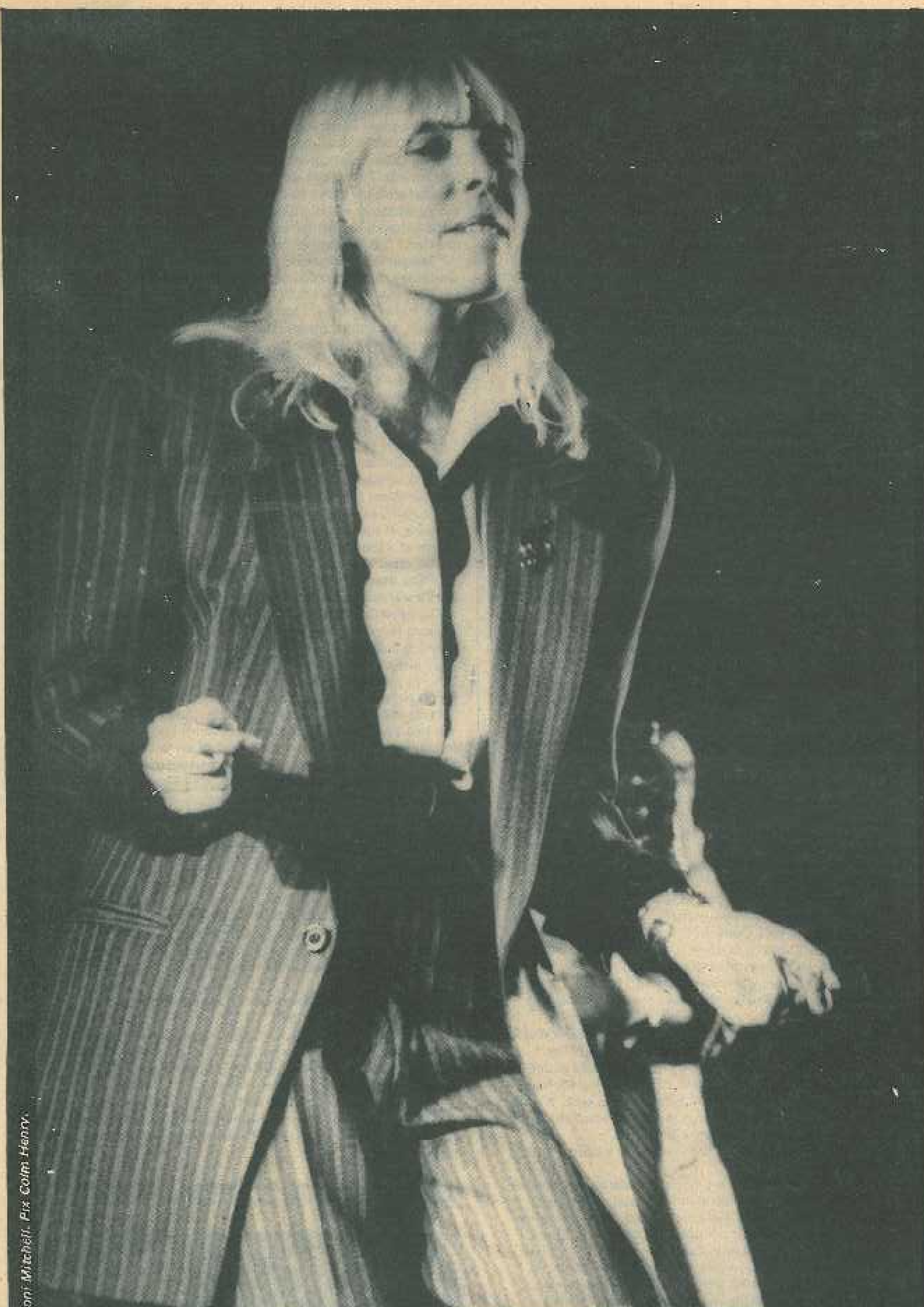

Joni Mitchell. Pix Colm Henry.

