

BOTH SIDES NOW

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A contactual obligation that required no new creative writing – just covers of American Songbook standards plus re-makings of two of her own greats. Killer or filler?

AFTER A COMMERCIALLY welcomed return to guitar-based songcraft with 1994's *Turbulent Indigo*, which felicitously collided with singer-songwriters becoming hip again, you could almost call it a study in Joni perversity that, just six years later, she was presenting an album of jazz standards from the 1930s and '40s.

By now it was the new millennium, and Radiohead's *Kid A* was taking rock in an awkward electronic direction, and those looking to the past for comfort were turning to bluegrass via the soundtrack to the Coen Brothers' chain-gang romp, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* – not supper-club crooner gear.

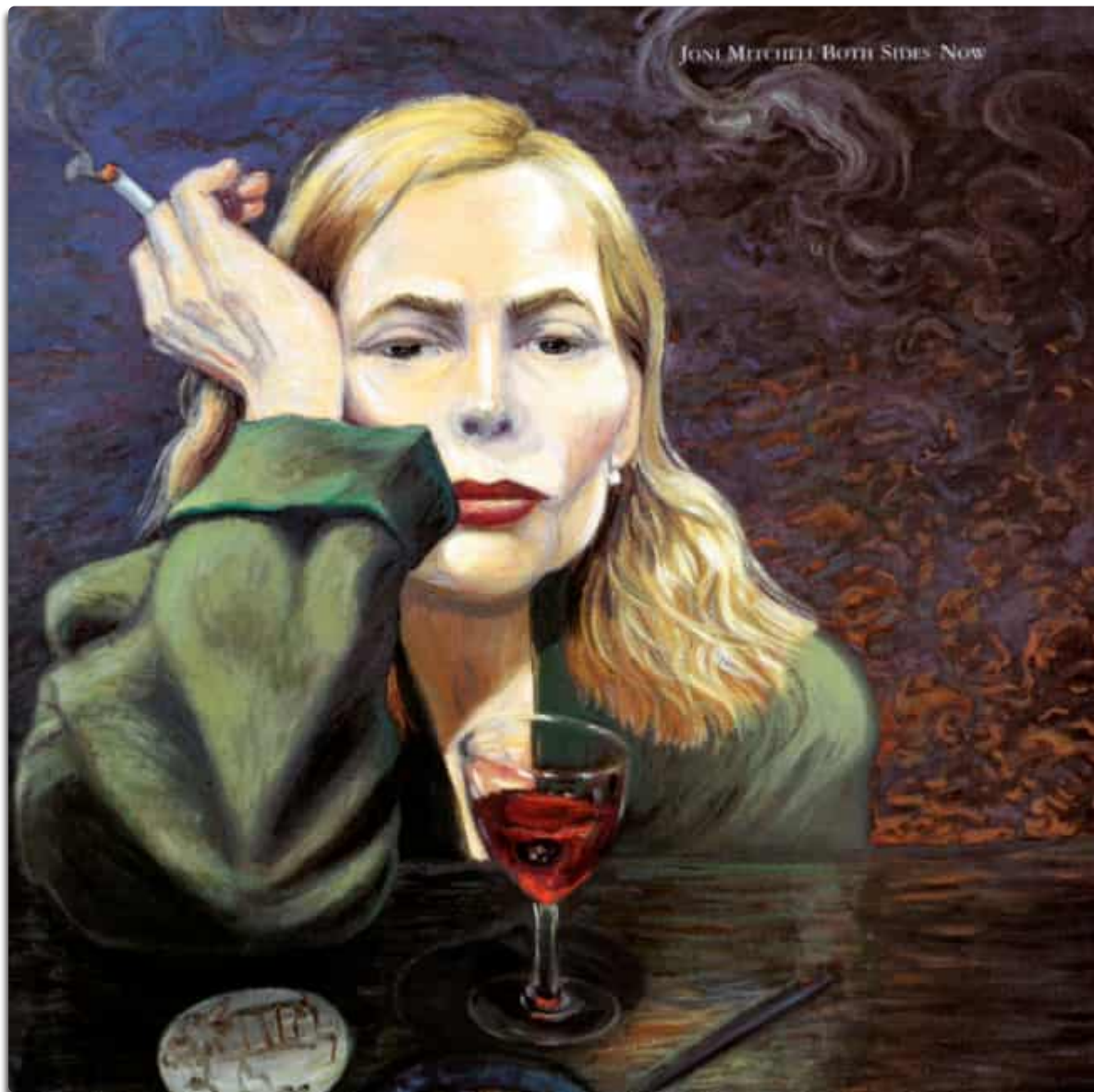
This expression of Mitchell's near-pathological refusal to 'stay in lane' would, of course, some 15 years later, be mirrored by that other great mischief-making genius from rock's golden era, Bob Dylan, when he initiated his run of Tin Pan Alley covers albums, with 2015's *Shadows In The Night*. Both hippy icons, in fact, had a go at Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler's Cotton Club staple, *Stormy Weather*, perhaps most enduringly known for its dusky 1952 rendition by Billie Holiday alongside Lester Young and Count Basie (Bob's version was on 2017's *Triplicate*).

