



That was then, this is now: (clockwise from left) Joni Mitchell performing at Newport Folk Festival, Rhode Island, 1969; a perfect moment: Mitchell on the same stage 53 years later last July; Joni's given a helping hand; Brandi Carlile salutes Mitchell; Brandi, Joni and Wynonna Judd enjoy the event of the year.

# “We Were Watching With Our Minds Blown”



**When Joni Mitchell appeared on-stage at the Newport Folk Festival in July, it was the culmination of years of encouragement, and is set to bear more extraordinary fruit in 2023. But as her bandmates reveal, her comeback was in the balance until the very last moment. “No one knew if Joni would be up to it,” they tell Grayson Haver Currin.**

**F**EW PEOPLE CAN have thought they would ever witness a Joni Jam. Paul McCartney, Elton John and Chaka Khan were among the music icons who, off and on since 2018, have been summoned to Mitchell's Bel-Air living room to join her and a loose confederation

of singers, songwriters and session aces as she worked to sing or play guitar with friends for the first time since a brain aneurysm in 2015 almost killed her. But would ordinary fans ever see the like?

Writer and film director Cameron Crowe offered up tantalising tidbits in a rare interview with Mitchell for the Los Angeles Times, linked to the 50th birthday of her first masterpiece, *Blue*. He described Elton John, sat on a couch with David Furnish, stunned to hear Mitchell's voice singing a snippet of Carey, before singing *Moon River* for her in return. But if Mitchell was on a journey towards performance, it was a slow one. “I'm still playing little clubs,” Mitchell told Crowe with a laugh.

And then – on the afternoon of Sunday, July 24 – suddenly she wasn't. Beneath a blue beret and big sunglasses and behind a beatific smile, Mitchell was headlining Newport Folk Festival. She sang classics of her own, including *A Case Of You* with Marcus Mumford and *Both Sides Now* with LA-based indie duo Lucius, and standards she cherished – *Summertime*, *Why Do Fools Fall In Love*, even *Love Potion Number Nine* – into a gold microphone.

Here was Mitchell, 78, in a gold-crested

Victorian chair, surrounded by so many who had stopped in at those Joni Jams – Brandi Carlile, the facilitator from the start; Wynonna Judd, weeping on-stage less than three months after the loss of her own mother and singing partner, Naomi; and multi-instrumentalist Blake Mills.

A revelation, but one that's due, almost unbelievably, to be reprised next June 10 in the Gorge Amphitheatre at George, the charismatic outdoor venue in the middle of Washington state where Mitchell will headline a bill again wrangled by and featuring Carlile.

“Joni Mitchell is going to play,” Carlile told *The Daily Show*'s Trevor Noah of the surprise date added to her *Echoes Through The Canyon* event. “No one's been able to buy a ticket to see Joni Mitchell play in 20 years... So this is enormous... and she is going to crush it!”

**T**HE SECRECY SURROUNDING Mitchell's 2022 Newport appearance stemmed, at least in part, from doubts that it would happen at all. Mitchell had last performed a full set more than two decades earlier. Her brain aneurysm was the third time she'd lost her full mobility, after a childhood case of polio and subsequent post-polio syndrome in the mid-'90s.

Cathy Adams Hirsch, Vera Weisawell



"I have to guard my energy," she told the *Star* tabloid back then. "Just like the bunnies in those battery commercials. I'm the one that's about to keel over. I'm not the one that's going and going."

Nearly 30 years later, could Mitchell tap even deeper into those reserves? Carliie, it seemed, believed so.

"It was something Brandi had been wanting to manifest for a long time," the songwriter Allison Russell, who harmonised with Mitchell for many of the set's most poignant moments, said to *MOJO* two days after the Newport show. "At her festival, Girls Just Wanna Weekend, earlier this year, she pulled me aside and said I should make it to Newport if I could, because she thought this would happen. But no one knew if Joni would be up to it until that very moment."

Blake Mills only became confident on the Thursday before the performance. Carliie sent a group text from an aeroplane, Mitchell buckled into her seat and headed to Newport for the first time since 1969. She arrived with a team of nurses and a therapist just in case something went awry.

In preparation, Mills had transcribed Jaco Pastorius's old bass parts on the car ride to rehearsals, hoping to add a little bit of *Hejira*-era magic. As soon as Mitchell joined the band in their stuffy rehearsal room at a nearby naval base, he realised that wouldn't be necessary.

"It was so much less about [musicianship]," Mills told *MOJO*. "It was more about the way a group plays – not just when they're in the moment, but when the moment is a really intimate setting – no bells and whistles, but a group of people playing songs they know really well and arriving at little moments, together."

There was plenty, however, that remained up in the air.

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JONI MITCHELL

"So many aspects of this were left up to the final moment: how much is she going to sing? What would her voice allow her to do? And is she going to play guitar on a song?" said Mills, recalling a moment a year or so ago when the actress Kathy Bates gifted Mitchell an ornate electric guitar carved into the shape of an eagle. Mitchell played it like a child picking up the instrument for the first time. But he could see her mounting resolve.

"And on Sunday, all of us were watching with our minds blown," Mills continued, "because there were things happening that hadn't happened in rehearsal two nights before."

**T**HAT ASTONISHMENT WAS clear when Mitchell, who had studied old videos to remind herself of her past guitar technique, stood and leaned against a piano halfway through the set, her angular Parker Fly electric strapped around her neck. As she sauntered through *Court And Spark*'s Just Like This Train, those on-stage lifted their cellphones high, trying to grab a photo of her. The audience clapped along in unison, Mills and Mumford improvised alongside her on fretless baritone guitar and percussion. And Carliie threw the horns before shouting "Unbelievable!" at the end.

"I don't think anyone knew she would be playing entire songs by herself, playing electric guitar solos," said Lucius's Holly Laessig, who had also been present for the handover of Bates's gift. "That was a total ride for everyone."

Mitchell turned 79 in November. Despite the ongoing example of Bob Dylan, 81, there's been no suggestion that there will be more Joni Jams after June 10's George show. But maybe it's best that Mitchell's appearances remain rare. As cherished songsmiths offload the rights to their catalogues or hit the reunion circuit for one last payday, its momentary quality may be the real value of Mitchell's Sunday afternoon song circle in Newport.

It was a pan-generational celebration of a singer and writer whose influence has grown far beyond the shadow of misogyny, since the days *Rolling Stone* magazine dubbed her "Old Lady Of The Year" or the decade the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame took to induct her. (She again lambasted that lag during her CBS interview at Newport.) The performance wasn't perfect or polished. But it was a perfect moment, a testament to personal resilience and the redemption available in song.

"It is a miracle, the way music is totally magical," said Laessig, likening Mitchell's achievement to that of her grandmother, who relearned to sing a little after Parkinson's disease stole much else from her. "When you see someone holding onto their gift again after not being able to walk or talk or do anything, you know that music brought you back from there."

On June 10, fans at the Gorge will witness a miracle repeating itself. Who's to say they'll be the last?