

# JOHN HABICH

## Watches from back room and a front row

"Everybody who's been on the floor before, stay on the floor. Everybody else on the steps." He doesn't have a megaphone and he doesn't need one. The basement hallway around the Coliseum floor resembles the orders in glossy gizzard red and flat lizard grey concrete.

Walter Hanley is trying to organize and energize his co-



orts from the union's Cultural Affairs Division. They must try to enforce all their careful logistical plans for handling the 10,000 people who will be coming into the building in an hour to see Joni Mitchell and the LA Express.

"Sake out a territory," Hanley directed. He is wearing a special limited edition sky blue T-shirt. It is the Union's commemorative Joni Mitchell T-shirt, available only to the

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self-styled power elite of University rock concerts. The artists' names are printed in hot-rod black on the shirt front above the Union's logo. Selected Joni Mitchell lyrics appear on the backs. "We are slandrums, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

Hanley gets himself back to the main floor instead, assuring the coterie that their floor passes will arrive in just a minute.

The back door is manned by a blonde woman, conservative in a long rust-colored sweater and pants. She has the demeanor of a receptionist in a very upper-level executive suite, smiling understandingly as she efficiently turns away the greater fraction of the seekers. The wistful sympathy in her eyes as she says, "I'm sorry, but your name's not on the list," is almost genuine. The doorkeeper is just enough older than the students

pondering on the back door to command obedience with her pleasant refusals. She does her best to maintain the friendly ambience as she readmits several people who have been fitting in and out. Hehossas at a surprise party keeping watch for the guest of honor.

An anonymous white van in the hallway makes a corridor from the door to the junction of the two hallways which run to backstage and around the Coliseum floor. Standing at the junction is a big bulk of a campus cop with the clean-cut jaw of Dinky Moore. He is one of a few in the backstage area who is both friendly and relaxed.

During a brief halt in the entrances and exits, the doorkeeper takes the chance to acquaint herself with someone else who knows what he's doing.

"I wish all these turkeys would get in here so we could keep this door closed," she says to him. In spite of the rust-colored sweater, her post by the door is uncompromisingly cold.

He grins and nods. Another policeman saunters over, hands in pockets, chewing gum with jaws as strong and square as his partner's. "What do you say, ehum?" he asks the first cop. The two police talk for a while. They have been hubbub and commotion like this before, and do not concern themselves with banter about where Joni Mitchell ate last night or what she was wearing this night.

By now the hallways are pretty much filled, and nobody is standing still. Students are walking back and forth self-importantly and without apparent direction. Hands point here and there, eyes follow. Everyone is hoping for a glimpse of a SOMEBODY, scratching their whiskers and chewing their fists anxiously.

From time to time the restlessness and chatter diminish slightly as a few local somebody announce themselves to the gatekeeper. There is somebody from the Athens Observer, somebody from the Atlanta Gazette. There is Dr. William Powell, director of a student affairs program for the Union, in a leather jacket and cowboy hat.

The somebody photographers go unnoticed; nine-tenths of the student population backstage have impressive cameras slung over their shoulders.

A masted officer of the law comes through the back door unimpeded. He is carrying a brown paper parcel addressed to Joni Mitchell. "Is that from Steveiro's?" the doorman asks him. "No, this one's from El Dorado," he answers, and in a flash of obscenity someone whisks the package off to its proper resting place.

Amid gusts of cold wind, a girl pleads in the doorway that she is waiting for Melita (Easters, president of the University Union). The name-dropping is of no avail, and she is forced to continue waiting for Melita outside.

A non-Union, non-media, non-stage crew couple almost make it past the gatekeeper. They show her their ID's on request, and although their names are not on the list, they



Photo by BOB NICHOLS

seem to belong backstage. But when she asks if they are representing an organization, they falter as cunning gives way to conscience.

In a last-ditch effort, one of the pair looks to the list, as it half hoping to be received into instant membership in one of the groups catalogued on it.

"I guess you'll have to go around front and wait there with everybody else," the doorkeeper says. They return here "c'est la vie" smile as they exit.

The melee of young people shrinks as the minute approaches when the herds at the main gates will be allowed to burst in. Everyone has secured a chair for himself in the front rows and another chair or two apiece for the best friends who had no credentials to come in the back way.

The white van has been claimed by a crew of caterers from Posey, who were feeding Mitchell's stage hands with the necessary hot hors d'oeuvres.

The half dozen or so police who have gathered in the back hall station themselves casually near the garage door and it is raised to allow the motorized chuckwagon to back out of the building. No one even attempts to speak in the and the mechanism is quickly lowered again.

Another garage door has gone unnoticed until now. It is at the junction of the two hallways. At the command of a campus policeman's hand, it descends to the midway point between ceiling and floor, to serve as a quiet but firm sign that everyone except the gatekeeper and other cops must leave for the main floor in accordance with the performers' contract.

Just before the door thuds to the cement floor, closing off the backstage area, another delivery man is seen with a brown paper sack. This one is from Steveiro's.

