

CLOUDS, COLORS, AND THE WONDER OF U

The Influence of Joni Mitchell on Prince

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Maybe I've never really loved. I guess that is the truth. I've spent my
whole life in clouds at icy altitudes.

—JONI MITCHELL (FROM "AMELIA")

CLOUDS

In “All I Want,” the opening track to her album *Blue*, Joni Mitchell sings, “I am on a lonely road, and I am traveling . . . looking for something. What can it be?” In another song originally intended for the same album, she sings, “I get the urge for going/When the meadow grass is turning brown/And summertime is falling down and winter is closing in.” “Urge For Going” is a song about things on the move—seasons, lovers, birds—all of them “going” in their appointed time. Joni observes the movement and the changes, and she describes them with poetic precision. “I get the urge for going,” she sings in the opening verse, “but I never seem to go.” In her most famous song, “Both Sides, Now,” from her album, *Clouds*, she uses clouds as a metaphor for love and life: “So many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way.” Joni comes to the realization that what we see of things are merely illusions, and we never really know the thing itself: “I really don’t know life at all.”

Often when we’re looking up at clouds in the sky, we think we can discern shapes and forms of things—people, animals, etc. But looking away for a moment and then returning our gaze to the sky, we can’t see the thing anymore. Then we understand it was never there, and the only realities are movement and experience. This is what the artist does: using a medium—color, paint, words, music—she recounts her experience of the movement of clouds.

In “Clouds,” from Prince’s *Art Official Age* (2014), it is another kind of cloud that gets in the way. The song champions experience over technology, and advocates for romance in real time: “Never underestimate the power of a kiss on the neck when she doesn’t expect.” Despite “this brand new age” in which we are accustomed to doing everything “quick, fast in a hurry,” Prince insists on face-to-face engagement, an experience that all the tech in the world cannot replicate: “We’re getting high on something that doesn’t require clouds.”

Arguably the most prolific pop and rock musician of his era, Prince was also its most protean. Over four decades, he was constantly inventing and reinventing himself, giving meticulous attention to every detail of his art—the music, the image, the performance, the words, and even the colors and fonts used on album covers. Prince’s own prolific body of work includes not only thirty-nine albums released under his own name but dozens by satellite acts (the Time, Sheila E., Madhouse, the Family, Jill Jones, and others) in which he writes, produces, and performs the music. A handful of musical figures loom large over Prince’s formation—Stevie Wonder (the studio virtuoso), James Brown (the showman par excellence), Sly Stone (the integrating bandleader), and Jimi Hendrix (the guitar god). Not as immediately obvious, but no less significant is Joni Mitchell, the musician, the songwriter, the painter. Prince was inspired by Joni’s use of color as a means of expression in both the literal and figurative sense. She also influenced Prince’s use of space and silence in his musical arrangements. At times both Joni Mitchell and Prince connected brilliantly with audiences—she is a nine-time Grammy Award winner; he has been awarded multiple industry awards, including several Grammys and an Oscar (for *Purple Rain*), and sold over 130 million records worldwide. Both artists have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Even when their work wasn’t well received (*Mingus*, *Under the Cherry Moon*), neither artist deemed it a failure; neither Joni Mitchell nor Prince defined artistic success solely in terms of commercial sales or critical recognition.

I am a lonely painter. I live in a box of paints.

—Joni Mitchell, from “A Case of You”

The first few times you hear “River” (from Joni Mitchell’s *Blue*) the musical notes from “Jingle Bells” prepare you to be carried off as if on a float in a holiday parade. “It’s coming on Christmas, they’re cutting down trees, they’re putting up reindeer and singing songs of joy and peace,” the singer announces. But it’s not in the right key for “Jingle Bells,” and the imagery

takes a different turn. “River” is no Yuletide carol. The twist is subtle, so much so that it feels natural. The singer wants to get away: “I’m going to make a lot of money, then I’m going to quit this crazy scene,” she elaborates, a reference to the music business. She wishes she had a river, not to float down, not to carry her home, but rather “that I could skate away on.” In this scenario, the river does not flow but is solid ice; the protagonist is looking for a way to *escape* rather than a passageway home. All of this during Christmastime, when people typically long to come together with the people they care for the most. The sentiment is bittersweet, and the irony is heightened by the “Jingle Bells” motif reprised at the coda.

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM CANADA

The singer knows about icy rivers. Roberta Joan Mitchell was born in Alberta, Canada. At age twelve, after several moves around western Canada—her dad was a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Air Force—the family settled in Saskatoon, the largest city in the province of Saskatchewan. From her youth, Joni was chiefly interested in painting but also developed a love of country music. Her first instrument was the ukulele. From there, Joni taught herself guitar from the Pete Seeger songbook. Two musical favorites early on were Edith Piaf and Miles Davis. Hailed as the most important and influential female recording artist of the late twentieth century, and one of the greatest songwriters ever, Joni Mitchell claims that her notable musical career was the result of serendipity: “I stumbled into it by accident,” she says. “I was very, very serious about my art and not very serious about my music.”¹ Eventually, she relocated to the United States and recorded her first album, *Song to a Seagull*, in 1968. The quintessential singer-songwriter artist, Joni Mitchell’s catalog includes nineteen studio albums and embraces elements of music from her early years—folk, rock, pop and jazz. Her fourth album, *Blue* (1971), is her most universally acclaimed album; and her sixth, *Court and Spark* (1974), is her most commercially successful.

