

# joni mitchell

INTERVIEW: KRISTINE MCKENNA

USED TO love Joni Mitchell's music but I stopped listening to it once I realised that The Dream girls get raised on wasn't good for me. I can't say that I've replaced it with a better dream, but that one was a definite dead end, and it was all I was hearing in Mitchell's music.

So, around 1972 — after 'Blue' — I shifted my allegiance elsewhere.

Then, over the next ten years, while I wasn't watching, Joni made some drastic revisions in her telling of *The Dream*. Her thoughts on the white picket fence happy ending became increasingly convoluted and oblique, and a lot more interesting.

One of the major stars to emerge from the '60s, Mitchell was the quintessential folk-rock old lady of the Woodstock era; her persona as a sweet beauty on a quest for spiritual growth sent her reeling in and out of ill-fated romances.

Simplicity and candour were admired qualities in the Dylanesque '60s, and Mitchell's confessional writing style coupled with her imaginative melodic ear, yielded some of the most popular standards of the folk-rock canon. An exquisitely controlled vocalist capable of yodelling octave leaps, Mitchell accompanied herself on exotically tuned guitars. She sounded unique and pretty, so that when her debut collection of dainty warblings from the battlefront of love came out in 1968, she was an instant star.

The sunny childhood of Mitchell's career culminated in 1971 with *Blue*, considered by many to be her finest work. Although she scored three hit singles with her 1974 release *Court And Spark*, she'd already begun to finker with the lucrative song formula she'd perfected and was edging out of the glaring pop spotlight and into the world of jazz.

Her music began to stretch out and took on more air and space. Structurally her albums evolved from being collections of songs, into fluid, interwoven symphonic compositions with cinematic feel; ethereal music embellished with ethnic rhythms and flourishes of jazz, floating around a loosely sketched story line.

Her melodies were now fragile hothouse creatures that required special handling to survive. Her contemporaries stopped covering her compositions because who else but Mitchell could sing them? Her voice, too, had become so elegant and arch it was downright air conditioned.

This phase peaked in 1975 with *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, Mitchell's last album to reach the Top Ten. The musical equivalent of a story by Ann Beattie, *'Hissing'* was an essay on the



## the dream girl wakes up

spiritual bankruptcy of America's upper middle class, and a work of jarring disillusionment.

The wide-eyed lass of the '60s who'd penned such anthems of hope as *'Woodstock'* had clearly seen a lot in the intervening years.

Mitchell's involvement in jazz deepened, while the cynicism she expressed on *'The Hissing Of Summer Lawns'* subsided into just plain weariness on her next albums, *'Helira'* and *'Don Juan's Reckless Daughter'*, which dealt with escape, lost innocence and the parched purity of the American Southwest.

Mitchell completed her transition from pop singer to jazz vocalist in 1978, when she collaborated on an album with jazz great Charles Mingus, which was his last work prior to his death in 1979.

Gone in rambling across the musical map for nigh on seven years, Mitchell had let that white picket fence get a mite run down and had completely estranged herself from her early fans. Joni, we hardly knew ye, they moaned . . .

Mitchell's new album *'Wild Things Run Fast'* should help quiet the grumblings of fans who've

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