

Music Review**Joni Mitchell Excels (As Always)****BY JEFF MORTIMER**
News Music Critic

Joni Mitchell saved it, after all. Hardly anyone else could have.

The show at Hill Auditorium Thursday night began inauspiciously and stayed on that course for quite a spell. Although billed as "Joni Mitchell," it opened with 50 minutes of her backup band, the L.A. Express, and it was a 50 minutes that did not leave the packed house groaning for more.

The Express is a quintet of marvelous session men. They have made a splendid addition to Mitchell's last four albums and perhaps it was because of gratitude (or her apparently close relationship with drummer John Guerin, to whom "The Hissing Of Summer Lawns," her latest release, is dedicated) that she indulged them to such an extent.

The unfortunate result was a tedious prelude, which confirmed again that session men are stronger on euphony than content and, therefore, generally incapable of sustaining interest.

So Mitchell had to contend with a hopeful group whose patience was wearing a trifle thin by the time she finally took the stage, ominously attired in a black hat and black suit with wide shoulders, narrow waist and Bonnie Parker bravado.

Almost before she knew it herself, she

warmed to her excellence, after warming the hall with a couple of sure-fire hits ("Free Man In Paris" and "Help Me, I'm Falling").

She doffed the hat, and the vaguely threatening mien, for "Big Yellow Taxi," shaking her long blonde hair free, and her reticence with it.

What followed was what was anticipated all along: brilliance. She is near the end of a long tour but there is still a voice that is great within her, a voice that is stronger than the road and the motel food and every night in a different town.

If there is a popular musician of this decade whose work will still touch other human beings a hundred years hence, it is Joni Mitchell, for she understands and communicates the painful, frustrating ambiguity of being human.

As she refines this central concern of her art, she grows in her powers. It is marvelous to hear in her records (each one since "Blue" has been truer and more coherent than the last), and it is devastating to witness.

The process of her self-realization is still gaining momentum. She sang five new songs Thursday night — five, and it has only been three months since her last album hit the racks.

Each of those songs was comprehensible on first hearing, a clear step up from

much of her earlier work, and each dealt, in varying degrees, with this awful confusion that afflicts the people and the societies and the nations of this age.

"We are all oppressed prisoners of some duality," she sings in "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," one of the new compositions, yet (from another, whose title was not revealed) "we come and go unknown, from the forcepts to the stone."

All the resources of the poet, the philosopher, the musician, the sociologist, the graphic artist (she has illustrated all her albums' jackets), the actress (her one costume turned out to be four, each synchronized with a particular sequence of songs) are applied to the solution, or, for a beginning, the comprehension of this dilemma.

She sang "For Free," one of her classics: "I slept last night in a big hotel; I went shopping today for jewels," then she hears a clarinet player on the street, who is "playing real good for free" but is ignored, because "they haven't seen him on TV."

The duality, the irony, seems clear — skill is incidental to success, and vice versa. Simple enough, until she expands the context by relating the genesis of the song, telling how the person who inspired it turned out to be a hustler, a fraud who preyed on her naivete.

"There you have the romance and the

reality," she quipped.

She is strong, yet pleads for help ("Talk To Me" is one of the new songs). She is emotionally unkempt, yet longs for domesticity. She is romantic and cynic, virgin and whore.

She is a Scorpio, and dogged by the twin possibilities of that sign, the serpent and the eagle. When she was in Memphis early in this tour, she went to see Furry Lewis, an aging, disabled bluesman.

One of the consequences was another new song, "And Furry Lewis Sings The Blues." The eagle goes to see him and the serpent bribes him to play with bourbon and cigarettes. Both are Joni Mitchell, and she endures his palpable contempt in return for hearing him.

She did not sing "Both Sides Now," perhaps her most famous song, nor did she need to. The truth that "somethin's gained and somethin's lost in livin' every day" was nonetheless pervasive.

There are no ends in her universe, only means; no victories, only battles; no solutions, only possibilities. The harmonies and the discords are to be treasured equally, because they are equally alive.

It is a disturbing, provocative, profound universe, best entered with a sense of adventure, bounded by a reality that exceeds imagination.