

Q

Q REVIEW

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When metal turns to gold



The BOOZE BROTHERS

The staggering success of THE POGUES

JONI MITCHELL



SEX, LIES, GUSTARD PIES!

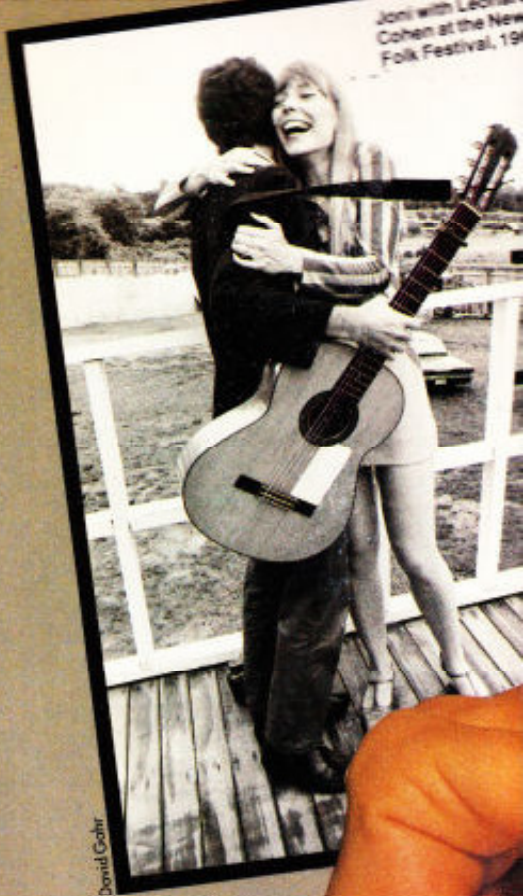
DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

She's danced to the beat of her own drum all the way from Laurel Canyon to uptown Los Angeles. Joni Mitchell talks about her life, her loves and her courageous musical ventures in a rare interview with Phil Sutcliffe.

On the office wall, in elegantly lit monochrome and framed, Joni Mitchell's husband Larry Klein bends down fondly to bury his face in the hair at the nape of her neck and wraps his arms around her. Nestling against him, she in turn affectionately hugs a bright-eyed cat. A picture of love and fulfilment — at last, you might fairly say.

There is recent evidence too of her public life: copies of *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*, her fifteenth album in 25 years, the last 16 of which have seen her veering away from her early folk roots into a sequence of experiments and unpredictable collaborations which are evolving still: with Crosby, Stills & Nash, jazz virtuosos black and white — Charlie Mingus and Jaco Pastorius, soul singers black and white — Lionel Richie and Michael McDonald. She's even been working with Prince, a devotee of her 1975 LP *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, though nothing has emerged yet.

Now, though, after working for a couple of years in nine British and American studios, she has completed her most elaborate co-operative venture.





"I couldn't stand it — all that exploitation and posturing, the gasping at the mention of your name, the pursuit by photographers and phenomenon-seekers . . . you get that shot of adrenalin and it's fight or flight. I chose flight many a time."

Brian Aris

JONI MITCHELL

The Chalk Mark cast includes Peter Gabriel, ex-Eagle Don Henley, old outlaw Willie Nelson, Hopi Indian Iron Eyes Cody, Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman from Prince's Revolution, Tom Petty and, perhaps least likely of all, Billy Idol ("I saw him at the Grammys, thought he was fantastic, rang him and told him I wanted him to sing with me"). And the result is a wonderfully original album, her most compelling compositions for years moulded, as ever, by her remarkable ear for arrangement.

The picture of wedded bliss hangs on the wall of her manager Peter Asher's office in Los Angeles, between Sunset and Santa Monica Boulevards. There have been rumours that Joni is "under the weather" but she arrives, half an hour late after a 15 minute drive from her home in Bel Air, apparently in the pink, at ease and expansive whichever way the interview turns. We perch on either side of a glass and chrome desk like job applicant and employer. Someone looks in to toss her a pack of Camels.

Joni Mitchell laughs a lot, from the lower end of her range. When she tells a funny story she makes big, comic gestures with her arms. She's 44 now, but there's still something enduringly innocent about her. Her mild accent turns "out" into "oat" and "docile" into "dossil". Talking, as in writing, she takes care with words and relishes what she calls "a well-contoured phrase". Though names and numbers escape her, she has almost total recall of what she saw and what she felt at any particular moment. She can even remember what she was wearing at every crisis point in her life.

Roberta Joan Anderson, who has lived her public years in the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, grew up in the rural sprawl of the Canadian prairies. The only child of Bill, a flight lieutenant

THE JONI MITCHELL CATALOGUE (all the sleeve illustrations by Joni Mitchell)

Peter Asher (manager): "Her objectives are solely artistic, and I don't say that is a virtue. She doesn't even think of pleasing the public."



