

THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

JONI MITCHELL

UPDATED
DELUXE
EDITION

EVERY ALBUM
REVIEWED

CLASSIC
ENCOUNTERS,
REDISCOVERED

A Case Of You
JONI MITCHELL
THE FULL STORY

ARCHIVES
VOL 1:
THE VERDICT

HER **30**
GREATEST
SONGS

THE 2020
COMEBACK

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**

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“You’re going to get me into my apocalyptic vision...”

From star-packed LA galleries to intimate London hotel rooms, Joni Mitchell is back on the scene and giving interviews again. **ALAN JACKSON** and **ADAM SWEETING** bear witness to a rare intellectual intensity as she talks about Reagan and the environment, MTV and Weimar cabaret, marriage and feminism. And, of course, jazz. Also starring Jack Nicholson: “Life’s been fucking great...”





SCENE ONE: *Joni Mitchell, New Paintings And Songs', an evening benefit for the Museum Of Contemporary Art at the James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles.*

Subtitled: "All the people at this party/They've got a lot of style/They've got stamps of many countries/They've got passport smiles/Some are friendly/Some are cutting/Some are watching it from the wings/Giving to get something..." – "People's Parties" (Joni Mitchell)

A low building in a parade of liquor stores, restaurants and other sub-glamorous service industry ephemera. Outside, faces watch figures emerging from cabs and limousines. Inside, faces are watching faces... Mitchell's husband Larry Klein, handsome eyes shining, is talking with a beaming Pat Metheny, who suddenly throws his head back and laughs delightedly. A posse of the curious, gathered close by in the as-yet-uncrowded room, pauses mid-conversation, anxious to share in the joke. A tall young man with a video camera balanced on his shoulder moves in towards the room's dominant canvas, a vast and semi-figurative work titled *Dog Eat Dog*, like Mitchell's new LP. He is recording the event for Japanese TV...

Shelley Duvall is looking earnestly at a work called *The Marriage Of Church And State*, which features a soiled crucifix hammered onto an American flag. Within the Stars And Stripes there stands a small army of toy-shop tin generals tacked on by hand. A woman squeezes past, wine glass aloft. "My God, that's Barbi Benton. She looks no older," says a whisper in her wake... A flurry of excitement in the entrance hall and Mitchell herself is here. The presence is palpable, long before her trademark black beret can be glimpsed amid the clamour, because waves of people radiate from her wherever she moves.

Closest to her are the friends with whom she exchanges kisses and conversation mindful of the audience. Next there are the friends of those friends listening in. And by them, a broader band of spectators watch the listeners listening. Further back linger the shy, the single, the resolutely un-starstruck. Fame, it seems, acts like a pebble dropped into a pond.

"Life's been pretty good to you, hasn't it?" a beautiful, dark-haired girl with wide-open eyes is asking Jack Nicholson as he lounges in a doorway, granting audiences to a procession of young callers. "Yeah," replies Jack, giving that slow, wicked smile and tilting his shades forward a little. "Life's been fucking great..."

Wayne Shorter's saxophone trails behind the general conversation and rises to the ceiling like cigarette smoke in the smaller of the gallery's two main rooms. It is *Dog Eat Dog*

being played on continuous loop through loudspeakers. Mitchell is now circulating among her guests. Having been introduced to Sheena Easton, she is craning forward in conversation. "You're from a small town too, aren't you?" those passing can hear her ask.

Outside in the warm, dark-blue night, departing guests are being presented with copies of the new album. One group pauses on the sidewalk discussing the paintings inside. "I expected them to be more figurative somehow, like her record covers," says one man. Asked about this, her first ever collected exhibition of art work, Mitchell will say later: "At their most trivial you could think of them [*her paintings*] as party decorations for the release of the new album. At their most trivial, they are at least that good."

