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**JONI MITCHELL LOOKS BACK ON THE LIBERATION OF HER JAZZ YEARS. P62**

# A Kind



# of Blue

BETWEEN 1975 AND 1979, *Joni Mitchell* EMBARKED UPON A QUARTET OF ALBUMS THAT FOUND THE FORMER ACOUSTIC FOLK ICON EMBRACING JAZZ IMPROVISATION AND HARMONIC EXPERIMENT. *David Fricke* SPEAKS TO THE MUSICIANS AND COLLABORATORS WHO JOINED IN HER QUEST FOR A NEW CREATIVE FREEDOM.

PORTRAIT BY *Henry Diltz*



Desert blooms: Joni Mitchell takes the air outside Las Vegas, Nevada, May 1978.

THE LINE RAN DOWN THE BLOCK OUTSIDE THE BAKED POTATO ON TUESDAY nights in 1973. Named after the main dish on the menu, the small, venerable Los Angeles jazz club – founded by pianist Don Randi in 1970 – hosted a popular residency by a combo of top, local improvisers who also happened to be among the busiest session musicians in town. The nominal leader, saxophonist Tom Scott, made records with John Coltrane’s producer Bob Thiele and did a roaring business in TV and movie scores. But the other cats were his equals in resumé.

Pianist Joe Sample was a founding member of hard-bop-turned-R&B stars The Crusaders; bassist Max Bennett grew up in the bebop era and worked with singers Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald; drummer John Guerin played with Thelonious Monk, Lou Rawls and Linda Ronstadt and was in a late line-up of The Byrds. He and Bennett were the backbeat on Frank Zappa’s 1969 instrumental smash, *Hot Rats*.

“It was just for the fun of getting out of the studio,” says guitarist Larry Carlton, who was in The Crusaders at the time and joined the Baked Potato fun after a previous guitarist didn’t work out. “We never rehearsed. We just jammed.”

Things got more serious after Scott – who had played woodwinds on Joni Mitchell’s latest album, *For The Roses* – invited the Canadian-born singer-songwriter to see the band, dubbed the L.A. Express. Mitchell’s early records – the largely acoustic quartet of 1968’s *Song To A Seagull*, ’69’s *Clouds*, ’70’s *Ladies Of The Canyon* and *Blue* the following year – made her a folk icon, a regal angel of tenderly frank, romantic confession. But the former Roberta Joan Anderson knew a few things about jazz too. She heard Miles Davis’s *Sketches Of Spain* as a teenager in Saskatoon and was especially knocked out, at a party, by *The Hottest New Group In Jazz*, a 1962 LP by the vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. “I’ve always considered that album to be my Beatles,” Mitchell told *Downbeat*’s Leonard Feather in 1979, “because I learned every song off it.”

At the Baked Potato, Mitchell met the L.A. Express and asked the band to play on her next record, *Court And Spark*. Mitchell and her engineer Henry Lewy “booked four or five days with us” at A&M Studios, Carlton says, “but it worked so well that they just committed to it.”

Mitchell – 29, a divorcee and previously linked romantically with Graham Nash and James Taylor – also fell for Guerin, a handsome charmer in his mid-thirties.

“Joni loved the band, but she *really* loved the drummer,” Bennett cracks fondly. “They were a hit right away.”

So was *Court And Spark*, which was finished in late ’73, issued in January, 1974 and went to Number 2 in *Billboard*, selling over two million copies. It was Mitchell’s first album with a working band (guests included Crusaders bassist Wilton Felder and The Band’s Robbie Robertson), and the bond was plain in the title song’s firm groove and the rhythmic, choral buoyancy of *Raised On Robbery*. Mitchell’s run-on melodies and eccentric guitar tunings perplexed the L.A. Express at first.

“Joe and I were looking at each other,” Bennett says, “like, ‘This is different. Is it going to work?’”

