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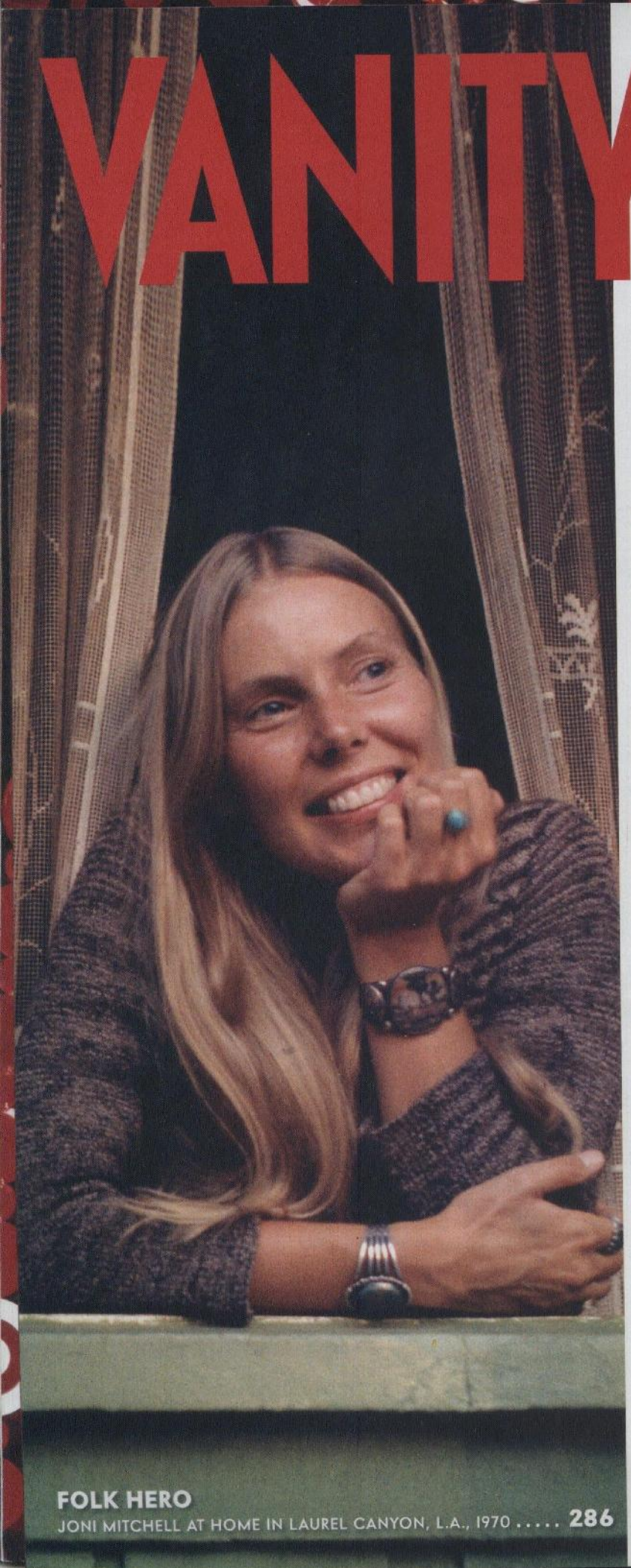

VANITY FAIR®

November 2004 No. 531

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VANITIES

ET CETERA

FOLK HERO
JONI MITCHELL AT HOME IN LAUREL CANYON, L.A., 1970 ..... **286**

A CASE OF TWO Joni Mitchell and Elvis Costello, photographed on the grounds of the Hotel Bel-Air, in Los Angeles, August 12, 2004.

Joni's Last Waltz?

With two new collections just out, Joni Mitchell has curated her own retrospective. Now a fellow musician and longtime fan quizzes Mitchell on retirement, her four-decade career, Ira Gershwin's lyrical missteps, and the value of the waltz

BY ELVIS COSTELLO

We were talking about "The Circle Game," a song that has made several appearances in Joni Mitchell's career. It was initially recorded by other artists prior to the beginning of her own recording career; Joni's version was released in 1970 on her third album, *Ladies of the Canyon,* as she approached her early peak of almost universal acclaim. The lyric, a meditation on the cycle of life, must have appeared precocious to some upon its original issue:

> Sixteen springs and sixteen summers gone now
> Cartwheels turn to car wheels thru the town
> And they tell him,
> "Take your time, it won't be long now
> Till you drag your feet to slow the circles down"

The song was later invested with a poignant resonance that could only come with time when she re-interpreted it on the 2002 orchestral album *Travelogue.* The composer had been down this road before: "I heard and saw it performed by Mabel Mercer, who was then in her 70s, and it had all that life experience behind her. I went backstage afterwards, and I didn't tell her I was the author—I was just a young girl. And I said, 'You know, that's the best performance of that song. It takes an older person to bring it to life. . . .' And I offended her. I learned a woman is never an old woman."

Joni's laugh rolls easily out of a speaking voice that is still imprinted with her Saskatchewan origins despite many years in California. Her striking features frame one of the most clear and penetrating gazes you might hope to encounter.