SCENE TWO: *Afternoon tea at the offices of Peter Asher Management, North Doheny Drive, Los Angeles. Joni Mitchell turns aside from the birthday celebrations of her manager's secretary, wipes crumbs from her fingers, and dissects her art, her music and her increasingly troubled view of America and the wider world.*

"The western world has all the symptoms of downfall"

JONI MITCHELL

Subtitled: "Fiction of obedience/Fiction of rebellion/Fiction of the goody-goody and the hellion/Fiction of destroyers/Fiction of preservers/Fiction of peacemakers and shit disturbers..." "Fiction", from the album Dog Eat Dog, Joni Mitchell, 1985

The flaxen-haired figure sitting behind a large glass desk in a small side office looks tired. Joni Mitchell at 41 is an intriguing mixture of sage and schoolgirl. Clothes are elegant, expensively understated, heavy silk sleeves carelessly rolled up, emerald suede shoes slipped on and off unconsciously while considering a response. The look is anything but Hollywood, just minutes down the boulevard, and the effect as unselfconscious as can be. But her beauty and candour are as disarming as her music.

This is the woman, born in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who began singing while at art school in Calgary; who married and divorced the folk singer Chuck Mitchell in the mid '60s, whose songs "The Circle Game" and "Both Sides, Now" were recorded by other artists (Tom Rush and Judy Collins respectively) before she released her first solo album; whose song "Woodstock", from her third album, *Ladies Of The Canyon*, became the anthem for a generation; who released the ultimate bedsitter-land soundtrack with 1971's *Blue*, expanded its folk-pop concerns in the following year's *For The Roses*, then sold self-pity down the Swanee in the search for jazz.

This is the artist whose 1974 release *Court And Spark* stands today as a milestone of romantic introspection, leading into a double *Miles Of Aisles*, reworking her existing songbook in a jazz-aware framework that would itself lead to 1976's historic *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. An impressionistic collection of jazz-pop vignettes, it contrasted the sterile life of her suburban sisters with the

threatening but fertile jungle world lying beyond the well-manicured lawns and airy interiors of Beverly Hills and Bel Air...

This in turn would be developed into the pared-down, minimal jazz accompaniments of *Hejira*, an album which paired Mitchell's guitar with the brooding electric bass work of Weather Report player Jaco Pastorius on songs about flight, fame, fear and escape. These achievements alone would assure Joni Mitchell of her place in some cobwebbed hall of all-time fame. But add a career which continued to flourish (artistically if not commercially) through a still more fully blooded romance with jazz on studio double-album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and the collaboration with the then-dying composer and bassist Charles Mingus on 1979's *Mingus*, and it becomes more difficult to fathom Joni Mitchell's place in the scheme of things.

Has she released an electro album using synthesised voices ➤



At the James Corcoran Gallery, West Hollywood, CA, October 1985

Lady in blue:
backstage at the
Farm Aid concert,
September 22, 1985



to disguise the vocal shortcomings of being middle-aged? Has she published a racy autobiography detailing her love life with California's mellowest but most macho men? Has she even turned a well-timed back on liberalism and come out in support of nuking, nationalism and New Cold War Diplomacy? None of these things? What? She's even turned in a more-than-halfway-decent new album that brings her razor-edged lyricism into the '80s world of Fairlights and pre-Holocaust paranoia? This is not what becomes a legend most, these days at least. Joni Mitchell has some answering to do...

The legend is laughing. "You know, I'm just one of those Spock babies. We do everything a little late..." In this case the joke could be on any one of the many Joni Mitchell fans who rely on their heroine to articulate those unique yet universal stirrings of the heart – the circumstantial minutiae of the love affair. Her own emotional turmoil has fuelled both her art and the animosity of critics.

She has been called the High Priestess Of Confessional Songwriting in some columns. *Rolling Stone*, in one article featuring a family tree of her liaisons, called her "Old Lady Of The Year".

Every silver lining has its cloud. "It took a long time for me to remarry," says Mitchell, referring to 1983's ceremony with bassist Klein, 28. "It took me a long time to find the stability of a partner again. But what am I going to do now? Torture myself? Sit there and reminisce about the past? It would be bad for me, bad for my marriage. So with that taken care of, you begin to look around you. It's a natural sociological phenomenon, you know?" She is explaining the logic behind the new-found politicism of her music. *Dog Eat Dog* has the odd strand of romanticism in its lyrical fabric, but also contains attacks on consumerism, right-wing evangelism, media hype, international aid policy and good old-fashioned greed. It's a list of targets that might be considered hip if addressed less articulately by someone half her age.

