

The poet is the vainest of the vain, even before the ugliest of water buffalo doth he fan his tail."

I haven't been in the room five minutes and Joni Mitchell is quoting great chunks of Nietzsche at me.

"I've searched among them for an honest man, he muddies his waters that he may appear deep but from these waters all I've dredged up are old God's heads, old God's heads."

Fred Nietzsche's return to *NME* is sparked off by none other than Richard Jobson, poet, model, TV face and erstwhile Skid. He's just interviewed Joni for a show called *01 For London* and she's so bowled over by the man's poetic presence, she resorts to Nietzsche. I'm impressed. I do the obvious thing. I ask about Billy Idol.

How come you let Billy Idol sing on your album?

"The sneer".

Right.

"Sure. No one else can sing with such a sneer. I saw him at the Grammy and I thought this guy is old fashioned rock 'n' roll. He thinks he's Elvis. All the bad boy posturing is kind a sincere and humorous—the nearest the '80s get to the spirit of rock 'n' roll."

Phew! Nietzsche, Jobbo, Idol and the ghost of Elv The Pelv. Is it any wonder Joni Mitchell is still one of the more interesting '60s survivors? Alongside Neil Young's enduring weirdness, Leonard Cohen's obsessive devotion to the confessional and the fading hope that Dylan might pull himself together, Mitchell's muse has remained intact, capable of startling insight and uncanny detailed observation.

Now in her 40s, she is the Godmother to a generation of female troubadours that spans the whimsy of Vega, the naked protest of Chapman and the drifting frontier spirit of Michelle Shocked. She has long since left behind the "bare bones approach" herself and is decidedly offhand about odious comparisons:

"They're gonna run every girl with a guitar past me at one point or other. Always have done. When I came up, it was Baez and Judy Collins. It's unfortunate people can't relate to things or critics can't describe things without creating these comparisons. It does no one any favours".

Today's Joni Mitchell is very far removed from the folksy stereotype that took on the world with just voice and guitar for company. Looking back, however, '71's *Blue*—a stark, uniquely articulated "bare bones" album—stands tall as her first great work. With '74's *Court And Spark* and the truly magnificent landscape that was '75's *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, Mitchell offered us some beautifully constructed, unerring accurate yardsticks for the times. Each of those albums reflected a slice of contemporary America and a



Idol Talk

Poetry, short stories, music, painting . . . JONI MITCHELL is a woman of the arts. Her talent has stood the test of time and with the release of her 15th LP, she talks to SEAN O'HAGAN about her influences. Picture: BLEDDYN BUTCHER

portrait of the artist at one with her art.

Since then, it's been a process of refinement—only the juttery experimental tones of 'Mingus' sticking out like an unfocused, yet intriguing, exception. Three years ago she hit out at American morés with the refined anger of 'Dog Eat Dog', finding, like Jackson Browne, that she could no longer sit back in LA whilst the rest of the country edged beyond the pale. Now, we have 'Chalk Mark In A Rainstorm', her 15th album, complete with a supporting cast that includes Idol, Willie Nelson, Wendy & Lisa, Wayne Shorter and, on the current single 'My Secret Place', one Peter Gabriel.

"I kind a need a hit, I guess. I mean, I'm real pleased that people seem to

like this album better than the last few but a little more commercial action wouldn't go amiss. Sometimes I think I've been real out of step with the times—'Dog Eat Dog' and especially 'Wild Things Run Free'. I was singing love songs when the fashion was for cynicism. But everything comes round. People always come back to romance."

Alongside romance, Joni Mitchell's signature has been her literate songwriting, images constructed like a landscape seen from a passing train, fragments of narrative caught in motion and imbued with a painter's sense of composition. Since 'Court And Spark' she has moved from "line drawings and sketches to full blown paintings". I've always noted a certain cinematic tone and imagery in her

consistent use of background detail—bar room, houses, gardens, interiors. Often, there's an undercurrent of tension in her ability to place human dramas in a backdrop where the urban meets the elemental—check her sleeve painting for ' . . . Summer Lawns':

"Well, my work reflects the migration of my life. I was brought up in a tiny hamlet, a place where teams of horses delivered the fresh water for the village. When I was ten, I moved to the town but I still lived a life on the outskirts. I have a love of raw land that's stayed with me even in New York and LA. For a long time, I found cities tragic. In New York, I was a girl from the prairies with a severe case of the bends."

