

Chasing The Past

by Jeff Hankins

Ironically it's a very recent recording which has renewed the chase for me. Joni Mitchell's December 1994 Toronto Concert Performance, captured on the recording 'Just Ice' (which I'm presuming must be widely available since I've seen it at several record fairs) featured a delightful oddity: a recital of a poem called 'The Fishbowl' written, Joni tells us, as a school literature assignment at the age of sixteen. The poem actually turns up - more complete, there's another few lines that Joni must have forgotten despite that remarkable recall of hers! - in a music book published by Charles Hansen Music and Books in 1969 just as Mitchell songs were beginning to be realised as saleable material.

Hearing that poem, and in fact looking back over that book with its seven or eight unrecorded songs, reminds me of the precision and sheer craftsmanship of the early writing. And why chasing up anything I can find from these hidden years is more than just an obsessive drive for memorabilia, more than just a pitiable nostalgia, but a nod of respect towards the fact that these early, finely crafted little pieces, though lyrically slight and unsophisticated, have considerable power to move an audience. Well, me anyway. I can no way consider myself retrograde, and am as stimulated as the next discerning listener (like yourselves, presumably) by the progressive artistic march - some of

the stuff on 'Turbulent Indigo' is as good as anything anyone is producing today. Yet still the hidden years intrigue me, and things like 'Gifts of the Magi' (a neat and sinuously melodic reworking of the O. Henry story) are every bit as powerful as, for example, the chilling 'Magdalene Laundries', written over 25 years later. So it's very hard to consign the prolific output of the pre 1969 years to vaults of oblivion!

Putting together the pieces of these early years - from the Toronto coffee-house days through the ill-fated marriage of 1965 to the move to Detroit and the club circuits there and in New York - it's all a bit of a fun Sherlock Holmes job for the would-be biographer with time and inclination. But I'm not. And I don't. And I'm really much more interested in what we know to have been a prodigiously prolific output in those years. Anyone who has heard anything of Joni's club performances from those years (and I've heard very little) will be well aware of what an enormous - and enormously listenable - repertoire she had composed for herself well before the time when she first got the chance to commit a dozen songs to vinyl early in 1968.

Such a repertoire that even classics got left behind or held off till later albums. Doesn't it seem amazing that the 1965 song 'Circle Game' could be held over until the third album, 'Both Sides Now'

until the second, 'Little Green' until the fourth, 'Urge for Going' not recorded at all until it filled a B side for 'You Turn Me On' in the mid-seventies? Others like 'Eastern Rain' existing only on a cover version (Fairport Convention's)? Others ('Jeremy', 'Carnival in Kenora') just as pages in the 'Music of Joni Mitchell' book, and others never surfacing at all....

So with a sleuth's spirit, but without the energy, I chase the past. I'm aware we're talking about time thirty years ago but, well, maybe there's some grannies out there who perhaps caught Joni in those few folk clubs when Joe Boyd brought her over in psychedelic 1967, to

open for the Incredible String Band; or on her second British visit, to the Festival of Contemporary Song in 1968, where the Johnstons became so enamoured of her music and began covering them; maybe you've heard a copy of the same demotapes that Fairport Convention must have heard to get them doing 'I don't know where I stand' on their first album.. Maybe someone with a little foresight and a reel-to-reel hung around Toronto coffee-houses in the early-to-mid sixties?! Maybe you're involved in the same chase and have uncovered other gems from these less documented years too. I'd love to hear from you.



Seal on Joni

On January 5th 1996, The Guardian published an article where Seal aired his admiration of Joni Mitchell. The interview was conducted by Sam Wollaston. For the benefit of those that missed it first time round here it is:

"There's something for everyone in Joni Mitchell's music. She might be talking about something completely unrelated to anything in your experience but then there'll be a line which is worth waiting the whole song for - something you can relate to. For example, in a song called Jericho there's a line: "Anyone will tell you just how hard it is to keep a friend/ Maybe they'll short sell you or maybe they'll turn Judas in the end." Everyone can recognise that kind of sentiment.

Joni Mitchell has an amazing ability to record parts of her life in a way people will understand. I like all her albums for the same reasons - they have such longevity, you can listen to them over and over again.

What's also incredible is the way Joni's career has changed over the years. She's been a folk singer, almost a Joan Baez type, and she hasn't been afraid to experiment with jazz. In fact she's very much admired throughout the jazz scene -