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70TH BIRTHDAY EXCLUSIVE

JONI MITCHELL

"We need goddesses
— but I don't want
to be one"

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AND MORE...

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JONI MITCHELL

Interview: Jian Ghomeshi

Photograph: Henry Diltz

“Oh yeah.
Sure.
I blazed a
lot of trails.”

Hippy Goddess... First Lady Of The Canyon... Peer of Dylan and Cohen... Woe betide anyone who deals with the great JONI MITCHELL in such reductive terms. On the eve of her 70th birthday, one of the most important artists of the past 50 years gives a rare, revealing and provocative interview that defies such simplifications. From being “the only virgin in art school” to being “excommunicated from the airwaves”, Mitchell discusses her remarkable career, and the battles she fought along the way. “I didn’t really have a peer group,” she says. “I’m too good for a girl, right?”





Queen of the desert:
Mitchell near Las Vegas,
Nevada, May 22, 1978

JONI MITCHELL



Joni Mitchell shot for *Vogue* magazine, November 20, 1968

IT'S NOT EASY to get in touch with Joni Mitchell. She doesn't carry a cell phone around. There's not a lot of email exchanges. You have to call her house, and she has to answer the phone. If you're going to do this, you're going to deal with her. She graciously agreed to let the interview happen at her place in Beverly Hills. It's quite a large, sprawling house, with a Spanish vibe to it. She's lived there since 1974. There's a fountain in the courtyard, and there's a lot of art on the walls. A lot of it is her art. There's some photographs of her, performing, or with friends or contemporaries. Lots of plants. It feels like a very fertile, creative space. I saw her studio where she paints and writes, and her bedroom.

She was very generous. I was quite astounded about how accommodating she was about letting us into her space. She comes alive at night; she does a lot of her creative work at night then sleeps until the early afternoon. The later our interview went, the more energised she became...

This place is quite remarkable, it feels like a sanctuary. Yeah, that's what it is.

There's artwork on all the walls, most of it yours. How do you decide what makes it onto the walls? Oh, it's changing all the time. They're moving around. I only paint things that mean something. That's Saskatchewan at 40

below, this is Oshun, the Nigerian Water Goddess. You know, I'm a water junkie.

And there's self-portraits around as well?

There's some self-portraits. That's where I'm building my house in British Columbia, that's my property. That's Edmonton on the banks of the North Saskatchewan.

Does all of your creativity – painting, writing songs, poetry – come from the same well? I believe there are different languages, and some things don't translate as well from one language to another. So I've got vignettes of things that happened that would make a good short film, but wouldn't make a good song, right?

So is it about assigning the idea or the inspiration? Kind of. The paintings, they're like memories on the wall. There's a lot of where I come from in here or land that I love.

If painting and music are different languages, how do you describe the languages? I'm a painter first, and I kind of apply painting principles to music. I think my production skills are visual. You don't need to read in the [recording] studio because you can go straight to tape, and I play with literate musicians who can transcribe my changes. So it's a good thing I don't know about that.

So painting is your first language? Painting is my first language.

You said in the *Woman Of Heart And Mind* documentary, "Anytime I make a record, it's followed by a painting period. It's a good crop rotation, painting to clear the head."

It feels like you're saying that music is a vocation, painting is liberation... No, I wouldn't exactly say that... OK, let's say, which came first: the lyric or the music? Usually the music comes first. Then I mantra it, I play it over and over. I listen to those chords and I go, "OK, here's where the high note goes and this is where the main thrust, the most important idea has to go because this is the pinnacle in the music." Then I'll get the melody. I'll go over it like The Beatles: "Scrambled eggs do do do do do do do" [to the tune of "Yesterday"] or maybe something phonetic. Then something happens, maybe it all comes in one day or it's later that week. In some cases, it's taken as long as seven years to get the libretto of what this music is craving as a story...

On the point of painting to clear the head: that feels like painting is your comfort food. No, they're all different mental processes. Poetry, what you're doing is you're stirring up thoughts. It's a stimulant of some kind. So you're watching the thought process, which is anti-Buddhism. Instead of trying to empty thoughts out, which is

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Coffee house music: Joni performs at The Bitter End on October 23, 1968 in New York City

meditative, with the poetry, you're making the head jump and raiding it for linguistics. I've got Irish blood so I'll go, "Oh, the blarney's running!" All of a sudden, linguistically, there's a lot of alliteration in my thought patterns, it's a good time to address a melody you're working on. But it's a jumpy head and you're going – good, better, best. With painting, the head process is different.

