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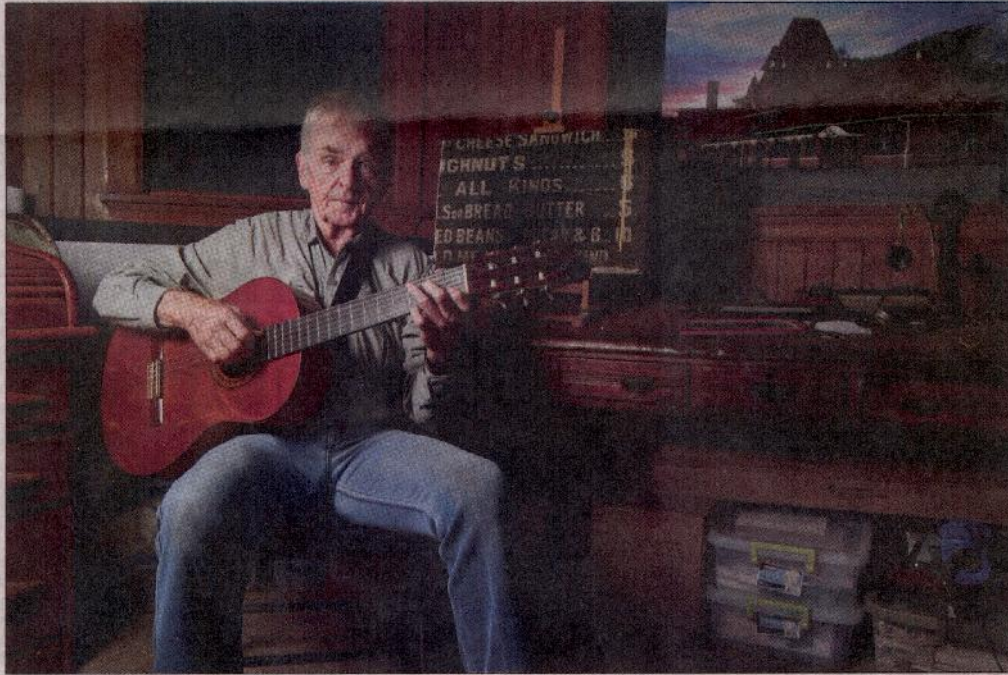
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Rolling with the music

"She was an unknown tomboy from the prairies of Saskatchewan. ... I think we spent a total of 36 hours together, and I impulsively, compulsively proposed. She said, 'Sure, why not?'"

Chuck Mitchell, discussing his ex-wife, Joni Mitchell



Josh Newell/The Hawk Eye

Folk singer and Keokuk resident Chuck Mitchell plays his guitar Thursday inside the Keokuk Union Depot in Keokuk. While in the Army stationed in Korea, Mitchell continued his love of music by performing for the troops in musical variety shows. He and folk music legend Joni Mitchell divorced in 1968. Mitchell has called Keokuk his home for several years.

Folk singer Chuck Mitchell finds Iowa home after lifetime of fame

By BOB SAAR
for The Hawk Eye

Ask Chuck Mitchell if he's a Renaissance Man, and the singer and actor will tell you he's old enough to be one.

Mitchell's rolled with some of the biggest names in folk music, and he has stories to tell.

Born in New York City about 80 years ago, this longtime folk musician grew up in Michigan farm country and lives in Keokuk, a lucky move because his childhood dream was to be a forest ranger like Burlington native Aldo Leopold.

"When I was about 6, we flew out to Detroit on a DC-3, and I grew up in Rochester, Mich," he said. "Back in the day, it was a little farm town about 25 miles north of Detroit. Then, it got swallowed up."

Young Charles did farm chores as a child, mostly pulling weeds around barns.

"My first real gig, other than yard work and family chores, was pumping gas in a Shell station when it was 12 cents a gallon," he said.

Mitchell liked listening to the

"Lone Ranger" and the "Green Hornet" on the radio.

"Both were produced in Detroit at WXYZ in the Macca-bees Building," he said.