MOOD INDIGO

“It don’t snow here, it stays pretty green,” continues Joni Mitchell in “River,” the “here” meaning sunny California, where this song and all the songs on *Blue* were recorded. The weather is but one reason for her longing to skate away. Another is a failed romance: “Now I’ve gone and lost the best baby I ever had,”

she says about one who “loved me so naughty, made me weak in the knees.” “River” is an eloquent expression of melancholy, that craving for the comfort and solace of isolation. In a later song she would sing, “There’s comfort in melancholy, when there’s no need to explain” (“Hejira”). The color blue (indigo in particular) is captured visually in the album art. Of the many tools in Joni’s paint box, indigo blue is her most potent and expressive. “Blue, songs are like tattoos,” she sings on the title track. “I’ve been to sea before. Crown and anchor me or let me sail away,” she continues, touching again on the motif of escape. Blue is a color associated with loneliness and solitude: indigo, in particular, with “intuition, perception and the higher mind,”² the perfect symbolic color for Joni’s fourth record, a seminal singer-songwriter album.

You meant the world to me, but now you’re gone and I’m so blue.
—Prince, from “So Blue”

Prince utilized the “blue as loneliness” motif on his debut album from 1978. But he was in the third decade of his career when he produced what may be called the closest spiritual cousin to Mitchell’s *Blue* in his catalog: his solo piano and voice album, *One Nite Alone . . .*, originally released in 2002. Included on the album was Prince’s cover of “A Case Of U,” another song from *Blue*. The title track, the album’s opening cut, begins with a lyrical conflation of color and sound: “In a pale blue spotlight, a figure spins around. And a voice calls out to you, ‘baby, do you like the sound?’” That sound is a sparse arrangement of Prince’s voice accompanied by his piano and a few other instruments and sound effects. Although Prince had recorded a whole album with sparse instrumentation before, *The Truth* (1997) employs primarily acoustic guitar with a few embellishments. The blue mood and sound of *One Nite Alone . . .* is the closest he comes to paying homage to Joni with an entire album.

For Joni, a painter, color is literally her medium of expression. Moreover, her own artwork adorns the covers of a majority of the albums in her catalog.³ Prince drew and designed, using cut-and-paste, the cover of his 1999 album; his hand-drawn art also adorns the cover of his 1991 single, “Gett Off.” But Prince uses color in the figurative sense, almost like a painter would. Color features extensively in the artwork and motifs of his albums and their accompanying tours: easter egg pastels (*Around the World in a Day*), black and white (*Parade*), peach and black (*Sign o’ the Times*), gold (*The Gold Experience*), lemon yellow (*Diamonds and Pearls*) and orange (*Emancipation*). The most famous color associated with Prince, of course, is purple. A combination of red and blue, Prince’s signature color, evokes passion and royalty. In two

of his best-known songs, purple conveys the end of the world. “The sky was all purple, there were people running everywhere,” he exclaims in “1999” and in the title track to his hit album and film, “I only want to see you bathing in the Purple Rain.” In these instances, the color of the sky (blue) mixes with blood (red) to make purple. The blood suggests destruction, and in Prince’s biblically literate worldview, that destruction signifies redemption.⁴ Prince has prefaced performances of “Purple Rain” with a discussion of his music bringing people together from different backgrounds. At the United Center in Chicago, at one of three benefit concerts in late September of 2012 (a Presidential election year) Prince said it was time for red (Republicans) and blue (Democrats) to come together and create one color, purple. For “Gold,” a similarly styled anthem from the early 1990s, Prince adopted a different, brighter color to convey the message that “all that glitters ain’t gold.” One part of the song speaks about people living in “ocean of despair” and includes this typically Prince-like couplet: “They’re unhappy each and every day/But hell is not fashion/so what you trying to say?” That line recalls Joni Mitchell’s observation in “Blue”: “Everybody’s saying that hell’s the hippest way to go/but I don’t think so.” And she adds, “but I’m gonna take a look around it though.” Blue, the color, is an apt description of the most pivotal album in Joni’s catalog. Simply put, *Blue* sounds like blue. In like manner, Prince’s “Gold” twinkles and shimmers for seven and a half minutes with layers of keys and a load of reverb that make it the aural equivalent of beholding the beauty of that precious metal; a true “Gold Experience.”

Coming from the land of snow, I guess I’m kinda used to cold.
—Prince, from “White Mansion”

Minneapolis is so cold it keeps the bad people out.
—Prince to Oprah Winfrey (1996)

An apocryphal story circulated online shortly after his death purporting that Prince had inspired the main song from Disney’s *Frozen*. The claim was that the Purple One had met with the film’s producers, who were looking for a strong musical number with a classic pop feel to it. Prince reportedly described what it was like growing up in Minnesota, telling them that he thrived there despite the loneliness and harsh winters and—wait for it—the cold never bothered him anyway. Thus was born the lyrical punchline to the Grammy and Academy Award-winning song, “Let it Go.” The story—which the superfan in me kind of hoped was true—made the rounds on social media before being denied by the film’s producers. In the aftermath of

Prince's death in 2016, some seemed uber-zealous to assert his influence on popular culture, even fabricating a connection to the most highly acclaimed and lucrative film of the era. Nevertheless, a key takeaway from the "Prince inspired *Frozen*" hoax is this: Prince, like the enchanted Elsa in the film, grew up bearing the blessing/curse of a unique and potent gift, and both of them cultivated that gift in solitude. Isolation, particularly self-imposed, can lead to loneliness and loneliness to despair; in some, such as the kid born Prince Rogers Nelson, it can also inspire and foster intense creativity.

