presence—though hardly a polish—which is somehow even more appealing.

It was most evident last night when she flubbed a note in Tale of Two Houses—a new twin composition—on the grand piano. And oddly enough, it was the flub that pulled the whole concert together.

Things had started out tight, polite, unelectric, when she opened the show with Chelsea Morning, a



JONI MITCHELL'S NO LONGER A LITTLE GIRL
The flower-girl image has been left behind

collage of stained glass colors and imagery, then worked her way through three more numbers.

The packed Avon Theatre—crammed with 1,100 fans who'd wolfed up every available ticket two days after the box-office opened last March—still was a n't moving with her.

Then she slipped off the guitar, looking suddenly slim and sensual, and slipped down at the piano stool explaining, "I'm a little nervous about playing for people. I just started to play the piano." And already the house seemed to feel better. Less intimidat-

Suddenly the show had become a very personal thing. And it stayed that way, like a fine fantastical trip she was taking each person on, through the second half till the end.

Her long rambling reminiscence at the piano stool about finding a stray black cat, was as if she was just stopping by for a friendly rap, and they hung on every word of it. When, tuning her guitar, she suddenly exclaimed, "That's the lunge! The boy who I met down by the lake today—you know who you are—that's the lunge," there didn't seem anything odd about it.

Everybody seemed to feel she'd been saying special things to them all night too.

5 NEW SONGS

There were five new songs sprinkled among the Mitchell old standards. Three of them she accompanied on the piano. She's been composing for the last six months—despite the fact that she only had one year of formal piano lessons at the age of eight. Unlike the letdown of her second album, the new songs sparkled as much as her hits.

When she closed with the Circle Game, the man next to me looked at his watch just as I did. It didn't seem possible a show could go so fast. And, indeed, it hadn't all gone.

Through two standing ovations and a full five minutes of applause, the audience called her back for two encores and five curtain calls. Nobody seemed willing to let Joni Mitchell's new-found magic slip away.

Two minutes later, when she thumped a mischord with a look of horror, then stopped like some sort of gracious hostess, "Oh dear, I'm so sorry. I'm going to start that all over again." The whole audience seemed to unbend with a spontaneous sympathetic laugh.

When she started again, flubbed again and passed it off coolly with, "Same place isn't it? Definitely a mental block." The audience was at her feet.

By the time she got through the spot successfully with a we're-all-in-this-together wink the third time, they were eating out of her hand.