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Joni MITCHELL

THE INSIDE STORY OF HER STUNNING RISE TO FAME



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On the cover: Joni Mitchell by Jack Robinson/Getty Images
Mark E Smith by Howard Barlow/Redferns

WHEN *Uncut* interviewed Mark E Smith, in Manchester's Crown & Kettle pub last summer, he was typically forthcoming on a range of subjects: the Vorticists, the BBC, Jane Austen. In the lengthy tributes that have been written about Smith since he died, there has been focus on his often irascible nature and his lifestyle choices. But The Fall leader was also a polymath; a man of wide-ranging interests in literature, politics, sport and other more esoteric subjects that all, somehow, collided in the extraordinary music he made with his band.

"HE was a one-off," Fall guitarist Pete Greenway tells David Cavanagh in our extensive tribute to Smith. "Whatever subject you talked to Mark about, he'd always come at it from a completely different angle to you. An angle you'd never thought of and would never expect. And that would be *all the time*. He was like that in his life and he was like that in his songwriting."

As David says, the band was an extension of the man; more than just an outlet for his creative purposes, The Fall embodied Mark E Smith in all his complex, contradictory glory. "He always wanted everything to be right," his friend and producer Grant Showbiz notes. "Forget all the stuff you've heard. Nobody loved The Fall more than Mark did."

I hope it's not too much of a leap, but I'd like to think that a common thread

linking all the musicians in this month's issue is a visionary, questing spirit. It's there, surely, in Joni Mitchell – whose debut album, *Song To A Seagull* was released 50 years ago on March 1. Graeme Thomson speaks to many of those involved in Joni's early years – including Crosby, Judy Collins, Tom Rush, assorted members of Fairport Convention and the Incredible String Band – to discover a songwriter stretching out at the very beginning of her extraordinary career. Elsewhere in the issue, you'll find interviews with other remarkable musicians – The Breeders, Josh T Pearson, The Decemberists, Chris Robinson among them – who are pursuing their own, indefatigable sonic quests.

You'll also find a piece by Stephen Deusner, who travelled to Muscle Shoals, Alabama following the death of FAME Studios founder, Rick Hall. There, he speaks a number of people – including, in an *Uncut* first, Donnie Osmond – who worked with Hall over the years. David Hood remembers his former boss as a driven, focused leader. "He made you tough. He made you good." Attributes, you imagine, that could also be applied to Mark E Smith himself.



Michael Bonner, Acting Editor. Follow me on Twitter @michaelbonner

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Song From The Siren

Fifty years on from her debut album, we tell the story of JONI MITCHELL's remarkable rise to fame, from the Newport Folk Festival, via New York clubs to the hillside cottages of Laurel Canyon. "She was stunningly good, right off the bat," David Crosby tells Graeme Thomson. "She had a fire in her belly. She wanted to be a big deal," says Tom Rush...

Photo by JACK ROBINSON

FOR David Crosby, the impact was immediate and far reaching. When he walked into the Gaslight Café in Miami's Coconut Grove in the autumn of 1967, he encountered for the first time the willowy Canadian he still regards as "the best living singer-songwriter we have". On the cusp of 24, Joni Mitchell had already composed songs like "Michael From Mountains" and "Both Sides Now", flawless miniatures crafted from complex guitar figures, personalised poetry and intricate, unusual melodic twists. "She was stunningly good, right off the bat," Crosby tells *Uncut*. "I was amazed. Amazed by her, of course, but also that there wasn't a gigantic crowd of people saying, 'Holy shit, did you hear that!'"

Though Crosby was astonished not only by Mitchell's gifts, but her relative obscurity, her career was slowly gathering momentum. Throughout 1966 and 1967, from the Newport Folk Festival to London's Speakeasy, from New York's Bitter End to the hillside cottages of Laurel Canyon, a growing band of influential artists had been turned on to her talents. Leonard Cohen, Judy Collins, Tom Rush, Fairport Convention, The Incredible String Band, Dave Van Ronk and Buffy Sainte-Marie had all fallen under her spell, long before she made her first album. They recorded her songs, championed her to friends, and lobbied record labels.

Rush, a folk veteran who had already been around the block and back, "was absolutely blown away" when he heard her in a Detroit club in 1966. When Judy Collins first met Mitchell in her Chelsea apartment, in May 1967, "She sang me all her songs in her living room, with the candles burning, and I sat there and wept. She sang me 'Both Sides Now', 'Little Green', all these fabulous songs. It was staggering. She was very ambitious, but it was a fresh ambition, without an edge to it. She was in for the whole enchilada. She wanted the whole thing and she was going to get it." The following year, Collins helped her on her way, giving Mitchell a mainstream hit with her zestful version of "Both Sides Now". Crosby, meanwhile, went on to produce her first album, *Song To A Seagull*.

Fifty years old this month, *Song To A Seagull* is not merely the first,

remarkably assured, intimation of Mitchell's genius; nor simply the deeply satisfying fruition of several hard years playing, writing and touring. Dense, intimate, poetic, sentimental, pensive and unerringly beautiful, the LP initiated an entire sensibility and style to which generations of artists have cleaved. "Try to imagine hearing Joni Mitchell for the first time without having heard any of the 200,000 singer-songwriters who subsequently copied Joni Mitchell!" says Joe Boyd, another friend and supporter from that time. "She was just unbelievably impressive."

