

# Wonder, joy and magic

## WORLD LEADERS

Joni Mitchell

At the Liberty Grand  
in Toronto on Friday

REVIEWED BY  
ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

Joni Mitchell is famous for looking at clouds, and for deciding that "it's clouds' illusions I recall! I really don't know clouds at all." But it was still a bit startling to discover, during her appearance at the World Leaders festival, that the creator of *Both Sides Now* and so many other distinctive songs really does look for the secrets of the world in the shapes of clouds and in portents and magic of all kinds.

"I have a lot of voodoo following me around, whether I like it or not," Mitchell assured the prosperous-looking audience that had paid up to \$175 to dine and bask in her presence.

She spoke at length about black, white and red magic, about her discovery that a Nigerian religion she'd never heard of was seriously affecting her life, and about how the island of Jamaica once stopped her from singing or writing and forced her to paint murals.

She talked of how on Sept. 11 she sat in front of her TV, snapping photo after photo of the smoke billowing from the World Trade Centre, and of all the shapes she found in those clouds of destruction. Teddy bears, demonic figures, Arab heads in turbans, ravens flying up — it was all there, and further proof of the mystic psychedelic coherence of the world Mitchell lives in.

She has sent dispatches from that world for more than 35 years, building a body of work that's been one of the most inventive and unpredictable in popular music. Nobody who heard *Big Yellow Taxi* on the car radio in the early seventies could have predicted that the giddy-sounding singer of that frisky hit would have driven so many roads by now.

Mitchell began as a folkie, quickly burst the usual harmonic and prosodic boundaries of pop music, and kept on going till she was skirting the horizon with jazz musicians such as Charles Mingus and Herbie Hancock. She made the short forms of the pop lyric her vehicles for a lifelong exploration of the strange realities behind the ordinary face of things.

Mitchell in conversation came across as an earthy visionary for



PETER IYEM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Joni Mitchell at the World Leaders tribute: 'I have a lot of voodoo following me around, whether I like it or not.'

whom real magic always leaves a physical trace. Perhaps lots of people have felt some occult truth in the way a candle burns as the air swirls up to a window from the dusty street below, but only Mitchell found a way to ground that particular magic in a precise string of words and harmonies (in *Two Grey Rooms*, one of two Mitchell songs performed on Friday with terrific probing skill by Rebecca Jenkins).

She's a painter, and a lot of her chatter had to do with images and the truth of metaphor. But she's also a storyteller who needs to link those images into narrative. "A lot of my songs are frustrated filmmaking," she said. "They're attempts to tell a cinematic tale."

Harbourfront Centre's homage — or "homage," as they precisely preferred to call it — went back to the baby pictures and forward to clips from films and TV shows that have name-checked Mitchell, usually in ways that enforce the notion that her music is "chick music."

There were live or taped tributes from Gordon Lightfoot, Hancock and Anjelica Houston, and lots of laudatory speeches written by Barbara Budd and spoken by Jenkins, Brent Carver and Ann-Marie MacDonald. There were performances of her songs by Jenkins and Carver, and by a mongrelized ensemble of piano, cello and Indonesian gamelan instruments.

And there was much laboured wrestling with the notion of "creative genius," which — as at previous World Leaders sessions — revealed itself to be less a spark for discussion about exemplary artistic work than a way of short-circuiting that discussion.

The most revealing part of the evening, apart from Mitchell's funny, nutty chat with Sony Music's Denise Donlon, was Mitchell's performance at the piano and with a set of working tapes for her next album.

She improvised at the keyboard for several minutes, producing a quiet chordal jam that bridged the

musical worlds of Stephen Foster and Claude Debussy.

Then she sang fragments of seven songs from the new disc, including old tunes such as *No Regrets Coyote* and *Cherokee Louise*, and new ones such as *Be Cool* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, based on her adaptation of the W. B. Yeats poem. Mitchell's unique timing was there, as always, working now through a voice that has smoothly darkened and deepened with the years.

The orchestral arrangements — after last year's *Both Sides Now* album, she's "addicted" to working with full orchestra — belonged to the further edge of the pan-tonal jazz universe.

As she sang, they became more and more clustery, drifting in tangled figurations (some devised by long-time collaborator and ex-husband Larry Klein) that refused any clear resolution.

There was innocence in these songs ("Yesterday a child came out to wonder") and bitterness as well,

notably in a dreamy come-down song that stuck pins in every feature of her star's life, including the "people who have slices of you from the company . . . I guess I seem ungrateful with my teeth sunk in the hand that gives me things I can't give up just yet."

But there's still a lot of wonder and joy in Joni Mitchell, as we saw when she caught sight of Arthur Kratzman, her Grade 7 teacher from Saskatoon, whom she routinely credits with opening the door for her early creative efforts.

She and he were equally lucky, and equally thrilled to be in each other's company again, as he tried to give Mitchell the Harbourfront World Leaders prize through her many and long recollections of those days in the Prairie school. Forget about genius — this was an oven-warm slice of real life.

For information on the World Leaders Festival:  
[www.worldleadersfestival.com](http://www.worldleadersfestival.com).  
For tickets call: 416-973-4000.