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Pleasant Distractions or Life Savers? The impact and appeal of Joni Mitchell's songs

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Abstract

When talking about her song writing, Joni Mitchell said, 'I get letters from people that give me some idea of how the songs go into their life. The interesting ones are life-changing. Malka Marom, having heard "I Had A King," went home that night and left her husband.' However, Mitchell added that most of the time her music is 'a pleasant distraction.'

Another for whom hearing Joni Mitchell's songs was life-changing is Amy Wadge who sings 'I played Joni till my fingers bled' in her number, 'These Are The Songs (that saved my life).' Amy co-wrote the platinum selling 'Thinking Out Loud' with Ed Sheeran who, at the Glastonbury Music Festival of 2014, was given the opportunity to choose any artist living or dead to top the bill of his ideal music 'Fantasy Festival'; he chose Joni Mitchell. It is evidence of the continuing power of Joni Mitchell's work that these singers are from different and younger generations; testimonies to the enduring appeal of her work.

For those, including young contemporary song writers at the top of their game, who experience Joni Mitchell's music as more than a 'pleasant distraction,' what are the qualities within the songs that have so deeply affected them? Are there particular songs of Joni's that have changed lives, possibly even been life savers?

Using personal narratives from musicians and members of the Joni Mitchell Discussion List (JMDL) this paper considers Joni Mitchell's songs amongst her most knowledgeable and dedicated aficionados. From a humanistic perspective, it establishes similarities and differences of the emotional impact of Joni Mitchell's songs, locating them as a tool people use to better understand their lives.

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Introduction

'I played Joni till my fingers bled' sang Amy Wadge in 'These Are The Songs (that saved my life).' Amy co-wrote the platinum selling 'Thinking Out Loud' with Ed Sheeran who, at the Glastonbury Music Festival of 2014, was given the opportunity to choose any artist living or dead to top the bill of his ideal music 'Fantasy Festival'; he chose Joni Mitchell. It is evidence of the continuing power of Joni Mitchell's work that these singers are from significantly younger generations, yet testify to the enduring appeal of her work. But is it true that songs can be life savers? Or, as Joni said herself, are for most people her songs merely a 'pleasant distraction'?

Joni's music has been an important part of my life since my brother first heard her music in 1968, thought I might like it and bought me the first album, 'Song to a Seagull.' The phrase 'soundtrack to my life' is clichéd but for me has a degree of truth: I could write a book about my personal experiences of her music but, for the purposes of this paper, I intend to relate Joni's work to my professional role as a counsellor.

An exploratory research study was undertaken early in 2015 to inquire into the significance of Joni's songs in people's lives. Are they regarded primarily as entertainment or is there evidence that the songs might enable people to achieve a better understanding of their lives? Following discussion of some themes that emerged from the study, we present two case studies constructed from participants' stories. There is a brief account of the use of one of Joni's songs in my counselling practice before I venture an answer to the question.

JMDL

The study was undertaken amongst the knowledgeable fan base who comprise the Joni Mitchell Discussion List (JMDL), a daily email exchange which considers all matter connected to the life and work of Joni Mitchell. It has over 800 subscribers and this year celebrates its nineteenth year of existence. Founded by Les Irvin, the Joni List started in 1996 and I joined in 1998. The range of topics discussed is extensive, from the lyrical meanings people ascribe to Joni's songs through harmonic and chord progressions, Joni's life history, her place in queer history, cross-dressing as 'Art Nouveau' and the perennial question, what did she mean by 'Your notches, liberation, doll' in the song 'Don't Interrupt The Sorrow.' Many people on the list are first class musicians and have made substantial contributions to maintaining Joni's music as a vibrant force. Musician Dave Blackburn, as well as performing nine of Joni's albums live with his band and partner, Robin Adler, recently transcribed 'Paprika Plains' in its entirety and made it available for free on the Joni Mitchell web site. Singer Laurie Antonioli recently took part in the San Francisco Jazz Tribute to Joni and produced a fine album of her own. Bob Muller provides a weekly download of covers of Joni's songs. Over the years, Joni List members have worked out her tunings, held festivals, JoniFests, all over the world. The performances and get-togethers are wonderful offshoots of JMDL and it's fair to call JMDL a vibrant community.

