

JONI MITCHELL

A Hiss of Resignation

by Lynn Kellermann

Oh the power and the glory
Just when you're getting a taste for worship
they start bringing out the hammers
and the boards and the nails

Perhaps it was all inevitable. Joni—her incredible prolificacy striking our anxious and adoring ears with the consistency of a beautiful sunrise... a literate virtuoso, her contemplative lyric surfaced much of the pain, suffering and awkwardness that accompanies growth and self-awareness. Joni's introspective nature was haunting, like a bitter contagion, it caught us off-guard at our weakest moments.

All good dreamers pass this way someday
Hiding behind bottles in dark cafes.

Here was a universal autobiography of life itself. And so, we awaited each fresh new masterpiece like mental invalids seeking verbal panacea in her verse.

Joni—the painter of words, the saint-like songstress, immersed in her own sense of mortal panic, she learned how to cope with and understand it like an aesthetic scientist.

But, realistically how long could it last, this unwavering, unadulterated genius? All artists grow up someday and Joni Mitchell is no exception to the rule. The genius is still as strong, still phenomenal, but it's of a different sort, rooted in anger and a smug sense of self-righteousness.

The beauty and authenticity in Mitchell was her public vulnerability. Children of the 60's that many of us were, we saw her music as a reflection of our own pain, latching on to her every revelation, her succinct prophecies, none of them especially unique, but exceptional in their accessibility to those who needed a poetic spokesman.

Blue here is a song for you
Inside you'll hear a sigh
A foggy lullaby
Here is my song for you.

Now Mitchell seems to seek freedom from the public's parasitic grip. No longer a spokesman, she has become more of a poetic politician, condemning ideals, standing at a safe distance from self-criticism; no longer empathetic toward her anti-heroes and heroines, she suffers from the same sickness.

The fault, if it is one, seems two-fold; stemming from an overly-dependent public and Joni's voluntary departure from the flawed and largely-confused human race.

Going back over the peak years of Joni Mitchell's career, the transformation she's made seems ineluctable. Before 1967, she had released two albums, *Joni Mitchell* and *Clouds*, both innocently expressing the emotions of a young, inexperienced woman with an innate gift for self-expression. Leaving the hills of Alberta for brighter lights, she carried with her a guitar, a ragged suitcase and dreams of becoming a rock & roll lady.

The ethereal quality of her music was pervasive and biting. Even in her voice, there were tinges of dreamy naivete. Her soft, echoey soprano was hidden somewhat under an overbearing acoustic guitar and a celestial multitude of backing harmonies. The underlying breathiness, the full tone was not yet realized.

In 1968, with the releases of *Ladies Of The Canyon* and *Blue*, the unassuming poetess began developing into a social and philosophical commentator. With *Ladies*, a part of Joni still craved the canyons of Canada; but signs of sophistication were prevalent. The dichotomy that appeared in her life was frustrating. The need for musical saturation through public recognition juxtaposed with the relentless cold the city offered her. The fragile earth mother felt somehow misplaced in the dead of the night, indirectly attaching herself to the lonely faces, the street musicians, their melodies meshed into the empty sidewalks, hidden under the city's noisy impersonality.

I was standing on a noisy corner
Waiting for the walking green
Across the street he stood
and he played real good
On his clarinet for free.

The sterile, cubby-holed buildings left her no solace, only visions of credit card existences, 9-5 monotony, computerized emotion.

You could have been more than a name
on the door
On the 33rd floor in the air
More than a credit card swimming pool
in the backyard.

Joni's need for change and proper perspective brought her to Laurel Canyon, near Los Angeles, the up and coming mecca for a new form of music.

1968 was a time of restlessness, protest and a new, sort of earthy rock & roll, exhibited in the styles of The Byrds and Buffalo Springfield. It was during this period that Joni, inspired by the new generation of spiritual revisionists, searching for peace of mind amid the chaos, wrote her generational masterpiece, *Woodstock*.

We are stardust, we are golden
We are billion year old carbon
And we've got to get ourselves
back to the garden.



ILLUSTRATION BY NEATHER

A revolutionary of sorts, Mitchell became, as Linda Ronstadt put it "the first woman to match any man on his own terms as a songwriter, guitar player or as an incredible, magnetic human being." She offered a new freedom for women and a new direction for men, mis-understood by women, who'd been forfeiting their own needs in order to live up to some supposed unflagging virility:

You criticize and you flatter
Imitate the best and the rest you memorize
You know the time you impress me most
Is the time when you don't try

The voice became sensual, freed from past uncertainty, the piano added forcefulness and unique style.

Overriding and recurrent in Joni's statements were the struggle for freedom and success in the face of love. One could hear the conflict in her phrasing. The jumps from low to high register suggested restlessness, confusion. Yet, it consequently broke the wall that held her incredible soprano back. She discovered a whole new consciousness as to where her voice could go.

Isolation and the return to self-affirmation, separating the need to be alone from loneliness, Joni wrote:

She will love them when she sees them
They will lose her if they follow
And she only means to please them
And her heart is full and hollow
Like a cactus tree
And she's too busy being free.

Blue, a very private album, is the study of a woman, torn between that unfettered freedom and traditional love, seeking perspective once more on foreign shores. It was first total lapse into self-scrutiny, staged before the public eye.