Remove the thoughts? It's like meditation. It just comes down to synapses, the hum of the wires. Non-verbal. The discourse has been silenced. So it's a different headspace from poetry.

So are poetry and lyrics more cerebral? What would you say, you've got a busy head...

I'd say, I guess so... You're watching your busy head from a detached point of view and stealing from it: "Oh good thought, oh bad thought, oh colourful, uh not quite to the point." That's the way I write, but it's an active brain and the analytical process is in play. In the painting, the analytical process appears from time to time as a command – [puts on robot voice] "red in the upper

"I'm a painter first, and I kind of apply painting principles to music"

left hand corner, nose is too fat" [laughs] – it's more like a meditative or a Zen mind painting, whereas writing is more – from a Buddhist position – neurotic. You're raiding Mishigas.

You recently took part in a tribute concert, called Joni: A Performance In Song, at the Luminato Festival in Canada. How comfortable are you being venerated? Depends on the venerator. In a certain way, honour died in WWII. Not many people know how to do it anymore. If they honour you wrong, it makes you arrogant, because it's dumb. If they honour you right it's humbling because it's inspiring. The more experience I have, the less bugged I am by it. I just come to expect that people really don't know how to honour.

So you were bugged by it at some point? Oh, yeah!

BUYERS' GUIDE #1

Joni on record

The '60s and '70s



SONG TO A SEAGULL

1968

David Crosby-produced debut whose "city" and "seaside" sides serve as the expression of Joni's desire for freedom, especially from would-be suitors' restraints. Her unique sense of rhythm and melody is already evident on "I Had A King" and "The Dawntreader".

7/10



CLOUDS

1969

Suffused with romantic uncertainty, hope and betrayal, *Clouds* is an emotional accounting of the free-love era, profit and loss measured in the expectations love places upon us – especially on "Tin Angel" and "I Don't Know Where I Stand".

7/10



LADIES OF THE CANYON

1970

The emblematic Laurel Canyon album, a pioneering milestone of the new "confessional" style (for instance, "Willy", about Graham Nash) which also included the breakthrough hits "Big Yellow Taxi" and "Woodstock".

8/10



BLUE

1971

The apotheosis of Joni's early style, its raw-nerve emotional autopsies ("Little Green"; the title song) handled with a courageous frankness and melodic maturity that are utterly compelling. Stephen Stills and James Taylor are among the guests.

9/10



FOR THE ROSES

1972

Transitional album. Scarily mature, the autobiographical ruminations here border at times on fretful self-absorption ("Woman Of Heart And Mind"); but Tom Scott's reeds are a harbinger of how Mitchell's music would develop.

6/10



COURT AND SPARK

1974

The fuller arrangements and jazz-inflected horns impose a less insular and navel-gazing mood, akin to Steely Dan, though the themes are just as

9/10

romantically knotted as ever. Marks the debut of regular players, drummer John Guerin and guitarist Larry Carlton.



MILES OF AISLES

1974

Live double, recorded over four nights on the Court And Spark tour, featuring Joni backed by Tom Scott's LA Express ensemble (Guerin, Carlton, plus guitarist Robben Ford), with songs reworked accordingly. The original two-disc vinyl release is superior to the edited CD reissue from 2011.

8/10



THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWN

1975

Moving focus from the personal to the cultural, Mitchell tracks the thin veneer between the primitive and the sophisticated like an anthropologist observing contemporary LA lifestyles, set to a brilliant amalgam of rock, jazz, folk and world music. Highlights include: "Shades Of Scarlett Conquering", "Don't Interrupt The Sorrow" and "Shadows And Light".

10/10



HEJIRA

1976

Joni's constant search for love and music, depicted as a flight from both boredom and the anchorages of partnership, her songs missives from a variety of locales, a succession of hotel rooms and a string of lovers – literally, the "Refuge Of The Roads". The cast of characters includes crows, horny coyotes, restless hitchhikers and Amelia Earhart.

9/10



DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

1977

Joni's Jazz Odyssey curdles somewhat, with Jaco Pastorius' fretless bass irritatingly omnipresent on this double-album featuring the side-long, semi-improvised jazz symphony "Paprika Plains".

5/10



MINGUS

1979

Tribute album of "audio paintings" co-written with the dying jazz legend and performed with Pastorius, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, but fatally prey to the etiolated, academic jazz style of the era.