AS IT is, Joni Mitchell has made one of the most political albums to come out of America this year. The title track refers to a nation of "snakebite evangelists and marketeers... a culture in decline". "Land of snap decisions/Land of short attention spans/Nothing is savoured long enough/To really understand..."

"Although I see it in America because I'm here, it's more of a global point of view," she says, gesturing with a cigarette. "We are so interrelated with the news being the way it is... world incidents broadcast into your living room... the western world has all the symptoms of downfall if you study it and compare it with all the other civilisations which have gone under. There are the youth cult obsessions, a greater openness regarding homosexuality, the decadent theatre reflecting the repressed savageness of a culture. Look at German

theatre before Hitler. It's very similar to MTV with all its black studs, that one pocket that rock went through a couple of years ago that was dominantly savage, apocalyptic... the enactment of surviving a holocaust... savage scavengers. Even though there's a certain theatricalness, there's also a truth to it." This awareness, coupled with the stability of marriage, led her away from what others would call her confessional muse.

"I never thought of myself so much as a confessional songwriter," she says, "but in order that my work should have vitality I felt I should write in my own blood. The closer it was to my direct experience, the less it was going to be hearsay, the more poignancy it should have. My job as I see it is to be a witness. I am a witness to my times. The world had become so mysterious from the vantage point of the '70s. The disillusionment, the killing of the president, the stain of the Vietnamese war. It was a natural thing for people to look into themselves. "That period was one of soul searching. The

dream, everything that America stood for, was broken, and the people break a little with the dream. Where do you have left to go but in? It was, she concedes, a very particular moment in time, experienced by those coming of age in the '60s. We really broke from our elders. There was a clear cut. A line was drawn. This generation kind of resembles my parents' generation, like a throwback, which often happens. Their aim is to get a job and hold it because they came up in a depression although not one as severe as that of the '30s. But they came up under the same pressures. We came up in the greatest pocket of affluence post-Second World War, though. The country was rich, the economy was in good shape, and we were raised on certain philosophies. Like, spare the rod. Yes, do spoil the child. So we never really reached adulthood in a certain way. We were a kind of freaky generation; very self-centred as a rule, in a good way and a bad way..."

Liberated from the need to introspect, Mitchell found inspiration in full measure by looking around at the confused kingdom her baby boomer peers had inherited. To her, one of the most disturbing phenomena was the eerie interplay between religion and politics which began as a reaction to the soft-pedal Carter years and which has found full expression during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Her song "Tax Free", from the new album, analyses the implications, employing actor Rod Steiger's melodramatic oracular talents to simulate one of the hawkish TV preachers.

"Lord, there's danger in this land/You get witch-hunts and wars/When church and state hold hands", she sings, as Steiger counters, "I think we should turn the United States Marines loose on that little island south of Florida and stop that problem... I am preachin' love... I am..."

"Tax Free" starts from the premise that the new right-wing religious are playing the same stadiums

"Terrible doings are being done in the name of commerce": at Farm Aid, September '85

as the rock bands they so despise, and can outdraw even Springsteen. It then shows how the "immaculately tax free" preachers combine with the president to inculcate the idea that any opposition to church or state is Communist-induced, and that perhaps the right of free speech should be taken away from its instigators.

"So now it starts to get really scary," says Mitchell, leaning forward and jabbing the air with her cigarette. "You think, we're only a hairline and a few laws from incredible censorship. They're already trying to censor rock'n'roll. One of the reasons this album is so outspoken in the context of my work is that I think it's a case of use it or lose it. If I don't start speaking out, taking a chance and addressing things that are important to me in this way, we might not have this outlet very long."

HAVING taken part in the recent Farm Aid benefit and joined in the recording of "Tears Are Not Enough", the Canadian equivalent to "Do They Know It's Christmas", did she detect a reactive movement back to more Woodstock-style values among the young? "Woodstock was Woodstock... it had its own identity. There'll never be another Woodstock," she says. "Every time there's been one of those large





gatherings of people, any one of them, they've been entirely different. Collectively, each of those crowds had its own personality. To me, Woodstock was a very high event. It was the height of the hippie movement. Afterwards it began to recede. Live Aid didn't have the same things up against it as Woodstock did. It was much more commercialised. They were flashing up the band's latest album after every song. I don't think people were weeping in the wings. I don't think there was the same poignancy surrounding the event."

