

“COME ON DOWN TO THE MERMAID CAFE...”

Uncovered: the amazing story of Joni’s sidekick on Crete, Penelope Ann Schafer.

Words: GRAYSON HAVER CURRIN

● In the lore around *Blue*, “Penelope” seems like some fictionalised goddess – the Ottawa poetess, as Joni Mitchell called her, who whisked the heartsick songwriter away to a transformational period on Crete, her mononym bestowed by Greek mythology. To wit, in previous essays about *Blue*, Penelope has never been given a last name.

But she is actually Penelope Ann Schafer, a best-selling Canadian poet, award-winning actress, Buddhist explorer, beloved impresario and mother of two, who had a decades-long and sometimes-contentious relationship with Mitchell. Her fascinating life can seem at times like a tall tale.

Born in 1939 in Victoria, British Columbia, she was raised by a Second World

War hero, then starred in *The Tragic Diary Of Zero The Fool*, an acid trip of a film that inspired Werner Herzog. She worked for a drug cartel exchanging money in South America until she developed dysentery and returned to Canada, where she became a crux of the creative counterculture. And in the late '60s, she had a short-lived tryst with Leonard Cohen (possibly while he dated Mitchell) before convincing Mitchell, in 1970, to follow her to Crete, where Cohen had purchased a home a decade earlier.

“Penelope loved travelling, but she was also interested in philosophy, history and architecture, so it was a spiritual pilgrimage,” says Willow Verkerk, Penelope’s eldest daughter and a philosophy professor and author in Canada. “My mom also admired Leonard as a Canadian songwriter and poet, so she would have been curious to see where he had gone.”

Indeed, Penelope penned a poem about her time with Mitchell on Matala, called *Letter To Crete For Joni*. She wrote of “growing wild with the mystics” and “a simple day/spent learning to

pray/in the sun.” Mitchell, in turn, wrote a playful and lascivious poem about Penelope’s lust for life in Crete: “Penelope wants to fuck the sea... She wrinkles up her nose and screams.” In November 1970, after Mitchell had returned to the US, she recited the poem on-stage with Frank Zappa. Verkerk still owns the 58th handmade copy of Mitchell’s *Morning Glory On The Vine* book, a photo of her mother and Mitchell affixed beneath the poem titled *Penelope*.

After Penelope’s second husband died in an accident in 1982, Mitchell was around more. But they were both opinionated, obdurate people, unafraid of telling their version of the truth. As Mitchell’s star rose, Penelope worried that money was warping her. After Penelope died in 2011, a mutual friend said she would tell Mitchell, but Verkerk never asked how Joni responded.

“I remember asking my mom if Joni was coming to visit us, because I had a really beautiful experience with her, a nice feeling,” she says. “But mom said Joni was too materialistic, that her fame was getting to her.”



Burden bathed the picture in a blue light and sharpened the image until it looked almost like an antique daguerreotype – extreme contrast and edges, so that every crease of Mitchell’s face looks deep, like a steep canyon on a topographical map. In 1968, Considine felt he had captured a certain softness; Burden, however, tapped Mitchell’s experiences since, the windfall of highs and lows. Considine is still not sure who made the call, Mitchell or Burden, and it remains the only album cover he’s shot.

Burden’s version, at least, aligns with Mitchell’s own take on that time, a moment when she felt so vulnerable she soon retreated to a cabin in rural Canada, where she planned to garden, maybe live without electricity, and write. After *Blue* was released in June 1971, she rarely appeared in public for the better part of a year. Never again would she make an album as exposed, unfiltered, and unflinching.

“I love that record more than any of them, really,” Mitchell would say in 1983, before her decades-long battle with its confessional legacy.

“I’ll never be that pure again.” ●



Muse: (above) Willow Verkerk, daughter of Penelope Ann Schafer, sits between her sister Sophie and Joni in Crete; (above top) Mitchell on-stage in Toronto, Canada, July 26, 1970.