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The Vancouver Sun

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\*\*\* TUESDAY, SEPT. 4, 1979



Joni Mitchell: "I'd rather be crucified for changing than for staying the same."

## Joni jazzes it up to create Mitchell Music

By VAUGHN PALMER

It was a long long way from We Walked as the Pacific Coliseum Sunday night when singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell and band debuted what is best described as Mitchell Music.

But despite the unfamiliar territory, it is a tribute to the Canadian-born performer that the audience stuck with her every step of the way for what turned out to be one of the most revealing concerts ever staged in the big hall.

Various Mitchell's musical styles—jazz, rock, gospel, blues, folk, African chants, and the doo-wop, and it was paired with an equally varied music backdrop.

The avoidance of labels recalled Mitchell's conviction to the late Charles Mingus, who, when he was pressed to define his style, replied: "What I write and play is Mingus music."

Free to Mingus' death Jan. 1 of this year, Mitchell collaborated with the great man on her latest album—titled after him—and despite differences about the non-commercial nature of the project, she has boldly gone on tour with them.

She's a stubborn woman, who has for the past four albums, declined at "sticking

the same-old machinery behind the popular song," as she sang on 1974's *Free Man in Paris*.

After a string of intense, soul-baring folk-oriented albums, Mitchell in 1975 produced a demanding look at subjects, *Hanging of Summer Ladies*, followed by intense experiments on *Hejira* and Don Juan's *Rockness Daughter*.

And critical acclaim and changing sales, she admitted to *Rolling Stone's* Cameron Crowe: "I know some of those projects are eccentric... experiments... and some of them are half-baked." But, "I'd rather be crucified for changing than for staying the same."

The reach of her persistence is that on Sunday about 10,000 people—perhaps three times as many as ever saw a single jazz show in Vancouver before—got to experience the richness and variety of Mingus Music and Mitchell Music.

Backstage, while her parents from Saskatchewan waited at the dressing room door, Mitchell, supposedly the outbreak, exclusive type bent to the press.

"It's really really good, when you consider some of the reviews of the recent albums. So much great music has been minority music. It's good to reach people."

After a wistful comment that three decades ago the best pop music was also the best jazz music, she noted that these days a lot of jazz musicians are selling out to pop forms.

"I guess," she added with a trace of pride, "I'm the only rock and roller creating over into jazz."

But at the same time, Mitchell is hardly a half-again jazz singer. "I don't like a lot of jazz singing. The great ones like Billie Holiday, yes, but I feel many don't interpret a lyric the way I do," she said.

At the same time "jazz has a lot more freedom, space for variation, than rock and roll, where you get locked into a certain way." So her band this time around is jazz oriented, headed by Pat Metheny, guitarist; Pat Metheny, saxman; Michael Brecker, keyboard player; Lynn May and Don Alias on congas and drums.

Besides jazz, Mitchell treated the fans Sunday to the rare sounds of soul, gospel and doo-wop, via the opening act the Permutations, who also teamed with her on two numbers.

As with the Mingus collaboration, which came about when Mingus approached her, Mitchell looked onto the Brooklyn-based a capella quartet:

"We were both playing the Berkeley folk festival. One night at the hotel the drums staggered through the lobby singing 'Why Do Fools Fall in Love?' I started to sing, and so did the Permutations. The next day at the festival they did *Circle K* on stage with me. Afterwards they said 'I'm over touring and need an opening act.'"

Following the Permutations 45-minute warm up Sunday, Mitchell and band opened their two-hour set with Big Yellow Taxi, and another old favorite, Just Like This Train, from *Court and Spark*.

There it was Mitchell on electric rhythm guitar "roll, roll, roll, rock and roll," and a final selection from yesterday, *Free Man in Paris*, with a racy sax break by Brecker.

No one was quite ready for it, but Mitchell discarded her guitar and the band deftly slipped into a track from Mingus, *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, a tribute to the great sax player Lester Young (1909-1970). Inspired Mitchell tries over a Mingus instrumental: "When Charlie speaks of Lester you know someone great has gone, the sweetest music man I had a Purkin Pig hat on."

Another selection from Mingus, *Dry*

Clones From Don Minors, was followed by a daring bass solo by Pastorius, a vibrant, bounding piece of work that was far removed from the boring, self-indulgence it might have been.

Backed by some moving guitar from Metheny, Mitchell then tried two songs from the misaligned *Hejira* album, that showed her in full possession of her insight and sensitivity.

"Maybe I've never really loved, I guess that's the track. I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes, and looking down on everything I created into his arms. Dreams, Alms, Dreams and false alarms (Amain)."

And *Hejira*, which, says Mitchell, means "travelling away homewardly." "I'm so glad to be on my own, still sometimes the slightest touch of a stranger can set up a trembling in my bones. I know—no one's going to show me everything, we all come and go on, each so deep and spiritual between the forepaws and the stone."

Another mood swept us away, as Alias began a conga solo that led into the enigmatic, African-flavored *Dreadnought*, Don Juan's *Rockness Daughter*, followed by *Beale Street* with *Blues on Perry Street* the blues.

The recent material wound up with the sardonic *God Must Be a Bouncer* from Mingus. Mitchell: "If there are religious believers out there tonight, I'll remind you that you, God does have a sense of humor. He made it all of us."

Throughout this section of the show the audience response had been solid and enthusiastic. And as she said later, when asked if she missed playing a hockey arena: "I thought it was very intimate in these arenas."

To close, Mitchell treated the crowd to a rockier version of *Blame on Bobbery*, then brought out the Permutations to sing on a gospel tune.

The concert began with Mitchell on piano, doing the *Last Time I Saw Richard*. Then—"in rock and roll now"—with her and the Permutations doing a energetic and intense version of the doo-wop classic, *Why Do Fools Fall in Love*.

At the very end it was just Joni and her guitar, with a wistful, philosophical recitation of Woodstock, so long ago and far away.

Having seen so many artists freeze in space, it was freeing to find one who's come so far and glimpsed new folk in the road, while still knowing the way back.

Photo by Tom Swartz

## Joni Mitchell Sept 1979



Clipped By:  
craig evans  
Mon, Dec 16,  
2019