

Joni Mitchell running free



Rock

Kristine McKenna
in Los Angeles

JONI MITCHELL doesn't take herself nearly as seriously as her music might lead one to expect. Her image of a tortured, restless soul at the mercy of doomed romance may be straight out of 'Wuthering Heights', but Mitchell seemed a relaxed, open woman with a terrific sense of humor during a recent interview.

"The anatomy of the love crime has always been my favorite theme, and I do write about personal, internal things," she said, reflecting on her image at her manager's West Hollywood office. "There are many people who prefer not to deal with those things, and they probably find my music depressing."

"I think depression is generally misunderstood, though. I hate to get poetic on you, but it's like winter and is necessary for further blooming. I'm rather an overly sensitive person with a loud antenna and sometimes I pick up too much and things become chaotic. But I don't consider myself a melancholy person — my wonder is still intact and I laugh a lot."

One of the big stars to emerge from the 1960s, Mitchell has maintained a low profile in the pop world in recent years, and her current album, 'Wild Things Run Fast', is the first collection of new material she has released since 1977. Although it is widely assumed she abandoned the pop arena for the jazz world, she claims she has actually spent most of her time in a non-musical medium.

"I've always considered myself a painter first and a musician second, and I have reached the point where I want to focus exclusively on painting. This record was to be my last for Elektra-Asylum and I wanted it to be my swan song because in ways it summarises everything I have to say about love."

"Instead, it turns out that it's the first of five albums I'll do for Geffen Records — and being as involved with painting as I am now, there are days when I regret having committed myself to another contract. But there is some logic to the decision. The album is good and has the potential of reaching a lot of people, and I haven't made a record too many people could relate to in a long time."

Joni Mitchell has indeed led her fans down some strange and foreign paths since she won their hearts 15 years ago with dainty warblings from the battlefield of love. The quintessential Canyon Lady of the Woodstock era, Mitchell

offered the persona of a sweet beauty on a quest for spiritual growth that sent her reeling in and out of ill-fated romances.

Simplicity and candor were admired traits in the Dylanesque 1960s, and Mitchell's confessional writing style, coupled with her imaginative melodic ear, yielded some of the most popular standards of the folk-rock canon. An exquisitely controlled vocalist capable of yodelling octave leaps, Mitchell accompanied herself on exotically-tuned guitars sounded unique and was pretty enough to become the darling of the folk scene after her debut LP was recorded in 1967.

"Becoming famous was the biggest upheaval in my life, and it took me about eight years to adjust to it," she recalls. "It was terrifying. When it first hit it was so extreme that when people looked at me I just wanted to shrivel up. I just couldn't get used to people sucking in their breath when I walked by."

The sunny childhood of Mitchell's career culminated in 1971 with 'Blue', considered by many to be her finest work, although 'Court and Spark' (1974) yielded her two biggest-selling singles. She then began tinkering with the lucrative song formula she had perfected, edging out of the glaring pop spotlight into the world of jazz.

"One of the things that attracted me to the jazz world was the fact that many jazz people didn't know who I was and there was no phenomenon surrounding me there — I found that delicious. I also like the fact that the jazz world allows you to grow old gracefully, whereas pop music is completely aligned with youth."

At that point her music began to stretch out and take on more air and space. Structurally, her records evolved from collections of songs into fluid, interwoven symphonic compositions with a cinematic feeling; ethereal music embellished with ethnic rhythms and flourishes of jazz, floating around a loosely-sketched story line. Her melodies were now fragile, hothouse creatures that required special handling to survive. Her contemporaries stopped cov-

ering her material because who else but Mitchell could sing it? Her voice, too, had become so elegant and arch it was downright air-conditioned.

This phase peaked in 1975 with 'The Hissing of Summer Lawns', which was her last album to make the Top 10. The musical equivalent of an Ann Beattie story, 'Hissing' was an essay on the spiritual bankruptcy of America's upper-middle class and was a work of jarring disillusionment. The wide-eyed lass of the 1960s who had penned anthems of hope like 'Woodstock' had clearly seen a lot in the intervening years.

Mitchell's involvement with jazz deepened, while the cynicism she expressed on 'Hissing of Summer Lawns' subsided into just plain weariness in her next albums, 'Hejira' and 'Don Juan's Reckless Daughter', which dealt with escape, lost innocence and the parched purity of the American south-west.

She then collaborated on an album with jazz legend Charles Mingus in 1978 — his last before his death in 1979 — which completed her transition from pop singer into jazz vocalist and confused her public even more.

"The pop Press didn't know what to do with the Mingus record, so they either ignored it or treated it as some kind of breach of orthodoxy, as if I'd been a Catholic and suddenly became a Baptist. They called it pretentious and many other adjectives that seemed to say, 'Don't you know what you are?'"

"It just seems to be human nature to typecast — friends even do it to one another, so it's not just the Press or record buyers. For an artist, once your audience realises that change is part of your style, they assume an attitude of, 'What will he do next?', and then you're home free. I think that after 15 years of making records, people have adjusted to the fact that I change, and so my changes are more comfortable now."

The changes on Joni Mitchell's current LP are not quite as radical as many she has made. In some respects the album signals a return to the pop field, including as it does a vocal duet with Lionel Richie and a version of Buddy Holly's old hit, '(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care', which has been released as a single.

Mitchell doesn't see it "as a step back" toward pop, but rather as a synthesis of a lot of things I've done. There is a return to rock steady rhythms, which I'd

abandoned for a while simply because I was sick of the backbeat, but there's still a lot of jazz phasing in the vocals.

"As we were making the record we found ourselves saying, 'Gee, that sounds like a single', but I really don't know what a single is in 1982. I'm interested in musical trends so I listen to the radio, and a lot of what they play remind me of that banal phase in the early 1960s, which was a very anti-intellectual period for music. Bobby Dylan and that whole movement — we did our part in the evolution of the American pop song, but I don't hear too much deep thought in the music on the radio right now. And by deep I don't mean it has to be down — there isn't even much wit in the music on the radio now."

Mitchell struggled to wrench herself away from her paintings and into the rehearsal hall to prepare for the extensive tour of Japan, New Zealand, Australia and Europe. [She performs in Melbourne on 18, 17 and 21 March.] This being her first tour in three years, her work is cut out for her.

"I don't remember any of my stuff. I don't even remember the titles of some of the songs on the new album! As far as who I expect will come to the shows, my manager, Elliot Roberts, tells me most of my audience is dead already," she says, laughing.

"I'm expecting a lot of kids who are unfamiliar with my music to come because there seem to be large numbers of kids turning out right now to see the old guard perform before they croak. Elliot gave me a pep talk the other day: 'Run, Joan! Swim, Joan!' He says that when you're pushing 40 (she is 39), you have to run back and forth like Mick Jagger. I told him to just push me out in a wheelchair and I'd do the whole set sitting down!"

No longer unnerved by the spotlight, Mitchell seems to have come to grips with her career. However, she still sees life as a wily opponent with new tricks up its sleeve.

"There have been times when I feared I might be done in by the conflict around me, but I think the major crises of my life are behind me," she concludes. "And every time I flirt with one of them again I get the dreaded feeling that it's going to latch on and stick to me, but it never does. This isn't to imply that I've 'solved' anything because nothing is ever dealt with and done with, and human beings are always in conflict. And for an artist, to run away from conflict is the kiss of death."

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