

Love Boat's Gopher runs for Congress

'Mrs. Cosby' and her new man



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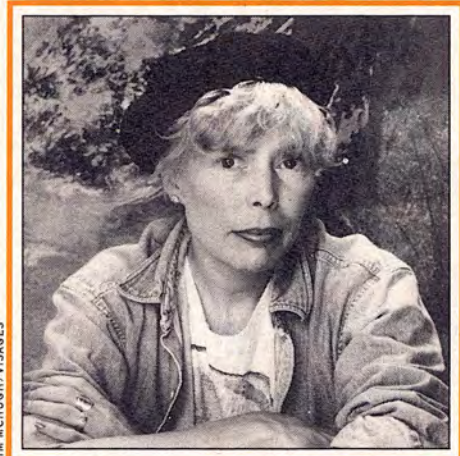
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Misha with
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SHE'S LOOKED AT LIFE FROM UP AND DOWN, SO JONI MITCHELL HAS NEW WAYS TO WRITE ABOUT BOTH SIDES NOW

by Michael Small

Song



Mitchell, who paints about as often as she writes songs, just leased a studio "where I slosh around to my heart's content."

What would you do if you were loved, then hated? Would you pander to the crowd, or would you be true to yourself?" Those questions come from Joni Mitchell—who went from folk to pop to jazz to rock music and even became an exhibited painter during the past two decades—and her answer is clear. Joni Mitchell has made a career out of doing what she wants. Once

the darling of flower children who sang her confessional, poetic songs in coffeehouses across the country, she discovered that her bright star had suddenly turned into an earthbound meteor in 1975, when she released a jazz-oriented album, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. *Rolling Stone* rated *Hissing* the worst album of the year. "If they had just said they'd hated it, I

could have taken it," recalls Mitchell. "When other publications picked up the same attitude, I thought, 'I'll finish up this contract and quit making records.'" Whatever became of Joni Mitchell? You know, the one with the jutting cheekbones and the blond hair, who wrote *Both Sides Now*?

What became of Mitchell, now 43, is that she didn't quit making records,

CONTINUED

stayed true to her unique, offbeat impulses and kept producing albums with rhythms too complex for coffeehouse singers and lyrics too abstruse for sing-alongs. The industry may long for her to write another *Both Sides Now*, which has been recorded more than 50 times by such diverse talents as Judy Collins, Willie Nelson, Jim Nabors, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and a Muzak orchestra. But Joni is unimpressed. "It's young work," she says of her most famous ballad. "There are things I've written that are much more satisfying." Though *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, despite *Rolling Stone*, eventually became her sixth gold album and two more followed in the '70s, Mitchell's audience dwindled as radio stations stopped playing her. "It's the same as typecasting," she says. "However you come into the game, they're going to try and hold you there. But I shouldn't be ashamed that I like a lot of different kinds of music. Once something's in your soul, it's got to come out in your music."

The latest thing in Mitchell's soul seems likely to put her back on the airwaves and the charts. Her new album, *Dog Eat Dog*, combines sophisticated synthesizer sounds and the most political lyrics she has ever written (on Ethiopia, evangelists, yuppie materialism). With synth bands like A-Ha at the top and political rock everywhere, Mitchell is suddenly back in step. Critics have found the album variously striking, original and artificial, but her friend James Taylor, who sings background vocals on *Dog Eat Dog*, thinks Mitchell is back in her musical home, even though it's been redecorated. "Her music isn't whimsical, transitory or momentary," Taylor says. "When I worked on her album, I said to myself, 'That's the stuff.'" Another longtime Mitchell fan, Jack Nicholson, loves her work precisely because it keeps changing. "It's very easy to repeat past successes," he says. "Joni hasn't done it, and that takes a lot of strength."

If some critics find her musically inconsistent, her friends praise her for her continuing enthusiasm. "She keeps good, loyal friendships," says Nicholson, who claims she has been yakking his ear off for years about her passion for ice skating. She stays in touch with secretaries from record companies, and the folks at the coffee shop near her home in L.A. greet her like one of the gang. On the rare occa-

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sions when she goes out, she wants to dance all night. "What I like about her," says Nicholson, "is that she kind of dresses up cute. When she goes out, she makes an effort. She's a sweetie."