Prince was born in Minneapolis in 1958. Both his parents, John L. Nelson and Mattie Shaw, were musicians. Nelson led a band called the Prince Rogers Trio. From his father, Prince learned the hard work and discipline required for making music, particularly the demands of learning your instrument and performing for an audience. He was also exposed to the exciting side of show business when the senior Nelson brought his son onstage at a James Brown gig: "I saw some of the finest dancing girls that I had ever seen in my life!"⁵ Prince revealed this in an interview for MTV in 1985. The thing that impressed the young Prince most was the control Brown had over his dancers. Or, as he put it, "over his apples and his oranges."

From the heart of Minnesota, here come the Purple Yoda.

—Prince, from "Laydown"

After John and Mattie separated, Prince was often left to fend for himself at home. He taught himself to play piano at age seven. By his midteens, he could also play guitar, bass, and drums. Prince could hear a song and instantly play it back. "In high school, he retreated into himself quite a bit," observed Rev. Art Erickson, who supervised youth activities Prince was involved with at Park Avenue Methodist Church in Minneapolis. "He would eat lunch alone and became very reflective."⁶ Prince was the lonely kid, seemingly shy, who found expression in the ability to learn music and make his own. Aside from his sense of humor, "sometimes sophisticated verbal stuff, other times pure pranks,"⁷ music was the way he communicated. "In high school, Prince was absorbed in his music," said Jon Bream. However, "he wasn't much for sharing his music. But he'd pay attention to the music of other students . . . that seemed to be his style—always absorbing."⁸ As talented and committed to learning as he was, Prince was dead serious about making music his profession. "I'm about to be a star," he told Ronnie Robbins one day in 1976. Robbins replied, "I know you are."⁹ He was also determined, having seen James Brown, to control every aspect of his art, even wanting to produce himself once he had a recording contract. Once, at age eight, Prince was to

learn piano from a teacher who lived across the street from his mother. He refused to go back after one lesson. The reason: “She wants me to play what she wants me to play, and I want to play what I want to play.”¹⁰ In a strikingly similar episode, when seven-year-old Joan Anderson presented her first composition to her piano teacher, she received a slap on the wrist “for playing by ear.” Her teacher scolded her: “Why would you play by ear when you can have the masters under your fingers?” Relating the story now, Joni says she realized then, “I didn’t have any masters I wanted to follow.”¹¹

God, Joni, And U.

This writer has a confession to make. When I first noticed the references to “Joni” in the credits of early Prince records, I had no idea who she was. I really didn’t know much about Prince either. There he was, staring out at me from the cover of *Controversy*, looking dead serious about something. Behind him, the headlines screamed: “Do You Believe In God” (a statement, not a question), “Love Thy Neighbor,” and on the back, simply “Joni.” In the credits of his previous album, *Dirty Mind*, Prince had thanked “Joni” alongside “God” and “U.” My unseasoned sensibility gave me a hunch that if Prince was deeply religious, he might also be an admirer of Joni Eareckson, the evangelical Christian author (who also happened to be a paraplegic). I was mistaken. Whoever Joni was, though, Prince was making her front-page news when no one else was.

Don’t play me, I already do in my car.
—Prince, from “Don’t Play Me”

In 1981, the year in which albums by REO Speedwagon, Foreigner, and Pat Benatar dominated the *Billboard* charts, Prince certainly stood apart as different. So different that it seemed as if he came out of nowhere. Journalist Neal Karlen put it this way: “Everyone came out of a tradition. [Prince] came out of no tradition.”¹² Even so, it was possible to see some of his influences (R&B, funk, new wave) on the surface. In a review of *Controversy*, one journalist referred to Prince as a “young RJIT—Rick James In Training.” *Rolling Stone*, in a four-star review of the album, noted the influences of Funkadelic and Jimi Hendrix. But how exactly did Joni Mitchell, a white, female, country- and folk-inspired singer-songwriter from Canada, fit into the equation? Apparently, Prince really admired her, but aside from that fact, how important was Joni Mitchell in the big picture? Who was playing her in 1981? Prince’s attitude and philosophy would be this: It does not matter

how significant or popular an artist is as long as that artist is significant and popular to you. It would be another year until Joni made a “comeback” and returned to pop music with her album, *Wild Things Run Fast* (**½ in *Rolling Stone*). *Blue*, her fourth album, has been considered a definitive artistic statement; it was her best album up to that point. After reaching a commercial high water mark three years later with *Court and Spark*, Joni took a left turn artistically and began exploring what we would now call “world music” but at the time was not even a recognized genre. *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975) and *Hejira* (1976) followed a musical path that left some of her followers behind. Excursions into jazz with Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, and Weather Report bassist (and fellow Canadian) Jaco Pastorius; a collaborative effort with Charles Mingus shortly before his death; a double album with one song taking up an entire side (“Paprika Plains” from *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*)—such moves fed Joni’s artistic muse, but at the time alienated a good portion of her listeners. Time has caught up to *Hissing* and *Hejira* and vindicated both. They are to her catalog what *Around the World in a Day* and *Parade* are to Prince’s catalog precisely a decade later: one-time commercial and critical letdowns that now rank among the artists’ most highly regarded albums, particularly for the wealth of deeper cuts. Notably, the cover art of both *Hejira* and *Parade* make effective use of black and white.

