

# Thank you, Mr. Kratzman wherever you are, for Joni and the fateful words

By DAVID CORB

*This album is dedicated to Mr. Kratzman, who taught me to love words.*

So runs the brief and generous note on the inside of Joni Mitchell's first album. It comes after the usual album credits for musicians, cover photos, "art direction", engineers, and coffee carriers, and automatically you ask:

Who in hell is Mr. Kratzman? Just like that, without even a first name?

"It's Leonard Cohen," says the office fount of information. "She's been very influenced by him."

The office fount as usual sprayed recklessly on truth and untruth alike. Yes, Joni (Anderson) Mitchell has been influenced by Cohen. No: Mr. Kratzman is not Leonard.

Mr. Kratzman, Joni explains, is the Mr. Kratzman who taught her the love of words between the ages of 11 and 12. He was an Australian teacher of English at high school in Saskatoon, and the love of words he taught her can be heard three times a night at the Riverboat in Yorkville through Sunday week April 28.

They are simple and remarkable words — more remarkable than the music which even when matched to Joni's clear and flexible voice, tends to too much keening on the same plane: A curious mixture of plangent plainchant and the characteristic Mitchell swoop, reminiscent of a yodel that doesn't quite make it. But if Mr. Kratzman never did anything else, he gave the impetus to a singer with a telling gift for imagery and atmosphere.

Where is he now? Possibly in Edmonton, but Joni isn't sure. What is his first name? Joni never knew. What did it matter, when she was an impressionable 11-year-old and this guy Kratzman "looked like Gable and Peck rolled into one, with gray sideburns"?

The cover of Joni Mitchell's first album — selling like crazy in California, starting to move on the east coast, just released here — was designed and

painted by her. Somewhere in the drawing there is a woman with long flowing hair, and somewhere in the hair there are the words, modestly picked out: Joni Mitchell. Too modestly for Warner Bros. Arts, who otherwise gave her carte blanche on the album; and the singer's name is blasted out in plum colors top right. Warners plainly have high hopes for her: It's a fold-out album, rare for a first, and there's not a word of bio blurb anywhere in it (even rarer for a first). Just the words of the songs.

"It seemed to me that all I had to say was in the songs," Joni says deprecatingly. Mr. Kratzman would probably appreciate that, since he was (probably still is) very strong on essentials and death on superfluties.

Still, painting was Joni's first love. She met Kratzman for the first time at the end of a school year, and he told her: "If you can paint with a brush, Joni, you can paint with words. See you next year."

Next year she was in his class and she wrote an epic poem about a stallion, full of superheated stuff about "equine statues bathed in silver light." Joni thought it was great; and had it returned brusquely with red Kratzman circles all over it, plus the crushing word "Cliche" to go with each circle.

Kratzman took her aside. "What do you really know about stallions?" he asked.

From then on she stuck to things she knew, like crocuses, and tadpoles caught in a mayonnaise jar . . . and the boys stuck to things like squashed toads which the other teachers would have hemorrhaged over.

"He was just a great man," says Joni. "What he did was keep alive the fresh images that come out of the mouths of children."

These images remain with her in her songs today. It's a feel for one's roots that is rare among English Canadian singer-composers; as rare as singer-composers are in English Canada. Ian and Sylvia used to have it, Ruffy Ste. Marie has it intermittently; Murray McLachlin is getting it, at 19. True, roots or no roots, little of it is localized, except for some songs of Gordon

Lightfoot, our best-known exponent. And though he is known for the Canadian Railroad Trilogy, he'll be just as well known for

*This old airport's got me down  
It's no earthly good to me  
'Cause I'm stuck here on the ground  
As cold and drunk as I can be.  
You can't jump a jet plane  
Like you can a freight train—  
So I'd best be on my way  
In the early morning rain.*

Which could — unless in some excess of chauvinism one can detect a distinctive Canadian feel — come from any place as a moving lament for the passing of rustic simplicities.

French Canada on the other hand has been at it for years, hymning itself in passionate and unequivocal terms. Gilles Vigneault's *Mon Pays* must be its best known expression; but for anyone who wants to know more about the chansonniers there's *The Singer Composers of Quebec* (Gamma label) with songs and singing by Pauline Julien, Jean-Paul Filion, Claude Gauthier, Georges Dor, Raymond Levesque, Herve Brousseau, among others; all in one album.

Inside are the words in French and English, some of them far angrier than Lightfoot or Leonard Cohen or Joni Mitchell is ever likely to be. Sample, from Levesque's *Quebec My Homeland*:

*When I was in Ontario  
Where I was cutting birch  
I worked as hard as the English  
But one day I found out  
That for the same amount of work  
They paid me less than the others  
And I was treated like an animal.*

The album is worth its price alone for Georges Dor's *La Manie*, one of the most beautiful love songs in the world. It is about a worker at the Manicouagan water dam in northern Quebec. Addressed to his girl friend "outside," it tells her that if she only knew how lonely it was up at Manie, she'd write more often.

