

The very private Joni Mitchell

After years and years of silence, she's finally talking to the press

By Peter Goddard Toronto Star

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Elliot Roberts is the very model of the successful rock manager: self-spoken, as tough as a 20-page contract, and actually fond of the music. His clients include Devo and Neil Young, but right now they're forgotten with the other worries he has on his mind.

For here, in the concrete dressing room of the Blossom Music Centre, the sensually sculpted open-air theatre on a hillside 20 miles south of the city, Joni Mitchell has decided to take time off from her 25-city tour and talk. And talk and talk. All these years she has shied away from the media; all these years of not needing the media.

Roberts looks ever so slightly alarmed as he stands next to the food trays of fruit and cheese slices.

She has remained remote, rather than aloof (although the Village Voice once panned one of her albums with a headline reading: *Raised On Snobbery*), out of an instinct for survival.

This instinct goes way back. "Jean does not relate well," was a note frequently added to her report card in school. As a child, growing up chilly Saskatoon, she remembers hanging out, not with her school mates, but "down-town, with the Ukrainians and the Indians: they were more emotionally honest and they were better dancers."

Artistic breakthrough

And when, in recent years, the press started panning her albums — first *Hissing of Summer Lawns*, then *Hejira* and, most emphatically, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* — she was hurt by the reaction, feeling that she had finally made an artistic breakthrough with these albums, a breakthrough no one apparently completely understood.

The final blow seemed to come several years ago when *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a lengthy gossip piece on her, outlining her affairs with Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills and Nash, and others.

She even quit touring fearing that it would "destroy" her writing, that she'd end up, like so many others, writing about being a rock star on the road, a narrow perspective on life at even the best of times. Yet, in retrospect, her writing that brought her back out on the road and meeting the press.

Working with Mingus was proof of her artistic instincts and inclinations. At one time, she says, she would have been happy to have been considered to be as good as Peter, Paul and Mary. But she was always after bigger artistic game.

And now it's in the bag. And she's happy about that, indeed, proud of it.

But still, Roberts worries.

For a while, though, what she's saying is okay. She remembers working with the great Charlie Mingus, the volatile jazz bassist and composer whose music she set for her current album, *Mingus*.

"There weren't many conflicts between us," she says. "Maybe because I was a woman. He liked women. He was such a flirt."

And she becomes brightly enthusiastic about her new band, which includes bassist Jaco Pastorius and guitarist Pat Metheny along with percussionist Don Alias, saxophonist Michael Brecker, and keyboard player Lyle Mays. It's a band that can truly embrace her music, with its fluid rhythms and liquid melodies.

Ah, yes. Everything free and easy here,



Speaking out: Joni Mitchell is changing a bit. Not only is she beginning to speak out — Hurricane Carter, she says, "was a bit of a jerk" — but she has gained weight, she now moves to the music on stage and she's calmer than she was 12 years ago when she was "all nerves and vis-

ion."

as she begins to reminisce about her appearance on Bob Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Revue*, (which was in Toronto four years ago) the last time she appeared in public.

Her current tour does not include Metro because, as Roberts says, "we could not get a hall."

"I only came along as a spectator and got kind of sucked up into it," she says breezily, lighting up a cigarette. "I wasn't that directly involved; I was more of a foot-soldier. Personally, I thought Hurricane Carter was a bit of a jerk."

On no, Roberts suddenly stands bolt upright. Bob Dylan was the most fervid of supporters of jailed boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. Dylan believed Carter had been wronged, and even managed to raise \$500,000 at one Houston concert for his defence. *Rolling Thunder* was an extension of Dylan's beliefs. And here was Joni Mitchell, his client, saying Carter was a...

He looks furiously at her and she seems suddenly startled.

"Can't you see what they're doing?" he says with a forced smile. "They've got pads. They're writing things down."

For a moment tension flicks like lightning around the room. Then, just as suddenly as it arrived, that startled-fau-

look vanishes from her eyes. In that very brief moment of indecision, or fear or whatever, one had a glimpse of her as she was once 10, 12 years ago, when she worked the Riverboat, on Yorkville, the golden girl writer of pastel poetry. I remember arguing with her back then, feeling slighted by her sensitivity, furious about the vulnerability, in her song, *Both Sides Now*.

She was all nerves and vision, back then: Skinny Joni Anderson from Saskatoon, who idolized James Dean, tried art school in Calgary — she now does many of her own album covers and a collection of her work will be appearing in the forthcoming book, *Starart* — and who left Chuck Mitchell, her then-husband of eight months with this memory: "She always had a strong visceral sense of what to do."

But now it seems, much of what she has wanted to do, she's done. She's where she wanted to go.

