

50 YEARS IN THE CLOUDS

**The sublime voice and songwriting
of Joni Mitchell**

by Caryn Rose

WHEN DISCUSSING Joni Mitchell's body of work, her second album, 1969's *Clouds*, is almost always glossed over. No one claims it as their favorite Joni record, as it, understandably, lives in the shadows of albums like *Blue*, *Ladies of the Canyon*, and *Court and Spark*. But *Clouds* deserves a place of honor not just because it contains chestnuts like "Chelsea Morning" and "Both Sides, Now," but also because it was a critical artistic stepping stone, without which those subsequent efforts — and in fact, the total arc of Mitchell's career — might not have manifested in the same way. Fifty years after its original release, *Clouds* remains a milestone of a female artist asserting her equal rights and talent as well as a signpost in the '60s folk movement, even if its creator felt that she was no longer working or writing within that particular tradition.

Clouds greets listeners with a self-portrait of Mitchell staring boldly off from the cover. The image is not unattractive, but it isn't the soft-focus photo typical for female artists in the

early-'60s. Instead, Mitchell went her own way, controlling the image as well as the arrangements and production for her music. The credits for Mitchell on *Clouds* read: "Composer, cover art, guitar, keyboards, producer, vocals." She allowed Stephen Stills to play occasional bass and guitar where needed. Paul Rothchild shares a production credit on one song, and Henry Lewy, the man who became her longtime partner behind the board across 13 albums, has the engineering credit. In 2019, this is not terribly remarkable, but in 1969, it was exceptional, deliberate, and hard-won, even with supportive managers Elliot Roberts and David Geffen standing alongside her. In that era women did not often march into the recording studio of their choice, then direct the recording of material written and performed by themselves, carrying a guitar strung to their own tunings.

Getting there was a carefully calculated strategy on Mitchell's part, pieces she put in motion once she made the decision to focus on music. At age 22, she moved from Toronto to Detroit, and just two years later (when she and her first husband Chuck Mitchell divorced),

she left for New York City, building her career as she went along, the steps becoming more deliberate as she gained momentum. In New York, she set herself to writing four songs a day and booked herself into coffee houses all over Greenwich Village. The quality of her songwriting had a long reach, garnering even more admiration than her stunning vocal range. Established artists such as Judy Collins, Tom Rush, and Ian & Sylvia wanted to use her work.

Running the Show

Mitchell arrived in Los Angeles in 1968 and headed for Laurel Canyon. In her house on Lookout Mountain, she put together her first album, known both as *Joni Mitchell* and as *Song to a Seagull*, released in March 1968 and produced by her friend David Crosby. This was another calculated move on both Mitchell's and Crosby's part, as Mitchell explained to *Mojo* in 1994: "His instincts were correct: he was going to protect the music and pretend to produce me. So we just went for the performance, with a tiny bit of sweetening. I think perhaps without David's protection the record

company might have set some kind of producer on me who'd have tried to turn an apple into an orange. And I don't think I would have survived that."

That debut did well enough, peaking at No. 189 on the *Billboard* 200, to afford Mitchell the opportunity for *Clouds*. But she bided her time, despite having enough songs ready for three albums. "I could have recorded a year ago," she told *Broadside* in 1968. "But I waited until I was in a bargaining position. And Judy Collins' album was the thing that really put me in a position where I could get the things I really want." (Collins released the first recorded version of "Both Sides, Now" on her 1967 album *Wildflowers*, where the track won the Grammy for Best Folk Performance in 1968. Mitchell would claim the same award for *Clouds* in 1969.)

Mitchell went into the studio to work on *Clouds* with Paul Rothchild, a producer pre-assigned to her who was best known for his work with The Doors. However, they didn't work well together, so when Rothchild left the studio for two weeks on a Doors-related errand, Mitchell persuaded engineer Henry Lewy to help her record the entire

album in his absence.

Her confidence and self-determination proved effective: *Clouds* sounded better, stronger, and clearer than her debut. It sounded like Mitchell was running the show.

Folk and Not Folk

"I was a folksinger as Joni Anderson," Mitchell told biographer David Yaffe. "As soon as I became Joni Mitchell, I was no longer a folksinger. Once I started to write my music, that's not folk music." But despite her own assertions, *Clouds* and other albums from her early years are regularly claimed as folk due to their reliance on acoustic instrumentation and emphasis on songs that were deeply personal and told stories.

These songs remain transformational because at the time, women were not writing in such candid, unabashed terms about their love lives. Mitchell had no qualms about detailing her affairs, and she did so not with remorse, but with great forgiveness and affection.

While there isn't as clear a thematic line on *Clouds* as on her debut, it is

sonically cohesive. On *Clouds*, she uses the silence around the songs to emphasize the emotions, whether flavors of shade ("I Think I Understand"), light ("Chelsea Morning"), or drama ("The Fiddle and the Drum"). This album is Mitchell and her voice, along with her guitar — and in one case (the Tolkien-esque "I Think I Understand"), a trumpet.