And in LA, at the turn of the '60s

"completely overhauling the way I heard music". His jazz tones and upfront melodies spilled out all over her best work but, according to Joni, "he had a big bushy ego that ruffled a lot of people but even his arrogance was appealing to me. Life got him in the end, he just didn't know when to stop and a lot of people were waiting for him on the way down. It was a real tragedy."

Apart from the unfortunate Pastorius, Joni has found some pretty disparate bedfellows along the way, from Lionel Ritchie to Charles Mingus—"he wanted his stock to go up before he died, there was an element of choosing me to write his epitaph, help ensure he got a bigger funeral"—Billy Idol to Wayne Shorter, Rod Steiger to Wendy & Lisa. There's even been a load of unreleased stuff in tandem with the Minneapolis midget.

"Prince has been a fan since' . . . Summer Lawns'. He loved 'Jungle Line', connected with it right away. Last year we did some songs with Wendy & Lisa."

That's it. They've never seen the light of day, another might-have-been album in Prince's back catalogue. Other than His Highness, she seems blissfully unconcerned by anyone currently trading the boards. A brief review of her favourite listening reveals a love for mid-period Miles Davis—'In A Silent Way', 'Nefertiti'—a shot of Stravinsky ("a real rock 'n' roller") and the more predictable nod to Lady Day and Piaf. Of late, her main inspiration has come from the short story writers that map out America's small town dramas:

"You heard of Alice Munro? Boy! I connect with her. She's a fellow Canadian and she writes about things I lived through. But I kinda slept through 'em. I didn't absorb them like her—detailed memories of childhood, family gatherings, events. I used to look to Dylan or Neil (Young) for song writing inspiration but now, there's no one really cutting it so you gotta turn to the short story tellers—Munro, Raymond Carver, the dirty realists. Since 'The Hissing Of Summer Lawns', I've been a frustrated short story writer but whereas Carver makes me think I can write short stories, Munro makes me think I can't."

And film?

"Tarkovsky—it's hard on the tailbone but it lingers in your mind, stays with you. That's why I did this video with Anton (Corbijn, director of 'My Secret Place'), I knew he was a big

and early '70s, she moved with a succession of musicians come lovers in a hermetically sealed world of post-hippy laid backness. It was a lifestyle with more of its share of casualties and those that didn't burn out, banded out.

"You gotta understand there are sprinters and long distance runners. Back in the drug worshipping era, everybody threw caution to the winds but there was a spirit of adventure, of being on the verge of something. Then, in the '70s, we kinda retreated into drugs because the dream died away. I was never a big druggie but I had my moments. I wrote some songs on cocaine 'cos, initially, it can be a creative catalyst. In the end, it'll fry you, kill the heart. I found it sent all the energy up my spine into the top of the brain. It kills the soul and gives you delusions of grandeur as it shuts down your emotional centre. Perfect drug for a hit man but not so good for a musician."

A while back, the fast lane killed Jaco Pastorius, a supremely gifted bass player whom Mitchell credits with

Tarkovsky fan when I saw the Depeche Mode video and those close ups of wind and grass. *Beautiful*. I like Fellini too. I thought he was a surrealist until I went to Italy. Now I realise he's a graphic realist!"

With her best record in years just behind her and a single on the verge of the charts, Joni Mitchell may yet find herself in the homes of people who know nothing of her past work. In the age of the short attention span, there are those who'll take the time to delve back into a body of work that repays close contact.

"Sometimes I think that the pop song is too debased a medium in the '80s. If all people want to write and sing about is sex and parties then it's time for me to bail out of this form of expression 'cos, when it comes to those two things, I'd rather do 'em than write about 'em. Then I think of all the flak I took for dealing with things that weren't supposed to be pop song themes. So I guess my work has always contained the question of how far the pop song could go, what themes it could hold without collapsing. I guess I should just hammer away at that one."