

MY LIFE WITH JONI

MUSICAL MAN

ABOUT TOWN

ROBERT HOLLISTON

ON THE MAGIC OF

JONI MITCHELL



Story Highlights

Joni's song *Both Sides Now* has been covered by over 1100 artists.

Last season Jonathan Gould starred in *Chelsea Hotel* and Anton Lipovetsky starred in *A Christmas Carol*. Brent Jarvis, Evangelia Kambites and Linda Kidder are all making their Belfry debuts in *I Think I'm Fallin'*.

Joni has been nominated for 16 Grammy Awards, won 9, and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999.

I REMEMBER MANY THINGS ABOUT LIFE DURING THE SUMMER OF 1979: preparing my move to Vancouver as a full-time UBC music student; working during the day at the Inter-Cultural Association (and during the evenings for what is now Pacific Opera Victoria); practicing (when time allowed) and partying (time always allowed). And most of all haunting our local record store daily, waiting for the release of Joni Mitchell's newest album, *Mingus*. I remember the day it arrived: I bought the vinyl album (for home), the cassette (for work), and the new issue of *Rolling Stone* which had a photo of Joni on the cover and the (now-legendary) interview with Cameron Crowe inside. Went back to work, shut the door, sat at my desk, listened and read. Was baffled a bit by the melodies, lyrics, and sound - at first. But by the third listening was absorbed, impressed, entranced, astonished, still maybe a bit baffled but starting to sing along. It occurred to me then that perhaps no artist in the history of popular music had gone through so

many changes, explored so many styles - and done all of it so convincingly, so beautifully, so well - in so brief a span as a mere decade.

My introduction to Joni Mitchell came about in junior high school when I got to know her third album, *Ladies of the Canyon*. Of course I knew a few songs from the earlier records, but only tangentially, and probably in recordings by Judy Collins (note to potential Joni fans: it's a rite of passage to learn to prefer Joni's recordings of her early material to anybody else's). I loved that album and knew every song by heart, but other musical interests took over and that was that, which means that such iconic releases as *Blue* and *Court and Spark* more or less passed me by. For a while

Full Joni fandom struck in the summer of 1978, when a friend introduced me to *Miles of Aisles*, Joni's first live album. As I could afford them, I bought all the others, listened closely and really

got to know her songs, lyrically and musically. And as I wanted to know about this multifariously gifted human being, I read as much as I could find about her.

The revelation of hearing, within a span of one summer, *Blue, For the Roses*, and *Court and Spark* is something I can't adequately describe: this was songwriting, singing, and music making at the highest possible level, but as sophisticated as it was, it was also moving. I mean solar plexus, emotionally moving.

By the mid-1970s, Joni was using more sidemen in her recordings, some of them culled from a local group known as L.A. Express (her accompanying band on *Miles of Aisles*). Individually they enlivened and enriched the sound of the above-mentioned albums as well as Joni's first live release, but writers and critics were confused. Was this jazz? Was it still pop? Was a former folkie becoming too "L.A.?" How are we supposed to choose a category for someone who keeps changing??

The 1975 release of *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* established once and forever that Joni Mitchell was an artist who answered to nobody. Lyrically, her subject matter seemed to move from personal revelation to social commentary. Musically, she continued to explore new sounds and different genres, most strikingly using a recording of the African Drummers of Burundi many years before "world music" began influencing California-based pop music. Joni's follow-up album, *Hejira*, usually ranks higher in the overall popularity stakes, and it's a magnificent achievement in an entirely different, and different sounding, way. For the first time since *Clouds* (1969) there were no piano songs, and the familiar players in the back-up band were now

joined by the iconic bassist Jaco Pastorius, who, along with Joni's own guitar sound, most defined this album's unique sound-world.

And then there's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. In my opinion, you can't be a Joni fan if you don't love this album. (OK, you can, but I'll never stop trying to convert you.) Among the back-up players on *Don Juan* we encounter for the first time in Joni's work the name Wayne Shorter of *Weather Report*. Almost 40 years on, I LOVE this very daring, also very polished album. Much reviled at the time, *Don Juan* caught the attention of the great jazz bassist Charles Mingus.

[Long before the release of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, Joni was talking about the influence of jazz musicians on her work: Miles Davis, of course, but also Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf.]

So, back to the summer of 1979. A small notice in the Victoria Daily Times that I almost missed: Joni Mitchell at the Pacific Coliseum. September 2, 1979 – a show that has now been immortalized on an album (called by *Rolling Stone* "one of a half dozen or so truly great live rock albums") and a video: *Shadows and Light*. Opening the concert was the *a cappella* vocal group The Persuasions, and Joni was backed by a now-legendary band: Jaco Pastorius, Pat Metheny, Lyle Mays, Michael Brecker, Don Alias. I've heard Joni live twice since then but this concert was and remains one of the top five concert experiences in a lifetime of concert-going. And a great way for Joni Mitchell to cap a decade of extraordinary musical evolution. ▲

Robert Holliston is Head of Keyboards at the Victoria Conservatory of Music and is Curator of Public Engagement at Pacific Opera Victoria. He taught The Life and Career of Joni Mitchell for the University of Victoria's Continuing Studies.

Cast & Creatives



Jonathan Gould
(ACTOR / MUSICIAN)



Brent Jarvis
(MUSICIAN)



Evangelia Kambites
(ACTOR / MUSICIAN)



Linda Kidder
(ACTOR / MUSICIAN)



Anton Lipovetsky
(ACTOR / ASSISTANT
MUSICAL DIRECTOR)



Michael Shamata
(CONCEPT / DIRECTOR)



Tobin Stokes
(MUSICAL DIRECTOR)



Cory Sincennes
(DESIGNER)



Alan Brodie
(LIGHTING DESIGNER)



Laura Krewski
(CHOREOGRAPHER)



Deborah Williams
(ASSISTANT DIRECTOR)



Paul Tedeschini
(SOUND DESIGNER)



Amy Jewell
(STAGE MANAGER)



Christopher Sibbald
(ASSISTANT STAGE
MANAGER)