

Joni Mitchell

Very easy to love

By J. JACK NAGLE

It is very easy to love Joni Mitchell. She looks like a cameo, carved by a spotlight. Long hair serenely flowing down her back, emerald green dress clinging to her gentle curves, pale complexion ivory alone at centre stage. She sings her own poetry, voice and guitar playing with each other, emphasizing her dominant themes of alienation, love and the city.

Last night's concert at Place des Arts was a love-in for Joni, the girl from Saskatchewan who translates her memory of a Western Ethos into haunting musical poems. From the opening chords of Chelsea Morning to the end of her Ring song, the empathy of the audience could almost be tasted.

Her voice is a clear soprano, charged with power as she works over her material. She actually brought terror into the Salle Wilfrid Pelletier a couple of times: In the Fiddle and the Drum and the new piano song about a late night visitor, her keening strength penetrated to the back of the balconies.

She even scared herself once, after trying half her new piano themes, she remarked, casually to the audience she wanted to do a happy song to cheer herself up.

Two or three such good-humored exchanges across the footlights kept the evening from being an overpowering emotional experience. It is much more intellectually demanding to listen to Clouds, her new record, where all the intensity of emotion is untempered by the presence of the beautiful person.

The evening was most rewarding for the chance to hear her personal reading of the song Clouds, which she modestly calls "my hit." It

has been recorded by Simon and Garfunkel, Frank Sinatra and Judy Collins. And she took a moment to boost Collins as a significant influence in her own development.

However, it is the new material that is most interesting for those who study the evolution of Joni Mitchell, the poet. She is as much a trendsetter and hit writer as Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen and her Nashville piano is on that current trip. As a footnote, it is worth remembering that she forgot the words to I had a King. This poem is her version of her short, unhappy marriage. Later in the show she swung lyrically through a new love poem about Willie, who really must have replaced Michael in her affections.

More seriously, she seems to have been through some dark personal experience in the past year, if the piano poems reflect her mood at the time of writing. They echo with depression — so much so she must make jokes as she sings them — now that her depression is over.

But Joni took the gloves off when she started the song, which is a perceptive statement on the youthful preoccupation with the barrier between illusion and reality. And it didn't take long to register her handling of Clouds as vastly superior to any other version available.

Audience response was strong throughout. Joni's new piano bag seems to work quite well, although she'll never put Oscar out of work. What the piano has done is change her head a little. She always composed on the guitar before, with consequent style limitations. Her piano work shows more variety and when she wrings the changes on a Nashville-type song through the piano, the effect is beautifully comic.