SONG FOR A SEAGULL

Reprise 1968
Canadian innocent hits big city and chronicles her everyheartache in sometimes over-delicate story songs. Sparsely arranged but already melodically ingenious it includes Nathan La Franeer and Night In The City.
★★★★



CLOUDS

Reprise 1969
More poise in the singing, more focus in the material and lucrative cover versions for Both Sides Now, Chelsea Morning and I Don't Know Where I Stand.
★★★



LADIES OF THE CANYON

Reprise 1970
An autobiographical set detailing the Laurel Canyon life, this uses extra instruments to achieve a range of textures and hint at a new exuberance in both material and performance. Includes Woodstock, For Free and Big Yellow Taxi.
★★★



THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS

Asylum 1975
Divides fans into those who find its ornate sound and dense lyricism exhilarating and those who think it's overly clever. In either case it's an intriguing departure and includes some of her most telling songs, such as Don't Interrupt The Sorrow and The Boho Dance.
★★★★★



HEJIRA

Asylum 1976
Reverting to sparse instrumentation she used ghostly desert images and Jaco Pastorius's lonesome bass to paint a telling picture of a single woman nearing 30. Includes Amelia, Coyote and Refuge Of The Roads.
★★★★



DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

Asylum 1977
Double album which shouldn't have been, this caught too many of her experiments going wrong but nonetheless has its moments of illumination, particularly the ravishing Dreamland.
★★★★



MINGUS

Asylum 1979
In which her jazz aspirations started to look like pretensions and her tribute to the dying bass player came uncomfortably close to gushing hero worship. Includes God Must Be A Boogie Man and Dry Cleaner From Des Moines.
★

At the Isle Of Wight Festival in 1970: not scheduled to perform, Joni went on "in the spirit of co-operation" to fill space left by acts who'd cancelled. "A handful of French rabble-rousers had stirred the people up to feel that we — the performers — had sold out because we arrived in fancy cars — Neil and I had rented this old red Rolls."



in the Canadian Air Force, then grocery store manager and part-time trumpeter in a marching band, and Myrtle, a teacher, she had an itinerant childhood following her father's postings and employment across the vast flatness of Alberta and Saskatchewan: Fort McLeod, where she was

"In the second number (at the Isle Of Wight Festival) this guy in the fifth row comes squirting up and lets out a banshee yell. I knew him from the caves at Matala, Yogi Joe. He leaps up on the stage, sits at my feet and starts to play the congas with terrible time saying, Spirit Of Matala, Joni! I bend down off-mike and say, This is entirely inappropriate, Joe . . . A couple of guards grab him. The crowd then stand up and scream, They've got one of ours! And they're moving forward . . ."

**BLUE**

Reprise 1971

Alternatively sensual and chilling, Blue anatomises love in the post-Aquarian age to devastating effect. One of the most lyrically acute and musically mature "singer/songwriter" records of all time. Includes Blue, A Case Of You and The Last Time I Saw Richard.

★★★★★

**FOR THE ROSES**

Asylum 1972

Her naked bottom has disappeared from the sleeve but this remains the most flamboyant of her early records, revelling in the beginnings of a proper band and new-found sense of humour. Includes You Turn Me On I'm A Radio, Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire and Baran grill.

★★★★

**COURT & SPARK**

Asylum 1974

Pitching straight into the mainstream of American popular song she came up with a romantic masterpiece, swapping lyrical detail for jazzy simplicity, fashioning songs of great elegance and universal appeal. Includes Free Man In Paris, People's Parties and Down To You.

★★★★★

**MILES OF AISLES**

Asylum 1974

Double live set released to capitalise on her tour with Tom Scott's band this is tolerable but less than essential and includes two then-unreleased songs, Love Or Money and Jericho (the latter turned up on Don Juan).

★★

**SHADOWS AND LIGHT**

Asylum 1980

Another live double, this time with a superb band featuring Pat Metheny, Pastorius and Lyle Mays making the most of material like Hejira, Dreamland and Amelia.

★★★★

**WILD THINGS RUN FAST**

Geffen 1982

The first of three recent albums made with her husband Larry Klein, this is annoyingly inconsistent, its high points including a witty retake of Presley's You're So Square and the unambiguous pop song Solid Love.

★★★

**DOG EAT DOG**

Geffen 1985

Her most biting piece of work since Summer Lawns found her lambasting TV evangelists in Tax Free and rich kids in Shiny Toys while celebrating her domestic serenity most convincingly in Lucky Girl. The talent's still there but the hunger may not be.

★★★★

**CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM**

Geffen 1988

See review, p. 75



Joel Bernstein

Joni, with her set list taped to her guitar, prepares to take the stage at her first performance at New York's Carnegie Hall, February 1, 1969.

Peter Albling (a comedian in LA now) and wrote her first song. The second, Day After Day, came to her on the train to the '64 Mariposa Folk Festival, near Toronto, and inspired her decision to shovel the last clod on the grave of her formal education, quit her course and leave home.

