

WAS THERE A '70s POP FAN WHO DIDN'T WEEP TO THE ALBUM BLUE?

The madness in my soul

FOR ME, IT'S
PAINTING,
POETRY
AND MUSIC
SAYS JONI
MITCHELL



By [unreadable] Photo by [unreadable]

THE MINDFULNESS
OF THE ARTIST
IS THE KEY TO
CREATING GREAT
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She has become a weather-beaten beauty, frankly preferable to those bulgy eyes and gawky smiles of her youth. Since the Sixties her songs have been written in her own blood. She is the pioneer of dangerous candour; find a raw nerve and skin it.

But here she is today and talking about her songs is strictly off the agenda. She is here to speak about her London exhibition of paintings at the Rotunda Gallery as part of the Canada In The City 'celebration of culture'.

And to ensure we stick to the format, and to reassure us that she is still such a star, we have both the agent and the PR clinging like limpets and beady-eared. It seemed strange that the woman who'd bared her soul to the world, and made her fortune out of it, needed such protection. Surely coping with vulnerability is her strength?

'Well, I've survived, haven't I?' She lights up another Marlboro, scrutinises me. 'I don't suffer for my art. If I suffer I make art out of it.'

Domestic

'I have three obsessions and I pounce between them. Poetry, painting and music. They are all a kind of madness. Poetry is adult, but painting is prolonged adolescence.'

It seems she needs the painting to be soothing, textural, domestic. 'I like to paint my husband (it's been eight years of conjugal harmony now with Larry Klein, a record producer) and my cat. I couldn't write a song about my husband and my cat and how dear they are, people would throw up.'

'My cat is a complex personality; more withholding yet more giving than anything I've ever known. A strange beast with spots like a leopard, she's really long and you can wrap her around your neck like a scarf.'

'Yes, she's my baby substitute'. Didn't she and Larry want real babies? The entourage tenses up, the agent's face moons in.

'No, no, I've never felt the need. No, we don't need more people in this world. Besides, I have these gifts and I need to fulfill them.'

'I'm not a feminist, I am a traditionalist but in pursuing my art, I am doing it for my grandmothers who were both thwarted. One was Irish, very volatile, and thought to herself: "I'm a musician, a poet, I'm far too good for this

Today: The learned squaw who likes to paint her husband

Picture: MIKE FLOYD



Interview by CHRISSIE ILEY

child rearing." She was always angry.

'The other was Norwegian, a stoic and a saint. That woman cried for the last time when she was 14 because she wanted a piano. Then she said to herself: "Silly girl, you'll never have a piano, dry your eyes." She never wept after that. For those two women, this is my life.'

Joni, it seems, started off akin to the Irish grandmother with all those weepalong songs she wrote in her twenties, and ended up in line with the Norwegian.

'For seven years around the Blue album, I was a weepy. Now I don't cry any more. An accomplished woman is treated like an honorary man, and men don't cry; you're not allowed.'

Her real release is her poetry: 'There's a lot of self-confrontation, and I don't use painting or music for that. I have to go down inside myself. You stir up your distraughtness. It's a kind of insanity. In the long run, wading further in to your distraughtness makes you gain greater self knowledge and a greater understanding of human nature ... not that that helps you very much at all,' she muses.

'Most people are afraid of failing. If you don't risk, you don't grow. People would say I've had failures.' Her voice trails.

Critical

Her last couple of albums have neither been great sellers nor hailed as great critical achievements. (No right-on record collection of the Seventies was complete without The Hissing Of Summer Lawns and practically no one of that generation has not wept their heart out to Blue).

The climate has changed. Possibly we no longer want to hear her emotional plumbing; scratching the surface has ousted scouring the soul.

'If you've laboured for two years on a project, it hurts when it gets attacked. It could make me quit the

business but I wouldn't quit creating. I'd still make songs and I'd still paint.'

'It's hard not to be insecure. You have to have the hide of an elephant in my job. I went into a waffle place last week for breakfast, paid for my meal with a cheque. The waiter brought it back and came over saying: "No, you're not Joni Mitchell. She's beautiful with long flowing curly hair." I went home and I said: "Klein, do you think I should get a perm?"'

The album we're not supposed to be talking about is out in January and it's called Night Ride Home. ('It's full of middle-aged love songs.') There's reminiscence and the usual repressed and unrequited love.

Passion

It's harder for her to write about passion when she lives in harmony with Larry. 'He knows he has to live with me uncovering my past loves in my songs and it's not *that* harmonious but passion is based on insecurity. The more desperately insecure the person is, the more passionate the relationship. When you are secured, no longer hungry.'

'Married love is different. In the first couple of years we had uncertainty, and once in a while now he gets out of line or so do I but basically I know we were designed for one another. Insecurity and passion were painful. I'm glad that's over,' she says, wafting her hands.

It's a far cry from Joni singing of the lovers she'd been destroyed by or had destroyed.

'I've had relationships that just wouldn't die, one in particular. We broke up and we broke up. The ending pattern was strangely obsessive behaviour. I'd do crazy things like driving up and down the street just to go past his house. We couldn't let go. Couldn't live together, couldn't live apart.'

She's pretty animated when she trills about this and it has touched a visceral nerve. No doubt it'll be a song some day.