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Joni Mitchell



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Joni Mitchell - For The Muses

by Jon Andrews

Joni Mitchell, nee Joan Anderson, was born with the Moon in Pieces on Nov. 7, 1943, in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She wrote and painted all her life and music was originally just a hobby, one, however, that finally "mush-roomed." Her performing instincts emerged quite early. While in the hospital during a Canadian polo epidemic (one in which Neil Young was also stricken), she began singing for people and discovered she enjoyed the attention. As folk music came into prominence in the early 60's, Joan began associating with people who played Kingston "The records" and she eventually bought herself an instrument. She began her musical career in local coffee houses while attending art college at Calgary, Canada. In the mid 1960's she was briefly married to folk singer Chuck Mitchell. After they separated, she moved to New York and became an important folk presence by virtue of her songwriting. Even before she made her first

record several of her songs were recorded by other artists. Folk singer Tom Rush did "The Circle Game" and, of course, Judy Collins covered "Clouds" and "Michael From The Mountains."

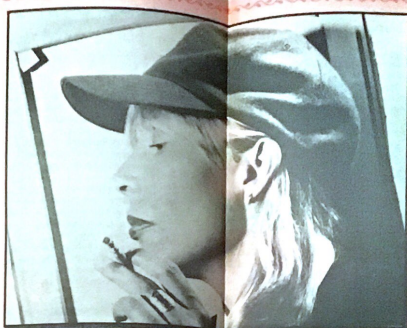
With the move to NYC, Joni developed a small circuit of clubs that she managed to fill to capacity every night, even before her first LP was released. It was this strong early success which, at least in part, caused her to turn to confessional and biographical songwriting, mainly because she felt people "should know who they're applauding." Two important changes occurred in this early period. First, David Crosby "discovered" Mitchell in a Florida club and produced and played on her first album. This she regarded, and still regards as, "a great service to her career."

The second major change was in her artistic style. She decided to let go of some of her preoccupation with childhood, with "Fairy Tales and Fantasies." With her head "out of the clouds," her music began to change, showing fewer poetic adjectives just as her art featured fewer ornamental lines and curlicues.

Her first album, *Song For A Season*, was released in 1968. The record was hailed as one of the most notable debuts of the year and contained the exhilarating "Night In The City." The album *Clouds* was released the following year and on it Mitchell offered her own renditions of the haunting and beautiful "You Free." With the release of her third album, *Ladies Of The Canyon*, she became the author of an anthem, "Woodstock." It was also a major hit for her friends, Crosby, Stills and Nash.

Her next two records, *Blue* and *For The Roses*, saw Mitchell expanding beyond conventional folk-pop song forms into a more complex and freely inventive narrative style. Inspired by Bob Dylan's rough-hewn oracular song poems, she began to compose steps in this direction were especially prominent on *Blue*, which Joni described as her most "honest."

The album featured delightful "old guard" ballads such as "Crazy," which is accompanied by the delicate strains of a dulcimer, and "River" with its haunting piano intro. But it also showed an increasing tendency toward exploration in new areas. "The Last Time I Saw Richard" particularly shows a breaking free from regular meter, a touch of the Spontaneous elements that would become both a source of controversy among those in her audience who craved more accessible songs, and a fountainhead for her later metamorphosis into a jazz-pop singer. "You Turn Me On I'm A



Radio" also had a similar soul-like turn, as Joni Mitchell began to woo, "court and spark," a new style. Joni Mitchell's first brush with jazz in her music came because of a chance remark made at one of her sessions. While trying to explain in an abstract way what she needed for a track, one of the musicians suggested (helpfully) that she get herself a jazz drummer. Coincidentally, Tom Scott and the L.A. Express happened to be playing in the area. Scott had played on her *For The Roses* LP, but when she heard the full

L.A. Express live, she invited them down to a session. After a few false starts, things began to cook and in 1974, Court and Spark burst luminously into the stellar pop sky. With the assistance of Tom Scott as hornman and arranger, Mitchell cautiously began to incorporate jazz instrumentation. Court and Spark gave Mitchell her biggest hit to date, "Help Me" as well as its follow-up, the straight-on rocker "Raised On Robbery." But rock was not to be her ultimate direction. Her next rendering of Ross and Gray's "Twisted" showed her veering further into the orbit of classic jazz, a la bebop.

Her upbeat *Miles of Ales* LP contained restatements of her outstanding earlier work, recorded on the road with the L.A. Express. But her sleek new jazz rock approach to

and true that she was to undertake Mitchell has commented, somewhat wryly, that being popular in the entertainment field is rather like getting elected to a political position. After about four years people get the yen to vote you out of office. If the entertainer changes, Mitchell feels, they will be crucified for changing. If they stick with a formula they will be crucified for not changing. Of the two, Joni says she much prefers the former kind of crucifixion since it is "much less boring."

There was certainly nothing boring about the public reaction to *The Hunting Of Summer Lawns* issued in 1974. As Mitchell herself said, "Whatever the mirror was that I held up, it was more of a consolation than a lot of people could take." In fact, she had drastically changed the theme of her lyrics to that of a social commentary on alienated marriages and the trapped housewife in suburbia. Gone were the confessional lyrics. Gone also were the pop orthodoxies. "The Jungle Line" features sparse Moog and acoustic guitars over a repeating loop of Burundi water drums. "Shadows and Light" used only farias and arp keyboards and vocals. "Centerpiece" was a further digression towards the jazz age. While cuts like "In France They Kiss On Main Street" were clearly post-Court and Spark, the important new element was a jolting minimalism.

On *Hejira* Mitchell returned to the confessional mode with a collection of song-poems about travel and escape. What remained of the sleek jazz-pop sound of *Summer Lawns* was pared down to bare, brooding sound marked by the intimate interplay of Mitchell's guitar and the sensitive electric bass playing of Weather Report's Jaco Pastorius. Throughout most of this period, Joni frequently associated with jazz musicians, asking questions and

curiously about the jazz medium, she felt it only natural to re-discover the excitement and rhythmic animation of rock. The songs on her new album run from pure rock to flowing jazz-pop. The record, a site of passage statement, is a self-portrait of the artist on the threshold of middle age. As always, she scrutinizes the romantic life with a mixture of very humor, high spirited optimism and thoughtful resignation. The LP is organized around two pillars: "Chinese Cafe," a song about approaching middle age, opens the record. "Love" is the foil for the rest of "Cafe," it is the closing track, an adaptation of Confucius' chapter 13, verse 1. *Wild Things* draws its energies from the "new music" hybrid rhythm character, used by groups like The Police, but it

is uniquely recalled by the fresh new rhythm section of Larry Kinn (bass) and Vinicio Colonna (drums).

An added surprise has been a summer tour by Mitchell, featuring many of these new cuts as well as the new backing group. But for Joni Mitchell, for whom the only constant is change (and dedication), surprise is the rule. She has followed, and continues to follow, her muse, "constant as a northern star." Her "hejira" (the term for the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) was not and is not a one time or one album event. It is continuous growth. And after all, to pose a musical question, "How you gonna keep 'em down in Saskatchewan after they've played 'A Whole Lotta Love'?"

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