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CONNIE KUHNS

A new anthology of reviews, interviews and commentary on Joni Mitchell's music reveals the star-making machinery



photograph by Paul C. Babin
August 1976, *Steppenwolf Amphitheater*

Just months before she was found unconscious in her home in California, in the spring of 2015, Joni Mitchell was the new face of an Yves Saint Laurent clothing campaign called the Music Project. In photographs taken by creative director Hedi Slimane, Joni is wearing an embroidered tunic and wide-brimmed hat from Saint Laurent's "Folk Collection" and holding her guitar. At seventy-one years of age, she is regal.

It was an image to hold on to, as confusing reports circulated regarding her condition. Eventually it was revealed that she had suffered a brain aneurysm. Almost two years passed before there was some public evidence of a slow recovery when she attended a Chick Corea concert in Los Angeles.

For those of us who came of age, grew up and grew old listening to her music,

Joni Mitchell gave women a more serious understanding of themselves. She made women visible to the outside world. She was a romantic and a lover, and a woman who was constantly moving forward. She rebelled against categorization and often suffered the consequences. For Joni, who started out as a painter and took to heart the creative sacrifices her grandmothers were forced to make, there was no question that her art came first.

After dropping out of art school in Alberta, and drifting east in the mid-'60s toward a heightened folk scene in Toronto, Detroit and New York, Joni rose to fame quickly. She got immediate attention for her beauty, but soon enough for her songwriting and unconventional phrasing. Her tunings were unusual, too, an accommodation she made for her left hand, weakened by polio when she was nine. Decades passed before her "chords of inquiry," as she called them, could be broken down and translated into songbooks for novices.

From the beginning of her recording career in 1968, Joni Mitchell expected and received full artistic control, a right rarely given to a new artist and never to a woman. She refused to work with producers (her friend David Crosby, who produced her first album, *Song to a Seagull*, was more of a gatekeeper), and she selected, directed and replaced musicians on her recordings until she got the sound she wanted. In a very short time, she went from accompanying herself on piano and guitar to working with jazz musicians, as she found they were the only players who could follow her inside her head. She recorded and produced nineteen studio albums, thirteen of them and the live album *Miles of Aisles* with her faithful engineer Henry Lewy, a legendary sound engineer who became a close friend. "She's the only true genius I've ever met," he said. Joni also released another live album, nine compilations and four video albums. She was prolific, profound and articulate. She was feted and maligned.

Since her near-fatal brain injury, her contribution to modern music has undergone re-evaluation. She is in the top ten of *Rolling Stone's* 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time, and on NPR's list of the top 150 albums by women, with her 1971 release *Blue* in the number one spot. Essays have appeared in the *Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Ringer* and other publications. In the UK, an international symposium called *Court and Spark* was held at the University of Lincoln, with dozens of international speakers exploring "the

images of freedom, travel and liberation within Joni's work." A book of scholarly essays from this conference will be published in 2019.

Meanwhile, in the realm of music journalism, Barney Hoskyns, co-founder of the online music library *Rock's Backpages*, and author of the books *Hotel California* and *Small Town Talk* as well as other significant works, compiled a comprehensive selection of album and concert reviews, interviews and commentary covering almost fifty years of Joni Mitchell's career. Released in the UK in 2016 with the title *Reckless Daughter: A Joni Mitchell Anthology* (I found my copy last spring at Blackwell's Music Shop in Oxford), the book was published in North America in the fall of 2017, under the title *Joni: The Anthology*, so as not to be confused with another fall book, a biography of Joni Mitchell by David Yaffe titled *Reckless Daughter*.

The forty-eight career contributors to Hoskyns's anthology represent more than a hundred magazines, newspapers, radio broadcasts and other media in the US, UK and Europe. Most are influential writers in their field, and the Contributors page is its own historical document.

With the exception of an introduction by Hoskyns, individual pieces in the anthology are presented without commentary or explanation. For the most part they are chronological, which makes the book even more illuminating, as the writings naturally reflect the attitudes of the times in which Joni worked. The late Paul Williams, founder of *Crawdaddy!*, one of the first magazines of rock criticism, shows his hand when reviewing *Song to a Seagull*—which he liked—when he writes: "A great many ladies have their heads so full of all they've read and heard and seen about why a man loves a woman that they can think of little save how lovable they are. But Joni even knows that a woman can have a will without being unfeminine or unyielding herself."