Method

We adopted an interpretive approach to the research. A short questionnaire was devised inviting statements about the respondent's views of the short and long term effects of Joni Mitchell's songs. The questionnaire was emailed to twelve members of the JMDL and ten replied. The questionnaire was also used as basis for a personal interview with Amy Wadge.

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The questions were:

1. Please name a song of Joni's that has particularly affected you. If it feels important to name more than one song, please feel able to do so.
2. Please tell me something about the circumstances in which you first heard the song(s), (perhaps how old you were, where you were, any significant relationships at the time) or anything else you feel important.
3. How did the song(s) affect you and what was your response?
4. What has been the long term effect of the experience of the song(s)?

A fifth question was asked inviting the participants to add anything further.

Participants were also invited to locate themselves in a number of standard classifications: gender, age, country of residence, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and social class. No statistical significance was planned in the study as it was intended to be an exploratory exercise, a possible pilot for a more substantial study, but we thought it important to collect this contextual information.

Analytical Frame

For its analytical approach, the research draws on two academic fields: from humanistic counselling and from biographical research.

For the purposes of this paper, an optimistic, humanistic belief has been adopted, that people innately move towards self-actualisation and growth (Rogers 1967). Humanistic approaches to counselling and psychotherapy prioritise the ways in which individuals perceive themselves consciously, value the choices of clients and tend to be phenomenological (Spinelli 1989).

In the field of biographical research, Goodson et al (2010) explored ways in which adults may or may not learn from their life experiences through the construction of stories about their lives. They drew attention to ways in which stories have differing *narrative quality* and differing *efficacy*, characteristics that may reveal how people learn 'in' and 'through' their lives. Biesta and Tedder (2007) [see also Tedder and Biesta, 2009] connect biographical learning with narrative theory, noting that the differences between the stories people tell 'correlate with ways in which people learn from their lives and with ways in which such learning bears significance for how they conduct their lives' (p. 79). They make a distinction between learning from the process of narrating a story about life and a process of learning from having a story that can be reflected on and shared with others.

Our approach to the research was influenced by aspects of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in that we wanted to identify and understand the significant constructs of our respondents that they defined in the stories they shared about their lives. We were also sensitive to the discourse that they employed in responding to questions: the study was prompted in part by the thought that music is a field of popular culture, a discourse of images, metaphors and ideas, with which people frequently understand and explain their lives through storytelling. We wanted to know whether the songs of Joni Mitchell function in this way. However, we would not at this stage claim rigour in using grounded theory or discourse analysis for the understanding of our data.

Findings and Responses

Our participants emerged as residents of North America and Europe; they were aged in the main over 50 so most would have been teenagers in the 1960s and young adults in the 1970s.

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However, while some discovered Joni's music in their teenage years, there were others who said her music did not become significant for them until they were in their 30s or 40s. Our participants include both gay and straight people and several references to university suggested that most were well-educated.

The questions were intended to be focussed and structured, but the respondents came at the questionnaire in a variety of ways. Some were very specific with their responses, giving brief or extended answers to different questions, whilst others responded in an alternative structure, using our questions as a springboard for reflection on life experiences and the relationship of Joni's songs to them. In one case, an extended reflection used song phrases as sub-headings. In two responses, the length and depth of the comments suggested a deep desire or need to communicate about themselves and their lives and our questionnaire had provided an opportunity to disclose the importance of Joni Mitchell's songs to their recall and understanding of certain key events.

The song that was most frequently mentioned in response to the first question was 'Hejira.' Hejira is transliteration of the Arabic word hijra, which means 'journey', often referring to the migration of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622. Within the song, Mitchell herself notes that she 'sees something of myself in everyone' and it is perhaps the projections of both Joni and the listener that have led to this song being cited as significant for so many. Joni writes of a journey which starts and ends with

*I'm travelling in some vehicle, I'm sitting in some café
A defector from the petty wars*

At the beginning, Joni is a defector from petty wars that shell shock love away; but by the end she is a defector from petty wars only until 'Love sucks (her) back that way.' Between the beginning and the end, there are reflections on the existential 'givens' of Freedom and Responsibility, of Death, Isolation and Meaninglessness. All are scrutinized. Finding one's relationship to the world and the existential has pervaded Joni's work. Why are we here? What are we doing? How are we relating to the planet, to ourselves and to others?

