

INSIDE STORY

Court and Spark

Folk Troubadour Ani DiFranco Chats With the Iconic Joni Mitchell
About Her Legacy, Her Life—and the Current State of Feminism.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK HANAUER

Interview - 1. A meeting of people face to face to confer about something 2. A meeting between a reporter and a person whose activities, views, etc. are to be the subject of a published article. 3. A journalistic article giving such information

WHEN I WAS ASKED TO WRITE AN "APPRECIATION PIECE" ABOUT Joni Mitchell and chat with her to flesh it out, I thought, "Sure! Why not? I appreciate Joni Mitchell. That sounds cool."

I pictured our interview to be the sort where two people's faces are meeting and conferring about stuff (thank you Webster's Unabridged) but soon realized that another, more conventional model was to govern our conversation. Because she has never heard my music and underwent the usual struggle just trying to pronounce my name, I was thrust, by default, into the role not of fellow songwriter, but of journalistic interviewer.

Considering that I generally dread doing interviews myself, it's a strange and dubious sensation to be a stop on some other poor artist's press junket. She too, has known the horror of being misquoted, condescended to, taken out of context, framed the wrong way and hung crookedly on a wall not of her choosing by an ill-suited, or simply unprepared, media, for many more years than I have. Joni even described her relationship with the media at the time of her last album as a "big fight." "They treated me like a hostile witness," she told me, "and I kept saying, 'I didn't kill anybody!'" Luckily, the media have been more supportive with her new record, and she's been doing a little less fighting.

"Why do you do it?" I asked her. "Why do you even bother trying to talk to people?" In my head I heard my own answers to those questions: If you have a political or artistic purpose, a vision, then part of the down-and-dirty work of realizing it is to attempt communication not just with your own audience, or the people who choose you, but with everyone. I fear the laziness or false securi-

Ani DiFranco is a songwriter, musician and CEO of Righteous Babes Records. Her next album, "Up Up Up Up Up Up," will be released in January of next year.

ty of just preaching to the converted and periodically accept the position of trying to explain myself to the society at large. It's usually such a futile and exhausting proposition, though, that I wonder what any artist is thinking when they do it.

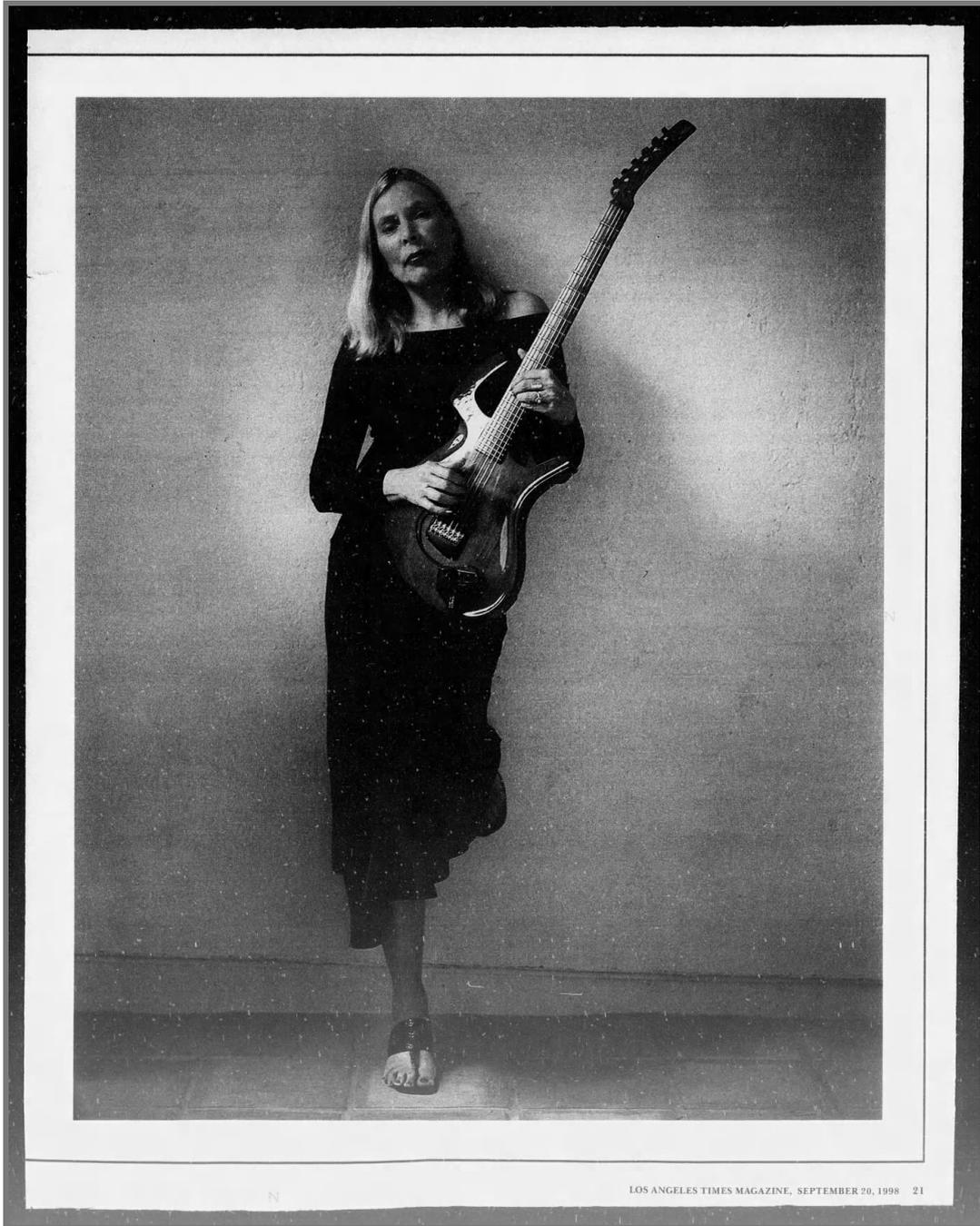
"Well, you have to let people know you have a new product out there," Joni told me. "Oh," I said, "right." This is a much more practical and understandable industry model for "doing" press. Plus, she reminded me, when you're working with a record company, you have to get behind your record and help promote it, in hopes that the company will reciprocate by using everything in its power to do the same. Good idea, I suppose, given the music industry's awkward partnership of businesspeople and artists, but it's not really an area I feel capable of, or qualified to, write within.