As Crosby points out, perhaps the most impressive part is that Mitchell "was not in full flower yet. This was still just the beginning." It's not so much that she outgrew *Song To A Seagull*, more that Mitchell resolved to build palaces from its potential, chasing down every one of its strands in her later work. The poeticised biography of "Michael From Mountains" and the title track were honed to a devastating point on *Blue*'s intimate confessionals; "Marcie" is a warmly drawn character study of the kind Mitchell perfected on *Ladies Of The Canyon*; the dazzling melodic leaps of "Cactus Tree" and "The Pirate Of Penance" foreshadow the groundbreaking twists of *Court And Spark*; the hard swing of "Night In The

City" eventually led to a deep immersion in jazz, on *Hejira* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Listen closely to her debut and the vast terrain Mitchell will go on to explore is laid out like a map. "The first album was like 'Notes I Will Continue Further'," says Mike Heron, of The Incredible String Band. "She was already aware of where she was going to take this stuff afterwards."

MITCHELL had already done her fair share of living by the time Crosby caught up with her. Born Roberta Joan Anderson on November 7, 1943, she was raised in Saskatoon, a compact Saskatchewan city stranded in the vast plains of central Canada. At the age of nine, Mitchell contracted polio and started smoking. By the autumn of 1967, she had already ended her first marriage and, unbeknownst to almost everyone around her, had given up her daughter for adoption two years earlier. This was no ingénue. "She had already lived," says Boyd, who met her for the first time in July 1967. "She had the appearance of this sweet innocent little girl, but when you got to know her, it was clear that she was very grown up and clear-eyed. She knew how good she was. She wasn't overbearing about it, but you could sense this inner confidence."

Her musical instincts were always eclectic. Though she briefly studied classical piano as a child, she resisted formal tuition. *Song To A Seagull* is dedicated to Mr Kratzman, her English teacher at

BEST SIDES NOW

A case of you

Five great early **Joni covers**

TOM RUSH
"URGE FOR GOING"
(THE CIRCLE GAME, ELEKTRA, 1968)



Rush's unhurried, contemplative, rough-hewn reading has the powerful economy of prime Tim Hardin. Also featuring songs by James Taylor and Jackson Browne, the album is a landmark in the embryonic singer-songwriter scene.

FAIRPORT CONVENTION
"CHELSEA MORNING"
(FAIRPORT CONVENTION, POLYDOR, 1968)



The B-side of their first single, "If (Stomp)", and a light, energetic, rhythmically inventive joy. The vocal switch between Judy Dyble on the 4/4 verses and Iain Matthews on the waltz-time breakdowns works a treat, too.

JUDY COLLINS
"BOTH SIDES NOW"
(ELEKTRA SINGLE, 1968)



Different from the *Wildflowers* album version, sharpened by David Anderle's new mix. Drums, harpsichords, vaulting strings and Collins' clarion vocal accentuate both the ache and the wonder, as Mitchell's introspective contemplations are transformed into a rushing folk-pop classic.

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE
"SONG TO A SEAGULL"
(FIRE & FLEET & CANDLELIGHT, VANGUARD, 1967)



A quietly haunting reading, like something from Tim Buckley's *Goodbye And Hello*. Deftly negotiating Mitchell's complex guitar lines, Buffy's flinty voice and raw emotion brings a crisp clarity to one of her most serpentine melodies.

GEORGE HAMILTON IV
"THE CIRCLE GAME"
(THE GENTLE COUNTRY SOUND OF GEORGE HAMILTON IV, RCA VICTOR, 1968)



Continuing his transition from mainstream country to a folkier sound, the "Abilene" star follows up his hit cover of "Urge For Going" with a lovely, lilting version of Mitchell's much-recorded standard.

Joni with her husband, folk singer Chuck Mitchell, in their apartment near Wayne State in Detroit, 1966





Marriage of convenience? Chuck and Joni Mitchell at home in the Verona building, Ferry St, Detroit, 1966

could not adequately provide for her daughter, and later in 1965 put Kelly up for adoption. This personal drama remained a secret to even her closest friends for much of her life, though she scattered clues in plain sight in her songs, notably “Little Green”, eventually released in 1971 on *Blue* but written in 1966: “Child with a child pretending/ Weary of lies you’re sending home/ So you sign all the papers in the family name/ You’re sad and you’re sorry, but you’re not ashamed, little green/ Have a happy ending.”

Shortly after the marriage, Chuck and Joni moved to Detroit. They rented a fifth-floor walk-up apartment on Ferry Street and scored a residency as a duo at the Chess Mate club. Their repertoire was orthodox – folk-based, from Dylan to Eric Anderson, with a smattering of Brecht – although Mitchell had already started to write. Her first attempt, “Day After Day”, was an account of life on the road that she wrote while en route to the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1965. “Miles and miles of railroad track/ Night after night/ The humming of the wheels...” Soon, they were pouring out.

It was in Detroit, in the spring of 1966, that Mitchell first entered the orbit of Tom Rush, the New England folk and blues singer who frequently passed through the city on the circuit. “I was playing the Chess Mate, and Joni came in,” Rush recalls. “This little slip of a girl. She asked the owner if she could play a guest set so I could hear some of her stuff. She had been in a duo with Chuck Mitchell, and had just started writing songs. I think performing the songs for me was one of the first steps out of the duo – and the marriage. She got up and did four tunes, and knocked me off my feet. When she got off stage I asked if she had any more songs. She said, ‘No, but give me a minute,’ or words to that effect.”