Our data suggest such questions resonate with many listeners. Some of the comments made about that song were:

Participant 1

I felt as though the song, which also references death 'the granite markers, tributes to finality, to eternity' became a metaphor for the entire life experience, not just a mere slice of it.

Participant 3

The lyrics became more meaningful with time, to the point where they come to me from time to time, as do the lyrics of many of Mitchell's other songs, to bring additional meaning to situations I encounter throughout life.

Participant 4

A song of wisdom, experience and journey.

This draws attention to the way that, for many of our participants, the songs are important ways with which they construct meaning in their lives.

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Immersion in our questionnaire data identified several significant themes though it was also noticeable what our respondents did not say as well as what they did. Firstly, it was striking that relatively little was said about Joni Mitchell's instrumental music: one respondent noted her 'unusual chordal structures' and another characterised her music as 'dreamy and trancelike.' A professional musician described Joni's music as 'the most complete musical experience that I've ever had' and a fellow songwriter commented on Joni's innovative use of guitar and voice. Yet no one used terms like 'melody' or 'tune' in their accounts of the impact of the songs, no one wrote about 'rhythm' or 'dance', and no one wrote about the quality of instrumental playing.

Secondly, it was interesting that only one of our participants had much to say about Joni's appearance. She thought that Joni 'made being a smart girl look meaningful and pretty and fun, a little glamorous' and recalled:

Participant 6

As a teenage girl with blonde hair, I idolized those that looked like me that seemed to offer a role model... I did not think [Joni] was all that beautiful...I thought she was very interesting and a lot older than me; very strong featured and didn't smile; a little odd perhaps. I did not see her as some object to be viewed, but a strong voice to listen to.

For this participant, Mitchell was potentially a role model but no one else spoke of Joni's appearance.

A simple word count of the transcribed data reveals that the word 'song' was frequently used in the discourse; this was unsurprising given that our questions specifically asked about their short and long term significance. However, only two respondents used the word 'singer' in their comments and one of those respondents was outlining her own musical career. While the songs, Joni's work, are important, the significance of the singer remains more elusive.

What our participants did write about are the texts of the songs: one praised the literary qualities and another Joni's ability to conjure beautiful images. They write noticeably about the emotions they associate with the songs: one wrote about 'uncontrollable weeping' at breaking up with a girlfriend but also of being 'inspired to go deep into my own psyche.' Another remembered the 'waves of sadness and confusion my adolescent mind was experiencing' at the end of a relationship. A third wrote of the 'anger' associated with the death of his partner, yet the capacity of one of Joni's songs to help him find his way through the stages of grief.

As was noted earlier, the songs are important ways with which listeners construct meaning in their lives. In other words, they have a significant learning function, they provide tools with which people make judgements about their lives, particularly in relation to learning about emotions and relationships:

Participant 1

It's made me smarter, more sensitive, more understanding to the myriad of situations that people are in. Understanding that life is an ever-evolving combination of hope and hopelessness.

Participant 2

Joni Mitchell... held a hallowed place for me for 'emotional bloodletting' as she seems to have done for many others.

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Participant 7

jonimusic was some kind of litmus test - we believed that we could not have a relationship with someone who did not 'get' Joni.... if you could not understand and appreciate that, you were not on a level with us to make a relationship work.

Almost all the respondents commented about their awareness of the artistry of being a song writer. For some this was linked with how they saw the relationship they had with the artist:

Participant 2

The long term effect of the song I suppose was establishing a powerful connection to the writer of it, wanting to learn about the art and craft of songwriting, record making, and reaching people ...

Participant 3

she has been my spiritual guide since then. I don't want to make her seem something that she is not, since she is above all very human and not the goddess some might want her to be, but I consider myself so lucky to have 'met' her along the way, even though I've never met her in person.

Participant 5

I had come to trust Joni Mitchell. She was and is obviously a true artist, more interested in growing than becoming a hit machine. ... She is one of a kind and I feel fortunate to be living at the same time she is on this earth and I am grateful for every record that I have had the pleasure to hear as they were released over the past 40 years.

