

sounds

A promising return

The last time I saw Joni Mitchell was Oxford, Ohio, in 1976 and I promised myself at the end of that concert, I would never be a Mitchell fan again.

It was her last concert tour with the L. A. Express, a slick, well-disciplined jazz band whose music, at the time, was well-suited to Mitchell's musical evolution.

Mitchell's performance then was flawless, as it had been in all of her concerts in Ohio. However, the emotional honesty and rapport, which had cultivated her album fans through the years, was sadly lacking during the show.

At that time she had just released her "Hissing of Summer Lawns" album which marked her break with the pop music world and had met surprisingly harsh criticism upon its release. Her musical turn with her "Hissing" album was not popular with audiences either. With work beginning on her more novel "Hejira" album, Mitchell seemed to be in a popular musician's no-man's land.

The unfamiliar music that comprised the concert sounded bizarre and boring to an audience turned on to Mitchell by her upbeat "Court and Spark" album. By the end of her concert, half of the audience had walked out.

Enter 1979, and I found myself seated up front at the Mississippi River Festival to review yet another Joni Mitchell concert. So much for promises.

I waited impatiently for Mitchell's warm-up group, The Persuasions, to finish, hoping that Mitchell's recent optimistic interview in "Rolling Stone" magazine was accurate. I didn't want to make a pledge to burn all my Mitchell albums at the end of this performance.

And I did not. I left with good feelings. Not only had Mitchell shed her cold professionalism toward the audience, she exuded a new confidence in her music and maturity in herself as a person and performer.

There were no excuses for her art and no cold silence to stem any possible criticism of her work. Instead, Mitchell bantered good-naturedly with her audience. When someone from the audience yelled "We love you, Joni," halfway through the performance, there was resounding applause instead of the smattering of claps I had heard in Ohio.

Mitchell's selection of music indicated her growth as a performer. Although the highlight of the evening was "Pork Pie Hat," a Charles Mingus tune from her new album "Mingus," Mitchell kept her new tunes to a minimum and devoted her concert to her more established and popular songs. Most of those tunes, which had been reworked for her concert tour, came from her "Court and Spark," "Hejira," and "Hissing" albums.

The performance itself was far from flawless, but on the whole much more enjoyable because Mitchell is not just a musician whom fans come to hear — she is a personality and a poet who has managed to translate most of our innermost fears and insecurities into an honest and open dialogue within her lyrics.

A special treat was solo performances by bassist Jaco Pastorius of Weather Report and percussionist Pat Matheny.

But there was no doubt that Mitchell was the star. Where during her last concert tour she seemed to balk at taking a hold of L. A. Express and leading the performance, at Edwardsville she was not afraid to communicate with her musicians and her audience.

"It's been a long time since I've been out of the chute," she said after wobbling through a series of rhythm problems in several of her songs.

Even the way she ended her concert was different. At the end of her '76 concert, when the audience had to beg Mitchell to return to the stage for an encore, she sang "Twisted" and spoke the



Joni Mitchell: at ease again.

Marilyn Shapiro

only patronizing words she had uttered the whole evening: "Is everybody crazy?" Somehow my friends and I felt a little crazy for staying.

For her final MRF number, Mitchell sang "Woodstock," which seemed particularly appropriate in honor of the music festival's 10th anniversary and the beginning of her career rise.

Mitchell joked as she sang but toward

the end of the song, her voice and lyrics became more urgent and somber. "We've got to get ourselves back to some semblance of a garden," she sang.

Maybe, after these last few years of her artistic endeavors and critical badgering, Joni Mitchell has finally come full circle.

Marilyn Shapiro