She's a handsome woman; her broad shoulders, tapered, well-muscled hands, and deep tan give the impression of a strong calm. She's relaxed. She has also gained weight, not much, but just enough to make you notice her body and her physicality. She now moves on stage, throwing her hips into the beat, letting

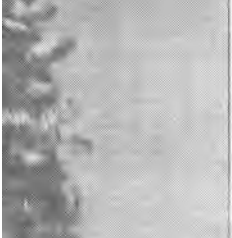
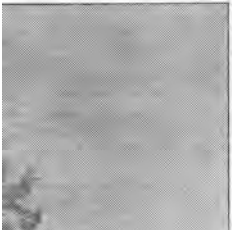
her shoulder relax into the flow of the sound.

In one of her albums, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, she mentions the turn-of-the-century French painter, Henri Rousseau, whose works are a fantastic collation of exotic scenes and bold primary colors. Her fascination with Rousseau has not stopped; her concerts are a jangle of colors.

The Persuasions, the a cappella male quartet open the show, reaching way back into gospel music for their bittersweet harmonies. Their singing comes from the gut, but it is no more visceral than her's, starting with the rolling version of *Big Yellow Taxi*, a subdued Court And Spark, and, next, *Coyote*.

Her concert spans about 40 years of music, with her *Mingus* collaborations — *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* and *Dry Cleaner From Des Moines* — being both literally and figuratively the centre pieces.

The music's as lush and as softly textured as tropical jungle. What she has accomplished with pieces such as *Furry Sings The Blues*, *Raised On Robbery*, or even *Why Do Fools Fall In Love*, sang without instruments but with the Persuasions, and, finally, *Woodstock*, is bring the color she so loves to use in her painting and forces into her verbal imagery



directly into her music. You can almost see what she's playing.

There are grumbling, almost manicured solos by Pastorius — the dark tones for her picture; saxophonist Michael Brecker hoots and hoots out old rhythm/blues riffs — slashes of red; Metheny, spins out a glittering solo, with notes darting like swifts around a beily.

Backstage she tells another story about her work with Charles Mingus — about how, during one rehearsal, she sang a certain note and he attempted to correct her.

"He said I sang the note 'square,' that I should do something differently with it. We got along well. I overrode his decision a couple of times, and he insisted on a thing or two. But this time I thought I was right."

"Charles," I told him, "that note may have been square in your time, but it has been so long since it was done, it's hip again."

She pauses: "Working with him was a radiant experience," she adds. "Everything was such a high."

"When I was just a little kid — before all the pop thing came along — I listened mostly to jazz. I have more bebop melodies in my head than anything else."

"I'm 35 now, so it's natural for me to have listened to jazz."

But did she listen to any singers of 30 or 40 years ago, Anita O'Day, perhaps? she was asked.

"She was white, right?," says Mitchell. "No, I don't know her — maybe it's the whiteness in my voice you hear. I can't help but sound white."

"Although now" — and here she shrug — "there's something about black people I feel very close to. I know that sounds weird, because I'm a WASP and all. But, well, I don't have that much respect for technology, although I drive a car and work in a 24-track (recording studio), and I have a tremendous respect for those people who are not that many generations removed from something really basic."

More questions

More questions come up, but she ignores them for a moment, to remember a Halloween party she went to "where I decided to dress up as a black man." So successful was her impersonation that after the party she went to one of her favorite restaurants, a place where she'd been known, only to find no one recognized her. She was even introduced as Stevie Wonder. Still, she says, no one knew.

"I've not been given a lot of liberty with my music," she says. "It wasn't until this year that I got hip about radio formats — you know, music for 19- to 25-year-old males and all that. My position, right now, is like a president's in office. People out there will say, 'okay, you've had your rise, now it's someone else's turn.'"

"But I feel I still have my best work left ahead of me. I always make my music to please me, not to please someone else. I like to think that if it does please me, it will please someone else too. This thinking has served me well, so far."

"Like these benefits you're asked to do. I've been asked to do the anti-nuclear concerts at (New York's) Madison Square Garden (next month, along with Jackson Browne, Bruce Springsteen, John Hall and James Taylor), but I don't know. I'm more of a pro-type person than a negative one."

"I'm against nuclear energy as such, but I think, while you're against something you have to come up with some feasible alternatives. I prefer I stay out of things like that."

"The kind of political thing I like to take part in are the ones where there are immediate problems with immediate remedies. I did the James Bay benefit (in Montreal several years ago) because there were a lot of people who would be displaced immediately, and there would be immediate problems."

"I just don't want to go off half-baked on anything, not even if half of me is for it. I don't want to be naively radical."

"In the '60s, if you didn't do benefits you were made to feel that something was wrong. But I think I saw through that. I don't want to be under my parents' roof I saw through the self-righteousness of go-gooders."

"I suffered some ego bruises during the *Rolling Thunder* thing. It was something that costs you a lot of harm as well as a lot of good."

"The experience was rewarding in one way, in that it taught me about handling superstars on the road together — some of them I was aware of with my hand, now. Mostly, with *Rolling Thunder*, I wrote a lot."

"She paused again, and looked over at Roberts, nodding that they should go. As it turned out he hadn't anything really to worry about. It was just Joni Mitchell talking."