At the risk of causing the same offense, I tell Joni that in 1972, when I was 17, I bunked off school with my friend Tony Tremarco and took the early-morning train from Liverpool to Manchester so we could be in line when the box office opened in order to get good tickets for her only show within 40 miles. That concert was remarkable for the indelible impression created by the revealing songs from her then latest album, *Blue.* The show ran so long that four of us had to pool the very last of our money to pay for

COSTELLO'S GROOMING BY JEANNE TOWNSEND; FOR DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE

the unimaginable extravagance of a taxi back to Liverpool after we stayed for the encore and missed the last train home.

I mention this because it was a time in my life when money had to be saved up to make one album purchase a month, at best. Having received her first LP as a gift from my father, each subsequent Joni Mitchell record was greatly anticipated, saved for, and bought on or close to the day of the release. Like so many people, I felt a curiously intimate connection to Joni's songs even though they spoke mostly of things outside my own experience. The rarity of those purchases meant that I spent many hours alone, listening in the dark to such increasingly emotionally and musically complex albums as *Blue* (1971), *For the Roses* (1972), and *Court and Spark* (1974).

> Elvis: "You described a life that wasn't shared with much of the audience, and yet they accepted it."

In this period, Joni shifted from the beautiful pure soprano voice of her first records to her more natural alto tones—the opening vocal note of the song "Blue" sounded like a horn—while the subtle instrumental accompaniments of her unique open-tuned guitar gave way to the precisely arranged ensembles of *Court and Spark*. Though she was often described as a "folksinger" and had a place in the "wooden music" trend of rock 'n' roll that included Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, her most sympathetic accompanists began to come from the world of jazz. She followed the popular success of *Court and Spark* and its hit single, "Help Me," with the even more ambitious *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975). The influence of jazz upon her writing and arranging became more pronounced, and the dense, third-person lyrical portraits of damaged and unsympathetic characters in songs such as "Edith and the Kingpin" and "Shades of Scarlet Conquering" did not sit well with some of her more starry-eyed listeners.

I had begun playing the guitar in 1968, the year that Joni Mitchell's first record was released. I started to write songs almost immediately, and like most novices, I imitated the things I loved. I recall telling my school careers adviser that I wanted to "write words and set them to music," as if I had invented the wheel, and he ridiculed me, saying, "So you want to be a pop star." Like many teenagers, I was probably rather serious and self-absorbed, but this calling seemed attainable and legitimate to me as I was going home and listening for hours to writers like Joni (and also Randy Newman and David Ackles). Such albums could be as rewarding as books. They did not yield up all of their secrets at one hearing.

This process for me ran out shortly after the release of the exquisite *Hejira,* in 1976, when I realized that rock 'n' roll music was the best way to get my songs heard, and I began making my own first recordings. Within a year I was earning enough "disposable income" to buy 10 records in one day but no longer had that unique time with which to concentrate on any one piece of music.

Nevertheless, I continued to buy each LP as Joni stretched the width of the canvas with 1977's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter,* an album which still yields up unnoticed pleasures; collaborated with Charles Mingus on one of his final projects, her 1979 album *Mingus;* and gradually moved her artistic focus from within to the outside world, often finding it wanting.

In the 80s and early 90s, I took some comfort in the knowledge that an artist I greatly admired thought it worthwhile to do battle with an era of shrill sonic choices that I would characterize as the aural equivalent of being trapped in a Chinese restaurant that boasts of added MSG. A move from Asylum to Geffen Records did not seem to help matters: the promotion of Joni's albums became lackluster and poorly focused. An individual voice that had seemed both universal and timely was now met with a dim and impatient critical response. Still, there continued to be remarkable, enduring songs, such as the beautiful but harrowing "The Beat of Black Wings," a conversation with a disturbed soldier who had returned home from another military folly, which appeared on 1988's *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm.*

BOTH SIDES THEN Mitchell at the Newport Folk Festival, July 1969. *Inset,* her first album, *Song to a Seagull,* from 1968. Costello, then a teenager, began writing his own songs that same year. "This calling seemed attainable and legitimate to me as I was listening for hours to writers like Joni."

The last few years have witnessed a house being put in order. The Grammy for *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) and other awards seemed less of an acknowledgment and more of an apology from a rather shamefaced business that had done much to marginalize her work in the preceding period. Joni herself began to engage in a process of re-examining her song catalogue. First there were the orchestral re-recordings of *Travelogue.* She then cooperated with the making of the television and DVD portrait *Joni Mitchell: Woman of Heart and Mind.* The interview footage contained in that film reveals someone who is considerably more candid and uncompromising than any of her contemporaries.

We are meeting on the occasion of the July release of *The Beginning of Survival,* a very specific collection of songs taken from her 80s and 90s Geffen releases and final two Reprise albums of original material, *Turbulent Indigo* and 1998's *Taming the Tiger.* This is not a "greatest hits" record but, rather,

LEFT, BY JOEL BERNSTEIN

a passionate and prescient series of responses to a world on the edge of a spiritual, moral, cultural, and environmental abyss.