FUNK IS SPACE

Prince contributed songs for two tribute albums: one to Jimi Hendrix (*The Power of Soul*) in 2003, and the other to Joni Mitchell (*A Tribute to Joni Mitchell*) in 2007. Uncredited, he contributed guitar to “Edith and the Kingpin” on Herbie Hancock’s Grammy-winning album, *River: The Joni Letters*, from 2007. He also selected “A Case of You” for a collection of Joni songs curated by other artists in 2005. People like Hendrix, James Brown, and Sly Stone are low-hanging fruit on the tree of Prince’s musical influences. Joni Mitchell, no less significant an influence, requires more reaching. It is worth noting that Prince has drawn inspiration from Joni’s “difficult” period. He had used a phrase in Joni’s “Coyote” (from *Hejira*) as the title of a ballad, “When We’re Dancing Close and Slow,” on his second album, *Prince*. That song showcases a peculiar hallmark of Prince’s balladry—a sparse beat embellished with discreet synths to create a unique quivering effect, which critic Jon Pareles had praised, drawing attention to his “ear for floating tempos.”¹³ The effect is utilized on other songs such as “The Beautiful Ones,” “Condition of the Heart,” and “When 2 R In Love.” His penchant for minimalist arrangements

certainly owes a debt to Ms. Mitchell. And also to Miles Davis, whom both he and Mitchell admired. The legendary jazz trumpeter was an advocate for knowing that the notes a musician does not play are just as important as the ones he does. On his *A Piano & a Microphone* tour in 2016, Prince told anecdotes about growing up with a musician father and shared that one of the things he learned from him was the importance of that minimalist approach: “Funk is space,” he would say and then demonstrate by pounding a funky groove on the keys. In 1996, while playing back a preview of his *Emancipation* set, Prince revealed to Anthony DeCurtis of *Rolling Stone* his inspiration for the sparse arrangement on “Let’s Have a Baby”: “Bass, piano and silence. Joni Mitchell taught me that. If you listen to her early stuff, she really understands that.”¹⁴ Joni’s most developed and effective use of space and silence is on *Hejira*, on which she collaborates with jazz musicians, most notably bassist Jaco Pastorius. He creates rolling colorful bass lines that serve as a counterpoint to the melody. The result is music that is more impressionistic than immediate; more of a challenge to penetrate initially but ultimately more rewarding too.

He’s driven like an artist. His motivations are growth and experimentation as opposed to formula and hits.
—Joni Mitchell on Prince¹⁵

Prince told journalist Neal Karlen in 1985 that Joni Mitchell’s *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* was “the last album he loved all the way through.” Prince was coming off the success of his watershed *Purple Rain* (his sixth album) and was discussing with Karlen critical and commercial responses to his then recently released follow-up, *Around the World in a Day*. Like Mitchell after *Court and Spark*, Prince did not take commercial appeal into consideration much and did not seem too concerned about not selling as many records. “The same people who bought 1999 bought *Around the World in a Day*,” he reasoned. At the time, both albums had sold close to three million copies, compared to nine million for *Purple Rain*. “I’d rather have people buy my music because they like it and not just digging it because it’s hip,” he continued, suggesting that he placed greater emphasis on making art that pleased himself than on multi-platinum sales.¹⁶ Joni Mitchell, on her live album *Miles of Aisles*, her follow-up to *Court and Spark*, jokes from the stage about the pressure on musicians to repeat their own success that a painter does not face: “Nobody ever said to Van Gogh, ‘paint a Starry Night again, man!’ You know? He painted it and that was it.” Significantly, Prince essentially said he did not want to make another *Purple Rain*. “Do you know how easy it would

have been to open *Around the World in a Day* with the guitar solo that's on the end of 'Let's Go Crazy?' he asks rhetorically. "I don't *want* to make an album like the earlier ones."¹⁷

In that same conversation with Neal Karlen for *Rolling Stone* in 1985, Prince spoke about his bandmates: "Lisa (Coleman) is like my sister. She'll press two notes with one finger, so the chord is a lot larger . . . she's into Joni Mitchell too."¹⁸ Wendy and Lisa were themselves unabashed admirers of Mitchell, something that is reflected in the music that they made together with Prince, as well as on their own albums following their time with him.¹⁹ Indeed, the mutual admiration of Mitchell shared by Prince and his Revolution bandmates Lisa Coleman and Wendy Melvoin—as well as Wendy's twin sister and one-time fiancée of Prince, Susannah—can be heard most tellingly on songs he recorded during their time together: "Sometimes It Snows in April," Starfish and Coffee," and "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker," the latter being one song in his catalog that name-checks Joni. In the recently unearthed "All My Dreams," from the same era (it was originally recorded for *Parade*), Wendy announces, "Lisa, I'm going to hand you the brush and you're going to paint the side of the train," at which point Coleman proceeds to do the aural equivalent of just that with the piano keys. It is a striking example in Prince's music of sounds imagined as colors. During that same prolific era (*Parade*, *Sign o' the Times*), Prince offered Joni Mitchell a song, "Emotional Pump." She turned it down, thanking him and saying it was probably a hit for someone else. Joni did not think she could sing it. Despite the song's musical merit—a spare, pounding Linn drum beat over a strong melody and hook, it's not hard to see why Joni did not connect with it. A sample of the odd (but not for Prince) lyrics: "I want you not just sexually/ Not just sexually/But in a way like a mother wants a child." In the sparse, demo-like "Why The Butterflies?" from 1983, the piano chords and phrasing owe a debt to Ms. Mitchell. One later-period Prince song that unmistakably bears Joni's influence is "Reflection," released digitally in 2003 (and later on *Musicology*) in which he gets nostalgic (briefly) for the laid back scene of his adolescence, specifically 1977, the era of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*: "Two sevens together, like time indefinite." Significantly, when Prince performed the song for the *Tavis Smiley Show*, he chose to have Melvoin accompany him. It was the first time the two had performed together in seventeen years.