However, the musicians were versatile enough to relish and master the challenge. Mitchell’s writing “was very sophisticated harmonically,” Carlton says, “yet so accessible.” The L.A. Express’s



“Joni loved the band, but she really loved the drummer. They were a hit right away.”  
Max Bennett



unhurried swing and incisive flourishes, in turn, illuminated Mitchell’s reflective language in *Free Man In Paris*, an affectionate portrait of her label boss and friend David Geffen, and the swooning hit single *Help Me*, a clear reference to the singer’s new ecstasy with Guerin.

*Court And Spark* – which ended with *Twisted*, a cover from that Lambert, Hendricks & Ross album – marked the start of Mitchell’s most provocative era on record, an adventure in harmonic exploration, textural dynamics and interior complexity often referred to as her ‘jazz years’. She worked with members of the L.A. Express across three more albums – 1975’s *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, ’76’s *Hejira* and the 1977 double long-player, *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* – while forging a profound, creative bond with the prodigious bassist Jaco Pastorius, an association that peaked on 1979’s *Mingus*, Mitchell’s homage to the titanic jazz bassist Charles Mingus.

Bennett is blunt in his summation of Mitchell as a jazz singer. “It was fantastic to work with Peggy and Ella,” he says, “but Joni’s voice – there was nothing to match it.” Former *Weather Report* drummer Peter Erskine, who played on *Mingus*, says he heard “a burning essence, the white heat of phosphorus” in Mitchell’s work, especially with Pastorius. But guitarist Robben Ford – who joined the L.A. Express for the 1974 tour that became the live album, *Miles Of Aisles*, and played on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira* – claims Mitchell drew from “countless resources” including visual arts and African music, notably in *Hissing*’s *The Jungle Line*, a densely lyrical vision of French painter Henri Rousseau set to Moog and a proto-sampling loop of Burundi drumming. “It was like she was making movies,” says Ford.

Mitchell’s hard turn from easily adored balladry tested her audience – *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* was her last Top 10 album in the US – and divided critics. She was voted 1975’s Top Jazz and Pop Vocalist by *Playboy*,

Henry Diltz/Getty Images



Car on a hill: Joni takes the wheel, October 1974; (opposite) Mitchell and L.A. Express drummer and more, John Guerin; (insets) her '74 highlight *Court And Spark* and the inspirational Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.



**"This is different. Is it going to work?": Joni with The L.A. Express in October '74 (from left) Tom Scott, Max Bennett, Robben Ford, Larry Nash, Guerin and Mitchell; (below) more '70s classics.**

◀ while Rolling Stone dismissed *The Hissing...* as "substantial literature... set to insubstantial music" and complained that on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* Mitchell had "chosen to abandon melody at a time when she needs it most urgently."

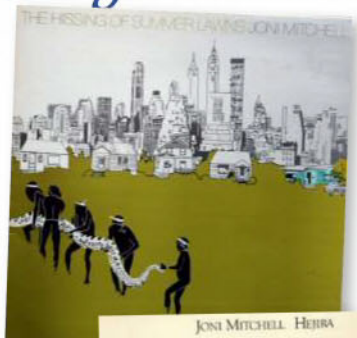
But her experimental ardour resonated with subsequent generations: On *A Tribute To Joni Mitchell*, a 2007 compilation, Björk, Elvis Costello, Sufjan Stevens, k.d. lang and jazz pianist Brad Mehldau all covered songs from this period. "I learned *Hejira* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* by heart when I was 15," Björk told me last year. "She was creating her own universe; she wasn't a guest in a man's world."

Mitchell – now 72 and in seclusion, recovering from a brain aneurysm last spring – was adamant in her course when she spoke to Rolling Stone in 1979. "You have two choices," she told Cameron Crowe. People will "crucify you for staying the same. If you change, they're going to crucify you for changing. But staying the same is boring. And change is interesting."

"I'd rather be crucified," she declared, "for changing."