Many of these vehement and even angry songs originally sprang from a spiteful and hollow decade during which such concerns were patronized and ridiculed by the pop media nearly as much as they are today. The tone of the material is serious. But then, so are the blighting ills observed: the plunder of nature ("Ethiopia" and "Lakota"), the actions of those who make an entertainment of justice ("The Windfall [Everything for Nothing]") or who profit from the distortion of faith ("Tax Free"). These provocations to the conscience, and the re-statement of uncomfortable truths, such as the adaptation of W. B. Yeats in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," could not be more timely. If you are looking for "balance," you can always turn on Fox News.

This release was followed in September by *Dreamland,* a Rhino Records career-length anthology made more valuable by Joni's insistence on the inclusion of a more balanced and personal view of the contents than could be achieved with the curious *Hits* and *Misses* collections that appeared in the 90s on Reprise. The packaging of these new releases also features a pictorial commentary that makes lavish use of Joni's painted self-portraits, family groups, and other studies of nature and memory.

I met Joni for the first time only a couple of years ago, through my wife, Diana (Krall). Since then, we have talked on the phone occasionally, and the three of us have spent a few relaxed nights over dinner or playing pool at Joni's house, games of "two against one" in which our hostess trounced us on every occasion. Today, I wield my tape recorder and list of questions with some trepidation. My contempt for a media industry that postures but lacks insight or even a sense of joy, while reducing much musical criticism to the level of puerile name-calling, probably surpasses that of my conversational companion. We are well matched in our disdain for the cynicism of the disintegrating music business. What follows are a few moments from a conversation that took place at the Hotel Bel-Air, in Los Angeles, and lasted six and a half hours. It yielded 50,000 words, ranging across art, commerce, belief, and the "Prairie Lope" . . .

ELVIS COSTELLO: You've mentioned to me before that you think of yourself as a painter as much as a musician. So, now you are the curator of your own retrospective.

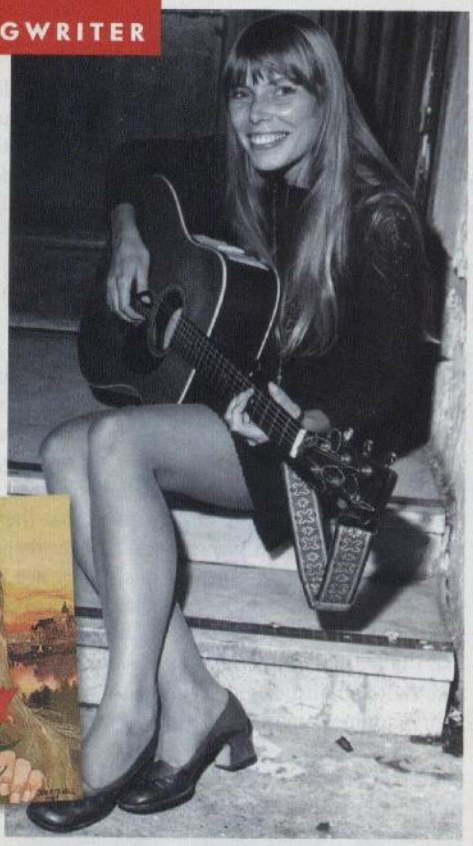
JONI MITCHELL: I will tell you how these things got made. Rhino Records approached me to put out a greatest-hits album—I'm retired, just meaning that I can't go through the process again—and they showed me what they originally wanted the album to be. There was a big hole in the middle. It was all my very young work and then, at the end, it was from the last couple of records. So you went from this ingenue to this mature voice, but the middle had been kind of obliterated. The songs were the ones that the executives had selected [originally, as potential hits]. They are the ones that were promoted, so they were the ones that got the most exposure.

E.C. But they are not necessarily the strengths of those records.

J.M. I don't understand why Europeans and South Americans can take more sophistication. Why is it that Americans need to hear their happiness major and their tragedy minor, and as jazzy as they can handle is a seventh chord? Are they not experiencing complex emotions? I certainly am.

E.C. I believe they are, though. I have to believe it is an underestimation.

J.M. So, we managed to put together a compilation [*Dreamland*] that had some creativity to it. In the meantime I was listening to the free [public] radio stations and I noticed that during their war coverage they were playing these songs born out of the Vietnam War that were all critical of the soldiers. At the time [the Vietnam era],



HELP ME Mitchell in 1970. *Inset*, her 1969 album, *Clouds*. "Like so many people," Costello writes, "I felt a curiously intimate connection to Joni's songs even though they spoke mostly of things outside my own experience."

I remember thinking that that perception was inappropriate, and as a matter of fact it drove me down to play to the soldiers in Fort Bragg, where I met the Killer Kyle [the soldier she later quoted in "The Beat of Black Wings"], who said, "I went over there to kill a Commie for God," and he'd come back all broken up, saying, "Give Charlie a safety pin and he'll blow up a whole platoon. This is an unjust war."

