

Taking Risks

Mitchell Songs : Cover Versions:

by Jeff Hankins

Probably it's Bob Dylan who has laid down the greatest challenges to the interpretive singer - to pick the jewels of startlingly sweet melodies from the bare rock of his raw, idiosyncratic recordings, and yet somehow try and retain their immediacy and their power. Joan Baez and Judy Collins were two notables amongst a great crowd who took up the challenge with remarkable vigour, and occasional success. (More about Judy Collins in a moment.) Joni Mitchell's work has presented a similar, but different, challenge to the interpretive artist: to take a song which has already had its definitive embodiment and bring from it some new flavour.. It's remarkable the number who have taken up this challenge, though not always with equal degree of adventurousness..

Judy Collins, whether we like it or not, probably did more than any other artist to bring the songwriting talents of Joni Mitchell to a mass audience, through her stirring, strings-augmented version of 'Both Sides Now', lifted from the *Wildflowers* album of 1967. The same album sees her taking a successful stab at 'Michael from Mountains'. I remember seeing Judy Collins during this era doing a spot on some glitzy TV show (Tom Jones Show? Something like that). Playing the piano to accompany herself she sang a song called 'Chelsea Morning', .. I was

arrested very much by the delightful construction of the song - something refreshingly different about the melodic and lyrical patterns and.., well, apparently Collins released the song as a single around this time, but, displeased with the result, had it withdrawn, and had another (indeed, better) bash at it on the semi-live album *Living* some years later. I think I remember hearing an interview with her somewhere where she said she'd have recorded a lot more Mitchell songs if the composer hadn't done them so beautifully already. And there, put very succinctly, lies the problem.

So we tend to find some of the bolder covers in the days before the writer herself had been discovered and put onto disc, and we had no "original" to compare their efforts with! Tom Rush in whose Detroit Club Joni was performing in 1965-66 before her move to New York, recorded three of her songs on his *Circle Game* album. One wonders, if her own recordings had been in existence at the time, whether he would have had the courage. Of the three, for me, only 'Tin Angel' stands as bringing something new and distinct to the song: perhaps what Mitchell herself described (talking in that instance about Dave Van Ronk's version of 'Both Sides Now', the only cover at that time that she actually liked...) as a quality of male sadness. I applaud Rush

for choosing the song, too, acknowledging a classic beauty in it too often overlooked. Of course several people besides Rush were beginning to record 'Urge For Going'.. I've still not heard the George Hamilton IV version which was the earliest, successful (c & w charts!) one. So I'm indebted to Rush because his was the first version of the song I heard.

In this country the folk group The Johnstons recorded it. I've got a single with that song and 'Both Sides Now' back to back. They must have been quite entranced by what they heard when they

met her here in 1968; I believe they also recorded 'Marcie' though I've not heard that cover. (What happened to the Johnstons?) These days you can hear several cover versions of 'Urge For Going'; I believe Mary Black has one on an album. Oh, and I notice there's a Crosby, Stills & Nash



Judy Collins,

version unearthed and included on one of those boxed CD sets. In the late sixties others over here must have got hold of a demo-tape that Joe Boyd or someone was floating around. In one interview I read, Joni says that Julie Felix was doing some of the more obscure songs in club performances, though I've found no recordings apart from the obligatory 'Both Sides'.. Fairport Convention, in one of their earliest incarnations, did 'I Don't Know Where I Stand' and also 'Chelsea Morning', and then on their *What We Did On Our Holidays* album a lovely version of 'Eastern Rain'. And here they really have made something a little different.

Ambitiously they've injected a sort of new busy pace into it, and dropped the lyrics of the bridge section. Not a bad idea: it works well. A bit of risk-taking that the artist would surely applaud.

Because, after all, a bit of creative risk-taking is the only way to do a cover version of a Mitchell song. Witness that sad imitation of 'Songs to Ageing Children Come' from the soundtrack of *Alice's Restaurant*... or witness Buffy Sainte-Marie's version of 'Song To A Seagull' which changes nothing, stylistically, and so certainly adds nothing new or fresh to

the definitive composer-version. Was it worth it? A hundred mediocre versions of 'Both Sides Now' attest the same thing. But one person who wasn't afraid to make it fresh was Pete Seeger who added his own verse to it. Have you heard that wonderful recording of him and Joni duetting on it (from some US TV programme in 1969)? Ah, now that captures

the creative spark burning bright! In the same way, however much Ian Matthews' hit single made a rather tamed and comfortable 'Woodstock', I still have to admire him for seeing its potential for a different kind of treatment (even a slightly different melody)! After all Joni herself did the same kind of thing in her guitar-version 80's performances of the song.

