

Heart's spokesman

by Geoffrey Cannon

"WELL, thank you," said Joni Mitchell, on stage at the Festival Hall, last January. And she began a second encore, minutes of applause in her ears. I'd never before experienced such a close communion between a singer and an audience. On that day, Joni accomplished the dream of every singer: to be the heart's spokesman of everyone in the audience.

And, after the second encore, a great raucous shout, as loud as football barracking, but yet, in the closeness Joni had created, as if from across a room: "Joni, please; do it again." And she smiled and sang again.

Joni Mitchell's fourth album, "Ladies from the Canyon" (Warner Brothers) is about to be released here. I believe that Joni Mitchell is better able to describe, and celebrate, what it means, and should mean, to be alive today, than any other singer. She tells us what we already know, but have felt obliged, through life's circumstances, to forget; that we are free. That we have love. And she does this by scrupulous observation and thought only of what she herself has heard and seen, and felt.

The difference between her, and other singers who search themselves, like Davy Graham, Tim Hardin, or Nico, is that they are wandering in the spaces of their mind, finding waste, purposeless patterns, and fragments of different personalities. Each of these three outmatches all but a few other singers. But, compared with them, Joni has arrived; not at a fixed point, but in a country where she may live. For her, nothing is accomplished until she makes sense of it, for herself.

She says what she sees. She sings of the lady who ~~hates~~ a man she cares for: "She removes him, like a ring, to wash her hands." She sings of the man she loves, who wishes to be able properly to love her, but who is bruised by previous emotional blows. "He stood looking through the lace, at the face on the conquered moon."

Each of her songs she sings clearly with her own guitar accompaniment, and also with some augmentation. The meaning of her music is so large—because so personal—that clarity is crucial. I would think that any lady, hearing Joni sing, would feel herself love. Joni could sadden only a man who was irreversibly alone.

The album ends with her first great song, "The Circle Game." The words have been attempted by so many other singers. Joni means them. "And the seasons they go round and round. And the painted ponies go up and down. We're captive on a carousel of time."

The great new song on this album is "Woodstock," her anthem to hope. She sings of someone she meets, walking to the Woodstock festival. He speaks, "I'm going on down to Yagur's farm. I'm gonna join in a rock 'n' roll band. I'm gonna camp out on the land. I'm gonna try and get my soul free."

Joni Mitchell isn't soft. She admits grief. If everyone knew her, as we all can by going to the record store, then I'd have no need to say that she, alone of every singer I've heard, reclaims the sense of the holiness of every human being. But she does.