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TVBest

The stars come out for Joni Mitchell

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NEW YORK — "I am on a lonely road, and I am traveling, traveling, traveling..." Joni Mitchell's songs of love, loss and self-discovery are celebrated by several generations of musicians at the "All Star Tribute to Joni Mitchell" (TNT at 9), taped two weeks ago in New York.

Mitchell's music and career have always been hard to categorize. She first emerged as a songwriter. Two of her signature songs, "Chelsea Morning" and "Both Sides Now," were first hits for folk singer Judy Collins. After emerging as a folk star and then the first lady of the singer-songwriter boom of the early 1970s, she moved headlong into jazzy improvisations, first with Tom Scott and most notably with the dying Charles Mingus.

The variety of Mitchell's influences are well-reflected in those who came to pay tribute to her. Bryan Adams and Wynonna Judd kick-start the evening with a rocking roadhouse rendition of "Raised on Robbery," followed by a downbeat, jazzy take on "Carey" by MTV pop star Cyndi Lauper. The difficulty of Mitchell's musical arrangements and the unique quality of her voice are evident when even the extraordinary k.d. lang seems challenged by the 1974 hit, "Help Me." Mary Chapin Carpenter and Shawn Colvin emerge as the most reverent fans, and turn in three strong performances on "Chelsea Morning," "Big Yellow Taxi," and a moving version of "Amelia."

Some of the performances here are more heartfelt than memorable. James Taylor's take on "River" only served to remind this listener that nobody should try to sing that song except Joni Mitchell. Elton John rushes through "Free Man in Paris" like a good sport and then sheepishly tells the audience that playing for Mitchell, sitting regally in a box besides the stage, was far more daunting than playing for the



SUZANNE PLUNKETT / Associated Press

Joni Mitchell (left) with singers Cyndi Lauper (center) and Mary Chapin Carpenter during Thursday's taping of the 'All-Star Tribute to Joni Mitchell,' to air tonight at 9 on TNT.

Queen of England. Other notable performances include Richard Thompson's "Woodstock" and "Black Crow." Wynonna Judd returns with an earthy version of "You Turn Me On (I'm a Radio)," and jazz singer Cassandra Wilson performs the Mitchell-Mingus number, "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines." Host Ashley Judd has a hard time reigning in her hero-worship for Mitchell, as does the star-studded audience. For her part, Joni Mitchell often seems both bemused and overwhelmed by the fuss. The evening concludes with Mitchell, backed by a full orchestra and making the most effective use of her now limited vocal range, performing a contemplative and autumnal take on "Both Sides Now."

■ **Mary Steenburgen** may only be a supporting actress in the update of "Picnic" (CBS 2,3 and 22 at 9, TV-PG) but she steals the show. Josh Brolin plays Hal, the stranger who drifts into Elgin, Kan., in this adaptation of William Inge's play. Brolin lacks the raw sensual heat that William Holden exuded in the 1955 movie, but this TV update (set in the pre-hippie 1960s) has many small rewards.

Hal's presence makes the local beauty queen (Gretchen Mol) and her non-conformist sister (Chad Morgan) doubt their roles in this safe, small town. But Rosemary (Steenburgen), the repressed "old-maid" school teacher, is most inspired by the arrival of someone exciting and slightly dangerous. Featuring beautiful location shots, a restrained and intelligent use of period details and one of the most inspired use of 1960s instrumental hits in memory, this "Picnic" is well worth attending.

■ **Having given viewers the** vicarious experience of life in the mob on "The Sopranos," and in prison on "OZ," HBO now presents "The Corner" (at 10, TV-MA, L), an unflinching look at life at the center of a drug bazaar in present-day Baltimore. In the first installment of this six-part miniseries directed by Charles Dutton, we see Gary (T.K. Carter), a formerly successful businessman, live the life of a junkie who must steal, rob and lie to come up with the money for heroin day after degrading day. Khandi Alexander ("NewsRadio") turns in a powerful performance as his sly and manipulative partner in