

# Inspiration For Inspiration

## Joni Mitchell's Artistic Reponse To Art

by Jeff Hankins

One thing that Joni Mitchell demonstrates is that it is in the nature of the artist to respond creatively to the work of other artists, as much as to the raw material of life itself.

Right from early on, it seems, from those folk club and coffee house performances, the rambling anecdotal long introductions often told not only of the experiences and observations which had given stimulus to songs, but also of other art-form, particularly reading matter, which had helped the inspirational process. One of the early narrative songs, 'Gifts of the Magi', for example, was a straight poetic reworking ("a Readers Digest condensed" version, she called it) of the famous short story by O. Henry. In those early concerts, too, she would tell how her (then new) song 'Both Sides Now' "came from" her reading of a book by Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*. The creative process on this one is interesting; in reality it's just one small sentence from the book (about the modern phenomenon of air flight enabling us to see above clouds) which has in fact caused her to pause, and respond... and perhaps that is the mark of the artist before the art of others; alert to the infinitesimal impressions that can trigger their own individual expressions.

It's quite strange when you consider Joni Mitchell saying, as in a 1972 interview "I must admit I hardly ever read... to me,

reading was a vicarious experience..", in that same interview talking about her reading of Hermann Hesse's *Narziss and Goldmund*. Somewhere, though, she'd clearly managed to fit a bit of reading in; the song 'I think I understand' for instance, is her response to reading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, or at least her employment of the imagery and vocabulary of it to express something personal to her own experience (in this case, to power of friendship's memories to arm us against fearing life's unknowns).

And of course it isn't just reading she responds to. An accomplished visual artist herself, her writing reflects appreciation of others; 'The Jungle Line' obviously responding to Rousseau's explorations of the primitive, and 'Turbulent Indigo' paying homage to Van Gogh. Introducing an early unfinished song 'Ballerina' (which she jokily adapted in performance to a Coca-Cola commercial!) was a response to an underground film she'd seen about the life of an Australian dancer. 'Judgement of the Moon and Stars' is a good example of "inspiration for inspiration", for it is not only a response to the music of Beethoven but very much prompted by reading a book about his life and work, *Beethoven: His spiritual development*.

Both *Wild Things Run Fast* and *Turbulent Indigo* showed Joni adapting and interpreting biblical text - the "love"

chapter from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and Job's lament. In 'Night Ride Home' we get a wonderfully evocative adaptation of Yeat's poem 'The Second Coming'. On *Hissing of Summer Lawns* she acknowledged Tom Wolfe's book as the source for her 'Boho Dance', but there must be so many other allusions and starting points we are unaware of. I remember a young American girl engaging me in conversation on a train some years back. Seeing me clutching a copy of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, which I'd just bought, she launched into some theories of her own about Joni's sources of inspiration. In particular, she pointed out the dragon image from Court and Spark's 'Trouble Child' was "pure Nietzsche".

In my long protracted adolescent fanhood, learning of any of these literary sources would send me out to buy the book, to read it avariciously, hoping to find... what? The same inspiration? Some key to the mysterious workings of the songsmith? Certainly older, maybe wiser, I've finally got the point - I've learnt, or I'm learning, to stay alert too... and the things that have inspired my own expressions, that have sparked my own creative responses, are, surprise surprise, different books, different works of art, different experiences. But with Joni Mitchell, miraculously, the circle repeats; her inspiration inspires others too. And for me its the greatest credit I feel I could give to any artist - that her art engenders creativity in others. Even me.

## COMPETITION

Win a copy of Brian Hinton's book *Both Sides Now*, personally signed for you by the author!

Sanctuary Press Ltd have very kindly offered to supply copies of the new Joni Mitchell biography as prizes. Simply answer the following questions and send your answers to the address below. Several lucky winners will receive a copy of *Both Sides Now* signed by Brian Hinton.

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| Question 1 | What is Joni's nationality?  |
| Question 2 | What are the names of her two recently released compilation albums?              |
| Question 3 | Which Joni Mitchell song contains the words "Moons and Junes and ferris wheels"? |

Send your answers to:  
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