

Concert review

Mitchell electrifies Arts Center

By ELAINE SPELLMAN

Listening to Joni Mitchell perform at the Garden State Arts Center July 16, I was first struck by the musicianship of her band. They were tight players as an ensemble and individually. With Vinnie Colaiuta on drums, Mike Landau on lead guitar and Larry Klein on bass, she has a unit that definitely plays together.

Mitchell, on electric guitar, started "Coyote" — a sketch of a friend found in her travels. The band kicked in midway through the song. The breezy jazz chords and syncopated beat set the song running. The audience greeted her with cheers as she went right into "Free Man in Paris," an anthem of wishes and regrets for the life in the music business. With a strong backbeat and her smoky voice, the song had punch to it.

Joni Mitchell has changed again and again over the years. Her voice has lowered. In fact, at times it bordered on sounding a bit ragged in the lower register. But when she moved up to the high notes, they came across clear and sharp. Her writing, once folk-pop, with mainly acoustic guitar or piano accompaniment, has evolved to its present form through her use of elements of jazz, classical and rock music. Always unpredictable, she surprises her audience with her changes in musical direction and keeps her personal signature within her compositions.

Mitchell performed songs from her earlier albums, such as "Edith and The Kingpin," done as a torchy jazz ballad; "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio," a catchy country tune; "Raised on Robbery," a fast and furious honky tonk scenario; and "Help Me," her Grammy-nominated hit on which she sang and played full out.

On "Refuge in the Roads," a synopsis of a journey across country, she first explained some of the lyrics to the audience, which was hanging on her every word. She seemed relaxed and happy throughout the evening, perhaps sensing that the crowd was very pleased with her.

Since Joni Mitchell is also a painter, it seemed natural that some of her work would contribute to the visual atmosphere of the concert as well as the aural. In back of the band were hung several banners with picture symbols — obviously of her creation — cut out of each banner. These representations of water, the moon, mountains, the city, etc., when lit from behind during the appropriate song, lent a theme to each piece. It was a strikingly original visual statement.

"Sweet Bird," a seductively thoughtfull jazz flavored ballad, was put across by her voice, though the lyrics are powerful enough. "You're So Square" from her latest album was fast, jazzy, and punctuated by razzing guitar licks and pulsing drums. "You Dream Flat Tires," from the same album, again came across as a jazz rocker in which Mitchell showed off the full range of her voice. On "God Must Be A Boogie Man," from the *Mingus* album, she was joined in the chorus by the crowd.

Going back to some earlier songs, Mitchell played "For Free" on the piano, adding some lyrics. Of course "Big Yellow Taxi" on acoustic guitar drew recognition. "A Case Of You," a slow ballad of love obsessed, was beautifully played on her dulcimer with a delicate piano backup.

"Song For Sharon" from the *Hejira* album was played as a rocker instead of a ballad. The arrangement was tight — again the strong beat emphasizing the thoughtful emotions in the lyrics.

Frequently, Mitchell's lyrics take reading and listening to several times.

When combined with the multi-colored chords and rhythms she employs, her songs can pass over one rather than striking that responsive chord that an artist tries for in reaching to an audience. But on a song like "Banquet," where the words fit so well and the music is urgent and poignant, that chord can't help but be struck. Her arrangement of this song was masterful. It had a raw, ragged edge, with Colaiuta's relentlessly pounding drums and Landau's searing guitar. Words like:

*"Some get the gravy
Some get the gristle
Some get the marrow bone
And some get nothing
Though there's plenty to spare..."*

have meaning now, though they were written 10 years ago.

In all she played 23 of her songs, some new some not so new, but all played with a great band and an enthusiastic audience.

Her last encore was "Woodstock," done solo on electric guitar. She walked back and forth before the first rows, playing to the people and smiling, then slowly playing her way offstage.

If anything was missing from this performance, it could only have been that she might have extended herself in her singing a bit more to get at the heart of the music, beyond the fine arrangements and instrumentation. Other than that minor point, Joni Mitchell's concert at the Garden State Arts Center was terrific.

Arch villain to appear at festival

Perhaps the most memorable villain in dramatic literature, Richard III, the arch fiend and Machiavell grotesquely depicted by Shakespeare as hunch-backed, limping and deformed, will ascend the English throne in the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival's production of *Richard III*, the third and final part of the *War of the Roses*.

Opening Thursday, July 28, at 8 p.m. at Drew University in Madison, with previews on July 26 and 27, *Richard III*, in a freshly edited version by Artistic Director Paul Barry, will alternate nightly with the first and second parts of *War of the Roses*, *Henry VI* and *Edward IV*, through Sept. 18. The three plays, directed by Barry, together represent an extremely rare opportunity for audiences to see the entire *War of the Roses* story on successive nights.

Richard (Michael Tolaydo) of the House of York, having killed the good King Henry VI (Davis Hall) in *Edward IV*, will slowly weave his way to the throne by picking off, one-by-one, relatives and nobles who stand in his way. After the ruthless and bloodthirsty Richard takes the crown, his reign of terror continues.

The Tudor family (whose descendants include King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I) amass forces to dispose King Richard III. Fierce battles and court intrigue of the festival productions continue in this final chapter of *War of the Roses*.

In order to appreciate the full scope of *War of the Roses*, it is necessary to see all three plays in the correct order. Single tickets as well as subscriptions and group rates with substantial savings are available. Call the box office at 377-4487.