

“OUR MINDS WERE ALL BLOWN”

The inside story of Joni Mitchell at Newport Folk Festival, July 24, 2022

In late May, Holly Laessig and Jess Wolfe from US indie-pop band Lucius received a text from Brandi Carlile: “All right jammers, we’re on! We’re doing this.” The extraordinary plan for Joni Mitchell to perform for the first time since playing the Wiltern Theatre on November 13, 2002 was afoot.

Mitchell’s already legendary appearance at Newport Folk Festival on July 24 was a long shot that came off. “A very small number of Newport staff and artists knew it was a possibility she was coming for many months,” says Jay Sweet, executive producer of the festival. “But we also knew that it was only Joni who could decide to step on that stage. There was never full certainty it would happen until it did.”

Central to the plot was Carlile. The singer-songwriter became friends with Mitchell in 2018 and since then has spearheaded gatherings of musicians at Mitchell’s home in Los Angeles to sing, play and socialise – among them Wolfe, Laessig, Taylor Goldsmith, Marcus Mumford, Bonnie Raitt and Elton John.

In October 2019, Carlile performed *Blue* in its entirety at Disney Hall in LA. Wolfe and Laessig joined her on stage and at Christmas were invited to their first ‘Joni Jam’. “Brandi assured us that Joni was really excited about having some young people making music in her living room,” says Wolfe, who recalls walking in to find Chaka Khan singing “At Last” at the piano.

“We were singing ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ and wearing Santa hats! Joni made us carol books that said, ‘Joni’s Jingle Jam.’”

“That was the start of these incredible series of special moments with insanely talented people playing music with and for Joni Mitchell. It felt like we were in the living room of a family member. We were passing around lyrics, sharing new songs and singing as a group. It felt very sweet. Over the last couple of years Brandi started singing some of Joni’s songs in the living room, and Joni started singing along. Slowly that morphed into Joni doing her own tunes again.”

Since her aneurysm in 2015, Mitchell has had to relearn how to play guitar, and how to use her voice. For Carlile, the moment that Newport became more than a pipe dream was when she heard Mitchell “really sing” Gershwin’s “Summertime”, prompting Herbie Hancock to burst into tears. As her health improved, says Wolfe, “there was talk about having all of the people that she’d want to be there from her Joni Jams be on stage lifting her up. Then we get the text from Brandi.”

Between early June and July 24, things “went up to the wire”, says Laessig. “Everyone was unsure



Backstage with an excited Celisse Henderson and a momentarily distracted Wynonna Judd

because of Covid and how comfortable Joni would be whether it would go down. You never knew until you were actually there that it was going to happen. It was too much of a dream come true.”

“I want[ed] it be good,” Mitchell said afterwards, explaining the hesitancy, “And I wasn’t sure I could be.”

The musicians gathered for a rehearsal in Newport on the Friday before the Sunday show. “The logistical complexities for the artists were immense,” says Sweet. Carlile, for example, flew in on Friday for rehearsals, flew back to Chicago for

a Highwomen concert on Saturday, then returned the next morning to Newport. Allison Russell and Sista Strings played in Canada the night before, walked off stage, took a red eye into Boston and drove hours to get there in time.

“On Friday we ran through the set,” says Wolfe. “These were all songs that we had sung in her living room at various points throughout the last few years. They were

in the repertoire already.” Sweet also attended rehearsals, but only lasted two songs. “When she started the third,” he says, “I started sobbing and had to leave.”

On the morning of the festival, there was a growing sense locally that something special was brewing. “It was meant to be a surprise, and I feel it was pretty well kept,” says Wolfe. “One of the band had gone into town on the morning of the gig, and the barista said, ‘I heard something big is going to happen at the festival tonight, and I’m pretty sure it’s the Eagles...’”

The concert had been billed as Brandi Carlile & Friends, a deliberately “malleable space”, says Sweet, for whatever might, or might not, be about to happen. Her set began at 5:30pm Eastern time. At around 6pm, a visibly elated Carlile introduced “back to the Newport stage, for the first time since 1969: Joni Mitchell!” Beforehand, says Holly, “Joni was so excited. She doesn’t get nervous. We sang something in her room and she was ready. She was full of joy and energy.”

Even as she shimmied on stage, nobody on stage really knew what Mitchell might do. “There was no pressure for her to be or do anything,” says Wolfe. “But her attitude was like, ‘I’m here and I want to be a part of it.’”

“What we’d prepared for was that everyone would probably take a

SETLIST

- 1 Carey
- 2 Come In From The Cold
- 3 Help Me
- 4 A Case Of You
- 5 Big Yellow Taxi
- 6 Just Like This Train
- 7 Why Do Fools Fall In Love
- 8 Amelia
- 9 Love Potion No 9
- 10 Shine
- 11 Summertime
- 12 Both Sides Now
- 13 The Circle Game

“SHE STARTED SINGING ENTIRE SONGS BY HERSELF”

HOLLY LAESSIG

an impossibly poignant rendition of “Both Sides Now”, and Mitchell’s mean extended electric guitar jam on “Just Like A Train”.

“That was nuts!” laughs Wolfe. “It’s astounding how much character and rhythmic prowess she has. She is fully Joni; her rhythm and tone are just as brilliant. It’s different, obviously. She’s more of an alto now than a soprano, but it’s so good.”

Afterwards, says Sweet, Mitchell was “radiant and beaming. A miracle personified.” “I don’t think she wanted to go to sleep,” says Wolfe. “She was so pumped! It was great, we all went out and celebrated. We had oysters and lobsters, as you do in Newport.”

As to whether we will see more of Mitchell on stage: “It wouldn’t surprise me,” she says. “I hope so. She seems gung-ho. We’ve been talking about that in our exchanges about the weekend and her recovery in general.

“It’s clear that musical is magical and has the ability to really heal. We’re honoured to have been a witness to it, let alone play a part in it. It was one of the most special moments of our lives.” © GRAEME THOMSON



Joni, “full of joy and energy”, with Brandi Carlile at the Newport Folk Festival, 2022

NINA WESTERVELT



Joni Jammers celebrate the return of a true legend to Newport

