

# THE SPECIALS

## AND 40 YEARS OF 2-TONE!



# M

Music Magazine

**22-PAGE SPECIAL!**

"My gift was  
born of tragedy"

**THE AGONY  
& ECSTASY OF**

# JONI MITCHELL

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## JONI ON JONI: #8

### Two Grey Rooms

(*Night Ride Home*, 1991)

"I had that music back around the time of [1982's] *Wild Things Run Fast*, but it took seven years to find the story to fit the music. It's a story of obsession... about this German aristocrat who had a lover in his youth that he never got over. He later finds this man working on a dock and notices the path that the man takes every day to and from work. So the aristocrat gives up his fancy digs and moves to these two shabby grey rooms overlooking this street, just to watch this man walk to and from work. That's a song that shows my songs aren't all self-portraits."





**HOLLYWOOD,  
1976**

"Joni arrived at the studio with a whole bunch of clothes," says Seeff of the session for *Hejira*'s cover, "and I saw this sort of feathered throw. There are all these subpersonalities roaming around Joni's subconscious that she imagines herself to be. They talk about how everyone has a spirit animal, and she crouched down and became this eagle woman. She travelled around and skated and swam and went to different places, and her outer world experiences informed her inner world expression. But she could do that wonderful thing with the feathers and become the eagle woman, then suddenly an hour into the session, instead of this mythological creature, I caught her giggling to herself. She realised it was all just play."

# "Every Time, She'd Arrive AS A DIFFERENT CHARACTER"

Eagle woman. Painter. Dancer. Jock. **NORMAN SEEFF** spent the '70s and '80s photographing the ever-changing Joni. As a book of his portraits arrives, **JOHN MULVEY** hears about their creative relationship, then - and now!

**N**ORMAN SEEFF FIRST MET Joni Mitchell in 1974. A South African doctor, he had arrived in the US in 1968, "in a hurry to get out of the apartheid system." Working as an emergency medic in Soweto, he also ran a safehouse where Nelson Mandela's associates hid, but in New York he reinvented himself as a photographer and designer. By 1972 he was directing The Rolling Stones for the sleeve of *Exile On Main St.*, and living at the notorious Hyatt House hotel in Hollywood. "My first walk was along Sunset Boulevard and I saw this line of rock'n'roll, billboards," he remembers. "And I went, Oh my God, this is an urban art gallery. I want my stuff up there. Within a year, I would have four to five billboards in a row."

Seeff's energy and creativity made him an artistic force in '70s LA, where he soon fell into

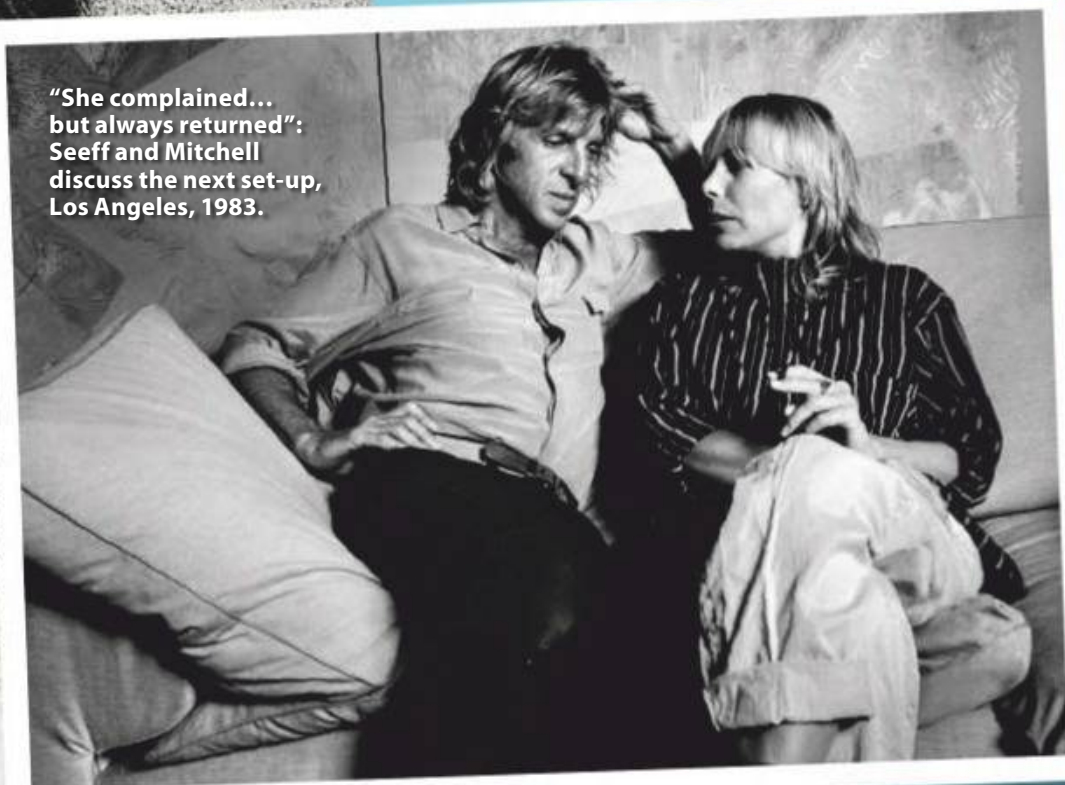
Joni Mitchell's orbit. Over 15 years, he photographed her 13 times, a potent relationship that's memorialised in his new book, *The Joni Mitchell Sessions*. "Every time I worked with her, she'd arrive as a different character," he says. "One time she arrived very contentiously in blackface [for the *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* cover shoot], which caused a lot of consternation. The next time she's this gorgeous, fair-haired woman in a diaphanous floral dress, then she's in an electrified cage that we had to build where she's interacting with wolves."

