

Brief Encounter With Joni Mitchell

By Conrad Silvert

Joni Mitchell closed out the Berkeley Jazz Festival Sunday night with an all-too-brief set before an all-too-adoring crowd of close to 9000 people.

Mitchell (accompanied by the rather incredible band of Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, Jaco Pastorius and Don Alias) was there primarily to test some of the new songs she wrote in collaboration with the late Charles Mingus. She is a true artist — in more ways than one — and it was fascinating to watch and hear her sing difficult and daring new material with such a stellar band.

But the set was insufficient. Mitchell, the headlining act of a major festival, was through barely thirty minutes after she had begun. Sustained cheering from the reverent audience brought her back for an encore (she sang an exquisitely slow version of "Woodstock," which she wrote ten years ago). Then, reluctantly, after a few more minutes of applause, she brought the band back onstage for an unprepared version of "Twisted."

Joni tossed back the roses that had been presented her, kept one red flower for herself, and left the stage again, this time for good. A chorus of boos quickly died down as people realized that was the end. Somehow, I don't think Joni would have performed such a short set to a New York, or even to a Los Angeles audience.

Better quality than quantity, however, and Mitchell possesses a unique combination of talent and sense of adventure. She sang four songs that will be included on her forthcoming album tribute to Mingus (due in two weeks). Her words to "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" sensitively portrayed the great bassist, composer and presence that was Mingus. "Chair in the Sky" was a cool and languid ballad describing Mingus' aspirations and frustrations. Mitchell sang lines like "Next time I'll be bigger . . . better . . . I'll be rich as Standard Oil" with a genuine jazz feeling, sustaining notes without vibrato, singing under the pitch, very blue and bittersweet. Hancock, Pastorius, Williams and Alias accompanied with artful restraint. Jaco broke loose from time to time with some loping, floating, stinging, beautiful fills and grace notes.

Mitchell sang another new one in fast jazz time with Hancock on acoustic piano and Williams kicking up a small duststorm on his big drumkit. She sang two older songs, "Coyote" and "Black Crow," from her great "Hejira" album, but just as the band seemed to be getting warmed up, the set was over.

It would have been easy enough to let the quartet play a tune or two by themselves, or for Joni to have sung a few more songs with just her guitar. If I weren't such a big fan of hers, perhaps I wouldn't have felt so shortchanged.

(Mitchell & Friends, it should be noted, donated \$5500 from their fee to the Bread & Roses organization).

Prior to Mitchell's appearance, Dizzy Gillespie



Dizzy Gillespie was entertaining, Joni Mitchell was fascinating but the show ended too soon



The Berkeley Jazz Festival's Smooth Finish

entertained the crowd with a surprising set of funky music that bordered at times on disco. Dizzy brought an electric band — Michael Howell on bass, Ed Cherry on guitar and Woody Denny on drums. Of course, Diz played the same jazz as ever on his upswipe trumpet, and it was a clever move for him to improvise on the likes of "St. Louis Blues" over a rock beat.

Dizzy played his big conga drum, sang African chants, American blues, silliness like "swing low, sweet Cadillac," and he put the audience in his hip pocket with several between-songs wisecracks and anecdotes.

The longest such talk concerned his performance last June on the White House's south lawn, where he and Max Roach taught Jimmy Carter the words to Diz's vintage '43 bebop classic, "Salt Peanuts." Actually, as the audience discovered when Dizzy taught the song to them, the words posed no problem. It was the rhythm that had caused "his majesty," as Gillespie referred to Carter, to stumble.

As Dizzy related it, "I said, 'Pres, you got to get it up — faster.'"

Uh-oh.

Richie Cole preceded Gillespie with a masterful set of his own tunes e.g., "Waltz for a Rainy Bebop Evening" and standards including the rarely performed "Holiday for Strings," which, like "Cherokee," Cole played at a breakneck tempo, aided by, among others, drummer Les DeMerle.

Cole's performance was especially gritty consider-

ing the tragic death a few weeks back of his close friend and musical partner, singer Eddie Jefferson (Jefferson was senselessly gunned down outside a club in Detroit.)

World opinion perhaps hasn't yet caught up with Cole's talent, but this department feels that he is one of the best two or three alto saxophonists alive who choose to play in a mainstream mode. Bird's spirit lives in his playing.

NOTE: Sunday's show began with sets from Rodney Franklin, who performed with his sister Audrey (flute, vocals) and former Berkeley Jazz Quartet associate, the brilliant Peter Apfelbaum; and from Robben Ford, a fine guitarist, who performed a high-powered set of blues rock. More on these gentlemen at some future date.

This year's festival continued to run more smoothly than any of the previous twelve. I suspect that this was not purely coincidental to the involvement of Bill Graham's organization.

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