“She got up, did four tunes, and knocked me off my feet!” TOM RUSH

At the time Rush was overdue delivering his next album for Elektra, and was eager for original material. “A few weeks later she sent me a tape of six songs, all of which were dazzling. One was ‘Urge For Going’, which she sang the very first night. Just before the last song on the tape she apologised, saying, ‘I’ve just finished writing it, it’s not much

good, I’m so embarrassed...” The song was “The Circle Game”, one of Mitchell’s simplest, sweetest and most effective early compositions, tracking the evolution of a boy into a man. Rush ended up naming his next album – delayed until 1968 – after the song, and also included “Urge For Going”, Mitchell’s powerful, elemental ballad, inspired by the harsh Saskatchewan winters. He still performs both songs today. “They’re universal,” he says. “As long as winter comes, ‘Urge For Going’ will be a great song; as long as kids grow up, ‘The Circle Game’ will be a great song.”

As well as playing regularly at the Chess Mate and Living End in Detroit, and making frequent visits back to Saskatoon and Toronto, Mitchell opened for Rush at several shows in New England during May and June ’66. “I had her do a couple of songs, trying to introduce her to a wider audience,” says Rush. “The audiences loved her, of course, but it was hard to get the industry to wake up. I remember trying to get labels interested in her. Jac Holzman at Elektra turned her down, saying she sounded too much like Judy Collins. She did a bit. At that point, Judy was a big influence on her, but so what? Listen to the songs – Jesus! I couldn’t get him interested. I also tried Columbia. It baffled me.”

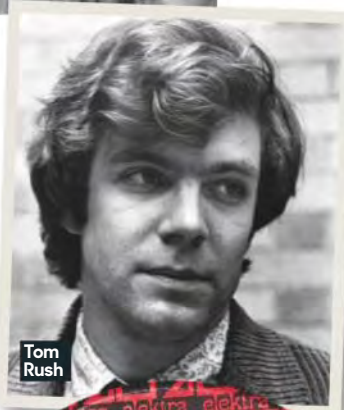
Buffy Sainte-Marie was another significant champion. Mitchell admired the Saskatchewan Cree and had made a pilgrimage in 1964 to see

Queen Elizabeth school in Saskatoon, “who taught me to love words”, and told her, “If you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words.” The advice unlocked something profound in her understanding of what was possible in her writing.

As a teen she had more modest aims. She first learned to express her musicality with a ukulele and a Pete Seeger songbook. Soon she graduated to guitar. Though one of the legions enthused by the folk boom of the early ’60s, Mitchell also loved the works of Miles Davis, Édith Piaf and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Beginning in 1962, she began playing at parties, coffeehouses and hoots in Saskatoon, Calgary, Regina and Edmonton.

In 1963 she enrolled at the Alberta College Of Art And Design in Calgary, moonlighting regularly at The Depression club, before dropping out and moving east to Toronto in June 1964. The move was, in part, a reaction to the fact Mitchell had become pregnant by her college boyfriend. The father, Brad MacMath, left for California before the birth of her daughter, Kelly Dale Anderson, in February 1965.

“Literally penniless” in Toronto, in June she married Chuck Mitchell, a jobbing folk singer, originally from Michigan. She later described the union as a “marriage of convenience”. The intention was to raise the child together, but Mitchell felt she



Tom Rush





Tuning in

Where did Mitchell's dazzlingly unusual guitar chords originate?

IT'S been suggested that childhood polio forced Mitchell to find more agreeable chord shapes, which led to her inventing new tunings. The early influence of Buffy Sainte-Marie and Tom Rush also played a part. "I always tuned my guitar all sorts of funny ways, and she had seen me play at Mariposa," says Sainte-Marie. "It was something we had in common, but I don't know whether she got it from me."

"I showed her some open tunings," says Rush. "I was using a good many, but she took them to Mars! I remember having to call her up when I was trying to learn 'The Circle Game' and asking, 'How do you make that chord?'" He laughs. "David Crosby claims he taught Joni open tunings – I haven't argued with him." Crosby concedes, "I learned a whole shitload about tunings from her, and songwriting in general."

Sainte-Marie play at the Mariposa Folk Festival, near Toronto. Later she sought her out, armed with demos of her songs.

"The tape was good, and quite fancy," says Sainte-Marie. "'Song To A Seagull' was on it, and 'The Circle Game'. She was a great lyricist, writing about original things, and she played good guitar. I thought it was better than anything I was hearing around town, but she wasn't getting anywhere with her career."

Sainte-Marie recorded her full-bodied tilt at "The Circle Game", as well as "Song To A Seagull", on her fourth album, *Fire & Fleet & Candlelight*, released in July 1967. Like Rush, she also attempted to get industry figures interested in Mitchell – with remarkably little success.

"I'd started carrying her cassette around with me, and I played it for literally everybody: for Vanguard, for Blue Note," she says. "It was amazing, the lack of interest! People in the entrepreneurial side of the music business are there for a lot of reasons, but big success is probably the main one, and they couldn't hear it with Joni."