Dog Eat Dog contains the song "Ethiopia", her own comment on the political inertia and short-sightedness that contributes to the famine and threatens its repetition elsewhere. It will also provide royalties for charitable causes, but is far removed lyrically from the self-involved smugness of, for example, "We Are The World". It fuses the ecological concerns of past songs like "Big Yellow Taxi" and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* with the bleak, minimal sound of *Hejira* and provides a despairing, angry whole. Mitchell admits that, yes, she worried that she might be accused of picking up on a chic subject and that, yes, there was opposition in some quarters to its inclusion on the album.

"It's too good a song to even think about what people might think of it on the downside. I'm used

"My work should have vitality, so I felt I should write in my own blood"

JONI MITCHELL

to people thinking of my work on the downside. I've had plenty of it". Mitchell's husky voice has a hard edge to it now. "The song was too good to kill. I thought, it's not a pretty subject. It will be too sad for some people. They won't like it, won't want to look at it. But what would you do if you'd written that song? Abort it? Wouldn't you put it on record?"

"After I'd done the Canadian Band Aid, I felt that all the songs that had been written, while they were good for generating the spirit to gather money and to focus people on a cause – in that they were perfect – they were more about us, we the performers and we the contributors of money, than

they were about the people of Africa themselves. So once I had that idea I did the portrait more of the Ethiopians themselves in the context of our own world hunger.

"To me it's not like they're over there and they have a drought, they mismanaged their soil, it's now sick and their government doesn't really care about them. That could happen anywhere in the world at any time, closer to home. We can cause the same problems with our pesticides going into the ground... You're going to get me into my apocalyptic vision now... Terrible doings are being done in the name of commerce. The rainforests are coming down around the globe. We're going to have deserts springing up all over the place. It's not just going to be in Ethiopia."

The song's impression is made all the more powerful by the simplicity of its musical form in contrast to the computer-age pop she has adapted elsewhere. The sound is expensive – it is Mitchell's most costly album to date – and uniquely for her post-folkie work, production credits are given to outside agents. Nile Rodgers and Thomas Dolby both volunteered, but she was wary of turning her music over to someone so completely.

"I found it difficult, because I've always been kind of a benign dictator on my dates," she says ►



Mitchell with Neil Young and Elliot Roberts entering the studio to record the supergroup Northern Lights' charity single at Manta Sound, Toronto, February 10, 1985; (inset) the single sleeve for "Tears Are Not Enough"

of the production-by-committee (Mitchell and Klein, engineer Mike Shipley and, on some of the tracks, Dolby as well) that resulted. "There's never been a producer. There never was a credit given, and I leaned heavily on artistic contributions from my players. A producer is kind of the guy who has the last word. Often he's a formula man. He's trying to make something commercial, and that can be a watering down. I don't think of producers generally speaking – and there are exceptions – as people who play long shots."

Mitchell says that she and her husband had been attracted by the best of recent music using Fairlights and drum machines, and wanted to assimilate that sound into her own work. But Shipley was invited onto the sessions to handle the more complex functions of the equipment that they had not yet learned to perform, and then the need for a fourth person – Dolby – to speed up programming was recognised. There have been rumours that it was not an altogether harmonious relationship.

"I was reluctant when Thomas was suggested because he had asked to produce the record," she admits. "Would he consider coming in as a programmer and a player...? So we met with him and said, 'Now we know you're used to being a frontliner and this is kind of a foot-soldier position...' and he said, 'I would love to do it. I am sick of people always looking to me for the answer.' And when he said that I thought of the play *A Chorus Line*. I thought, 'I know his intentions are



the best and that at this moment he believes he can do that, but he's still a lead player and can he go back into the chorus line? He's going to have to subordinate his ideas.'

"So on that level we did have some problems because he'd get excited with some idea and I couldn't get him off the keyboards. Then I'd feel bad. I'd think, 'Oh God, I understand. He's on a creative roll. But he can't, because if he does that he'll decorate me right off my own project. He may be able to do it faster. He may even be able to do it better, but the fact is it won't really be my music.'"