In the transcribed interviews, Joni is candid and intelligent. She stands out for being reflective and uncensored. *Rolling Stone's* Larry LeBlanc talks with Joni backstage at the 1971 Mariposa Folk Festival, where she tells him about her time in the caves of Matala. Kristine McKenna ("I was pleasantly surprised to find a warm and open woman of impressive intelligence") questions her in 1982 for NME, about fame and Joni's sometimes combative relationship with the press. Writing for MOJO in 1998, Dave DiMartino has an expansive conversation with Joni about her life

as a painter and about an industry slow to recognize her immense contributions. Robin Eggart, reporting for the German edition of *Rolling Stone*, is with her in 2007 at the premiere of her ballet *Fiddle and the Drum* with the Alberta Ballet.

In the reviews of her early albums and concerts, much is made of Joni's tunings, her "confessional" style of songwriting and the way women are drawn to her. But there is wonderment in some of the writing as the critics, most of them male, sense there is something here that is not like the other.

"JONI MITCHELL IS PROLIFIC,
PROFOUND AND ARTICULATE.
SHE IS FETED AND MALIGNED!"

Geoffrey Cannon, in reviewing a concert in London for the *Guardian* in 1970, writes: "I believe that Joni Mitchell is better able to describe, and celebrate, what it means, and should mean, to be alive today, than any other singer. She tells us what we already know, but have felt obliged through life's circumstances, to forget: that we are free. That we have love. And she does this by scrupulous observation and thought only of what she herself has heard and seen and felt."

That same year, Jacoba Atlas writes in *Melody Maker*: "Her ability to understand and transform has made her almost a legend in the United States. Critics and listeners alike rhapsodize over her songs and her psyche. She is fulfilling something of a 'goddess' need in American rock, a woman who is more than a woman; a poet who expresses a full range of emotions without embarrassment. . . she is virtually without competition. . . she is without comparison. Her work, for now, goes almost totally without question, without debate."

However, the negative criticism of her work, and of her personally, is dismissive, brittle and ugly.

Richard Williams, in 1972, in a review for *Melody Maker* of Joni's fourth album, *For the Roses*, writes: "More songs of transient euphoria and stabbing loss, played out against an ambiguous background of relentless fatalism and constant hope, mingled in approximately equal proportions,

from the poorest little rich girl in Laurel Canyon." In fact, those very first albums were filled with grief.

In 1990, Joni was blindsided by Trevor Dunn on GLR (Greater London Radio), in the middle of an interview about her exhibition of paintings in London, with a question about a child she had given up for adoption when she was twenty-one years old. It was a thoughtless and cruel act and she struggled to answer, stumbling between shock and defensiveness.

She had shared this heartbreak privately with

husbands and lovers, and even looked for her daughter in the crowds. But it was still a shameful secret. In a time when young, unmarried women and girls were forced to give up their children, Joni had given birth in the charity ward of a Toronto hospital. Not even her family knew. This experience shaped the rest of her life.

Completely alone and devastated, she began to write songs and sing as a way to support herself and find her way through. She had written more than twenty songs before she stepped into a recording studio for the first time. "Little Green," a song to her daughter, was among them.

While reviewing a concert in Long Island, New York, in 1976, Michael Gross writes in *Swank*: "Where are all the world's beautiful, ripe fourteen-year-old-girls? Where are all those Lotitas we've all heard so much about, with their pert tits, hard bums, yadda, yadda, yadda? The answer? They're home listening to Joni Mitchell albums, of course." He concludes: "By the time of her third album, Joni had grown, if not to complete womanhood, to at least an inkling of her own self-sufficiency, couched as it was in the counter-cultural garbage of making cookies in the canyon."

In the late '70s, in what was considered in all camps a very controversial move at the time, Joni accepted an invitation to collaborate with the

legendary jazz composer and bassist Charles Mingus. He had been impressed with her album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (on the cover of which she had appeared dressed and made up as a black man). Mingus was said to have been "intrigued by the audacity of that act." He was dying and he wanted his last project to be with her.

Joni had been working with Tom Scott's jazz group L.A. Express since *Court and Spark*, and she had experimented with world music—before it had a name—on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. She was already moving away from what was seen as her "traditional" place. *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was truly reckless, particularly as it included "The Tenth World," a dynamic conga jam with Don Alias, Manolo Badrena, Alejandro (Alex) Acuna, Aírto Moreira and Jaco Pastorius. Among the background vocalists was Chaka Khan.

In a conversation with Ben Sidran, the *Roll-*

liner notes reveal how much Joni held Mingus to be some kind of mystical black saint figure, the typical dizzy white people's view of black people, the stupid idea that they're privy to some inner secrets that us poor honkies will never understand."