Will you take me as I am?
Strung out on another man
California I'm coming home

Despite *Blue's* intimacy, Mitchell was so perfect in her lyric, so vivid in her universal portrayal of desperate love, (perhaps feeling safe from ridicule in a foreign land), that she never once detached the listener. If anything, the feeling was almost sinful, intrusive, the sensation one would get from reading someone's personal diary and relating it to their own lives.

For *The Roses* was the next logical step toward maturation. Mitchell tackles more worldly subjects; *Cold Blue Steel Sweet Fire* traces the excessiveness of the junkie's world. For *The Roses* scorns the selfless superstar, the manufactured god who once "used to sit and make up his tunes for love." Now "he's seen on giant screens and at parties for the press."

Each tune flowed smoothly into the other, the concept complete, the introduction of jazz influence making it all the more intriguing, but never alienating.

With *Court An Spark* came the final fruition. Love like all other empirical ideas, is handled as realistically as possible. Joni is no longer the magical princess but the practicing existentialist; looking at her life in retrospect, placing love on the shelf of intangibles, not forsaking it, only accepting its elusiveness.

Still I sent out my prayer
Wondering who was there to hear
With the millions of the lost
and lonely ones I call out
to be released

Caught in my struggle
for higher achievements
And my search for love
that don't seem to cease

The "same situation," the essence of Joni's philosophy in this period. Can those intangibles be attained? Can love in its truest sense be achieved without conflict? Joni once commented that: "the maintenance of individuality is so necessary to what we call a true or lasting love," and calls love a "very fragile plant," hard to keep alive.

With *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* it is difficult to recover the artist of old among lines and lines of self-congratulatory, grandiose statements of upper-class complacency and suburban mediocrity. Joni constantly evades the reason for her anger and impatience—her own submission to the societal disease her characters have already succumbed to.

No longer the sensitive soul who fumbles "deaf, dumb and blind" at parties of confused people, Mitchell stands aloof, smug in her pseudo-existential appraisal of people, baptized into her own self-made religion, intolerant of hypocrisy, yet sucked into it by her own self-indulgence.

She would like us to think she's no longer vulnerable, that she's surpassed the mundane search for "higher achievements" and love that "don't seem to cease." Writing of "paper wives and paper kids and paper walls to keep their gut reactions hid," there's disdain where there was once understanding. She denies any connection with their plight, nor does she wish to be a "subterranean" romantic, disgusted with anything that is less than pure sensuality. Joni is a misfit in both worlds:

Nothing is capsulized in me
On either side of town
The streets were never really mine
Not mine these glamour gowns

The sermon-like "impersonal third" echoes over track upon track of incessant, mostly forgettable melody (with the exception of *The Boho Zone*, *Scarlet Conquering*, *Harry's House-Centerpiece* and *Don't Interrupt The Sorrow*, all thoughtful, well-constructed pieces), the instrumentation precise and professional as always, but gutless and formulaic. Joni's voice, like a far-off ghost in a seance, loses its fullness and "talky" vibrance—reminiscent of her beginnings when her records were filled with uncertainty. It's come back again. She no longer talks to us but safely above us.

In *Shadows and Light* Mitchell deliberates on the forces of good and evil, with the authoritarian tone of god on earth; the divine Arp-Farfisa perfecting the deliberately religious effects. Joni excels far beyond these contrasting forces, accepting the force that governs us all with a sense of total despair.

Is the self-portrait finished? Over the years, Mitchell has consistently added more color, depth and dimension to her own image. As the portrait was studied the illumination grew. For every experience we brought to it, we came away with so much more.

But now the lines of age have begun to show, the crevices abundant from over-exposure, the colors dulled from changing priorities and shifting philosophies, the beauty no longer as vital. The concept is missing, the canvas attacked haphazardly leaving only a faded sketch of what was. Joni even admits in her liner notes that: "the record is a total work, conceived, graphically, musically, lyrically and accidentally as a whole."

And so many who once "worshipped" Joni Mitchell feel somehow slighted, taken aback by her indignation and coldness. Yet she purposely seems to be painting her myth to prove she too only "guesses at most" about life's essence, according to what "each set of time and change is touching." She speaks to us on vinyl, after all, not on the Holy Bible.

Since we are makers of the myth, often the catalysts of exploitation, we must suffer the consequences of disillusionment. Joni, no longer a critic of societal fakery and a representative of human pain, has grown too proud, a neophyte in the exclusive circle of musical demi-gods.

Denouncing romanticism, ("Don't you get sensitive on me cause I know you're just too proud. You couldn't step outside the Boho dance now even if good fortune allowed.") she's convinced herself that the ever-frustrating void between material conquest and blind idealism, romantic love and spiritual union has been filled... by the abandonment of all of them.

Instead, she embraces a higher, almost nihilistic order of things. Stepping out from the cellar in the "Boho Zone," a symbol of her philosophical beginnings where she once sought "sweet inspiration," she sighs, "oh well," sublimating her once undying lust for life and admitting that:

Even on the scuffles
The cleaner's crease was in my jeans
And any eye for detail
Caught a little lace along the seams.

No longer the woman of "heart and mind," the heart is now obliterated, anger and cynicism replacing it; the mind over-worked, mysterious and boggling. The honesty is still there, but it's hard and/or to accept. Joni no longer seeks self-affirmation, afraid of confronting her own reflection. And so she's dubbed herself queen of the high and mighty. She's defeated the gloom before. Let's hope she's not too high on her pedestal to mistake her present gloom for infinite knowledge.