

Joni gives detached, uneven show

By J EDDIE FIELD

Last Friday night Joni Mitchell made her first appearance in San Antonio to "sing with her whole heart," as the radio commercials put it—but that didn't happen.

Joni Mitchell was born Joan Anderson in Fort Macleod, Alberta. She grew up in Saskatoon hoping to become an artist. She left art school at 19 to become a professional musician, and married Chuck Mitchell, a club performer from Detroit. The marriage lasted six months and Joni moved to New York, where David Crosby became her record-company president, personal manager and musical tutor. She completed her first album, "Song to a Seagull."

By 1968 parts of the musical community were tuning in to her music. She became associated emotionally and musically with James Taylor, Leonard Cohen, David Crosby, Stephen

Stills, Graham Nash and Neil Young. Her classic song "Woodstock" and appearance in the film "Celebration at the Fillmore" boosted her popularity, which rose further with her AM radio hit "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio." Her next major hit, "He's Me" from the Court and Spark album, was played into the ground by commercial radio. The single sold 800,000 copies, while her six albums sold over 4.6 million copies. Her last two albums, "Miles of Aisles" and "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," have sold furiously lately.

Joni's audience now ranges from the grown-up youth of the 60's to contemporary adolescents. Women particularly seem to find Joni's expression of womanhood accurate. Some men admire Joni as the ideal woman.

"I just love her, her voice, lyrics and music. She is the best female vocalist around," said the woman sitting next to me

in the Municipal Auditorium at the concert.

The audience was dressed in jeans except for a few women in long simple dresses. The crowd was almost all white middle class. Joni missed a sellout by 500 seats. The crowd was different from rock concerts, and one guy said "too many straights here, just look around."

The LA Express started the concert, racing through a set of slick, uninviting jazz. The audience was restless. The best number was "Down the Middle," by drummer John Guerin.

At 9:40 p.m., an hour and 40 minutes after the scheduled start, the house lights went out. A six-string guitar could be heard, strumming softly. The announcer's voice boomed, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome Joni Mitchell!" The lights came up and she was there, on stage left, playing her guitar, walking toward the mike and singing "Help me, I think I'm falling in love again..." she faded out and busted the song. She started over, getting it right this time. The audience applauded continually, not noticing her mistake.

She rattled through the first six songs without a single pause or greeting. She sang "Free Man In Paris," "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire," and "Big Yellow Taxi's". People around me were saying "I hope she plays one of my favorites." Shouted requests for "Woodstock", "For the Roses" and "Circle Game" rose up and died, unanswered. Joni ignored them. She tuned her guitar calmly and played for herself, forgetting the audience. It was like

seeing a Joni Mitchell robot perform.

I was getting mad; I don't like being ignored. I wanted to scream, "Say something to us, please!" but I silently watched Joni sit at the piano to crank out another song. An equally frustrated person on the left screamed, "We can't see you, Joni." The grand piano was placed on stage right, blocking his view. Mitchell replied "We moved this piano the best we could, so just pretend it's the days of radio."

Joni played "For Free" and the words gave me some understanding of this concert. "For Free" is about Mitchell, a paid professional performer, seeing a man play his music for free on a street corner. The words describe her working art:

*Now me I play for fortune
And obey this curtain call
I got a black limousine*

She quickly spoke, "and a good manager, and a good road crew too." The next lines in the song explained everything.

*And I'll play if you have the money,
Or if you're a friend to me.*

We sat in our \$6 seats, getting an expensive joy thrill, not a presentation of an artist and her talents.

After the piano numbers, Joni returned to her guitar and said, "I've got some new songs to lay on you." The new song was "On The Freeway," and it was great, with attractive music and unique poetic sequences. She referred to an aggressive lover as a coyote who was a traveling

man. Then she played "Just Like This Train" and I caught myself thinking "Oh, that's one of my favorites!"

Another high point of the concert was hearing a new song she wrote the night before. It didn't have a title, and she sang the words from her notebook.

She was offered four roses during the set, took a sniff and put them on her stool, then went into the next number. No comment was made. I guess the gift of the roses is familiar from past concerts and has now become an old trick that doesn't faze her.

The final section included "In France They Kiss on Main Street," "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow" and "Harry's House—Centerpiece," all from her latest album. Oldies like "Rainy Night House," "Trouble Child" and "Raised on Robbery" were recognized within the first chords.

After more requests Joni said "I'm not going to play all those. I'm not going to become another Judy Garland and sing 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow' all the time."

In her last number she sang "The Jungle Line", marked by pounding drums. The image didn't fit, with the savage rhythm accompanying the frail figure in front of the band. After the song she strolled off the stage without a word.

She came back to perform the encore, "Twisted", in matter-of-fact fashion, and offered us this little morsel: "Are you all crazy? Well, we all are up here, some more than others." She tossed a kiss and left for good.



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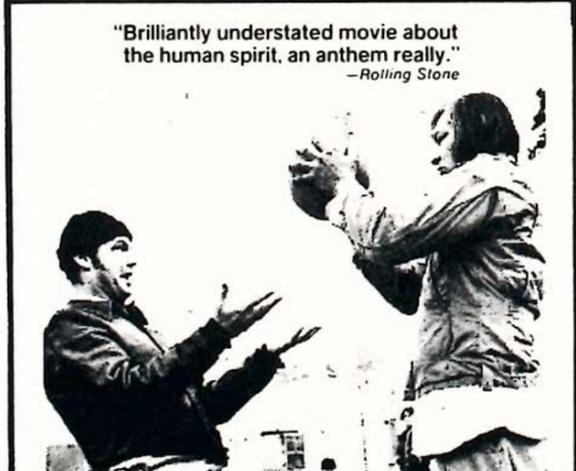
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