With her few thin songs, "love-lost pieces for a wandering Australian who really did me in", she plunged into the musicianly hurly-burly of Yorktown, Toronto, an area rather like Greenwich Village, where the tough competition on the local circuit was from the folk-rock protest sector: David Clayton-Thomas (later of Blood Sweat & Tears), Jack London & The Sparrows (later Steppenwolf), Gordon Lightfoot, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Phil Ochs. She faced the drunks yelling "Get 'em off, sweetheart!" and the mockery of musos like Dave Van Ronk who listened to her play then said, "Joni, you've really got groovy taste in clothes. Why don't you become a fashion model?"

She almost did. Initially she worked in women's wear shops to pay for her musicians' union card. And the coffee house grind went on for four years. She got married to another folk singer, Chuck Mitchell, in '65, and moved in with him in Detroit. They toured the northeast US circuit as a duo, then split up after a little over 12 months. But she kept right on, solo, handling her own bookings, enjoying what she calls the "scuffling". "OK, I've got you up to full capacity now," she'd say. "Last time I made *this* much; this time why don't you pay me *this* much more and you can still make a profit. Let's be fair." One regular gig was the army base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where, among other broadening experiences, she acquired the guitar she was to use onstage until it was stolen from an airport baggage carousel at Maui, Hawaii, in the late '70s. She bought it from a captain who would get drunk and tell her she was "better than Peter, Paul & Mary".

born in 1943, Calgary, Maidstone — pop. 400, "a two-church town" where the highspot of her day was to watch the only train going through and wave to the driver — North Battleford, and, from the sixth grade on (11), Saskatoon.

Life post-war had a peculiar flavour throughout the victorious nations, even in the rich wheat prairies the tight belt of rationing nipped every waist. "It was a strange, surrealistic time," she says. "Stocks on the shelves were dwindling down to nothing. You were lucky to get soap, and when you did get it, you washed your dishes and your hair and your clothes with it whether it was detergent or shampoo."

Although she was always artistically inclined she was never any good at school. The only period when she made real progress was when she had polio (Neil Young caught it in the same Canadian epidemic) and her mother — "an old-fashioned woman, presser of flowers, scrapbook keeper," says Joni — who had stopped work by then, taught her at home for an entire year while she recovered. "She had this blackboard and when I didn't understand something she would say, For Pete's sake Joan, do I have to draw you a diagram? And that was exactly it — I needed pictorial references."

At first they wondered whether she would walk again. Then she wanted to do nothing but dance. Ballet, she dreamed. Rock 'n' roll, she loved it, jiving with the door handle to the two weekly hit parade shows on the radio. It led her into bad company, bussing downtown in her smart frock, proper hat and gloves to the juke box hang-outs, forbidden public dances, brothels even. "If you've seen pictures of me when I was 25 when I started recording, you'll know I looked 12 then," she says, "so you can imagine what I looked like when I really was 12. Awfully wholesome to be in those places. The kids used to say to me, You look too innocent. Smoke!"

Into her teens, she drew a Christmas card for a senior boy at school and in return he gave her The Hottest New Sound In Jazz LP by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Strangely enough, this motormouth, avant-garde flare-up took her by storm — "I don't think there's another album I know every song on, including my own." But The Kingston Trio were in the pop charts with Tom Dooley so she bought a ukelele, her mother having decreed that the guitar was "hillbillyish".

While studying at the Alberta College Of Art, Calgary, at 19 she played her first pro dates at The Depression coffee house with a friend called

By then Joni was set up in New York with a small apartment north of the Village. She got into what she calls her "Magic Princess trip", covering the bedroom walls with tinfoil and wrapping crepe paper round the doors. Life was good: independent, writing up to four new songs a week, as much as \$400 in the bank. This was her Chelsea Morning — she celebrated it with the joyful song eventually recorded for *Clouds*, her second album.

Then she started to get noticed. Suddenly renowned folkies like Tom Rush and Buffy Sainte-Marie, who both recorded *The Circle Game*, wanted her songs. Most significantly, in '67 on *Wildflowers*, Judy Collins covered Michael From Mountains and Both Sides Now, the latter an American Top 10 single some months later (and a lesser UK hit in 1970). Still, in autumn that year Joni was on \$15 a night, opening for Richie Havens at the Cafe Au Go Go in the Village when Buffy took one of her agency team, Elliott Roberts, to see her. He has described her as "a jumble of creative clutter with a guitar case full of napkins, road maps and scraps of paper — all covered with lyrics." Immediately, he left his job to manage her.

Roberts negotiated a deal with Reprise and brought Joni to LA. She didn't like it at first because the pavements were dead, it was a city that lived in cars. But by '69 she and Graham Nash, the former Hollie lately partnered with David Crosby and Stephen Stills under the Roberts umbrella, were living together in Laurel Canyon — the hill suburb of Los Angeles that had become so fashionable among rock stars. Indeed Stills, Crosby and Cass Elliott (of the Mamas And Papas) comprised their immediate circle of friends and neighbours.

