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Joni's Tantrums on the Common

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BOSTON — "I have this weird quirk. I have never been able to play to people who are milling around." With those words, Joni Mitchell walked off stage Wednesday night after a 30-minute performance at the sold out Miller Concerts on the Common. She promised to return, but only if the obviously disinterested crowd was seated. An uneasy period followed, during which frantic ushers attempted to settle the packed house. Little effort was made to lure the ex-flower child turned jazz musician back on stage.

The concert began just after 6 p.m. Helped into her guitar strap by bass player-husband Larry Klein, Mitchell kicked off the show with "Coyote," a cut from her 1976 hit album "Hejira." She wore a white blouse and stockings beneath a flowing black skirt with wide crisscrossed shoulder straps. Guitar in hand, she swayed on black sandals and tossed her blonde curls, eyes scrutinizing the audience from beneath the cream-colored beret tilted jauntily across her forehead.

Without ceremony, she broke into a second song, "Free Man in Paris," from the album "Hissing of Summer Lawns." That over, she greeted the crowd, "Good evening, Boston." The response was minimal. The music continued. Mitchell attempted to loosen the audience up with a bit of humor. She looked out over the crowd and laughingly said, "This is not Woodstock, man. This is Boston." Some people laughed. Mitchell stayed with the same album, playing "Edith and the Kingpin." She sang strongly, and the band was tightly behind her, but the crowd was difficult. Halfway through the next song, "Sharon," Mitchell lost her patience and walked off stage.

A half hour later she returned to a lukewarm reception — drink in one hand, cigarette in the other. She had changed into a rust-colored jumpsuit with a silver clasp at the waist. In new clothes and new spirit, she belted out a jazzy rendition of "Precious Love," a cut from her latest album, "Wild Things Run Fast." Still the audience was not moved, and Mitchell, fully distressed by this time, sat down at the piano. She wept as she played "Chinese Cafe," another new song,

which reflected the ongoing passage of time and the changes that have taken place since she made her debut in the '60s. Perhaps more than any of her songs, "Chinese Cafe" laments the fact that Mitchell and her friends are now "middle class, we're middle aged. We were wild in the old days. Birth of rock 'n' roll days."

Fresh drink in hand, Mitchell stood up from the piano and thanked the audience, complaining of technical difficulties and lack of proper stage lighting. She admitted to being tired, apologized for it, and said she hoped her fans would some day be able to hear the show as it should be. Then she left the stage. But the night was not yet over.

Like some sleeping giant, the lethargic crowd, sensing suddenly that something was missing, clapped and shouted until Mitchell returned. She came back strongly with a Marvin Gaye tune, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." By the end the crowd was cheering. Mitchell flashed her wide, even smile and said, "I got the feeling now. It was latent." And with that she sang "Underneath the Streetlight," another from her latest album. Again the crowd cheered. A man in the audience said to his companion, "She's so moody." Then he continued to tell her about the softball game he was starring in.

Mitchell sipped from her drink, the band disappeared, and she was left on stage alone. Lights were dimmed and the "Lady of the Canyon," a melancholy version of her song "Woodstock," an anthem of her generation popularized by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. She introduced the band: Vinnie Colaiuta on drums, Klein on bass, Mike Landau on lead guitar, and Russell Ferrante on keyboards. Arm in arm they bowed together and said good night, leaving an army of bag people to sift through the trash cans brimming with bits of hot dogs and sips of Coke.

The Miller Concerts on the Common resumes tomorrow tonight at 6 with Linda Ronstadt, followed by John Denver, July 26; Al Jarreau, Aug. 1; Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie, Aug. 9; George Benson, Aug. 16; James Taylor, Aug. 18 and 19; Beach Boys, Sept. 1 and Willie Nelson, Sept. 10, 11.



Recording artist Joni Mitchell sings at a Boston concert attended by some 10,000 persons Wednesday night.