

Joni sings to the chosen few

MANDY LYNCH enjoys a cosy chat with Joni Mitchell — the 'magical and special' girl from the Canadian prairies

WHEN she tours Australia next year, Joni Mitchell could not hope to play to a more adoring audience than the bunch of admirers who attended Monday's press conference at the Sebel Town House in Sydney.

Mitchell sat down and played an unrecorded song much to the delight of the 12 far-from-jaded members of the media seated in the front rows. "It seemed to me that sometimes the talk gets so far away from the music that I would like to start by playing a brand new song," she said in her gentle Canadian voice.

The song, *Fourth of July Night Ride Home*, set the scene for the relaxed and casual atmosphere that characterised the next hour and a half. It was like having a cosy chat with someone very familiar and yet someone magical and special.

Mitchell has had a long and celebrated career and she emphasises that far from winding it up she has plenty of songs still to write. Her latest album, *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*, which she is currently promoting on a world tour, is evidence of this. Despite criticism that it is more an exploration of the textures of sound rather than concentrating on the lyrics, as she does in earlier albums, it is a fine album with lyrics that stand on their own.

The two songs about war, World War II in *The Tea Leaf Prophecy*, and the Vietnam War in *The Beat of Black Wings*, and her vivid portrayal in *The Reoccurring Dream and Snakes and*

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Reoccurring Dream and *Snakes and Ladders* of the image-making deception that is at the core of consumerist society, show that Mitchell has not lost her talent for scratching below the surface even if it means discovering the discomfiting truth that perhaps there is nothing there after all or that the answers are elsewhere.

*This is the reoccurring dream.
Born in the dreary gap between
What we have now
And what we wish we could have
More fulfilling — and less
frustrating!*

— From *The Reoccurring Dream*

Lakota is a moving song about the plight of the American Indian and the pressure on tribes such as the Hopi to sell their land for uranium mining.

The girl from the Canadian prairies who sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1967, wrote *Woodstock* and achieved major success with her 1974 *Court and Spark* album, is now middle-aged. Her work has always been written for personal rather than commercial motivations and at times she has been "out of sync" with prevailing trends. "Am I early or am I late?" she said recently "I don't know." Her interest in African music, the foray into jazz working with the dying Charles Mingus and her deeply personal love songs have inspired a range of performers from Paul Simon to Sting.

Many of Mitchell's songs have been concerned with the pursuit of love. In *Amelia* she wrote "Maybe I've never really loved". This heartache was replaced by happiness and security when in 1982 Mitchell married the jazz bass player Larry Klein and recorded the album *Wild Things Run Fast* to celebrate their love. She still writes love songs though they are less wistful and yearning than in the past. *My Secret Place* from *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* is a song where her voice and Peter Gabriel's blend and become one like the lovers in "a place so wild and

Peter Gabriel's friend and become one like the lovers in "a place so wild and pretty."

Artists who worked with her on the album included Peter Gabriel, Willie Nelson, Billy Idol, Tom Petty, Don Henley and Wendy and Lisa from Prince's Revolution. Mitchell said she had jammed with Prince who she described as "the greatest performer I've ever seen". For his part, Prince is an avid admirer. He cites *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975) as his favourite album and wrote a song for her called *(You Are) My Emotional Pump*.

Despite 15 albums and more than 20 years of performing, Mitchell is down-to-earth and still open enough to be vulnerable to what the critics write. "You release an album to the press, who either love it, hate it or are indifferent to it," she said recently. "Your first access is the reviews. If they are negative in an unjust, ignorant way, it hurts." In Sydney on Monday, dressed in a cream lacy suit and a quirky black hat, she need not have worried, surrounded by a charmed and slightly protective audience.

An artist (she has designed most of her album covers) and a poet, Mitchell sees her inspiration as coming from various sources such as ideas, feelings and flashes of insights. "You have all of these areas to draw from," she said. "At a time when I was introverted, I wrote from my insides. At a time when I am more gregarious and socially active I write more about what is around me. It's the same process, it's just different perspectives." She has described *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm* as "back more in the pop field . . . I'm singing a little crunchier than I ever have."

When all the questions that had crowded the room during the press conference had been answered, a Sydney reporter begged for another song. Mitchell obliged graciously with *Number One*, from the new album. She sang:

People cheer

*People cheer
And people gasp
People want your autograph
When you're a winner*

And that wonderful voice filled the room. Then the rush for autographs was on, and Mitchell proved that she is still a winner.



