



Views and reviews

Music

Joni Mitchell, the ever-cool chronicler of affairs of the heart, opened her winter cross-country tour at Northrop Auditorium Friday night before a sold out house of about 5,000 people.

It was a show, nearly three-hours in length, exhibiting little in the way of opening night flukes and jitters. Sound quality and performances were first rate, pointing up the fact that Northrop is really a very comfortable place for rock shows. All that groaning over the years about the hall's bad acoustics, doesn't apply for shows such as this that are heavily amplified. Now if we could just find a place to park.

Ms. Mitchell, wearing a gold brocaded charcoal vest and loose-fitting black pants, sang for 90-minutes accompanying herself alternately with guitar and piano. Her band, the LA Express, filled in occasionally with tight, polished playing and did the first set. At the end of the show, Joni was called back for an encore, a new tune called "Talk To Me," so new, in fact, that she read it from notebook paper as she sang.

She dedicated the song to the fellow who had shouted "Say something" during a break. It is, of course, not Joni's style to talk much to the audience during a concert, which seems to bother some of her fans. Indeed, she has never seemed totally at home before an audience. The standard reason given is that, her songs being so personal, she feels she's baring her soul up there. Might it not be that she's just not a "born performer" and doesn't crave the footlights,

Joni Mitchell Michael Anthony

the immediate response?

Whatever it is, the inevitable "Joni, I love you" shouted from the audience seems to embarrass her. (It embarrasses some of the rest of us, too.) One might interpret her response Friday — a little girl laugh, then "You're a little over-familiar, aren't you?" — as saying, "My songs, they deal with the difficulties and pangs of love. How can you treat the word so lightly?"

The set opened with "Help Me" from the "Court and Spark" album and continued with a number of older things: "Free Man In Paris," "For the Roses," "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire," "Just Like This Train," "Trouble Child" and "Rainy Night House." Vocally, she was in fine form. By any standard, hers is not a magnificent voice, but she uses it in so many interesting ways and has an unerring sense of pitch. Nor are her melodies, with some exception, very appealing. It is her lyrics that are striking — overcrowded with words as they sometimes are — as well as the increasing sophistication of her arrangements and productions.

Her major concerns—the wounded innocent, the tension between love and freedom — continue in her newest album, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," most of the songs on which she sang Friday night. It's a troublesome album, a transitional one, no doubt, in which her occasional tendency toward vagueness of meaning is amplified. It's a shift into third person and a couple of tunes — "Edith and the Kingpin" and the title tune — are as un-sentimental and sharp in image as a John O'Hara short story.