



—Chris and Mark Jack Cohen

The old folk image is gone and in its place there's a sensual jazz singer.

The new Joni Mitchell a brilliant performer

BY ROBERT MARTIN

It was established early on, last night at Massey Hall, that this was not to be a folk concert. The show opened with a short set by Joni Mitchell's back-up band, the L. A. Express, that included such numbers as John Coltrane's *Dahomey Dance*. Then Joni Mitchell walked on stage wearing a scarlet dress with a waist-deep décolletage and sequined butterflies and proceeded to destroy her folk image forever.

The new image is that of a mature, sensual singer who would feel just as much at home singing jazz in a smoky cabaret as she would be at *Mariposa*. Or, for that matter, fronting a rock'n'roll band. Last night Miss Mitchell performed material in the blues, jazz, rock and occasionally even the folk idiom and did them all brilliantly.

Miss Mitchell's retirement from touring a couple of years ago has done her nothing but good. Her repertoire has fleshed out, her sound has become more varied and her attitude is now totally relaxed. The almost painful shyness has disappeared. She is still restrained, but she obviously enjoyed the show as much as her fans. After a particularly rousing rendition of *Help Me* she was so excited that she walked into a speaker on her way to the piano.

It was a long and generous concert. Miss Mitchell sang 19 songs, then two more for an encore.

Some of the songs were old chestnuts like *Cactus Tree*, but the delivery was completely new. Gone was the metronomic phrasing of *Both Sides, Now*. Miss Mitchell twisted both the melody and the lyrics into new and fascinating shapes until the song ceased to be a clever conceit set to music and became the genuine expression of a woman who has seen both sides of life and still can't arrive at any conclusions about it.

You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio, which she recorded as a bouncy pop number, was delivered last night as a blues-influenced lament. This new reading eliminated the cloying cuteness of the basically silly lyrics.

During the first set, with the help of the band, she ran through *Free Man in Paris*, *The Same Situation* and *Just Like This Train*, all from her new album and all excellent songs. She ended with a rendition of *Woodstock* that put her recorded version to shame. From a spooky ethereal warble, she brought the national anthem of the now defunct *Woodstock Nation* down to an earthy memorial.

She only played at playing the piano during it and concentrated on the vocal, tearing it apart and putting it back together again in entirely different ways. For the last verse she rose and simply belted the words into the microphone. She looked as though she felt a little naked without her guitar in front of her and clutched at the sides of her dress to compensate.

For the second set, Miss Mitchell changed to a white dress with sequined leaf patterns and great flying sleeves. A little more conservative, but far from virginal. She performed an acoustic set that included *Big Yellow Taxi*, *This Flight Tonight*, *All I Want*, and *Blue*. She introduced *Cold Blue Steel* and *Sweet Fire*, a song about heroin addiction, with the words "It's written anonymously. It's for no one in particular." This was her response to recently published reports that the song was written for James Taylor.

The set demonstrated, if it was really necessary, that Miss Mitchell still has a commanding presence with only the assistance of an acoustic guitar. She has taken up a band through choice, not necessity.

It also showed in a couple of rambling but very personable monologues, what an intelligent and deliberate artist she is. Her explanation of her flight from Hollywood to the Canadian wilderness north of Vancouver did more than illuminate the lyrics of *For the Roses*, the song she was introducing. For a moment it turned Massey Hall into a giant confessional as she sang about her need for applause.

Miss Mitchell also sang *For Free*, a song with a related theme about selling her art while others give it away. The song is built around a street corner clarinet player and as it ended, Tom Scott of the L.A. Express wandered onstage playing a clarinet. That signalled the return of the band for the finale that ended with a rousing all-out rocking version of *Raised on Robbery*, undoubtedly the dirtiest song currently on the hit parade.

It's all about a prostitute trying to pick up a man in a bar. And for the flag wavers, it's Canadian—he's watching the *Maple Leafs* on television.

Miss Mitchell showed last night that she has matured into an artist who can draw from all musical idioms and make them her own. She is truly a contemporary performer and I hope that we don't have to wait as long as we did this time for her next appearance in Toronto.