It would be hard not to see the irony in the fact that Mitchell has just released her most rock-aware album in more than a decade, at a time when the American mega-sales are going to artists testing their toes in jazz.

Complete immersion in the form led to her being pilloried by many critics on her home continent,

and being largely ignored by record buyers.

Is she bitter?

"I felt bitter at the time. I had bitter moments; I had to fight it. But I did not become an embittered person, so I won some of the battles. I took a lot of hard knocks. Mean knocks, not smart knocks. People weren't thinking... they were just afraid of it. It was just different at the time... and now this is a good time for it. I'm glad it came about this way because it gives me optimism. I like to make that kind of music and I like the idea of it having a broad public communication. There is a tendency on some projects for something to be considered jazz because jazz is new chic. But it's not good jazz. It's beginner's. But the players that Sting is working with, for instance – those are real virtuosi."

"I like the idea that good musicians can have a broad public communication. And you've got to start somewhere. Even if I'm thinking, God, you think this is hip but you haven't even digested the history of jazz enough to know that, like, this giant existed and he did that... It may be very beginnerish, but it's still where to begin to educate the public. Maybe if they can like that, then they can like something else too and gradually acquire a taste for this magnificent pocket of music which has always been designated as something for kind of '50s cellars in Europe."

As for herself there are no plans to explore the area further now that the rest of the industry is catching up. "All people have to do is go back and play the old records," she says. "I already did that."

Old wounds are still discernible though. *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, widely considered to be her landmark album of the '70s, was voted "Worst Album of The Year" by the staff of *Rolling Stone* on its release in 1976. She got a telegram from Paul and Linda McCartney that year saying, 'We really liked it.' It was the only good review that it got, and then it was almost a sympathy telegram.

"It was destroyed on so many levels and that really hurt. There's no way just on a level of craftsmanship that you could say it was the worst record made that year. If they'd just said they hated it, you could take it, because it would be a personal opinion. But to say it's the worst. Stay as you are and bore us, or change and betray us. That's your choice." Mitchell smiles and shrugs, pausing to light another cigarette.

Asked to consider her position in relation to the women's movement, she draws herself up behind the desk with shoulders hunched and hands clasped, like a pupil concentrating in class. On one level she has done more than any other female songwriter to express the sexual and emotional landscape of the past two decades. On another, she has always seemed apart from other women, either isolated in her art or distanced from them by her romantic relationships. She admits she has never seen herself as a feminist, finding the structures of the movement too limiting and divisive.

"I had a good relationship with my father," she says carefully. "He taught me a lot of things that, had he had a son, he would have taught a boy. How to make bows and arrows and so on. I enjoy men's company, and I grew up enjoying it. My best friendships generally speaking that I've made in my life were with men. It's not that I don't like women. I've made good friendships with women too, but I'm so driven as women go that I can relate more to driven men. A lot of women would like to paint, for example, but they have 101 things that keep them from doing it. I can have friendships with these women, but sometimes I remind them of their inability to get going, which leaves a hole or a potential hole in the relationship. Feminism was too divisive. It was us against them... but it did something to open things up. I hate the word but I like the idea of a person, that a man and a woman can sit and for one moment all of these sexual considerations are bypassed and you have an open dialogue from person to person. I have basically tried to live my life as a person in that way."

Suddenly she lightens, remembering an article she has read recently about one of the new right-wing women's organisations. It is hard for her to keep from laughing while relating the story. "I forget the name of the particular group, but it was Christian women linked to getting the devil's language out of rock'n'roll," she says. "They like being housewives. They're anti-feminist, and they were in training to go out and visit the media, because some of them had appeared on television and had felt awkward. So the training programme consisted of a woman standing up and saying, [Mitchell adopts a prissy Miss Manners delivery] 'Now remember, girls, on TV your knees are your best friends. Keep them together...', and then, 'Take out your pocket mirrors, girls. I want you to notice that if, when you're speaking, you raise your eyebrows up and down, your voice takes on a more melodious quality.'"

Mitchell is laughing with delight now as she

winds up the anecdote: "The last thing the article said was that the women prayed, they sang songs, and then they looked at an aborted fetus, and I thought, God, this is a new movement? It's just as sick and limited as the old one. It's the pendulum sprung back too far against a reaction which was itself already too extreme. When is the pendulum going to get to the middle?"

