

Los Angeles and Southern California have an indigenous imagery which has spawned a music in many ways linked to the ecology of the land. This environment, and its lifestyle, have shaped the lives and work of the musicians and singer-songwriters who are the subjects of my book, *California Rock, California Sound* (from which this Joni Mitchell feature was excerpted).

Artists continually grow and evolve, often outgrowing their environment. Many of the musicians to whom Henry Diltz and I talked (Eagles; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; Linda Ronstadt, etc.) feel that having used this place, they are now looking towards New York, or to America in general. It is hard, though, to let go of L.A., this city of extremes and curiosities, glamour and myths. The plasticity of the signs, the billboards and the neon, vying for attention with the panoramic sunsets and twinkling hills. An amorphous, jangling mish-mash of elements, the rhythm of the concrete freeways—this is the synthesis of Los Angeles.

Joni was interviewed and photographed for the book in both Nevada and California. She was working night and day on a set of songs which jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus had written especially for her; she was very excited by this project and discussed it in detail. In our talks she also emphasized how important her painting had become, and how it was interrelated to her music.

A.F.

I am a painter first," Joni Mitchell has emphasized to me at the very beginning of our talks and it becomes clear that although she has always drawn, sketched and painted for as long as she can remember, her painting has taken on a new importance in her life these last few years—to the extent that her recent canvasses are intricately interwoven with the music she has been creating. During the period that Joni was writing and recording *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, she simultaneously worked on a large painting which depicts in pigment some of the same themes, metaphors and imagery of that album. "I can do songs on a square canvas," she said later, "and I can have the same symbolic diary in this medium as in the other."

Conversely, Joni's music, which is always in a state of flux, always moving forward, now incorporates many painterly characteristics, like a Picasso canvas where everything is pared down to the spaces in between objects, distilling the work into multi-faceted planes and the core of meaning. What is left out is for the others to put in.

"You see, the way I write songs now," Joni explains, "is around a standard melody that nobody knows, because that way you can get your words to have their organic inflection so that when you emphasize something you go up or you go down. Or if you want to put ten syllables in a line that in the next verse is only going to have three syllables drawn out through those bars, you have that liberty. As a result you can't write one lead sheet and put the four verses on it, every verse has to be written out individually—it's all variation on a theme."

Out in the desert, the sun casting its last golden rays on the red-rock mountains in the distance, Joni is feeling like a free spirit, laughing, happy, enjoying the tranquility of the landscape. The Joshua trees are flowering, ripe with juice for the first time in twenty years, and the cacti, too, are in bloom. Joni seems in harmony, both with the elements and with herself—flatlands, wide open spaces, being an inherent part of her and her music.

The dustless azure of the open sky is broken only by some frail cirrus stripes which echo the vastness of the desert floor. As she talks, Joni wanders barefoot among the chollas and the bright yellow poppies, the wind blowing through her hair and silk shawl. Her face is radiant; tan and sensual, at the same time showing a certain maturity which defies description because it is emotive but touches on the primitive; a Georgia O'Keefe, earth-oriented quality.

Joni sits on a rock, looking up at the sky meditatively. "Lightning storms; how are Californians going to relate to that?" she says. "They're not an institution in your life like they are for flatlanders, you know." She talks with fondness about the long distances and the prairies of her Canadian youth. That is one of the reasons why she can easily relate to the work of other artists whose *oeuvre* has grown out of similar flatland environments—artists such as O'Keefe and Boyd Elder.



JONI MITCHELL

Excerpted from the book
California Rock, California Sound
By Anthony Fawcett, Photos by Henry Diltz

"Back in my hometown
They would have cleared the floor
Just to watch the rain come down!
They're such sky oriented people—
Geared to changing weather . . ."

Paprika Plains.

Blue neon strips of fluorescent light echo a Chinese motif atop the hotel opposite our window, with mauve mountains and grey sky washing together in the distance. Back from the desert and the Red Rock Mountains we are now in the heart of Las Vegas, where Joni has been staying for a few days. Down in the lobby the jangling fruit machines are continually at fever pitch, the ring of the jackpots rising above the cacophony.