A strange phenomenon ensued around the time of her first album, *Song For A Seagull*. She and Nash took to conducting press interviews at home and, given the run of the place, journalists from *Time* or *Rolling Stone* would stroll about, in effect, conducting inventories. Fascinating. The contents of the fairly bijou two-bedroom residence — previous owners Houdini and Tom Mix — included one grand piano, one grandfather clock (gift from Leonard Cohen), one turkey made of pinecones, one "Souvenir of Saskatoon" ornamental plate, one Art Nouveau lamp in the shape of a frog on a lily pad, one hand-carved hat rack, one sewing machine, musical instruments and brown velvet rocking chairs (various) and one giant antique wooden pig. All reported glowingly on the friendly atmosphere.

With Nash, Joni put herself on the line. Combine this sort of media exposure with her music and the rock public felt an unusual intimacy with her which both demanded and fed the supply of stories about her love life: Leonard Cohen, James Taylor, Neil Young, Stills — there'd been liaisons with all of them but what was the latest? Millions followed the rumours on a need-to-know basis.

At first she held nothing back. She was on the road for 40 weeks in '69. She opened for CSN on a US tour and played major festivals at Miami, Atlantic City, Newport, Big Sur, New York and Monterey (she missed Woodstock, but played the Isle of Wight the following year). Her second album, *Clouds*, went gold in America and won a Grammy, while her success as a songwriter reached a new peak in '70 with *Woodstock*, her imaginative response to not actually being there, a massive hit in Britain and America for both CSN&Y and Matthews' *Southern Comfort*.

But for all that she became a celebrity it was simply voice, melody and lyrics that established her as an artist of substance. On her great sequence of albums through to the live retrospective *Miles Of Aisles* in 1974, she had the stillness and purity of Baez or Collins, her immediate forerunners, but she wasn't so cool — there was romance and vulnerability about her. And no barriers. Women were Joni, men were her boyfriends (in fact, she often portrayed herself as the wayward boy's mother too), and her improbably sinuous melodies, playful swoops and sustains made your hair stand on end.

Her lyrics were a joy: built with immense discipline as in *Both Sides Now*, a song all about "balance" and its limitations; dazzlingly inventive as in *Big Yellow Taxi* (the firecracker fun and spot-on satire carried by alliteration in "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot" still gives me a big grin). But for the less sentimental, her poetic often lurched towards the poetical and her flights of imagery went airy-fairy. *Song To A Seagull* stands accused of anticipating Jonathan Livingston of that ilk: the bird as vaguely mystical symbol of our higher aspirations to something or other and harbinger of this and that. The busker in *For Free* with whom she critically, but romantically, compares her strictly-cash-on-the-barrelhead self would, given a voice, carp at her only for giving herself a hard time while she could have been dropping a dollar in his hat.

Like any writer, she couldn't always evade the current clichés. She did try though, and with remarkable conscientiousness. Already, in January 1970, she was worried that stardom had cost her the observer status in life which she valued so much. Her range of experience, her air supply, was being circumscribed by the common round of rock.

So she stopped. She stepped right away from

the music business and went travelling: Greece, Spain, France, Jamaica, Panama. On Crete she spent five weeks roughing it with the hippies in the caves of Matala, until the police came and turfed them out.

She returned with a new policy for personal defence which was to sustain her for some time. Her next album, *Blue*, 1971, was the ultimate in her "confessional poetry", wide open and apparently vulnerable — and yet not so because, other than in her music, she had determined to keep herself hidden. She refused interviews and gave fewer concerts, and even then pulled out of so many that at one point Roberts did some rueful arithmetic and said she had notched up more cancellations than gigs played. Onstage she would even threaten that if she saw one photographer's flash she would be off.

Towards the mid-'70s a durable solution, artistic rather than career-tactical, began to shape itself quite naturally for her. The first signs of it came when she asked a jazz band, Tom Scott And The LA Express, to play in the studio for *Court And Spark* (her only US million-seller) and then as her backing band on the *Miles Of Aisles* world tour. Also she fell in love with the drummer, John Guerin, who moved in to share the 16-room Spanish-style Bel-Air house she lives in to this day. An American magazine interview at the time related scenes of tranquil domesticity: goldfish pond, swimming pool, Chinese paper dragons by the door and Joni and John playing backgammon on a table in the sun.

Q: A media picture of you has emerged from about '69. You were living with Graham Nash and apparently keeping virtual open house to the press.

You have to put it in the context of those times. Back then, we, the musical . . . heroes, for lack of a better word, didn't feel very separated from our audiences. We were all hippies. It's not like now where the musical stars have become like the movie stars of the era before us — transformed by luminous images. We felt we were all in this together. I know I didn't feel separate from the press — which was a mistake. Oh yeah, you must maintain some privacy. I mean, I like my place to be cosy. I like cats. They give the home a heartbeat — in lieu of children. I don't have children. I see home as a sanctuary with a tea kettle rocking and good conversation.



The Last Waltz, November 25, '76: (from left) Dr. John, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Rick Danko, Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, Robbie Robertson. "If I was a spokesperson for a generation, nobody heard me — so big deal."

JONI MITCHELL

Q: What did you feel at the time then about that public scrutiny via the media?

Oh, I couldn't stand it. All that exploitation and posturing, the gasping at the mention of your name, the pursuit by photographers and phenomenon-seekers . . . you get that shot of adrenalin and it's fight or flight. I chose flight many a time.