There was a time some years back when I started to collect lists of these cover versions (too much time on my hands, obviously!).. but here are some of the quirkier ones I recall:

'Night In The City' by the Athenians
(Nana Mouskouri's band)
'In France They Kiss On Main Street'
by the Swingle Singers!
'Dreamland' by Roger McGuinn
'The Circle Game' by the
Ian Campbell Folk Group
'For Free' by David Crosby
'Big Yellow Taxi' by Bob Dylan
'This Flight Tonight' by Nazareth
(remember that?!)
'Ladies of the Canyon' by Annie
Lennox (only heard that recently)
'I Don't Know Where I Stand' by
Barbra Streisand
My own favourite? Bonnie Raitt doing
'That Song about the Midway'. She gives
it a new soulful quality, and anyway its

such a great, under-exploited song and
Raitt is such a great singer.

You've got the idea by now, I'm sure,
that the point I'd make is; if you're going
to cover a Mitchell song, don't just repeat;
certainly don't try and compete; but do
something with the song which grabs a
hold of the creative challenge that each
song is; creativity renewed and
rediscovered with each intelligent
interpretation; so give me a bold Nazareth
'Flight' to a bland Perry Como style 'Both
Sides' every time.

*Thanks Jeff. Maybe Joni should record
Carly Simons' 'Nobody Does It Better!'.
Seriously, do any of our readers have a
favourite Joni cover version? Please write
to me at the usual address. Ed.*

ROLLING STONE

The following article appeared in the 17 May 1969 issue of Rolling Stone magazine:

Folk music, which pushed rock and roll into
the arena of the serious with protest lyrics
and blendings of Dylan and the Byrds back
in 1964, has re-entered the pop music cycle.
Once again, with a new crop of guitar-
toting composer-singers at the vanguard,
folk is "in".

As with country, jazz, and
other rock music satellites, it is
not 100 percent pure. Joan
Baez is completely off of her
abortive rock-album trip, but
there's a solid country beat to
her Dylan LP. Peter, Paul, and
Mary couldn't have been
serious singing 'I Dig Rock
and Roll Music'; nevertheless,
they used a full complement of
session men (and even backup
voices) in their *Late Again*
album. Dylan is back to the basics, leaving
electronics largely to the boys in the Band,
but his next LP - as with his *John Wesley
Harding* - are Nashville-twanged.

The old names are back, but in more
commercial regalia. Judy Collins, softened,
orchestrated, countrified (and even, on
national TV, miniskirted), is a regular chart
item now, after years of limited success.

The music (someone called it "Art
Rock", but that can be ignored) features a
lighter, more lyrical style of writing, as
exemplified by Leonard Cohen. As if an
aural backlash to psy-ky-delick acid rock
and to the all-hell-has-broken-loose styles
of Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin, the
music is gentle, sensitive, and graceful.

Nowadays it's the personal and the poetic,
rather than a message, that dominates.

Into this newly re-ploughed field has
stepped Joni Mitchell, composer, singer,
guitarist, painter, and poetess from
Alberta, Canada.

Miss Mitchell, a wispy 25-year-old
blonde, is best known for her
compositions, 'Michael from
Mountains' and 'Both Sides
Now', as recorded by Judy
Collins, and 'The Circle
Game', cut by Tom Rush.

She has a first LP out (on
Reprise). A second album -
recorded during successful
concerts at UC Berkeley and at
Carnegie Hall - is ready for
release, and another studio
album has already been
recorded. She is editing a book of poetry
and artwork; a volume of her
compositions will follow shortly. And she
has received a movie offer (to conceive,
script and score a film).

Not bad for a girl who had no voice
training, hated to read in school, and
learned guitar from a Pete Seeger
instruction record.

Just who - and what - is Joni Mitchell,
this girl who's so obviously perched on
the verge?

To those who don't spend hours in
audio labs studying the shades, tones, and
nuances of the human voice, Miss
Mitchell is just a singer who sounds like
Joan Baez or Judy Collins. She has that