"I've been trying to win this coyote, over at the bowling toss," Joni informs us. "The fun is worth it, it's better than putting silver dollars into those one-armed bandits!" She explains the games intently, a winner's glint in her eyes. Two hundred and twenty points each game wins you a monkey, and thirty-six monkeys win you the coyote. Her room right now, she laughs, is a menagerie of monkeys. "But I'm not leaving here without that coyote," she adds confidently.

Joni's speaking voice is soft, rounded, with an unusual, wide, mid-plains accent. She walks the line between glamour and sophistication, and a down to earth, country quality. Charles Mingus called her a hillbilly. Joni "gets some smokes" and we sit down in the back of the restaurant to talk more. She is at this moment very excited about and involved with a new project:

"All of a sudden I'm finding myself now in a very interesting project with Charlie Mingus. He's given me eight of his songs to sing and set words to, which is odd because I've never set words to anyone else's music. He's given me a lot of arranging—choice of musicians—he's given me a lot of leeway. What I'm having to learn is the rudiments of be-bop and everything, and the odd part of it is, the timing is so perfect, it's just natural to me. The songs are difficult to write, but the one and a half that I've finished are a more natural vehicle for me to sing, in some ways, than many of my old songs. His music is forties, early fifties, that kind of idiom—ballads, very Billie Holidayesque except they have a lot more range than she could sing. Some of them are about two and a half octaves—it's a lot of notes. There's a possibility that I might do some things with double-basses and voice and saxophone. I want to try in some way to take the piano and vocalist thing off of it, so that it'll have a new sound to it. It's such good music—you almost gotta trick it into being modern without being gimmicky in a way, so more people don't just see it as a stereotype and say 'Order me a vodka collins, it's a girl in a cocktail lounge.'"

There are six new tunes which Mingus has written for Joni, and two old ones, "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" and another which she has to choose. He gives them to her in piano form—there are no titles: "I asked him what was on his mind when he wrote them. He's dying of cancer, and for one of them he said, 'The things I wish I'd done and the people that I'm going to miss.' It's a very delicate subject matter. He's in a wheelchair, so he can't actually play his part on it."

Mingus' first idea involved T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets." He started composing a piece for classical orchestra, bass and Spanish guitar, interspersed with readings. Where they broke in stanzas he wanted Joni to condense it and sing it. She tried but soon gave up. "It was easier," she told him, "for me to condense the Bible than T.S. Eliot because you don't want to tamper with the beauty of his expansiveness, you can't distill it down." So then Mingus composed the songs.

"Charlie's into cacophony, multiple melody and contrapuntal overlays," Joni explains, "which I mess around with too, and somehow or other he liked what I did. I got a message through a friend and I called him up. The first time I talked to him was so warm, there was no barrier at all. And when I got to know him and read his book I understood why. He's a romantic and very spiritual man—very eccentric with a big chip on his shoulder, which has kind of devoured him all his life. It's very bewildering, this combination, you know, but it's very beautiful."



"My goal is to get three songs written, by the end of this month (June)" Joni continues, "and get in the studio with Charlie. I want him to be there, if not for the complete project, to see some of it going into actuality. Four of the songs are ballads, very slow—and then there's some real be-bop blues, it's the freakiest thing. Six of them he wrote directly for me and he even attempted in his idiom to include some of my musical idiosyncrasies; I mean he would say, 'This is like something you do,' and I couldn't see it was like anything that I do!

"It's very demanding, in every way. And it's also peculiar to be setting words to someone else's vocal rhythm—everybody has their own rhythmic speech pattern—and the phrases are almost set up to be crooned, that's the kind of lyrics that were written for a lot of these old moon-June-croonisms, although there were some great old standards. But the problem is to take the knowledge of progressive pop writing and apply it to this old form."

The first song that Joni finished, "A Chair in the Sky," has a moody, sensuous sound, conjuring up images of the nighttime Manhattan skyline, with her voice full of emotion, capturing every subtle nuance within each bar.