**R**OB BEN FORD WAS 22 AND ABOUT to quit his job – playing guitar for blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon – when Tom Scott called his manager's office in January 1974 with an offer to go on the road with Joni Mitchell. Ford had no idea who she was. When Scott played him an acetate of *Court And Spark*, the guitarist found the music "a little over my head". He also recalls Mitchell's arrival during his first rehearsal with the L.A. Express.

"Staying the same is boring. And change is interesting. I'd rather be crucified, for changing."  
Joni Mitchell



"She looked like a gazelle, glorious and magical," Ford says brightly. "I had been scuffling, and this was a huge step up on every level – the company I was keeping, the music I was making." Ford worked from charts, building on Carlton's parts for *Court And Spark*. But the "harmonic environment created by her alternate tunings was a different language and very demanding."

Carlton – who declined to tour, choosing to stay in the studio and stick with The Crusaders – says the members of The L.A. Express mostly arranged their own parts on *Court And Spark*, encouraged by Mitchell. "But we were servants to the artist and song," he adds, citing the rattled sigh of his guitar in the opening of *Help Me*. "It's just a G major 7th chord on a down beat, but it sets up her next line perfectly. That's all I had to play in that spot."

Mitchell, working closely with Lewy, was a decisive leader too. The L.A. Express cut their tracks for *Court And Spark* live in the studio, often with Mitchell in the vocal booth. But when Carlton heard *Free Man In Paris* on the album, he discovered a second, over-dubbed guitarist, Jose Feliciano, in the final mix. "I can hear the roughness in his playing," Carlton says. "She added his licks back there to put some edge on a mood."

"I do have this reputation for being a serious person," Mitchell admitted to Cameron Crowe. But, she insisted, "I love to dance. I'm a rowdy. I'm a good timer." She was as good as her word on two 1974 North American tours with The L.A. Express – more than 60 shows in major theatres, arenas and amphitheatres. She and Guerin "would hang

Henry Diltz (2); Getty Images; Robert Trujillo

out together – they were an item,” Bennett notes. “But she was really one of the guys.”

Ford was walking through an airport, waiting for a flight to the next show, when he spotted Mitchell, Guerin, Scott and Lewy in a bar with a portable tape deck, cracking up as they listened to a recording of comic hipster Lord Buckley’s life-of-Jesus routine, *The Nazz*. “She was a ball,” Ford says of Mitchell. “And John had played with Monk. Suddenly, I was in this culture, inundated with coolness.”

George Harrison wanted a piece of the fun after he saw Mitchell’s April show at the New Victoria theatre in London, her only European stop that year. The next day, the ex-Beatle invited the entourage to his Friar Park estate. Mitchell returned to London in the evening; *The L.A. Express* stuck around until 7am the following morning, cutting two tracks with Harrison that ended up on his 1974 album, *Dark Horse*. Ford later played on the title track as well.

“It took me six years to find a band that inflamed me to that degree,” Mitchell said of the *L.A. Express* in a 1973 interview with Malka Marom, a singer and friend from the Toronto folk scene. (In 2014, Marom published their conversations over the years in a book, *Joni Mitchell In Her Own Words*.) “But even with that band,” Mitchell added, “I wanted a more resonant sound.”

For *The Hissing* . . . , Mitchell retained the *L.A. Express* – using both Carlton and Ford on guitars – but in varying combinations with additional colouring including brass, vibes and electronics. (Mitchell plays the Moog on *The Jungle Line*.)

“I did the same thing there that I did on *Court And Spark*,” says Carlton, who played on *Edith And The Kingpin*, a cautionary tale of hard-drug life, and Mitchell’s childhood memoir *Don’t Interrupt The Sorrow*. “I think she became so familiar with what each of us could give that she heard it in her head – ‘Oh, I hear Larry on this one.’ But it was very loose – the kind of freedom where we would all magically find that spot where the song was.”