LPs by Burl Ives, Flanders and Swann, Mahalia Jackson and musical comedies, such as Finian's Rainbow and The Fantasticks, were standard fare for the teen, who by then fancied the view from a stage.

"When I was a kid, I was a ham," Mitchell said. "When I went to college, there was always somebody to play the piano or the guitar. When I got out, I was already a singer and an actor."

After earning a degree in English and drama at Principia College in Elsah, Ill., Mitchell hit the New York acting scene in 1958, working at the Henry Street Settlement House on lower east side. He had no one to accompany his singing.

"The Settlement House had a guitar teacher; I bought a cheap nylon guitar and started playing in the manner of Burl Ives," he said. "I think the first song I learned was 'The Streets of Laredo,' and the second was probably 'The Fox' by Harry Belafonte. He was the other person I listened to a lot."

Mitchell's acting career was interrupted when he was drafted into the Army, doing basic training at Fort Knox, Ky., and learning how to drive a tank.

See Mitchell on page 4A



Chuck Mitchell with his then-wife and musical partner, Joni, record Gordon Lightfoot's "When Spring Was O'er the Land" on Joni's Wollensak tape recorder in their Detroit apartment in 1966. They also recorded the Holy Modal Rounders' "Blues in the Bottle," Jesse Fuller's "San Francisco Bay Blues" and "Norwegian Wood" by Lennon and McCartney.

Detroit News

Mitchell

Continued from page 1A

"I took my guitar with me, and it was embarrassing because there were at least half a dozen people in my platoon that could play a hell of a lot better than I could," he said.

And so Mitchell's first big musical event was at an all-Army talent contest.

"I've forgotten what I sang, but it was something folksy, and I won in my base area and went to the next level, so I was able to avoid Army-type stuff in order to be a performer," he said.

"Then, I got sent to Korea, where I won a contest and ended up in Seoul at the finals for Korea. I didn't win, but they put together a traveling troupe of performers, and I ended up being kind of like the supervisor. We traveled all around in big Army trucks, and we went on beat-up little Korean railroads."

The crowds were composed of Army guys. Mitchell's troupe was like a USO tour, only it was all Army.

"I sang some songs, but we did Broadway show tunes and danced and sang and all that kind of stuff," he said. "It was a variety show."

Mitchell returned to Detroit to write for a public school experiment, bankrolled by the Ford Foundation, called the Great Cities project. He started singing in Detroit folk joints in 1961.

"When I got out of the Army, I went to work for the Detroit Board of Education. My first music gig for pay was at The Rail Bar in Detroit, and I got union scale, \$15 a night at that point. I worked a lot in bars, and I worked around Michigan in various little coffeehouses."

For years, Mitchell played

nights and worked his day job as a writer. Then, in February 1965, on his first out-of-town playing job in Toronto, he saw Joni Anderson singing at the Penny Farthing.

"I walked in, and she was playing. She was quite attractive, and she was singing, and I thought, 'Oh, that's interesting.' I think we spent a large chunk of the night chasing around. It was a February thaw, so it was relatively warm — cold and rainy but not bitter cold and snowing. We went to parks and spent most of the night, if not all of the night, up talking. We had a romance that began there."

Anderson wanted to go to the United States, and Mitchell offered to help get her gigs in Michigan.

"She was an unknown tomboy from the prairies of Saskatchewan," Mitchell said. "She came down on the train to Windsor, right across the river from Detroit, and I met her there and brought her over. I think we spent a total of 36 hours together, and I impulsively, compulsively proposed. She said, 'Sure, why not?' We got married in June."

Their three-year marriage was conducted on the folk circuits in the U.S. and Canada, including the Flick Coffeehouse in Coral Gables, Fla., a hotspot for the likes of rising stars Jimmy Buffett, Kenny Rogers and Gabe Kaplan.

"John Denver was in town, just starting to get his reputation," Mitchell said. "We were standing outside The Flick, and he told me how Peter, Paul and Mary had just recorded 'Leaving on a Jet Plane.'"