Songs like "That Song about the Midway" are vivid and memorable. Here, Mitchell employs a lilting melody that conveys the free-wheeling feeling brought on by the circus rolling into town. The casualness of her vocal delivery seems to imply that Mitchell isn't all that invested in the gentleman described in the song. Also of note is her ability to vocally shape words to make them fit into the melody she's specified, like "another town," or "worth the price." It's elegant and gentle, as Mitchell's innate faculty with phrasing and swing foreshadows her later jazz-influenced sound.

Other songs on *Clouds* became commercially successful fan favorites. Although Mitchell later downplayed "Chelsea Morning" by saying, "It's a very

sweet song, but I don't think of it as part of my best work," the track stands well within the canon of great songs about New York City. Mitchell's authoritative chords and brisk delivery invoke the sounds of the traffic she's singing about, with her crisp, impeccable vocals making for a solid radio hit in 1969.

A standout showcase for those vocals is the album's protest song, "The Fiddle and the Drum." It's presented a cappella, the melody reminiscent of an old mountain ballad. The pause it creates at its finish sets the stage for the album's final track, the standout "Both Sides, Now." Mitchell's authoritative chords open the song, then slide back to let her voice come to the forefront. Her delivery is definitive, and singular; no one has ever sung "Both Sides, Now" the way its author did. She inhabits the words with warmth and gravity. She is telling a story, summarizing the essence of having a human experience, which is likely the reason for its enduring popularity.

"Both Sides, Now" has been performed by a diverse body of artists, including Glen Campbell, Herbie Hancock, Sara Bareilles, and Hurray for the Riff Raff's Alynda Segarra.

Kristian Matsson, the Swedish singer-songwriter who performs under the name The Tallest Man on Earth, included "Both Sides, Now" in his YouTube video series "The Light in Demos" in 2017. His version evokes a feeling of stardust similar to that of the original, and Matsson carefully, intentionally uses space with the vocals and interlaces them with delicate horns that escalate gently until the end. He introduces the song by asking, "What is the best song in the world?" before answering himself, with an air of obviousness: "It's 'Both Sides, Now' by Joni Mitchell."

Matsson, whose fifth album *I Love You. It's a Fever Dream* was released in April, discovered Mitchell's music as a

self-declared teenaged "weirdo."

"I felt like I was connecting to Joni because of how she writes, the melodies and the lyrics, they are so unique, and in the best sense, weird," he says. "But they sound so natural. And that is with different weird guitar tunings and melodies that ... how could you ever think about some of these lines? They just tumbled out of her, and they sound also so natural, and it was extremely inspiring."

Too Much Hiss

Despite how much the record was lauded in many quarters, two voices of the counterculture Mitchell was part of at the time were outright dismissive of *Clouds*. Ben Fong-Torres wrote in *Rolling Stone*, "Miss Mitchell is just a singer who sounds like Joan Baez or Judy Collins" and "Joni Mitchell is a fresh, incredibly beautiful innocent/experienced girl/woman" in a story that devoted more words to the decor of her house in Laurel Canyon than to her music.

Robert Christgau of the *Village Voice* gave the album a C, complained that Mitchell's voice sounded "malnourished," and bemoaned the absence of David Crosby as one of the reasons he found the album lacking. (Crosby later admitted that he not only had had no idea what he was doing as producer, but also that he in fact bungled the job, according to Yaffe's *Reckless Daughter*: "I hadn't recorded it well enough. I had allowed too much noise — too much signal-to-noise ratio — too much hiss.")

In 1972, Mitchell would pay the price for her unrepentant musical stance, when *Rolling Stone* dismissively termed her "Old Lady of the Year," visually depicting her as a lipstick kiss in the middle of a family tree of the Los Angeles music scene. Unsurprisingly, none of the men in the chart suffered this type of indignity (if anything, their inclusion in

that graphic enhanced their clout).

"The patriarchy is a motherfucker," John Doe of X, The Blasters, and punk supergroup The Flesh Eaters states flatly about the sexism Mitchell faced — and faces still, in terms of her legacy. "I agree with her. I think that Neil Young and Bob Dylan and people that are her contemporaries get way more attention, more honor."

Matsson agrees. To him, Mitchell's legacy represents "a massive amount of fearlessness, and also being fearless of showing your weaknesses. It feels like the windows were blown open, and doing that in the middle of the patriarchy and not getting things for free — that probably all the other dudes in the '60s and the '70s got — to be considered rock stars and geniuses. And she just ... kept on trucking, kept on doing it."

What she also kept on doing was to continue to inspire both her contemporaries and new generations of artists. A concert celebrating Mitchell's 75th birthday last year featured Graham Nash and Kris Kristofferson, as well as Rufus Wainwright and Norah Jones, culminating in a live tribute album released this past March. A recent photo of her walking through an art gallery with English visual artist David Hockney went viral on Instagram, garnering more than two million views.

In discussing the album, jazz/blues/gospel vocalist Lizz Wright noted that for her, "[*Clouds*] has to be the Joni record that I actually like to stand inside of the most."

Wright continues, "[Mitchell] just sits so deep in her humanity that I feel — especially as a woman of color with a big instrument and a lot of emotion — that I've been given a kind of blessing and permission and affirmation to be tender, and to stand flat-footed on the ground with no shoes and just be a poet." ■