

Joining a Joni cult in La-La Land



► Joni Mitchell backstage during the 66th GRAMMY Awards at Crypto.com, Los Angeles, in February this year. Monica Schipper/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

I'VE tried many times to write about what Joni Mitchell means to me, but I always fail miserably. I mean, lines have poured out of me. But none do my obsession justice.

Even attempting to write about her generation's finest poet and musician feels audacious. You see, there's something mercurial about Joni. When she left her then-partner Graham Nash in 1970, she wrote him a telegram that said: "If you hold sand too tightly in your hands, it will run through your fingers." What a line. The woman even bins off lovers in poetry.

You might know Joni as the flaxen-haired '60s folk singer writing about environmental destruction in *Big Yellow Taxi*. Perhaps I can persuade you to dive deeper into her back catalogue by telling you Joni was Prince's favourite musician. Or that at the height of her fame, she went off on a multi-record jazz tangent, collaborating with the legendary Charles Mingus on an album released after he died in 1979.

Because Joni never did what she should, only what she wanted. She painted her own album covers and refused to be pigeonholed by the misogynistic rock press, quietly outshining all her so-called peers.

I first discovered Joni in my early twenties through her seminal 1970 album *Blue* – a record that, as one critic put it, sounds like the singer-songwriter turning her skin inside out. I was heartbroken, and she whispered directly into my soul. A one-sided love affair took root and never waned.

I love Joni in an obsessive, know-all-the-lyrics, play-on-all-occasions way. She's less of a musician and more of a spirit guide. So when she announced two headline shows at the Hollywood Bowl, a friend sent me a two-word message: "Shall we?" It took me precisely a nano-second to decide that we absolutely should.

I resolved years ago that if, by some miracle, Joni ever played live again, I would be there. I never dreamed I would get the chance. At 81, the singer has re-learned how to walk, talk, sing and play music after suffering a brain aneurysm in 2015. A show on her home turf, in a natural



SARA ROBINSON

amphitheatre in the Hollywood hills, felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to commune with our lady of the canyon. It's one of my Joni-inspired philosophies that sometimes, you just have to book the flight.

Six months later, my friend had to pull out of our trip unexpectedly. I briefly considered doing the same – a week's a long time to be in a strange city alone – but the spirit of Joni whispered "go". Plus, after years of being the responsible adult on trips with my son, there's a delicious decadence in travelling solo.

I had a guidebook, tickets to the show, a week to



► Members of the Joni Mitchell Discussion List (or JMDL) with Sara Robinson in Los Angeles

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fill, and no concrete plans. As it turned out, all the ingredients for accidentally joining a Joni Mitchell cult.

On my first day, I spotted a sign for a Joni photography exhibition from the top deck of a tour bus. That felt like a sign to follow. At the gallery, I chatted with a fan who told me about a Joni tribute concert at the Riot House in West Hollywood that evening. It takes an absolute age to walk anywhere in L.A., but the California sun was blazing down, and I had nowhere better to be. As Court and Spark blasted in my ears, I trekked through technicolour streets choked with Teslas and the scent of eucalyptus. It felt like freedom.

When I arrived, I discovered the tribute show was organised by the Joni Mitchell Discussion List (or JMDL), the original online forum for her fans. The list was founded in the mid-90s (before the phrase "surfing the internet" was even coined) by the lovely Les Irvin, a Colorado fan now the webmaster of Joni's official website.

I learned the list is a digital space where thousands have found kinship through Joni's music. It has also transcended online boundaries to spawn annual in-person gatherings – or JoniFests – and countless lifelong friendships. The gods of solo travel were smiling on me. How did I not know this list existed?

Because whaddya know, it turns out that Joni people are the loveliest people you can imagine. And, as a bonus, they all play an instrument or can sing beautifully. I flew to California to accidentally find my kin – yet they've been there on the internet all along.

What followed was a whirlwind 72 hours in which the JMDL adopted me as a Welsh mascot. I watched this gang of Joni devotees jam through hotel lobbies, picnic areas, and Sunset Strip sidewalks at 2am, spreading her gospel around town. I got to ride their bus to the show. And what a show it was. This is what happiness in the afterlife will feel like: a balmy, star-studded velvet sky with Joni Mitchell on a perpetual loop.

I cried hot, fat tears when she played everything I'd barely dared hope for – Carey, California, and A Case of You – as the constellations shimmered above us, 18,000 lucky pilgrims united in awe.

Imagine my delight when I bagged cheap tickets for the second show, where Elton John and Meryl Streep provided backing vocals. You're not supposed to do bucket list things TWICE, are you? But no regrets, coyote.

When Monday morning came, and my new friends left for flights to all corners of the States, I felt a stab of sadness. It took me this long to find my people; now they were leaving. So soon?

At that moment, I understood why people join cults. If my new friends had bought a bus to embark on a life of self-sufficiency, I'd have been at the front of the queue with a tambourine and snacks. But we all had responsibilities waiting for us.

As we hugged goodbye, someone joked that the JMDL family is like the Hotel California – you can check out but never leave. I've already signed up for a JoniFest in Scotland next year to prove the point.

To fill the void left by their departure, I headed to Venice Beach. Palm trees whispered, and the pungent perfume of (legal) marijuana filled the salt air as a dreadlocked dude called Richard etched Joni's face onto my forearm. I think she'd approve of my tattoo, a permanent postcard from the trip of a lifetime.

Because Joni taught me that the art we love – the stuff that truly speaks to us – is the only thing we should ever hold too tightly.

My new ink and I are now home, wondering if I hallucinated it all. When colleagues ask how my holiday went, I quickly reply: "You mean my pilgrimage?" with a starry-eyed stare.

I let the question mark linger.

Who cares if they think I'm on a prolonged acid trip?

I found my tribe under those endless California skies. Now that's what I call far out.