Quite a contrast with the remarks offered by the actor Lawrence Fishburne two decades later, in 2000, during the Joni Mitchell All-Star Tribute in New York, as he introduced a visual tribute to her work with Mingus, followed by Cassandra Wilson's interpretation of one of the songs from the album. Joni Mitchell had responded to Mingus with an enthusiastic, open heart, honoring him but also being true to herself. It's all context. ("The reviews were mixed," she told Kristine McKenna.)

Joni received a Grammy award in 1969, and another in 1974, but more than twenty years passed before the industry acknowledged her again. When the awards started coming in 1996,

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ing Stone writer whose essay in *Joni: The Anthology* explains how these two artists' lives converged, Joni recalls the moment when Mingus asked her to write some lyrics that would suggest "the things I'm going to miss."

"We all have some things in common experientially," she said. "And there are things in common musically. We both have a broad range of feeling. And there's literariness to his writing. And within his idiom he's an eccentric; some of his eccentricities are parallel to mine." Mingus wrote six melodies for her, each named and numbered *Joni I-VI*. He died before the album was completed.

In a review of the album *Mingus*, released in 1979, Sandy Robertson writes in *Sounds*: "The

she won two Grammys, including Album of the Year (for *Turbulent Indigo*), followed by the US National Academy of Songwriters Lifetime Achievement Award, the inaugural Billboard Century Award, Sweden's Polar Music Prize and a Grammy for Lifetime Achievement. (In 2016 she received a Grammy for Best Album Notes, bringing her total to nine.)

In Canada, she was inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 1981, but she did not receive a Juno award until 2001, and it was for Best Vocal Jazz Album. In time, she received the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement, and a star on Canada's Walk of Fame. She was also appointed

a Companion of the Order of Canada, Canada's highest civilian honour. In 2007, she was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, and she was featured on a postage stamp.

In 1999, Joni was finally included in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, after the New York Times writer Stephen Holden accused the organization of an anti-woman bias. Joni agreed, and didn't show up to accept. In the interview with Dave DiMartino in the anthology, she explains her position: "Unfortunately, I don't have a good attitude about the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and you can say this. It was a dubious honour in that they held me out conspicuously for three years. To go, Oh, thank you, thank you, I mean having conspicuously ostracized me for a few projects, how can I be gracious, really. And the other complaint I had is that it was gonna cost about twenty grand to take my family."

That year, she had begun a very public search for her daughter. "Little Green" had started looking five years earlier. Her name was Kilauren Gibb. She was living in Toronto and pregnant with her first child when she learned she was adopted, and she wanted to find her birth mother.

It is a dramatic story of closed files and waiting lists, unanswered emails, and someone remembering someone they once knew. Finally, Kilauren had a lead. She received a registered letter from the Children's Aid Society with this piece of non-identifying information: "Your mother was from a small town in Saskatchewan and left for the US to pursue her career as a folksinger." By the time they met, Kilauren had given birth and Joni was a grandmother.

Perhaps reflecting on that time decades ago, when she had left art school, pregnant and without possibilities, and her life had come full circle, Joni told Dave DiMartino in the *MOJO* interview—after a production where her paintings hung in a circle around the stage—"I'm really a painter at heart, and I can say this now, since, you know, Kilauren has come along. Music was a hobby for me at art school, and art was serious. Art was always what I was going to do; I was going to be an artist."

She had taken intermittent breaks over the years, but in 2002 Joni Mitchell walked away from the music business. "I'm quitting because the business made itself so repugnant to me," she told Dave Simpson, writing for the *Guardian*. "Record companies are not looking for talent. They're looking for a look and a willingness

to cooperate." Simpson writes that Joni's sales have never matched her influence and critical standing. Despite her landmark deals for artistic control, she fought a thirty-year battle with record companies.

In her interview with Dave DiMartino, she says: "You only get about five or six years before they're sick of you in the business generally and they let you ride. They don't put any money or effort or interest into you, really. They just let you sit there like manure in the pasture, as a procurer of young artists at the label. For the last 20 years, I've had no record company support, no radio support."

"My predicament wasn't one in which effort worked anyway. I was just *shut out*, period, after the Mingus album."

She tells Robin Eggart, writing for the German *Rolling Stone*: "You are supposed to stay neatly in your decade and then die. From my 6th album on [critics] were dismissive while I knew I was still growing. It was an extraordinary rejection of good work. Everything was compared unfavorably to *Court and Spark*."