What follows is not an interview with Joni Mitchell or an article about her new album, or even an appreciation piece. The album is called "Taming the Tiger," and if you're interested in songwriters, or if you *appreciate* Joni's great importance to American popular music, you'll get it to hear what she's up to these days. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you this. I'm sure you don't need me to blather on about the state of contemporary feminism either, but that's unfortunately what I feel compelled to write about.

Feminism: 1. (a) The theory that women should have political, economic and social rights equal to those of men.

WHAT INTRIGUES ME MOST ABOUT JONI MITCHELL IS THAT SHE is such a notable feminist in terms of her own life, yet she refuses to publicly support feminism and would dispute my, or anyone else's, use of the word in reference to her. She has, in fact, nothing but disparaging words for "the feminists," describing "them" as a militant political faction that only "made things worse." OK. Let's rewind a little.

Joni has insisted on retaining the publishing rights to all of her songs since the beginning of her recording career. This may not sound special, but it is an astounding *Continued on Page 32*



Joni Mitchell

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accomplishment, especially for the time, and has meant a huge difference in the income she enjoys in her career maturity. Now, when Janet Jackson samples "Big Yellow Taxi," the money goes to Joni, thank goodness. If only Bo Diddley had been as savvy about his fair share.

Another thing Joni has retained is complete control over the artistry of her albums. She has used her own paintings or designs for each cover (with the exception of the "Blue" album) and has produced most of the music herself. As someone who also wears many hats, I was curious: "Is it difficult for you to be music maker and producer simultaneously?"

"It takes two different heads," she said knowingly. "To play, you want to be emotional and sensual; you don't want to be intellectualizing. But to go in and adjudicate, you have to swing up and use intellect and clarity . . . then swing back into sensual mode. Because I'm a painter, I'm used to standing back and saying yes and no. I approach it like I do painting. Painters don't need producers."

Can I get an amen?
Of course, try convincing a record company that the artist wants to be in charge. The chick singer no less. It takes a self-confident, independent and strong-willed person to do that.

Joni has insisted her whole life that nobody stand between her and her unique musical vision, and in retrospect, she says she likes her albums. Like anyone else, she feels she has made some mistakes along the way, but insists "they were my mistakes," and therefore is not bitter about the things she would do differently now. Conversely, when she listens back to something she made and thinks, "Oh, I'll never do that again," therein lies the inspiration to make the next album.

Hallelujah.

It is well known that Joni is a woman who does not tolerate being told what to do. She resents being called the best *female* anything, recognizing that a sexist double

standard exists in such a label. She even indulges in a blatantly feminist analysis of her disrespectful treatment by the media. "It's partially because I'm a woman," she told me, "and an uppity woman." She said in order to be taken seriously, "I knew I always had to be twice as good."