Participant 6 listed a series of bullet points summarising what Joni Mitchell means to her. She includes the statements: 'The power of the spoken/sung word and emotional introspection made public. The thrill of truth and discovery intellectually on display, as well as emotionally.' For this participant, Joni 'Helped me get through the hard times, as well as the good.'

Two Case Studies

In order to undertake the task of uncovering further the emotional impact of Joni's songs, we have chosen to focus here on two members from the JMDL who most clearly shared stories about events in their lives and the impact of Joni's songs when they replied to our questionnaire. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of these respondents. Matt is a sixty year old gay man living in the USA and Marie a sixty four year old woman, also American, who, in response to the box marked 'sexuality,' responded 'A Good Thing.' Both narrated substantial stories of loss: Matt linked Joni's songs with his experiences of the illness and death of a partner while Marie linked them with a search for meaning after the death of her parents.

Marie wrote about her life in a highly creative format, ignoring the structure of the questionnaire but embarking instead on a piece of creative biographical writing. She was reflexive as a respondent, self-aware in writing bracketed asides about her writing and about influences on the comments she makes:

I was coming of age in the 60's as a teenager and the 70's as a young adult, at a time when the youth culture and the issues of the 60's were foremost in my gaze. (Damn, JM...phrases pop up all the time of hers. Can't help it...her songs are like tattoos. Damn it, there I go again.) It's fun to quote her turn of phrases when I'm talking, most people don't get that I'm quoting, they just think I'm brilliant. So Joni, hats off to you, my friend.

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She establishes a historical context for her exploration of popular music by reference to the seminal Beatles album Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band that was released in 1967:

my best friend and I would listen to every chord, every note, every nuance to wrestle meaning from a piece of music that really spoke to us. So really, it was the Beatles that started me on my way to listen to contemporary music as albums with themes.

Marie is Participant 6 mentioned earlier who was impressed by Joni's appearance and she seems to view Joni's early appearance as a long-haired folk singer as an image of strength:

I liked the strong women I saw and heard. I wanted to be like them. If I got the chance to ask Joni a question, I suppose I'd ask her when and why she started wearing her hair in that iconic look. And my question is a serious one. ... I thought she was remarkable; her chords, her voice, her words cut like a knife, a beautiful knife. ... She had a power over the audience and they really were listening to her. That seemed important.

Using the first line from the Joni song 'River,' Marie writes a subheading 'It's coming on Christmas' and narrates the sudden death of her parents:

The fun of leaving home to major in art at the university in the big city was suddenly and horribly interrupted when my parents died in a Christmas car crash on the way to do some shopping in that same city. The year was 1971, I was only 19 and immediately 'orphaned'. The world turned upside down after that. Grief was a constant visitor. It was a lot to handle.

Her response to the tragedy is to undertake a tour of Europe that she recalls as a quest to find meaning in the world. She begins with a search for meaning through art but learns that she shares the quest with others:

My tourist plan was to seek out a lot of the landmarks of my Art History classes; the paintings, the cathedrals, the cobblestone streets....anything meaningful I could fill myself up with. I found I was not alone. I met many, many people that summer, all doing the same thing. I felt like I belonged.

A key moment becomes associated with a Joni Mitchell album:

Someone asked me what I was doing on my sojourn and I just stated that my parents had recently passed and decided to take off and see Europe and deal with my grief (I had never said those words to a stranger) and I just broke down crying. That same day, someone at the front desk had an album playing beautiful, haunting music with a lot of words. It was Joni Mitchell singing her Songs to a Seagull album.

She finds that similar life resonances are established with other albums: the 'Blue' album linking with her European adventure while the songs on 'Hejira' resonate with a transition when she leaves an established home and takes to the roads in a campervan.

Marie's account illustrates the capacity of Joni Mitchell's songs to resonate with important life events and become associated with strong emotions. They appear to function as tools with which a new understanding of life experience is achieved. The song titles are used as icons for key events in her life story.

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Matt's narrative is unusually descriptive, frank and open in style. At times he evokes images that might have come from the pen of Joni Mitchell herself; in writing about his weekend behaviour during the 'aftermath' of his partner's illness and death, he says:

weekend nights drinking ... bourbon and Coke and watching VHS tapes of old movies. The caffeine and sugar allowed me to stay conscious longer while I got more intoxicated.

