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Joni Mitchell (left) projected an image of strength and daring at her Lenox, Mass., concert; she sang the pointed lyrics of "Shadows and Light" with The Persuasions (right)

# In Concert, Joni Mitchell Integrates Rock With Jazz

By CARLO WOLFF

Special to the Free Press

She launched her triumphant show with her signature tune, "Big Yellow Taxi," performed 10 numbers spanning all her styles, and ended with her anthem for the '60s, "Woodstock."

She left a satiated audience projecting and sharing a sense of community all too rare in rock concerts.

She is Joni Mitchell, leading a band that's a veritable roster of the best contemporary jazz musicians. She's coming off a controversial album that pays homage to the great jazz bassist Charles Mingus, and projecting an image of strength and daring in her performance that's not easy to associate with her recorded work.

She and her cohorts — Pat Metheny, guitar, a familiar face in the Burlington area; Jaco Pastorius, bass; Lyle Mays, keyboards; Michael Brecker, saxophone, and Don Alias, percussion — played for nearly two hours this week at Tanglewood in Lenox, Mass. It was beautiful.

It's natural to expect sensitivity and sophistication from Mitchell, the mature Canadian who's traversed her country fields of 10 years ago ("Clouds," "Blue") to stalk the jazz alleys of race (all her albums since "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," 1975). What was not expected was how much of a rock 'n' roller Mitchell is, and how well she's managed to integrate jazz and rock, at least live.

"Big Yellow Taxi" was bright, insistent rock; "This Train," an older tune about a fading lover, was bittersweet, her dominant attitude; "In France They Kiss on Main Street" made Europe feel at home in America.

In the classical sense, her voice is a mezzo-soprano; but her control is overcome by her freedom, her need to express herself through that voice, swooping, crooning, shouting. Her enthusiasm was con-

tagious; and even though some of the music was unusually demanding — especially the tunes from the new "Mingus" album, and her tortured, passionate "Coyote."

It was clear she was enjoying herself. During her solo/voice reading of "The Last Time I Saw Richard," an oldie from "Blue" she leaped into nasty cockney to snarl out the waitress' putdown. It was funny, a relief, rather than a bitter.

Her interviews indicate she's a proud, idiosyncratic woman. Certainly her albums express her individuality, even though one doesn't necessarily agree with her experimentation. But onstage, she's happy, proud to be playing electric

guitar with a band such as the one she's assembled. The show was organic. Sure, Metheny, Pastorius, all of them took solos, and Pastorius, despite his undeniable virtuosity and way with a riff, might have been a little long. Still, as one soloed, the others would drop back, then come together in clusters, and finally as a full band to back Mitchell's vocals.

They all PLAYED together. "Dreamland," from Mitchell's least successful album "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," was a fat-out rhythmic delight, with Pastorius and Mays playing mean cowbell and block. Even Mingus' "Goodbye Porkie Hat," with Mitchell's lyrics skirting bathos, turned out moving

and smoky, true to the musical line. Metheny may have been the most memorable soloist, though Pastorius, playing his guitar horizontally, then jumping on it, was the high dramatic point.

Metheny spun cathedrals. Possessed of fingers made for the guitar, the slim musician singled out his way around the instrument, creating harmonic masses that incorporated and transcended melody, forsaking logic for the sake of feeling. He plays guitar in a unique way: His sound is more like a synthesizer than anything else, and it's luminous.

As if her reading of "Amelia" (about womanhood and flight) and

"Furry Sings the Blues" (homage to singer Furry Lewis, precursor of her Mingus tribute) weren't enough, she sang "Shadows and Light" with The Persuasions, a group of five blacks who sing a cappella — incredibly, "Shadows and Light" approached the feeling of Gregorian chant, with its ecstatic musical empathy. Mitchell's conducting/choreography, Mays' organ, and its pointed synthesizing lyrics about good and evil.

It was over then, or at least it seemed to be. But the 12,000-plus people under the tent and on the lawn that balmy night clapped, shrieked, lit lighters, went all re-

ligious for Joni.

So she came backed and sang Frankie Lyman's "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" with The Persuasions and full band, and it rocked and rhythmed and wasn't at all blue. The crowd was in ecstasy.

