

Mitchell worth the trip

Mitchell, Sept. 2.

Concert review by Gary McGowan

Joni Mitchell is on the road again. In line with the general superstar malaise of the 1970s, her current tour is the first concentrated series of appearances she's made since her 1976 outings. In that three year period, Mitchell's jazz leanings have completely altered her music. Apparent on the *Court and Spark* release, they flowered on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira* and regrettably ran rampant on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Despite the reluctance of many of the *Court and Spark* fans to follow the lady into the ozone of jazz music, she was successful enough at her experiments to impress Charles Mingus, who solicited her for his final project, an album that's come down to us as *Mingus*, the latest LP from Joni Mitchell.

It's certainly the most outside thing she's ever released and when I left for Vancouver, the cynic in me held the distinct impression that this current tour was more an attempt to generate some interest in a fading career than a concerted attempt to bridge the growing chasm between her music and her audience. Even the seemingly limitless patience of Asylum records must have been stretched to the breaking point with the introduction of the *Mingus* album into the corporate boardroom.

So what is going on with Joni Mitchell circa 1979? Another jaded folkie looking for direction? At least she hasn't brought back a spacesuit like Joan Baez or started appearing in the nude on the back of her albums like Judy Collins. Is she poised on the brink of becoming the first pop artist to "crossover" into jazz music; the George Benson of folk perhaps? Jazzbo's tell me that there's regrettably more Mitchell than Mingus on the new album, a fact that probably precludes the garnering of any sizable following among jazz freaks. At the same time, another *Raised on Robbery* is distinctly absent from this release, so goodbye triple platinum. Rickie Lee Jones notwithstanding, Mitchell's commitment to jazz music seems firm whether an audience follows or not, so I had visions of being issued a candle upon entry to the Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver- ready to worship at the altar of ART along with Ms. Mitchell.

Wrongo. Out comes Joni Mitchell and a band composed of Pat Metheny on lead guitar, Jaco Pastorius on bass, Michael Brecker on horns along with drummer Don Elias and keyboard specialist Lyle Mays. All stars in their own right, but what will happen after the first notes are struck? With apologies to Guy Lombardo, some of the sweetest music this side of heaven. The group started the show with *Big Yellow Taxi* (theory A no old chestnuts is hereby discarded). From the word go the ensemble playing was tremendous, mistakes being the only thing these musicians cannot play. Mitchell herself shone on rhythm guitar: all those years of playing with bizarre tunings has given her a fine sense of phrasing and a subtle touch that is a treat to listen to. Never attempting to overshadow the band, she was likewise not outclassed by the rest of the group. Patrolling the stage in her new "cover of *Rolling Stone* perm", she would form a circle with Metheny and Pastorius to play out the end of the tunes. Given the nature of these musicians, a distinct flavor pervaded the evening, even on older tunes like *Free Man in Paris*.

Unlike Bob Dylan, Mitchell seems comfortable with her old songs, toying with few of the arrangements. Material was predominantly from the post 1974 years, however. *Court and Spark* received a fine reading as did *In France They Kiss On Main Street*, *Coyote*, *Amelia*, *Furry Sings the Blues* and the title track from the album that contained those songs, *Hejira*.

Closing the show Mitchell brought out her opening act, New York a cappella group, the Persuasions. They had experienced a mediocre response as the warm-up band, but when linked with Mitchell's voice on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* the effect was electric. A collective chill ran through the audience as their voices united on the words *Blindness, Blindness...* and people began streaming down to the front of the stage. Mitchell then treated us to her only piano work of the evening, reaching all the way back to *Blue*, for *The Last Time I Saw Richard*. The Persuasions then returned and launched into the evening's lighter side with Frankie Lymon and The Teenager's 1958 hit, *Why Do Fools Fall In Love?*

Mitchell did Lymon's high parts like the pre-pubescent Lymon himself. One final encore closed the evening. In response to a shouted request, Mitchell performed *Woodstock* and then slowly walked offstage, still playing, while the stage lights dropped to a dim red hue.

