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# Both Sides of Joni Mitchell

**B**orn Roberta Joan Anderson in Alberta, Canada in 1943, Joni Mitchell (that's her married name) has become one of contemporary music's most durable and adventurous singer-songwriters. Her albums, covering four decades, moved from the confessional folk-influenced recordings of the late 60's and early 70's to jazz-flavoured experiments with bass-guitarist Jaco Pastorius and jazz-composer Charles Mingus to her later recordings of the 80's and 90's where she has come to terms with modern studio technology in collaboration with her former husband, bass-guitarist and producer Larry Klein.

Talk of a comprehensive box set covering Mitchell's career was preempted earlier in the year by the release of two CDs compiled by Mitchell: 'Hits' and 'Misses' (songs that Joni thought deserved more attention).

**BILLY PINNELL** was granted a rare interview with **JONI MITCHELL** some years back and **Rhythms** presents this in print exclusively for the very first time.

**BP:** Can you recall the time when you made the transition from poet to songwriter?

**JM:** Let's see, I started singing professionally, that is for pin money in Art College in Calgary for fifteen dollars a night and travelling a little bit up to Edmonton. At that time my repertoire was mostly 'found' songs. We would all skim through Sing Out magazine, and the trouble with being on the folk scene, even in Calgary, where there wasn't that many of us, was that certain artists like Peter Albling was the resident folk-singer in Calgary when I arrived, and he was a bank of folk songs, and all of the songs that I had learned in Saskatoon before I came, fell under his territory, 'Oh you can't sing those songs, those are my songs see...' So eventually a person in order to have an original repertoire, because everybody had claims to these songs that were floating around, almost had to write. So it was there that I wrote my first song, it was something about trains I think, and I played it for Peter Albling and he didn't seem too much impressed with it, and I don't even remember much about it now. So the first attempt was like the first waffle, you use it to warm up the pan and then you throw it out, you know.

*Did you have some poems stockpiled that you tried to put some music to?*

Well the poetry that I'd written as a kid wouldn't have made songs. I was writing a

lot in blank verse, I'll give you an example, I wrote a poem when I was 16 or 17 called 'The Fishbowl' which was about Hollywood and it went -

*The fishbowl is a world reversed  
Where hooks that dangle from  
the bottom up  
Reel down their catch on gilded bait  
Pike, Pickerel, Bass, the common fish  
Ogle through distorting glass  
See only glitter, glamour, gaiety  
Fog up the bowl with lusty breath  
Lunge toward the bait and miss  
And weep for fortune lost  
Envy the goldfish why,  
His bubbles breaking round the rim  
While silly fishes faint for him and say  
'Look here I think he winked his eye at me.'*

(Laughing) You couldn't really put it into a song! So I had oiled the wheels of introspective poetic reflection, you know, but the idea of singing them hadn't really occurred to me. And when I got to Toronto there were eighteen functioning folk clubs, but the same problem prevailed, you know everybody had dibs on certain songs. I remember when a singer came through from the States named Hamilton Camp and I was hanging around with him and Ian Tyson for a couple of days and Hamilton had a new Bob Dylan song, I was not a Bob Dylan fan at that time, I thought he was imitative of Woody Guthrie and not particularly original - an opinion which I voiced loudly and to much flak in coffee houses at the time. But I heard this song which was unrecorded at the time, called 'Tambourine Man' - and being in Hamilton's company with the usual people on the scene not being around, I tried to memorise the song, I thought if I learned this song this song will be mine on this particular turf. Anyway I learned most of it, but there was a lot to learn just by sitting in an audience and hearing it twice and even taking notes, and I missed part of it, but I talked about it constantly. And one night some people said to me, 'You know that song you were talking about, well there's an American folk singer upstairs playing it.' I was playing in the cellar of a little club 'cos I was non-union, so I rushed upstairs to hear 'Mr Tambourine Man' played by Chuck Mitchell, and he had completely re-written parts of it. So my immediate introduction to him was you know, in conflict. 'Why did you change these lines,' I said to him. He'd changed 'Wait only for my boot-heels to go wandering' to something like 'Wait only for my sneakers....' or I don't know, 'cos he didn't



wear boots, and I was quite offended. So this was the beginning of my relationship with Chuck Mitchell, who kind of kidnapped me and carried me across the border, and it was there in that climate, I fell into a hotbed of educated people who believed that intelligence was roomed in that manner and not innate, and something then stirred in me and I began to write.