"It was an old boy's club in those days," she continues. "The whole Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie folk scene was very homogenous, very vanilla. The same three chords. Simple songs in predictable chord patterns. Bob Dylan broke the mould with some songs, but even though people like Tom Paxton, Judy Collins and Phil Ochs were writing great words, the music often was not very original. What I loved about Joni was that there was a sense of the music coming from the person, not somebody trying to get into showbiz."

Despite the industry's indifference, word of Mitchell spread among fellow writers and artists. Ian & Sylvia took a rather polite swing at "The Circle Game" as the opening track on their 1967 album, *So Much For Dreaming*. Veteran country singer George Hamilton IV had a Top



(Above) Joni champion Buffy Sainte-Marie

10 country hit with "Urge For Going". Pleased as Mitchell was that established performers were seeking out her songs, Rush sensed it wasn't enough for her.

"She wanted to be on stage. I remember thinking at the time, she really had a fire in her belly. She wanted to be a big deal. I also remember thinking at the time, she's going to be a big star and it's not going to make her happy. Fame and money are two things of which there is never enough."

Mitchell's marriage ended early in 1967. A brief but intense affair with a folk singer from Colorado, whom Mitchell had met the previous November at The Second Fret club in Philadelphia, hadn't helped an already shaky union. The liaison resulted in the outstanding "Michael From Mountains", one of the earliest examples of her ability to romanticise her lovers in song as free-spirited muses. The Mitchells' musical partnership dissolved around the same time; their final show together was in May 1967.

By then Mitchell had moved to New York, to an apartment at 41 West 16th Street in Chelsea. Not long after her arrival, she ran into Al Kooper, latterly Bob Dylan's organ player, who initiated a new, valuable introduction for Mitchell.

"I got a call in the middle of the night, around May 1967, from Al Kooper," Judy Collins recalls. "It was three in the morning. Al said, 'I followed this girl home and she writes songs.' He put her on the phone and she sang me 'Both Sides Now'. That was my initial encounter with Joni. I would not have known her to see her, but I knew 'The Circle Game' and I knew that there was someone called Joni Mitchell around the clubs in the Village. She was almost completely unknown. It was surprising, because she was already an attractive singer with some very good songs. Tom Rush was very enthusiastic about her. Tom really discovered her."

The following morning, Collins visited Mitchell's apartment. Like everyone else on the scene at the time, she was permanently song-hungry. "We were finishing an album of mine called *Wildflowers*. We were almost done, but I went over to her apartment and she sang me all her songs, including 'Both Sides Now' – and that was it."

Written in March 1967, during the death throes of her marriage, "From Both Sides, Now", as it was initially titled, was inspired by Saul Bellow's 1959 novel, *Henderson The Rain King*. "There's a line in it that I especially got hung up on," she said. "[*Henderson*] was flying to Africa and searching for something. He said that in an age when people could look up and down at clouds, they shouldn't be afraid to die. And I got this idea: 'From both sides now.'"

It was an early case of what would become a classic Mitchell approach: circling a subject in its entirety, seeking changing perspectives, rarely taking a settled view. Her husband had sneered at what he regarded as the song's naïve sentimentality, but Mitchell knew she had a winner. "I've been driving everybody crazy by playing it twice and three times a night," she said, days after it was written. For Collins, too, "it was an instant wow. I was just blown away."

When *Wildflowers* came out later that year, it included Collins' version of "Both Sides Now", as well as "Michael From Mountains". The former, however, did not become a hit single until the end of 1968, after being remixed for radio "three or four times", according to Collins. "It didn't happen overnight, it took a long time for the whole country to get it." ➤

A MARQUEE listing in the folk calendar, the Newport Folk Festival enjoyed a hefty reputation as a career-making platform. The 1967 festival, held from July 10 to 16, didn't make a star of Mitchell, but it did foster some significant connections. Judy Collins exerted her influence as a board member at the festival to get Mitchell to appear on the afternoon of Sunday, July 16, and to contribute to a workshop called 'Songwriters And The Contemporary Scene'. Collins was keen to acknowledge the existence of a handful of post-folk artists who were moving the tradition forward, composing their own material in an acoustic framework. "This was the logical next step," says Tom Rush. "The songs were much more sophisticated lyrically and musically, but they weren't totally alien."

"I wanted Joni on it immediately," says Collins. "I just thought she

With Leonard Cohen at the Newport Folk Festival, 1967



The ballad of Joni & Len

AFTER meeting and falling for each other at Newport in 1967, Mitchell and Cohen were briefly the golden couple of Canadian folk. They co-hosted the Mariposa Folk Festival later that summer, although it was Cohen, 33, and already an admired poet and novelist – not to mention a man – who received most of the coverage. Cohen influenced Mitchell profoundly. At Newport, she was bowled over by "Suzanne", a song which, she said, "set the standard", forcing her to raise her

game and "plumb the depths of my experience". At her request, Cohen gave her a reading list that included Camus' *The Outsider*, the I Ching, and Hesse's *Magister Ludi* and *Siddhartha*. Mitchell memorialised their romance in "The Gallery" and "Rainy Night House": "I am from the Sunday school/I sing soprano in the upstairs choir/You are a holy man/On the FM radio." "There wasn't much relationship other than the boudoir," was her retrospective take. "He was so distant, and so hard to communicate with."

was incredibly gifted, but I had a very tough time pushing the idea, because nobody was interested, including my cohorts, Pete Seeger and Peter Yarrow. Can you imagine? They were all interested in the old-timey music, the tradition."

