

Rock 'n' Roll

Joni Mitchell, Artist, Is Simply That

BY KATHERINE ORLOFF

● To mention Joni Mitchell is to touch upon a talent so stunning and exceptional, so clear and out of context, that there simply are no comparisons to be drawn. The irony of her environment presents itself in songs so personal and perceptive that one can only stand in awe of both her unique vision and the courage behind its offering.

Joni Mitchell, aspiring painter, began a career in music by singing in clubs around her native Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to help pay art school debts. Her initial success came, however, as a song writer. "The Circle Game" and "Michael From Mountains," for example, were recorded by Judy Collins and Buffy Sainte-Marie before Joni herself came to the realization that her art transcended pictorial representation.

Amidst the clutter and cacophony of acid rock, Joni Mitchell's first album appeared in 1968. Despite prevailing trends, her debut in Los Angeles at the Troubadour in June of that year acknowledged an already commanding figure in popular music.

Her songs were defined and more than merely diverting. She also projected a fine ironic sense of humor and a great deal of personal charm. Moreover, the warmth of her presentation gave her very special music an identity which set it apart from the commonplace.

Joni Mitchell took a chance with what she calls "art music," feeling that the choice would find acceptance. Encouraged by recognition from a growing audience and much moral support from her manager, Elliott Roberts, she moved to Laurel Canyon and surrounded herself with hand-carved merry-go-round horses, stained glass windows, and a sunlit loft where she painted in the afternoons.

Treasured Musical Possession

Her most treasured musical possession was an old Martin D-28 guitar she had bought in the South from an Army officer about to leave for Vietnam. She preferred it to newer, assembly-line models, the way she preferred to keep most things around her tasteful, simple and to the point.

Her songs began as poems in a sketchbook, her words and drawings sharing pages. The melodies came later, almost all of them in open tunings. Avoiding rhyme for its own sake, she tried to keep her images consistent.

"When I first saw Joan," remembers Elliott Roberts, "she sat down and sang me 15 of the most amazing songs. She still reads me words of new ones and I can't imagine how she's going to put melodies to them, but she always does."

Those songs and several others were finally recorded. Yet it took three Reprise albums to exhaust an already existing repertoire. In addition, her third album, "Ladies of the Canyon," ended her dependence on the guitar alone, including as it did the first songs she had composed on the piano.

Following this effort, she recognized her growing difficulties with performing, her susceptibility to critical analy-



Joni Mitchell's new album is "For the Roses."

sis, and the closing circle of public interest around her private life. She spent a year and a half coming to terms, traveling both alone and with friends, investing time in herself.

This period of rest was a definite contribution, for if anything, it helped heighten her perceptual awareness. With newfound energy she completed a fourth album, "Blue," in which her eye for detail became secondary to the depth of her involvement.

Her songs of friendship, love, heartache and subtle retribution, though perhaps more emotional, also appeared closer to the surface, more honest and direct. In "Blue" her feelings seem to come unedited, yet still refined and poetic. Thus the woman balances the child, the strength offsets the doubt and hesitation.

She is unpredictable and steady, at once explicit and vague, her insight related on equal terms with her confusion. Joni Mitchell's ability to decide which songs to record and which to discard, however, remains extremely accurate.

"She does a lot of writing," says her manager, "and she admits not all of it is good."

To dwell on the lyric quality of her songs somehow does injustice to the magnetism that her performances bring to them. Joni Mitchell approaches the stage a bit defensively at first, inspiring protective urges and encouraging enthusiasm.

She appears fragile, in a way, almost as if she were a victim of her own femininity. Yet when she begins to sing, her face, not unlike her voice, becomes changeable, quickly expressive, warm and lovely.

A certain maturity has taken effect, noticeable these days in performances which flow from guitar to piano to dulcimer. Her delivery still incorporates

the sudden shifting of notes, the highs always somehow beyond the expected, yet the vascillating moods seem to have been replaced with comfortable conversation and reflective composure.

Four years ago a broken fingernail would equal a broken performance. Today, two hours on the stage, singing, talking, quickly smiling or laughing, Joni Mitchell finds herself at ease.

She remains a perfectionist, particularly with the piano, still a relatively new instrument to her. Before performing "Judgment of the Moon and Stars," a song dedicated to Beethoven (subtitled "Ludwig's Tune"), she made certain there would be no mistakes. Strangely, she feels a missed note will be the remembered one, and it disturbs her continually.

Deeply affected by the tragedy of Beethoven's premature deafness, and inspired by his tenacious artistic spirit, the song has come to be what she calls "a pep talk," representing a search for strength and a source of optimism.

"Ludwig's Tune" is one of a dozen fresh songs on her new album, "For the Roses," her first at Asylum Records. This most recent effort also includes some commentary about the record industry, its personalities, and the marketing of souls, all of which supplied emphasis for her four-day series of concerts at the Troubadour in mid-November. They were among the best shows she has ever done in Los Angeles.

In contrast to her stage presence, however, Joni Mitchell does not grant interviews. Possibly she feels the need no longer exists, that she has nothing really to say. No doubt there is probably a little fear involved as well, and considering the nature of some of her songs, it would be justified.

Dangerously Thin Line

The line between poetically relating experience and the exploitation of personal affairs is already dangerously thin. The artistic qualities of her work must stand alone. The lady has earned her privacy and she enforces it in her quiet way, without any posturing or temperamental nonsense.

She creates her music in a stone house she had built on Vancouver Island, which is isolated, separate and peaceful. She comes to Los Angeles for the express purpose of seeing friends, frequently hanging out in the clubs, dining in popular restaurants, and of all things, bowling. Her average score is a respectable 179.

Joni Mitchell, the artist, is simply that. Her best songs are recollections of feelings and emotions that all of us, at one time or another, have hopefully enjoyed or endured. She demands the attention and respect of a public so bludgeoned with mediocrity that she has, in the final superlative, no real peer.

She is better than her loves and disappointments, and this is also finally obvious. No photograph can do her many-sided beauty justice. Listen, please, and be thankful.