"Beyond being the most incredible lyricist, songwriter and actual musician, she's a painter, a performance artist, a conceptualist. We usually had a little battle every time, because she'd have this preconceived idea and I was sort of resistant to preconceived ideas. But I learned ultimately to embrace her ideas in a spontaneous way. And while she was sometimes explaining to me what her idea was, I would start shooting. She was very animated in the way that she would tell me the story, and then she would often get pissed off that I was shooting while she was talking. We ended up with a reluctant appreciation of each other's approach."

In a Rolling Stone cover story from 1979, Cameron Crowe describes a session where "Mitchell lectures [Seeff] on how 'you try celebrities here, you push them to the limit, test them against your Zen training.'" After their first shoot around the release of *Court And Spark*, Seeff "had no idea Joni would come back". "She has complained at different times that I pushed too hard," he continues, "but for some reason she always returned."

Seeff's sessions at his studio next to the Chateau Marmont hotel were famously social events, with crowds watching the ➤

"She complained... but always returned": Seeff and Mitchell discuss the next set-up, Los Angeles, 1983.







◀ action, and a film crew capturing the photographer's intimate conversations with Frank Zappa, or Steve Jobs, or Huey Newton. He is currently marshalling the thousands of hours of footage into a massive cross-platform project called Norman Seeff: The Power And The Passion To Create.

He has also, for the first time in 25 years, reconnected with Mitchell. "I was at her house about a month ago," he says, sharing news of the 75-year-old's recovery from her 2015 aneurysm. "She's still in a wheelchair, but she's beginning to walk a little bit on her own. She is going to walk again. Her mental capacity is pretty much back.

"I showed her the book for the first time and she loved it. We were looking at pages and, basically, you know that people's intellect is back when they can laugh at themselves and tell jokes, because it takes a certain level of comprehension to be funny. We had such fun, laughing, and she remembered everything. She's improving rapidly and I think that it's not going to be long before she's either painting or writing songs again.

"I don't know if she's going to sing, she might play piano, I'm not sure. But there's an incredibly touching story of a woman fighting, as she fought her way out of polio, back to living a normal life. It's pretty mind-boggling to observe."





## BEL-AIR, 1977

Mitchell and Seeff risked being run over during a creative shoot outside the gates of her Bel-Air mansion: "It was scary, because it's a very narrow single lane road and a hairpin turn," he says. "And I know once she starts, she forgets where she is. When I looked at these pictures afterwards, I saw Joni drawing around her hand and around her body on the ground like a cave dweller, this sort of archetypal identity: 'This is me. I've passed this way. I know that I exist.' I didn't realise Joni was much more private and vulnerable than I thought. I misread her as out there, willing to do anything. Underneath it wasn't quite her nature, but we always pushed the envelope together." The shoot was later used on the covers of the 1996 compilations *Hits* and *Misses*.



