

THE TRIBUTE TO JONI MITCHELL

I just heard a girl called Maria singing Joni in Skaneateles

By Ellen Leahy

Of course I knew Joni Mitchell's music.

Or so I thought, until Maria DeAngelis' carefully crafted tribute to the artist on the last Saturday in April. The event was staged at Skaneateles' First Presbyterian Church. I realized early into the show that I really didn't know Mitchell's music ... at all.

Although, by the end of the evening, I had gathered a new understanding of why she had always stood above the crowd.

DeAngelis, who I knew as a buttoned-up, poised jazz singer, became sort of flighty in her interpretation of, as she would say, "Joni." She not only sang, but also played several string instruments. A couple of times during the evening she stopped a song and asked to start over while she re-tuned her instrument. DeAngelis was acting very California to her usual New York jazz artist. This worked for me, as she always maintained an air of sophistication.

She explained why Mitchell's music carried different sound qualities. She was always monkeying with the tuning of her instruments; looking for new attitudes. It was enlightening to learn of the more technical intricacies of her songwriting.

When I was a lot younger the meaning of lyrics didn't always register. These were more like sounds. I knew and could sing most of them, still can. But it wasn't until I was much older that I would stop to contemplate what the rock generation was singing.

Beatles and all.

When I finally did listen, I was amazed at what these songwriters knew at such an early age. I mean they were lamenting and deciphering concepts I didn't start figuring out until I was hitting my 40s.

Mitchell was singing about social issues like a Vonnegut. Her paving paradise and putting up a parking lot has an eerie resonance in this watershed where we now carefully measure each lot's permeable space.

She was chastising her lovers and admiring her friends. She sang of the circle of life, the circles of life. I was realizing her music, which I often thought of as light, was actually often embittered.

DeAngelis surrounded herself with great players. That was a treat in itself. She referred to her collection of very talented working musicians as the Westminster Express - as most of them are neighbors on Westminster street the Syracuse University section. Her three back up singers, Hanna Richardson, Karen Oberlin, Tori DeAngelis, were often dead on in their rich harmonies and each did a solo, which allowed for more interpretations of Mitchell's work.

Two members of the band were gentlemen. Phil Flanigan, a bass man, whose line was steady and complete. Barry Blumenthal on the grand piano was tremendous. DeAngelis performed this tribute months earlier in Syracuse at Jazz Central with a different keyboardist, David Yaffee.

I can't imagine how he could have elevated Blumenthal's intense level of play.

Probably the first song and a half were a little shaky until DeAngelis' band tightened up and took the room over. But also this performance was



Are those halos in the front pew? Sandra Thomas of Marcellus' First Presbyterian Church joined Reverend Craig and Judy Lindsay of Skaneateles First Presbyterian Church.

such a different feel compared to the Skaneateles Festival Chamber Music one was accustomed to witnessing in the same space and the Reverend Lindsay's often calming sermons. Rock by it's very nature was a bit of a rebellion from anything traditional in music or culture, and I was learning that Mitchell tended to even deviate from this deviation.

Bravo to Joe Strodel Jr. for bringing this project to the attention of the Skaneateles Area Arts Council, who partnered with the Everson Museum to raise awareness for the arts in our community. These two organizations also brought in Mitchell's visual art, as well as classic photographs of her by Henry Diltz. Several were auctioned off during intermission.

Also noteworthy was the emcee Jeffrey Pepper Rogers a music journalist in Syracuse through the Newhouse School of Communication. Each set was opened with a snippet of an interview he recorded with Mitchell several years ago.

This retrospective made it finally all good for my generation to grow up and appreciate our culture from a more mature and respectable vantage point.

Turns out growing up ain't so bad after all.

SAAC's take:

"I would like to say thank you to Skaneateles for supporting the Arts Council's tribute to Joni Mitchell," Art's Council President Joe Strodel Jr. said. "Also a special thank you to Kimball and Jim Kraus and the Everson Museum for hosting the pre-concert reception, and to Reverend Craig Lindsey of the First Presbyterian Church for allowing the Arts Council to stage the concert in such a beautiful church."

At the end of the evening's performance Strodel brought four bouquets of flowers to the stage for the female singers. He told the audience he was introduced to Joni Mitchell through his sister Cindy's playing "For the Roses," a little around the clock. The album came out in 1972 and gave Mitchell her first big hit, "You Turn Me On I Am a Radio."

He said her three to four octave range blew me away, and that's when I realized I better pay attention to who this singer was.

Strodel asked the audience a Joni Mitchell trivia question:

"The acronym that I wove into my toast to Maria is the name of Joni's first publishing company, which was called Siquomb Publishing. Siquomb stands for She Is Queen Undisputedly Of Mind Beauty."

Strodel said the title certainly fit DeAngelis too.