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MOJO

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"We were wreckage. Like Mötley Crüe but not stupid enough to write a book about it"

BILLY DUFFY INSISTS THE CULT WERE ROCK'N'ROLL. HONEST. SEE P52

Poetic voice of the Woodstock generation, **Joplin** hated her, “ignorant” critics dissed her and she longed to be **invisible**. But now **she has returned**. “Starbucks resurrected me,” says **Joni Mitchell**.

Interview by **ROBERT HILBURN** • Portrait by **FRANK OCKENFELS**

TO BE CALLED A ‘CONFESSIONAL WRITER’ is repugnant to me,” snaps Joni Mitchell. “The term makes what I do seem cheap and gimmicky. ‘Confession’ to me is having a gun stuck to your head or going, ‘Forgive me Father for I have sinned.’ That’s not what I do. If someone calls me a confessional writer, it is ignorant and insulting.”

On an otherwise lovely southern California afternoon on the outdoor patio of a restaurant in the upscale Los Angeles area known as Brentwood, MOJO’s suggestion that Mitchell is one of the architects of the confessional school of songwriting has caused her to go on the offensive.

“What did I ever confess to?” she demands. “Name one of my songs that was confessional!”

Dozens of songs come immediately to mind, but MOJO settles for A Case Of You from Mitchell’s classic *Blue* album from 37 years ago.

“It’s a love song. That’s all,” Mitchell replies dismissively, lighting another in a non-stop series of cigarettes. “It’s art. Sometimes you write about the exact thing you saw, but other times you take something that happened over here and put it with something over there.

“In Edith And The Kingpin [*The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, 1975], part of it is from a Vancouver pimp I met and part of it is Edith Piaf. It’s a hybrid, but all together it makes a whole truth.

“Basically, I am trying to present the human truth, but did [those things] happen specifically to me? What does that matter?”

Mitchell – whose sparkling eyes and defined cheekbones remind you that her photos once graced thousands of ’70s student dorm walls – stares across the table to see if MOJO has the nerve to suggest any other song title. She takes the silence as surrender and lightens the atmosphere by offering one of the only things she could think of that *was* confessional – a line from the ’80s song, Man To Man [*Wild Things Run Fast*, 1982]: “I don’t like to lie/But I can sure be phony when I get scared/ I stick my nose up in the air/Stoney, stoney when I get scared.”

Mitchell bursts out laughing at the words, as if embarrassed by them, and reaches for yet another cigarette.

This outburst (and a couple more to come) aside, these are good days for the British Columbia native whose ’70s albums, including *Blue*, chronicled romantic anguish and desire with an insight and grace which made it almost impossible to separate the emotions in the songs from the woman who wrote them. Among the hundreds of artists who have recorded her songs or been effusive in their praise for her work are Bob Dylan, Prince, Morrissey, Elvis Costello, Björk and Paul Westerberg.

But the acclaim eventually turned to scorn and even ridicule as Mitchell moved from the accessible and romantic terrain of *Blue* to social commentary and jazzier textures.

Finally, Mitchell abruptly announced ➤

We’re not WORTHY

How Ms Mitchell altered **Herbie Hancock’s** world view...



“Joni is all about being in the moment. She opened up a whole new pathway to what I think of music. All her lyrics are brilliant. Unbelievable imagery and metaphors. I have an incredible respect for Joni. She is a real renaissance person, a real hero of mine.”

◀ in 2002 that she was quitting the record business.

When I interviewed her in 2004, she spoke openly for nearly six hours about, among many other things, the reasons for her disenchantment with the business, including “asinine” critics who charged that smoking had ruined her voice. The depth of her anger surfaced when I asked Mitchell, who was then devoting all her creative energy to painting, if she planned to sell any of the pieces.

“No,” she replied. “When money meets up with art, there is a lot of pain, and it’s the pain of ignorance, and I don’t want to meet up with that ignorance again. My work is personal, too vulnerable. That’s why I quit making records.”

