

Joni enters movies. backwards

BY PAUL McGRATH

FOR THE first time in almost 15 years, **Joni Mitchell** is a novice at something. She's been perfectly at home as a singer for that long, but in the past three weeks she has been unusually insecure polishing up a script at home near Los Angeles and then flying to Toronto to step in front of the movie cameras in a studio on the Lakeshore. The work in progress is her contribution to Love, an anthology that includes, among nine short films, work by Lady Antonia Fraser, Edna O'Brien, Liv Ullmann and Mai Zetterling, who directs Miss Mitchell's segment.

She was reluctant to reveal the full story contained in her 14½-minute segment, but her certainty of its length is at least a tip-off to the style. The measurement is that precise because, being a musician, she started with the sound-

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track, including a heavy helping of Miles Davis but none of her own music, and worked from there. Not satisfied with being allowed to script and act her first time out, she insisted on going at it back to front, according to cinematic norm.

"Musicians are always annoyed at that, that music is always an afterthought in cinema. Some people compose fairly articulate scores to a set piece after the fact, but that's not the way I want to work. My vision of the relationship between the soundtrack and the visuals is very precise. The character I play, for instance, is a Miles Davis fan, and he carries the soundtrack around with him on a big portable cassette. I didn't think until today that they really understood the way I see it, I wasn't sure Mai knew how articulate I wanted each gesture to be, to the beat, in some key scenes where there is no dialogue."

It makes for tough slogging in the editing room, but she is already familiar with that end of it. She did all the editing for Shadows and Light, a two-hour concert film to which her latest double-album is the soundtrack. There were some problems with the filming — "all five cameras were sometimes on a wide shot with nothing to cut away to, small things like that" — but with concert footage and "found footage" she put it together, her first real film enterprise. It will be aired Feb. 22 on the CBC and on pay-TV in the United States.

The concert film features the corps of musicians she's attracted to her studio dates since her steady shift to jazz began after the 1974 release of Court and Spark. It's the bumpy, live flipside to the cool, controlled studio band, featuring bassist Jaco Pastorius at his most playful and a

host of fine horn players, the musicians who have shaped her sound since then, taking her from the fringes of both rock and folk to the larger vistas of jazz, from increasingly poppy love songs to her appreciation, almost veneration of Charles Mingus, the subject and guiding light of her last album, Mingus.

It's a shift that left a few behind and attracted others previously uninterested. "When I wrote The Hissing of Summer Lawns, with a jazz flavor in the harmonies, less vertical rhythm, more freedom of phrasing, and the topic being the plight of the suburban housewife, they came at me gunning because I'd left the church. I stopped writing so personally and began to look out, and a lot of people were offended. They liked it when I turned my eagle eye on myself, but not when I turned outwards. I think some women identified with the women in my songs and resented me for that identification. They found it unflattering and found me annoying for bringing it up."

The shift was in the air for years, and she boils it all down — from the wistful white virgin on her first album, now 12 years old, to the black pimp she plays in her short movie — to one crucial shift, a visual one. "It came first in my drawings. One day I looked at them . . . I must have been at childhood's end, I was 24 and I wanted to draw more boldly. That search led me into contact with a friend of Leonard Cohen, Mort was his name, and I said, 'I don't like the way I draw,' and he said, 'Well draw me, and don't look at the paper.' So I did that and a lot of superfluous detail was eliminated. I began to draw like that, abandoning this baroque, Aubrey Beardsley style, and as the drawing got bolder, suddenly the music shifted.

"It used to be a lot more like European classical, very melodic, lots of grace notes, lots of adjectives in the poetry, a lot of curlicues in the drawings. Between that and Mingus, there is certainly a lot more black influence, from living in the States and being exposed to black culture

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in the cities, more bluesy, more rhythmic, more taking your time with the phrasing, more *grease*, more elasticity. I wouldn't write 'paradox and periwinkle blue medallion' for Charles Mingus, he'd hit me."

So she's changed, even though "friends and loved ones are generally the least supportive of any change. It threatens the friendship and forces them to change. It scares them, whereas it interests me. Look what happened to folk music. When Bobby (Dylan) went electric, some people threw things at him, and those who didn't wept. It made dino-



The familiar **Joni Mitchell** (above) and (right) portraying a black pimp in her new short-film venture.

saurus out of them."

Some change is troublesome, though, such as her friend Dylan's latest move, back to The Bible. "I don't think it's a step ahead. I think he's just exploring, but I think it's a step behind. He had more spiritual intelligence before, he's never followed leaders. I've gone through my Christian zealot period, I had an attack of it earlier in my career. I understand the contributing factors to that degree of desperation."

Now less Christian, more mystic, her mythology is constructed from the "incredible magic" in certain people she meets, characters such as Mingus and Georgia O'Keefe. She is less interested in the Bible than she is in strange circumstance, like her story of the whales stranding themselves on a Mexican beach the day Mingus died in Mexico — there were 56 of them, one for each year of Mingus' life.

"Charles had a lot of magic in his life. These things are not uncommon to seekers, and Mingus was a seeker. That's the magic of mundane coincidence, it's ordinary except that he died at that moment. A lot of people would die on that day in Mexico, but it so happens that out of that mundaneness something magic happened. In order for that to happen you have to be looking for something intensely; if you haven't started wanting, it's going to go right by you."

