

APRIL 1991

Interview

(April)

INTERVIEW

**COME WITH US
TO
HOLLYWOOD WITH
JENNIFER JASON LEIGH.
TO HEAVEN WITH JONI MITCHELL.
TO HELL WITH WILLIAM BURROUGHS.
TO TAJ MAHAL. TO LONDON FOR
FASHION AND BERLIN FOR ART. TO
THE BRONX WITH MICKEY MANTLE.
TO THE TOP O' THE POPS WITH
THE BOYS.
ALL ABOARD**

MATT DILLON



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THE WHOLE KIT AND CABOODLE



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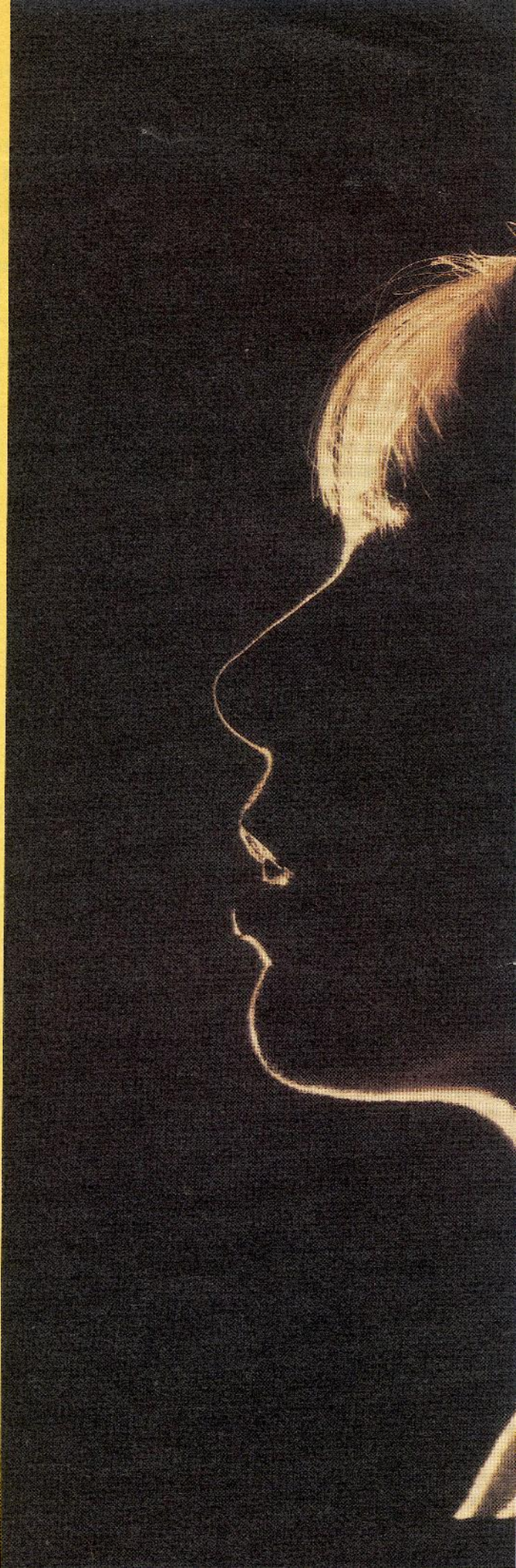
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the cover **Matt Dillon** photographed by Albert Watson; hair by Mitch Barry/Elizabeth Watson; make-up by Frances Hathaway/M.A.C. Bendel's, NYC; styling by Wendy Schecter; blazer and handloomed cotton pullover by the Smiths, T-shirt by Calvin Klein, silver ID bracelet by Gregg Wolf

this page **Joni Mitchell** photographed by Matthew Rolston; makeup by Paul Starr/Profile, L.A.