Having got her way, Collins introduced Mitchell on stage for a short set that included "Michael From Mountains", "The Circle Game" and a new song, "Chelsea Morning" – a rapturous greeting to a life of freedom and possibility in New York. She was welcomed with polite indifference by the audience – on departure, according to contemporary reports, there was "a tumultuous and prolonged standing ovation". "She stood out a mile," says Joe Boyd, a Newport veteran whose latest discovery, The Incredible String Band, also played on Sunday afternoon. "It was hugely impressive."

Also participating in the songwriting workshop was Leonard Cohen. Backstage, he and Mitchell met and bonded, swiftly embarking on a love affair that had a profound impact on her writing. That Sunday evening in Newport, a party was held in one of the grand "cottages" that grace the well-heeled Rhode Island town. "I have this vivid memory of Robin [Williamson], Mike [Heron], me and Joni way out in the backyard, under a tree," says Boyd. "Her singing some of her songs, them singing some Incredible String Band songs, chatting and talking. She was very smart and interesting, and interested in every kind of music."

"We swapped things," says Heron. "I think it was probably Robin's complicated tunings she was more interested in rather than my 'Hedgehog Song'! They had a lot in common."

This cultural exchange led directly to Mitchell's first visit to Britain, in late August 1967. An American based in London, Boyd had received a letter from Mitchell requesting help with finding a publishing deal in Europe. "She was very organised for someone who didn't have a record contract," says Boyd. "Quite self-contained and determined. She was ambitious, but not in a Lady Gaga way. It was a nicely balanced, integrated determination to the get the music out there."

To this end, she had already formed her own publishing imprint, Siquomb, a scion of Warner/Chappell Music. "Although she wasn't known as a performer, it was public knowledge that she had signed a publishing deal for more money than anyone from her generation," says Simon Nicol of Fairport Convention, early adopters of Mitchell's music. "Such was the confidence they had in her."

In London, Mitchell stayed with Boyd in his airy flat in Westbourne Terrace. Her welcome was inauspicious. Boyd's flatmate and partner in his fledgling production company, Witchseason, was Todd Lloyd, a fellow American who had recently bailed out Michael X, the British Black Power leader. "The police were not amused by this, and at 6am the night after Joni arrived, the Flying Squad arrived at the door with a search warrant for 'guns, ammunition and seditious literature'. We had to stand in the hallway in our bathrobes in the cold while they searched our flat. That was her welcome to the UK!"

Mitchell later recalled "doing all the usual tourist things" during her short visit: negotiating Piccadilly Circus on a double-decker red bus; going to Hyde Park and "soaking up all sorts of speeches"; playing Monopoly; visiting a Wimpy burger bar. She met a woman called Marcie who inspired a new song. After returning to the US, for a time she performed a whimsical and not terribly funny rewrite of "London Bridge Is Falling Down", in which she imagined The Beatles buying the bridge and painting it in psychedelic colours.

As well as setting up a meeting with Essex Music, The Who's publishers, to discuss a European publishing deal, Boyd also introduced Mitchell to Fairport Convention, whom he was producing and managing. They were gearing up to record their self-titled debut album, which featured two Mitchell songs: "I Don't Know Where I Stand" and "Chelsea Morning"; the follow-up, *What We Did On Our Holidays*, included another, "Eastern Rain". "We knew about Joni," says Ashley Hutchings. "We had our fingers on the pulse, even though we were very wet behind the ears. The very first demo we recorded was 'Both Sides Now', which never came out."

Here, memories diverge. Simon Nicol remembers Mitchell playing her material for the band in Boyd's flat. Ashley Hutchings recalls meeting her alone and being given a demo tape. "It was a teatime rendezvous in west London," says Nicol. "We sat around for an hour and she ran through a few songs. She performed flawlessly. Her

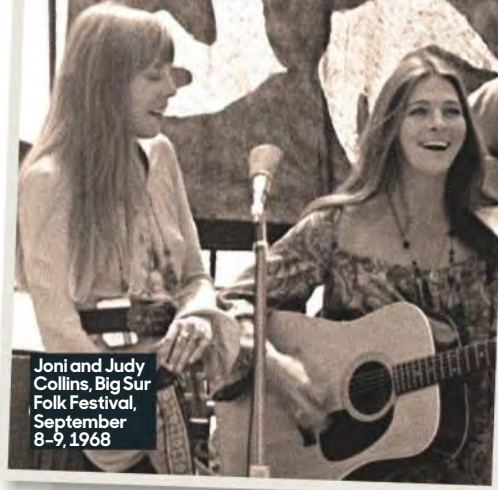
tunings were all over the place, which was new to me at the time; she was making all these wonderful internal resonances. She was so *finished*, as a performer and a singer, and then you had all this wonderful meat on the songs."

"I'd gone to Joe's flat to talk business," is Hutchings' recollection. "He said, 'Oh, Joni Mitchell is in the front room, do you want to speak with her?' She was standing by the window with her back to me when I came in, and turned around to say hello. She was very friendly, and seemed young. She had heard about us, and was very supportive. It was a lovely experience. She didn't play. I clearly remember a small demo disc with a white label that we got hold of. They were great songs. The music and the lyrics were both very, very good, but if you want me to put my finger on why we were drawn to them, it was the lyrics. We sought out songs with really good lyrics, and hers were peerless. There was no one as good as her at that time."