Q: Hard to do on stage, you're not supposed to . . .

The first time I stood my ground was in front of half a million people at the Isle of Wight. What happened was this. It was a hostile audience to begin with. A handful of French rabble-rousers had stirred the people up to feel that we, the performers, had sold out because we arrived in fancy cars — Neil and I had rented an old red Rolls, the driver had to sit outside, a real horseless carriage. Backstage there was all this international capital — bowls of money, open coffers.

Some acts cancelled so there was a dead space of about an hour. No one would go on. But in a spirit of co-operation, knowing it was death, I said, OK, I'll go out there.

In the second number a guy in about the fifth row, flipped out on acid, comes squirting up and lets out a banshee yell, guttural, demented, devils at his heels. It's as if a whale came out of the water, the waves, the energy from him spreads to

the back so fast. Now the whole thing is *undulating*. I go and sit at the piano and this guy I knew from the caves at Matala, Yogi Joe, he taught me my first yoga lesson, he leaps up on stage. He gives me the Victory sign, he sits at my feet and starts to play the congas with terrible time. He looks up at me and says, Spirit of Matala, Joni! I bend down off-mike and say, This is *entirely* inappropriate, Joe. It was Woodstock of all the songs to be singing, because this was so different — it was a war zone out there.

At the end of Woodstock Yogi Joe springs up, grabs the microphone and yells, "It's desolation row and we're all doomed!" or something to this effect. A couple of guards grab him. The crowd then stand up and scream, "They've got one of ours!" And they're moving forward.

Now what would you do? I've run for much less than that. But I thought, I can't. I have to stand up. The place I drew my strength from was very bizarre. I had been to a Hopi snake dance ceremony — it's a very high ceremony to bring rain to their runty corn crops. They dance with live snakes and there was one that stood up on the end of its tail and launched itself like a javelin right into the audience. The people scattered but the musicians, the antelope-priest drummers, never missed a beat. Their earnestness, their sincerity, their need to bring rain, was unaffected. They kept the groove.

So, with my chin quivering, fighting back tears and the impulse to run, I said "I was at a Hopi snake dance a couple of weeks ago and there were tourists who acted like Indians and Indians who

acted like tourists — you're just a bunch of tourists. Some of us have our lives involved in this music. Show some respect." And the beast lay down. The beast lay down.

Q: Did you and your friends live communally?

No, not really. There was a community of musicians but we didn't all live under the same roof and alternate duties or anything.

Q: You wouldn't have wanted that?

I'm too much of a loner. I was too much on the fringes of everything.

Q: But all your personal relationships centred around the "community of musicians"?

They usually began as friendships, burst into flame (*laughs*), and continued after the fact as friendships.

Q: Did the whole hippy cultural and social period feel natural to you?

No, never, because it was a *style*, you know. Lay off the scissors and you were a hippy.

Q: In your group of friends there was a lot of closeness, but was there also competition, rivalry?

Uh-huh. It doesn't suit my body though. I short-circuit. It feels tense and, uh, vulgar. I was sort of passive in my twenties, very manipulable. I was opinionated, mind you, but . . . I had a desire to be agreeable and co-operative and you can take that desire and move a person around.

BOURGEOIS TAGG

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Q: Did you get moved to where you didn't want to be?

In some cases, Woodstock, for instance. We were all standing in the airport, CSN and myself, and it was agreed by the managers, David Geffen and Elliott Roberts, that I should not go because it would be difficult to get me out of there and back to New York for a television show that Monday night. If it happened now I think I would have given them a good argument because it kind of broke my heart. But I was the girl in the family. 'Daddy' said I couldn't go.

Q: Where did drugs figure for you?

I was late to try everything. I was so over-protected within this stable. When Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young did their first album all I knew was suddenly all their personalities were changing. Graham was getting thin; he wouldn't eat and he stayed up all night. I didn't know any of them was doing drugs. They would hide them and whisper when I was around.

Q: But you eventually tried them?

Oh yeah, I tried everything. Well, I never tried heroin because I thought, "What's the point? The worst that could happen would be you'd like it." But altered consciousness is completely tempting to a writer. I did some good writing, I think, on cocaine — Song For Sharon (*Hejira*) — but it kills your heart, takes all your energy, puts it up in your brain and gives you the arrogance that, you know, ruined Jaco Pastorius. (*After destitute years of drink and drug problems the former Weather*

Report and Mitchell band bassist died last September after being beaten up outside a Florida club.) I watched it ruin a lot of people.

Q: Were you aware of being "the spokeswoman for a generation"?

You mean via the song Woodstock? If I was a spokesperson nobody heard me, so big deal.

In 1975 Joni Mitchell took a typically peripheral part in the great rock 'n' roll gang show, The Rolling Thunder Review, which featured Dylan, Baez, McGuinn and friends. But she was preparing to make her own splash with an album which can now be seen as the axis of her career. The *Hissing Of Summer Lawns* came out in the autumn and its smoky, languorous, jazz tension provoked her first critical pasting, in America at least. She had been revered, "the Goddess of song" no less. Now she stank the place out. The crime seems to have been, as with Dylan a decade earlier, that she had deserted folk and, thus, all the associated purities she had represented.