Perhaps the biggest gamble in Mitchell's career was her 1979 *Mingus*, a collaboration with Charles Mingus, the jazz bassist, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. Her record company wanted her to do something more commercial. Instead she wanted to write the lyrics and sing Mingus' tunes. "It cost me plenty," says Mitchell about the critical and commercial flop. "It put me in a no-man's land where radio stations couldn't pin me down. But if I had to do it over again, I would."

Mitchell didn't suddenly start composing for the synthesizer because she was bored with jazz or anxious to be a pop star again. "The synthesizer was irresistible," she says. "It puts a whole orchestra at your fingertips." Her label, Geffen Records, suggested she bring in as producer electronic whiz Thomas Dolby, but Mitchell nixed the idea. "To think I need a producer makes me feel like a head of lettuce," she says. Dolby wound up serving as a technician. "He's a creative person," explains Joni, sympathetically. "So if I let him, he would have fleshed everything out, and it wouldn't have been my music."

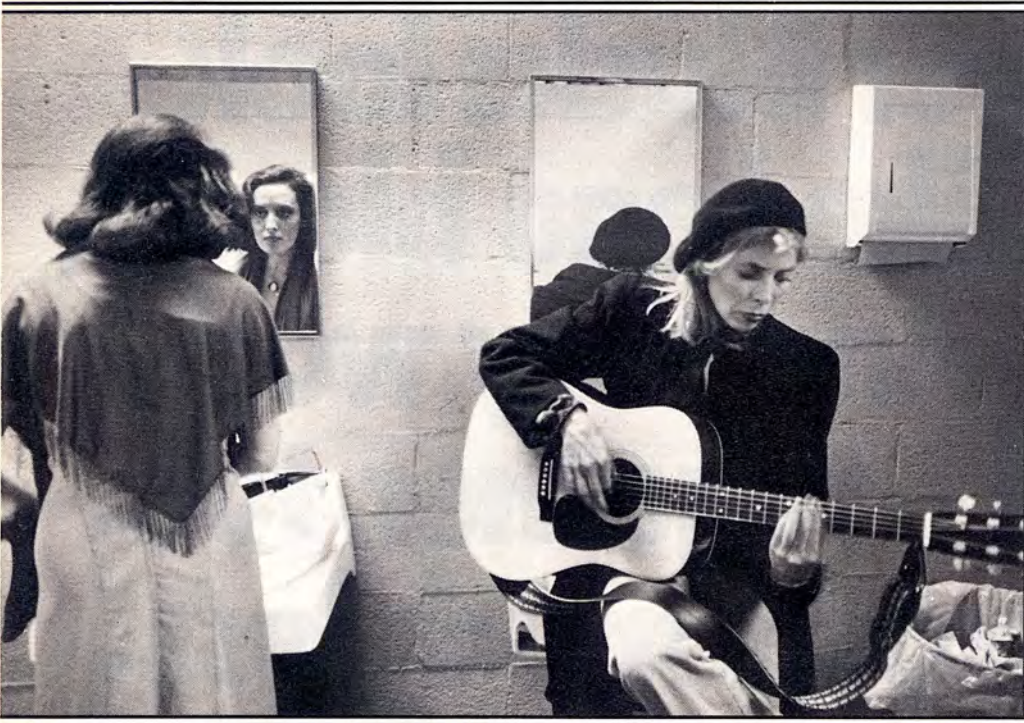
Doing things her way, and changing

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"There's me with my opium garden," says Mitchell, who tended poppies at age 4 near her home on Saskatchewan's plains.



Country rocker Ronee Blakley (left) and Mitchell warmed up in Hartford, Conn. for Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue tour.



KEN REGAN/CAMERAS

Song

the way frequently, are the reasons that Mitchell has now looked at success from both sides. She has painted the covers for nearly all her albums and for *Dog Eat Dog* constructed a collage showing herself surrounded by wolves who might be singing along with her but more likely are preying on her. A committed painter for decades, Mitchell used to draw simple colored portraits, but her work evolved into bold abstract acrylic paintings. She refuses to sell her works and rarely exhibits them because she says most of the profits would just go to agents and taxes. In this dog-eat-dog world, she gives her paintings away to friends.

