

**I Drew a Map of Canada:  
Joni Mitchell's Constructions of Place**  
Jacqueline Warwick, 2004

Writing about Joni Mitchell for the *Globe and Mail* in 1969, Susan

Gordon Lydon begins her article this way:

Joni Mitchell lives in Laurel Canyon, in a small, pine-panelled house loving cluttered with two cats, a stuffed elk's head, stained glass windows, a grandfather clock given her by Leonard Cohen, a king's head with a jeweled crown sticking out from the brick fireplace, votive candles, blooming azaleas, a turkey made of pinecones, dried flowers, old dolls, Victorian shadow boxes, colored glass and an ornamental plate from Saskatoon, where she grew up ... It's a lovely house, sunny and friendly and filled with the easygoing good spirits of the Laurel Canyon music scene.<sup>1</sup>

For a golden moment at the end of the 1960s, Laurel Canyon became a haven for a certain kind of musician, a peaceful retreat from the glitz and grime of Hollywood that is actually only minutes above the Sunset Strip. Mitchell was not the only musician to be closely identified with this community, but I want to argue today that she was one of the primary architects of the Laurel Canyon sound. A preoccupation with *place* is one constant thread running through Mitchell's work, although she has explored a marvelous array of sounds and styles over the decades. From "Sisotowbell Lane" on her debut LP, to the compelling paintings displayed in her recent releases, Mitchell is a careful and perceptive observer of space. I have considered compiling a list of all her songs that hinge on depicting specific places, but the project soon became unmanageable, precisely because this is such a central theme in her work. She evokes particular places with such

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan Gordon Lydon, "Joni's Trek from Canada to Laurel Canyon," *Globe and Mail*, April 29, 1969.

intensity that we seem to recognize them even if we have never seen them for ourselves. With regard to Laurel Canyon specifically, many fans of Mitchell's and other people's music from this place have no literal connection to it, but they feel a sense of belonging and homecoming through listening.

The notion of a "Laurel Canyon sound" is widely accepted, and many musicians today make conscious efforts to emulate it — the Counting Crows' 1999 single "Long December" is a representative example, to say nothing of their recording of Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi." Other contemporary musicians also clearly feel that the Laurel Canyon sound is a tangible reality, and still relevant long after its halcyon days. The 2002 film *Laurel Canyon* by Lisa Cholodenko features a character ostensibly based on Joni Mitchell. It tells the story of Jane, a legendary female producer of rock records in the 70s now navigating a complicated relationship with her adult son. In terms of music, the turning point of the drama comes when the band working with Jane has a breakthrough in creating the right sound for a single recorded in the Canyon; a bittersweet song called "Shade and Honey" provided for the soundtrack by Virginia's Sparklehorse. Clearly, the idea of Laurel Canyon still means something quite specific; even musicians outside of California can emulate it.

In all of these cases, musicians demonstrate a nostalgic reverence for the Laurel Canyon sound, which seems to involve poetic, introspective lyrics, a high voice and acoustic guitar or piano. Obviously, these musical elements are scarcely unique to records made in Laurel Canyon in the early 70s, and yet there is something distinctive about the sound. It seems to me that the

Laurel Canyon sound results partly from particular methods of production — vocal and recording production — and an aesthetics which originates largely with Joni Mitchell. A recording like 1969's "Both Sides Now," for example, creates intimacy because we can almost see her hands on the guitar when we hear the rasp of her pick against the strings. Similarly, the microphone is so close to her mouth that we hear each quaver and indrawn breath; the voice is relaxed, weightless to the point that it seems detached, dispassionate. We can understand the uniqueness of Mitchell's style by comparing her recording with another performance of the same song with a very different feel. Judy Collins had recorded it in 1967, when both women were still in New York, and the contrasting production values point to a sharply dissimilar context. In Collins's treatment, the song features a large string section, rock'n'roll drumming, dramatic swells and flourishes, and a heartier, full-throated singing.

The juxtaposition of these two recordings makes it clear why Mitchell's sound on her own records was such a revelation. Famously, David Crosby and Elliot Roberts convinced Reprise to let Mitchell record a solo acoustic album — 68's *Song to a Seagull* — without all the overdubs and orchestration that we hear in Collins's version of "Both Sides Now". This is the aesthetic that Mitchell brought to Laurel Canyon, where it became *the* sound of the place.