Some small consolation was that it did strike a chord in Britain. In case anyone was going to miss the point of it all she drew a diagram. Her cover painting showed Amazon tribesmen bearing a giant snake, approaching the outskirts of a cityscape incorporating LA and New York — with the Mitchell homestead bottom left.

She had taken a theme outside love lost and found and worked it to the limits of her

imagination and intellect to build a whole album. Offsetting black and white, the jungle and the city, she had a muscular metaphor for the big idea that was eating her — how the orderly and the wild fight it out beneath the skin of everyone. Burundi drums thundering through The Jungle Line or sprinklers hissing like snakes . . . She had her subject, the animal/human/animal. She had her musical field to explore, at last discovering how she might connect with the black and white blending she had loved so much on her old Lambert, Hendricks & Ross LP. (She covered their *Twisted on Court And Spark* and *Centrepiece on The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*.) It wasn't that she took a vow against "personal" songs from then on, but they were no longer a trap to her.

Her next, *Hejira*, was written almost entirely on the road, in the Kerouac sense. She was

"Bobby and Joan Baez were going to rescue Hurricane Carter. I had talked to Hurricane on the phone several times and I was alone in perceiving that he was a violent person and an opportunist. I thought, Oh my God we're a bunch of patsy white liberals. This is a bad person. He's fakin' it. Anyway, Hurricane was released and the next day he brutally beat up this woman . . ."



Taja Sevelle

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cooling her heels on the beach at Neil Young's house one day when some friends came by and said they fancied driving across the country. They climbed into her car and did it. Among other things, Hejira actually bade farewell to another lover — presumably Guerin, whom she left that year — but *Furry Sings The Blues*, a reflection on her encounter with ancient bluesman Furry Lewis, was the piece which attracted controversial attention.

Then, astonishingly, she turned up in blackface on the cover of her next, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, a yet more ambitiously jazzy double set, with the late bass virtuoso Jaco Pastorius a forceful presence. While it took her further away from a mainstream audience, Charlie Mingus, a jazz immortal composer, acoustic bass player and band leader, listened and liked it. He contacted her through the grapevine with a proposal that they work together on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. If she could trim the texts down a bit ready for singing, he would write a score for full orchestra. Joni read the thing and, regretfully, cried off. But Mingus was persistent. In April '78, already crippled by a rare, paralyzing disease, he produced what proved to be his last six compositions and told her their provisional title was *Joni I-VI*.

It was a great gamble. She had never collaborated with anyone to this degree before, and Mingus's music was very difficult, but how could she resist? She spent time with him in Mexico while he consulted a faith healer. The dying of a great man hung over her work, challenging her ingenuity and her artistic integrity. She gave up on a couple of the pieces. She tried his signature tune, *Goodbye Porkpie Hat*, instead and it took three months to get a lyric. Finally she found she had recorded up to four separate cuts of every track and, although she knew Mingus hated amplified instruments, she chose the electric versions because she felt they were best.

In her touching sleeve note she sees herself "dog paddling around in the currents of black classical music". Referring to the two tunes she had to leave out altogether Joni said they were "too idiomatic" for her. Ironically, this was exactly how the entire album would sound to her fans.

No such nice considerations though for Joe Smith, chairman of Elektra/Asylum. On surveying the plush gatefold sleeve and listening to the music therein he made a conference phone call to his promotion men nationwide. "I'm having a contest for them on sales of Mingus," he explained afterwards. "First prize is they get to keep their jobs!"

Q: Your most controversial work in the second half of the '70s came from your unusual approaches to black music from *The Jungle Line* and on to *Mingus*. In between there was *Furry Sings The Blues*. How did that song come about?

I had been out on *Rolling Thunder* and for my own amusement on that tour I had taken to



At an exhibition of her paintings (which included her cover for *Dog Eat Dog*) in '85.



With husband, bassist and co-producer Larry Klein.

ripping off cops. I would use my wits and try and get a piece of cop paraphernalia off 'em — I got hats and jackets and tie-clips and badges. One time I chased a cop and he wouldn't give me anything so I said, "What if I get a gang and we pin you up against a wall and you tell your superior you were outnumbered?" He was real deadpan. This smile came over just one corner of his mouth and he said "Go get your gang." It was really a charming game. I would introduce myself as Mademoiselle Oink, the liaison officer between rock 'n' roll and the cops.

So when we got to Memphis on my own tour I hit on this cop and he agreed we would trade a badge for a record. Then he said we should go and see old Beal Street, which used to be the heart of blues music in the town. Well, it was an amazing vision, like a Western ghost town three blocks long. Shards of wreckage all around, cranes with wrecking balls still standing there. Two pawn shops were functioning and there was a modern movie theatre with a double bill of black machine-gun movies — next to a statue of W.C. Handy, a trumpet player of the jazz era. We came down the street and, if I'm not embellishing, a tumbleweed drifted across in front of the car — it seems to me it did.