The Beginning of Survival was a reaction to listening to talk radio with many, many, many topics being discussed. And these songs *were* the topics that were being discussed. And they were being discussed on a radio station that was very, very compartmentalized, ethnically speaking, so I'm listening to a lot of different perspectives, different cultural perspectives. I am seeing that the [Vietnam era] music that they are using is totally inappropriate to the themes, and that I have these themes but they were buried in the basement because they didn't sell in the first place. They were introduced into a very awkward period in American culture [the 80s], when people just didn't want to look at it. This is a nation that has lost the ability to be self-critical, and that makes a lie out of the freedoms. "Land of snap decisions / Land of short attention spans . . . " [*Quoting her own lyric from the 1985 song "Dog Eat Dog."*] Everyone I know has attention deficit, and they say it with great pride.

E.C. As if it's a badge of honor.

J.M. Yeah. Well, what's wrong with you? You know, your problem is you are scattered and you can't focus. You should do some exercises because your machine is busted. . . .

It's a bad time to be right. This [*The Beginning of Survival*] is my best work, and it has not gone into the culture. I wanted to be a voice in there. I wanted to participate, but the songs had been deemed sophomoric and negative. Basically it was: "Aren't you being kind of negative?" And I said, "Aren't you being kind of an ostrich?" This is not music for ostriches. I am praying that Americans are not ostriches right now, because if they are we are going to be in terrible trouble.

E.C. The media apologists for the politicians, who wage war, always level the same criticism at artists. They say, "You don't understand the complexity." Well, we do understand the complexity. Why wouldn't we? We read the same newspapers.

J.M. Most of this is such truisms that, in reality, there really aren't any arguments against it. We are leaving the culture in terrible decay, morally. Then there is this rise of this aberration of fundamentalism everywhere, combative religions that have nothing to do with the prophets that started them, a complete misinterpretation of the meaning of their figurehead. So you have this mounting aggressive ignorance with the rabbit's foot of their particular religion. You don't really have any kind of spiritual law, just a kind of a rabid mental illness. The songs are a little slice of life, and the subject matter happens to be "advertising." It happens to be "The courts are like game shows." It happens to be "War was being preached from Baptist pulpits back in the 80s, and it is being preached from the pulpit again." We have a war dictator who was not elected, he snuck in, so he punishes people that threaten him in any way, or even say something he doesn't like.

E.C. So it's the opposite of democracy.

J.M. It has no resemblance to democracy.

We begin talking about Joni's gradual shift from the more personally revealing songs of her earlier career to her use of characters and commentary in her writing.

E.C. If I am correct, "I Had a King" is a song about disillusionment. That is the very first song on your first record [*Song to a Seagull*, 1968]. But you managed to do something that's quite unusual: you carried a substantial audience with you through increasing emotional complexity, right through to *Court and Spark*, which was a big hit record. The sophisticated life you wrote about in "Free Man in Paris" and "People's Parties" was not exactly everyone's experience. You were describing a life that wasn't shared with much of the audience, and yet they accepted your version of it, and it worked both as art and as pop music. The very next record you did was, in my opinion, the masterpiece of that time.

J.M. What is it?

E.C. *The Hissing of Summer Lawns.* Suddenly you are talking about the isolation of wealth: "She patrols that fence of his / To a Latin drum . . . " And for some reason the release of this marvelous record marked a critical fracture and a break in the commercial continuity of your career. However, I think that this accidentally liberated you.

J.M. When you reach that kind of successful pinnacle, it is the nature of the business and the press and everything that they go about tearing you down . . .

Joni: "Everyone I know has attention deficit, and they say it with great pride."

E.C. The song "For the Roses" contains very honest lines about the isolation and corrupting power of acclaim, illustrating that you understood that game: "Oh the power and the glory / Just when you're getting a taste for worship . . . "

J.M. " . . . They start bringing out the hammers / And the boards / And the nails." [*Completing her own line with a laugh.*]

E.C. You do get a taste of it, and we all have our weaknesses.

J.M. No one likes to have less than they had before. That's the nature of the human animal.

E.C. Nevertheless, the audience identified even with the most personal of lyrics in songs as naked as those on *Blue*.

J.M. I didn't really think about audience. CONTINUED ON PAGE 297

LEFT, BY PHILIP GOTLOP

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 290 I was working with my experiences and with my love of musical progression. If you are obsessing something, you may as well take that obsession and put it to some kind of use, to create something. You could write a song about some kind of emotional problem you were having, but it would not be a good song, in my eyes, until it went through a period of sensitivity to a moment of clarity. Without that moment of clarity to contribute to the song, it's just complaining. [*Laughs.*] Even "I came in as bright / As a neon light / And I burned out / Right there before him." [*Quoting her own lyric from "Lesson in Survival."*] That's a hard thing to write about yourself, but recognizing that's what I did, I "watched them buckle up in his brow / When you dig down deep / You lose good sleep / And it makes you / Heavy company."

So I wasn't really thinking about "audience." Not really. Not unless they were in front of me in a club, but not in the abstraction, certainly not during the writing processes, ever. Then it came to that period where I began to look outward.

E.C. And you started to write character studies, as in these lines from "Shades of Scarlet Conquering": "Dressed in stolen clothes she stands / Cast iron and frail / With her impossibly gentle hands / And her blood-red fingernails."

