

I'm back: Joni with
Brandi Carlile at the
Newport Folk Festival,
July 24, 2022.

“IT’S A
LONG
WAY
FROM
SASKA-
TOON...”

Words: VICTORIA SEGAL

Mitchell was first taped live in a Toronto coffee house in 1964 – and last captured in performance at Newport in 2022. In between, several ultra-special concerts made it onto tape. Here’s our guide to the best...

NEWPORT FOLK



IT'S AUGUST 1974, and from the stage of Los Angeles' Universal Amphitheatre, Joni Mitchell is explaining the "major difference" she sees between painting and performance. "A painter does a painting, and... that's it. Nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint a Starry Night again, man.'"

Captured on her November 1974 live album *Miles Of Aisles*, Mitchell's thoughts on art introduce a sing-along rendition of The Circle Game, a song that she had written in 1966 and that had been covered by Ian & Sylvia, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Tom Rush before it appeared on 1970's *Ladies Of The Canyon*. It's not hard to understand her slight air of resentment: for an artist in forward motion, being asked to reproduce the old hits in high fidelity is not a task to be relished. That's possibly why she encourages the audience to participate. "The more out-of-tune voices on it the better," she laughs, maybe seeing it as an excuse to rough up The Circle Game's simple lines, ensure that every version is different, not just a straight blueprint.

From her *Live At Canterbury House 1967* set, originally included on *Joni Mitchell Archives – Volume 1: The Early Years (1963 – 1967)*, to *Joni Live At Newport*, the 2022 recording of her triumphant return to the stage after the aneurysm she suffered in 2015, Mitchell's live recordings have become important documents of her changing colours, her shifting geometry. They often show her wildly ahead of herself – Little Green, caught in husky progress at Canterbury House in October 1967, wouldn't emerge until 1971's *Blue*; Jericho, tumbling down on *Miles Of Aisles*, wasn't recorded until *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* in 1977.

As well as the light from the future, there are also shadows of the past. At Canterbury House, she sings Scottish border ballad The Dowie Dens Of Yarrow a cappella during a string change – a reminder of her coffee-house roots, as vividly captured on *Archive Volume 1*'s set from the Half Beat in Yorkville, in October 1964. Unearthed along with Neil Young recordings in 2018, the three Canterbury House sets show Joni in confiding mood, her homespun memories the stuff of folk intimacy.

She deals with requests, gets into what she calls "my North Carolina tuning" before Michael For Mountains and offers up stories: about her father and his military marching band trumpet before I Don't Know Where I Stand, or about dancer and "witch" Vali Myers before Ballerina Valerie's Coke-ad bohemia. There's even the Bo Diddley bounce of surreal dental night-mare Dr Junk, quite a contrast with the wistful water-colour delicacies of Urge For Going or Songs To Aging Children Come.

Archives Volume 2 also features a March 1968 set from Le Hilbou Coffee House, Ottawa, recorded by none other than Jimi Hendrix. (From his diary: "Talked with Joni Mitchell on the phone. I think I'll record her tonight with my excellent tape recorder, knock on wood... hmmm... can't find any wood... everything's plastic.") Once you've got over that crazy detail, it's unremarkable next to the Carnegie show.

A year later, what Variety would call "natural showmanship" and "quiet, un-gimmicked ballads" was in play on a bigger stage. Included on *Archives Volume 2*

and released as a standalone set *Live At Carnegie Hall 1969*, Mitchell's set before the 3,600-strong audience – among them her parents, Bob Dylan and her then-partner Graham Nash – shows how deftly she scaled up her presence. In a skirt embroidered with an American eagle and an artichoke, she begins on home territory with the super-saturated New York domesticity of Chelsea Morning.

It's Mitchell very much talking in present tenses, whether through a beautiful Cactus Tree, Blue Boy's piano storytelling or Dino Valenti's Get Together. On a medley of The Circle Game and Little Green, she encourages the audience to join in ("pretend you're the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and I'm the only one who showed up for your concert"). Role reversal, aside, though, there's no who doubting who is the star.

She shares a stage with her new partner James Taylor for *Amchitka* – a 1970 show to fund the first ever Greenpeace project, sending a ship to Amchitka Island to halt US hydrogen bomb tests. Only formally issued in 2009, the concert stands as a moment of jubilant counter-cultural union, reflected in Mitchell's medleys – a sweet-voiced, earthy Big Yellow Taxi merging with Bony Maronie ("One of my favourite songs from those YMCA dances I used to go to back in Saskatoon!") or Carey dreamily dancing into Hey Mr Tambourine Man. Taylor also joins her on a complete document of her *BBC Live In Concert* appearance in December 1970 (again on *Volume 2*), much broadcast on TV when the channel has an opportunity



BY THE TIME she is touring to support *Court And Spark* in 1974 – the concerts captured on *Miles Of Aisles* – Mitchell has shed the eagle-and-artichoke trappings of the post-hippy solo artist to become her own bandleader, backed by Tom Scott's jazz-fusion crew L.A. Express. It's even more acutely noticeable by the time of 1980's *Shadows And Light*, recorded on the tour that followed 1979's *Mingus*. The accompanying concert film shows her sleek and satiny, surrounded by an elite band that includes Jaco Pastorius on bass, Pat Metheny on guitar and Michael Becker on saxophone. There are throwbacks to the age of rock'n'roll – an introduction lifted from Rebel Without A Cause, a cover of Why Do Fools Fall In Love? featuring The Persuasions – but also stretches that are very much the state of the Mitchell nation, such as the languid stretch of Amelia into Hejira, bridged by Metheny's solo. It's an abstracted Woodstock that underlines how far she's travelled, though, time underlining The Circle Game's wisdom: "We can't return".

The garden isn't entirely lost, however, as *Joni At Newport* briefly shows. Surrounded by a support crew that includes Blake Mills, Brandi Carlile and Wynona Judd, her unexpected return to the stage on July 24, 2022 generates a tangible crackle of joy – not least from her. There's amazement at her richly grained voice on Amelia, or her guitar on Just Like This Train. Listen to her sing Both Sides Now at Canterbury House, and then here, to see how a live album might change. One of "life's illusions", maybe, but what power it can have. ●

Much travelled:
Joni live at The Bread & Roses festival, the Greek Theatre, Berkeley, October 4, 1980.

"The three Canterbury House sets show Joni in confiding mood, her homespun memories the stuff of folk intimacy."

HIGHLIGHTS

Little Green

(*Live At Canterbury House*, 1967)

Cactus Tree

(*Live At Carnegie Hall*, 1969)

Jericho (*Miles Of Aisles*, 1974)

Woodstock

(*Shadows And Light*, 1980)

Amelia (*Joni At Newport*, 2022)