Yet when I suggest to her that perhaps feminism is not just political slogans and short haircuts, that it can be something different for each person, she waxes poetic about the nobility of women staying in the home. She even cites the breakdown of the family and says children are not "playing in the backyards anymore" because their "mothers are not at home," implicating feminism, and no other social or economic circumstances, as the cause of the problem.

This seems ironic coming from a woman who, at a young age, made the difficult decision of adoption for her child, when confronted with the choice between motherhood and career. Speaking of a former boyfriend, she recently said, "He wanted a stay-at-homewife to raise his children. And I said that I could—a rash promise I made in my youth—and then realized I couldn't."

Now let me just stop here and say that I absolutely agree with her about the nobility of the role of homemaker, mother and nurturer. Still, I support her, or any other woman's, right to choose a life outside of these spheres. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that such a choice has not historically come easy. It's only through the hard work of many a dedicated feminist that women have these choices at all.

As a woman, an artist and a person who governs her own destiny, I came of age in a much different world than where Joni grew up, the Alberta, Canada, of the '40s and '50s. I have enjoyed a life filled with more respect and opportunity than my mother's, and I fear the trend toward marginalizing the historical work of feminism.

Look at women's lives before the suffragettes got us the right to vote in 1920, and

you will see that feminists made things better, not worse. Look at women's lives before the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, and you will not see the female politicians, athletes, college students, professionals, musicians, etc., that you do now. This is the living legacy of feminism. It is democracy at work and it is nothing short of inspirational, not unlike Joni Mitchell's life, which has inspired countless young women to artistic honesty and personal and professional strength.

"I prefer the company of men," Joni told me in response to my suggestion of feminism, and went on to describe the pleasure of being the only female presence among men. I see no problem with her preferences and no inherent contradiction between the two ideas. One of the great lies of conservatism is that feminism and femininity are somehow in opposition to each other. Feminism is simply the belief that a woman has the right to become herself, just as a man has the right to become himself. All decent people, male and female, are feminists. The only people who are not feminists are those who believe that women are inherently inferior or undeserving of the respect and opportunity afforded men. Either you are a feminist or you are a sexist/misogynist. There is no box marked "other."

So what's the big deal, you ask? Why can't women just lead their lives to the fullest, stick up for their own rights as people, without having to identify themselves as feminists? Why don't I just drop it? It's only a word, right?

Right. And words are some of the most powerful and important things I know. I have spent my life as a songwriter, exercising language. Language is the tool of love and the weapon of hatred. It's the bright red warning flag of danger—and the stone foundation of diplomacy and peace. The manipulation, decoration and revelation of language are what songwriting is all about. So how can we, with good conscience,

ignore the definition of the word feminism and let it be replaced by a Rush Limbaugh-style connotation? There is, quite simply, no other word in the English language that recognizes the idea that women are just as good, despite any behavior or prejudices to the contrary. How can we, as wordsmiths (or citizens), perpetuate the taboo of the word feminism, and therefore the idea? Any liberated person who does not acknowledge the actual definition of the word "feminist" and refuses to identify as such is effectively helping the right wing to wipe the very idea from our language.

Joni has been personally disturbed by her own second-class citizenship for many years, as well she should be. It is interesting to study her public treatment, especially in the context of, say, her buddy Bob Dylan. For 30 years, Bob has been surrounded by a wealth of media hyperbole ("voice of a generation," etc.) that was never lavished on Joni. Only now is she beginning to receive some of the public strokes befitting her contribution to popular music. After all this time, though, some of the praising "rings hollow," she confided.

Why has Bob been so thoroughly canonized and Joni so condescended to over the years? Maybe, in part, because when Joni was uppity, she was considered a bitch, and the media retaliated. From day one, however, Bob could be as uppity as he wanted, and the great mammoth rock press lauded his behavior as rebellious, clever, renegade and punkishly cool. Maybe it's also because Bob's songs are inherently more masculine (go figure) and have therefore been viewed as more universal, while Joni's writing, which has a more feminine perspective, is put in a box labeled "girl stuff."

Over the years, Joni has been compared to every other chick singer in the book (a fact that infuriates her), although she insists that her artistic peers are Bob and very few others. She believes that she has never truly been given the respect that she deserves by the writers of American rock 'n' roll history, and for the record, I agree entirely.

Joni Mitchell's songs were some of the first that I was ever really inspired by. They are well-crafted, profound and adventurous. She is not one of the great *female songwriters* of this century, she is one of the great *songwriters* of this century. Period.

She was amicable and generous with her time when we spoke, and I would like to say finally to her: Sorry Joni. One more goddamn interviewer with a goddamn agenda. Ah ... the irony of it all. ■