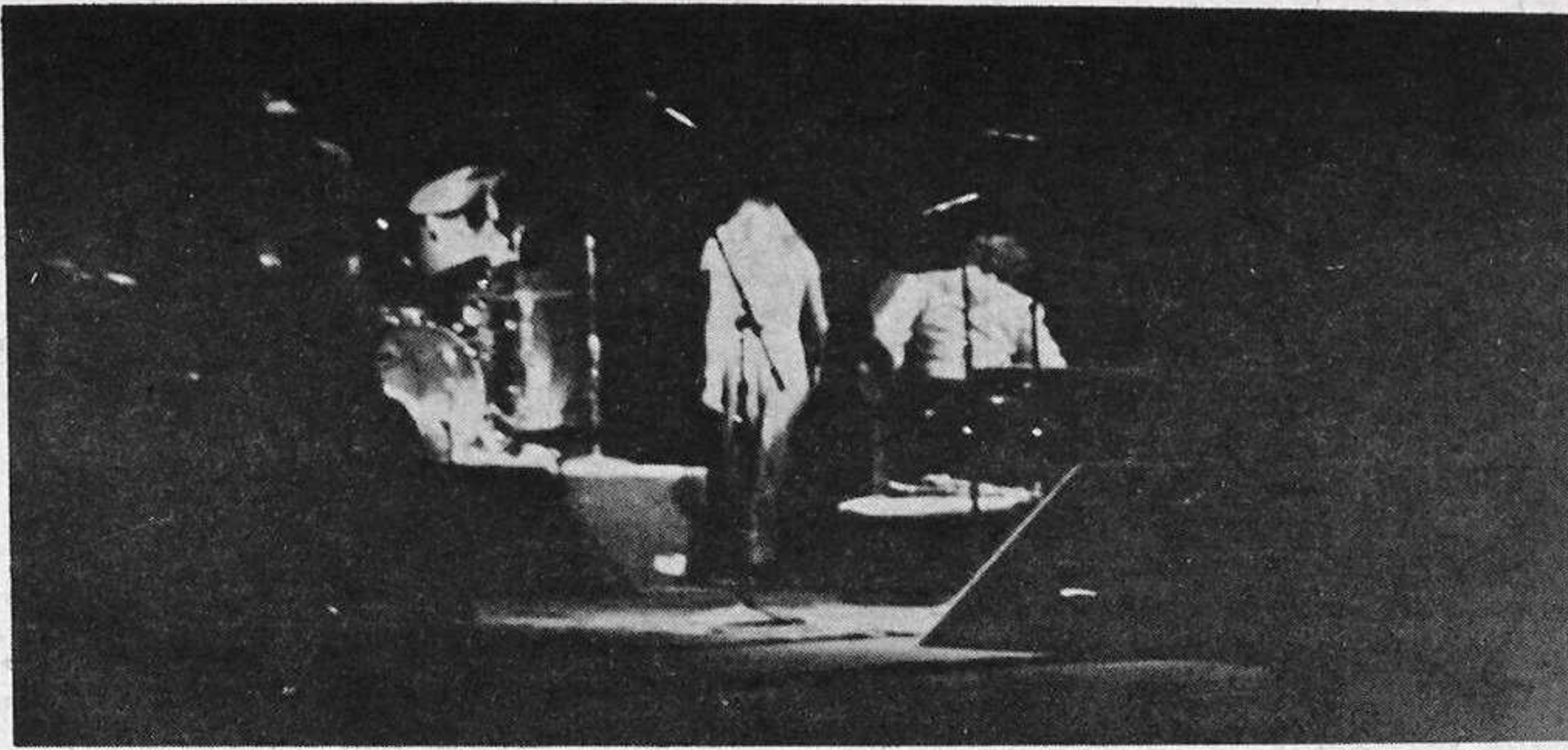


# FOR THE ROSES

*Joni Mitchell in London*

*Reviewed by Michael Aitken*



Easter. An unusually dispiriting time to spend in and around Stirling and the University. The sunshine made good for three mile hikes and visits to the Safari Park but for a night creature there was only the local taverns and Cliff Richard in "Take Me High"(take me where?) at the Allan Park. Even the Grange, that haven of dissatisfaction, was shut.

Something had to be done, some scheme had to be hatched to keep mind and body from slipping into acceptance of the yawning weeks to come. The musical press had announced the previous week that Joni Mitchell, California songstress and princess incarnate, was to play two dates in Britain later in the month. Since neither of the gigs were set for Stirling's Albert Halls, a journey to London took on a feasible significance. A check on the mid-semester bank balance was hardly encouraging but travelling allowances were due soon and one night with Joni would be worth a month of brown rice.

And so, despite the portents and the calm advice of friends, we went. The Melody Maker had headlined "JONI ADDS AN EXTRA CONCERT" while the worlds most uninformative rock weekly left the gentle pop fan to scurry about the small print to discover the same information. Both papers, however, made it clear that the concerts Ms Mitchell was scheduled to play on the 20th and 21st April had been immediate sell outs. Tickets for this extra date, Monday 22nd, seemed doomed to go the same way. As we boarder the train for London it looked like our arrival would be 24 hours to late for the quest to be assured of success.

A telephone call to the New Victoria theatre after our arrival at King's Cross confirmed that the Monday concert was indeed sold out. The thing now was to find somewhere to stay that was central, clean and cheap. Camping outside the theatre was definitely taking the thing too far. Finding a place proved to be less difficult than one would have imagined, thanks to the efficiency of the London Tourist People. For a small fee of 25p they'll find you, on the day you arrive, bed and breakfast that is cheap (£2 a night), that is clean (may, spotless) and that is central (half a mile from Victoria station). One would be hard pressed to find that sort of deal in any other of the world's major capitals.