Mitchell toured with *The L.A. Express* again in January and February 1976 but that magic was on the wane. She had just come off the late-’75 leg of Bob Dylan’s *Rolling Thunder Revue*; *The Hissing* . . . was getting a hard time in the press; and her relationship with Guerin was coming to a painful finish. “We were in Philadelphia,” Bennett says, “and somebody said, ‘John’s got his own room.’ I was like, Uh, oh.” On February 22, at the University of Maryland, Mitchell sang the first line of her opening number, *Help Me* – “Help me, I think I’m falling in love again” – then stopped and walked off. The tour ended a week later.

Nevertheless, Mitchell turned to Guerin for drumming when she recorded *Hejira*, named after the Arab word for a journey of escape, and *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*. “Later on, my wife and I went to dinner with Joni,” Bennett says. “She was talking how John just loved women. It caused a lot of heartache for her.” But ➤



Joni as ‘Art Deco’, her name for the *Don Juan* drag, sizes up Henry Diltz’s wife Elizabeth at Lee Sklar’s Halloween, November 1976; *Reckless Daughter* album sleeve (inset).



## “He was super-cool.”

METALLICA BASS MAN Robert Trujillo ON THE STAR OF HIS NEW MOVIE, LATE JAZZ BASSIST (AND KEY JONI COLLABORATOR) Jaco Pastorius.

“Around 1978 I started to hear about this bass player, Jaco; one-word, four letters. An older friend, a bass player, turned me onto Weather Report’s *Heavy Weather*. The picture of this Jaco guy on the back of that album was really . . . exotic. There was a mystique to him. Soon after, I heard his first solo album. That track, *Portrait Of Tracy*, blew my mind because I couldn’t figure out what instrument I was hearing. It had the same effect on me as Van Halen’s *Eruption*.

I first went to see Jaco live in 1979 at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. It changed my life. He was super-cool. He looked like the surfers and skateboarders I grew up with in Dogtown. He took command of this audience of old jazzers, heavy metal kids, punks . . . The energy that surrounded him was enthralling. He had this edge, this attitude. Creatively, it made me realise there are no rules. It’s wide open.

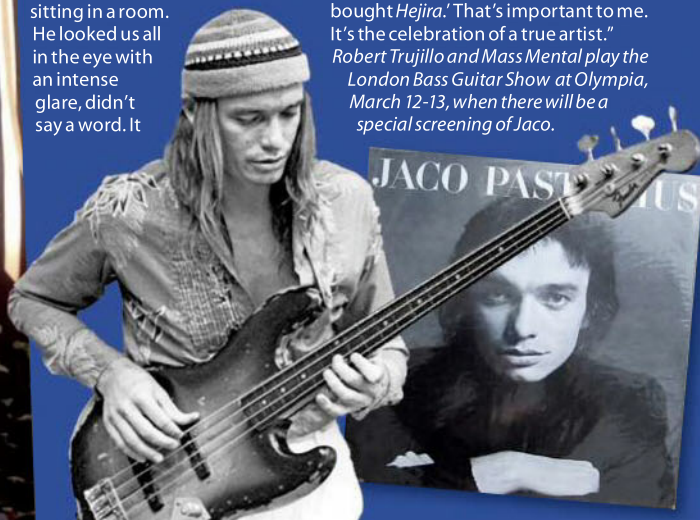
I’d always appreciated Joni Mitchell’s music but then I heard what she’d done with Jaco as collaborator on *Hejira*, *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*. I was blown away. It’s Jaco sharing terrain, catering to the creativity of someone else, but he’s still present, turns it into its own art-piece.

When he died I was at my friend’s home studio, creating music inspired by Jaco. It was very sad. There’s been lots of stories about his personal life, lots of rumours . . . I’d seen him play at The LA Guitar Show, sitting in a room. He looked us all in the eye with an intense glare, didn’t say a word. It

was beautiful, like he was psyching us out. Then his girlfriend came in, this beautiful surfer girl, with a beer in each pocket, and said, ‘C’mon Jaco, let’s go,’ and he put the bass down and walked out. It was amazing, to have your idol glare you in the eyes.