*"The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time.
I'm trying to play the truth of what I am."*

Charles Mingus

The folk days of Laurel Canyon and the little house on the hill have blurred almost out of recognition, given the strides that Joni has taken since then with her musical development, each album advancing stalwartly forward for the last ten years. But that period was her breaking ground and she looks back on it with fondness: "That belonged to a time, in a way. I wrote a song called 'California'—it was written in Europe, and it was longing for that kind of creative climate where we did drop around with our songs to play, but that kind of thing happened prior to success. After success everybody became, whether they'll admit it or not, very much into their own particular creative process. For myself, as my work began to encompass other kinds of music outside of the L.A. circle, the people that I enjoyed singing with really didn't—or indicated to me that they didn't—like the harmonies that I added any longer. Their concept would be tight banks, and I would come in and sing; I would weave my melodies. I wouldn't come in on the downbeat. I'd already moved into an area which is more related to jazz, that is to say it's more expressive within the bar. There's more freedom within the bar where you come in and enter.

"I'm not a jazz musician but I need that creative freedom. That's why now I'm being sucked into jazz projects and working more and more with jazz musicians. I find I'm more understood there, and the heavier the player that I work with, the more easy it is to communicate. Because I'm illiterate; I don't have the number system nor do I have the letter chord system, I don't understand it. I'm a painter, I like to speak in metaphor: 'play me some semi-trucks going by,' you know, 'here we have the waves coming in, the keyboards should break like a wave, here's the pressure point'—by emotion and by remembrances.

"Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius—I would give them metaphorical instruction and they would thrill me, whereas musicians that are still in numerical/alphabetical reference-points would not feel the way it swelled or they would play something too repetitive through a place where the music was not repetitive—they couldn't feel the expression of it. Some of them even knew that and told me, 'Joni, get a jazz musician.' I'm working more in an improvisational way. Even though popularly I'm accused more and more of having less melody, in fact the opposite is true—there's more melody and so they can't comprehend it anymore. So I'm an oddball, I'm not part of any group anymore but I'm attached in certain ways to all of them, all of the ones that I've come through. I'm not a jazz musician and I'm not a classical musician, but I touch them all."

The music, John Coltrane once said, is "the whole question of life itself," and as a number of jazzmen have also emphasized, what you live and how you live becomes an instant, integral part of what you play each night, so that jazz is a continual autobiography, or rather a continuum of intersecting autobiographies; one's own and those of the musicians with whom one plays. And the great players are simple. "They're more intuitive," Joni agrees, "increasingly intuitive the greater they are. They have that knowledge if they need it, but they don't talk that way. They don't talk music too much—it almost breaks their heart to talk about it, it makes them angry and makes them play bad the next set, because it's very hard to explain, it's never accurate."

Joni's own involvement into working with and within the jazz framework came about gradually. "It started, I would say, back on *Ladies of the Canyon*," she explains. "There was one song, 'The Arrangement,' which was a predecessor (it was like a predecessor for 'Blue,' which came on the *Blue* album) which had a bit of that voicing—post-Stravinsky modern open-voicing—and in the chordal patterns, too. It's been very organic. It definitely wasn't rock 'n' roll voicing or movement."

*While you still have the time
You could get away and find
A better life, you know the grind
Is so ungrateful
Racing cars, whiskey bars
No one cares who you really are*

The Arrangement

Joni had been looking for a band because she was way behind everybody else in playing with musicians and going out on the road; she couldn't seem to make it happen. "The L.A. Express was a band intact and John Guerin and Larry Carlton were the musicians within that band who impressed me the most. Carlton because he was playing jazz with a country feeling—jazz and country being the most polar opposites. It was a criticism of Carlton that he was doing all these arced bends, which are very like pedal steel, and it turns out he's a weekend fly fisherman! So his long casting splash, I would say, is related to that. Everything's related, everything you do comes out.

"It was good experience to play with a band that was intact rather than to fit it all together. It was good for the time. Now, some of the criticism of that band, which people said to me at the time, I would have to agree with. Not all of it, because it was a prejudice based on 'all jazz is the Johnny Carson Show.' It was a prejudice based on a certain kind of ignorance.