No longer homeless, and what's more settled in walking distance of the concert hall, we decided to check out the phenomenon known as the ticket tout. Never having had cause to meet one before I wasn't sure how to recognise him/her, but of one thing I was certain. The tout would not be a friend to my bank manager.

As it was, about an hour later, the tout was almost given a bear hug and that for the exorbitant price of £10 for 2 £1 Saturday night tickets. Still we were happy, we were going to get in. The rest of our stay could now be enjoyed in a state of relaxation. Nervous agitation was replaced by a smug anticipation.

"The Rocky Horror Show" at the King's Road theatre was where we spent ourtime that friday night. The show didn't begin until 9.30. so there was time for the sampling of that inferior English ale in a Chelsea pub beforehand. The atmosphere of peace, love and acid proved to be long gone even from this part of the world as a momentous brawl broke out half an hour after we'd entered the place. The fight spilled out onto the street taking many customers and not a few glasses with it. What was the counter culture coming to?

Saturday morning was passed at some exhibitions, the most moving and notable of which was Diane Arbus' photographic retrospective at the Hayward Gallery. Two fine new films by British directors, Dick Lester's rollicking "The Three Musketeers" and Ken Russel's not-so-rollicking biography of "Mahler", exhaustingly filled the afternoon.

The bar in the New Victoria that night was impenetrable. So we went and took our seats and waited. Waited for what seemed an interminable period of time, watching all those who entered and worried in case we had been passed a couple of forgeries and that the 'officials' might turf us out onto the streets at any moment. We were still in our places, however, as Joni's back up band, Tom Scott and the L.A. Express, took the stage. It was odd that given the Express had lent such a distinctive sound to Mitchell's two most recent albums - "For The Roses" and "Court and Spark" - that their music should come over sounding so bland and programmed. The L.A. Express neither excited nor offended (apart from one dreadful drum solo that somehow drew the obligatory applause) and the half hour they played was no more than another half hour of waiting.

It was time. Joni Mitchell strode on, smiled, gave a self-conscious bow and picked up her guitar. She sang

Oh starbright, starbright  
You've got the lovin' that I like, all right  
Turn this crazy bird around  
I shouldn't have got on this flight tonight.

and it was as if she was singing about the concert as much as some plane flight, her ambivalent attitude towards performing resulted in a somewhat shaky delivery of that first song. Then it was "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio" and all the critics worries were swept away. The live version completely transcended the studio cut, Mitchell duetting with the lead guitarist in a beautiful piece of call and response the two of them soaring in perfect unity. Only since her arrival had the band begun to play with more than precision. She inspired them and they, in turn, brought a new verve to old Mitchell

tunes like "Woodstock" and "Rainy Night House". Songs from the new album "Court and Spark", were heavily featured throughout, thankfully, being carbon copies of the vinyl version. In fact, on "The Same Situation", she totally blew the number, mixing the melody up with that of a new song in the making. Joni seemed as surprised as we were and giggled at her mistake. The band stopped, she then jokingly sang "Again and again and again the same situation" before coaxing from herself and the group a straight and perfect version of an extraordinary song:

You've had lots of lovely women  
Now you turn your gaze to me  
Weighing the beauty and the imperfection  
To see if I'm worthy  
Like the church  
Like a cop  
Like a mother  
You want me to be truthful  
Sometimes you turn it on to me like a weapon though  
And I need your approval.

All too soon it was time for the interval, she smiled and said they'd be back in about 10 minutes.

Now a curious thing happened in this interval. It was pointed out to me on the way to the toilet that a certain pop personage by the way of Rod Stewart was coming up the aisle towards us. Rod Stewart, I might add, is King to Joni Mitchell's Queen in my pop hierarchy. All thoughts of propriety were swiftly abandoned: I had to have his autograph. Unfortunately the only piece of paper I could find was one printed by the Bank of England which I duly stuck in his hand and asked "Would you mind signin' that pound note Rod?" His recognition of my Scottish accent immediately established a "relationship" between us. Football and Scotland's chances in the World Cup being briefly discussed (ie Rod: "We're gonna win the World Cup then, aint we?" Me: "Oh aye, I think so".) His parting shot was "See you in Munich" to which I replied "See you". Some hope. All this, however, was a little too much for me. Forgetting the toilet I returned to my seat and smoked two cigarettes (one after the other). This weekend was more full of surprises than degree exams. Once again the house lights went down.



Big Rod off for a pee

The second half was quite simply the best performance by a contemporary singer that its been my good fortune to witness. Joni sang about 14 songs, accompanying herself at the piano, with Appalachian harp, with guitar, and once again with the help of L.A. Express. Throughout she sang with unequalled grace: now quivering, now shrieking, now talking the lyrics in a manner that astonishes one how well it all fits together. The special highlights were "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire" with a haunting off-stage solo from Tom Scott, a revamped version of her definitive romantic work "Both Sides Now" and the stomping finale "Raised on Robbery":

You know you ain't bad looking  
I like the way you hold your drinks  
Come home with me honey  
I ain't asking for no full length mink.

The audience needed no second offer and they gave her a joyous standing ovation. She eventually returned and encored with "The Last Time I Saw Richard" followed by Annie Ross' "Twisted". Joni chatted about the song, as she had done earlier with "People's Parties" and "For the Roses", in a manner that displayed the intimate relationship she has with her audience. They love her and at her concerts that love does not go unrequited.

True fans, we waited outside the stage door along with numerous other members of the faithful just to say "Hi" and "thank you". When she eventually came out she sent her companions on to the waiting parked car, thanked us for coming and then distributed roses that had earlier decorated the stage. Was she just "Stoking the star-maker machinery/Behind the popular song"? Ask someone for the objective view. I know what she did it for.