THE JONI MITCHELL INTERVIEW

During her recent visit to Ireland JONI MITCHELL conducted only one interview – with RTE 2's Dave Fanning. What follows is a blow by blow account of their summit meeting. Seconds out . . .

We just played "Wild Things Run Free" and as you say yourself you are "back in the harness". Now, except for the vocals would it be a fair assumption to call the music on the new album pop with a rock steady beat?

"Well I guess you can call it whatever you like!" (laughs)

The jazz phrasing on the vocals is still there but apart from that it is the Joni Mitchell we know from years ago – rather than the Joni Mitchell of the last five years.

"The band can play Rock 'n' Roll as well as jazz, so there is some improvisational quality to the music but it is a strong beat and I am phrasing pretty much accordingly. It's closer to pop than jazz."

The album took a long time to record – some songs were recorded four times before they were cut. There's a feeling that the record is not exactly as spontaneous as it should be.

"It took a long time to find the right personnel because the three or four takes or the songs that you were referring to, were cut by people who were basically still in the jazz idiom. It still wasn't rocking enough. Just now we were listening to it. We hadn't heard it since it came out – and now in performance the playing has gone a lot further into rock 'n' roll. I think we are bordering on heavy metal now." (laughs)

Do you have fixed ideas when you go into the studio or is it very much a collaboration?

"Very much so. There is the structure of the song, which is designed kind of like a folk song – so I don't want that to get too dissolved unless what is getting lost is being replaced with what I feel is something better. I am kind of guiding it along but I require a lot of contributions from individuals."

Do you find when you are looking around for musicians that there are very few who have everything that you are looking for – power, dexterity, grasp of the subtleties in the structure, technique. The works?

"Yeah, it's like painters. Often the ones who draw well have lost a certain amount of emotional power and the ones who have the emotional power don't have the draughtsmanship or the virtuosity. So it is difficult to find a band that has rock power, spontaneous compositional gifts, and also a certain kind of big ego – that has a love of their own art but also big ears for what everybody else is playing so that they can spin off of other ideas. In other words, if somebody catches a lick somebody else will jump in on it. That's the jazz part of the music that I enjoy, a kind of spontaneity and alertness."

You have a commitment now to make five LPs with Geffen – even though you had said that this LP was to be your swansong. Do you regret making that commitment?

"No I don't. This was to be my last record for Asylum and David (Geffen of Geffen Records) kind of finagled it away and instead it was the first of a new contract. Because the old one was coming up, and in view of the increasing fickleness of movements and so on, I thought 'Oh, this is as good a time as any to get off, take up something else, it's just kind of the rat race'. You know, you have to change your socks three times a day to stay abreast of it!"

Does this mean then that it'll be a long time before we get another Joni Mitchell LP?

"I don't know. There's no time for writing while we're touring and we don't get off the road till the fall. Now I'm in the mood, now I'm kind of directed towards the music because of the touring which has been very enjoyable, it's kind of pulled me away from the brushes. Probably when I get home I'll have a desire to write, I'll put the energy in that direction. We'll see, you know."

If someone who didn't know the music of Joni Mitchell said they wanted to take one LP where Joni says it all about love, should I refer them to "Wild Things Run Free" or should I refer them to the past?

"Oh, God. You mean just one? I think the best statement I've ever made about it is not even my own, and that's the Corinthians piece. To me that's the definitive statement about what it is. My own writing just sort of gropes around for what it is, by comparison. But that's such a highly personalised thing – it depends what changes they're going through; there's a lot of intricate changes on all the albums with regard to love, and something might suit their situation better than something else. It's very individual."

Do you always feel that each album you make is better than the last?

"You do when you're doing it, of course you do. In the final analysis I don't think that that is so, but you have that feeling when you're doing it."

What was it about the music of the early sixties that turned you on?