In 1996 I met Johnny Pastorius, Jaco’s eldest son. He’d bought a round of drinks at a Fort Lauderdale bar where a surfer friend of mine worked. He sees the name on the credit card and says, ‘My friend’s a bass player and there’s a guy called Pastorius who’s his biggest influence.’ Johnny says, ‘That’s Jaco, my father.’ A year later I met Johnny and said, ‘You’ve got to make a film about your father – his story is so important. He starts working on one. Years go by and I’m invited onto the project. I realised it’s going to take money, time, passion . . . It pulled me in.

Every year we’d show rough cuts. Six years of hard work. Joni didn’t come on until year four. We kept re-editing, but it made for something very special. The director, Paul Marchand, was amazing. We could have easily created a tragic story but there was so much to celebrate. He wasn’t on this planet long but he made a powerful statement. If there’d been better understanding of his addiction, his bi-polar disorder, there’s a chance he’d still be around – at the time people didn’t understand what was going on. But we wanted the film to be a celebration. Now, young kids approach me and say, ‘I’m now a Jaco Pastorius fan. I went and bought *Hejira*.’ That’s important to me. It’s the celebration of a true artist.” *Robert Trujillo and Mass Mental play the London Bass Guitar Show at Olympia, March 12-13, when there will be a special screening of Jaco.*





**Make mine Mingus:** (above, from left) Peter Erskine, Joni, Jaco Pastorius, Herbie Hancock, 1978; (below) Joni and Herbie, 1978.



Joni and Wayne Shorter, again at A&M studios during the *Mingus* sessions, 1978; (bottom, from left) Joni and Herbie on-stage, Berkeley Jazz Festival, California, September 1978; Joni and Charles Mingus, '78; inside sleeve to *Mingus*, painted by Mitchell.



◀ searching and musicianship were, Bennett suggests, more important for her. “She had gotten over it. It was back to reality.”

Mitchell had also discovered Jaco Pastorius, a Florida-born electric-bass whiz who joined the fusion supergroup Weather Report in 1974 and was recommended to Mitchell by Ford. “For the first eight albums or so, I was directing bass players and annoying them to death,” Mitchell said later. “I wanted them to stop putting dark polka dots all over the bottom and instead treat it like a symphony.”

Pastorius’s elegant, fluid assertion, threading the guitars and percussion in *Hejira*’s opening farewell Coyote (with its deceptively casual allusion to Guerin) and the bleak, frantic Black Crow, was a signature departure for Mitchell. “Jaco was more than overt, any time he worked with Joni,” claims Peter Erskine, who joined Pastorius in the Weather Report backfield in 1978. “But I loved the majesty of her tunes with Jaco.”

In the side-long Paprika Plains on *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, Pastorius is a vital, grounding complement to the soprano-sax flight of Weather Report’s Wayne Shorter and Michael Gibbs’ orchestral impressionism. “Joni was very clever as well as poetic,” Erskine says, in her use of Pastorius. “It was a brilliant, fortuitous choice.”

Ford recorded tracks with Pastorius and Guerin for *Don Juan* that, he says, “wound up not being on the record. They weren’t songs, just blues jams – instrumentals that she wanted to use as source music.” Mitchell was “thinking very cinematically in those days,” sometimes in ways that, Ford admits, confounded him. He points to the insertion of the sultry, romantic fantasy Centerpiece – another tune from that 1962 Lambert, Hendricks & Ross album, written by Hendricks with trumpeter Harry ‘Sweets’ Edison – in the middle of *The Hissing’s* Harry’s House, Mitchell’s eerie rendering of a destructive relationship.

“It was intense,” Ford says of playing on Harry’s House. “I was trying to match what was going on emotionally in that song. I was trying to accomplish intensity – actually, I accomplished irritation,” he adds, laughing. “I’m sure she picked up on that.” The same night, later in the session, Ford played acoustic guitar on Centerpiece.

