

Joni: some sides now

Joni Mitchell:
Shadows and Light,
The Definitive Biography
By Karen O'Brien
Virgin Books, 344 pages, \$34.95

REVIEWED BY PETER FENIAK

"How are you?" she was asked
in the early nineties.

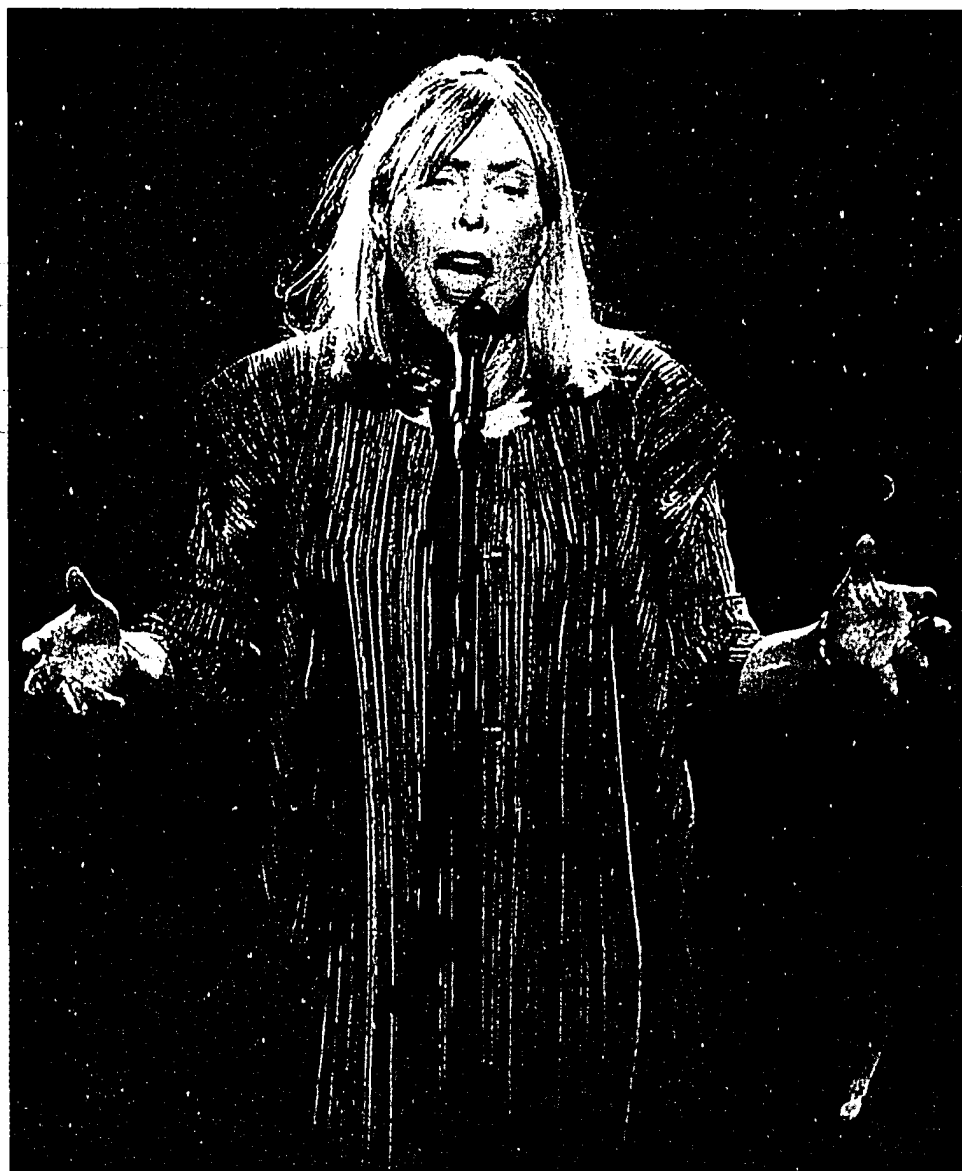
"Undervalued," **Joni Mitchell** replied.

She had a point. To many, **Joni Mitchell** was frozen in the past as blonde lady with guitar, winsome singer and master-crafter of hippy-era whimsy and heart-sore laments. Her record sales may have peaked in 1974, but Mitchell continued to chart one of the most adventurous and uncompromising careers in pop music. Lower-selling albums like *Hejira*, *Mingus* and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* had devoted admirers; the industry only remembered platinum-selling *Court and Spark*. Mitchell was not shy about saying she didn't like it.

But as the '90s unfolded, the depth and span of Mitchell's music (21 albums to date) began to attract more notice, spurred by the admiration of younger performers, from Madonna and Prince to the entire cast of *Lilith Fair*.

