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ENTERTAINMENT C3

Joni Mitchell performance is strong

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HOLMDEL — Joni Mitchell's career has been a 15-year odyssey during which she has evolved from frail flower child to pop-rock heroine of the melancholy to jazz singer.

Saturday night's performance at the Garden State Arts Center showed a maturing artist combining all three personas.

Although she sang no new compositions during the two-hour show, Ms. Mitchell dramatically reinterpreted many older works, while projecting a strong, self-assured presence in stark contrast to the sometimes insecure Joni of the past.

It was a performance that surveyed her career and — because she has not released a new album since last year's "Wild Things Run Fast"

— gave strong hints of its present direction, as she moves toward jazz/rock fusion in many of her new arrangements.

Gone is Joni the folksinger, who started her career playing cabarets and coffee houses and writing self-confessional songs about rain, sunlight, "dark uncertainty" and "aging children," that she performed on such discs as "Song to a Seagull," "Clouds," "Ladies of the Canyon," "Blue" and "For the Roses."

Also disappearing is the strictly jazz Joni, featured on the "Mingus" album, for which she wrote lyrics to melodies by the late jazz artist Charles Mingus and on "Shadows and Light," which featured live performances with members of the "Pat Metheny Group."

The present sound seems to combine those of "Court and Spark," the

1974 turning-point album with jazz artist Tom Scott, whose up tempo marked the beginning of her departure from the folk vein, with "Hejira," the strongly jazz-influenced disc on which she developed her current electronically altered guitar sound accompanied by the meandering bass of Jaco Pastorius, formerly of "Weather Report."

In what only can be taken as a statement, Ms. Mitchell did not pick up an acoustic guitar during the show, sticking to electric guitar and solo piano but for one pre-intermission dulcimer interlude on "A Case of You," off of "Blue."

Larry Klein, whom Ms. Mitchell recently married, accompanied on bass; Mike Landau played guitar; Vinny Colaiuta played drums; and Russell Ferrante played keyboards and synthesizers.

In another radical departure for someone who has normally hidden behind one instrument or another, she occasionally put aside everything but the microphone and belted out solos in a rock vein, especially during re-interpreted versions of "Raised on Robbery," off "Court and Spark" and "You Dream Flat Tires" from "Wild Things Run Fast." And there's nothing folksy about "I Heard It through the Grapevine," the Marvin Gaye tune, which was her first encore.

Through much of the show, Ms. Mitchell projected the self-sufficiency and certainty of a woman who has reached 40 and knows she is in her prime. Her movements were sensual — almost sexual — and she did not hesitate to come onstage smoking a cigarette, a departure from the flower-child of old.

Playing solo at the piano on "For Free," the haunting "Court and Spark" ballad in which she contrasts her life with the artistic purity of a street-corner musician's, she added lyrics that tempered her admiration with a dose of cynicism about the futility of the man's efforts.

Her voice, which sounded almost whiskey-laced, shone in new rock-like arrangements for "Banquet," and "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio," both from "For the Roses."

Other highlights of the 22-song evening included "Big Yellow Taxi," and "Woodstock," off "Ladies of the Canyon"; "Free Man in Paris," from "Court and Spark"; and "Coyote" and "Song for Sharon," off "Hejira."

Ms. Mitchell also sang many of the standout tunes from her last two studio albums, "Mingus" and "Wild Things Run Fast."



JONI MITCHELL
... three personas