

## Din Mars Sensitive Concert Mitchell's Audience Deserves Spanking

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The level of background noise at the Coliseum during Joni Mitchell's concert was a constant, steady murmur punctuated by brief vocal outbursts and the angry hissing of more attentive, attuned and annoyed concert-goers trying to quiet the scattered, less-polite patrons. After repeated interruptions during her most sensitive song and having her stern looks of reprimand and pleading ignored, Mitchell finally resigned herself to the will of the lowest common denominator element.

"It sounds like you guys would probably prefer boogie," she said, complaining after singing two quiet, piano-accompanied numbers from "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" through the din Thursday night. When the crowd responded with just a few too many cheers for the magic word "boogie," she sighed.

"OK. So we're gonna cut out half of the show."

Although she went ahead and performed a respectable hour and 25 minutes — hardly half a show — the effect was much the same. For their rudeness, Houston's fans received only a half-hearted effort from one of popular music's most gifted songwriters and fluid singers. And it was probably more than they deserved.

It's too much of a rarity when artists performing in concert are as openly critical of their audiences' behavior as those same audiences ought to be of the artists. As embarrassing as it was — since she condemned a Coliseum-full of people for the impolite actions of a relative few — Mitchell's response to the crowd's lack of consideration for her was refreshingly welcome. Sort of like the long overdue spanking of an annoyingly spoiled child.

Despite being hindered not only by the audience but also by an inadequate sound setup and the Coliseum's innate tendency to echo and obscure even the most delicately broadcast vocals, Mitchell put on a surprisingly strong performance. It was almost as if she set her mind on proving her artistry and professionalism to the ones who cared to listen and filter out all the extraneous noise.

She moved from the almost perfunctory performance of her opening numbers — when the artist-audience tension was worst — like "Love Or Money" and "Free Man in Paris" to a truly inspired climax, which built from the slow sensuality of "Rainy Night House" and "Troubled Child" through the bluntly direct "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow" to the ultimate transcendence of "The Jungle Line."

Backed by the L.A. Express, which also opened the show, her singing was as smooth and fluid as ever, effortlessly gliding through familiar melodies and spontaneously creating new ones. But so much was lost or dispersed between the artist and the audience that real meaningful communication was seldom established.

Even with the best of intentions, the crowd spoiled the haunting fade-out of "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire" by applauding too soon. And the recurring feedback irrevocably shattered the delicately wrought mood of "Shades of Scarlet Conquering" with a piercing squeal.

Hopefully, the next time Mitchell ventures onto a concert stage in Houston — that is, if she ever returns — she'll be afforded a more conducive atmosphere in which to work creatively and her audience will be more respectful. Otherwise, it would be better for all concerned if she simply bypassed our town.