

Mitchell Returns to a Packed House; Audience Appreciates Two-Hour Set

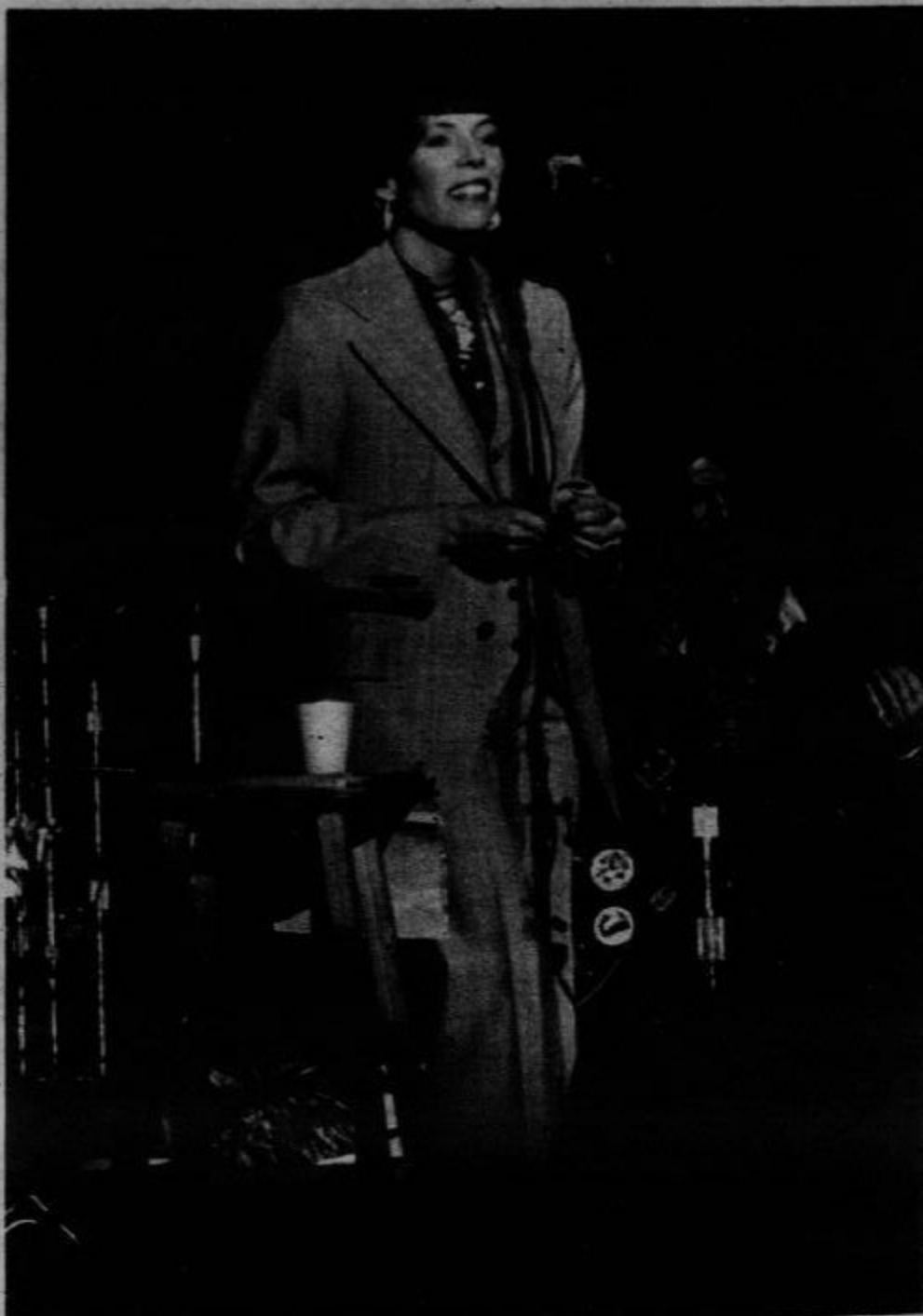
By Wayne Studer
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The last time Joni Mitchell performed in concert here, close to two years ago, I foolishly did not go to see her. But fortunately, she saw fit to pay us another visit, and last Friday night a packed William & Mary Hall greeted her enthusiastically. In the midst of a worldwide tour with her back-up band, the L.A. Express, Mitchell gave a fine two-hour show which disappointed few, if any, of those present.

The L.A. Express opened with a jazz-rock set which lasted just over a half-hour. The personnel had changed a bit since their last appearance in Williamsburg. John Guerin remained on drums, Robben Ford was still guitarist, and bass was still played by Max Bennett. But the former leader of the group, woodwind man Tom Scott, was replaced by David Luell, and new member Victor Feldman handled keyboards and percussion. Their selections included a medley (one part of which was a rollicking group-percussion spree) from their new album. Most of their work was funky, danceable music, competently played and with enough syncopation thrown in to make it interesting.

Joni came on after a 15-minute intermission, the Express backing her up. The crowd immediately recognized the first chords of "Help Me." The lights went up revealing her dressed in a grey suit and hat, looking more like a thirties gangster than a popular music star. Following was "Love or Money," after which a few fans presented her with a gift of white flowers. Placing one in her hat, she began "Free Man in Paris," knowing that it would be the hits that would quickly win the audience's favor.

The band retired to grant Mitchell a solo set. First she played several songs on the guitar, such as "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire" and the perennial crowd-pleaser "Big Yellow Taxi." She then switched to piano to perform "Shades of Scarlet Conquering" and "Real Good, for Free." Returning to guitar, she introduced two new songs, not on any album: "Coyote" and "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter." Each was upbeat,



Kieffer photos

'...those velvet curtain-calls...'

similar in tempo and style to "In France They Kiss on Main Street." The former was rather humorous, and the group rejoined her as the song developed. The latter number was thematically much like a great deal of her most recent LP.

In the course of the concert, Joni Mitchell proved to be a near-perfect entertainer. She was exciting to watch, carrying a type of stage "presence" which I have seen in few performers. Her facial expressions as well as her songs communicated to the audience. Personally, I would have liked to have heard her talk directly to the audience more often (aside from the great talk-filled encore, she spoke over the microphone to the crowd only twice), but not many seemed to mind this.

Her voice sounded superb. Various "vocal excursions," such those in "Rainy Night House," showed that her wordless soprano was as much an instrument as a guitar or piano. Mitchell continued to move through some of her more popular compositions: "Just Like This Train," "In France They Kiss on Main Street," "For the Roses."

About an hour-and-a-half into her performance, things began to drag some. A couple of slower songs seemed to be presented almost listlessly. Mitchell flubbed a few lines, at one point forgetting the words to a song altogether, but her charm in handling the situation was admirable and endearing. The audience accepted her even more for it.

Her live version of "Harry's House — Centerpiece" was inferior to the recorded version, but this was rectified by her last few choices. She put on a feather boa for "Raised on Robbery," which brought most of the audience to their feet. "The Jungle Line" live was vastly superior to and far more powerful than the LP rendition, the driving percussion again rousing the fans to a standing ovation.

The encore was Mandel and Hendricks' "Twisted," and befitting the lyrics, she asked the audience if they were crazy. "Yes!" She smiled and sang on. She was obviously enjoying herself, something which helped the crowd to enjoy itself all the more. Though flawed some, Joni Mitchell's concert was excellent and certainly one of the best of this year.



Joni performs "Raised on Robbery."



The Express' new saxist, David Luell.