Standing in front of one of the pawn shops was a guy in a purplish-blue shirt, bright blue blazer with brass buttons on it, bald, smokin' a stogie. He looks at me and says, You Joni Mitchell? I think, Culturally this is impossible. This guy should not know my name. However, I had heard that Furry Lewis lived in Memphis so I mentioned it to the pawnbroker. He says, Oh sure, he's a friend of mine. Meet me here tonight and we'll go over and see him. Bring a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a carton of Pall Mall cigarettes.

Furry was in his eighties or nineties and senile at this point. Lived in a little shanty in the ghetto there. It was quite a nice visit until I said to him — meaning to be close to him, meaning "We have this in common" — "I play in open tunings too." Now I dunno, people must have ridiculed him about it or something, because he leaned upon the bed and said (*hoarse old voice*) Ah kin play in Spanish tonnin'. Real defensive. Somehow or other I insulted him. From then on it was downhill. He just said, I don't like her, as I wrote in the song.

Q: What do you feel about this whole episode?

I'm too sensitive. I'm likely to feel shitty over things that would just roll off another back. I would like to be appropriate. I would like to be

fine-tuned to the point where my instincts are working well, where everything is in alignment. But to say, I play in open tunings too — this is not an insulting remark (*laughs*)! You can't control these things.

Q: And how do you see the experience with Charlie Mingus now?

The musicianship on that album is at a very high level and I'm proud of it. But it's obscure. It hammered the nail into my coffin which said: Joni is dead on pop radio, she's a jazzier. I would do it again in a minute though, that project. To have the experience of collaborating with such an unusual character and a fine jazz musician. Definitely.

Q: Was Mingus's being black a big part of it for you?

No, my blackness was a part of it actually because I appeared on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* as a black man. Charles thought I had a lot of audacity to do that and that was one of the reasons he sent for me.

Q: His response seems unusual. The old "nigger minstrel" blacking-up business is normally taken as racist. Why did you do that?

There's a whole history that led up to that action. The first seed was on *Rolling Thunder*. Bobby and Joan Baez were in whiteface and they were going to rescue Hurricane Carter. I had talked to Hurricane on the phone several times and I was alone in perceiving that he was a violent person and an opportunist. I thought, Oh my God, we're a bunch of white patsy liberals. This is a bad person. He's fakin' it.

So when we got to the last show, which was at Madison Square Garden, Joan Baez asked me to introduce Muhammad Ali. I was in a particularly cynical mood — it had been a difficult excursion. I said, Fine, what I'll say is — and I never would've — I'll say, We're here tonight on behalf of one jive-ass nigger who could have been champion of the world and I'd like to introduce you to another one who is. She stared at me, and immediately removed me from this introductory role. I thought then, I should go on in blackface tonight. Anyway, Hurricane was released and the next day he brutally beat up this woman. . .

So there came Halloween, and I was walking down Hollywood Boulevard. There were a lot of people out on the street wearing wigs and paint and masks, and I was thinking, What can I do for a costume? Then a black guy walked by me with a New York diddybop kind of step, and he said in

the most wonderful way, (*croons*) Lookin' good, sister, lookin' goood. His spirit was infectious and I thought, I'll go as him. I bought the make-up, the wig, the sideburns, I went into a sleazy menswear and bought a sleazy hat and a sleazy suit and that night I went to a Halloween party and nobody knew it was me, nobody.

The art she professed herself most worried about at the start of the '80s was "growing old gracefully." Further, with mock melodrama, she enquired of a journalist, "Is my maternity to amount to a lot of black plastic?" She had drifted a long way from centre-stage. Like Miles Of Aisles, the Shadows And Light live double, her last recording with Pastorius, seemed to have drawn a line. Then she went to ground for a while. Wild Things Run Fast, in '82, featured Guerin on drums — she's terrific at staying friends with former lovers — and her new husband Larry Klein on bass. It took a potshot at a single hit with a spunky remake of Leiber and Stoller's (You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care. In Lionel Ritchie it introduced the first of what, on her last three albums, has become a parade of unlikely guest duettists. It was very good — she really has never made a clinker — and sold moderately.

The same applied to her next, Dog Eat Dog, three years later. While shifting further towards the adult rock consensus it was literate as ever, sharply satirical about fang-and-claw consumerism and the seedy side of pop's efforts for Ethiopia. Joni found new Madonna and Stevie Nicks areas in her voice and, while English new-tech wizard Thomas Dolby's production work didn't make much impression, two straight ahead songs with music by Klein — Fiction and Tax Free — hinted that she might be examining the possibilities of stadium rock.

In the middle of recording, she broke with Elliott Roberts after 17 years. For a few weeks she tried to look after herself as she had done back in the coffee house days but, when she realised it meant the phone never stopped ringing, she turned to her old friend Peter Asher, actress Jane's brother and very late of '60s chart duo Peter & Gordon, not to mention long-time manager of James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt.