JONI mitchell MUST LOVE

bass. Her current bass player, Larry Klein, is also her husband, and some of the greatest bassists of all time have been her friends and collaborators. The late Charles Mingus was working on an >



< album with Mitchell when he died in 1979. (She completed *Mingus* as a tribute to him.) And the late Jaco Pastorius helped Mitchell forge the radically free-spirited *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Hejira*, which surprised fans accustomed to her simpler folk style of the early '70s. Mitchell's search for the perfect bass is one of the things that

"ROCK 'N' ROLL DIED A LONG TIME AGO

led her out of folk, and into pop and fusion—and back again. Her latest album, *Night Ride Home*, is a dreamy synthesis of jazz melodies with acoustic instrumentation. The songs brim with her trademark warmth and complexity. Primarily a return to heavy acoustic guitar, the record is pretty without being simplistic—Joni Mitchell coming into the '90s. Since childhood, Mitchell's passion for art has vied with her devotion to music. The cover of her 1982 album, *Wild Things Run Fast*, is a self-portrait, and she did the eerily beautiful photomontage on the cover of *Night Ride Home*. Last fall Broadgate Centre in London organized a show of her paintings, an exhibit that will be traveling through Italy this summer.

DIMITRI EHRLICH: Does the title track "Night Ride Home" signify anything about a return to your roots as an acoustic artist?

JONI MITCHELL: Well, that thought crossed my mind, because I could see fairly soon after it was completed that it was viewed by friends as a kind of return to something that they wanted from me and that I perhaps hadn't given them for a while. I didn't much intend it as a return, though ultimately it doesn't really matter what I intended.

DE: Your early records, such as *Ladies of the Canyon*, were created with generally spare arrangements. Then you went into more complex instrumentation. Now it seems like you've returned to "less is more."

JM: Well, I started singing folk songs because it was a great way to begin. By the time I began to write my own music, I would say I was no longer a folksinger, although I looked like one because I was a

THE ROLL WENT OUT OF IT

girl with a guitar. The music I heard in me was harmonically and rhythmically much more complex, which you can hear as I began to learn the studio a little bit and began to overdub—like, for instance, on *Court and Spark*. Even though we used an orchestra on that record, everything you hear is my composition, not an arrangement by someone imposed on my composition.

DE: Do you feel that your last two records before *Night Ride Home* were rejected because they were so densely orchestrated?

JM: Well, I am slightly defensive about the last couple of projects because they were really underestimated. I tried to write for large choruses on them. Suppose I want to write musicals. If I went along doing only nice intimate little things, how would I ever

learn how to write for a full stage?

DE: When you write, are you conscious of the balance between simply expressing yourself and reacting to the demands of an audience?

JM: No. I would think my creative process is fairly pure. It takes its own course. On the other hand, I'm not a purity freak. I'm not prejudiced against outside influences. I like

collage—you know, inserting prerecorded music. It's like adding a piece of found object into a painting.

DE: Have you actually been sampling records?

JM: No. But I used to make tape loops with music from Burundi, which I thought was the greatest rock 'n' roll I ever heard. That was way before world beat became so popular. As a matter of fact, people thought I was out of my mind, because while they liked rock 'n' roll, they didn't really like its

IT NEVER EVEN MADE IT INTO THE '60S

roots. Now all that's been assimilated.

DE: How did you get into African drumming?

JM: I was always interested in rhythm, so I had a lot of ethnic records. I've always thought about the spirits of music, you know. Like rock 'n' roll: people keep writing songs about how rock 'n' roll will never die. Well, rock 'n' roll died a long time ago. It never even made it into the '60s. The roll went out of it. What died was the push beat, the remnant from swing and boogie-woogie. And when it died what was left was just rock—a more vertical beat. A certain joy went out of rock 'n' roll, and what was left was a militancy—which I guess makes sense because of the times.

DE: You once said you didn't like playing to large crowds because you thought that the masses of people were buying your records based on illusory ideas of you.

JM: Well, I had enough of the ham in me to enjoy being the center of attention of a small group. But on the big stage, there's a bigger pressure. The bulk of people are manipulated by the industry, because

they're so uncertain of their own taste. Many of them are sheep and have to be told what to like. That keeps the mercantile coffers full.

AND WHAT WAS LEFT WAS JUST ROCK"

DE: Are you saying that you don't like fan worship because it's not honest, like they're not really digging you for what you are?

JM: Some are and some aren't. How do you separate them? Basically I couldn't buy that overnight there suddenly was this kind of mass adoration coming at me. It didn't seem real. And, of course, it wasn't. Some of them stay with you; you're drawn together like friends through a genuine affinity. And the others are kind of phenomenon seekers. They see a little action, but they

don't really know what's going on.

