

The Detroit News.
May 26, 1982
Jimmy
friend
Barry

Joni Mitchell brings folk back to Detroit

By Ben Edmonds
Special to The Detroit News

DETROIT

As the Pine Knob audience listens to the smoky vocals of Joni Mitchell under the stars next Wednesday night, few will be aware of the crucial role Detroit played in first exposing that voice to the world.

The singer-songwriter icon will be bringing a full orchestra and a program that mixes classic torch songs with selections from her own 30-year catalogue of exquisite compositions. But were it not for the time she spent as a resident of the Cass Corridor, those songs might have remained locked in her imagination.

She was Joni Anderson, an art student and fledgling folk performer from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, when she met Michigan folk singer Chuck Mitchell at a Toronto coffeehouse in 1965. By June of that year she was Joni Mitchell, having gotten hitched in the Mitchell backyard in Rochester, and was living with her husband in an apartment building called the Verona at the corner of Cass and Ferry.

"We used to call it 'the castle' because the building was big and fortresslike," Landra Rosenthal says. Now an attorney in Berkeley, Calif., the former Landra Epstein still remembers meeting Chuck's wife-to-be.

"Chuck came back from a trip to Canada and told us he had met this really great girl and couldn't wait for us to meet her. He was going back up to play a festival outside Toronto, and invited me and a friend named Ron Levine to come.

"After the festival ... Joni said she'd written a new song and wanted to play it for us to see what we thought. So we went into their hotel room, and she sat on the bed and played us 'The Circle Game.' I was one of the first people on the planet to hear that song. She absolutely transported us with



Singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell returns to Metro Detroit to perform Wednesday night at Pine Knob.

CONCERT PREVIEW

Joni Mitchell

8 p.m. Wednesday at Pine Knob
Sashabaw off I-75, Clarkston

Tickets \$7.5, \$55
Call (248) 377-0100

this amazing piece of writing."

Chuck and Joni Mitchell began performing as a duo. "They played together," Rosenthal recalls, "but you were always aware of the two individuals. Chuck had his repertoire of Brecht art songs and traditional folk, and Joni had the things she was writing. ... I thought they were both incredibly talented, though in different ways."

Those differences would ultimately prove to be the duo's professional, and then personal, undoing. At the time, all people knew was that Joni's artistry was growing by leaps and bounds. It was the old story of the expatriate divesting herself of the baggage of her history. "Once I crossed the border," Mitchell says, "I began to write, and I began to find my real voice."

Detroit has never been

known as a folk mecca, but Joni stayed here for a spell after the marriage dissolved, renting another apartment in the Wayne State area and devoting herself to her music.

Tom Rush came to town to play the Chessmate folk club in early 1966 and "was blown away by the quality of her songs. Joni has reinvented herself repeatedly throughout her career, so what we had then was the first iteration. But she was already writing songs that were timeless. As soon as I heard 'Urge For Going' I asked her to teach it to me. As long as winter comes, that song will always be relevant."

Rush proved an important proselytizer for Mitchell's work. For example, his playing of her songs for Judy Collins resulted in the recording of "Both Sides Now."

By the time the Collins version of "Both Sides Now" hit the Top 10 late in '68, Mitchell had already transplanted herself to New York. She was now well down the road that would take her to Crosby Stills & Nash country, jazz outings with Charles Mingus, and the extravaganza she brings Wednesday to Pine Knob.