The Canyon was sufficiently recognized as a music scene in 1968 for pop singer/songwriter Jackie deShannon to release an album called *Laurel Canyon*, at a time when Mitchell had only just arrived there. DeShannon's

songs are all explicitly about the place, with titles like "Holly Would," "LA" and the title track, but the pop/rock orchestrations, foregrounded drums and full-throated singing are miles away from the production values most people associate with the Laurel Canyon vibe (In fact, Barry White is one of the backing vocalists on the album, and he also has a songwriting credit). To my ears, the Laurel Canyon sound is about intimacy but also about spaciousness: the close miking and casual performance style evoke sitting in a living room, but it's a big living room, uncluttered, and with windows that look straight out into the sky, not into a neighbouring house. This is not a sound that could come out of a crowded coffeehouse in Greenwich Village or Yorkville; it's not a sound I connect to Bob Dylan's recordings of the period, or Joan Baez, for all that the instrumental forces are the same. The vocal style of records coming out of Laurel Canyon at this time is ethereal, the singing so light that it seems almost numb, with a sense of a singer who is worldly — because of lyrics about the complexities of human relationships — but also somehow otherworldly. The introspective, intimate lyrics imply vulnerability, frailty, nostalgia, but there is also a feeling of peaceful detachment.

In a recent article on the relationship between sound and place in drum'n'bass music from Bristol, Peter Webb argues that a music scene is best understood when we consider the "ways in which different combinations are *played with by*, and *play with* individuals and milieux in its formation and

development.”<sup>2</sup> Armed with an understanding of music as a social practice, an activity, Webb draws on Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “ethnoscapes, landscapes made up of people who shift constantly as tourists, immigrants, refugees and other moving groups of persons.”<sup>3</sup> In a world of restless and overlapping ethnoscapes, music often serves as a symbolic anchor, a crystallization of a particular place, moment and feeling — often all three at once — that affirms a sense of belonging and shared history. In Joni Mitchell’s music, her depictions of specific places invariably do this work for her listeners. We do not ourselves have to be displaced prairie girls bruised by lonely struggles in alienating cities to hear the homecoming and melancholy peace in Mitchell’s Laurel Canyon records.

It’s important to remember that the musician denizens of the Canyon were diverse in their aesthetics: as well as Jackie deShannon, the Doors’ self-consciously macabre style, the Mamas & Papas’ polished Tin Pan Alley arrangements, and even the Monkees’ bright rock’n’roll confections all sat cheek by jowl here. But the Laurel Canyon sound, as it has been understood since the early 70s, follows Mitchell’s style. We can hear it in the ethereal harmonies and steadily moving guitar work of Crosby, Stills and Nash’s “Helplessly Hoping.” I hear it also in some of the work of Gram Parsons, affiliated with the Canyon although operating in a more country music-

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Webb, “Interrogating the production of sound and place: the Bristol phenomenon, from Lunatic Fringe to worldwide Massive,” in Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins, eds., *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 66-88: 68.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Andy Bennett, “Music, Space and Place,” in Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins, eds., *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2-8: 3.

influenced idiom: a song like "She" exemplifies the same fragility and serenity. All of these musicians were immigrants to the Canyon, forging a sense of community in a strange new place and with like-minded strangers. For a crucial moment, the ethnoscape of the Hollywood Hills produced a musical sound that is as distinctive as it has been influential. Poetic, confessional lyrics together with a light, relaxed voice, laidback tempo undergirded by constant motion provided by acoustic guitar or piano, all closely recorded, can perhaps metaphorically represent the canyon itself; a sort of ivory tower where life is peaceful, but still rooted in the bustle of Hollywood below.

In the quotation that began this paper, the journalist interviewing Mitchell takes great pains to position her in a home, surrounded by bric à brac that connects her to her Canadian roots: a gift from Leonard Cohen, an elk's head, an antique plate from Saskatoon. It is important for the writer to emphasise Mitchell's Canadian-ness in this foreign context: you can take the girl out of the prairie, but you can't take the prairie out of the girl. It seems equally important for the journalist to present Mitchell in a domestic setting, as though to reassure her readers that the artist is still capable of normal womanly behaviour and feeling. The associations of women with home are strong, necessary for theories of identity that insist on the importance of home as a place where one belongs and which belongs to one, as feminist geographer Doreen Massey points out. But for an émigré like Mitchell, questions of home and belonging are complex; like many of us, she has made her home in many places, and carries a sense of both home and

homesickness wherever she is. As bell hooks writes, for people who experience estrangement and alienation, "home is no longer just one place."<sup>4</sup>

In a recording like Mitchell's 1971 "A Case of You," the listener can hear each inhalation, can practically feel her breath, but at the same time she seems shy, reserved and detached. The fragile, floating singing is produced almost entirely with the head voice, a disembodied sound expressing grief, with a quiet stillness that makes it all the more compelling. The effect is an intimacy that is anything but claustrophobic: it is intense precisely because she seems to protect herself from the powerful emotions she reports.

