

**"Both Sides Now", a meteorologically
significant popular song**

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Many meteorologists, particularly those of the older generations, may have failed to note the highly meteorological content of the first verse of a recently current popular song, "Both Sides Now," by Joni Mitchell:

Bows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feathered canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way.

But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way.

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all.²

The first four lines provide a most picturesque description of fair weather cirrus and towering cumulus; the third line should be particularly appreciated by those who have had the experience of flying in a light aircraft trying to wend its way between cumulus congestus and/or cumulonimbus.

The next four lines express the frustrations that inclement weather so often imposes on both the forecaster and the

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public in general, including both occupational and recreational aspects.

The final four lines of this first verse should strike a particularly sensitive nerve among those who have been involved in the meteorological satellite program during or since its earlier days. Although earlier weather reconnaissance aircraft data and rocket photos had led Harry Wexler (1954, 1957) to prepare a rather remarkable prediction of how satellite cloud pictures might look, as discussed by Widger (1961) based primarily on the TIROS I data, most of us who worked with the early satellite cloud pictures would have readily confessed that we really didn't "know clouds at all" after first having a real chance to see them "from both sides now, from up and down." This was doubtless equally true of those involved in weather research aircraft programs, including the various Jet Stream projects, the several cloud physics projects, and others. And even now, although our knowledge is certainly far greater than before and many of our "cloud illusions" are now well dispelled, in many ways we still "really don't know clouds at all."

References

- Wexler, H., 1954: Observing the weather from a satellite vehicle. *J. British Interplanetary Society*, 13, 269-276.
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Widger, W. K., Jr., 1961: Satellite meteorology—fancy and fact (A tribute to astute visualization). *Weather*, 16, 47-55.