In my opinion, that is as good as any writing. That's a whole book's worth of writing and yet it doesn't rely on anybody assuming that's you. In yet another song from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns,* "The Boho Dance," you acknowledge that you never really fit in with the supposedly bohemian culture from which you are supposed to have come: "But even on the scuffle / The cleaners press was in my jeans / And any eye for detail / Caught a little lace along the seams."

> Joni: "I wanted to participate, but the songs had been deemed sophomoric and negative."

These new collections allow the listener to connect the writer of the work that we have been discussing to the writer of the songs on *The Beginning of Survival.* This is part of your life's work. It is something of which you should be proud.

J.M. *The Beginning of Survival* is my best album. I am very proud of it, and I am surprised at it, too. I thought some of *Travelogue* was a little heavy, but I don't think this is heavy.

E.C. Why in the world would you think *Travelogue* is heavy just because the first CD refers to W. B. Yeats, Saint Paul, Beethoven, and Job—all in the first eight songs? [*Both laugh.*]

We both contributed songs to the Allison Anders movie *Grace of My Heart* [1996], which is about the career of a fictional female songwriter in the 1960s. I wrote "God Give Me Strength" with Burt Bacharach, and you wrote "Man from Mars," which was for a scene in which the main character must record a song after the suicide of her songwriter boyfriend. It is also a rare example of you revisiting the style of your older compositions. However, that song seems deeper than simply an example of Joni writing a Joni song from 1972.

J.M. There was a great line in that movie: "You're a woman—you will be able to write things that men can't." They took it out, but I thought it was great. I said, "Nobody ever said that to me." [*Laughs.*] The director wanted me to write this song in response to this guy's suicide. And I said, "I can write one kind of song and one kind of song only, right now: *I hate show business.* If you want *I hate show business,* I can give you a lot, but I don't think I can do this."

But then my cat, Nietzsche—he's kind of wild—got mad at me about something, and he got up on this chair and he peed right close to my ear. He jumped off from there and ran with his belly to the floor. He knew he did wrong. I caught up to him and I took him by the tip of his tail and the scruff of the neck and I held him at arm's length so he couldn't scratch me, because he's really strong. I said, "O.K., if you're going to act like an animal, you can live like an animal." I put him outside for the night, which I would never do. Well, he's very sensitive, you know. I hurt his feelings. And he didn't come back the first night. He didn't come back the second night. I only had a picture of him as a kitten. So I painted him, had it photographed, and on the third day took it to the printer, and got it back in a laminate form on the fifth day, and hand-delivered it into everybody's mailbox in a three-mile radius. On the back it said, "Have you seen my Nietzsche?" and gave the phone number to call.

He was gone for 18 days, and like a Method actor I took the pain of his absence and wrote the song "Man from Mars." Even in the mix [of the recording] you can hear it. I had been out there listening for him and my ear was hearing three miles away. It is the deepest mix that I ever did, with little sounds going way, way, way back into the mix.

E.C. The quiet sounds in the background.

J.M. "I call and call" [from the lyric] describes it. So I finished the song. It took me 17 days, and on the 18th day he came back. He stayed away just long enough for me to write—

E.C. To serve your purpose. [*Both laugh.*] This is a deep cat? [*Pointing to Mitchell's painting of the cat in a record booklet.*]

J.M. Yeah, Nietzsche.

E.C. You mentioned something there about production. The songs on *The Beginning of Survival* come from a time in which it seemed it was very difficult for people to record. Certainly in my own experience—

J.M. The 80s?

E.C. Yeah. I mean, did you ever feel when you were reconsidering this material that any of the choices that you made then were influenced by what was available in that time?

J.M. Are you talking sonically?

E.C. Sonically, yes.

J.M. There is that period when all of a sudden everything was extraordinarily bright. I think it was all the cocaine or something. It was fingernails-on-the-blackboard bright. I didn't really like that. However, drum machines did afford me the ability to, right or wrong, dictate the rhythm and where the major pushes were. Some of them are eccentric, I admit, but then I rolled in great live players and also the samples that I had in these records. But even in the use of programs, it was still really creative.

E.C. "Tax Free" [from 1985's *Dog Eat Dog*] and "The Reoccurring Dream" [from 1988's *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*] are compositions that are presented in a form of sonic collage that is common in hip-hop and dance music. But I don't believe there should be an orthodox view of these techniques or such concern about ownership. I just had to give up a slice of the first composition on my new record, *The Delivery Man,* because Steve Nieve, the piano player in my band, quoted Leonard Bernstein's "America" for a bar and a half in the accompaniment. The publishing company hit me up for 10 percent of the song. If you apply that same logic to most jazz records, it would make it impossible for you to release them.

J.M. If Charlie Parker was around today [*alluding to the Charles Mingus composition "Gunslinging Bird"*]—

E.C. There would be a lot of dead publishers. [*Both laugh.*]

Did you ever feel that way? Because there have been girls down the years who have glossed you in an ineffectual way. Or did you view it with affection?