She talks a little about the art show, her recent move into abstract painting – "I've just broken into a movement that happened in the '50s. I'm still an art student" – and other plans for coming to Europe with her band next year. Outside the room her husband lounges in a chair chatting with office staff. He grins when he sees her. With the heart soothed, Joni Mitchell has found fresh sources to energise her music.

ALAN JACKSON



THEY'VE all been coming out of the woodwork this past year, the artists who'd never deign to speak to anyone – ole Neil, Dylan a bit, and now the reclusive Joni Mitchell. The recent *Dog Eat Dog* is her 14th album, and it's a mighty long way from her 1968 debut *Song To A Seagull*.

I didn't even have to go to California, because Joni flew into Europe just before Christmas to face the press. Still, not doing interviews for years does have its advantages. It means you actually have something to say for yourself. About how *Dog Eat Dog* isn't a collection of songs written on the move, for instance.

"When I did *Hejira*, that writing year was spent driving around in the States. I drove across country

"A lot of people think Reagan's a nice guy. He's an actor, y'know"

JONI MITCHELL

with a couple of friends of mine to Maine, then to New York, and from New York I drove back home across country by myself, so that year was spent writing against a moving landscape, as was *Blue*. *Blue* was mostly written in Europe, in Greece and France. It has a lot of longing for going back to America.

"*Dog Eat Dog* is a very domestic American album in a certain way, it has a global overview but mainly it was written... married, settled, staying home a lot, watching a lotta television, which puts you in contact with millions of other people watching television. You are the recipient of communications that are going out that a lot of people are picking up."

Dog Eat Dog finds Mitchell handling some big and disturbing topics alongside her more familiar

personal cryptograms. The sound is weighted towards some sort of rock mainstream, unlike *Mingus* or *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, so in that respect it follows on logically from her last recording, 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*. Mitchell's musician husband Larry Klein appears as co-producer, writer and musician, while Thomas Dolby also figures prominently among guests with famous names like Don Henley, James Taylor, saxman Wayne Shorter and even actor Rod Steiger, enlisted to enact the role of an ultra-right-wing evangelist on "Tax Free".

The growth of the TV preachers and the Moral Majority with all its hideous hawkishness has alarmed Mitchell more than somewhat. A child of the flower power years, she still cherishes the American ideal of plurality of thought and deed. She's Canadian herself, of course.

"The ideals of the '60s and '70s have a true and clear enemy in this new idea, absolutely focused," she said grimly, exhaling a jet of Camel smoke. She admits to being a chain smoker, and evidently can't kick the habit.

"I guess people, finding that there was an emptiness in their lives, and a lack of community in a certain way, turned to the churches and the more flamboyant of these speakers. Looking for wholesomeness, looking for something that perhaps had been lost in America with the family unit disintegrating and so on, they turned to this idea of the paternal figure at the head of the family, the wife in the kitchen and the children coming up, and temperance. This idea seemed to flower and expand. A lotta people stopped drinking, became born-again Christians."

And the perfect father was, of course, Ronald Reagan, who has been at pains to court the evangelists of the new right as publicly as possible.

"A lot of people think Reagan's a nice guy," said Mitchell, wryly. "Neil Young thinks he's a nice guy." She paused before adding: "He's an actor, y'know." She rocked back in her seat, laughing.

In retrospect, 1985 might be remembered as the year when rock finally faced a few facts about itself. It was no longer radical or unruly, but had become institutionalised and safe. But it still wielded enormous media clout and earning power, factors with huge potential if suitably harnessed.

Joni Mitchell decided rock ought to speak up against the preachers and zealots trying to emasculate it further and subject it to self-righteous censorship of the most obnoxious kind. Hence "Tax Free": "*Tonight I'm going dancing with the drag queens and the punks/Big Beat deliver me from this sanctimonious skunk.*"

On the other hand, the Live Aid and Sun City operations left her with some reservations, though she took part in a Canadian Band Aid project. She was asked to appear on the Sun City disc, but then discovered that the original lyric went like this: "*Linda Ronstadt, how could you do that?/Rod Stewart, tell me that you didn't do it/Julio Iglesias, you oughta be ashamed to show your face/Queen and the O'Jays, what you got to say?*"

Linda Ronstadt is an old friend of Mitchell's, part of the whole LA/Asylum/Geffen crowd, and Joni was damned if she was going to have her pilloried on disc. She declined to take part, and insists Ronstadt's visit to Sun City was undertaken in all innocence on the basis of "art should cross any border". Perhaps Linda's ►

watched the Sun City video by now, which ought to have rocked her ivory tower.