## SUNSET STRIP, 1977

Another elaborate 1977 session at Seeff's studio, which tried to capture Mitchell's multi-disciplinary vigour. "She brought a whole team with her, she actually had dancers as well. They did a kind of a performance piece where we brought the paintings in, and at a certain point they did a dance as an interpretation of the painting. I loved her lines, 'I am a lonely painter/I live in a box of paints' [from *A Case Of You*]. She saw herself as an artist first."

## HOLLYWOOD HILLS, 1974

"I'd just arrived in LA and this friend of mine, Tony Hudson [the father of Slash], was Joni's designer at the time. He called me one day and said, 'Hey, Norman, would you like to shoot Joni Mitchell?' And I said, Yes, my heart beating, because everyone was in love with Joni. I said, Look, I don't have a studio but come to my house. And so she rolled up one evening, no make-up people, no wardrobe. I put a grey backdrop up against the wall in my little living room and we started drinking wine and playing music and shooting, and ended up getting an amazing series of images."

## SUNSET STRIP, 1983

A new wave-tinged shoot from the early '80s, with Mitchell at her goofiest. "Joni's very professionally integrous, exploring boundaries," explains Seeff. "But every now and again she looks at it and goes, 'This is just child's play, and you shouldn't take yourself too seriously.' That's the humanity there. I've worked with some artists who take themselves incredibly seriously. Joni would suddenly just be this playful girl who loved to dance. We always had a great time."





## SUNSET STRIP, 1979

"Who are these alternative Joni Mitchells? Was it just that she found a lovely black outfit with a hat that looked good on her, or was this a deeply subconscious personality? What are all these symbolic movements with her hands? It's like the shape is a geometric portal into the shadow self. When I saw her last month, I asked Joni if there was a symbolic meaning, and she said, 'You know, I never thought of the symbolic meaning.' But that's what came up from the subconscious. You can interpret it any way you want."



## SUNSET STRIP, 1979

After avoiding interviews for most of the 1970s, Seeff photographed Mitchell to accompany Cameron Crowe's Rolling Stone cover story. "I had a studio and people doing make-up and wardrobe, but she was never heavily into that, she often rolled up the way she wanted to be," says Seeff. "But this is Joni stepping into womanhood, moving from folk singer to sophisticate. She could go from looking extraordinarily beautiful, in a Vogue way, to being totally out there."



## THE JONI MITCHELL SESSIONS

is now available on [www.normanseeff.com/store](http://www.normanseeff.com/store) in two versions:

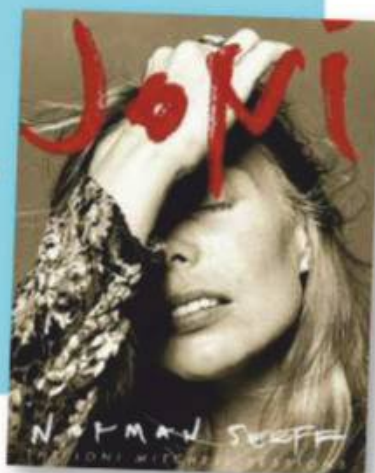
### THE PREMIUM EDITION which includes:

- An 11x14 inch print
- Password-protected access to Seeff's library of filmed sessions featuring multiple artists exploring Joni as the Boundary Dweller and Innovative Artist
- Seeff's 7-Stage road map of the Boundary

Dweller Archetype as exemplified by Joni. This schematic serves as a tool to empower personal creativity

### THE COLLECTORS EDITION which includes:

- A signed copy of the book inside a slipcase
- Original limited edition signed 11x14 inch print







## THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWN'S' COVER SESSION, BEL-AIR, 1975

"I don't normally think I'm going to put an artist in a swimming pool on an album cover. But I looked at Joni's pool and I thought, Wow, this is graphically really beautiful. I didn't know about her swimming [Mitchell's post-polio rehab, as a child, involved a lot of work in the water]. The next thing is I'm seeing her in the pool, and she's a damn good swimmer. Powerful. All these people were standing around, and she was in this reverie, communing with nature. She wasn't lying in the pool in this lovely repose wondering about how they're all looking at her. She's a bit of a jock, you know."



## BEL-AIR, 1977

From the 1977 session outside Mitchell's house, this time Seeff captures her in a beat-up old car she'd creatively customised. "Another one of her identities, this is the tough chick: 'Don't fuck with me.' She'd taken this car, taken a piece of junk and turned it into art. The seats were leopardskin, and there was a chain that locked the wheel, and she was smoking and looking at you with a foot up. You don't mess with this woman."