It's hard to see green when there's so much blue.

—Prince's character (The Kid) in *Graffiti Bridge*

Prince once described his songwriting in terms of painting and revealed that he visualizes the sounds as colors. “Sometimes I’ll be walking around and I’ll hear the melody as if it were the first color in the painting,” he said to Robert L. Doerschuk in an interview for *Musician* describing “The Holy River” (1997).²⁰ “If you believe in the first color and trust it, you can build your song from there,” he continued. Of another track from *Emancipation*, “Soul Sanctuary,” he said, “I’ll have a color or a line in mind, and I’ll keep switching things around until I get what I’m hearing in my head. Then I’ll try to bring to Earth the color that wants to be with that first color.”²¹ Discussing his creative process using the “sounds as color” metaphor is certainly befitting the Prince mystique. In the 1997 *Musician* interview, Prince elaborated further on the process of songwriting, shifting the imagery from a color palette to a delivery room: “It’s like having a baby, knowing that this baby wants to be with you. You’re giving birth to the song.”²² Prince had compared his songs to children before, but here he is extending that metaphor and speaks of creating songs in terms of giving birth.

“Little Green” is another key song from Joni Mitchell’s *Blue*. In it, the singer addresses the difficult subject of losing a child. In Joni’s specific case, it meant having a daughter but giving her up for adoption, something she would allude to later in “Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody” from *Wild Things Run Fast* (1982): “My child’s a stranger. I bore her but I could not raise her.” The narrative in “Little Green” is rich with nostalgia and imagined longing for an experience that now ultimately belongs to someone else: “There’ll be crocuses to bring to school tomorrow . . . there’ll be icicles and birthday clothes and sometimes there’ll be sorrow.” Here, Joni associates the titular color with the newness of life: “Just a little green like the color when the spring is born.” Significantly, it’s that same “green” that fuels her longing to get away in “River.” Lyrically, despite the emotional difficulty of the situation, the speaker holds everything together with optimism and dignity: “You’re sad and you’re sorry but you’re not ashamed.” And she exhorts the daughter she does not know to “have a happy ending.”²³ In November of 1996, Prince became a father for the first time, but the son born to him and his wife Mayte only lived for weeks. Prince was reticent to address the loss of their child, and only made an oblique reference to the tragedy in a song: “If you ever lose someone dear to you, never say the words ‘they’re gone. . .’ they’ll come back.” Significantly, in that same song, he coins a phrase, “Chelsea afternoon,” an intended nod to Mitchell’s artistic influence on the acoustic guitar-driven singer/songwriter approach of the parent album, *The Truth*.²⁴

SUBTERRANEAN BY YOUR OWN DESIGN

Fast-Forward: 1991. It's Thanksgiving week, and Joni Mitchell is setting the music charts on fire, in spirit at least. Prince Nelson and Prince Be of P.M. Dawn—both unabashed devotees of Ms. Mitchell—have scored number-one hits on the *Billboard* Hot 100, nearly back-to-back. While Prince and the NPG's "Cream" was in second place after two weeks at the top spot, "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" by P.M. Dawn, in its rapid ascent toward the peak, was bumping up against it at number 3.²⁵ The catchy "Set Adrift" was loaded with pop culture references, some current and others more obscure, all of them *tres cool* at the dawn of the 1990s. For their breakthrough hit, P.M. Dawn sampled the beat from Dennis Edwards' 1984 song "Don't Look Any Further" and the main hook from Spandau Ballet's 1983 hit "True"; they name-dropped actress Christina Applegate (from *Married With Children*); and they quoted, of all things, Mitchell's "The Boho Dance" from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, a generally under-appreciated album in her catalog, but one which Prince Rogers Nelson claimed to truly admire. "Joni, help me, I think I'm falling . . ." P.M. Dawn would sing two years later in another top-ten hit ("Looking Through Patient Eyes"), taking their cue from Prince's interpolation of "Help Me" in "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker," a song in which Joni's hit from *Court and Spark* is purported to be the protagonist's favorite. Another song on P.M. Dawn's 1993 release *The Bliss Album* . . . ? samples "I Had A King" from Joni's first album.

Prince was fairly straightforward in his devotion to Joni, as was P.M. Dawn in their love of Prince. The group covered Prince's "1999" as part of their "Fantasia's Confidential Ghetto" medley on their album *Jesus Wept*. Prince Be, asked by *Rolling Stone* in 1993 if he had ever met "a feather that could crack a nut," replied, "Once. His name was Prince. And he was funky." Such tribute by triangulation prefigured somewhat of a Joni Mitchell revival in the early 1990s. Her 1994 album, *Turbulent Indigo*, had been her best-reviewed work in decades and was awarded two Grammys, including one for Best Pop Album. After several years of underwhelming appeal, including a string of albums released on the Geffen label, Joni Mitchell once again had critical and commercial clout. The following year, "Big Yellow Taxi" from *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) appeared on the soundtrack to *Friends*, the most popular television sitcom of the decade, alongside hits from Hootie and the Blowfish and the Rembrandts. In another telling example of Joni's being tapped into the cultural zeitgeist, in late 1997, Janet Jackson scored a number three R&B/hip-hop hit with "Got 'til It's Gone." The main hook of the song, produced by one-time Prince protégés Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, was an interpolation

of the aforementioned “Big Yellow Taxi.” Taking the lead from their musical mentor, Prince’s disciples did not hesitate to publicly acknowledge both their love for Joni and her influence on their own work.

