

Joni Mitchell at Alpine Valley shows growth as jazz performer

By ROB FIXMER
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When Joni Mitchell recorded her "Court and Spark" album four years ago, she took a first, halting step into the jazz idiom. It proved to be an important move that steered her toward remarkable growth as both a composer and a performer.

Thursday night, in the first of two concerts at Alpine Valley, Mitchell displayed facets of that growth with a

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spontaneity and vitality that no studio production could ever capture.

Backed by a dream band, featuring Pat Metheny on guitar, Jaco Pastorius on bass, Michael Brecher on saxophones, and The Persuasions on back-up vocals, she intermixed the milestones of her career ("Woodstock," "Big Yellow Taxi," "Free Man in Paris," and "Raised on Rivalry") with the roots and branches of American music.

Visions of the past included "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" — a soulful vocal collaboration with The Persuasions that had the entire audience dancing in the aisles. The future was suggested in her latest material, music derived from Mitchell's association with Charles Mingus in his final days.

A sense of resignation marked the performances of her old standards, as if Mitchell understood that the pillars of her popularity had to be reckoned with like so many lingering phantoms. If she seemed anxious to get them out

of the way it was only because the real meat of the concert was not the old Mitchell, but the new — and the two bear little resemblance to each other.

With each successive album, the jazz influence has become more pronounced, and Mitchell's facility with it more impressive. Yet, you could no more pigeon-hole her in the jazz idiom right now, than you could have once tagged her as merely another folk artist of the late '60s. All along, she has remained the oddball.

When she played the folkie, her harmonies were too weird, too dissonant, and her melodies too heavily dominated by blues intervals. When she moved in a rock/funk direction with Tom Scott and the L.A. Express, her rhythmic structures were too complex and inverted, and her harmonies were too expansive for a public that generally considered her the final whimper of the Crosby, Stills and Nash legacy.

Now that she's playing jazz — and playing it well — the purists like to note that she doesn't play the root of a chord. The fact is, Joni Mitchell doesn't know what the root of a chord is.

Having always approached music in terms of song, and song in terms of a textural collage, she knows nothing about music in an academic sense, and seldom knows in what key she's playing or even the names of the chords. But that same technical innocence leaves her totally free to explore sound viscerally and metaphorically.

When, shortly before his death, Charles Mingus asked her to collabo-

rate on a piece of music based on T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," she agreed — with reservations.

Although Mingus died before work had formally begun, Mitchell did finish some inspired lyrics for a few Mingus classics and found inspiration for more material in his life and musical philosophy.

The results, which appeared on her latest album called "Mingus," were the highlights of the Alpine Valley concert. In fact, they were the highlights of the '79 concert season.

The irony of her adaptations is that Mingus had a strong aversion to electronic instruments. He neither trusted their tonal continuity nor believed in their dynamic potential. Mitchell's band belied that distrust, however, in an awesome display of electronic virtuosity.

At the forefront was Pat Metheny, whose guitar work ranged from inspired to astounding. Whether mimicking a vocal phrase, adding a complementary melody or bursting through with a brilliant, expanded solo, he borrowed loose ends from the various voices around him and tied them into a unified musical statement.

Jaco Pastorius, who was automatically put on the spot in the jazz selections because there simply has never been a bassist to rival Mingus, seemed unawed by the ghost of his mentor. If anything, he was the most electronically indulgent of the lot, adding splashes of digital delay and synthesizer effects to his complete mastery of the electric bass.

And The Persuasions gave it all an air of authenticity. Their glorious a cappella harmonizing served as a reminder that jazz and rock — in fact all genuinely American music — derived from the streets, the fields, or wherever people raised their voices to express common hopes, joys and sorrows.

The Alpine Valley concert suggested that Joni Mitchell has grown as an artist because she heard those voices and accepted the notion that the music of the present, however calculated or inspired, is meaningless if not steeped in the genius of the past.

Paulu named concertmaster

A new concertmaster for the Madison Symphony Orchestra has been chosen, but the man isn't new to the job.

Norman Paulu, UW music professor and violinist for the Pro Arte Quartet, will replace Thomas Moore, who has taken a post as concertmaster of the Miami Philharmonic.

But Paulu has served as concertmaster before — only for a single year — and was one of the first asked to take the post when Moore left last spring, according to Robert Palmer, orchestra manager for Madison Civic Music.



Norman Paulu