The appeal of this song lies largely with its careful evocation of place: the tv's flickering light and the beer mats speak directly of the dreary bar where the narrator nurses her hurt feelings. In fact, these images are so effective that she doesn't have to spell out her sense of loneliness and sorrow, and her voice is light and calm in the telling. As she indicates her regret and homesickness by describing how she drew a map of Canada, Mitchell connects to her chest voice for a stronger, more resonant singing style, and also brings in a fuller instrumentation as she gestures towards the opening phrase of "O Canada."

A veiled quotation of the national anthem is not Mitchell's only direct reference to Canada, of course. Even one of her most mean-spirited critics is perceptive when he describes her as "a prairie girl from Alberta who wailed about the garden she had willfully forsaken for the grit and darkness of

---

<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 148.

adopted cities like Toronto, Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles” (Perry Meisel, *Village Voice*, 1977 — this is the notorious article that dubbed Mitchell “the Queen of el Lay” and included a chart of famous men she had slept with). Mitchell’s “Canadian-ness” has been central to her work in a way that it is not for someone like Sarah McLachlan, or Rufus Wainwright — the work of these artists is less interested in the effects of place. For Mitchell, though, place is an important agent of meaning, and many of her songs function as postcards along her journey — a notion she makes explicit in 1976’s “Amelia.”

I want now to turn to a song from 74’s *Court & Spark*, an album that paints pictures of several different places as it explores a wide range of sounds and styles. “Raised on Robbery” intrigues me both because its aesthetic is so different from her previous work and the other tracks on the album, and also because its setting and characters seem to come from a different world. The song takes place in Regina’s Empire Hotel, one of many old, rundown hotels across Canada that provide weekly rates on barebones lodging for single men who live at or below the poverty line. Again, careful attention to place is important: the Leafs game on television, Andrews Sisters-style harmonies, Robbie Robertson’s gritty guitarwork, Tom Scott’s sax solo, and a rock’n’roll groove create a sense of working class people down on their luck even before the lacy-sleeved lady makes her entrance, bringing the whole band with her.

What is this vignette doing on an album that is otherwise peopled by such distinctly LA characters as frail rich kids in Malibu rehab (in “Trouble

Child”), neurotic Hollywood partygoers (“The Same Situation”), David Geffen (“Free Man in Paris”) and Cheech and Chong (“Twisted”)? When she wrote the music for *Court & Spark*, Mitchell had left Laurel Canyon and lived for a while in rural British Columbia before returning to LA, so we can understand the album as her musings on identity across all of these places. “Raised on Robbery” is placed on the second side, after “Just like this Train” and before “Trouble Child.” The solitary train journey in “Just like this Train” depicts reflection: the phrase “what are you going to do now? You’ve got no one to give your love to” acts as a bridge to the last verse, in which the narrator meditates on her immediate surroundings in the train compartment and tries to “let things slide.” The song ends inconclusively, with a repeated ascending figure over a tonic pedal that fades into silence. The opening of “Raised on Robbery” is startling, for all that it’s the same key; we have arrived at the Empire Hotel to witness a clumsy and crude encounter.

This institution has a sort of iconic status in Regina, evident in the fact that local band the Waltons named their 1998 release with Warner Records *Empire Hotel*, and their album cover is simply a picture of the building filling the whole frame. *Empire Hotel* is a dark, brooding meditation on the end of songwriter Jason Plumb’s long-term relationship, written in the hotel where he stayed upon his return from Toronto rather than move back in with his parents. Plumb says that “... I lived there for a while and wrote most of the music there ... it’s one of the oldest hotels in the West. I had gone through a rough spell” (in *Hamilton Spectator* Dec. 30, 98).

I'm struck by the juxtaposition of these statements. Bitter and bruised after a painful breakup, the young songwriter returns to Saskatchewan to lick his wounds in a rundown hotel with bad heating, and no phone or tv. In his own hometown, he forsakes the comfort of family to dwell among strangers, and finds solace and renewal through witnessing the day-to-day experiences of the underclass. Here, perhaps, is a clue to the function of "Raised on Robbery," one of Mitchell's most explicit songs about location. She works hard to evoke the milieu in a superficially light-hearted piece that is sandwiched between reflective, mournful songs. Just as Plumb goes to the Empire Hotel to heal, the persona of *Court and Spark* makes the same manoeuvre.

In Mitchell's body of work, there is a discernible interest in creating pictures of places; it shouldn't surprise anyone that she also takes painting seriously, and that a lot of her painting blurs the line between portrait and landscape. Recalling and describing a place provides a way for Mitchell to explore intense feelings without forcing herself to articulate them. For her listeners, a sense of specific place creates a feeling of connection to Mitchell, as though we are beside her, seeing what she sees. This has the effect not simply of making us feel that we know her and her world, but that she knows us and ours.