"Well, I'd written poetry or private thoughts down for a long time and I was a folk singer at that time so I was singing mostly the songs of the British Isles. In the coffee house circuit your individuality came from your repertoire. If you were travelling and you came to a certain town where somebody had the territorial rights to certain songs you couldn't play them, so there was always a rush for new material. It hadn't occurred to me to write my own until I heard what Dylan was doing, and the expansion of themes. In a way the American pop song was limited in its themes. Dylan inspired me to realise the many things you could sing about."

In 1969, the first LP came out, then "Clouds", "Ladies of the Canyon", "Blue", "For The Roses". Would it be too simplistic a generalisation, talking about those albums, to suggest that Joni Mitchell was trying to sketch out the coming together of love, freedom, communication – and the cost of success?

"Those are main themes, yes. Absolutely. Love and freedom – the paradox of it, you know. Women in America were freeing up their lives in a way . . . from my mother's generation of women. There were more freedoms offered and so the thing was slightly experimental and there was new things to contend with. We had more choice than our parents did, a lot more choice, which was very confusing. There were no guidelines."

You've said recently that the anatomy of the love crime is your favourite subject. Do you think that happiness in a relationship is a very rare thing?

"Ah, not really. Writing is a private business. If you're having a good time, you're less likely to be writing about it. Joy, I find a very evasive thing to describe. You live it out, it's very present tense, whereas the things that go wrong require scrutiny and wallowing. Driven into reclusiveness by some uncomfortable moment, the easiest theme is to take it apart and write about it. I guess it's a form of therapy and that's what a lot of my work is about."

Having said that, do you think that you can write better songs when you're down?

"For my nature, it seemed like that was the only thing that would drive me into it. When I'd be having a good time I wouldn't write. The times when something had gone wrong and I didn't feel exactly sociable, one of the forms of my entertainment – like re-arranging baseball cards – would be to sit down and try and figure out the root of my dissatisfaction, and try and work it out until you start to see some light at the end of the tunnel."

You grew up in public if you like, you grew up in the spotlight. Was that difficult?

"I think it added complications to it. I found fame, initially, extremely disquieting. It's like the difference between Charles and Lady Di. Lady Di is going through a period of adjustment, Charles was trained to it. There was a lot of adjusting to do. Ten years later, I'm much more comfortable with being a public person."

Do you like the fact that so many millions of people identify with your songs, I'm talking about the early albums?

"Oh, yeah. I thought that since fate had thrust me into this position as a public confessor, my salvation was that I was addressing souls that felt likewise. It would be horrendous otherwise, wouldn't it?"

Looking back do you have any doubts about being so brutally honest on those albums, about your feelings and your love life. I mean they're very private things?

"No; as a poet, the only thing that I could see to do fresh, that hadn't really been explored poetically, was the internal landscape. Did you ever read 'Thus Spake Zarathustra' on the poet? There's a great passage where he just makes idiots of the poets. He says the poet is the vainest of the vain, even before the ugliest of water buffalo, doth he fan his tail, he thinks that all of nature is whispering just to him . . . It's pretty scathing. But at the very end he says 'but I see a new breed of poet, the penitent of spirit'. That was one source.

"I had a good teacher at one time who told me that I should write in my own blood, write from my own experience. So those two things got nagging about my mind so that I thought that really that was one of the few territories left for a poet to be a contributor of any kind."

You changed your writing a bit in the mid seventies. The lyrics were not necessarily in the first person any more.

"This is a later reflection; when I switched to 'you', people thought I turned hostile. Dylan always sang 'you' which kept things at an arm's length, to a certain degree. I always sang 'I' which gave people the option of seeing themselves in it or if they didn't want to, they could say 'oh look at her'. They had a choice. So, when at a certain point I felt I don't want to do this anymore, I switched to 'you' and I did go back to fiction again. The first album has a lot of fictional writing on it. 'Marcia' and so on. It was a different style of writing. When I switched to the 'you' vehicle people thought I was pointing a nasty finger at them, they had no escape. Suddenly it was me pointing at them."

