

Joni Mitchell

STILL TOO ORIGINAL, TOO JAZZY, TO SPAWN ANY REAL IMITATORS, THOUGH MANY HAVE TRIED



A MAN ONCE CAME UP TO Joni Mitchell and told her that she was the greatest female singer-songwriter ever, only to have the woman he meant to compliment walk away. He imagined she was being humble – in truth, she was vaguely pissed off. Let's face the facts: Joni Mitchell is one of the greatest songwriters ever – no gender required. The former Roberta Joan Anderson from Saskatoon, Canada, moved quickly from the accessible folk of "Both Sides Now" and "The Circle Game" in the late Sixties into the

extraordinary sophistication of classic Seventies albums such as *Blue* and *Court and Spark*. Her subsequent work increasingly reflected a

"I sang in art school, just to get money to smoke."

compositional ambition that brought her away from the rock mainstream toward something closer to modern jazz.

Over the years, Mitchell's unflinching honesty and intense sensitivity have sometimes caused her grief, especially when she felt goaded by the media into putting down the legion of women she often felt were sent to try and take her place. But as you can hear on her upcoming album, *Travelogue* – which finds her reinterpreting some of her greatest work backed by the London Symphony Orchestra – Joni Mitchell always has been, and always will be, utterly irreplaceable.

How did you start singing for people?

I bought a ukulele to sing bawdy drinking songs at these wiener roasts that we used to have with my group of cronies. We were rock & roll dancers, for the most part. The guys I hung out with were slightly older

than me in high school, and one of them skipped a few grades and ended up in college at fifteen, so we used to go to college parties. The folk-music thing began to happen around that time, and people would sit around and sing. But there were no accompanists. Nobody played guitar around there. There weren't bands. It isn't like it is now, where everybody wants into show business.

What was the first concert you ever went to?

Ray Charles. I remember he'd just gotten busted. I was thirteen, and there was a kind of an eerie overtone from that. My parents weren't going to let me go. I went and bought some rhinestones, and I clipped rhinestones down the side of my slim jims, they called them, these black pants. And I borrowed my dad's jacket. My mother wasn't going to let me go out of the house dressed like that.

How did you find your own voice as a singer?

Well, for one thing, I found out two years ago that I'm an alto. My mother was an alto, my grandmother was an alto. And all this time I've been singing sort of soprano just because at the time that I began to sing in art school, I'd imitate Judy Collins and Joan Baez, just to get money to smoke, basically. With no ambition. Just for fun. I've heard early things where I sound quite a lot like Joan. And I don't really frankly remember listening to her much, but she was being played around me. Maybe that's why I started singing so high. I had a three-octave range then, so anything that I could play, I could sing, too. Now my range has narrowed down to what I always really loved, which is an alto, with a little bit of soprano range, but not a lot.

Is that why the vocals on your new album sound so much more womanly and sexy?

Yeah, the soprano is a girly tone,



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just by the nature of it. You will notice American women – because this is such a youth culture – speak unnecessarily high compared to women around the world. Women in Europe frequently talk with low voices, but here somebody is ready to call you a lesbian at the drop of a hat. You know, they want to check for hair on your chest or so mething. America is weird that way. I remember in one of my early reviews, a guy ripped up my music as “effeminate.” I thought that was pretty funny. I think if you will look at my early work, it is much more female. Art needs to be a balance between masculine and feminine. I’m just a spirit with a mouth.

Years ago, Dylan was asked in “Rolling Stone” about some women performers, and he had issues with their onstage sexuality, but he separated you from the rest of the pack.

The interviewer said, “What do you think of these young women?” He said they “whore” themselves – that was the word he used. And the interviewer said, “Well, what about Joni Mitchell?” And he said, “Well, Joni Mitchell, well, she’s kind of like a man.” And I thought, “What does he mean by that? Kind of like a man?” I guess that’s respectful. It was better than what the women painters used to get – they were called an associate of the academy. Maybe that’s what Bob was talking about – that he was calling me a member of the academy.

Do you think you paid a price in terms of some men viewing you as this blond hippie goddess, not an artist?

This is not a classy business that we’re in. And I think that the men who run it – and, in general, the spirit of rock & roll – are more comfortable with the vulgar. I always think of ROLLING STONE making an example of me in the Summer of Love, making this elaborate diagram of my victims. It turned me into this man-eater in this diagram, and it hurt my feelings terribly at the time, especially the irony of it in the middle of this supposed new free world, to be singled out when Janis Joplin and Grace Slick and everybody else was so much more overtly sexual.

Did you face men who were trying to reshape your image?

Oh, yeah. People always had a problem with the way I dressed, all the way along, for one reason or another. Like men I dated. One guy I dated for a while took all my clothes to the laundromat and washed them all six times. He needed his girlfriend to be ragged. Another guy said to me, “You dress like a senator’s wife. Your handbag is too chic.” I kept thinking about Charlie Parker. He comes into New York City, and the hip thing is that they are all wearing dungarees and striped T-shirts and goatees and sandals, right? He comes in wearing a good suit, and they throw a cymbal at him. But by the time he was done, everybody

was wearing hip suits. All the way up to the Beatles.

You once told me all your heroes were men, and all of them were monsters.

Well, I guess I would have been talking about Miles Davis and Pablo Picasso. They were kind of bad boys. There are not a lot of heroes, really. You know, I’ve tried to thank Annie Ross, because I listened to Annie Ross from Lambert, Hendricks and Ross.

Right, you covered her song “Twisted” on the “Court and Spark” album.

Annie is really hard on me. She’s a tough old gal, and she doesn’t really understand the direction that I’ve taken.

Throughout the years, the media have at times pitted you against some of the women you helped inspire. Have you ever regretted anything negative you said about any of your disciples?

See, I’ve never liked copycats, not that these girls are necessarily copycats, or that it is even their fault. It’s kind of like, “Get me a new Joni Mitchell.” So they kept turning up – they did it with Bob, too. Bob spawned his imitators closer to the beginning of his career. Mine, it took a while for them to kind of grow up or something. And

“It’s tragic what MTV has done to the world.”

every woman who ever came along has sold more records than I have – you know, Carole King, my contemporaries, Carly Simon. Everybody, always. I don’t

know why, but I’ve never been a big record seller, like Billie Holiday. You know, Doris Day outsold Billie.

If you were to run into a Britney Spears or a Christina Aguilera...

They’re sweet.

Would you give them any advice?

No. I mean, what can you say? I mean, that’s what they’ve chosen. God, my granddaughter is three, and she’s really rhythmic. And already she’s grabbing her crotch and dancing. It’s really tragic what MTV has done to the world. Because it’s piped all over the world.

Has the music business changed very much in your lifetime?

Well, no, I’ve been screwed from the beginning. There wasn’t any bidding war for me in the beginning. It was like I was like Rachmaninoff, a late romantic or something – what I was doing was already over, you know. Nobody wanted to really take a chance on me, so the deal that I got was just atrocious. I mean, it was like slave labor, really – no points, no budget. And I’ve never really had a good deal in the business. So I would never take another deal in the record business, which means I may not record again, or I have to figure out a way to sell over the Net or do something else. But I’d be damned if I’ll line their pockets.

So how do you feel when some people say the whole business is going down the crapper?

I hope it all goes down the crapper. It’s top-heavy, it’s wasteful. It’s an insane business. Now, this is all calculated music. It’s calculated for sales, it’s sonically calculated, it’s rudely calculated. I’m ashamed to be a part of the music business. You know, I just think it’s a cesspool.

DAVID WILD