This could also be said of her fans, many of whom were unable to make the trip from her powerful early writing through her experimental years. In recalling a tour she did with Van Morrison and Bob Dylan in 1998, she says of the Vancouver concert: "It was a difficult show for me because I'm not used to playing big sports arenas and there was a lot of milling, a lot of going for beer and a lot of talking really loud through all of the shows. It seemed to me that that crowd had come for the beer and the event itself, not to listen. And I thought that was a shame." I was in the audience that night and I can confirm that the auditorium was on the move, particularly during Joni's set. They really had come for *Court and Spark*.

"I came to hate music and only listened to talk shows," she told Paul Sexton when he visited her home in 2007, on assignment for the *Guardian*.

True to her word, Joni stayed away from ten years.

In the 2003 American Masters documentary *Joni Mitchell: Woman of Heart and Mind* (produced by Susan Lacey), Ball Flanagan, author and editorial director of MTV Network, sums up Joni's power when he describes "the really potent popular image of the California girl, the Beach Boys' girl, the beautiful golden girl with the long blonde hair parted in the middle. And Joni not only was the girl, but she was also the Bob Dylan, the Paul Simon, the Lennon and McCartney. *Writing it.*"

She was the whole package. She was the subject and she was the painter."

In *Joni: The Anthology*, Barney Hoskyns adds the names Brian Wilson and Stevie Wonder to Joni's list of peers when he refers to her "masterful albums" and describes her songs as "great art." He writes, "She's struggled to bear the weight of her talent and intelligence in an arena better disposed to the crass and the facile." Referring to his own interview, included in the book, he writes:

"FOR THOSE OF US WHO CAME OF AGE, GREW UP AND GREW OLD LISTENING TO HER MUSIC, JONI MITCHELL GAVE WOMEN A MORE SERIOUS UNDERSTANDING OF THEMSELVES."

"I've always felt privileged to have met this genius of North American music."

Joni Mitchell's last CD of original music was released in 2007 by Starbucks *Hear This!* (Hoskyns reviews it in the anthology.) *Shine* was her first attempt at writing since 1998 and she describes the CD to Robin Eggar as "a late birth." The songs were written at her home on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, the same place where she wrote *For the Roses* in 1972.

"All around the house the wild roses were blooming," she writes in the liner notes. "The air smelled sweet and salty and loud with crows and bees. My house was clean. I had food in the fridge for a week. I sat outside 'til the sun went down.

"That night the piano beckoned for the first time in ten years. My fingers found these patterns which express what words could not. This sound poured out while a brown bear rummaged through my garbage cans."

The CD is dedicated to her grandchildren, Marlin and Daisy.

Having come fully out of retirement, she had two other major creations that year, the ballet *The Fiddle and the Drum*, a collaboration with the choreographer Jean Grande-Maitre of the Alberta Ballet, and a major art show (L.A., New York, Toronto, Dublin) featuring sixty-four of her paintings, which had also been used as set

decorations. Up until her injury, she had been promoting *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to be Danced*, a 4-CD boxed set released in 2014.

Joni: The Anthology reveals the work of the real star-making machinery—the critics, whose opinions can encourage exploration or cause chaos. It also has a valuable story to tell, especially as it rests on a larger truth.

Joni would have been a successful musician and

songwriter under any circumstances. But it was the pain of bearing and then giving up her child—a uniquely female experience—that took her work into unknown territory and unlocked a talent so infinite and raw, she was propelled beyond the expectations and limitations of her womanhood, into a pure, undefined form of musicianship. No one else could have done this. Joni Mitchell is brilliant and brave. She lives.

Connie Kubus has a forty-year history as an essayist, journalist, photographer and broadcaster. Her essay "Strange Women" (Geist 95), about women in Vancouver's early punk scene, was a finalist for a National Magazine Award; "Last Day in Cheyenne" (Geist 84) was named a "Notable Essay of 2012" in the Best American Essay Series and a finalist for a Western Magazine Award; and other essays have appeared in publications ranging from the LA Review to Prism International to the New York Times Modern Love column. For fifteen years, Kubus was the producer and host of the radio show Rubymusic on CFRO Radio, Vancouver. Her interviews and commentaries have been published/produced in Geist, the Georgia Straight, Hot Wire, Fuse, Herizons, CBC Television, CBC Radio, the Vancouver Sun, the Province and a host of other venues. She is a recipient of the Dan MacArthur Award of Merit for Excellence in Radio News Broadcasting. Read more of Kubus's work at geist.com.