But Mitchell returned to the pop arena in 2007 with *Shine*, a widely admired CD on Starbucks’ Hear Music label. The collection, which includes reflections on the war on terror and environmental decline, is part of a creative resurgence that also includes *The Fiddle And The Drum*, Mitchell’s collaboration with the Alberta Ballet, and *Flag Dance*, a series of anti-war photographic canvases exhibited in Los Angeles and New York.

In this latest interview, Mitchell, 64, is alternately funny and self-deprecating when she talks about her life away from the music business, but there is frequently a sting to her words as she discusses that industry, the Woodstock generation, the cigarette/voice issue and that thorny “confessional” tag.

Let’s go back to 2004 when you were dead-set against making another record. What was your thinking then?

For much of my career, the public perception of my work was kind of underwhelmed, though I felt there was a lot of growth in it. Take [1985 album] *Dog Eat Dog*. That was kind of my political awakening and people weren’t ready for it, so there was a lot of negativity in the air, a lot of stupid press. It was called sophomoric in *Newsweek* even though it contained themes for their cover stories in the next couple of years. So there was a lot of reneging that went on about that record, but in the meantime, the record company dumped it. Every time that happened, I thought, “Well, I’ll get better.”

But when I turned in *Travelogue* [a 2002 album consisting of symphony versions of her earlier material], the record company came to me and said, “Joan, we’re just selling used cars now. We don’t know what to do with this. It’s a work of genius.” So, I thought, “Well, where do I go from here?” That was part of my reason for quitting. I just felt it was useless.

What did you do in the nine years between your last collection of new songs and *Shine*? Did you write for yourself or not write at all?

I didn’t write. I got kind of demoralised.

But what about the old notion that an artist has to be tough enough to not let criticism or lack of sales bother them?

People seem to think an artist is like an armadillo, but artists are sensitive. If it was intelligent criticism, that’s one thing, you know, but it’s often so ignorant and hateful. [Jean] Renoir was a great filmmaker and his *The Rules Of The Game* was a great film, but it offended the bourgeoisie. They walked out on it. You see it now and it’s a comedy about wealthy people in the country being very superficial and you wonder why that was so offensive. But I saw an interview with him where he said it took the wind out of his sails for a long time.

What was it like when you did start writing again? How did it come about?

I have this piece of land [in British Columbia] that I return to in the summer. It’s where I do most of my writing, where I restore my soul. I hadn’t played an instrument in nine years, 10 years, something like that and I just felt this rush of gratitude for the property. I would stand on my front porch of this tiny, 800-square foot house at night and the big dipper was all you would see. I was happy.

I ran to the piano and the first piece on the album just poured out. I even called it *Gratitude* for a while. I started playing on the piano and in a short period of time I had four piano songs, but no words. Then a friend called and said he had just discovered the If poem by Kipling and I thought that would be good to set to music and that came easy. Usually I do the music first, which is harder. It was easy having the words first.

Why write the “hard way”? Why not do the words first?

It’s not that I’m perverse and trying to make things difficult, but it sets up a more original rhyme scheme when you have to match the words to the music. That way you don’t recycle old melodies, which is probably why my music is not more popular (*laughs*).

How did you go about deciding to make a record again? What did you ask yourself?

I thought, Do I want to step out into this arena and listen to a lot of stupid people say stupid things about my work? This was pure music and this is not a world that embraces pure music. It’s all calculated, “look at me” music, if you know what I mean. I didn’t want to take my babies into that environment. So I was reluctant. For one thing, I told myself no more social commentary. People don’t want to hear social commentary from a woman; they’ve made that very clear to me.

Henry Diltz/Corbis, Roger Ressmeyer/Corbis, Getty (2), jonimitchell.com

A life in PICTURES

2

Mitchell’s self-drive: the one and only Joni

1 Coffee-house music: the 21-year-old folknik Joni in 1964.

2 My, my, my: looking rather uncomfortable on the *This Is Tom Jones* TV show in 1970.

3 Wight riot: Joni encounters the end of the hippy dream, Isle Of Wight Festival, August 1970.

4 Dead leg: Joni on-stage with Joan Baez. “Women of song don’t get along.”

5 ...Art attack: Mitchell at work on her other talent... despite a broken foot, 1984.