5/10

Continues on page 29...



Mitchell at a contract signing with, l-r, Elliot Roberts, David Crosby and Warner Brothers executive Mo Ostin, 1967

I'M YOUR FAN

"I'd give anything to be as good as her..."

DAVID CROSBY on Joni



"SHE'S THE BEST writer of any of them. When I first saw her at that club in Florida, she was already better than almost everybody. Even when she was starting, there were only a few people who were that good: James Taylor,

Bob Dylan, Paul Simon. In my opinion, when people look back and decide who was the best writer of those times, they're going to say Joni. She's as good a poet as Bob and certainly a better musician, by a long shot.

"Her voice was extraordinary, too, though she continually, obstinately kept smoking and lost a whole octave off the top. She's still smoking to this day, so I don't know what else I can say about that. But I don't know if anybody's made a better record than *Blue*. Mainly because it's so personal. After that, I thought her arrangements got too lush, too glossy and ornate. Her style developed into a more grandiose one. I still think she's the greatest singer-songwriter of all time. When you hear her on *Blue*, it's right here [plants his fist on his heart]. It totally nails you. She's talking directly to you, she's got you by the shirt. I'd give anything to be as good as her." ROB HUGHES

Why does it bug you?

People use it as an opportunity to grandstand. It's like at funerals. You know, the girl who goes "Oooh" and in her pseudo-grief throws herself into the arms of the one she's after. It's just human nature. The more education they have, the more they do it. It seems that intellect encouraged begins to speak a quarter truth, a very isolated and self-centred truth. It seems like education makes people want to complicate things and pat themselves on the back for their ignorant assumptions.

Another part of the veneration is that it's predicated on looking back on your career, your legacy, your work, your life, your art. Do you enjoy looking back? No. I don't like to look back.

At all? No. Because I'd like to redo the bass track on that, or why did I put that read on that word...

You don't go back and listen to *Court And Spark* or *Clouds*? I do have one friend who comes over and insists on putting my music on. We'll play pool. I'd rather have Duke Ellington on, frankly, to play pool.

It's interesting that you don't go back and listen to the music unless you have to, but you've got painting up all over the place. But there are things that I like to look at.



So you don't look at the paintings and think 'I would've done this differently'. They're square things to hang on your wall, to decorate your house. [laughs] Like Mozart is wallpaper for princes and sometimes you want wallpaper for princes. But you don't want Yoko Ono gagging. It's artsy and interesting, but I don't want that in my house.

Maybe you like your paintings more than your music? [Pause] Most of these paintings are quite satisfactory. I don't want to put another stroke on them. I put up things that seem finished, I guess. If I'm listening to my music and think, 'Jeez, I should've put a guitar fill there, why didn't I do that? Why did I read that line like that? Why am I whining?' [laughs] So I guess it's like divine dissatisfaction, it's what drives you to your next period. You won't make that mistake again.

On the question of tributes, part of the reason people love making them is because they feel a sense of connection to you – and we don't see you a lot. You've been called a recluse...

That's because I've been ill. What are you supposed to do? Wander around when you're as sick as a dog? You can't! Once again, fame is a series of misunderstandings surrounding a name.

Let's go back for a little bit. You go from Saskatoon to art school in Calgary. You start playing in some cafés in Saskatoon and then Toronto. How did music become the career? Because I got pregnant. I was the only virgin in art school. You've been holding on to this precious thing and I just kind of, stupidly, let it go.

One weekend in Toronto? As Jean, my choreographer, says, "You were Banffed." It was in Banff. I got caught out immediately and so I had to create a smoke screen. The music was not of interest. This is a trick of fate. I didn't know I had the gift, I hadn't started to write, I was a folk singer.

How did music become the smokescreen rather than painting? Because I

was going to quit art school. The pretence, to protect my parents, was that I was having problems with the pros anyhow. I was in debate with them all the time, they didn't like the way I dressed. Again, you have to go into a box. To be a painter, there was a uniform.

So music becomes the smoke screen. You go to Toronto and you have the child, you put the child up for adoption and you find your daughter many years later... Let's clear up

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BUYERS' GUIDE #2

Joni on record
The '80s and beyond

something that people assume erroneously, and I see it written again and again and again and again. That I gave up my daughter to further my career. This is so wrong, there was no career. I was just a folk singer – there was no ambition. I had a nice voice, I guess. I played OK, but there was no real gift. It was a way to get money to smoke, to have a pizza and go to a movie. With no frills. I had to earn half my fare to art school as my parents disapproved and there was nothing left over.

