



Post-Dispatch illustration by Joe Crouch

I'm an idealist in a world where inferior souls run things. We are facing extinction as a species because of it.

— Joni Mitchell

SINGER-SONGWRITER-ARTIST Joni Mitchell, 44, is trying to balance careers in music and art; she paints her own album covers and exhibits her work in Tokyo this month and next.

"I see music as a painter," she said. "I think, 'I'm going to draw some dark lines under this passage.' I don't think about the key or the notes or anything like that."

She's stayed current mostly by changing the paintbrushes, incorporating synthesizers or drum machines to color her songs, which she started recording in the '60s.

Mitchell has been married to musician Larry Klein (who co-produces her albums) for the seven years — happily, she says.

Mitchell's once-lovelorn compositions now deal with world events and political and social issues; on the new album, those issues include war ("The Beat of Black Wings"), subliminal advertising ("The Recurring Dream") and the plight of Native Americans ("Lakota").

But she's still aware that the masses would rather not look beyond "The Circle Game," the theme song for TV's "thirtysomething."

"I'm not gonna plug into some current formula for hits," she said. "I never have and probably never will. I could sit down and take any pop song, take it apart and put it back together and have a big hit. Radio has been graying out because everyone is working in that format; I don't want to contribute to that grayness."

The inner workings of the music industry were hardly what young Roberta Joan Anderson — the child of farmers from Alberta, Canada — had in mind when she began playing ukulele in college and developed her interest in folk music. She eventually moved to Toronto, where she met fellow folk musician Chuck Mitchell; they married in 1965 and moved to Detroit.

After working in Detroit for several years, they split and she moved to New York and was signed by Reprise Records.

Her sensitive, introspective songs, inspired by her love life — "we're all lonely and looking for a mate. That's the story of the human race in a nutshell," she said — were a perfect fit with the times. By 1969, she was an established star in the folk-rock music sphere.

"I'm a loner by nature and the kind of attention the Beatles received would be a nightmare for me. I never courted that kind of fame, because I'm a back-bush Canadian and was raised to believe that if you stick your head up, it will probably get knocked off."

During the early '70s, Mitchell took a slight turn, fleshing out her sound and adding tinges of jazz to her songs. At the suggestion of drummer Russ Kunkel — one of the few musicians to acknowledge that her songs were too difficult for most pop session players — Mitchell enlisted jazz players and began the musical experiments of "Hissing of Summer Lawns," "Hejira," "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" and "Mingus," the latter recorded with the dying jazz legend Charles Mingus.

The change threw off most people, while smaller circles embraced her. Mingus called her a "nervy broad" and meant it as a compliment. Wayne Shorter, the former saxophonist for Weather Report, has marveled over her unconventional chord and key changes. Chaka Khan said Mitchell's chords "sounded like questions."

British keyboardist Thomas Dolby said, "Her best moments in music have come when she's cut through everything that's going on, transcended that hippie-folk mentality and done something that couldn't have been anything else. The 'Hejira' album, that's completely timeless. You'll never find it in some musical museum as an example of a

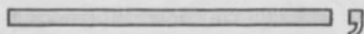
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Mitchell

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When I began experimenting, people weren't ready for it.



particular era."

The '80s /have found Mitchell back in the pop realm, though most people haven't noticed. She attributes that to poor timing. "Wild Things Run Fast," she said, was "a romantic album for an unromantic time." While writing "Dog Eat Dog" — on which she attacked TV evangelists and Reaganism — she said, "I could feel these world changes coming and was alarmed two or three years prior to the mass alarm. But nobody wanted to look at them; they wanted to look up to the sky where Ronnie Reagan was waving from a cloud."

Her newest album — her 15th — is "Chalkmarks in a Rainstorm," with guest performances by Peter Gabriel, Billy Idol, Don Henley, Tom Petty and Willie Nelson.

"You know, rock 'n' roll is about youth and sex," she said. "Can it mature? That remains to be seen. The only way it can is if our peers buy records, or if young people can find the work of middle-aged artists intriguing."

"But I had one gray-haired record company executive tell me, 'I don't like anything unless it makes me feel young and happy.' It becomes a question of whether adult themes can get the vote. You can be doing great work, but unless people buy it, you're condemned to obscurity, and it's only a matter of time before that's it for you."

"And if that happens, I might just play the guitar for pleasure. Maybe



Joni Mitchell performing in 1976 in St. Louis.

I'll make a career out of painting, or I'll write short stories. Both are idioms of self-expression in which one can age gracefully.

"I'm an idealist — it's obvious, isn't it? I'm an idealist in a world where inferior souls run things. We are facing extinction as a species because of it."

The artist's only recourse, Mitchell believes, is to run free. "There was always a feeling that if you illuminate something, perhaps you could make things better. That's the work of poetry."

Paul Luke of Reuter News Service, Kristine McKenna of the Los Angeles Times Syndicate and John Milward and Gary Graff of Knight-Ridder Newspapers contributed information for this story.



Joni Mitchell in 1969