*Tell me what happens in Montreal  
In the streets dirty and transversal  
Where you are always the most beautiful  
Because ugliness never touches you . . .*

A love song set around a water dam: *Transversal streets!* Only, as they say, the French.

All but two of the songs in Joni Mitchell's album were written in the past 12 months. From her heritage the images of flowers and animals and things remembered from the Saskatchewan and Alberta prairies recur:

*Marcie in a coat of flowers  
Stops inside a candy store  
Reds are sweet and greens are sour  
Still no letter at her door  
So she'll wash her flower curtains  
Hang them in the wind to dry  
Dust her tables with his shirt and  
Wave another day goodbye . . .*

*Someone thought they saw her Sunday  
Window shopping in the rain  
Someone heard she bought a one-way ticket  
And went west again.*

Joni had taught herself the guitar from a Pete Seeger manual (never finished, which helps account for some singular fingering with her left hand), and she left the prairies when she was 19. Since then she has played in Toronto at the now-defunct Gate of Cleve and the Seven of Clubs; and at the Penny Farthing, as well as the Riverboat.

Later she married folksinger Chuck Mitchell; now divorced; wrote *The Circle Game*, probably her best-known song, and about a year ago discovered the work of Leonard Cohen. Cohen's *Suzanne* —

*And you want to travel with her  
And you want to travel blind  
And you know that she will trust you  
For you're touched her perfect body  
With your mind*

had almost as much effect on her as Kratzman zeroing in on her stallion-statues. "He opened up a new me, sketching a whole character in one song."

Marcie is a direct result of that influence, as her occasional penchant for a long line ("There's a man who's been out sailing in a decade full of dreams") is a result of the influence of Bob Dylan. But where Dylan, with his

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# Who's Mr. Kratzman?

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sharp narrow face and look of back-alley cunning, is defiantly urban, Joni Mitchell, with her cornstalk hair, friendly teeth, and air of unassailable innocence, is somewhere on the fringes of town, gazing outwards.

For a time after Toronto she lived in New York, where in short order her apartment was broken into three times and where she was mugged last winter by a man with a beer bottle.

"Hey, Twiggy!" the man shouted, enigmatically, and then slugged her. "A racial grievance," Joni explains it. And now she lives in Los Angeles, among the curious and splendid canyons of North Hollywood, above the smog line, where the rents are still reasonable and the rest of Los Angeles seems a million miles away.

"It's a different world," she says. "The people up there have dropped out, and I think it's a time for me to put down some roots."

It certainly won't be as hectic a year as last, when she worked 40 weeks out of 52 — "and that's club work, which means *real* weeks."

She worked wherever she could — for money firstly ("I didn't want to go back to working in a Saskatoon dress shop"), but also in case all those people were right who kept telling her that she wasn't what was happening, baby, and that what *was* happening was wildly psychedelic and loud.

Above all, Joni Mitchell is not loud. She is direct and straightforward; but not loud. And after a bit things started coming around her way: Rooms became more flexible in their booking policies, Warner-7 Arts signed her to a two-year, four-album contract, and this year she stands to make a lot of money out of her blend of sorrow, nostalgia, and affection.

Certainly she feels anger, particularly about U.S. politics and policies. She

has written some quietly furious songs about them, which she may never perform. Why not, when such fury is fashionable? Just because. Suddenly the words rush out like spill over the Manicouagan:

"Every city has its Bonnie and Clyde story, you know. In one place a couple came out of the show and the boy jokingly put his finger in the back of the man who ran the candy counter and said jokingly 'Stick 'em up!' And the man turned round and shot him (everyone in the States carries a gun now).

"At a time when the world is very violent, putting more violence into it would only reap more. I don't mean, make everything sickly sweet and sentimental! But I do think it's time to pour out as many good vibrations as you can.

"The day Martin Luther King was shot, I was to do a concert in Swarthmore, Penn., and as we drove around there seemed to be violence everywhere, a couple of whites beating up a Negro, Negroes ganging up on whites, and Bonnie and Clyde was on the mar-quees . . . I know that when I came out of Bonnie and Clyde I felt empty and horrible. Niceness is unfashionable. It's called unrealistic, and people look for the ulterior motive."

During her brief marriage "I was too comfortable, I wrote like a sheltered housewife. My best songs, like Marcie and Nathan La Freener (a poisonously rude cab driver she came across in New York) come out of the world's cruelty. So I think I'll stay only a short time in the North Hollywood hills, only another year. It's going to be a very unpleasant year in the U.S., and it's going to be reflected in my writing . . ."

Hardly a year for crocuses and tadpoles in mayonnaise jars. More of a year for squashed toads.

Kratzman! Where are you?