Did it backfire?

"Not in Europe, but in America . . . I'm speaking of 'Hissing Of Summer Lawns' now, which is more of a concept album anyway. A portrait of women trapped – unfulfilled women. Had I sang the whole thing in first person, it would probably have given women who were in that position a softer option. It's a little bit harsh. Women especially found it annoying initially and a lot of them grew into it later. I've had women approach me and say 'I hated that thing when it first came out': it was like I was wagging my finger at them, or putting salt on some kind of a wound. Usually it was because it was something that was happening to them that they didn't want to look at. Once they faced up to it and looked at it, then the irony of the thing rather than the throbbing of it came through."

Pic: Colm Henry.

You were regarded as the quintessential folk lady of the rock era. I remember one review described you as the 'sweet beauty on a quest for spiritual growth'. What was so special about the whole Woodstock thing?

"Woodstock to me was almost like a bible story, it was a modern-day miracle, it was a moment in time when an enormous population came and shared and expressed a high degree of good will and consideration. It was a fellowship of man situation. It was the only festival really of its kind. Each one had a distinct personality — that was the love festival, Altamont was the hate festival and the Isle of Wight was the 'hate the performer' festival! Every audience that you stand before is an individual: the first ten rows are the eyes of the beast, and it telegraphs back. It's as sensitive as an individual. Hitler knew crowd psychology, he could make a mob move any way he wanted them to. They do in fact become an individual I think. The individuality of Woodstock was very high."

'Hissing' is now regarded as one of your best LPs, but it didn't get particularly good reviews. Were you disappointed or even hurt by that?

"Oh yeah. To me it was a subtle change, whereas the press took it up as a radical change and *Rolling Stone* gave it the distinction of the Worst Album of the Year. They were very unkind, sort of like the style of journalism that the English enjoy so much now. To me it was a real hatchet job. Oh it was called all sorts of awful things. I felt it was really unjust. I couldn't see that there was this great gap. For instance 'Aja' was a beloved album. It came out and people adored it, it was followed by 'Gaucho' which was equally great and it was just kissed off. I thought, 'now there we go again'. Those two albums, to me, belong in a similar period. I don't see a radical departure."

But 'Hissing' was in some ways. The symphonic compositions, the cinematic feel, the ethereal music, the ethnic rhythms, the loosely sketched story line. The new subject matter was less about love than the carry on of the upper crust or as someone put it 'it was an essay on the spiritual bankruptcy of the American upper middle class'. That's a hell of a long way from Woodstock.

"I remember thinking, while I was writing it — film, the American cinema, locked in as it is to certain themes which appeal to the masses, still has room for little eccentric films. Rock 'n' Roll is even more pathetically locked in. Rock 'n' Roll has nothing to do with the suburbs, I realised that, but why not? Why is rock 'n' roll always 'street'. Is it the property of only one class of people? We deny a whole class of people here. It turned out that it was not a rock 'n' roll theme and it was killed off as a result of that — and the ethnic rhythms, which now a lot of people have gotten into but at that time it was just weird and was just another point of attack."

Do you think that you were a bit before your time, that people weren't really ready for it?

"Yeah I always think 'oh this'll be fresh. Things are stating up. They'll like this.' It only seems like a little fresh to me but they perceived it as radical fresh whereas things that came along later and took similar ideas and developed them except on a slightly different tack were heralded. I found it disappointing."

Have you ever put integrity aside for commercial success?

"I might have on my first album. I was coming in looking suspiciously like a folk singer at the end of a folk movement. David Crosby filled me out on that because he said you know what they're going to do — they're going to put strings and elaborate things all over you to try and make you more commercial. So he, under the guise of producer, did not produce me. He served as a watchdog . . . If I was going to sell out I probably would have done it then, but the record did well and nobody really contested my directions since."