She may or may not have performed informally for Fairport, but Mitchell definitely played a handful of shows while in the UK, notably a brief spot supporting The Incredible String Band at the Speakeasy in early September 1967. "I'd persuaded them to put on the ISB, so I said to Joni, 'Why don't you come along and sing a few songs as an opening act?'" says Boyd. "She was delighted. Nobody had the faintest idea who she was. My memory is that she was wearing one of those straight mini-dresses with no waist that came quite high up on the thigh, and singing these extraordinary songs with that angelic voice. The whole Speakeasy was just open-mouthed."

"She was amazing," says Heron. "It was early stuff, very arty and very impressive guitar-playing."

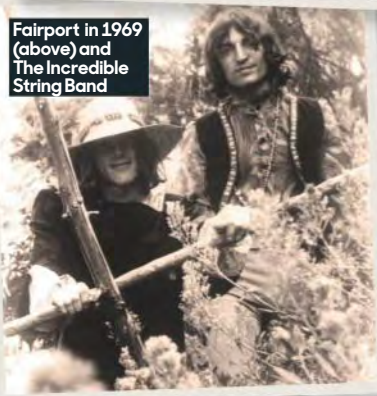
Mitchell played a couple more shows during her British visit, at the Digbeth Civic Hall in Birmingham and The White Swan in Leicester, as well as a support slot for The Piccadilly Line at The Marquee. By the end of September, she was back in the States, fulfilling a five-day booking at the Gaslight in Miami, when David Crosby dropped anchor. After being fired by The Byrds, Crosby sailed his 59-foot schooner, *Mayan*, around the Gulf Of Mexico. "I went into a coffee



Joni and Judy Collins, Big Sur Folk Festival, September 8-9, 1968



Fairport in 1969 (above) and The Incredible String Band



Live at her stomping ground, the Riverboat, Toronto, April 16, 1967

house on Coconut Grove, and she was singing," he says. "I was incredibly smitten. It was so impressive. The writing was so good, the voice so pristine and stunning, the playing excellent."

The semi-official live album, *At The Second Fret*, gives a good impression of the show Crosby heard in October 1967. (Incorrectly billed as a recording of her show at the Philadelphia folk club on November 16, 1966, it was actually taped around a year later: Mitchell talks about her recent London trip, which dates the performance to autumn 1967.) The repartee is a little cutesy and contrived, but her musical authority is already assured – as well it might be, with a set-list that includes "Little Green", "Marcie", "Both Sides Now", "I Don't Know Where I Stand", "The Circle Game", "Michael From Mountains" and "Eastern Rain".

DESPITE the minor in-roads Mitchell had already made in the industry, Crosby "had never heard of her. Nope. Nu-huh. But of course, I fell for her. Naturally. I fell for her at the same time as I was totally impressed with her as a musician, those two things were mixed together. She was beautiful and fascinating, and we got together very quickly."

The first verse of "Cactus Tree", one of the standout songs on *Song To A Seagull*, details the beginning of Mitchell's intense romance with the "man who's been out sailing", who "takes her to his schooner... He has called her from the harbour/He has kissed her with his freedom/He has heard her off to starboard/In the breaking and the breathing."

"I told her she was wonderful, that she was doing the right thing and going in the right direction," says Crosby. "She taught me as much if not more than I taught her. I'd sing her a song I'd written, then she would sing me three back that she had just written last night, all of which were better than the one I'd just sung her. It was a little daunting and not really fair at all, but educational as hell. She did it right in front of me.

Then I brought her back to California. She wanted to succeed, and that's where it was going to happen."

While Crosby historically takes much of the credit for "discovering" Mitchell, he was simply continuing the work of her existing champions, albeit on a more elevated scale. "David had a much taller platform, in terms of advancing her career," says Tom Rush. "He did her a lot of good."

"David was producer, lover, friend, consort, cheering crowd," says Judy Collins. "He was very important. He gave her a lot of confidence, and just adored her work, as everyone did."

Crosby's flamboyant patronage was priceless, but equally significant was the influence of a young employee at the William Morris Agency, whom Mitchell had recently met thanks to the unceasing efforts of Buffy Sainte-Marie. "My agent, Joel Dean, for some reason couldn't get Joni," says Sainte-Marie. "But there was another guy in the office, Elliot Roberts, and he went down and saw her in the Village – and the rest is history." At his client's urging, Roberts went to see Mitchell supporting Ian & Sylvia at New York's Café Au Go Go on October 26, 1967. He offered to become her manager; after a short probationary period, Mitchell consented. Roberts' colleague at William Morris, David Geffen, signed on as her agent. When Mitchell moved from New York to California shortly afterwards, Roberts and Geffen followed, forming Lookout Management. Mitchell, meanwhile, bought a "sweet little wooden cottage" just off Laurel Canyon Boulevard, in the heart of the district that housed a growing community of sensitive acoustic songwriters. Her new home cost \$36,000 and backed into a hill peppered with manmade caves.