“We got a successful take and went into the control room,” where Mitchell and Guerin started talking about splicing the songs together.





“That shift in the bass line – John’s eyes just lit up,” Ford says, “and Joan goes, ‘Wow, that sounds cool.’ She looked at me and said, ‘Robben, what do you think?’ I’m like, Oh, man, you’re messing up a beautiful song.” The guitarist laughs. “I said things like that to her often. Of course, it’s great. The whole thing works as a performance, great art from a great artist.” Ford laughs again. “Everything I said to her was completely wrong. And she was always right.”

**C**HARLES MINGUS WAS 56 AND TERMINALLY ILL with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease (after the late New York baseball star) when a friend played him *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* in early 1978. The bassist was intrigued by the cover – Mitchell in drag as a black man – and the extended improvising in Paprika Plains. Mingus – who had played with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and written the landmark compositions *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* and *Haitian Fight Song* but could no longer grip his instrument – contacted Mitchell, asking her to collaborate with him on a musical adaptation of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*.

She passed. Instead, the two worked together on a set of Mingus melodies, among his last, to which Mitchell wrote lyrics and vocal treatments.

“I felt this kind of sweet giddiness when I met him,” Mitchell told Cameron Crowe. “Charles put on this one record, and just before he played it, he said, ‘Now this song has five melodies going all at once.’ I said, Yeah, I bet you want me to write five different sets of words for each one of those melodies, right? And he grinned and said, ‘Right.’”

Despite his worsening condition, Mingus attended a few, initial sessions for the album that would bear his name, held at Electric Lady Studios in New York, where Mitchell was leading shifting casts of Hall of Fame jazzmen: saxophonists Phil Woods and Gerry Mulligan; bassists Eddie Gomez and Stanley Clarke; guitarist John McLaughlin and drummer Tony Williams.

By the late summer of 1978, Mingus was in Mexico with his wife Sue, vainly pursuing alternative treatments, and Mitchell was in Los Angeles, re-recording most of the album with her own version of *Weather Report* – with Herbie Hancock on keyboards instead of Joe Zawinul. “The vibe I got,” Erskine says, “was that she was being humoured a little” at the New York dates, “almost like, ‘Get out of our way – we’re the real jazz guys.’”

“Joni came by a *Weather Report* rehearsal,” the drummer recalls, “and that might have gotten some wheels spinning.”

She had been working with a pianist, Jeremy Lubbock. But on the first day of recording in LA, during a pass at *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, Mingus’s eulogy for saxophonist Lester Young, Pastorius came over to Erskine “almost in this conspiratorial way and goes, ‘Who is this guy? I’m going to call Herbie.’ And Herbie says OK!” Erskine says, still amazed. “Now Joni has to tell Jeremy, ‘Thanks, but sorry, you have to go.’”

Hancock overdubbed a new piano part on *Pork Pie Hat* in one take. “Then we jumped into the next song, and the one after that.” Wayne Shorter came in the next day. The band, with percussionist Don Alias, cut five of *Mingus’s* six extended songs in those two days, including *The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines*, a tangled-brass New Orleans-style march, and the jazz warrior’s reverie *A Chair In The Sky* (“Biding my time/In memories/Of old friends of mine/In day-dreams of Birdland”). Mitchell completed her personal memoir of Mingus, *God Must Be A Boogie Man*, two days after his death on January 5, 1979.

*Mingus*, ultimately, was not a jazz album; it was a meditation on dying, scored as a fight to leave in dignity and fulfilment. “To be honest, *Mingus* is not an easy album to listen to,” Erskine says, an admission affirmed by many of its reviews. But, Erskine insists, “We knew this was something special. That was apparent. Even though we weren’t in the 30th Street Studios in New York” – the legendary Columbia Records facility where Mingus made his 1959 classics *Mingus Ah Um* and *Mingus Dynasty* – “it was as if we were. Everybody knew this was something sacred.”