So what happened? At that time, you didn't even see the daughter. The right thing to do to protect your parents was to get out of town, go into a home. But in '65 the homes were full, so many girls got caught out because everything was changing. Movies were getting sexier. It was very confusing to be a young woman there. The pill was not available so there were a lot of unwanted children born in 1965, more than can be adopted, and all the homes were full. At the time I had her I was destitute, and there was no way I could take her out of the hospital into a blizzard with no job, no roof over my head. But she was beautiful and she found her way into a foster home and I tried to get work and get a set-up that I could bring her to. I couldn't get any work in Toronto as I couldn't get 160 bucks to get into the union. I was beset by predators trying to take advantage of the situation. A lot of human ugliness came at me... I mean, you wouldn't believe the gauntlet you have to run when you're young, destitute. It was a very difficult situation. Things changed, improved.

When did music become something more than the diversion? And when did you realise, "Hey, man, I'm good..."? I remember trying to get work in New York and saying to a club owner who wouldn't hire me, and bursting into tears, "But I'm good!" Under duress I knew... I guess, to a degree I knew I was good enough but, as David said, "Joni, you're the only person I know who doesn't want to be famous." I really didn't. I wrote a poem about it.

Which David? Geffen. I thought fame was going to be a horrible experience – which until you get used to it, it is. You just have to deal with an incredible amount of stupidity because this place is mentally ill with celebrity. So you have to see a lot of mental illness coming at you and you go, "Oh my God, this culture is so sick."

But you worked really hard in the late 1960s and '70s to cultivate your career. They had me in a harness. I liked writing, I like composing, I like creating... I love the creative process. I hate this! No, I really don't like the third degree. Neither does Warren Beatty. You don't see him doing interviews very much, and being interviewed guarantees misunderstanding. You can tell my values are very different than the norm. I'll tell you what, at 16, this'll give you an idea, I'm not a kid that played air guitar in my bedroom saying, "I'm gonna be rich and famous" and all of that. I felt sorry for stars. Sandra Dee was all over the local magazines. She was breaking up with her husband, it was misery. I thought, 'Oh, this poor woman, what if they did that to me in the school newspaper?' That's what empathy is. So I had to write in blank verse on assignment and I was getting my hair done for some beauty contest –

**WILD THINGS RUN FAST**

1982

Joni's Jazz Odyssey is abandoned for a more rhythmic, mainstream pop approach heavily influenced by new wave bands such as Talking Heads and especially The Police.

6/10

**DOG EAT DOG**

1985

Drafted in to help with production, Thomas Dolby applies a modernist synthesiser sheen to the kind of rote condemnations of consumerism, financiers and televangelists you'd never have expected from the younger Joni.

5/10

**CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM**

1988

Probably her poorest album, with bloodless love songs and further routine reflections on social issues (Native American rights, commerciality, pollution) swathed in adult-oriented easy-listening gllop.

4/10

**NIGHT RIDE HOME**

1991

Augmenting her old jazz-lite style with ambient guitar and omnichord washes, Joni devises an elegant, crepuscular sound, well suited to the album's dark, graceful reminiscences.

7/10

**TURBULENT INDIGO**

1994

The smoky timbre of Mitchell's mature voice is entirely in keeping with the tone of these articulate musings on pitiable yuppies,

8/10

celebrity wife-beaters and vicious nuns, including her most cogent commentary on contemporary mores, "Sex Kills".

**TAMING THE TIGER**

1998

A peremptory, tart response to the success of *Turbulent Indigo*, this found Joni deriding the degraded culture of pop music ("junk food for juveniles"), amongst other contemporary ills. Equal parts sad and sour.

5/10

**BOTH SIDES NOW**

2000

Depicting a relationship from flirtation, through infatuation, disaffection and separation to anticipation of the next romance, this orchestrated song cycle of mostly torch-song covers is the closest Mitchell comes to the Great American Songbook.

7/10

**TRAVELOGUE**

2002

Applying the formula of *Both Sides Now* to Joni's back catalogue, Vince Mendoza's subtle orchestrations unveil new shades of meaning in songs you thought you knew well. A transformative retrospective.

8/10

**DREAMLAND**

2004

The best of the many compilations available, this covers Mitchell's career non-chronologically, mixing early hits with later experiments to offer a full-spectrum account of her art.

