

MUSIC

she is a trail blazer

# Triumphant Return for Singer Joni Mitchell

By Conrad Silvert

**A** BRAND NEW electric guitar, a blue-green pantsuit, a curly new hairdo and five extraordinarily talented young jazz musicians accompanied Joni Mitchell onto the San Francisco Civic Auditorium stage last weekend for a pair of high-powered concerts that left the audiences breathless.

It was a triumphant return for Mitchell, who had performed several brief sets for Bay Area benefits and the Band's "Last Waltz," but hadn't made a full-fledged national tour in four years.

Mitchell is one of the few practitioners of any art form who is in a constant state of evolution. She is like a nine-lived butterfly, periodically withdrawing from the public eye, wrapping herself in some magical cocoon and finally emerging with a new style, a new sound. She is a trail blazer.

Actually, Mitchell has never abandoned the artistic products of her past. At the Civic Auditorium, she sang three new songs from her new "Mingus" album, dedicated to the late and great bassist/composer Charles Mingus. But these were placed in the context of many other songs from other albums, other times of her remarkable career. All of it was quintessential Joni Mitchell music.

The 35-year-old Canadian, who now lives in Los Angeles when she isn't traveling, began her musical career as a songwriter, tentatively making her way to coffee house microphones as she moved from Saskatchewan to Toronto to Detroit and then to Greenwich Village in New York City, where the heroes and heroines of the folk revolution — Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Judy Collins and others — had first made their mark. Collins, one of many to record Mitchell's songs, had a million-selling single with "Both Sides Now." Not too long afterwards, Joni was in Los Angeles, performing at the Troubadour, recording her first album and taking her first major steps towards acclaim and financial security.

Over the past ten years or so, Mitchell has fascinated millions of fans (well, at least a million steady followers) with her intensely personal approach to music. She has a poetic way of building words into quick splashes of bright imagery, and she's never been afraid of expressing her inmost emotional self. Many of her songs have been autobiographical "letters" to her present lovers, sentimental musings about lost lovers or whimsical wishes for a new one.

At other times, Mitchell's songs sketch real-life happenings, episodes on the road (such as "Furry Sings the Blues," about a visit to old Memphis bluesman Furry Lewis, which she sang last week).

Mitchell runs her life by instinct. She says he has a "lot of mojo" working for her, an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time, to meet exactly the person who will catapult her towards new levels of awareness and self-expression. Thus, she has said, when a friend of Charles Mingus played for him a 16-minute track from her album "Don Juan's Restless Daughter," a song called "Paprika Plains," it so intrigued the old jazz master that he decided to ask her to work with him . . . which she did, through the last year of Mingus' life.

Mitchell's intuitive approach to music relates to a jazz improviser's disposition in a special way. Although she doesn't often improvise herself — she doesn't scat-sing like Ella Fitzgerald or Betty Carter — her harmonic sensibility goes far beyond the usual confines of the folk or rock idioms.

In a recent interview, Mitchell said, "I didn't know — and don't know to this day — what key I'm playing in or the names of my chords. I don't know the numbers, letters or staff. I approach it

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paintingly, metaphorically. I rely on the players themselves to sketch out a chart of the changes."

The word "paintingly" is the key to her thought. Mitchell considers herself a painter first and a musician second (and, of course, she's a poet who paints with words). When she's working up some new music with jazz players, she says that she has to use metaphors to create the right sound. "Play me some semi-trucks going by, you know. Here we have the waves coming in, the keyboards should break like a wave."

Joni's art work and design have adorned virtually all her albums. "Mingus" contains four oil reproductions, one abstract and three portraits of Mingus, including a powerful vision of Mingus' troubled yet angelic personality, "Chair in the Sky."

Last summer, Mitchell performed the "Mingus" material for the first time, accompanied only by Herbie Hancock, the influential pianist who came to prominence in the pacesetter Miles Davis quintet of the '60s. Two of the Davis albums Hancock participated in, "Nefertiti" and "In a Silent Way," she said, became Joni's "all-time favorite records in just any field of music. They were my private music . . . for many years now. I never thought of making that kind of music. I only thought of it as something sacred and unattainable. So this year has been very exciting to play with the players that I have."

The band Mitchell brought with her to San Francisco was exceptional by nearly any measure. Jaco Pastorius, the amazingly nimble bassist with Weather Report, served as unofficial musical director. Don Alias, Joni's companion for the past year or two, played traps and congas with fiery expertise. Guitarist Pat Metheny and pianist Lyle Mays (who normally form half of Metheny's quartet)

fleshed out the music with unusually lyrical sensitivity and saxophonist Michael Brecker added a soulful yet precise edge to the sound.

All of these musicians are equally at home playing jazz or rock & roll (not a watered-down amalgam) and Mitchell seemed to delight in moving from one idiom to the other with barely a moment's pause. Between songs, she exchanged guitars with an assistant — Joni has bought eight custom Ibanez George Benson models and has tuned each in a different and unconventional mode.

She sang songs from several of her records. One of the Mingus pieces was really a non-jazz, non-rock, but totally original and joyous reflection on Mingus' not-always-joyous autobiography, "Beneath the Undersdog." The song was "God Must Be a Boogie Man," and Mitchell had no trouble in getting the audience to sing the refrain.

The largest number of songs from one album, five, were taken from the intimate and haunting "Hejira," which may be Mitchell's masterpiece to date. These pieces — "Coyote," "Black Crow," "Furry Sings the Blues," "Hejira" and "Amelia" — along with the others from the same record, "A Strange Boy," "Blue Motel Room" and "Refugee in the Roads," add up to a miniature, novelistic self-portrait of someone on an endless, restless, bitter-sweet search for understanding and fulfillment.

When Mitchell headlined the Berkeley Jazz Festival last May, she sang for barely thirty minutes. It was wonderful and tantalizing, but much too brief. Last weekend, in her charismatic yet modest fashion, she remained on stage, both nights, for more than an hour and a half and gave of herself in full measure. It was enough, and more.

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