

The Joni Mitchell success story

# A tribute to Mr. Kratzman, wherever you are!

By DAVID COBB  
These lyrics have arrived. 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, cover photos, "an director, engineers, and coffee carriers, and automatically you ask."

Who is he? Is Mr. Kratzman? Just like that, without even a first name?

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 Toronto's Yorkville.

They are simple and remarkable words — more remarkable than the music which even when matched to Joni's clear and flexible voice, tends to lose much meaning on the same plane. A curious mixture of plangent plaintiveness 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 tilting 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

cray 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 blazoned out in plum colors top right. Warner, plainly, have high hopes for her. It's a folk-rock album, rare for a first, and there's not a word of too blurb anywhere in it (even rare 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 depressingly. Mr. Kratzman would probably appreciate that, since he was (probably still) very strong on essentials and death on superfluous.

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 hunched in silver light." Joni thought it was great; and had it returned brusquely with red Kratzman circles all over it, plus the crumbing 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.



JONI MITCHELL

"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, Buffy Sainte-Marie has it intermittently.

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 (cover, first hand, which helps account for some singular fingering with her left hand), and she left the prairies when she was 18. Since then she has played in Toronto at the now-defunct Gate of Cleve and the Seven Farthing, as well as in the Riverboat.

Later she married folk-singer Chuck Mitchell, now divorced; wrote The Circle Game, probably her best-

known song, and about a year ago discovered the work of Leonard Cohen.

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, Twigg!" 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 46 weeks out of 52 — "and that's club work, which means real weeks."

She worked wherever she could — for money first ("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 hit things started coming around her way. Rooms became more flexible in their booking policies, Warner? 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.

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