6 Maiden voyage: with fellow traveller Herbie Hancock, 1978.

7 Sitting pretty: a shot for fashion magazine *Vogue* in 1968.



Why do they accept it from men?

Women can't use the patriarchal device like Dylan and say "you". He uses it all the time, but I used "you" on [1975 album] *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and everything rained down on me. That's why I use "I" and I get this reputation for being a confessional poet. If I go "you", everybody shuts down because I'm lecturing: "How dare you tell me that?"

So you don't consider your music confessional?

When I read "confessional style" in print, there's something in the tone of the way it is delivered that is kind of insulting, like you've flashed in a public place or something, when in fact you are attempting to illuminate the human condition. I feel when somebody calls me a confessional songwriter that they've missed the point. There's too much emphasis put on the artist and not enough on the art. I prefer to be like the Wizard of Oz where you just see what I've created and I'm invisible. I should have been a playwright.

Augustine, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are confessional writers and all three make me sick. I have nothing in common with them. Sexton was a whopping liar. She didn't even tell the truth to her shrink. All of her confessions, as far as I can determine, seem to be contrived. Plath, I don't know that well, but I don't think suicide is chic. I'm not suicidal.

But I think people mean it as praise when they call you a confessional writer. They just mean your songs are honest and personal.

Of course art is personal. If you are a writer and don't draw upon the vitality of your own experience, what have you got to say? That's what you have to work with. The reason people fix on me is because I am also the performer so people tend to think, "This is how Joni feels",

and that's not the point. It's a piece of art. The question really is how the listener feels. Do you see yourself in that moment? That's where I get frustrated, all this attention on the artist and not enough on the art.

Let's get back to *Blue* for a minute. You once told me that its honesty was, in part, an attempt to avoid becoming trapped in a kind of public image the way Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix did. Could you expand on that?

I made the decision in my emotionally disturbed period, which was when *Blue* was, that I wanted everything to be transparent. I wanted to present myself as I was. To continue [as a songwriter], I had to show what I was going through.

"Hippies became the greediest generation in American history. We dropped the baton."

What did you see happening to Hendrix and Joplin that made you feel that way?

Jimi and I discussed this one evening in Ottawa. He didn't like beating up his guitar and setting fire to it. He felt it humiliating after a while and degrading because he felt people thought he beat up women and he didn't. He had presented an image that was shocking, a violent act and people assumed that he was dangerous. But Jimi was a sweet guy. He became very uncomfortable with the image he had presented.

What was your relationship with Joplin?

She was very competitive with me, very insecure. She was the queen of rock'n'roll [one year] and then Rolling Stone made me the queen of rock'n'roll and she hated me after that. I always thought the women of song don't get along, and I don't know why that is. I had a hard time with Laura Nyro also, and Joan Baez would have broken my leg if she could, or at least that's the way it felt as a person coming out. I never felt that same sense of competition from men.

What is the quality in a song that you prize most — is it illumination, truthfulness, honesty?

I want it to have something for everybody. It should have sensitivity and emotionality and it should have intellect and some revelation, some brain food and clarity. Intellect and clarity go together. Clarity gives intellect brevity. Like I'm long winded. That comes from being sensitive. Sensitivity gives me a lot of details [in a song] and I have to distill a lot of thinking down to that which I feel is pertinent and artful, and it is art after all, so it needs to have truth and beauty.

There's a strong undercurrent of discontent in *Shine*. What are your feelings about the government these days?

I was angry at the handling of New Orleans and how quick the American people were to impeach a man for sex and how slow to move on other things that made everyone in the world want to nuke America. I was also angry at the inability of this generation to know what to do; their inability to move at all, which is an unusual thing for youth.