J.M. I didn't see it at all. This is another reason that I did this

LADY OF THE CANYON Mitchell at home in the Hollywood Hills, 1970. *Inset,* her emotionally revealing 1971 album, *Blue.*

record. I was given a tape some years back of this hour-long radio show. I held on to it for a couple of years and didn't play it, and then one morning, while packing for Mexico, I stuck it on. I shouldn't have done that. It was at the time when my name had gone stale, and no matter how progressive I got, it was my time to die.

E.C. When was this?

J.M. Mid-80s. So I put this thing on, and the commentator said, "There are all these young women coming up and they have all listened to Joni Mitchell—you can even tell what records that they are listening to." And they played this song with the first three chords you learn on the guitar, insipid lyrics, no depth, no clarity, no metaphor, nothing. Then at the end of the show they said, "All of these girls are beating Joni at her own game. Look how she's lost perspective." And they played "The Reoccurring Dream." [The song, with its complex vocal arrangement, constructs a critical argument against consumerism out of advertising slogans.]

So nobody understood "The Reoccurring Dream," but after September 11, when we were coerced to do a national duty and go out and shop, surely people could begin to see what I was getting at in "Fiction" [from *Dog Eat Dog*], which, of course, is written in an adolescent voice: "I can't decide / I don't know / Which way to go?" That was not my personal turmoil. But, again, they confused the artist with the art.

E.C. I think it is really clear when the "you" is you and when "you" is a character. It requires a willful misreading of this song ["Fiction"] not to get that. Then again, in 1972 you had already written, "No trouble in their faces / Not one anxious voice / None of the crazy you get / From too much choice." [From "Barangrill" on *For the Roses.*]

J.M. Well, I was going through it then. By the time I wrote "Fiction" I had passed through those things and was revisiting them in empathy with youth not getting any direction. How can you get the bearing when you seem to be drowning in lies and artifice? And that refers back to Nietzsche.

E.C. And that is Nietzsche the philosopher, rather than Nietzsche the cat. [*Both laugh.*]

J.M. The three great stimulants of the exhausted ones are artifice, brutality, and innocence. [*Paraphrasing Nietzsche as well as her own song on the subject, "The Three Great Stimulants."*] It should be "corruption of innocence." The more decadent a culture gets, the more they have a need for what they don't have at all, which is innocence, so you end up with kiddie porn and a perverse obsession with youth.

We now enter into a discussion that takes in the environmental catastrophe, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Saint Augustine, Buddhism, native North American culture, and the conflicting motivations and consequences of aid efforts that inspired the 1985 song "Ethiopia." Unfortunately, this part of the conversation is too long to reproduce here or even to edit without distortion.

E.C. What occurred to me when you were speaking about these things is that they are huge and difficult to convey. You can point at them in the length of a song, but even with all your skill, you run the risk of people pointing the finger at you—

J.M. But you have to. It's just too serious.

E.C. I wonder about the place of love songs in all of this. Even in desperate times, I believe that to speak or sing of love is the most positive thing that one can do. I remember when we sat in the car when you came to see my concert last year, at U.C.L.A., and I played you some demos of the songs for my last record, *North.* They were all concerned with a change of the heart, and I was the most surprised to have written them.

J.M. But look where you were in your life.

E.C. That is exactly where they came from.

J.M. Exactly.

E.C. I can't say I had any degree of ease with expressing these things quite so boldly. I remember you actually laughed out loud.

J.M. Because I had gone through that with *Wild Things Run Fast* [1982]. It was not a romantic period [in the culture], and they counted how many times I said "love," and they said, "Yuck, she used the L-word 44 times," or whatever it was. So that was my period, and then [producer, bassist, and ex-husband Larry] Klein and I made a post-divorce album about the arc of romantic love and what a farce it was, giggling all the way. So that's where I was in my life. There was no disrespect.

E.C. I didn't take it as disrespect, but you spoke that night of being done with that subject matter, so I am glad to hear you say that there will be other collections of yours that would incorporate songs I think of as "later in life" love songs. Songs concerned with love and resolution. These are things that other people haven't talked about.

Joni: "Without that moment of clarity to contribute to the song, it's just complaining."

J.M. There is no market for it.

E.C. You have "Facelift" and . . .

J.M. "Stay in Touch," absolutely. [Both from 1998's *Taming the Tiger,* her most recent album of new songs.] There is no song like it about the beginning of love. [From the lyric: "Part of this is permanent / Part of this is passing / So we must be loyal and wary / Not to give away too much."]

E.C. You said at the very beginning, "I'm retired."

J.M. Uh-huh.

E.C. Yet when Diana and I saw you last, if you don't mind me saying it, you did play us a very beautiful piece of music.

J.M. I have one piece of music, since 1997, and I don't see it hav-

TOP, BY JOEL BERNSTEIN

ing lyrics. Where does it go in this world? So I haven't recorded it.

E.C. But you paint a lot.

J.M. I think I would go further into fine arts, I think, if I were to continue.

E.C. Do you ever play music, as in sit at the piano?