9/10

**SHINE**

2007

The first of a two-album deal with Starbucks, *Shine* offers wearily familiar critiques – verging in places on glib sloganeering – set to bland coffee-table folk-jazz settings, awash with ghostly saxophone that's closer to Kenny G than Charlie Parker. **ANDY GILL**

5/10

at the hair school, by amateurs – and there were stacks of these magazines with Sandra Dee crying on the cover; so I wrote a poem, "The Fishbowl", about Hollywood before I ever was here.

So you see yourself as an outsider at that time, as well? Oh, yeah. I mourn the day of the discoverer, the week of depth. I'm cursed by astrology to be deeper than the average person and also have the need to be original, to plant the flag where no-one else has been. I'm going to have to listen to traditions that satisfy everybody and

sell like hotcakes and go, "That ain't shit, it's been done and done and done."

So how did you feel when you became a massive star? I retreated into the BC wilderness. I hated it. "The fishbowl is a world reversed."

You mean all of it? To the point where you look back at those times and go... That attention to celebrity is mental illness. That mental illness that creates that attention is tragic to me.



Mitchell with her 'king' Graham Nash in a limo on the way to Big Bear for a CSN photo session for their first album, February 1969

I'M YOUR FAN

"She had a zipper on her heart..."

GRAHAM NASH
on Joni



"HER ARTISTRY IS such

that she takes a personal situation and turns it into a world situation. The relationship she's

talking about can apply to anyone who's listening. And that's the art of writing a great song, taking a simple thing that's happened and making astounding music from it. She's incredibly direct on *Blue*. It's like she had a zipper on her heart, opened it up and spilled everything onto the record."

did well on this, this sounds good." Everyone has an ego. You can't say "I like this tomato soup" without having an ego. Ego is the original sin.

Do you feel many artists engage in false humility? Yes, it's disgusting [laughs]. I'd rather have a real arrogance than a false humility. When somebody pays me the few compliments I've enjoyed, they humble me. They're heart-warming because a connection has been made. I've put out a signal and this person has picked it up. We meet and that's a communication.

Why do you think artists engage in false humility? Because it's fashionable and it's politics. It's baby kissing. It's considered appropriate conduct, so that conduct is emulated.

Who do you see as your contemporaries? Didn't have any. Leonard and Bob were the only... peer group, you mean? I didn't really have a peer group. Maybe when I was starting out, everything sounds good when you're young and all your

friends around you are making songs. But it was much more competitive, I felt, than it needed to be. There was a lot of short-sheeting and breaking your guitar. Especially for a girl. I'm too good for a girl, right? So there's a lot of resentment for that.

You play too well? Yeah, being too good at pinball makes guys mad. In pool, I can sandbag just to make the evening pleasant, but in pinball you have to keep the ball in the air so it's hard to sandbag without throwing it.

So Cohen and Dylan, they're not peer groups but they're... They're writers.

So with contemporaries, there's no-one? People who I look up to: Stravinsky, Duke Ellington for daring. And individuality: Debussy.

But they're not even the same era as you.

Well, no. There wasn't much. Marvin Gaye, towards the end, when he got daring. They were trying to hold him back as he was moving away from the hit department into the art department.

Let me ask you a bit about the Joni Mitchell image that is projected onto you. [Laughs] Which one?

Well I guess there's a couple... A couple!

You've always had a distaste for being referred to as a confessional songwriter?

Yeah, that's like swinging billy clubs, 'you will confess', what did I confess to? I'm selfish? Mine is the most selfish generation in history. What is so confessional? I'm sad? Oh, Jesus, have you never been sad?

Well, if songwriting isn't confessional then it's storytelling and you are the actress or the director... I'm all of those things. Many-headed Joan. I'm the playwright, like Tennessee Williams. Then I have to perform the text, which takes sense memory, like a Method actor.

But if you're Method acting... All singers are.

So if Adele writes a song and she's singing it and it's about a break-up she's had, she's acting? Of course. She's not breaking up at that moment. It may be her own experience. She's reliving that experience. That's Method acting.

But when you're saying that it's acting or directing, that suggests it's something ersatz. It's not you then, it's a role you're playing. No, no. Method acting is being you. It's drawing on all your sense memory. It's very real. But of course it's art, and art is short for artificial. So the art of art is to be as real as you can within this artificial situation. You can make it like Van Gogh's paintings are exaggerated to make the landscapes more real for the deadened. You

What about the fact tons of people were buying your records? That's different. The

trick is, if you listen to that music and see me, you're not getting anything. If you listen to the music and you see yourself, it'll probably make you cry and you'll learn something about yourself. Most people know I'm famous, but there's no real communication, it's just a phenomenon and people will flick their bick at anything [laughs].