Citing Mitchell as a major influence, k.d. lang called her "every bit as significant as Dylan" and mused, "I wonder if she has any idea how worshipped she is?"

Mitchell must be getting the idea



Joni Mitchell performing in New York in 2000: The question is, just how great is she?

MATT CAMPBELL/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

a bar to tell the songwriter reverentially, "before Prozac there was you."

But "staying the same is boring," she said once, and Mitchell grew. While the radios are still playing *Help Me*, she makes lengthy forays into jazz, trading Crosby, Stills and Nash for Pastorius and Shorter. She collaborates with volatile jazz great Charles Mingus on an interpretation of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. And long before the world-music label is invented, she is using Burundi drummers.

As Mitchell moves away from the pop music mainstream in the 1980s and enters a happy 12-year marriage with musician/producer Larry Klein, the biography changes tone and eventually loses focus. The secondary sources O'Brien uses to find Mitchell's voice turn strident, as interviews are spent defending her musical choices. On *Blue*, Mitchell sings sweetly, "I'm so hard to handle, I'm selfish and I'm sad." Now the sweetness disappears. Revealed is a woman who takes her art and herself very seriously and is usually at odds with somebody.

Did **Joni Mitchell** turn bitter? Is the girlish giggle gone? (Remember the end of *Big Yellow Taxi*?) Do you pay that price for art? As a woman? O'Brien merely continues the chronological account. And she has no more to say about Mitchell's dramatic reunion with her daughter, Kilaurin Gibb, than you've read in *People*. The biography concludes with a lengthy treatment of Mitchell's work as a painter. But with little visual support the impact is weak.

Ultimately, Mitchell's fully lived life seems to sprawl past the author's grasp. **Joni Mitchell** is a restless, creative, pioneering artist. But who is she?

Mitchell once told The New York Times that, yes, she would write her autobiography; it would probably run to four volumes and would begin, "I was the only black man in the party." We can only wait.

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by now. Lifetime achievement awards, lavish international praise, tribute CDs and concerts and surprise Grammy Awards have addressed past slights. Today the question is never, "**Joni Mitchell**: great?" It's more like, "Joni Mitchell: how great?"

Now, out of Britain — where Mitchell's post-'70 albums have fared better than here — comes Karen O'Brien's **Joni Mitchell: Shadows and Light** to add to the river of praise. Despite lack of access to Mitchell and limited first-person accounts (many obvious Canadian sources aren't interviewed), O'Brien, a British journalist whose previous book was about women in rock music, has written a useful survey of a remarkable life and career. But Joni Mitchell remains elusive in this telling. Definitive it's not.

O'Brien's chronological account vigorously takes up the cause of Mitchell as a "complex and charismatic" woman who "has become a post-Modernist Muse, an unlikely Zelig of popular culture who has

permeated our consciousness."

Shadows and Light has its greatest life and energy as it begins stating evidence.

She was born Joan Anderson, in Fort McLeod, Alta., in 1943, raised in the Saskatchewan village of Maidstone, then in North Battleford and finally Saskatoon — a brilliant, restless, art-obsessed only child whose artist's vision is formed by the stark beauties of the prairies, and whose iron resolve is forged at the age of 9 as a bed-ridden victim of Canada's polio epidemic, (like her friend and fellow Canadian music legend, Neil Young).

Joan becomes Joni, in homage to her art teacher, Mr. Bonli. He and English teacher Arthur Kratzman fuel her love of image and colour; early rock and roll fuels her rebel spirit. She travels to art school in Calgary, discovers singing in coffee houses, travels east; poor and uncertain, she abandons an infant daughter to adoption, then becomes **Joni Mitchell** in a brief, ill-advised marriage to American folk-

singer Chuck Mitchell.

Her significant gifts were evident early on — in classic '60s folk songs such as *Both Sides Now*, *Urge for Going* and *The Circle Game*. She also fascinated musicians with her innovative guitar styling, using open tunings never seen before, developed to aid her polio-weakened left hand.

O'Brien deftly retraces Mitchell's path from Toronto to New York to L.A. as she becomes, as one critic writes, "the most exciting girl singer since Judy Collins, since Joan Baez." By the end of the '60s she is an icon, writing the boomer anthem, *Woodstock* (even though management made her skip the festival, worried that she'd miss taping *The Dick Cavett Show*).

The open-hearted, confessional songs on Mitchell's early '70s albums remain her best-known work. The high water mark, 1971's gorgeous *Blue*, is on most "best of" album lists. Its songs are "still the voice of the heart of young women," O'Brien writes. She cites the girls who approach Mitchell in