"In the meantime, since I have been playing with more masterful players, that is to say true artists who don't think in terms of commercial consideration, who just play gut-level and that's it, it's an entirely different experience. And since I began to play with them, I mean as a singer, I feel I'm a much better singer. If I was a better singer last year than I was the year before, I'm five or six times better a singer this year for the work that I'm doing on Charlie's music. You know, I can go almost anywhere that my range will take me; my pitch has improved, my confidence has improved—I really feel free now as a singer. But I still don't have my facility on any instrument. They're, to me, just tools for setting up a reference for my voice to float on. I'll probably never master those instruments, although there is a growth. The guitar, especially, is growing. The piano—all of a sudden I went through a breakthrough period last year where I sat down and off the top of my head, I couldn't play anything wrong. What I mean by that is that if I hit what would be called a wrong note, a dissonance, I would repeat it and it would sound fantastic—like where a dissonance was simply another statement and was not a wrong note. You know, lay on it; you hit a dissonance—well lay on it!

"So the improvisational, the spontaneous aspect of this creative process—still as a poet—is to set words to the music, which is a hammer and chisel process. Sometimes it flows, but a lot of times it's blocked by concept. And if you're writing free consciousness—which I do once in a while just to remind myself that I can, you know, because I'm fitting little pieces of this puzzle together—the end result must flow as if it was spoken for the first time."


"Paprika Plains," an unwinding slice of autobiography and dream sequences which takes up a whole side of the double album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, is an unusually complicated and ambitious example of this building process: "Oh! A lot of shuffling went on," Joni confirms. "There were Indian grass chants in the middle of it, there were a hundred and one different ways that I approached that. More so than anything else on the album. The instrumental passage in the middle just poured out."

It is early afternoon in Los Angeles; the house is quiet, apparently deserted. A stone fish pond graces the central courtyard, white flowering wrought-iron gates delicately guard the arched front door. Above the stone arch is a circular sculptured eagle, and miniature potted palms bask on either side of the entrance. The house sits on a hill, flowers around everywhere; Icelandic poppies, potted geraniums in full bloom. It is Joni's spirit defined in texture, color, and shapes.

After a while Joni appears. She had been working all night on one of the Mingus songs and had finally gone to bed at ten in the morning. But she looks relaxed in a simple white blouse and white pants, her blond hair slightly curled. We sit in the kitchen, the creative heart of the house. She had been working on one song; the first and last parts were happening but she couldn't get them to cross over, couldn't get the middle to connect. It is frustrating to her, being blocked on a part of a song like that, because she never knows how long it will take to work itself out. "I like a song to be either a soliloquy or a movie, a whole drama where characters butt up against each other and people change their minds," Joni explains as we sit down at the butcher-block table. She picks up little Harlow, her Persian cat, from a nearby chair and places the cat gently on her lap.

The kitchen is small but light, with windows looking out onto pots of flowers; yellow and blue ceiling beams echo the colors in the pattern of the floor tiles. A second song for the Mingus project has been completed and Joni is evidently pleased with it; it is a song which resulted from the recent stay in Las Vegas and is called, tentatively, "Fools Paradise." She sings it slowly in a soft, jazzy voice:

*I'm down to a roll of dimes
I'm stalking the slot that's hot
I keep hearing bells around me
Jingling the lucky jackpot . . .*

"Charlie likes it," she says. "Turns out he used to be a slot machine addict." Joni muses: "Any place you go can cough up a song if you're hot on the trail." 

Anthony Fawcett was born in London, was an art critic there for three years before joining Apple as John Lennon's personal assistant; after that he worked as Stephen Stills' European advisor and in 1976 Grove Press published his book, John Lennon: One Day at a Time. He now lives in Los Angeles, New York and London but not at the same time. Henry Diltz, born in Kansas City, Missouri, was a founding member of the Modern Folk Quartet 15 years ago; he started taking pictures of his L.A. music friends in the late 60s and was official photographer for Woodstock and the Monterey and Miami music festivals. His photographs have appeared on 80 album covers plus the covers of Life, Rolling Stone, Cash Box and the Los Angeles Times. He's currently recording an album with the recently reunited MFQ.