Meanwhile, Joni's song "Ethiopia" is designed to put that godforsaken hellhole into some kind of global context. She reckons that the world's in a critical ecological state, with the oceans turning toxic, ineradicable nuclear pollution everywhere and the rainforests coming down in tons. But how much impact does she expect a song like this to have? Live Aid and Sun City seem to have set some wheels in motion, but who does her song really influence? "Well, there's the appearance of wheels in motion and then there's the actual motion. For instance, Bangladesh [*The Concert For*] appeared to set wheels in motion, right..." And the money disappeared. "No it didn't disappear, it went into escrow. It was just released in 1984. It was held all that time – by who, for what, who got the interest I don't know, but the fact was wheels appeared to go into motion but the direct influence on the cause was all an illusion. The same with the No Nukes festival. There was a big to-do and a movie and a this and a that, but the funds have a mysterious way of being snatched by government and being disarmed along the way by, if not the government of the country from which they emanate, then the country to which they go. There's a hundred and one ways to stop the ball in motion."

So you think this will happen to Sun City?

"Well, I don't know. All I know is we just find out these things after the fact. I don't know how much good it does. It certainly seems to elevate people's spirits and they can feel like they're doing something anyway. That in itself is something."

Sceptical or what? Tell it to Bob Geldof and watch his blood boil. Mitchell isn't optimistic about the state of the world. Nuclear disarmament, for instance.

"Even if the miracles happened and both sides said, 'Yes, yes, we've been fools all along and we must lay down our arms', what do they do with all the crap that they've got? All of that stuff is toxic. Where are you gonna put it? And supposing they get the bright idea they'll ship it into outer space and blow it up out there. With the forces being what they are out there it's the same ideas as the oceans – 'Oh, we'll dump it in the ocean, the ocean is so big.' Well, nothing is so big. Even the universe isn't so big that one of those little bangs isn't gonna create some kind of chain reaction out there."

Not much to look forward to, then, though it seems Joni may just be going through a particular phase of doomwatching. She once had a reputation as a kind of professional bleeding heart whose albums were chunks of her personal diary set to music, thinly veiled accounts of her liaison with various rock'n'roll personalities. As her music grew more complex and idiosyncratic, her lyrics developed a broader reach and sought out less obvious targets.

But, she cautions, "I may go back to bleeding all over the public at any moment" [laughs]. "The thing that's peculiar is what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to do it in a pop context and apparently that's unusual. If they were short stories they wouldn't be unusual at all, and unless it's a case of Hemingway where they go picking through all of his short stories to link it up to his own life, most of the time they blessedly take a short story at face value as a short story."

So it won't surprise you to learn that Mitchell is considering devoting herself, for 1986, to having



My old man: with husband Larry Klein at Wembley Arena, April 23, 1983

"I'm trying to write short stories in the pop song idiom"

JONI MITCHELL



a bash at some short stories. She says she's been devouring volumes of other people's lately, by writers including Raymond Carver and the great John Cheever.

"My work is a combination of fiction, autobiography, a lot of the names are the actual names of friends and acquaintances, some are fictionalised and some aren't. How do you figure the whole puzzle out? How much of it is fact or autobiography and how much of it is theatre or fiction? And what difference does it make as long as it's a good piece? I'm trying to write short stories or small movies, I guess, in the pop song idiom. Because I have this musical ability I've decided to use that form to communicate. It creates all kinds of difficulties because it's so much more of a public life than that of a short story writer. They tend to confuse the artist with the art more in this idiom than any other."

And if writing fiction doesn't work out, she can still go back to her painting, an increasingly important part of her life in any case. She refers to this juggling of creative media as "crop rotation". "David Geffen said to me once that I was the only star he ever met that didn't want to be one," she observed. "The reluctant star, y'know." But it seems to suit her just fine. ●

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