*It's interesting that when you did record your first album it was produced by David Crosby - how did that come about?*

Well, David I met in Miami, in Coconut Grove in a little coffee-house there. He had just quit The Byrds and was putting together a beautiful schooner, polishing it up you know, and he came in to hear me and liked the music. Later when I got my first recording contract, I looked like a folk singer, but David realised there was something else there. The end of folk music had come and there was a new fad called folk-rock. What he was afraid they would do, which they would have done, is to try and make me, in the manner of record companies, is to make an apple out of an orange, they would enforce rock & roll onto this music, and it would have been premature, it wouldn't have married, it would have been a disaster. He had the insight to see that because if you're going to sell out, usually kids sell out at the beginning, they enslave themselves right at the onset. And I had nicely dodged slavery, I'd refused a lot of recording contracts because they were in fact, slave labour, output three albums a year, for instance, of original material, and you would dry up, you'd make a desert if you try and get three crops off a piece of land in that short space of time. But at this point I felt ready to record, I had the material for three albums, and he said 'This is what we're going to do, there's going to be so little added, I'm going to tell them I'm going to produce you, but then I'm not going to produce you at all, if we add anything it'll be so minimal, it'll be like a girl walking down the street in a pair of blue jeans, and as she goes by say "Was there a little lace on the side of her blue jeans" -

that little, you know.' So he was very good at keeping the company at bay, and of course the record came out, and it resembled that which had been, and not that which had come, but it sold well, and from then on they kind of left me alone.

*Joni, it's interesting that Stephen Stills played bass on your first album, and there's been a lot of talk about the fact that you actually introduced Graham Nash to Stephen Stills and David Crosby and instigated the group - is that true?*

JM:Um, I think so, it's a long time ago now. I met them all independent of one



another. I met Graham Nash in Ottawa, I met David Crosby in Miami, I met Neil Young when he was a kid still living at home in Winnipeg, so all of us had different migrational patterns. Stephen I didn't know, he was the last one, by the time I met Stephen - I met him through Neil because they were in Buffalo Springfield - which was kind of defunct at the time I came to California. Neil moved from Winnipeg to Toronto, he left home after I left and by the time he got to Toronto I had moved to Detroit, then I went to New York and he went to California, and the Buffalo Springfield was founded and they were already on the radio by the time I got to California. They'd been on the radio and they were already kind of earning a living by being ghost-players for the Monkees, they were having a hard go of it at that time. Um, Crosby had a house there - I think I introduced Neil to Crosby, and I can't remember how Graham came in on it.

He travelled through with the Hollies, I know that, and was staying at David's house, so I re-met him at David's house but how he got to David's house I can't remember that part.

*Your most successful album in the early days I guess was 'Ladies of the Canyon' - it had a big hit song with 'Big Yellow Taxi' which also did very well in Australia. But I suppose the song that's haunted you the most from that era is the song 'Woodstock' which you wrote, but you didn't actually go to Woodstock did you?*

Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young had just performed publicly for the first time, I think we played and I was opening to them. We played first in LA and then in Chicago on a Saturday night and the following Sunday we were supposed to appear at Woodstock. We got as far as the airport on that Sunday with David Geffen and Elliot Roberts who were our managerial team. When we discovered it was the second largest city in the state at that time and it was also a kind of a national disaster area, there was the

problem of getting us in and getting us out - the following day I was supposed to appear on a television show out of New York - so their concern was the plane was there to take us, we can get in but will we be able to get out in time, as the festival ends and the evacuation begins. So it was decided between Elliot and David that the boys could go but I couldn't - so David and I went back to his apartment and we watched everything about it on the news - so it put me in contact with those kids who wanted to go but who were kept from going by parents or whatever. And I'm glad that that happened because I would have never had the same perspective if I was back-stage in that ego-riddled curtained-off area, I mean I think it offered me a different vantage point.

*The next phase of your career gave you great commercial success with 'Blue' and 'For the Roses' and you were described at this time as being a confessional singer-songwriter. Did it prove to be therapeutic*

*for you to be able to talk about things that were obviously very personal on your records?*

Well what had happened is that I had introverted, you know, introversion is the antithesis of being a performer, I mean to be a performer you have to be an extrovert, introversion is the realm of poetry but not performing, so here we had a conflict between two aspects of my job. The introspection pretty much sealed off my external life experience and left me only with internal life experience, so anything that was coming out of me was coming from the inside of me, it was sort of a shocking transformation to me too and though at first I'd see it on the page and I'd say 'Oh, you can't say this about yourself in the pop arena' and then I'd say 'But it's valid human experience' - this is how the debate went - 'It's valid human experience, I've never really seen anything like this written, especially in the pop context' - I can't abort it, so in order to justify it I would say 'This is good, this is good, this will help' 'cos one of the things I couldn't stand was the phenomenon-seekers, those people who rush forward who are so impressed with success and stardom, not with anything you do, this will help to adjust things, it will help to separate the wheat from the chaff. The mere phenomenon-seekers will be disgusted by it, like because its anti-popular behaviour, and those people of like mind will come forward and will get things in perspective, you know let's tell them who you're worshipping, 'cos this tendency to worship is stupid.