So you had a problem with how popular you were becoming... No, wait. When I realised how popular I was becoming it was right before *Blue* and I went, "Oh my God, a lot of people are listening to me, then they better find out who they're worshipping. Let's see if they can take it, let's get real." So I wrote *Blue* - which horrified a lot of people. It created a lot of attention, that was very weird, so I bought a property in British Columbia and dropped out. What had happened is they were looking at me and all I've done is reveal human traits, they haven't seen themselves in it. The point that they see themselves in it, the communication is complete. But the point where they're looking after me, it's like pigs to blood, it's like Marilyn Monroe on a tightrope or something.

***Blue* is considered a classic now, but at the time people thought...** Horrified.

How were they horrified? Why were they horrified? The men, because it was a men's world. Kris Kristofferson went, "Joni, keep something to yourself", Johnny Cash said, "the world is on your shoulders". They all recoil as the game is to make yourself larger than life, don't reveal anything human. And my thing is: why? Movies do it. OK, it hasn't been done in the song, but why? The trouble is, I'm the playwright, I'm the actress, and I want them to look at the play and see past it, but it's such an intimate art form that all the attention is going to me. Which is insane.

Tell me if I've got this right, but you are willing to accept having an ego and say, "I

JONI MITCHELL



Moody blue: Mitchell painting at home, April 1984

● know, the stars aren't that big. But you're not seeing them so he blows them up. It's a lie so you see the truth.

Let me ask you about something else you get lumped in with, then. There continues to be the pervading image of Joni Mitchell as the winsome blonde with the guitar, the hippie folk goddess. How do you feel about that? [Laughs] Hippie folk goddess. We need goddesses, but I don't want to be one. Hippie? The only hippie thing I like is the fashion show and the Rainbow Coalition. But most of the values were silly to me. Free love? It's a ruse for guys. There's no such thing. Look at the rep I got, there was a list of people whose path I crossed... in the Summer Of Love they made me into this love-bandit. So much for free love. Nobody knows more than me what a ruse that was. That was for guys coming out of Prohibition. It was hard to get laid before that.

You basically don't like being pigeonholed. Exactly, I'm fluid. Everything I am, I'm not. And that's the way it is with all people.

What is the greatest misconception about Joni Mitchell? There are so many. If I made a list of the things I've been likened to and you didn't know who it was about... you're just like the Singing Nun, you're just like Marilyn Monroe. Joni, you're just like Mick Jagger, Richard Nixon and Gomer Pyle rolled into one. You look like Greta Garbo...

Can I ask you about your relationships to some of your songs. You said that you feel miscast now in those early songs. "Both Sides Now" are you into?

Why did you redo "Both Sides Now"? Well, it's not a good ingénue role. But that song, I've looked at life from both sides now. I was 21 when I

wrote it and I took a lot of ridiculing. I was miscast when I wrote it as a young girl. I like the performance I did in my fifties of it.

You got quite a critical drubbing for *Mingus* as well... Except in Europe where it was more understood, like jazz is.

Were you disheartened by the reaction to that record? No, things conspired. They warned me at my management company, "If you do this, you'll be excommunicated from the airwaves." Which I was.

The jazzers thought that you were a rocker, the rockers thought you were a jazzer? Some thought I took advantage. But not the greats, it's never the greats, they're risk-takers; but the near-greats gossip. All these schools have their perimeters, uniforms and laws... I'm an original.

What did you say earlier? 'I was cursed with the proclivity for originality'? Yeah, I'm born the day of the discoverer.

When I found out, it explained why I am contemptuous, and Mingus was too. He has a song called "If Charlie Parker Was A Gunslinger, There'd Be A Whole Lot Of Dead Copycats".

Where is the line between learning lessons from our musical predecessors, and being a copycat? Tradition is a copycat and most people love tradition. That's what sells, and 99.9% of musicians sat in their room, picked a hero and tried to copy that sound, or that this, or that that. I approached it like a painter, to try to be original. There's a great liberty in that, and I'm a freedom freak. There are times when you have no-one on your side, when you don't belong to anything.

But when you talked about Dylan, when you said he's not authentic, he's a plagiarist...