As 1967 turned into 1968, Mitchell refrained from playing any official shows in LA, but she was performing constantly

nonetheless. “What I did was simple,” says Crosby. “All I did was take her around everybody I knew, get them very stoned – because I had really stunningly good pot – and then said, ‘Hey Joni, why don’t you sing them a song?’ She would sing to them and their brains would run out of their noses into a puddle on the floor. They would walk out of the room talking about her. Within a short period of time there was a big buzz around Los Angeles about Joni Mitchell.”

Meanwhile, tipped off by Tom Rush, Elliot Roberts had already made contact with Reprise Records boss Mo Ostin. “Elliott was her manager,” says Crosby. “He got the Reprise deal, but partly because I was producing the album – at least that’s what he told me. He said that got him the leverage for the deal, which was all good. God knows, as soon as anybody heard her, there was no need for anybody else to help her along at all.”

SONG *To A Seagull* was recorded at Sunset Sound’s Studio One in February 1968. Crosby produced, with considerable restraint. Aside from the overlapping vocals of “Pirates Of Penance” and “Night In The City”, and the background banshee wail in “Nathan La Franeer”, the music is left unadorned. The only musician aside from Mitchell to feature is Stephen Stills, who adds bass to “Night In The City”.

“I did not do that great a job on the first album,” says Crosby, who had a notion for Mitchell to sing into the studio’s grand piano, setting up extra microphones to capture her voice repeating off the strings. This caused excessive ambient noise and high levels of tape hiss, and the resulting post-production fix left the album sounding flat and airless.

“David Crosby produced it very simply, but he put her voice and guitar right next to a piano with the lid open, so it would make the strings vibrate,” says Joe Boyd. “That’s the kind of thing that only he could hear when he was very stoned!”

“Falling for her was like falling into a cement mixer...”

David Crosby on Joni’s goodbye song

“**T**HAT Song About The Midway”, from *Clouds*, is widely thought to be about Leonard Cohen, but David Crosby offers a different interpretation. Crosby vividly recalls first hearing the song as their relationship dissolved in 1968.

“We were at Peter Tork’s house – it might have been Stephen Stills’ house by then – and the whole of our gang was there, maybe 20 people. I had met Christine Hinton, and fallen for her, and Joni and I were on the rocks. Anyway, we were all sitting around eating dinner, and Joni kind of storms in forcefully, plonks herself down, and says, ‘I’ve got a new song to sing you.’ We’re all like, ‘A new Joni song? Yippee!’

“She sat down and sang ‘That Song About The Midway’, which was her goodbye song to me: *‘Doing your hunting from the air...’* That’s me, being a Byrd. It was a pretty forceful goodbye! She finished the song, looked up at me – everyone was sitting there aghast – and then sang it again. Ha ha ha! Just in case I didn’t get it the first time. Then she packed up her guitar and left. Falling for her was a little like falling into a cement mixer. It’s been a rocky friendship, but I had dinner with her a month ago, and I still love her.”

“I wish I’d gotten a better engineer, but I settled for the one they had there [*Art Crystl*], who was not that good,” says Crosby. “I could have recorded it better, but the main thing was to catch the essence of what I saw and heard in her. The thing I did right was to keep people off the record. I kept people from trying to turn it into a band record, which she was not prepared to do, and which would have screwed it up and made it ordinary. Instead, what you got was a full dose of her – completely unusual, and pretty much untouched.

“The sessions went fairly quickly. She had been playing for a long time as a folk singer already, and she had really good arrangements. She knew what to do, and I knew better than to go more than a few takes on each song. I got Stephen to play on [*“Night In The City”*] because it swung so hard it needed it.”

Although the process was relatively straightforward, the sessions were often fraught. Crosby had recently met his next girlfriend, Christine Hinton, while Mitchell would soon be stepping out with Graham Nash. “It was very difficult because she and I were breaking up,” says Crosby. “It was emotionally tough. I loved her and thought she was fantastic. At the same time, she’s an incredibly difficult woman. I can’t really go there! I’m very lucky I managed to pull that record out of her.”

Mitchell made a conscious call not to cut songs already recorded by other artists. Her debut does not include “The Circle Game”, “Both Sides Now”, “Tin Angel”, “Chelsea Morning” or “Urge For Going”, their omission a quite remarkable act of confidence for a young artist making her first record. “The decisions about what did or didn’t go on were all hers,” says Crosby. “I loved all the songs she picked. I had no problem with any of it.”

Like Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks*, each side is subtitled. Side One is “I Came To The City”; Side Two, “Out Of The City And Down To The Seaside”. The chapter headings accentuate the sense of a personal

HENRY DILTZ/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



Crosby and Mitchell, California, February 1969: “He gave her a lot of confidence”

story unfolding, a suite of sorts. The city songs begin with the beautiful “I Had A King”, a tenement tale of longing and leaving. The long, folkish “Marcie” is a New York saga, influenced by Cohen’s “Suzanne”, though the stimulus of Joan Baez is equally apparent. It concerns a friend she had made in London, whom she later discovered had been a neighbour in Chelsea. When she sings “to the sea...”, her voice resonates like a cello.