J.M. I will when I go up to B.C. [British Columbia, where Joni has a home], because I am in a very small space. I have one TV channel, and I don't really like listening to much music right now. I'm still making peace with music. I only listen to a little bit, Debussy and Stravinsky and stuff . . .

E.C. So when you go to B.C., you would play for pleasure, for yourself?

J.M. More than here [Los Angeles].

E.C. What would you play?

J.M. Piano.

E.C. But what would you play? Would you just improvise?

J.M. Yeah. I can't remember anything I ever wrote.

> Elvis: "Even in desperate times, to sing of love is the most positive thing one can do."

E.C. Have you ever sat and just performed other songs that you know? Do you know other songs?

J.M. I don't know anything.

E.C. You don't know any songs?

J.M. Nothing.

E.C. By other people?

J.M. No. I don't know my own songs.

E.C. When you go to perform, you have to relearn them then?

J.M. Yeah. With a painting, you don't have to go back and paint it again.

E.C. There's only one painting, isn't there? Whereas, the medium that we work in is—

J.M. Different performances.

E.C. Yet even when you record them, it isn't just one record. It is mass-produced, so it can be reproduced. So, you would play and just improvise. Do you have no impulse to capture any of that? Even in the most casual way, in case you are being visited—

J.M. I managed to capture that one [the new composition].

E.C. And how did you capture it?

J.M. By repetition. It was intriguing enough to play it again and again.

E.C. I have a small digital recorder, and I carry it in my pocket when I'm writing. I sometimes leave it on top of the piano and just play. Because I don't play the piano very well, it takes me a long time to discover if there's anything of interest, and I have to go back and refine it. It seems to be one way of sneaking up on yourself. I wondered whether you've ever had the curiosity to improvise like that and just leave the tape running.

J.M. Oh yes. "Paprika Plains" [a 16-minute song from *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*]. That instrumental in the middle is edited from four sessions. I sat at the piano for 29 minutes.

E.C. In the *Woman of Heart and Mind* DVD, you speak about writing "chords of inquiry," and that's a beautiful description of the things that you found from using guitar open tunings. Yet people don't comment so much on your piano playing. It has something open-sky about it. It has a rolling sense and wide-open-space sense, rhythmically. But it didn't occur to me until I heard you talk about the background to the composition that "Woodstock" is actually a very melancholy piece of piano music with an optimistic lyric.

J.M. Well, I watched it on television like all of the people that couldn't go . . .

At this point we are interrupted and asked to walk through the hotel grounds so that pictures can be taken. The conversation lightens and flits from topic to topic, taking in the unique way musicians fit together, whether they are South American Carnival bands, the great Muddy Waters Chicago group of the late 50s, or the Duke Ellington Orchestra. We find that we both share a love of the great alto-saxophonist Johnny Hodges. When we return to the café we find our places cleared and are told that the establishment does not allow smoking during the evening sitting. This being a great inhibition to Joni, we drive to a nearby deli and conclude the conversation with talk of the mysteries of radio, dreams, and plans for the future.

J.M. There was this mountain village in Russia where my music was getting in on some German radio station. I remember this because music used to get up to Saskatchewan from Texas. Late at night after the local station closed down.

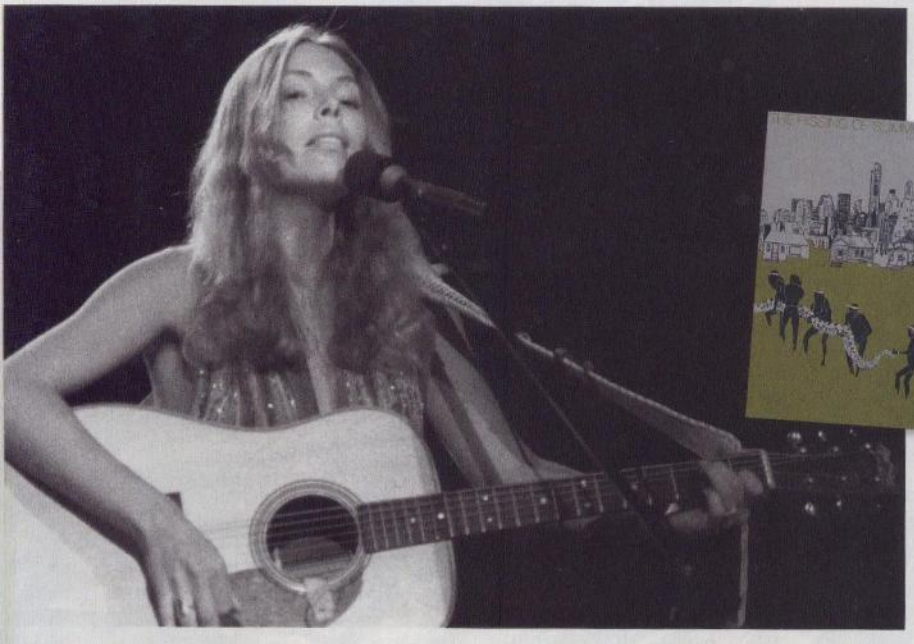
E.C. It must have been a powerful station that could broadcast up there.

