

Billboard offers glimpse of private **Joni Mitchell**

Portrait of the Artist
by Timothy White,
Billboard, Dec. 9

AT last week's Billboard Music Awards, Peter Gabriel presented the Century Award to an artist who had influenced not only him but a strange crew of performers that included Prince, Madonna, Annie Lennox and Chrissie Hynde.

The recipient of the Century Award was Canadian-born **Joni Mitchell**, who also is the subject of an unusually lengthy cover story in this week's Billboard. Writer Timothy White bows to the demands of the trade journal, which means that the first half is an exhaustive account of Mitchell's recording career, her label-jumping and tax troubles.

In the second half, White draws out the singer, who is deeply private and seldom speaks of personal issues in interviews. Mitchell, 52, talks about her childhood bout with polio, and of her solitude in the hospital at Christmas: "I said a prayer, some kind of pact, a barter with God for my legs, my singing."

An unmarried art student, Mitchell got pregnant in Calgary at age 20, which "in 1964 was like you killed



Magazines

somebody." The baby girl was given up for adoption, and although Mitchell has never met her she says she has put messages for the child into her songs, "just to let her know I was thinking about her."

It's an eerily intimate glimpse that brings to earth a woman often idealized by fans. — *Elizabeth Renzetti*

Limping into the Millennium
by Thomas S. Axworthy,
The U.S. on the Eve
of the 21st Century
by Stephen Blank,
Queen's Quarterly, Fall, 1995

TEN years ago Elvis Costello sang this lyric about the United States on his album *King of America*: "It was a fine idea at the time/But now it's a brilliant mistake." These lines could serve as a sort of theme to the articles cited above,

which are part of a massive, extended meditation (at 20 articles on 250 pages) on our neighbour to the south, titled *New Frontiers: The U.S.A. at the Dawn of a New Century*, edited by The Globe's Jeffrey Simpson.

Thomas Axworthy's essay is a pithy, orderly analysis of how the New Deal liberalism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt collapsed under the weight of racial tensions, the Vietnam War, the rise of the counterculture and the failure of government to overcome the "stagflation" of the 1970s. In the post-Reagan era, liberalism, the once-dominant ideology of American politics, "is reduced to either waiting for Newt Gingrich to fail or being able to outdemagogue the right."

Stephen Blank's musings are just as sobering and disturbing as Axworthy's. Yes, America is a mess, he says, but if one takes a longer view, what is happening today "bears a remarkable resemblance" to what happened in *fin-de-siècle* America. The structural changes that occurred then, agonizing as they were, provided the conditions for America's hegemony for most of the 20th century. With the United States and its North American neighbours once again undergoing structural transformation, "it is quite possible that the U.S. . . .

will recapture competitive advantages of the same scale" it enjoyed between 1945 and 1970.

For those who are, by sensibility, optimists, Blank's conclusions are pleasingly chipper; for those who don't believe that "short-term pain" is neither, of necessity, short nor a guarantor of "long-term gain," Blank's rather sanguine stance seems undermined by the very evidence he and Axworthy have marshalled.

— *James Adams*

The Glorious Tradition
by Katherine Betts
photography by Irving Penn
Vogue, December, 1995

WITH a major show about haute couture opening at New York's Metropolitan Museum, Vogue takes the opportunity to investigate the Parisian industry of handmade, one-of-a-kind dresses for itself. The magazine assembled a wonderful portfolio of Irving Penn's classic fashion photographs, which he has shot for Vogue since 1950, and then asked him to contribute some new ones. The *New Look* of the fifties meets the retro looks of the nineties on facing pages.

Writer Katherine Betts contributes a long series of quotes from couturiers, customers, a haberdasher and a corset maker — and the many seamstresses who toil in the ateliers, or workshops, of the fashion houses. Haute couture may seem impossibly elitist, with millionaire customers paying sums that could house a whole family for a single party dress. What's admirable, however, is its art: Behind the scenes, hundreds of anonymous hands devote hours of skill and patience in a bid for perfection.

So much contemporary writing about fashion is utter drivel, breathless stuff that goes on about new eye-shadow colours as though to be in style were some kind of moral duty. In comparison, this piece is wonderfully refreshing, revealing the world of proud artisans desperately debating whether innovation will save them or drive them under.

Says Colette Maciet, head of an atelier at Givenchy: "I started working for Mile. Chanel when I was 14. There were 1,500 seamstresses working in the ateliers, and there were 10 to 15 ateliers. Now when a seamstress retires, she is not replaced. And young people aren't interested. They have no patience. They all want to be designers." — *Kate Taylor*