

Rock: Joni Mitchell In Forest Hills Show

By JOHN ROCKWELL

JONI MITCHELL'S concert Saturday night at the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium was the best Joni Mitchell concert this writer has ever heard. Previously, her jazz-rocking bands have tended to reduce her songs to a kind of busy sameness. On Saturday, Miss Mitchell's five-piece band, which included such jazz-fusion luminaries as Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius and Michael Brecker, managed by and large to support her with considerable sensitivity.

In addition, Miss Mitchell looked wonderful and was singing very well, her jazzish sophistication of phrasing allied to the sort of soprano folkish purity of tone that one recalls from her youth. And in the encores, the Persuasions, who had also been the opening act, came back for a couple of numbers, most tellingly an absolutely riveting account of Miss Mitchell's "Shadows and Light."

What the concert reinforced was the realization that Miss Mitchell's evolution from folk to jazz has been a gradual and even inevitable one. From the first her "folk" music was extremely unusual, with its verbal sophistication and above all its asymmetrical song structures and its modal harmonies from her intuitively discovered guitar tunings. That music contained the seeds of her subsequent development into the quick-changing harmonies and rhythmic jumpiness of jazz, such that "Court and Spark" of 1974 seems in retrospect more a confirmation of her past than a break from it.

Between her first record and her "Blue" album there was a period of slight regression; there are great songs from that era, but also backsliding as she was too much influenced by her fellow musicians. Similarly, in the records after "Court and Spark," she hasn't always shaken free of the presence of her new jazz collaborators. At this point, she thinks of her earlier co-worker's in this idiom as "studio musicians" and her current partners as "masters," but to this ear there's still something a bit too facile about a lot of the playing on her last couple of albums and at Saturday's concert — especially when the band members went off on their own to solo, which they often did.

At its worst, Miss Mitchell's new idiom tosses aside her proven gift for song structure and measured declamation and replaces it with what sounds like mannered scattling. This kind of music is fun to play for instrumentalists, and it's clearly a stimulating challenge for her to attempt to keep up with

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Joel Bernstein

Joni Mitchell

it. But great recent songs like "Amelia" and "Furry Sings the Blues," both of which she sang Saturday, conform a little more readily to the sort of poetic story-telling that's always distinguished her best work.

Reservations aside, however, this was still a fine night for Miss Mitchell and the audience, which seemed stocked with adoring devotees. And for all the pleasure she can now provide periodically in a concert, what makes Miss Mitchell so interesting to follow is that her evolution is clearly by no means complete.

Morse Mime to Be in Tully Hall

The Richard Morse Mime Theater, which usually performs Off Broadway, will present a concert at Alice Tully Hall on Sept. 11 at 8 P.M. Richard Morse, Rasa Allen and Gabriel Barre will present their pantomime accompanied by a trio of musicians.

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