RAISED ON ROBBERY

“I don’t think Prince is an innovator. He’s a great hybrid,” Mitchell told *Rolling Stone* in 1991 when asked about the Minneapolis superstar.²⁶ Prince had the talent to absorb his influences, then turn around and produce something from them that sounded fresh and original. Prince’s love and appreciation for Mitchell has cropped up over the years, sometimes in unexpected places. In the unreleased track “Lust U Always,” Prince says that his fourth-grade teacher’s name was “Joni.” The name of Prince’s fictional boss in “Raspberry Beret,” his 1985 hit, is “Mr. McGee,” and is lifted from a song, “Paprika Plains,” that comprises an entire side of Joni’s *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*. In his film, *Under the Cherry Moon* (1986), the cover of *Hejira* can be seen on display in Christopher’s bedroom, alongside records by Miles Davis (*You’re Under Arrest*) and Sheila E. (“Sister Fate” twelve-inch single). The title of the third album by the Time, a Prince satellite act, is a borrowed lyric (“Ice Cream Castle”) from Joni Mitchell’s signature song, “Both Sides, Now.”

The influence of Joni on Prince, even through his associated musical acts, often hides in plain sight. Moreover, Prince has done a number of things over the years that pay subtle tribute to Joni. His seductive pose on the inside sleeve of 1999, his fifth record, shows the artist lying on a bed poised with canvas and paintbrush, his backside partially showing under the cover. Joni Mitchell, inside the gatefold of her fifth record, *For the Roses*, is photographed standing on a rock naked, her bare bottom exposed. On the same Prince album, his band, the Revolution, is credited (backward) only on the hand-drawn artwork by Prince himself, but not on the spine or record label. Joni Mitchell has drawn or painted a number of her album covers, and on her 1974 live album, *Miles of Aisles*, also a double, her band, the L.A. Express, is credited *only* on the cover art and in Mitchell’s own hand.²⁷ The “Oh, say can you see?” in Prince’s 2004 single, “United States of Division,” sounds like it comes straight out of Joni’s “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter.”²⁸ And the “Amen” at the end of “The Sacrifice of Victor” from Prince’s 1992 album bears an uncanny similarity to the vocal coda at the end of Joni’s “Rainy Night House” from *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970). Compare also the following: “Tell those girls that you’ve got Joni, she’s coming back home” (Joni, from “Blue Motel Room”); “If anybody asks you, you belong to Prince” (Prince, from “Private

Joy”); “I met a woman, she had a mouth like yours” (Joni, from “A Case of You”); “Excuse me but I need a mouth like yours” (Prince, from “Let’s Pretend We’re Married”). Even in burglary, Prince was meticulous.

Despite his expressed devotion to Joni, Prince’s covers of her songs were rare. In 1990 on the *Nude* tour, Joni’s “Blue Motel Room,” the playful, saucy blues from *Hejira*, was performed on at least one occasion. In 2002, Prince and the band spent hours rehearsing “Twisted,” the 1959 Annie Ross song covered by Joni on *Court and Spark*, but only played it at one gig on that tour. Moreover, Joni herself is known to have guested onstage with Prince at least once, at a show in Denver in 1986. Prince’s most well-known Mitchell cover is “A Case of You,” which he played for the first time live in 1983 (at the hometown gig where “Purple Rain” made its debut) and released on *One Nite Alone . . .* some nineteen years later. The latter version was also contributed to a Joni Mitchell tribute album in 2007. An early version of the song had surfaced on an intimate cassette recording and circulated unofficially for decades before finally being issued in 2018. Prince has said, “It’s one of my favorite songs to sing because the melody is so heartbreaking.”²⁹ He credits her use of the dulcimer, her style and technique for giving the recording “such a haunting feel that it would make even the hardest thug shed tears.” In all of his renditions, Prince opts to begin the song at the second verse: “I am a lonely painter, I live in a box of paints.” In a way, that deliberate choice seems appropriate for Prince. Perhaps he connected with that image of the “lonely painter” but didn’t have a use for what preceded it. In 2002, after his conversion to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Prince consistently changed Joni’s “I’m frightened by the devil” to “I *used to be* frightened by the devil,” making it consistent with his own beliefs. He also omits the song’s third verse: “I met a woman . . . she knew your devils and your deeds.” It’s a case of Prince knowing exactly *what* he wants to say and exactly *the way* he wants to say it, and making sure the words are a reflection of that.³⁰