What do you mean?

In their youth, my generation was ready to ➤





Joni Mitchell: "The last thing I wanted to be was famous."

◀ change the world, but when the baton was passed to them in the '70s they fell into a mass depression because all revolutionaries are quick to demolish and slow to fix. When handed the baton to fix it, they didn't know what to do so they kind of degenerated into the greediest generation in the history of America – the hippy, yippie, yuppie transition from the '60s to the '70s to the greedy '80s and Ronald Reagan. My generation dropped the baton and spawned this totally lacklustre generation.

Machiavelli said, "People don't know what to do with peace. It always degenerates into fashion and fornication," and that's what we have. We are not building the kind of strong people in this third generation that we are going to need for the catastrophes that lie ahead. They aren't getting any ethical instruction. I'm reluctant to say 'moral instruction' because it can get so diabolical; the things that are done in the name of morality are completely diabolical.

You've been called everything from a folk act to a jazz artist. How do you see yourself?

I entered the game as a folk singer, but it took me six records to find a band that could play

my music and that was a jazz band and lots of my fans threw up their hands. In truth, *Mingus* was the only jazz album I did. Everything else, while it may have sounded jazzy at times, is outside the laws of jazz. With *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, I cut my players some slack and they imposed some jazz chords on my music. Some people thought I was trying to do jazz and not quite getting it, but I wasn't. The only thing I have in common with jazz is sometimes experimental rhythms, and these wide harmonies that are outside the rules of jazz.

You often talk about your relationship with Miles Davis. How did he influence you?

As a singer mainly. People said it was kind of weird at the time and I can see that now. At the same time, some of those experiments were necessary for me to move forward. They probably cost me a lot of popularity, but I wouldn't change anything.

Why did you include *Big Yellow Taxi* on this album?

It fit the record. I didn't have to change anything except the price, which went from "a buck and a half" to an arm and a leg (*laughs*).

I liked the humour in another song where you ask, "Who do you think will save us?", and you name *Mighty Mouse and Superman*. I take it as a call to action – that we shouldn't keep waiting for others to do the work for us? Do you think Joni Mitchell or any musician can help save us?

I can only do what I can do and hope the thought will fall on the ears of someone who can do something active. Because of *Big Yellow Taxi*, I get photographs from time to time: "Look Joni, this used to be a parking lot and they've planted it all with wildflowers."

Why release *Shine* on the Starbucks' label?

I didn't listen to music for years. I would turn on the radio and it felt like crap, but Starbucks had this "Artists Choice" series going on and my office sent me one Diana Krall did. So I asked if I could do an album containing some of my favourite music. It would force me to review what it is that I like about music; back to my earliest memories, as an infant. I've been a composer for a long time. My early heroes were Duke Ellington and big band swing and the classical music that my mother and father played. I opened with *Clair De Lune*, which was

one of my mother's records, something I loved as a child and I went through the spectrum [Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Marvin Gaye, Leonard Cohen]. It took a long time and they came to me and asked why I was taking such a long time. To me, it was life and death in terms of whether I'd ever play music again [and] we developed a relationship. They resurrected me in a way.

How do you like to think of your music?

Like a river, it's always changing. Sometimes it is still and deep. Sometimes it rages over waterfalls; sometimes it's muddy, sometimes it's clear. I'd like to think that what those people mean when they say I've influenced them is that my standards are very high, that my work is high calibre.

What about your voice? A lot of critics have complained that smoking caused you to lose your ability to hit the old high notes. Has it?

That's just more of the ignorance. I have three octaves and I used my soprano voice when I came into the music business because that's what the folk singers were doing. But my mother was an alto and that's what I have started to use, too. It has nothing to do with cigarettes.

A lot of artists seek fame, thinking it will make them happy. Did you think of music as a way to be famous?