DE: David Byrne once said that he writes songs by setting nonsense words to a beat and then later fitting in real words syllable by syllable. I assume that you write your lyrics first, because they're literary and poetic.

JM: No. I set them to the music, which I write first. Sometimes the music wants phonetics that don't really appear a lot in English. Right now I've got a song that wants to be written in Spanish or Italian. It's still waiting for words, but it wants to be made up of words that end in o.

DE: How would you describe Jaco Pastorius's impact on your music?

JM: Prior to Jaco, I was questioning the bass's role in music. I would hum melodies to bass players and ask them to play them, and they'd refuse me and say, "That's not

the root of the chord, Joni." And then I'd say, "Why does the bass have to play the root of the chord?" In a way, I feel like I dreamed Jaco. I mean, he was exactly what I was waiting for, sonically: the big round sound and the different approach to the bottom end of music. But I think when I met Jaco it was pre-cocaine, because cocaine was not a good drug for him. Disastrous, actually.

DE: Prince always cites you as a major inspiration. What do you think he assimilated from your music?

JM: Well, Prince has assimilated some of my harmony, which, because it comes out of my guitar tunings, is peculiar. A lot of times my chords depict complex emotions—Joni's weird chords. Prince saw me play when he was very young in Minneapolis, and I remember seeing him in the front row, because his eyes are so unusual. You know, they're, like, Egyptian.

DE: It's amazing that you would remember someone from the audience. You must have seen so many faces.

JM: Yeah, but I remember I played a lot to him because his eyes were so unusual. Every time the light would spill down there, and he'd kind of hide inside his coat and look up at me.

DE: How's the art world treating you?

JM: Well, the thing about the art world is that everyone wants to pigeonhole the artists. And the problem I've run into is that to align myself with a gallery means to really curtail my freedom. I paint in, like, four different styles, but they want you to get a recognizable style going, like Lichtenstein or something. But in a way, everything you appreciate goes into you and comes out sooner or later. It creates the mulch for later work.

DE: I like that idea. Chogyam Trungpa, the Tibetan lama, once said that everything in

life is fertilizer: you scatter it on the field of awakening. Rather than saying that everything you hate about yourself is shit and that you're going to get rid of it.

JM: He loved the word "shit," didn't he?

DE: Trungpa did some very weird things.

JM: Oh, yeah. He was the bad boy of Zen. I wrote a song about a visit I made to him called "Refuge of the Road." I consider him one of my great teachers, even though I saw him only three times. Once I had a fifteen-minute audience with him in which we argued. He told me to quit analyzing. I told him I couldn't—I'm an artist, you know. Then he induced in me a temporary state where the concept of "I" made to him, which lasted for three days.

DE: Wow, that's very rare. Immediate transmission.

JM: Immediate, and from then on it was my decision whether to make that my life. But

you can't function from there as an artist.

DE: Did you ever tell him how much you learned from him?

JM: Yes. At the very end of Trungpa's life I went to visit him. I wanted to thank him. He was not well. He was green and his eyes had no spirit in them at all, which sort of stunned me, because the previous times I'd seen him he was quite merry and puckish—you know, saying "shit" a lot. I leaned over and looked into his eyes, and I said, "How is it in there? What do you see in there?" And this voice came, like, out of a void, and it said, "Nothing." So, I went over and whispered in his ear, "I just came to tell you that when I left you that time, I had three whole days without self-consciousness, and I wanted to thank you for the experience." And he looked up at me, and all the light came back into his face, and he goes, "Really?" And then he sank back into this black void again.

DE: How would you sum up Trungpa's effect on your life?

JM: Well, who knows? His particular lineage uses a teaching device that involves shocking you. Trungpa stopped me in my tracks. Made a space. Wham. He pushed back all this stuff, and it stayed pushed back for three days.

DE: I once asked a Tibetan lama about durability. He just took my head in his hand and smacked our heads together. It was, like, *bonk*. He said, "You think too much."

JM: You are a bright cookie, you know that? Your questions have almost been too cerebral for me.

DE: Sorry. They have been a bit dense.

JM: But on the other hand, I like what most might consider stupid questions.

DE: As in, What's it like to be a singer?

JM: Um, that's not a bad one. I could answer that. ■

Interview by Dimitri Ehrlich Photographs by Matthew Rolston