Matt selected two songs to relate to his experiences. One song was 'Facelift' from 'Taming the Tiger' (1998) and the other was Joni's lament on the album 'Turbulent Indigo' (1994) based on the story of Job, 'The Sire of Sorrow'.

In response to one question, Matt writes about his earlier life, recalling the challenges of growing up as a gay man in a small town in the Midwest.

I was not prepared for the emotional resonance that I would find in Joni Mitchell's words. They spoke so directly to my confusion about my sexual identity and my struggle to come out of the closet.

He quotes lines from Joni's songs that articulate for him experiences of humiliation and yearning. He recalls:

The desperate longing to find real love and having no real idea of what that meant

Matt relates how, in February 1993, he had lost his beloved partner of nine years to AIDS:

'The Sire of Sorrow' described how I felt after that gut-wrenching loss and I found many lines that seemed to speak directly to me about that and more specifically that I associated with the devastating effects of AIDS.

Matt describes the night sweats his partner had endured, referencing specifically these phrases from Joni's song: 'Already on a bed of sighs and screams', 'was it the sins of my youth', 'my loves are dead or dying or they don't come near.' He says:

I had begun to feel that some 'tireless watcher' was making 'everything I dread and everything I fear come true'.

I was moved by receiving, reading and understanding Matt's powerful testament and thought it required further exploration. It seemed as though he was trying to come to terms with some dreadful events. I wondered if Matt was asking himself the question 'was it the sins of my youth?' that somehow related to those dreadful events? Homophobia was prevalent at that time and certainly the media reported fundamentalists who viewed AIDS as a punishment of gay men from God. Matt replied:

When Ted and I were first diagnosed with HIV we both agreed that we must have been infected with the virus before we met one another. There was to be no assigning of blame. I had come to the conclusion some time before that sex itself has nothing to do with morality. The thought of people who think AIDS is a judgment visited on gay men by a righteous God as punishment for our sinful ways sickens me. I don't like to think there are other humans who feel that way about me even I know there are. But I never, never bought into that mindset.

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From this it would seem that, whilst acknowledging the presence of homophobia at the time, he has maintained the sense of his right to be himself and never, as he puts it, 'bought into that mind set.' I also asked Matt if he thought that these songs of Joni's were healing, and the answer seems to be in some ways yes and in others, no.

Discovering the beautifully crafted song 'Facelift' after such an intense relationship to 'The Sire of Sorrow' seems to come as a relief to Matt:

'Facelift' came along nearly two years after Ted's death. I had come to the conclusion that I would never experience the love that Ted and I had for each other again and was beginning to resign myself to living the rest of my life alone. Although this song deals in large part with Joni Mitchell's relationship with her mother and her mother's attitude toward out of wedlock sexual relationships, I heard a different message coming through to me. Why should I deny myself the happiness and pleasure of sharing myself and my life with another human being who loved me and whom I loved? In a way, the song gave me permission to love again. Later in the fall of 1995, I met Thomas.

Matt concludes about the significance and the emotional effect of both songs:

I suppose, in a way, these two songs helped me get through the two final stages of grief. Job's anger brought out my anger at what seemed to me to be the senseless death of a beautiful man whom I loved with my whole heart and soul. Joni's wise words to her mother helped me free myself from my grief, accept the loss and enabled me to move past it. I discovered that happiness is indeed the best facelift.

Like Marie, Matt's account illustrates the themes of Joni Mitchell's songs resonating with important life events and becoming associated with powerful emotions. Matt's data shows him using lines and phrases from the songs to articulate his learning about relationships and life experiences.

Working with survivors of abuse

When counselling survivors of abuse from religious institutions in Ireland, I have referred to Joni's song, 'The Magdalene Laundries.' Most of my clients were taking part in legal proceedings for redress from the Catholic Church. Their stories were harrowing in the extreme and, at times, nothing I could find seemed able to capture sufficiently the feelings that the survivors were trying to convey.