The last thing I wanted to be was famous. I even wrote a poem in school about Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin when I was 15 or 16. It was about how awful it must be to be teen idols and having everyone looking at them. I called it *The Fish Bowl*. I remember people around me, Tom Rush, for instance, thinking that I was ambitious. I apparently said to him that I'm going to be a star, but I don't think he understood the context. It was bewilderment and dread. I remember the first time people sucked in air – ooh! – at the mention of my name. I ran six blocks in the opposite direction.

So you didn't go into music to get attention?

I had a lot of attention as a youngster. I was popular, a dancer in high school. I didn't have anything to prove. At the heart of me, I'm really a good-time Charley. Dancing makes me very happy; a couple of spins and whatever problems I came to the party with are gone.

You mention truth a lot when talking about your music. Can you look back to see where truth became an important quality for you?

I was a little girl at church and the minister told this sermon, I think it was his first one at our church. The minister before was very safe and non-political and uninspiring. The new minister chose "Thou shall not steal" as his first sermon. There had been this story around town about a woman who was collecting for charity and some of the money disappeared. The rumour went around that she took it and even though no one ever proved she took it, people started treating her differently. It was like this lynch mob. Into that climate came this new minister and he started his sermon with the normal interpretation of "Thou shall not steal" and it was pretty boring. But all of a sudden, he says there are other ways you can steal besides stealing material things. He said you can steal a person's reputation and the congregation began to cough and squirm, really irritable like he hit a nerve. I was delighted, but the end of the story is next week half the congregation stayed home.

What did you learn from that?

I learned that tell the truth and you'll have half a house, but that it's worth it. **M**

A case of Joni...

The singer-songwriter's brilliant career highlights. By Mat Snow.

MASTERPIECES: 1970-75

Ladies Of The Canyon

★★★★ REPRISE, 1970



Though titled in tribute to LA's Laurel and Topanga Canyon bohemia, her great-leap-

forward third album's best songs draw their inspiration elsewhere. Written in Hawaii, *Big Yellow Taxi* combines two strokes of genius: an eco-warning that bats its eyelids; and the lyrical jump-cut from the spoilation of our natural paradise to the unexplained midnight flit of a lover (in a big yellow taxi): "you don't know what you've got till it's gone." And then Woodstock, the festival she watched on TV in tears in absentia: her song, a hit for Matthews' Southern Comfort and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, poetically links the back-to-paradise countercultural revolution to our origins as "million-year-old carbon", the weight of that thought echoed in her sombre, stately Wurliitzer electric piano.

Blue

★★★★ REPRISE, 1971



Written in transit – in flight, in Paris and Crete, in cafés, "on a lonely road ... and travelling"

– Joni's fourth is her naked mid-twenties life audit. Romance had taken a battering but she still believes intensely in a significant other, with songs of passing trysts with Leonard Cohen (*A Case Of You*) and a chef called Carey (the album's hit single); she's homesick too for California and, in *River*, her native Canada. More coded, the blessing of Little Green to the daughter she'd given up for adoption in 1965 trawls an undertow of loss that colours often playful, always chimingly tuneful music, played on piano, guitar and Appalachian dulcimer lightly accompanied by such fellow Canyonistas as James Taylor and Stephen Stills.

Court And Spark

★★★★ ASYLUM, 1974



Joni's voice had taken on a darker register on 1972's *For The Roses*, whose songs also prefig-

ured this album, her commercial peak where she perfected a sophisticatedly structured, arranged and personalised pop as revolutionary as had been The Beatles. Support personnel drawn vocally from folk-rock (Crosby & Nash) and instrumentally from jazz-pop (Tom Scott's *LA Express*) exquisitely frame Joni's harmonically zingy songs of anxious romantic rapture (*Help Me, Car On A Hill, Just Like This Train*) and social and artistic

isolation (the title song and *People's Parties*). Joni did funny too: *Free Man In Paris* (a fantasy on the theme of Asylum Records boss David Geffen) and *Raised On Robbery* round out this self-portrait of the artist as a hyper-sensitised 30-year-old.