Would you like American radio to be playing the current LP?

"They are playing it now. They didn't play the Mingus album, it didn't fit into any slot but the new album is getting airplay in the States."

Do you think there is a different requirement for a hit single in the eighties than say back in '74 or in the sixties?

"The singles department I have no control over."

Do you think pop has lost a lot of its charm? What do you like now?

"I find things that I like. I don't think that it's lost its charm. I think the things just go faster and faster all the way round. Every form of fashion changes radically within a year, whereas before it might be every four years. Everything's very sped up. But people have shorter and shorter attention spans, they have a greater appetite for change, which in some ways is good but what they throw out with that appetite is the ability to savour things, and a certain amount of classicism which I like, gets lost. I think there's a baby getting thrown out with the tub water there."

Do you think that punk had the same revolutionary effect on music as the Beatles did in the sixties?

"I think a lot of punk music is posturing and attitude and really belongs more to the world of fashion than to the world of music although there are people emerging within that context with that appearance, that have all the earmarks of musicians. It's really no different than the big goldrush to California when there was a million bands. If one makes it, there springs up a camp around them and you see who survives it. Only a few last. A lot of them just have the right look and the right texture and they'll have a short term at it. But there's very little really great that comes out of any wave."

Do you like to be in a situation where people have accepted you, where their main concern is the fascination with what you're going to do next?

"Yeah, I like that. I find most of my contemporaries didn't hang in that long but kids of twelve whose parents started them off with their first albums, they have the ability, through their teens, to hang in without going into radical warps as the thing changed — in my opinion subtley and in other people's opinion radically. I like that."

Do you think there are a lot more people from the old days will buy your new album or do you think there will be a new younger audience?

"I have no idea. In Australia, for example, we had a very mixed audience — they're mixed age-wise and class-wise and I like that the best. I like the idea of generations sitting side by side, I think it's healthy. I'd like to see an orange cockatoo hairdo sitting next to basic black and pearls, next to a hippy or whatever. I like the idea of a mixed audience."

Was Russel Kunkel the man who got you onto jazz in the first place?

"Yeah it was Russell. I was trying to lead him through this piece of music and there were grace notes and subtleties and things that I felt were getting kind of buried because Russell has a great strong kind of rock style but the intricacies were getting lost in it. I took the time to kind of instruct him and he said 'Joni, I can't play this music, I think you should really get yourself a jazz drummer'. So I went scouting the jazz clubs and I found the LA Express, a band that was intact, that had good rapport amongst themselves. That was the first recording band that I worked with."

How important is jazz to you now? I get the impression that you've sort of got it out of your system.

"It was just that the music that I invent has chord structures and rhythmic intricacies that rock 'n' roll musicians couldn't play. There was such a polarisation at that time. This band that I have now, some of the members are rooted in classics, and they love rock 'n' roll and they play jazz well also. They are a more versatile kind of musician but they didn't exist then. You were either a rocker or a jazzer. Now there are young musicians coming up who are not broken down into orthodoxies, so I have a fuller spectrum of people to pick from. But then I had no choice. So for that reason I went into jazz; they could play the more complex chords, notice the more intricate internal rhythm."

Was there ever a sense, when you went into jazz, that it seemed a more graceful way of growing old — like that pop music was youth?

"The rock 'n' rollers that I hung out with, in the scene that I was in, were very nervous as they approached 30, but when I went into the jazz cellars, the audience were of mixed age and I found people there who were very comfortable, being 40, being 50, hanging with 20 year-olds or whatever. Whereas rock 'n' roll was very neurotically youth conscious. And of the two situations I found it the more comfortable in the jazz clubs."

You have said that you would see yourself as a painter first, and a musician second.

