

# Joni Mitchell savors her ongoing musical adventure

By GREG KOT  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Back when she was loosening her ties to the folk world to explore jazz and world music, Joni Mitchell was asked about her career goals. There was only one, she replied: "To remain interested in the music."

Nearly 20 years after distilling her artistry to those six well-chosen words, Mitchell ponders whether she has succeeded.

"It died for me a few years ago, and I intended to quit," Mitchell replies. "But a few things have happened to give me a new enthusiasm. And then I began spending time with my daughter and grandson." Last year, Mitchell was reunited with the child she put up for adoption 35 years ago, when the singer was a struggling, if not starving, young artist. She has no other children and is unmarried.

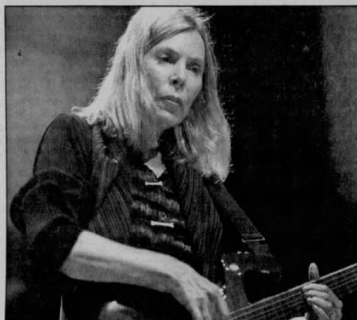
"I was recording some music with Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock recently and they were going on and on about my [vocal] tone, which was odd because I've known and worked with those guys for years, so why should it be different now?" she says. "And the only thing I can think of is that the coming of my family has done something to my central core. It's like there was a hole in there that is fleshed-out now."

Born in Canada but now living in California, her home for several decades, Mitchell, 54, is slowly re-emerging from a long period of artistic seclusion. Her career dates back to her mid-'60s coffee-house youth, when her finely honed songs won raves and were being covered by performers such as Judy Collins (who had a hit with Mitchell's "Both Sides Now") and Tom Rush ("The Circle Game"). Mitchell and her rapturous multi-octave voice invaded the national consciousness with indelible songs such as "Big Yellow Taxi," "Help Me" and "Free Man in Paris."

She was a beacon for songwriters and thinkers, forlorn lovers and closet poets, pop fanatics who loved her tunes and jazzers who were wowed by her unconventional chords. Her effect on aspiring female rock and pop musicians was incalculable.

"Her writing was so good — so literate, so descriptive," says Lucinda Williams, a Grammy-winning singer-songwriter who calls Mitchell an inspiration. "The fact that she was a woman and writing that way — there really weren't that many women doing that then. Judy Collins was there, and Joan Baez, but neither of them wrote the way Joni Mitchell did. That's why she made such a big impression on me and a whole bunch of other women who were picking up guitars."

Mitchell could easily have parlayed her penchant for introspective lyrics and memorable folk melodies into a career like James Taylor's, by creating variations on a successful formula that caters to a huge, loyal audience. But she chose a different path. For her, maintaining interest in the music meant pushing beyond the familiar. No one genre could ever hope to contain her.



Legendary singer and songwriter Joni Mitchell has experienced renewed enthusiasm for making music since reconciliation with her daughter, Kicouren Gibb, below.

PHOTO BY NIGHT RIDER NEWSPAPERS



"I came into the folk scene because it was easy and I did it as a hobby in art school to make some money — there was never any ambition or desire to be a performing animal," she says. Mitchell instead aspired to become a painter, and although she has become one (her artwork consistently adorns her album covers and has been exhibited around the world), she found in music a world of seemingly infinite possibility.

"I started out in folk with simple chords, but very soon an appetite for broader chords came about that weren't even on the guitar, so I began twiddling with tunings."

After the commercial triumph of "Court and Spark" (1974), Mitchell ventured into more esoteric territory on "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" (1975), which was castigated by Rolling Stone magazine as the year's worst album. Though Mitchell's hits dwindled, she kept following her muse, collaborating with the late jazz legend Charlie Mingus, incorporating Latin percussion and African drumming, and hiring adventurous jazz musicians such as Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius who gave her music a dreamy, searching, open-ended quality.

By the early '90s, Mitchell was getting frustrated speaking to the same band of 200,000 loyal album buyers every time out. "I'd been blacklisted from things (such as MTV, VH1 and commercial radio) ... I was doing good work, but record companies don't stay long

with artists anymore if you're not selling a certain number of records."

A new album, "Taming the Tiger," due out Sept. 29, reflects that enthusiasm. It is a lush, haunting work. "Stay in Touch" captures the first enigmatic pangs of romance with a lingering melody loosely based on a classical work by Rachmaninov, while "Harlem in Havana" is a sly update of Cab Calloway's mirthful brand of jazz. "Lead Balloon" is a fierce, funny swipe at corporate arrogance. "My Best to You" is an atmospheric interpretation of a 1940s cowboy-swing tune.

It arrives at a time when Mitchell is enjoying her highest artistic profile since the '70s. Prince sings her praises; Janet Jackson incorporates a sample from "Yellow Taxi" into her recent hit "Got 'Til It's Gone"; Billboard magazine recognizes her career achievements with its 1995 Century Award; the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year votes her into the pantheon alongside Bob Dylan and John Lennon.

Mitchell remains unimpressed. She pauses to drag on a cigarette. "You know, I played at the site of the original Woodstock the other day, and I took my kids — my daughter and my grandson had never seen me perform — and the audience was wonderful. Some people held up a poster 6 feet long saying 'Joni's Jazz,' which was encouraging, because the tendency of my music toward jazz is not for everybody. I sang 'Woodstock,' which was comically beautiful, because I wasn't in attendance at the original concert. But, I saw the movie."

Mitchell laughs her deep, nicotine laugh. She is in feisty spirits, opinionated and in love with the art of conversation, in love with art itself. She says her best days are still ahead. "It's so funny, I'm in this youth-oriented music business, yet artists, composers, painters — you don't really come into your own until you're in your 50s. It takes that long for you to assimilate your influences and make something of your own from them."