Wait, wait. I didn't say that. I didn't say that he's not authentic at all. That is not a word I used.

That's from the *LA Times*... Journalistic bullshit. I did say he's a plagiarist, and he is.

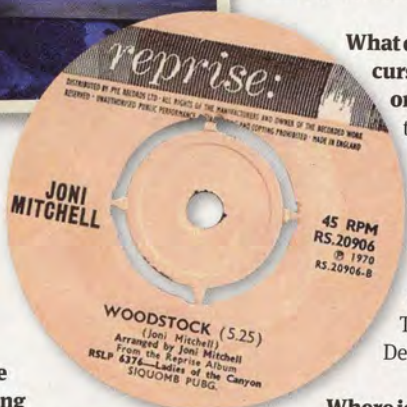
How did Dylan cross the line, in terms of being a plagiarist? He was in litigation. It's not like I outed him. He stole all of his lines out of a Japanese hoodlum's novel. There was a lawsuit impending, but it got dropped. He told me "I haven't written a song in years." I said, "What're you talking about? Who's writing them, then?" He came down to craft. Inspiration doesn't stay with a lot of artists long, then you're in the game and you've got to sustain it. You notice it - like one-trick wonders or two good albums, then they peter out. To sustain a gift for a long time is rare.

Does that make you disappointed in Dylan? No, I think that remark is completely out of context. We do not want to talk to stupid people.

We talked about Cohen and Dylan... I like a lot of Bob's songs. Musically he's not very gifted, he's borrowed his voice from a lot of old hillbillies. He's got a lot of borrowed things. He's not a great guitar player. He's invented a character to deliver his songs. [*Impersonates Dylan*] "Sometime I wish I could have that character." Because you can do things with that character. It's a mask of sorts.

You wrote "Woodstock" in 1969, a song that defined a generation. So they say, so they say...

A lot of people assume you were there, and you weren't. So how did you capture the moment better than anyone else, even though you weren't actually there? Because I was one of the many who were thwarted. That was the place many kids wanted to be. I got to the airport with CSN and our agent David Geffen and our manager Elliot on a Sunday night when I was supposed to play and it was a catastrophe. I had to do *The Dick Cavett Show* the following day and it was Geffen that decided, "We can't get Joni in, we can't get her out on time." So he took me back to the pier where he lived and we watched it on TV. I was the deprived kid that couldn't go. So I wrote



Joni Mitchell at The Band's Last Waltz at the San Francisco Winterland on November 25, 1976: (l-r) Dr John, Ringo Starr, Mitchell, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Rick Danko, Ronnie Hawkins, Bob Dylan, Levon Helm, Robbie Robertson

it from the point of view of a kid going there. If I'd been there in the back room with all the cutthroat, maniacal crap that goes on backstage, I would not have had that perspective. It's a good thing I didn't go 'cause I wouldn't have been able to write it from the point of view of a person in attendance. I wrote it for a person in attendance and why they wanted to go because I was not allowed by circumstance to attend. It was written with empathy.

You've been critical of that generation. Tell me about your views on the failures of the baby boomers. We were raised on Disney: someday my prince will come. We came up in affluence unprecedented. Not that we were greatly wealthy, but we all had houses, even though they were mortgaged. Our mothers had bought into the white picket fence. They got caught up in keeping up with the Joneses. The cars took the husbands away, they had a life separate from the housekeeper. When they came home, they were tired, they didn't want to hear about the housewife's problems. The housewife was shown smiling and holding up a detergent. It was all "My husband's got a nicer car than yours, therefore I'm the most important person on the block." All that pettiness. And it trickled down into the play of the children. But the home contained, for the most part, these unhappy women.

And it led to an unhealthy world... When the women aren't singing in the kitchen, you've got a sick nation. So whatever it was, the breakdown of that dream, out of it came this liberated, spoilt, selfish generation into the costume ball of it; free love, free sex, free music, free, free, free, free, we're so free. Woodstock was the culmination of it. At that point, the numbers were big enough to constitute a voting block; so suddenly we were a viable, political community. Then the straights started to grow their hair and get love beads and get a Nehru suit. My generation, for most of the '70s, fell into a state of apathy; heavy drugs followed light drugs; the thing got darker and they didn't know where to take it. When the Reagans got into power, it went hippie, yuppie, yuppie. They were converted into consumers. They went right into the thing their parents had – but on a bigger scale. Make more money; *Dallas*; crooked rich people are good, the Reagans are good. Madonna, "I'm a material girl". I was not a part of that. I was not a part of the anti-war movement either. I played Fort Bragg and I didn't write protest songs.