J.M. With a big antenna, and things would weave in and out. So I received a letter from this Russian mountain community close to the border of China, and they wanted me to adjudicate a festival up there. It had taken them a month and a half to hear a whole record, because of mountain reception. They had to wait until they played the record again. I remember from my childhood how precious that was. You had a piece of a song, and you were under the covers with the radio waiting into the night for them to play it again.

E.C. Now we have a "too much choice" situation.

J.M. Too much bad choice.

E.C. I had the same experience in the early 70s, listening to Radio



LEFT, BY ROBERTO RABANNE

THE BOHO STANCE
Mitchell performing in the 1970s. *Inset,* 1975's misunderstood jazz-influenced masterpiece, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns.*

Luxembourg in the early hours of the morning, when the BBC had gone off the air. They would say, "Tonight we're going to play songs from *Blue*," but because the signal was coming from overseas it would drift in and out. Then you'd have to wait through a Deep Purple track or something until they played another selection. But it did make you really listen.

J.M. Then there was an Irishman who was doing a radio-broadcast review of the music of the 20th century, and he called me and he said, "What do you think? Gershwin or Ellington?" I said,

Joni: "Ira Gershwin, shame on him. I mean, some of the writing . . ."

"Ellington." And not to dismiss Gershwin, but Gershwin is the chip; Ellington was the block.

E.C. "The Great American Songbook" is a term that is used a lot, bandied around and used to refer to Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter. But it doesn't include Willie Dixon and it doesn't include Hank Williams.

J.M. Yeah, yeah.

E.C. You've spoken about wanting to carry the beauty of that music along with the lyrical freedom that came with, say, Dylan. He learned the lessons of folk poetry, Symbolist poetry, Beat culture, but through his own imagination created new possibilities. Well, you've added still further to those possibilities. There is nothing before your writing that admits this kind of confidentiality.

J.M. Ira Gershwin, shame on him. I mean, some of the writing . . .

E.C. Some of them, like Porter, didn't live long enough to take advantage of that specific, confidential voice that you helped introduce—

J.M. . . . Do you know what I mean? "And so all else above." [*Quoting from Gershwin's lyric for "The Man I Love."*] Shame on you, Ira! What does that mean?

E.C. I want to believe that if Cole Porter had lived a little longer, then he might have taken advantage of it and maybe others would have considered it. Those songs are beautifully written.

J.M. They are beautiful and they're clever.

E.C. And they do have truth contained in them.

J.M. Very much so. I mean, Cole Porter and—

E.C. And Lorenz Hart definitely.

J.M. They were smart and lighthearted.

E.C. Do you realize that you have given a license to other people, even if it has been soundly abused, just as there are bad imitators of Dylan?

J.M. I think that Stevie Wonder told me that he had heard me coming in on the radio from Windsor [Ontario], that I had influenced some of his pieces. It wasn't like he copped the lick or anything like that, but basically he went in a more adventurous chordal direction than he would have had I not existed. That's the kind of influence that I like. It is not copying.

E.C. You hear it musically, but do you ever recognize that you have been a lyrical influence, even when it's abused?

J.M. No. Paul Simon started piling up a lot of words, more than the bar could handle, and I stopped! [*Both laugh.*] If that's what it sounds like, I better cut that out. [*More laughter.*]

E.C. Most of your ensemble work has been with jazz musicians, those with a great pictorial sense, such as Wayne Shorter, or someone who complemented your vocal phrasing, like Jaco Pastorius, but the *Last Waltz* movie was reissued recently, and that contains a rare example of you playing with an out-and-out rock 'n' roll band [the Band].

J.M. The Rhino record [*Dreamland*] is for the most part really a kind of a rock 'n' roll record. I was surprised when we got it all together. I went, Whoa, you know, there's more Chuck Berry on this one than I realized.

E.C. And where is that coming from?

J.M. It's mostly just me playing. Buddy Holly and the early rock 'n' roll was no lighter than the way I play. It's very minimal.

E.C. It also swings.

J.M. And it's got to in real rock 'n' roll.

E.C. This is my big argument. I won't even have the word "rock" attached to me. It just lies there gray and inert.

J.M. You know, Neil Young is singing "Rock 'n' roll will never die" and Neil never rocked and rolled in his life. I mean, he rocked, but he didn't roll. He has got no swing in him.

E.C. It's a square beat, but it's a good beat.

J.M. It's a good square beat. It's the "Prairie Lope." [*E.C. laughs.*]

Joni rolls into an approving riff about the African roots of swing in American popular music . . .

J.M. All "Whitey" knows is funeral and war marches. And the polka. That's about as gay as "he" gets . . . and the waltz.

E.C. Don't slander the waltz now!

J.M. I love waltzes! That [most recent] song is a waltz. Go figure—what am I going to do with it?

E.C. Write 11 more. □

THE CIRCLE GAME
Though they are well matched when it comes to discussing music, Mitchell can reportedly trounce Costello at pool. *Inset,* the new compilation *The Beginning of Survival.*

BOTTOM, PHOTOGRAPH BY ART STREIBER