Arthur Zeldin wrote in the Toronto Daily Star in 1966: "I think of the folk singing Mitchells ... as somewhat of a matched set. It's not that they do a duo or the same kind of act; they don't. ... Where she has an excellent sweet

"Everything is looking positive, as nearly as I can tell, from the standpoint of her recovery."

Chuck Mitchell on his ex-wife, Joni

soprano tempered with rich lower registers, he has a quality middle-range baritone enriched by shades of masculine sweetness. Where she cloaks absurd humor beneath smiley wholesomeness, he hides neat irony beneath clean-cut deadpan."

Yeah. It was like that.

"The Mitchells should, and likely will, be more widely known than they are at the moment," Zeldin prophesied.

Mitchell the English lit major was writing a lot of prose and poetry, but unlike Joni, he wasn't a prolific songwriter.

"It wasn't until I got married to Joni that I thought, 'Well, if she can do it, I can do it.' So, I wrote a few songs," he said. "I still write, but I've never been a songwriter as much as I've been a performer. We practiced on her Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder and used that to listen to ourselves singing."

Mitchell said the couple did not collaborate.

"She might have said, 'What do you think of this, Charlie?' and I'd

tell her."

Their fifth-floor apartment in Detroit was a waystop for friends on the folk circuit, heavyweights like Gordon Lightfoot, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Tom Rush, who released Joni's "The Circle Game" in 1968, not long after Joni left Detroit — and Chuck — for New York, L.A. and stardom.

"She moved out in February of '67, but we had a lot of gigs lined up, so we basically stayed connected as far as our professional lives were concerned," Mitchell said. "We did gigs together and all of her publishing stayed with the corporation we'd set up."

Joni's songs were initially copyrighted by the couple's Gandalf Publishing Co.

"In December 1967, we all met in Detroit and signed the agreement that transferred all of Joni's songs from Gandalf to Joni Mitchell Publishing," Mitchell said.

Their divorce document is stamped Feb. 29, 1968, appropriately a leap year day.

Joni's career skyrocketed in

1970 when she released "Ladies of the Canyon," and the last time Mitchell saw her was backstage at her concert near Denver in 1979.

Joni is presently recovering from an aneurysm suffered earlier this year. Her ex has not forgotten her.

"Everything is looking positive, as nearly as I can tell, from the standpoint of her recovery," he said. "Everything is on hold. She's getting her act together again."

The gentle folk scene fell victim to the brutality of rock and roll, and Mitchell went on to college and arts council residencies in Florida, California and Colorado. He was on his way home from a stint at Western Illinois University in Macomb in 1979 when he stumbled upon Keokuk.

"It was just pure accident," he said. "It was a beautiful September afternoon. I left Carthage (Ill.) and toiled down the highway and got caught in the bridge traffic crossing into Iowa."

While waiting on a barge making the river locks, Mitchell's gaze drifted up to the line of old houses on the Keokuk bluff.

He rolled across the Mississippi into Iowa, took a look around and bought Twain-era river pilot Captain Hutchenson's 1879 brick

home, where he lives today.

"I'd always been on the road and had little apartments, one place or another, so this was a major change in my life," he said.

Mitchell's credits include "A Prairie Home Companion" and repertory theater in Texas and England. With his co-star David Marion, Mitchell co-wrote and produced "Mr. Foster and Mr. Twain," in which Stephen Foster joins Mark Twain for an evening of story and song.

Mitchell's one-man show combines acting, singing and guitarist skills with a selection of cabaret songs. He roams the room singing a variety of tunes and reciting poetry by Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot.

Chuck Mitchell may be old enough to be a Renaissance Man, but he's not too old to do the online game. His recordings are on iTunes and CDBaby. Check out his 1987 live video "Chuck Mitchell sings The Circle Game" on YouTube.

"Those were the days," he said, reminiscing the halcyon dream in Detroit.

"I wish I had a river I could skate away on," Joni Mitchell sang.

Her road partner, Chuck, has a river of his own.