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The reporters and newspaper photographers and many of the Cultural Affairs people are in their respective seats as the main hall and the crowd surge in waves to the stairways which lead onto the main floor. As they push to grab the limited number of good passes, the folks who got in by the back door take on a collective look of nonchalant hauteur and mild disdain.

They back momentarily in one of their few glories as campus and local organization members, pretending to strut and preen, thank you's for the seats which their "connections" have reserved for their friends.

Up front, neither Melita Easters nor Walter Hanley sits down. They are acting as human "no trespassing" signs, keeping fans from standing in front of the stage and clearing the center aisle of stationary bodies.

Hanley has to nag some of the camera-laden spectators repeatedly to move out from the front and find a seat. "After the show starts, I care what the ( ) you do," he says, "but you've got to move out of here now." And as they move away, he contrasts a man who follows and eventually they move away, too.

"You know how they were at

the Horstadt concert," Easters waxes a reporter about the crowd. "We kept them from moving chairs up here, but that was about all we could do."

"We need barricades and we don't have them," Hanley adds, and promptly tells the reporter to take his seat along with everybody else.

As it turns out, this is not to be like the Horstadt concert. The Union unexpectedly has the necessary barricade: Hanley and Easters. Throughout the show, the two sit with their backs resting on the stage, guarding the audience's view like a pair of marble lions flanking a painful entrance-way.

The more relentless photographers were allowed up front for close-ups, one by one, and Easters' often violent arm gestures keep them squatting unobtrusively as they approach front center. Until the last half of Mitchell's act, no one's vista is disturbed by either camera freaks or boogie freaks.

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Fifteen minutes after the encore, all is quiet and cool backstage. Security is a lot tighter; the crowd in the back hall has changed from the pre-encore moths and grasses of mostly students. Now, about half of the onlookers are wearing police badges. The other half are mostly fans.

Nearly every non-policeperson is adorned with an iron-on backstage pass. The few who lack such passes have been cleared by the omnipotent blind woman in the rust-colored sweater. She is leaning against a wall several feet from the door, where the police have relieved her from duty and she is joking with Union Business Manager Tom Cochran, who is attired in his usual conservative suit.

The subjects of their dialogue are two long black Cadillac limousines which are parked in the former stead of the Pass' van. Cochran is lamenting that the chauffeurs' vehicles have been imported from Atlanta at the Union's expense, in compliance with Mitchell's lengthy contract. He says, "The businessman and the former doorkeeper joke that the cars have been standing

still and unoccupied in the back hall for the duration of the concert. They agree it would have been no trouble at all to get more of their money's worth for the limousine rental; they both would have been glad to stake a leg during the show, maybe drive up to the Varsity for a few hot dogs. They chuckle. "Oh, well," one of them says.

The onlookers all smile complacently as members of the LA Express file out of a dressing room and head toward the lead car. John Guerin waves to the cops and gives a determinedly toothy smile.

Robin Ford is almost the last one to enter the automobile. "Wanna split now?" he asks a young woman in a patchwork fox coat. She is indecisive, and thinks it might be better to wait and leave in the second limousine. As Ford hovers above the open car door, the passengers already inside rearrange themselves.

"C'mon, there's room," he says to the woman. She retreats, and the liveried chauffeur slams the door shut behind her. The garage door whirs upward and several people flank the vehicle as it wends its way through about 100 fans outside. Again, the door comes down very quietly.

In five more minutes, the diva enters the main back hall. Joni Mitchell is wearing a calf-length royal blue wool coat and matching skirt. She is also wearing a broad and sincere smile which was conspicuously lacking most of the while she was on stage.

Maybe because of the smile, maybe because of the softer lights, Mitchell looks much

more beautiful in the back hall. She is escorted by a long-haired man in very casual dress. Everyone smiles very toothy smiles at her, but nobody appears awestruck.

This is why they were allowed backstage. One young devotee steps forward and requests her autograph rather loudly. She is gracious, and two more fans follow suit. The third signature is written on a backstage patch which is ironed on a pair of occupied overalls. Everyone finds this oddity a good excuse for a polite giggle.

No interviews, please. No horns to mar the contract.

The songstress, too, appreciates the campus cops. She walks up to one of them and toys with his badge, murmuring something about having seen a similar jewelry. Then she enters the limousine and it pulls silently out of the back hall, leaving a cloud of applause and people scream, "We love you, Joni!"

Blue lights of a police car pulse a glowing escort until the limousine leaves the Coliseum parking lot. When the blue lights disappear, nobody remains in the back room, although the garage door has been left wide open for several minutes.

Quite a distance up the hallway toward the stage, a few student Union workers are recognizable from their sky blue T-shirts. The students are helping Mitchell's crew pack equipment. One campus cop is still hanging around. They are the last remaining representatives of the people who brought you Joni Mitchell and the LA Express.

**STOP DRIVING DRUNK. STOP KILLING EACH OTHER.**

*The Greers*

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