The ‘sea’ songs are full of pirates, mermaids, galleons, schooners and birds – and romantic intrigue. The verses of the album’s greatest song, “Cactus Tree”, measure Mitchell’s need for freedom against the affections and charms of an array of admirers. The first is Crosby; the second is Michael from “Michael From Mountains”; one of the others is almost certainly Joe Boyd, wheeling and dealing on Mitchell’s behalf: “There’s the one who writes her letters/With his facts and figures scrawl...”

Boyd prefers to rave about the song’s “octave jumps” and the LP’s “melodic amplitude: the distance between the highest and lowest notes. Most melodies now are so constrained, so narrow. Nobody writes songs like that today. It was a symptom of the optimism and freedom of the ‘60s, and Joni’s early records are the epitome of that.”

“Night In The City”, with Stills’ thick bass and Mitchell’s sprightly piano and pirouetting vocals, possesses a bouncy immediacy, but the overall mood is reflective. It wasn’t folk music, but nobody yet quite knew what it was. In the homespun spirit of the times, the cover image was self-composed. Its vibrant, colourful blossoming seemed to capture much of the naïve, folksy optimism swirling around Laurel Canyon in early 1968.

Released in March 1968, the reviews were strong. “A very personal tale told with an integrity,” reckoned the *Los Angeles Times*; *Billboard* called her “an important folk and folk-rock writer... Her rich, textured delivery is reminiscent of Joan Baez, but Joni Mitchell’s poetic imagery places her in a class of her own.” Robert Shelton, in the *New York Times*, noted her “evanescent imagery” and the “haunting song-off-the-moors quality” of her voice. Said *Rolling Stone*, “Her lyrics are striking. Her tunes are unusual. Her voice is clear and natural.”

“It made a big impact critically right away,” says Crosby. “It appealed to everybody, it was so pretty and straightforward, so fresh. That all fit in with that time and place. It was an immediate success, though not as big a success as Joni wanted it to be!” Peer reviews were also enthusiastic. “I must have been one of the first to buy it,” says Ashley Hutchings. “Every song was terrific.” “It was very exciting, everyone loved it,” says Judy Collins.

In the slipstream of *Song To A Seagull*, Mitchell returned to familiar territory, playing extended runs on the club circuit in Ottawa, Montreal and her old stamping ground, The Riverboat in Toronto. Roberts and Geffen, however, had plans. In early summer, she was officially launched on both coasts. Starting on June 4, she finally broke cover in LA,



Early steps: outside The Revolution club, London, September 18, 1968



“She’s the best living singer–songwriter we have”

DAVID CROSBY

playing 12 nights at Doug Weston’s Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood.

Her ascent was almost instantaneous. “The first time Joni played there, it was wonderful for her,” says Ron Stone, who worked with Mitchell at Lookout Management. “I would say the second time [in January 1969] she was doing them a tremendous favour.” Within a year, Mitchell had graduated to the far more prestigious Greek Theatre. Immediately after the Troubadour shows, she played an equally lengthy run at the Bitter End in the Village. There were appearances on *The Dick Cavett Show* and *The Today Show*. “She began to get her footing on the scaffolding of the star machine,” says Judy Collins. “She was very good at it.”

She returned to London in September 1968 for two shows at the Revolution Club, and to appear alongside Fairport Convention, Al Stewart and Jackson C Frank at the Festival Of Contemporary Song at the Royal Festival Hall. Hyped as “her first London appearance”, she was billed as “a special guest star from America”. “We didn’t, on that occasion, hear any new songs,” chuckles Simon Nicol. “She no longer needed Fairport to oil the wheels of her business.” While in London, she cut a

segment for Radio 1’s *Top Gear* and for *The Monday Show* on BBC TV, both broadcast later in the year.

By the time of her appearance at New York’s Carnegie Hall on February 1, 1969, Mitchell was a star. In December 1968, almost 18 months after she had first heard it sung down a phone line, Judy Collins’ flighty version of “Both Sides Now” peaked at No 8 in the US charts. “At first, she was blown away and thrilled by its success,” says Collins. “As the years went by, I think she became resentful that someone else had a hit with her song. The fact that it isn’t appreciated by the writer is always discouraging...”

When Mitchell’s second album, *Clouds*, came out in May 1969, it included her own reading of “Both Sides Now”. Though it had become a standard, with recordings by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Leonard Nimoy, she now felt sufficiently secure to put her own imprint on it. *Clouds*, which also included versions of the much-recorded “Tin Angel” and “Chelsea Morning”, reached No 31 on the *Billboard* chart. Alongside *Song To A Seagull*, it created a template that directly inspired hundreds of artists, from Judee Sill to Laura Marling; Kate Bush to Prince. Even though she has spent much of the rest of her career doing her utmost to subvert it, for many young artists with acoustic guitars, Mitchell’s earliest work remains the Platonic ideal of what a singer-songwriter can achieve. Yet equally as compelling as the manifold treasures displayed on *Song To A Seagull* is the sense of what was being held in reserve; an intuition of riches yet to come.

“While I feel good about the first record, it’s not the full bloom,” says Crosby. “The full exploration of tunings was yet to come. The dulcimer hadn’t happened yet. The complete falling in love with jazz hadn’t happened yet. The real growth into the serious introspective lyric that wound up at *Blue* hadn’t happened yet. None of that had come to full fruition yet. But it was coming – and I could see it coming. She’s a very problematical girl, but she’s the best living singer-songwriter we have. The amazing thing is, I think I realised that the first time I heard her.”