On the cover of *Both Sides Now*, Mitchell is depicted vaguely in the style of an Edward Hopper painting, glass of vino rosso on the table, and cigarette on the go. On release, many noted that her familiar piercing three-octave mezzo-soprano had weathered somewhat, and that maybe her unapologetic chain-smoking of American Spirits from the age of 10 had now drastically reduced her vocal powers. Just like mid-2010s Dylan, she was accused of butchering these sublime and time-honoured classics with a hideous croak.

But, why do it? As supremely talented songsmiths,



Gold standard: Mitchell at the ASCAP Pop Music Awards, May 17, 1999.



TRACKS



You're My Thrill
At Last
Comes Love
You've Changed
Answer Me, My Love
A Case Of You
Don't Go To Strangers
Sometimes I'm Happy
Don't Worry 'Bout Me
Stormy Weather
I Wish I Were In Love Again
Both Sides Now

both were surely drawn to the material as a period peak in their craft, as perfection in three-minute pre-pop melodrama. Perhaps jokingly, Joni claimed she was doing it to show off her new alto range, but after the fact suggested it was simply a matter of fulfilling her contractual obligations without the exertion of herself having to write. As the dust settled on her divorce from Larry Klein, perhaps these songs' ever-pervasive mood of romantic fatalism resonated too.

YET THERE IS much to savour about *Both Sides Now*: the orchestral arrangements from conductor and composer Vince Mendoza, who around the same time worked on Björk's *Selmasongs* and *Vespertine*, are zesty and colourful. The sequencing of tracks, as noted by Klein himself in the liner notes (in his ongoing collaborative role as co-producer), offers a skilful "programmatic suite, documenting a relationship from initial flirtation through optimistic consummation, metamorphosing into disillusionment, ironic despair, and finally resolving in the philosophical overview of acceptance and the probability of the cycle repeating itself."

Thus the 11 tracks rollercoaster along from a somewhat ominous You're My Thrill, and the resistance-is-futile Comes Love with its overpowering brass and unstoppable swing, to the inevitable Stormy Weather

(cue: funeral horns, defeated strings) and the equally tragic and worrying I Wish I Were In Love Again.

For Mitchell-watchers, the two key entries in the 12-song cycle reside at Tracks 6 and 12 – a pair of Joni compositions, *Blue*'s A Case Of You and, obviously, the title track (originally on *Clouds*), each given the bells-and-whistles orchestral treatment. Whether at her own discretion or by order of A&R at Reprise, the clear implication of including them was that they had become standards of their day and were fit to dine at the same songwriterly table.

A Case Of You here swaps the original's Appalachian dulcimer lilt for a sombre, churchy sway, with those iconic words of holy wine and touching souls delivered in a speak-singing style that feels, by comparison, fathoms deep. Both Sides Now is also taken at a snail's pace, certainly as compared to, say, the jaunty version cut by super-crooner Frank Sinatra on 1968's *Cycles*. Regardless of their gloomy atmosphere, both songs jar lyrically with the standards because Mitchell is such a complex and detailed writer, mixing obviously personal moments with higher truths, way too thorny and high-falutin' to blend in with that mid-century language of love, buffed for universal consumption by Hollywood scriptwriters and Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths alike.

All told, then, a slightly surreal but consummately executed late-period folly. ●

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