

Joni - breathlessly beautiful

By Richard Jonas

Review

The L.A. Express finishes its loud, jazzy set.

The lights go up, then die again for the first breathless, rhythmic, hopeful, pretty-poignant strains of "Help Me."

Suddenly she's standing there before you: Joni Mitchell, the Joni of a thousand magical, musical images — Joni, the lady with the lacy sleeves and the hole in her stocking; the wildwood flower with her eyes full of moon and her heart full and hollow; Joni who kisses on Main Street and counts lovers on her side; the Joni of dark cafe days and Chelsea mornings; Joni who has looked at life from both sides now.

Joni appeared at several campuses across Ohio last week, including a stint at the University of Cincinnati Armory Fieldhouse one week ago. She was worth traveling for.

WITH JONI it's all music, and she stands or falls with her songs. Joni is unyielding, uncompromising. There are no gimmicks, no patter, no jokes, no costume changes, no attempt at showmanship. It's an hour into the set before she speaks; she smiles only once and then fleeting-

ly, and if the crowd hadn't asked an encore of her, she would never have laughed.

She doesn't beg or apologize for her songs, or even promote or introduce them. They are hers — are her — and she presents them straight forwardly, unbendingly, integrity intact, refusing to jazz them up or bring them down to her audience's taste or level.

JONI FACES her audience with hauteur, even hostility. She's self-righteous about her music, even rude. She has a word for a back-up guitarist who's out of tune, and many words spill out to her lovers and hate-lovers of song, but the audience is placed firmly behind a glass wall of Joni's construction.

If you're very quiet, if you know her songs and enjoy them, it seems, Joni will sing them for you.

Joni makes no allowances for pace.

In her two-and-one-half hours of song, she bunched together a half dozen of her dreariest, least-known and slowest-tempo ballads. She seems almost to dare the audience to get bored and leave, and quite a few took her up on it.

BUT, TOO, she sings the

best of her old stuff and "Court and Spark" and the new album.

Joni sings them all — bitter, optimistic and achingly beautiful.

From across a sea of faces, her own face is a well-boned blur under a panama hat, and, not seeing her mouth move, it's even easier to imagine the sounds as coming from some incredible instrument instead of a voice.

And the voice reaches everywhere: from down deep or high in her head, hoarse, caged, free, a moan, a cry, a hundred words crammed into one breath or one syllable stretched out over time and rhythm, highs that echo through the auditorium and lows that ache in her throat and in your own.

TO LIKE JONI, you have to love her voice, and it has to

be enough. It is enough for Joni's fans, the sensitive highschoolers who feel Joni understands them and their own "dark cafe days;" the lovers of her poetry or her guitar or her piano; those who say they don't really like "girl singers" or "pop singers" but who make an exception for Joni . . .

If Joni must so depend on a voice, at least that voice is recording-studio perfect.

If Joni stands or falls by her voice, last week she stood and flew and soared, and along with her she took crowds of thousands lucky enough to be along.

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