The Hissing Of Summer Lawns

★★★★ ASYLUM, 1975



Midway through the Me Decade, 10 vignettes of Lotus-land where it isn't just the sprinklers hissing

but the snake in the grass – the seduction of a hip and easy lush life Joni is half in love with too in her sexy, sumptuous and serpentine meditation on the cocktail hour, Rhine wine, air conditioning, high fashion girls, fresh glistening lipstick, shining skin, the "taste of something smuggled in". On her second and most accomplished 'jazz' album, the sensual groove heightens a mood of almost spiritual incantation in songs like *Shadows And Light* and *The Boho Dance*, and every line is a jewel of erudite imagery – lyric poetry at its most glitteringly luxurious. Socio-cultural critique has never been so indiscreetly, hauntingly beautiful.

THE WILDERNESS: 1985-98

Dog Eat Dog

★★★ GEFEN, 1985



Joni made one more undisputed masterpiece, 1976's *Hejira*, a spacious, fluid and intimate

reverie duetting with Jaco Pastorius's sublime bass. This visionary mood came to overwhelm the songs, and her public switched off. Like many '60s giants, in the '80s Joni tried to upgrade her sound to recapture lost ears. Synth-pop pioneer Thomas Dolby might have seemed an unsympathetic choice of co-producer were not his work on Prefab Sprout's *Steve McQueen* that year so respectful of songsmith Paddy McAloon's cryptic romantic vision. But here everyone succumbs to gated snare-drum headache, Fairlight fever and modish hyperactivity. A fortysomething anachronism both in the MTV pop bubble and Reagan's America, Joni is full of angry liberal fight: we've gone to the dogs, and only the most savage survive. Angry Joni emerges here.

Taming The Tiger

★★★★ REPRISE, 1998



In the '90s Joni got her groove back by digitally tweaking her classic sound, finding

inspiration in her own comfort zone. *Night Ride Home* (1991) and the angrier, double Grammy-winning *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) returned to her strengths, though her voice began to show its age. Best of the three, *Taming The Tiger* is suffused with love: for her newly reunited daughter, Kilauren, given up for adoption in 1965; for her new beau Donald Freed, celebrated in the song *Face Lift* (Joni's ex-husband, Larry Klein, was to remain in her life as bassist and sometime co-producer); and for her cat Nietzsche, whose temporary disappearance was to inspire the lovelorn song, *Man From Mars*, a lyrical and melodic masterpiece among Joni's very best.

THE REBIRTH: 2002-07

Travelogue

★★★★ NONESUCH, 2002



Two years after *Both Sides Now*, her album of jazz standards plus two of her own chestnuts

revisited, the same Vince Mendoza-arranged 70-piece orchestral treatment of 21 more Joni originals. Where the former album cast her as a battered saloon-bar dame backed by a school-of-Riddle sound no less lush, *Travelogue* is both a coded life-in-song (its selection by no means a greatest hits or canonical best-of) and an assertion of musical self-belief: these songs, such expansiveness declares, are worth it. And most are, especially the *Hejira* numbers, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (based on a Yeats poem) and *For The Roses*, mining harmonic territory closer to Ellington than Neil Young, Debussy than Dylan. It flopped; Joni announced her retirement.

Shine

★★★★ HEAR MUSIC, 2007



Provoked out of retirement by the sideshow 'War against terror' while the world overboils, Joni

bestows upon our suicidal folly the blessing of serenity. On the title song her trademark suspended chords of doubt and inquiry enrich the reverie of long, lyrical piano-lead melody lines and synth textures rooted in the Reagan era as she itemises humanity's irretrievably overdrawn account with a grace that accepts it all without fear or rage. If I Had A Heart, Bad Dreams Are Good and Strong And Wrong allow some bitterness to peep through the hallowed mood despite her setting of Kipling's poem to stoicism, if. And she pointedly revisits her skittish eco-dystopia of 1970, *Big Yellow Taxi*: you can't that say she never warned us.

