

Joni Mitchell: Something just this side of a dream

By PETER GODDARD

*Roux and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air . . .*

It might be a fairy-tale as well as a castle, or a sunny Chelsea morning, crabbie New York cabbies, moons and Junes and ferris wheels.

For Joni Mitchell last night at Stratford's Avon Theatre it was always something just this side of a dream, just the other side of innocence.

Perhaps, a critical vocab-

ulary breaks down here. Perhaps: For her song's moods were too fleeting to be caught with a word; their atmosphere too fragile to hold up to the light to inspect.

For fewer performers have blended their life, their art and their performance so completely. As her voice keened over her long breathless melodies, a sound with an eerie fluty flavor, like a boy soprano alone in a cathedral, the entire atmosphere likewise seemed to float.

*But now it's just another show
You leave 'em laughing when you go
And if you care, don't let them know
Don't give yourself away*

And the effect of her singing last night was like that of her two albums, *Songs to a Seagull*, and *Clouds*: something not quite tangible, something too true to be real.

REALITY

Yet by the time she had finished, her nervousness all but gone, you realized

that there was a reality behind each song, something always autobiographical.

At times they were obscure, like visionary riddles. But in *I Had A King* we caught a glimpse of her brief marriage to Chuck Mitchell — a time just before she settled in Toronto, a time just before her songs were becoming known.

She had come from Saskatoon, armed only with a guitar and a Pete Seeger do-it-yourself manual. And still naturalistic imagery crowded her lyrics: *In the Gallery* pictured herself "in ice and greens, and old blue jeans, and naked in the roses."

In none of her songs was there a sense of despair — the Bob Dylan-like scream at the mess around him. A stillness settled around her

singing, a halt in time as she confronted a memory.

From Toronto she moved to Laurel Canyon, in California. Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, the Chicago convention riots, the Vietnam war, New York at night, all had given her a greater scope. The Americanization of Joni, now 25, had given her new contradictions.

"I just can't be complacent, now that I'm living in California," she had said. "There's so much change going on down here, and I feel I'm a part of it. I feel I have to be a part of it."

Quietly, in the middle of one set, she put her guitar down. Still alone on stage, green dress folding on the floor, she started a new song. *The Fiddle* and the Drum: "Oh, my friend, how

did you come to trade the fiddle for the drum?"

STARK

And here was something different, something stark and unrelenting. The hippie point of view, that of holy barbarians living lives of inverted sainthood was gone. There were real barbarians, the song said, whose lives may be inverted but certainly weren't saintly.

*But now old friends are acting strange
They shake their heads,
they say I've changed . . .*

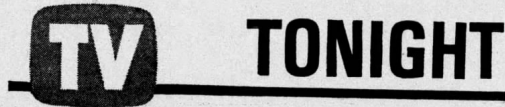
Her American experience has caused several changes. There's still a certain Canadian "feel" about her songs, an openness. But despite the fact that Joni herself was produced by that spirit, and her songs

made beautiful by that dream, things are less ethereal now, more concrete.

One moment, she suddenly went to the piano. "I've just started to write at the piano," she said, "and I've got two songs that go together. The one is the beginning of the story, the other is the end."

And as *Tale of Two Houses* unfolded, the sound became progressively darker, and more and more minor keys crept in. With her curious "open" guitar-tuning, she had been only able to get major keys. The songs just sounded lighter.

But now, a darker mood was building up. And she began to sing: "It was a rainy night . . ."



5.30

Day It Is

Gary Grant, Deborah Kerr, Hope, Bing Crosby.