When she paints with words, Mitchell prides herself on making her lyrics sound and fit right. "Writing a song is like doing a crossword puzzle," she says. "Though you can't get too literary, I do push vocabulary a little bit. It's a gift when the words come." But in person she tends much more toward street lingo. "I always hated poetry as a child," says Mitchell, who still prefers Dylan and Berry to Keats. "I used to read Classic Comics for my reports at school." Her greatest literary inspiration came from an iconoclastic seventh-grade teacher, Mr. Kratzman, to whom she dedicated her first album. "I wrote this ambitious epic poem for his class, and it went, 'Softly now the colors of the day fade and are replaced by silver grey as God prepares his world for night and high upon a silver-



ANDY FREEBERG/RETNA LTD.

Former housemate Graham Nash, who still sends flowers on Joni's birthday, joined her at a 1979 antinuke rally.

shadowed hill, a stallion white as newly fallen snow stands deathly still, an equine statue bathed in silver light . . . I got this thing back, and it was circled all over with red. He had written, 'Cliché, cliché, cliché . . .' and gave me a B. I read the poem of the kid next to me who got an A+, and it was terrible, so I stayed after school and said, 'Excuse me, but how do you give an A+ to that when you give me a B?' He said, 'Because that's as good as he's ever going to write. You can write much better than this. You tell me

more interesting things when you tell me what you did over the weekend.' "

" 'By the way,' he added, 'how many times did you see *Black Beauty*?' "

Joni got the message.

Mitchell's father, William Anderson, a merchandising manager for a grocery chain, and her mother, Myrtle, a former teacher, encouraged their only daughter to be creative. Mrs. Anderson constantly quoted Shakespeare, and Mr. Anderson, an amateur trumpeter, bought 7-year-old Roberta Joan a spinet from a truck that pulled up in front of their home in rural Saskatchewan. The piano lessons lasted a couple of years. "They conflicted with listening to Wild Bill Hickock on the radio," explains Joni. "So I quit." By the time the Andersons moved to the city of Saskatoon, Joni was a precocious junior high schooler. "I was always the school artist," she says. "I did the backdrops for plays, illustrated the yearbook and the school newspaper and wrote a little column called Fads and Fashions. I'd advise people to paste silver stars on their blue suede shoes, or I wrote that girls should wear their father's ties to school." She also flunked math, physics and biology—she had to repeat her senior year—and lived for the weekend dances at the Y or the redneck dance halls downtown. "I used to lie up at night and listen to the Hit Parade under the covers," she remembers. "Then in the morning, I'd drag myself to school. But I couldn't see what school had to do with my adult life."

In her final year of high school, Mitchell bought a reward for herself after having her wisdom teeth pulled: a \$36 baritone ukulele. She took it with her when she enrolled in art school in Calgary and, still not wild about academics, spent most of her free time singing the songs of Judy Collins and other folkies in a small club. After her first year there, she headed for Toronto to play the club circuit, earning her rent at a woman's wear counter in a department store. Since she had no union card, she could play only scab coffeehouses. One night she heard a folksinger named Chuck Mitchell performing Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man*. She approached him to talk about the tune and found a soul-mate. Soon after, Joni joined Mitchell in Detroit, his

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hometown; they were married in 1965.

As the singing duo toured, however, it became evident that they weren't a perfect match. "He liked Cape Cod, English furniture and was more cultured," says Joni. "I was just a rampant adolescent." One night she rented a U-Haul, went to their apartment, loaded up her half of the furniture and drove to New York City, where she found a one-bedroom apartment in the arty Chelsea district. "I papered the bedroom with rolls of aluminum foil and hung an American flag in the window," she says. "It was my Independence Day celebration." A divorce followed.