In the opening verse of Joni’s “A Case of You,” the singer tells her beloved, whom she has just accused of being “constantly in the darkness,” “If you want me I’ll be in the bar.” Hence, the idea of drinking “a case of you” as opposed to a case of some other beverage. The lyrics are picturesque and emotionally open: “You’re in my blood like holy wine, so bitter and so sweet.” The narrative is descriptive: “On the back of a cartoon coaster, in the blue TV screen light/I drew a map of Canada, Oh, Canada! with your face sketched on it twice.” The expression “cartoon coaster” is puzzling at first. Then you realize that a drink coaster might typically be made out of cardboard, that the French word for “cardboard” is “carton,” and then you guess that maybe she is using a mix of English and French as is often done in parts of Joni’s

native Canada, singing “carton” like “cartoon.” Whatever is going on here, you get the impression that the singer is attempting to describe a scenario and not finding the exact words. Joni claims she can handle her lover’s deficiency, but she betrays a vulnerability—I *may still be on my feet, but I’m feeling a bit tipsy*. And there’s the double entendre of the title: a “case” of you, like it’s a medical condition. All of this draws you in and invites you to appreciate the song *on its own terms* or not at all. It is surely one of the most quirkily intimate songs in hers or anyone’s catalog. Back when Prince first covered it in 1983, “A Case of You” was a deep cut from *Blue*. In the years since it has come to be regarded as a key song in Joni Mitchell’s canon.

LOST IN TRANSLATION: HOW YOU SAY?

In “I Wonder U,” a song from his 1986 album *Parade*, Prince does something akin to what Joni does in “A Case of You.” Something uniquely intimate is expressed in misspeaking the precise words. Prince “exquisitely captures that notion of ‘lost in translation’ superbly,” says Simon Williams.³¹ Although “I Wonder U” was recorded in Los Angeles, “the European vibe is clearly apparent.”³² And lest anyone consider it an interlude or mere segue to the better-known songs on *Parade*, the singular genius of “I Wonder U” comes out in *the way* the words are rendered in this brief number (it runs only a minute and 40 seconds), however quirky or misspoken:

The pause between “I” and “how you say” indicates the foreignness of the language or, perhaps, an internal dialogue—a person searching for the right word or words. And then there is the kicker “I wonder you.” Wonder—noun, a reaction to something that is beautiful. A word that indicates thought, consideration, preoccupation. A simply genius, foreign conceptualisation of the word love. Easy to understand how a non-native speaker may mistake this word for the one they wanted. Beyond that, it is also a word often used synonymously with adoration or awe. Here, the singer is conveying a sense of complete devotion to his beloved. The phrasing of each of the lines indicates this struggle to translate a compelling feeling; love, dreams, a constancy of desire and need. “Though, you are far, I wonder you, you’re on the mind.” It’s beautiful the way the struggle is summed up in a misspoken colloquialism that reinforces the fixed presence of the object in the thoughts of the singer.³³

In its full brilliance and odd charm, “I Wonder U” could speak for all of *Parade*. Like Joni Mitchell’s *Hejira* a decade earlier, Prince’s album exudes the air of its geography; *Hejira* is a travelogue, *Parade* is a blend of continental sophistication—the accompanying film was shot in Nice, France—and earthy funk. Prince’s soundtrack album to *Under the Cherry Moon* was more warmly received by European audiences than by those in his native America, where it was a platinum hit³⁴ but was still considered a “difficult” record. Much of its appeal got lost in translation back in 1986. In the time since, its estimation has grown, and *Parade* is considered a benchmark album in Prince’s catalog.

EPILOGUE: NO REGRETS, COYOTE

“I’ve been traveling so long, how’m I ever going to know my home,” Joni Mitchell asks in “Black Crow,” from her album *Hejira*. Another song on the same album, “Coyote,” deals with romance between two people who, despite the physical chemistry, are worlds apart: “We just come from such different sets of circumstances.” She is the road warrior-musician; he is a local rancher. She imagines him starting work just as she is getting home from an all-nighter in the studio. To Joni, the artist/musician is a different breed with a unique perspective. On *Hejira*, she expresses that perspective with eloquence and verve. A one-night stand may not be ideal, but there are no regrets in the end.

I’m porous with travel fever. But you know I’m so glad to be on my own.
—Joni Mitchell, from “Hejira”

The roving desire to create, to paint, to write, to play, to sing; in a manner of speaking, to recount the experience of moving clouds: *this* is the ethos of the artist. You live differently and you love differently. In a wry, self-mocking way Prince sings in “Guitar” (2007) about romance being interrupted by the urge to record music: “I got that call, so I jumped in my car/I love u baby, but not like I love my guitar.” He has also talked about the blessing and curse of always hearing songs in his head. “When you’re called, you’re called,” Prince told Charles Johnson, aka The Electrifying Mojo in 1986. “I walk around and go to the bathroom and try to brush my teeth and all of the sudden the toothbrush starts vibrating!” he says, suggesting that the creative muse can inspire even in the most mundane setting.³⁵

You dream differently too. In another song on *Hejira*, Joni says she had a dream of flying, but like the aviator of the song’s title, “Amelia,” her’s was

“just a false alarm.” In his own flying-in-a-dream song from 2010, Prince elaborates on a similar idea, albeit with a different result. Able to pilot the flight with his thoughts, he achieves oneness with everyone and everything and the result is universal music in perfect harmony: “Every living soul sang the most beautiful melody ever sung” (“Future Soul Song”).