No magic wand to hand, though. "I loved Dog Eat Dog," he says. "Other people didn't. Of course, Joni was disappointed when it didn't do well. The thing is every artist has a reluctance to accept that basically, not enough people liked the record. Then anyone who's around gets blamed, which is usually the record company."

"But Joni doesn't have any of this even vaguely on her mind, not for an instant. In the studio her objectives are solely artistic. And I don't say that is a virtue. She doesn't even *think* of pleasing the public. In that sense she's lucky she's as popular as she is. At least, around the world, she still does half a million every time. No danger of Geffen losing money on her — and even if an album didn't get its costs back, another label would sign her right away because of her reputation and

creativity."

It turns out that Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm, her latest, is a wonderful album. Apart from the intriguing and varied list of duettists detailed earlier, the songs show off her full scope quite beautifully (there's even a nostalgic variant on folk standard Corrina Corrina). The depth of reflection she is putting into her work now emerges in two songs which reach back over 20 years to events touched on elsewhere in this interview. Those Hopi antelope-priest drummers who inspired her at the Isle of Wight are on her mind again in Lakota, a protest against government attempts to take the tribe's land for uranium mining. And Fort Bragg, the army camp where that besotted captain sold her a favourite guitar is recalled in Beat Of Black Wings — it was there, she explains, that she met the song's central

"Back then, we — the musical 'heroes' for lack of a better word — didn't feel very separated from our audiences. It's not like now where the musical stars have become like the movie stars of the era before us — transformed by luminous images."

character, the Viet Vet, Killer Kyle.

"He was there. Fort Bragg was an interesting place. It gave me a balanced view because everyone I knew was, you know, dodging the Vietnam draft like crazy, pleading insanity and homosexuality, anything. The boys down there were Southerners for the most part: they all believed in America, mom, apple pie and the War. They were not at all Bohemian.

"There were some soldiers there who hadn't been to the War yet, and then you had the damaged coming back — Killer Kyle was such a person. He was in the Airborne Division, a paratrooper medic. Terrible experiences, hell on earth, you know? I came off stage one night — I can remember what I was wearing, the whole incident was so vivid: an old '40s purple silk velvet evening gown and my hair plaited up on my head with some roses in it. I looked like an old Sarah Bernhardt poster.

"I went into the dressing room and Killer was there, red-in-the-face angry, his fists clenched, in his neck the veins were standing out — it was kind of frightening. He said to me in a thick Southern accent (*which she doesn't mimic*), You've got a lotta nerve, sister, standing up there and singing about love because there ain't no love and I'm gonna tell you where love went. He ended up crying and shaking. The song doesn't exactly depict what he told me though. What he told me doesn't make a song."

Q: Did you start the '80s thinking "I have a problem here"?

I started the '80s by going to a party — at Stephen Bishop's — with the theme "Be nice to the '80s and the '80s will be nice to you". Everyone realised at the brink of it that it was going to be a

hideous era. I had this car, my beloved '69 Bluebird, and I was on my way, driving past Tower Records on Sunset, it was that royal blue time of night, just before it goes black. I stopped and ran into the store because I just had to listen to a Jimmy Cliff record, The Bongo Man Has Come. But when I came out there was the empty slot where my car had been. Never saw it again. I loved that Bluebird.

Anyway that's how the '80s were ushered in for me and it was all downhill from there. The government ripped me off — I was one of just 12 people in the entire country who were forced to pay a new tax on a record at the point you hand it over to the record company. Twelve people! What kind of justice is there in this thing? I'm still fighting it. Then my housekeeper decided to sue me for \$5 million.

Q: What did you do to her?

I kicked her in the shin because she was ripping me off. She was a Guatemalan and I'd paid for her to go home twice and the second time she didn't even go, she went to Europe, so she'd been lying. Finally I kicked her in the shins. But I can't do that as a public person. She went to the criminal court and they threw it out because it's just laughable. But she's still after me though she's on her fifth lawyer. Then I had trouble with the record company which we don't wanna get into, OK, because I'm still there.

Q: They wanted you to sell more records I expect.

No, no. Anyway, it's like the Anti-Christ is running things in this era.

Q: Why did you split with Elliott Roberts?

He needs a manager (*laughter*). We're still good friends. I don't really want to get into that.

Q: Why did you decide to get married at last?

Because Larry's such a wonderful person and I just love him.

Q: And you've become marriable?

Exactly. I've settled down.

Q: Have you ever been out with a non-musician?

Since my youth . . . not really. I'm drawn to talent. I've been out with a painter. Always in the arts though.

Q: How do you spend your time now, outside of music?

I'm so artsy, you know. When I'm not doing music I'm painting, I'm writing poetry. We enjoy home life. It's fairly simple really, we enjoy movies, I love card games, video games, backgammon . . . I don't go to the supermarket because I hired a cook, but up till then I did. I don't lead a tremendously sheltered life. We frequent a little restaurant in our neighbourhood almost every day. Most of our best friends are not in the Hollywood firmament.

Q: Does it matter to you that this album is a hit?

I could use a hit, yeah. On the last two records the production, the layering of keyboards, was an expensive process and I gotta sell more records to recoup, just to break even.