Not enough. So Mitchell came out for the capper, a solo version of "Woodstock" that gave the lie to all those articles we've recently seen "commemorating" that event.

It gave the lie to the commentary because, 10 years after, Mitchell reminded us that indeed, "We are stardust/ We are golden." She certainly was in Lenox.

# On Record, She Pays Tribute to Charles Mingus

By CARLO WOLFF

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Joni Mitchell, "Mingus" (Asylum).

This album is an act of love compromised by misperception and sublimation. And although it has some beautiful moments, ironically most of the credit must go to Mingus, not Mitchell.

Charles Mingus, one of the innovative jazz bassists and perhaps the greatest big band jazz leader since Duke Ellington, died Jan. 5, at age 56, in Mexico. He died of a myotropic lateral sclerosis, and during the last 18 months of his life was in severe pain, finding it difficult to talk, let alone play bass.

Mitchell somehow got in touch with him, aiming to collaborate with him on her first album since 1977's "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," a flawed, self-indulgent, ultimately boring double album that was both a musical and racial experiment; it was the first time Mitchell consciously went blackface.

"Mingus" contains six long tunes, four with music by Mingus himself, the other two

solely by Mitchell. The rest of the album consists of "raps," snatches of tape-recorded conversation from parties Mingus attended, where he wamped on his life and image, saying he'd outlive the Duke, or that he was born lucky because he was blessed by God.

The album's theme is Mingus, the big black boogie man whose life was tortured by the shadow of the Duke, by illness, what he conceived of as sin and salvation, and his own protean creativity. For fine examples of Mingus' talent in voicing, melody and pulse, try "Nostalgia in Times Square" (Columbia), a double-album collection of his big-band pieces circa 1960, or the comprehensive "Passions Of A Man" (Atlantic), which covers big bands and workshops from "Pithecanthropus Erectus" (1956), featuring fiery altoist Jackie McLean, to his final version of "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," his tribute to Lester Young (1977).

Mitchell's "Mingus" is riddled by self-doubt masquerading as homage. Mitchell's paintings adorning the elaborate, tribute-paying cover are better than her own music. Granted, she's singing freer than ever, and this tribute to a man she obviously misses and reveres has brought her in contact with her own wellsprings: a pure, eclectic soprano, a spacious sense of time and an acute, often precious sensitivity, often maskishly under-



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lined by Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, whose instrumental virtuosity on soprano sax and piano (respectively) is wasted here. Jaco Pastorius' resonant arco bass is all over the album. It's overdone, and the novelty of its tone that stunned on Mitchell's "Hejira" is becoming a cliché, inimitable as it is. Mitchell herself is delving into scat-singing, with some success (the nearly-successful "A Chair In The Sky," one of the few lyrics characterized by precision), but she only really gets going on "Sweet Sucker Dance," a languid recognition of and regret over an interracial romance, and the single great tune here, "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines," featuring fun, sharp lyrics and a fantastic arrangement with ecstatic horns and laser production.

Her lyrics to "Pork Pie Hat," marvelously

presented in earlier incarnations by Mingus himself (several times) and Jeff Beck on "Blow By Blow," perhaps the definitive fusion album, are embarrassing. She attempts to trace the history of racism in America vis-a-vis the jazz musician, sympathizing with the difficulties of Lester Young and his white wife. Finally she says, embracing but not incorporating the non-verbal message Mingus delivered for over 30 years, that as long as "black babies dance" on the sidewalk, everything's OK.

Perhaps this perspective on Mitchell is too narrow; perhaps the thing to emphasize is her homage itself, the ironic (and often-repeated) fact that in American culture, it takes the celebratory act of a white musician to bring the achievements of a far superior black musician to the fore.

Mingus was preachy, didactic, conscious of his power to persuade (check out "Gables of Faubus" off "Mingus Ah Um," Columbia), but his art was never self-righteous. Mitchell, by contrast, has no real anger; instead she offers a highly refined, fashionable sense of ennuï linked to a conventional liberalism. And her album about Mingus, no matter how well intended, is ultimately sanctimonious. That's a world away from Mingus, whose work was sanctified. "Mingus" confuses the two.