*Joni, is it disappointing for you that people tend to expect you to always be the confessional type of songwriter, and want to push your current work into the background in expectation of you being like you were in mid-career?*

Yeah, it is annoying to me, luckily not all people - there are people afoot who understand that in the life of an artist there are changes of perspective - so they don't hold me to the role of Ophelia all my life you know! (Laughs) But those who do I feel this about, either they have not lived a full life or they see music as a vehicle for reflecting like getting back their youth, which again means they have not had a very full life - I just have to proceed in spite of them.

*Towards the end of the 70's you were becoming much more experimental with your music, I think 'Hejira' is a good example of that, and that was the first of your collaborations with the bass-guitarist*

*Jaco Pastorius, who had an indelible effect on your music - how did you two first meet and why did you want him particularly to be involved in your music?*

Well, prior to meeting Jaco I had been newly introduced to the experience of working with an expanded palette with other musicians, and while the first collaboration was very exciting, 'Court and Spark' that is, most of the playing came from existing chords in the skeleton of what I played, it was added very carefully. Any counter-melody that was added I would sing to Tom Scott and he would transcribe it, there were a few pockets of free expression, there was

**It's hard for anyone to direct musicians, but men being directed by a woman get intolerant quicker, so there was a lot to learn**

one song where part of the horn stack arrangements are mine and they're kind of eccentric and part of them were Tom Scott's in the same song they are more normal horn writing, so like I say there were little pockets of free expression. It was my first experience in guiding musicians and I was clumsy at first in getting what I wanted from them without bruising their spirit. It's hard for anyone to direct musicians, but men being directed by a woman get intolerant quicker, so there was a lot to learn. In the coming of the next record - I gotta give you some background leading up to it - I gave my musicians freer rein, as a result on 'The Hissing of Summer Lawns' in some places there was more jazz expression in that I allowed them to express more of their own melodic opinion and they came out of the jazz idiom and therefore the colours that they added to my colours were more idiomatically jazz. As a result some people

were offended and said 'Joni's gone in a jazz direction' and really what I was doing was giving greater freedom of expression to my players and learning along the way. In the process of learning I learnt that what they did was nice but that I had strong opinions, so I began to then try and guide them closer to what I wanted. One of the things I wanted the drummer to do was take the pillow out of his kick drum, I couldn't stand that dead sound, and the bass players then didn't change their strings, it was fashionable then that they play with these dead strings, there was no roundness of tone. So what I was craving was a more Caribbean, not unlike what Police did when they first came out, when I heard Police's first projects I went 'That's what I've been trying to get' - it was a slacker head. Now with the bass I was trying to get the guy to get more round tone, to not necessarily anchor, you know, just play the root of the chord. The bass part always sounded dull if you isolated it and listened to it by itself, it wasn't musical. Why couldn't it be more musical than that I asked myself, that each part, rather than being merely supportive, would have a chance as a colour to express itself and then go back into a supportive role. So trying to direct people in this direction was nearly impossible and so I had to be satisfied with getting them as far along towards this desire as possible. When Jaco came along, I think in the process of describing what I wanted, someone said 'I know a guy in Florida who might interest you' - so Jaco was sent for, and when John Guerin heard him he said 'Oh you must love Jaco, he hardly ever plays the root of the chord' - I felt like I'd been trying to invent Jaco for a couple of years and there he was. So the ideas were in the air, it was time for the instrument to do some other things and innovators on instruments are rare. Miles changed the horn, Jaco changed the bass - it was great working with him. Plus he pushed himself up in the mixes really hot you know, like if you pulled him down he'd push himself up, he was a very dominant male (laughs).

*What caused the decline in Jaco Pastorius? You recorded last I think on Don Juan's Reckless Daughter with him, then we didn't hear much at all about him at all until his death last year.*