For two years Mitchell struggled to get singing jobs. Then, a couple of her early compositions, *Both Sides Now*, recorded by Judy Collins, and *The Circle Game*, sung by Tom Rush, became big pop hits. Even so, Joni was never quite admitted to the band of reigning female folkies, about whom she is uncharacteristically unaffectionate. "I've known stories of greater generosity," says Mitchell of her relationship with Collins, in particular. In 1968 the two folkniks met and agreed to go to the Newport Folk Festival together. "But my hero, who was supposed to pick me up at my house, never showed up," Joni says. "The following day I got a phone call from her in Newport. She said she felt I should be there. I guess she felt bad about stranding me." Joan Baez showed even less empathy. "She managed, whenever possible, to cut my set back one song when we played together," Joni says.

"It's funny about women in song," Mitchell muses. "The classic example of misunderstanding was between Laura Nyro and Janis Joplin. Laura invited Janis over to dinner. Unbeknownst to Janis, Laura's favorite food was tuna fish and pink champagne, which she served. Janis got all huffy about it. It was as if Laura had prepared this tacky food in her tacky honor." Mitchell does, however, have good friends among the women in the business. "Linda Ronstadt was always kind to me," she says. "She makes friendships with women easily. And Bonnie Raitt is a sweetheart and a good ole girl."

Disillusioned with New York by 1968, Joni went to L.A. to record her first album and moved with her boyfriend, Graham Nash, into a homey bungalow in Laurel Canyon, about which he wrote in the song *Our House*. The suc-

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cess of Mitchell's first five albums put her at a peak of her career in 1973 but left her depressed. "The hippie dream seemed to be collapsing," she says. Business deals increasingly intruded on creativity, her relationship with Nash was over, and the L.A. folk rockers were breaking up. Mitchell found a slip of land—accessible only by ferry—on the rocky coast north of Vancouver,

built a stone house there and left society behind.

Experimenting alone she began to develop the style that led toward jazz. "When it became necessary to play with a band, nobody could play 'Joni's weird chords' that I had always made on my guitar with untraditional tunings," she explains. "So finally somebody said to me, 'You're going to have to get a jazz band to play this stuff.'" She followed the advice, playing with

the L.A. Express. Longtime fans, including Crosby, Stills and Nash, "just sort of hissed and booed."

Mitchell's tenacity may now pay off. Prince told *Rolling Stone* that the last album he loved all the way through was *Hissing*, and Boy George recently raved publicly about another jazzed-up album, *Court and Spark*, which Joni made in 1974. "The authorization of those currently in vogue has such weight," says Mitchell. "I walked into Tower Records the next week, and I saw stacks of that album on the counter, like it was a new release."

Joni has never entirely returned from her Vancouver isolation, partly because she is troubled by the intrusions brought by fans. An obsessed fan camped outside her L.A. house for most of five years. Mitchell lived under armed guard until the fan disappeared two days after John Lennon's death. "It's my opinion that he realized how disruptive he was to my privacy," she says. "Or maybe he left because I had been pleading with his parents to intervene and they finally did." Another disruption was a *Rolling Stone* article that mapped her liaisons with James Taylor, Nash and others. "They portrayed me as this heart-breaker," says Mitchell. "They say that about Madonna now, and it gives her a certain distinction. But I don't know. A heart is something people need."

Married since 1982 to bass player Larry Klein, 31, whom she met when he played on her last album, Mitchell no longer writes about love lost. "I'm a lucky girl, I've found my friend," she sings on *Dog Eat Dog*, and the two share a nonstop work schedule. For eight months this year, Klein worked afternoons on jazz horn player Wayne Shorter's album, then till 3 a.m. in the studio with Joni. They take yoga lessons together at home three times a week and, says Joni laughing, "We even travel well together."

And now, about tomorrow. Not even Mitchell knows what she'll come up with, except that it won't be like any of the things she did yesterday. "Unfortunately I'm carrying this tail of history around with me," she says. "Some people call me 'that folksinger from the '60s,' which is odd because I didn't make a record until late 1968. And the other day somebody said I represented the confessional songwriting style of the '70s. Sure I was there during those decades, but I'm just as much here in the '80s as I was there before." It's nice to have her around. □



Old pal Jack Nicholson rapped with Mitchell during her art show opening in October at L.A.'s James Corcoran Gallery.

"He's a good critic of my work," Mitchell says of second husband Larry Klein, who backs her both at home and on records.