Three songs from *Mingus* made it to the concert. *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, *Drycleaner From Des Moines*, and *God Must Be A Boogie Man*. They were certainly well done (not that it could be otherwise with this band), but as the long instrumental passages took over the stage attention was drawn away from Mitchell and she seemed reduced to the role of a spectator at her own performances. It's here that the inflexibility and musical excesses that have marred her latest albums

surfaced. She is often so far inside her material, that any attempt to reach out to the audience (a substantial consideration in popular music), is lost in her sincere, unfortunately overwhelming, desire to get things right. Now, I'm not advocating sloppiness in concert performances, but it's not for nothing that old songs like *The Last Time I Saw Richard* seemed such high points of the show. A song about a failed folkie seemed closer to the lady's heart than the grafted lyrics to another man's music: music from a different age and tradition.

Still, Mitchell was worth the trip to Vancouver. Maybe one day she will grace an Edmonton stage.

Harmonica

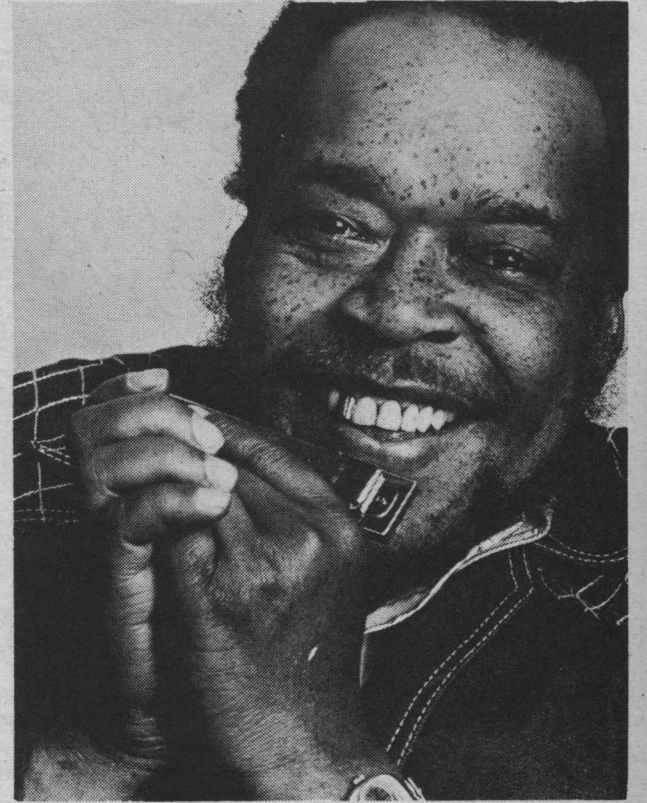
Popular bluesman James Cotton will be returning to SUB Theatre this Thursday for two concerts, one at 7 p.m., and one at 9:30 p.m.

The 43 year old Cotton was born on a cotton plantation in the deep south. He started playing harmonica at an early age, and at the age of nine he ran away to meet his idol, Sonny Boy Williamson. He stayed with Sonny Boy, and then six years later, the legendary blues harpist gave his band to Cotton. Cotton's youthful inexperience led to the breakup of the band. He then held a variety of nonmusical jobs before hooking up with Howlin' Wolf.

Cotton's big break came in 1954 when he met Muddy Waters in Florida. Waters had lost his harmonica man, and since a member of his entourage knew Cotton, he was hired on the spot. He spent the next 12 years touring the country with Water's group.

In 1966, Cotton went out on his own. Since then he has released several albums a year on the old Verve label and, toured the U.S. and Canada playing his distinctive harmonica sounds in front of a rocking five man band. He and his band travel over a hundred thousand miles a year, working 40 to 45 weeks out of each year.

Appearing with The James Cotton Band will be Wheatland County. Ticket information is available from Mike's, SU Box Office and West Den.



James Cotton plays in SUB Theatre this Thursday.

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P.S. there are sometimes free tickets and other goodies available.

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