"Yeah, always. I don't have any of the standard languages in music. I tend to see music graphically in my head, painterly. I often instruct my musicians in metaphors which rock and rollers couldn't understand; even a lot of studio musicians would get a good giggle out of it. As I began to find my own spirits in music, none of them baulked at metaphoric descriptions in music. As I began to find those people who were genuinely sympathetic to my music they all were metaphorical thinkers. Many of them also had talent as artists, whether they had fully developed it or not, they had a graphic eye as well as a graphic ear."

Do you think it's harder to be accepted in the art world because you are a pop star than if you hadn't been?

"Oh yeah, you come in as a dilettante."

Have you had an exhibition or public sales of your painting?

"I've been in three group shows. One with people in rock 'n' roll who paint and one with west coast and south west artists, that travelled mostly through Texas and museums and galleries in the south west. I'm just about to have a show in Japan of my paintings. They're stockpiling to an extent that I'm going to have to start selling them soon!"

Where are you based most of the time?

"We live mostly at the beach in California."

Do you think that by attempting the Mingus LP you left yourself open to an awful lot of criticism?

"Oh yeah. It was irresistable. It was like the call of fate. Like Charles called to me, much to the open jealousy of a lot of my jazz friends. To me he wasn't such a great hero. I wasn't that familiar with his music when I went to work with him, to apprentice or whatever exactly that relationship was. I didn't know why he had chosen me but he was a man of good instincts and it turned out that I was suitable for the job."

Mingus died in January 1979. Did the album become more of an eulogy than the collaboration you might have hoped for?

"My interest was a fuller musical education, that was part of what was in it for me. I knew I was going to be pulled through the dial, something intense that I would no other way get an opportunity of experiencing. And I love stories and I knew I would be assailed as part of the project with first hand stories of great jazz legendary figures and it was irresistable. Mingus could have walked through the streets of New York fairly anonymously until Donovan sang 'Mingus Mellow Fantastic' and that Charles liked, that increased celebrity. Part of *my* role in fact was to give him a larger funeral! But he'd chosen me specifically out of some respect that he had for me. He thought that I had a lot of nerve, to dress up like a black man on my album cover, that made him curious about me. 'Paprika Plains' was a piece of music that he was curious to meet me about, there was something in it that he admired. It was something that had to be done, it was the opportunity of a lifetime."

He came to you with six songs and you recorded four of them.

"The time that he wrote them he was fully paralysed so he sang linear melodies and called out chord changes to his neighbour who played them on a piano with a click track and that's all I had to work from. I would wake up in the morning and my foot would be going back and forth like a metronome. So finally I had somebody else put the piano changes down and set the metronome and I had to listen to them a lot. Also he played me a lot of records. He played me 'Reincarnation of a Lovebird' as a suggested melody because some of the songs I couldn't get into. Of the six he played me, two I felt were more interesting to me and that's why we ended up using existing songs instead of all the existing melodies."

He had an aversion to electric instruments.

"He was a real traditionalist. He didn't like the sound of them. He said they covered up lack of technique and you couldn't hear the style. He couldn't stand the sound of an electric keyboard, for instance."

What about his idea to write music based on T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets?

"That was his first idea. He loved layering things, he wanted a full orchestra and he wanted me to be playing the lead melody on acoustic guitar, an Oxford Englishman reading a stanza of T. S. Eliot and me translating it into, simplifying it into, street language, working as a translator. Bringing it down to a fantasy."

You're known as someone who does not like to do interviews. Why is that?

"I'm too open and they take advantage of it."

Is live radio easier to do?

"They're all easy to do, but what I'm saying is going to go out intact. It's my own noose, there's no one to muddle it around."

If you're the type who likes being onstage and in the studio, do you find the other bits hard to take?

"I have no complaints. No one has really screwed me in the business, considering what a dirty business it is. You hear a lot of complaints about it. But it's been very genteel. Showbusiness has been good to me."

This interview from Dave Fanning's Radio 2 programme, is reproduced by arrangement with RTE and with their kind permission.

Joni and Dave Fanning