I saw him toward the end, I'd lost track of him, you know, I'd heard all sorts of stories of him taking off his clothes and diving into fountains in Japan and things. He was always high spirited and a bit of a nature



boy, even in his teens, and he married young. It was nothing for him to sleep on the beach with his family, I mean he was very earthy, and I liked that about him. He was the only person that I knew at that time that thought that Thus Spake Zarathustra was funny, you know Nietzsche had a bad name 'cos Hitler was a fan. So Jaco was the first person who had absorbed it, and enjoyed it the same way I did, so we had a lot of laughs around Nietzschean philosophy. Then like I say, I lost track of him, when I hear the outlandish things that he was doing, I just took it to be high spiritedness and nothing too serious, until one night I came out of an art opening in New York city and I saw a little crayon sign across the street, a Puerto Rican place, 'Jaco Pastorius Tonight'. So I said to the people I was with 'Let's go eat over there, let's go see Jaco.' I found him at the bar, really in a terrible state of depression, I'd never seen Jaco in a state of depression before. He was so far inside himself when he saw me and I said his name it took him a long time to re-enter, you know, by looking into his eyes it was like coming back from a long way away. Then he threw his arms around me like he was drowning, you know, and I felt the weight of where he was at, then his mood

changed radically and he went crying through the restaurant, I mean shouting through the restaurant in a kind of euphoric state you know, how I was the 'baddest this' and I was embarrassed you know, I was embarrassed for both of us. And we ended up jamming that night, but he couldn't follow, he was a trickster, and he kind of short-sheeted me in various ways, and made it impossible for me to play while laughing at me you know. And the audience was forgiving and said its okay to make mistakes and rather than expose him, I said 'I'm going to quit playing now, he's going to lead and I'm going to follow him' 'cos I thought its easier, he can't follow me 'cos he has no will to do so. So I let him take off, he can go anywhere he wants and I'll just scat along, so we did that but it was kind of a heartbreaking experience. He projected some of his strangeness onto me, he couldn't accuse me of not having assimilated my many selves (laughs) which was kind of a perfect description of him at that moment and it was a sad evening. Then shortly after that I heard that he was gone. That evening I saw like how he poked at disaster, you know, I was talking to a black singer who was singing with him who was a bit of a standup comic - blues singer who

had a really great street sense of humour, and he kept saying to him 'Stay away from those niggers Joni, like uh, you don't know niggers like I do' and all this stuff, and the guy was tolerant you know, and he was pushing his luck at the end really hard.

**Was there a real 'Killer Kyle' that you talk about in 'Beat of Black Wings'?**

There was a real 'Killer Kyle' but the content of the song is much more general than the dialogue between him and I. 'Killer Kyle' was a kid that came back pretty shattered during the Vietnam War, I used to play for soldiers in Fort Bragg during the Vietnamese War which gave me a very good perspective, 'cos everybody I knew in the Village was a draft-dodger, so having contact with young gung-ho servicemen was a balancing thing for me so I never got that far into the hippy thing because I knew that 'Kill a Commie for God' mentality existed in some very nice people, deluded people, but not to be angrily wagging at them. Believe me they learned, they came back shattered, so there had to be some empathy for that also. The song is really not so much his story which is much more specifically the Vietnam War, but the general story of a young soldier in a disillusioned state - it could be any war.

## LIVE IN-STORE PERFORMANCES AT THE BASEMENT DISCS DURING APRIL / MAY

**APRIL 18TH**  
**Friday 12.45pm**

**KELLY AUTY  
& THE CUTTERS**

One of Melbourne's best r'n'b outfits promoting their recently released independent CD 'Blue Angel'.

**APRIL 19TH**  
**Saturday 1.45pm**

**TIM ROLLINSON**

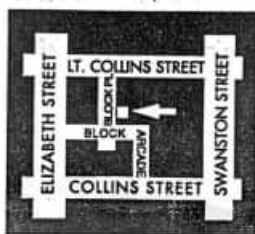
Tim is best known as a writer and guitarist for d.i.g. (the Sydney based jazz-funksters). He has just released his first solo CD 'Cause & Effect' and will be in Melbourne to launch it at The Continental on Sunday 20th April, as well as a special in-store performance on Sat 19th April. Tim will be joined by Barney McAll on keyboards, Hamish Stuart on drums, Jonathan Zwartz on bass and Phil Slater on trumpet.

**MAY 10TH**  
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**AMAZING RHYTHM ACES  
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shows at The Continental on Fri 9th and Sat 10th May, and will be promoting their brand new CD 'Out of the Blue'. Don't miss them this time!

**MAY 19TH**  
**Monday 5.00 pm**  
**BRIAN KENNEDY (UK)**

Yes... 5pm! Brian is touring Australia as part of the Guinness Irish Music Festival (Melb. Concert Hall, 9th May) and will be promoting his new CD 'A Better Man'. Brian is a member of VAN MORRISON's band and has also featured on recent Irish compilations 'Common Ground' and 'Sult'. He is a truly superb vocalist. Come and join us for a very special dose of Irish cheer!

**MAY 23RD**  
**Friday 12.45pm**  
**TEXICALI ROSE**

Texicali Rose have just released their debut self-titled CD. Driven by accordion, guitar, bass, mariachi horns and passionate vocals in Spanish and English, this band are great and fun!

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