We got high on travel, and we got drunk on alcohol. And on love the
strongest poison and medicine of them all.
—Joni Mitchell (from “A Strange Boy”)

Yellow sunrise over their bodies in bed, two people in love with noth-
ing but the road ahead.
—Prince (from “Rock and Roll Love Affair”)

Hejira, which means “exodus” or “migration,” is Arabic in origin and typically refers to the flight of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622, an event that marks the start of the Muslim era. It is related to the word for making a pilgrimage, *hajj*. Thus, *Hejira* has the connotation of not just travel but religious obligation. It is a fitting title for an album of road songs, particularly for Joni Mitchell, who approaches art and expression with something akin to religious devotion. Ultimately, that approach is what her most accomplished musical disciple, Prince Rogers Nelson, learned well and displayed in his own body of work. “Rock and Roll Love Affair,” released in 2012,³⁶ would easily fit on an album of road songs, a la *Hejira*, had Prince released one of his own. Like the mismatched lovers in “Coyote,” the pair in Prince’s song are subject to the pitfalls of romance on the road: “She believed in fairy tales and princes, he believed in the sounds coming from his stereo. He believed in rock and roll.” The road warrior-musician is like a pilgrim; or as Joni sings in “Coyote,” “a prisoner of the white lines on the freeway”; one who is perpetually on the move, an acute observer and charter of change; one who shares the experience with others by creating art that is both sonically rich and visually vibrant.

Notes

1. <https://www.facebook.com/jonimitchell/>.
2. “The Color Indigo: The Color of Intuition, Perception and the Higher Mind,” Empowered by Color, accessed January 3, 2023, <https://www.empower-yourself-with-color-psychology.com/color-indigo.html>.

3. Additionally, the covers of *Clouds*, *Wild Things Run Fast*, *Dog Eat Dog*, *Turbulent Indigo*, *Taming the Tiger*, *Both Sides Now*, *Travelogue*, *The Beginning of Survival* and *Dreamland* are all self-portraits.

4. Fr. Marc Boulos says that in the Bible, there is hope in the destruction of what human beings construct because we are ultimately only interested in the things that God constructs. <https://ephesusschool.org/hope-in-destruction/>.

5. "Prince's Debut TV Interview from 1985." MTV, April 21, 2016, <https://www.mtv.com/video-clips/ev9cwl/mtv-news-prince-s-debut-tv-interview-from-1985>.

6. Jon Bream, *Prince: Inside the Purple Reign* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 19.

7. Bream, *Prince*, 21.

8. Bream, *Prince*, 25.

9. Bream, *Prince*, 25.

10. Bream, *Prince*, 17.

11. Lindsay Zoladz, "Remarkable Records of Joni Mitchell's Changes," *New York Times*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/arts/music/joni-mitchell-archives-early-years.html>.

12. Steve Marsh, "The Press," *MPLS St. Paul Magazine*, December 2016, 86.

13. "[RETRO REVIEW] Around the World in a Daze: Rolling Stone Album Review of Prince's Around the World in a Day Album by Jon Pareles June 6, 1985 @furthermucker @gonzomike @zaheerali @questlove," Soulhead, July 23, 2014, <https://www.soulhead.com/2014/07/23/retro-review-around-world-daze-rolling-stone-album-review-princes-around-world-day-album-jon-pareles-june-6-1985/>.

14. Anthony DeCurtis, "Free at Last," *Rolling Stone*, November 28, 1996.

15. Mark Savage, "Prince's Sign o' the Times: An Oral History," BBC News, September 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-54203180>.

16. Neal Karlen, "Prince Talks: The Silence Is Broken," *Rolling Stone*, September 12, 1985, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/prince-talks-the-silence-is-broken-58812/>.

17. Karlen, "Prince Talks."

18. Karlen, "Prince Talks."

19. The pair would use the phrase "White Flags of Winter Chimneys" from *Hejira*'s title track for the title of their 2009 album.

20. Robert L. Doerschuk, "The Sound of Emancipation," *Musician* (April 1997), <https://sites.google.com/site/themusicinterviewarchive/prince/prince-1997-musician-magazine-interview>.

21. Doerschuk, "The Sound of Emancipation."

22. Doerschuk, "The Sound of Emancipation."

23. In 1997, Joni and her daughter were reunited.

24. "Chelsea Morning" is the second song on Joni's album *Clouds* (1969).

25. The reign of the two Princes was interrupted by Michael Bolton's cover of Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman."

26. David Wild, "A Conversation with Joni Mitchell," *Rolling Stone*, May 30, 1991, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/a-conversation-with-joni-mitchell-172726/>.

27. Miles of Aisles includes a song called "Love or Money." Prince would release his own song with the same title in 1986.

28. Listen at approximately the 3:00 mark.

29. *Joni Mitchell: Songs Chosen by Her Friends & Fellow Musicians*. Hear Music, 2005.
30. He also altered the lyric “when you know you’re a wizard at three” to “a *genius* at three” from “Twisted” in 2002, presumably out of similar religious objections.
31. Simon Williams, “I Wonder U,” Simon Williams Blog, April 16, 2016, https://simoncwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/04/16/i-wonder-u/?fbclid=IwARo8hpYmIjcT3YI7KQMVkSTl32Ybw3YIek-xeMYEijAK_cIMocx_3JTuxY4.
32. Williams, “I Wonder U.”
33. Williams, “I Wonder U.”
34. It reached #3 in the US behind Whitney Houston and Patti LaBelle; and “Kiss” was a #1 single on three *Billboard* charts.
35. McMorris55, “Electrifying Mojo Prince Interview,” YouTube, April 21, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJZCoxZ5COY>.
36. A different version appeared on his final album, *Hitnrun Phase Two* in 2015.