

Striking the right musical balance

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Striking the right musical balance

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AFTER her performance Thursday at the Edmonton Folk Music festival, **Joni Mitchell** was asked how long it had been since she had performed at a Canadian folk festival.

She couldn't remember — it was Mariposa, 1965 — but she noted that there came a time when the festivals "copped an attitude.

"They didn't want people with too much drawing power," Mitchell recalled. "Neil [Young] and I got banned."

As Mitchell's story illustrates, Canadian folk festivals have long had an ambivalent attitude toward the powers and prerogatives of stardom. In Vancouver, Gary Cristall, former artistic director of the Vancouver folk festival, actively discouraged any notions of stardom, enforcing a strict egalitarianism even on the festival's main stage. Mariposa flirted with stars during its brief relationship with Molson Park in the late eighties, but had trouble incorporating them into the festival as a whole.

Edmonton, on the other hand, has managed to strike a balance between the notion that some performers shine more brightly than others and the folk festival's need to forge a sense of community. As you flip through the index of *Playing The Field*, Rod Campbell's recently published

history of the festival, familiar names jump out: k.d. lang, Randy Newman, Lyle Lovett, Rosanne Cash and Rodney Crowell.

Artistic director Terry Wickham added significantly to that legacy this year, putting together one of the most impressive lineups in Canadian folk festival history. Landing Mitchell was, of course, a major coup, and one that paid off both artistically and at the box office, where the festival set a record for advance sales and managed to break even despite a rainfall Saturday that turned Gallagher Park into a mudpit.

But if anyone stole the festival, it was Solomon Burke, a man who has made a career out of being a star.

With an extravagant wardrobe draped on his substantial frame, his pencil-thin mustache and thinning hair, Burke looks like a cross between Rev. Al Sharpton and Marlon Brando. On stage he pulls out every trick in the book. His tuxedoed band warms up the crowd and changes jackets before the star comes out, accompanied by a valet whose only role seems to be removing Burke's fur-trimmed cape. He teases and flatters the crowd and, as he performs, two of his children stand by to wipe the sweat from his brow. It's all as outsized as the man himself and it's executed with such panache that you feel as though you're watching a master con man at work.

But Burke can also sing, and when he

releases that massive voice on material drawn from the confluence of soul, gospel and rock 'n' roll, he transcends the shtick. And it becomes apparent that, if he's a con man, he's that rare breed who, after bamboozling you six ways and sideways, mysteriously turns around and delivers even more than he promised.

At a Sunday morning gospel workshop Burke took the crowd to church, singing sacred songs, tossing in a brief, funny sermon and capping the performance by handing out autographed \$5 bills to all the children in the audience.

If Burke spent Sunday in church, his performance Saturday night was straight out of the roadhouse, as he took the stage around midnight and pushed well past the festival's curfew with a rocking collection of his old hits and other rock and soul chestnuts.

Burke's performance capped one of the most impressive mainstage lineups in festival history. R&B legend Ruth Brown was stylish and sassy. Ireland's Four Men and a Dog played a manic set of Celtic rock. And 73-year-old blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon, his voice a compelling blend of bluesy elegance and raw power, finished his set by turning the mawkish *What A Wonderful World* into a wise, wistful reflection on a life that has contained as much sorrow as joy, as much pain as beauty. Those four performances alone were worth the price of ad-

mission; sterling performances from Austin's Alejandro Escovedo and Joe Ely, the four women of Quartette and dobro ace Jerry Douglas were wonderful bonuses.

And there were no shortage of high-lights on the other days. Blue Rodeo rocked in the rain on Saturday afternoon. Richard Thompson's bleak and sometimes funny performance on Friday set the stage for a marvelous performance by the unlikely duo of country songwriter Tom Russell and R&B madman Barence Whitfield, who were backed by a crack house band led by Amos Garrett. Sunday saw memorable performances from Malian singer Oumou Sangare, T Bone Burnett, Taj Mahal and Bill Bourne and Shannon Johnson.

And in one of the most moving finales I've ever seen at a folk festival, Mitchell returned to sing her classic, *The Circle Game*, accompanied by the four women of Quartette. They were followed by Bourne and about 50 friends, who closed the festival with a stirring version of Ian Tyson's *Four Strong Winds* as hundreds of candles flickered on the hillside.

It was magical end to a magical weekend, a weekend when, in spite of enough mud and rain to bankrupt a lesser festival, the stars shone in Edmonton.

CBC Radio will broadcast highlights of the Edmonton Folk Music Festival this Thursday at 8 pm.