Mitchell went on the road on behalf of *Mingus*, leading a band with Pastorius, guitarist Pat Metheny, saxophonist Michael Brecker and the a cappella vocal group *The Persuasions*. But it was the beginning of a long leaving.

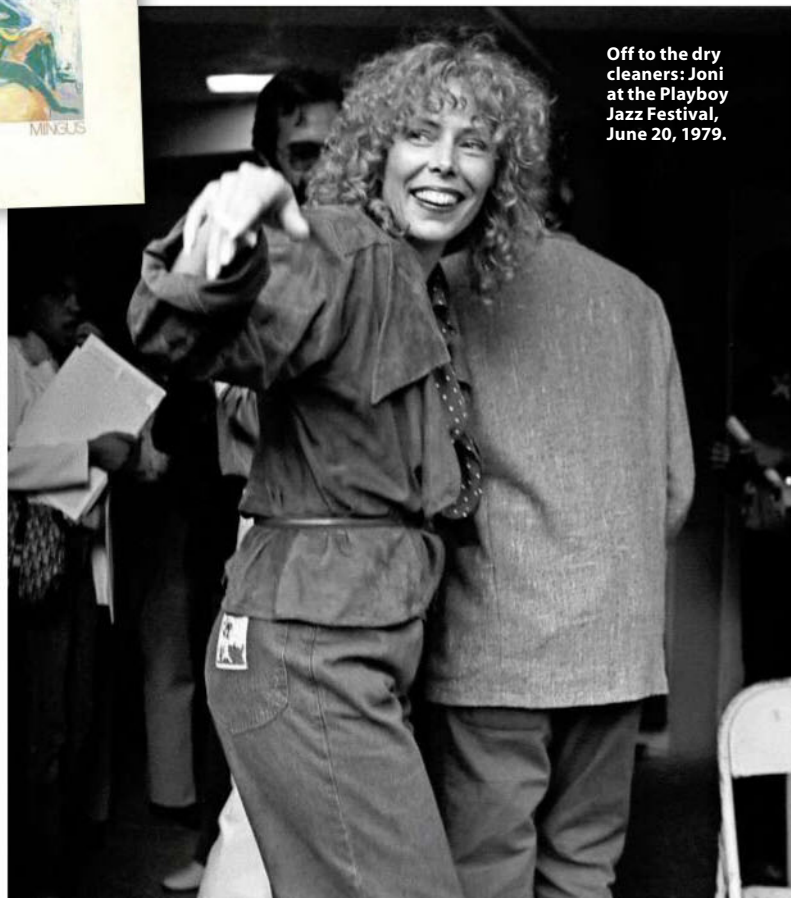
Starting with *Court And Spark*, the singer had made five of her most compelling, uncompromised studio albums in seven years. After *Mingus*, she would not return to record until 1982’s *Wild Things Run Fast*, and then issued new work between lengthening gaps over the next two decades, to diminishing sales. In 2002, Mitchell all but abdicated from the music business, calling it a “cesspool”.

But at her commercial height, Mitchell found a renewing energy in jazz. The improvising camaraderie and harmonic liberation transformed her as a singer, record producer and impatiently progressive songwriter. Carlton sums up Mitchell’s mid- and late ’70s this way: “Right artist, right songs, right players – and the world got to hear the goodness. I’m sure she was thankful for the success of *Court And Spark*, but Joni never tried to follow it up. She went on with the creative process – and the freedom.”

“Pigeonholes all seem funny to me,” Mitchell said in that 1979 *Downbeat* interview. “I feel like one of those lifer-education types that just keeps going for letters after their name – I want the full hyphen: folk-rock-country-jazz-classical . . . so finally when you get all the hyphens in, maybe they’ll drop them all, and get down to just some American music.”



“Charles put on this record, and just before he played it, he said, ‘This song has five melodies going all at once.’”  
Joni Mitchell



Off to the dry cleaners: Joni at the Playboy Jazz Festival, June 20, 1979.