

# The hissing of summer lawns

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## Will You Take Me as I Am

Joni Mitchell's Blue Period

Michelle Mercer

Free Press: 240 pp., \$24.99

When Joni Mitchell thinks about confession, two things come to mind: witch hunts and Catholic priests. To be held up as the exemplar of confessional songwriting is not her preference. This comes through clearly in Michelle Mercer's study "Will You Take Me as I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period," considering Mitchell's career from the release of her album "Blue" in 1971 through the 1976 release of "Hejira."

What distinguishes this work from standard celebrity profiles is that it reads like a collection of cultural essays. We learn about Mitchell's Canadian childhood alongside an examination of how landscape affects musical style. Mitchell's relationship with Leonard Cohen comes during an analysis of the difference between songs and poetry. We see how Mitchell's childhood bout with polio led to her

creation of unconventional chord arrangements, her "chords of inquiry." A discussion of St. Augustine is used to demonstrate her thoughts on confessional songwriting.

"Will You Take Me" is also a work of literary criticism. Mercer references Plato's allegory of the cave and Sylvia Plath, James Joyce and Annie Dillard. She does not shy away from tangents, some successful, as when she links the dogma of folk tradition to T.S. Eliot's criticism; and some not so, such as dips into associative logic and Foucault. As she explores the distinctions among confessional, autobiographical and personal writing, Mercer uses her subject's own words (she conducted a trove of interviews with Mitchell) to illustrate her thesis that Mitchell helped make the personal songwriters of the late '60s and early '70s the literary successors to the Beats.

Mercer plays with the idea of Mitchell as modern-day St. Augustine, describing how they both take on dual roles of protagonist and narrator. A recurring theme is that Mitchell has suffered from her audience's inability to separate these identities. A coexistence of wisdom and misanthropy, exemplified when Mitchell reveals she



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**COMPLEX WOMAN:** Joni Mitchell's artistic output from "Blue" in 1971 through 1976's "Hejira" is essayed in "Will You Take Me as I Am."

hates Augustine, is characteristic of the persona she develops here. At one point, Mitchell mentions the impetus behind her revelations in song: to show fans "who they're worshipping."

Mitchell, who has a reputation as being somewhat imperious, seems irritated that the world may never recognize her work as an incarnation of the Great American Novel. However, the question of lack of humility cannot help but involve her identity as a woman. Many men who are notably pompous are often seen as charming — Mick Jagger, Kanye West, Norman Mailer — but Mitchell's ego can come

across as irksome. For example, she attributes her inability to remember people's names to not having enough room in her mind for proper nouns because of all her ideas.

In general, gender appears to be a fraught area for Mitchell; she is especially critical of other female artists. Mercer describes how differently Mitchell was treated when engaged in the same pursuits as her male contemporaries. There is a tension in the book between not wanting Mitchell to be seen as the female mascot of her generation and Mitchell's continual desire to be "one of the boys": Graham

Nash, James Taylor, Leonard Cohen, Jackson Browne and Neil Young. But although Mitchell insists on being seen as a simple tomboy who prefers the company of men, her more than platonic relationships with many of the "boys" complicates the issue. Mercer seems to imply that Mitchell used the loss of men's love as her muse.

Mercer's role is inconsistent in a way that serves almost as a formal tribute to Mitchell. The author fluctuates between being absent from the text, objectively relating events, and being very present, interjecting personal narrative and subjective criticism. A tale of a camping trip Mercer took with an ex-boyfriend and his father becomes a screed against Dan Fogelberg as some kind of selout bogeyman. Mercer clearly enjoys language play and appreciates Mitchell's lyrics; sometimes the author's metaphors are so strange as to be strikingly effective: The song "Sisotowbell Lane" has "the atmosphere of Louisa May Alcott's 'Little Women' crashing a Dungeons & Dragons game." With few exceptions, Mercer stays true to her intention to focus on the literary merit of Mitchell's force of lyric and melody.

Fortunately, Mercer doesn't take her subject or herself too seriously. She addresses nuances of Mitchell's art that have not been adequately recognized but does not lionize her. Rather, Mitchell is revealed as a complicated woman for whom being widely liked is both anathema and a great need. It's not clear whether Mitchell doesn't care how you take her or cares too much.

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