

## PROFILE

# Singer Joni Mitchell cultivates artistic groove after seclusion

*Redefined goals, family influences lead to new album and new direction.*

By Greg Kot  
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Back when she was loosening her ties to the folk world to explore jazz and world music, Joni Mitchell was asked about her career goals. There was only one, she replied: "To remain interested in the music."

Nearly 20 years after distilling her artistry to those six well-chosen words, Mitchell is on the phone from California and pondering a new question: Has she succeeded?

"It died for me a few years ago, and I intended to quit," Mitchell replies. "But a few things have happened to give me a new enthusiasm. And then I began spending time with my daughter and grandson."

Last year, Mitchell was reunited with the child she put up for adoption 35 years ago, when the singer was a struggling, if not starving, young artist. She has no other children and is unmarried.

"I was recording some music with Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock recently, and they were going on and on about my (vocal) tone, which was odd because I've known and worked with those guys for years, so why should it be different now?" she says. "And the only thing I can think of is that the coming of my family has done something to my central core. It's like there was a hole in there that is fleshed out now."

Born in Canada but now living in California, her home for several decades, Mitchell is slowly re-emerging from a long period of artistic seclusion.

Her career dates back to her mid-'60s coffeehouse youth, when her finely honed songs won raves and were being covered by performers such as Judy Collins (who had a hit with Mitchell's "Both Sides Now") and Tom Rush ("The Circle Game"). Soon after, Mitchell and her rapturous multioctave voice invaded the national consciousness with indelible songs such as "Big Yellow Taxi," "Help Me" and "Free Man in Paris."

She was a beacon for songwriters and thinkers, forlorn lovers and closet poets, pop fanatics who loved her tunes and jazzers who were wowed by her unconventional chords. Her effect on aspiring female rock and pop musicians was incalculable.

"Her writing was so good — so literate, so descriptive," says Lucinda Williams, a Grammy-winning singer-songwriter who calls Mitchell an inspiration. "The fact that she was a woman and writing that



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Joni Mitchell's new album, "Taming the Tiger" due out Sept. 29, reflects her enthusiasm for performing.

way — there really weren't that many women doing that then. Judy Collins was there, and Joan Baez, but neither of them wrote the way Joni Mitchell did. That's why she made such a big impression on me and a whole bunch of other women who were picking up guitars."

## Bigger interests lead down different paths

Mitchell could easily have parlayed her penchant for introspective lyrics and memorable folk melodies into a career like James Taylor's, by creating variations on a successful formula that caters to a huge, loyal audience. But she chose a different path. For her, maintaining interest in the music meant pushing beyond the familiar. Folk — or any genre, for that matter — could never hope to contain her.

"I started out in folk with simple chords, but very soon an appetite for broader chords that weren't even on the guitar came about, and so I began twiddling with tunings," she says. "I've always been an 'adjacent folkie' — it was just that it took me six records to find a band to play my music. The rhythms were too intricate for folk-rock, because my harmonies were not very 'white,' like James Taylor's or Carole King's, where everything was in a major or minor key. I gravitated toward wider chords, 'black' voicings out of gospel and jazz because they mirrored what I was feeling."

After the commercial triumph of "Court and Spark" (1974), Mitchell ventured into this more esoteric territory on "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" (1975), which was castigated by *Rolling Stone* magazine as the year's worst album. Though Mitchell's hits dwindled, she kept following her muse, collaborating with the late jazz legend Charlie Mingus, incorporating Latin percussion and African drumming, and hiring adventurous jazz musicians such as

Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius who gave her music a dreamy, searching, open-ended quality.

## '90s frustrations squelch live performing

But by the early '90s, Mitchell was getting frustrated speaking to the same band of 200,000 loyal album buyers every time out. "I'd been blacklisted from things (such as MTV, VH1 and commercial radio) for reasons that are still not clear to me other than 'That's the way it is,'" she says. "I was doing good work, but record companies don't stay long with artists anymore if you're not selling a certain number of records. My work has been called too jazzy and too high-minded, and perhaps it is. But there has to be a counterforce. And I'm sick of thinking deep for others. If no one is interested, I'd rather not."

Live performances had become laborious because they required an armada of guitars to accommodate the 50 tunings she used in her songs. Then, a week before what was to be her last concert in New Orleans two years ago, she was introduced to a new technology — the Roland VG-8 Guitar System — that allowed her to dial up a new tuning in an instant.

"It was a dream — it solved a lot of my problems and gave me new enthusiasm for performing," she says.

A new album, "Taming the Tiger" (Reprise), due out Sept. 29, reflects that enthusiasm. It is a lush, haunting work: "Stay in Touch" captures the first enigmatic pangs of romance with a lingering melody loosely based on a classical work by Rachmaninov, while "Harlem in Havana" is a sly update of Cab Calloway's mirthful brand of jazz. "Lead Balloon" is a fierce, funny swipe at corporate arrogance, while "My Best to You" is an atmospheric interpretation of a 1940s cowboy-swing tune.

It arrives at a time when Mitchell is enjoying her highest artistic profile since the '70s. The Artist Formerly Known as Prince sings her praises; Janet Jackson prominently incorporates a sample from "Yellow Taxi" into her recent hit "Got 'Til It's Gone"; *Billboard* magazine recognizes her career achievements with its 1995 Century Award; the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year voted her into the pantheon alongside Bob Dylan and John Lennon.

Mitchell seems unimpressed by it all. She knows too well how the music business works. "The hip syndrome manipulates the money machine in America," she says. "The American public is so afraid not to be hip that they are constantly manipulated into needing the new thing."