You campaigned about environmental destruction. That was my issue. Nobody was interested. They were hung up on the war. It was dumb, even Dylan's writing... [Dylan voice] "I just want you to know I'll spit on your grave".

Do you accept you were a pioneer? Oh yeah. Sure. I blazed a lot of trails.

You don't like to be called a feminist? I'm not a feminist... I don't want to get a posse against men. I'd rather go toe-to-toe, work it out. There are too many Amazons in that community. The feminism in this continent isn't feminine, it's masculine. They tried to say to me when I said I'm not feminist, "If you're not with us, you're against us." All the feminists I've met have been so hostile, I go, "Woah, I'm not joining your club."



EYEWITNESS

Joni with the LA Express, Hollywood, October 1974: (l-r) Tom Scott, Max Bennett, Robben Ford, Larry Nash, John Guerin and Mitchell

"She was very much one of the guys..."

Guitarist **ROBBEN FORD** on touring with Joni

"IN 1974 TOM SCOTT invited me on tour with Joni and the LA Express. He brought over an acetate of *Court And Spark* and I thought it was an incredible record. We were jamming at A&M in Hollywood when Joni eventually came in. She was wearing tight blue jeans with high heels and a matching jacket with some kind of fabulous sparkly shit on it. She was a goddess, but very sweet. When we started hanging out she was nothing but fun. It was easy to be around her. She was very much one of the guys. It was an incredible chance to learn. She had written a couple of pieces of new music before the tour: one was

'Jericho', it's on *Miles Of Aisles*. She played it to us in the rehearsal studio, and someone said, 'Could you play that bridge for us again, Joni?' 'No - I'll have to start again from the beginning.' Every time she played you a piece of music she had to start from the top. It was very funny! We were on the road for nine months in 1974. She loved performing. I never saw her get ruffled - ever. After the tour I played on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, and on 'In France They Kiss On Main Street' she asked me to plug the guitar into the console rather than run it through an amp. I didn't think it was going to work, but she said, very sweetly, 'Well, just try it, Robben.' And sure enough, it was so cool.

"Joni is probably the greatest talent we've seen out of this generation. I would put her above Miles Davis and John Coltrane, in terms of the versatility and breadth. No-one matches it. Just a bigger mind, man!"

GRAEME THOMSON

Do you feel you've been properly recognised as a pioneer? I think people are seeing it now. Now that they've run all the new Joni Mitchells, they think it's something easy to create. It isn't. You have to have a certain value system. There are a lot of things that have to go into it.

You're 70 this year. How do you feel about ageing? Oh, I'm fine with it as long as I can be healthy. I don't mind ageing. It's hard to tell at this age, what is age decline and what is the disease. I'm always asking my doctor, "Can I fight it, or do I have to accept it?" So that's my battle at this time.

Are you concerned about your mortality? Oh, God no. I've faced death so many times. I want more time, it's as simple as that. I don't want to go yet, I've got a lot of things still I want to accomplish and savour. I can't sing, there's no point, my singing is probably permanently gone.

Really? Yeah, kind of. You have to know when to quit. I had an instrument I could control but due to the illness, even though it's getting a little better, it's still impaired. In the sinuses you have all these planes that you bounce notes off. Well, if I bounce it could ricochet. I can't control it like I used to, and I used to have very good intonation.

Looking back, what are you most proud of?

There isn't anything singular. There's healthy pride and unhealthy pride. I try not to indulge too much in pride; but there are cases in the street, where people come up to me. For instance, two young girls who lost their mother in their early teens holed up in their bedroom with this music and it was cathartic for them, I kind of surrogate-mothered them. And there are people... where did I read, the woman that plays in *The Sopranos*.

Edie Falco... She says that I raised her. So there are these strange things out there. There's one thing I've been trying to bring across to people: "You're on your own, let's face it. [Laughs] And that's OK." That's what Nietzsche's Übermensch was all about. To remove the crutches.

That's a little scary. It is, for most people. For me, it just kind of happened. I didn't have anybody guiding me. They just removed themselves because I've had a very interesting and challenging life. Like I say, a lot of battles. But I have a tremendous will to live and a tremendous joie de vivre, alternating with irritability. ☺

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Revealed! The 50 best singer-songwriter albums

HENRY DILTZ