

AT AMPHITHEATER

Joni Mitchell in Charge

BY ROBERT HILBURN

Times Rock Music Critic

Even though she's one of our very finest songwriters, I must admit I wasn't all that enthusiastic about going to see Joni Mitchell's opening Tuesday night at the Universal Amphitheater.

Maybe it was because I had seen her only a few months ago at both the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and Anaheim Convention Center in shows she would essentially repeat Tuesday. And she was to be backed again by Tom Scott and the L.A. Express.

Or maybe it was that I'd heard her songs so many times on albums that I just didn't think listening to them again, even in a concert setting, could bring out any further rewards.

Or maybe it was just that I was dreading sitting through the almost gushy adoration that portions of her audience pour out at her every move. Do they really think she wants to hear all those "Joni, we love you" exclamations? Most people paid \$7.50 to get in. That's love enough.

My outlook for the evening didn't brighten as Scott, a much respected saxophonist who contributed to the arrangements on Ms. Mitchell's heralded "Court and Spark" album, and the Express (guitar, bass, drums, piano) opened the concert with much the same material used in March at the Pavilion and in Anaheim.

I've never been fond of jazz, a position that Scott and the Express don't make me feel is in need of reevaluation. It's musicianship over music, if you understand what I mean. But the quintet is versatile and



ACOUSTIC — Joni Mitchell accompanies herself on a dulcimer opening night at the Amphitheater.

Times photo by Kathleen Ballard

clearly accomplished.

During the final number of its 30-minute set, Ms. Mitchell appeared in a darkened rear corner of the stage and the most zealous fans immediately began oohing and ahing. They, quite naturally, gave her a standing ovation as she approached the microphone. I feared the worst.

But all the doubt and hesitancy on my part disappeared as she picked up a guitar and began singing "Free Man in Paris," a song about the pressures of artist management (a twist from the more common theme of strain on only the performer).

Throughout the rest of the concert, Ms. Mitchell showed that an occasionally zealous audience, repeated listenings to an album or frequent concert appearances cannot dampen the power of a great

song. And Ms. Mitchell has some great songs.

As previously noted, no one writes as consistently revealing portraits of the intricacies of love—from the tensions and insecurities to the optimism and celebrations.

In "Help Me," for instance, she reminds herself of the dangers in what seems to be a newly evolving, seemingly eternal relationship: "It's got me hoping for the future/ And worrying about the past/ 'Cause I've seen some hot, hot blazes/ Come down to smoke and ash."

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TIC — Joni Mitchell accompanies herself on dulcimer opening night at the Amphitheater.
Times photo by Kathleen Ballard

Besides the quality of her lyrics and the loveliness/appeal of her music, Ms. Mitchell is a wonderfully arresting vocalist with a highly distinctive, affecting style. The backing by Scott and the Express was tasteful and effective, vigorous when needed and soft when required. She also did a long solo set in which she accompanied herself on piano, guitar and dulcimer.

While Ms. Mitchell's manner and dress were less flashy—her hair was back to the straight look of her early folk days—than on her spring tour, she was

relaxed and open on stage; not the "shy, delicate" figure of old.

The coldness of the evening did seem to throw her a bit at the beginning of the second half, causing her finally to borrow a jacket from a member of the stage crew.

But not even the cold air could dampen her artistry. Joni Mitchell, we see once again, is an artist of the highest order—the kind of irreplaceable talent that ranks above great "entertainers" (e.g. Diana Ross) and big "stars" (e.g., Heler

Reddy) that have preceded her this summer to the Amphitheater stage.

Her sold-out engagement continues through Saturday.

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