Joni's song describes a place where 'fallen' women were locked away, their human rights removed, they were treated as slave labour, imprisoned, often beaten and had their babies taken away at birth by the nuns in charge. Several films have depicted the regimes the Laundries operated. Joni's song is a description of an 'unmarried girl' who was 'branded as a Jezebel' and taken to the Laundries for 'the way men looked at me.' As a beautiful young woman in the 1960s who herself had fallen pregnant without being married and had her child adopted, Joni had walked a similar path and this fact contributes to the song feeling completely authentic. This authenticity undoubtedly conveyed itself to those who survived the abuse they endured at the Laundries and other religious institutions.

During the years I worked with survivors, I played the song on three occasions. Each time, the phrase 'lame bulbs' was commented upon by the survivors, along with the heartfelt cry that follows the phrase. Joni sings:

*One day I'm going to die here too
And they'll plant me in the dirt
Like some lame bulb*

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*That never blooms come any spring
Not any spring*

At the end of the song, I would try to mirror closely the person in front of me by holding kindly eye contact, following their posture and movements as we breathed in and out together. In person-centred counselling, such mirroring is intended to enable the client to experience a listener as empathically alongside and with them. Our first and most profound experiences of mirroring are usually as a baby and, if we are fortunate to receive good enough parenting, it is usually naturally given by those who care and love us. As adults, we can experience mirroring dissolving our feeling of being alone. There can be a strong sense of relief or release within that contact and it was this quality of connection I was trying to achieve during these long moments, when a client would quietly say 'Lame bulb..... that's me.'

The Irish survivors of abuse in religious institutions who were often neglected as children may never have experienced someone attempting to understand or empathise with them. The experience can be overwhelming. I was deeply moved to be present in the moments when Joni sang the 'Magdalene Laundries' to those who had endured extreme suffering and torture. My own words as, here and now, I try to describe my experience with the survivors strike me as completely inept.

Conclusion

Using the perspective of my professional role, I initiated an enquiry into the qualities and significance in people's lives of the songs of an elusive and charismatic artist. The study has led to some conclusions in two areas: one concerning the artist and her work (the songs she composed, arranged and recorded over four decades); the second concerning the power of those songs in the lives of others.

Concerning Joni the artist, our respondents did not particularly highlight her musical achievements. Joni's instrumental playing, innovative tunings, arrangements, production skills and voice were not singled out. However, the literary qualities and images of her music which combine into 'trance like' songs is regarded as significant. Alongside this, several respondents mentioned their 'trust' of Joni's work. Joni emerges as a character less concerned with making hits but with making music that is true for her and it is this perception of Joni as an artist of integrity which seems to assist the way her music reaches the respondents. The research also suggests that Joni fulfils a cultural need for people to have a guide or advocate to help deal with existential challenges. This idea of existential guide may well be a role Joni is entitled to adopt given her personal exploration of her inner depths, but is a position she would most likely resist. A fellow singer-songwriter said that 'For every minute of their lives someone's got a Joni Mitchell song' and it is Joni's ability to write songs with relevance to everyday experience that gives us a further clue to their potency.

In responding to questions about the impact of her songs, the stories shared were predominantly accounts of Joni's songs assisting the understanding and the processing of existential givens. The two case studies report the way that Joni's songs have become connected with traumatic events in their lives.

On the three occasions I have met Joni, I found her to be kind, humble and very down to earth, not the mythical figure I imagined as a youngster, deeply affected by her music. It was Joni's extraordinary ordinariness that was impressive. It can also be easy to forget that, in amongst the existential, Joni has written songs of great humour and lightness. Songs like 'Chelsea Morning,' 'Lucky Girl', 'Underneath the Streetlight', 'You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio' and 'Dancing Clown' give an insight into the pool playing dancer, the fun loving aspect of Joni that is frequently overlooked.

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Our initial question asked whether the songs of Joni Mitchell are ‘pleasant distractions’ or life savers. They may well be both and our findings indicate that people undoubtedly use them as a tool to better understand their lives. Our evidence suggests that an interesting process is happening with Joni’s songs: the images and ideas that are expressed, the language and the poetry within an innovative musical landscape provide a discourse with which people learn to give significance to their life experiences. The data suggests that, in developing a narrative, some use the discourse to help articulate the meaning they find in life events while others use it to interrogate their life stories. This process was clearly in evidence for Marie and Matt, the subjects in our case studies, and in evidence also with the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries. Joni seems to find words and music where others simply cannot.

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