

Joni confounds folk-era fans

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a review

CLARKSTON — The free programs distributed to the audience promised that Joni Mitchell's Pine Knob concert would be "a pleasant combination of old and new: jazz, blues, pop and folk." That teaser also should have stated that her mixture of music would be post-1974.

Ms. Mitchell, now into a musical phase simply described as "heavy jazz," devoted about half of her two-hour performance Saturday night to cuts from her latest album, "Mingus."

That album, her first collaborative venture, combines the music of

the late bassist-bandleader Charles Mingus with her lyrics and vocals.

The project, which began in 1978, was completed this spring by Ms. Mitchell after Mingus' death Jan. 5 from a type of sclerosis. Several musicians who performed on the album have joined Ms. Mitchell for her current tour, which included Saturday and Sunday shows at Pine Knob.

Perhaps to Ms. Mitchell's hard-core fans, she can do no wrong, her first big round of applause was earned after a switch from several older songs to a bluesy tune from "Mingus."

BUT FOR her old fans — those who first discovered her when she and former husband Chuck Mitchell were playing folk music in Detroit coffeehouses during the 1960s — her weekend performances were a surprise, if not a disappointment.

Devotees of Ms. Mitchell's early folk music, filled with confessional poetry, were out of luck if they headed for the hills expecting to hear numerous cuts from albums written prior to "Court & Spark," released in 1974.

Ms. Mitchell rocked her folk music fans by introducing electrified sound and strains of jazz in that album. And she reeled concertgoers by abruptly switching from older tunes, such as "Coyote," "Just Like This Train" and "Free Man In Paris," to selections from the "Mingus" album.

Surely anyone who has kept up with Ms. Mitchell's music since "Court & Spark" could not have expected her to pull up a wooden stool and play mellow folk ballads on an acoustic guitar.

But who would expect that her concert would include a long solo by her bass player that amounted to him plucking strings, slapping the body of the guitar, placing it on the floor to strum and finally, hitting it with his guitar strap to end the number?

Still, the audience, about half of which looked to be under 25 and perhaps never heard of Ms. Mitchell's folksy "Blue" and "For the Roses" albums, responded enthusiastically to the number.

AND ALTHOUGH some of her audience may have been displeased with the antics — reminiscent of a Ted Nugent concert — it would be hard to fault either the quality of Ms. Mitchell's playing or voice. An impeccable sound system created the illusion of listening to her music under stereo headphones.

Appearing detached from her audience, Ms. Mitchell performed for nearly 45 minutes before finally greeting her fans and introducing her back-up band. The group included a guitarist, bass player and drummer, plus a keyboard player, saxophonist and bongo player for select numbers.

After playing almost continuously for two hours, cheers and applause brought Ms. Mitchell back on stage for two encores. For one of them, she performed a rousing rendition of the 1950s tune, "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" with the Persuasions, five Black a appella singers who had served as the warm-up group.

And even after she finished her second encore, a solo version of "Woodstock," the audience screamed for more.

Ms. Mitchell declined that invitation. But the 36-year-old performer made it clear that she is a constantly evolving musician, capable of both more and diverse music.

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