

THE SUNDAY TIMES

CULTURE

The lonely painter

Joni Mitchell, the great songwriter, talks about quitting music — and men

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CULTURE BULLETIN

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Joni Mitchell talks to Bryan Appleyard

PORTRAIT OF GENIUS

The 'emotional scientist' of her generation has finally given up on love. Music, too, she says. So what's this new box set all about?

A few weeks ago, an old couple danced on the stone floors of a huge terracotta-coloured Spanish house on a hillside in Bel Air, Los Angeles. They didn't dance for long: their knees let them down. She complained that she couldn't pivot any more and they had to stop. He was called Ray, she was called Joni and, more than 50 years earlier, they had been high-school sweethearts in Saskatoon, Canada. Ray would borrow his dad's Cadillac and they would make out on the back seat.

In 1991, on her album *Night Ride Home*, Joni Mitchell sang a song about those times. "Oh, little darlin' / Rock'n'roll in the dashboard."

Ray's dad's Cadillac was a celebration of what may have been the happiest times of Joni's life. Her early years were scarred by multiple childhood ailments, including polio, and she was to leave Saskatoon for art school in Calgary. She then fled to Toronto to conceal a pregnancy from her parents. The father vanished, and Joni foolishly married a man called Mitchell, but ended up putting her daughter for adoption. Chuck Mitchell left her with only his surname.

She would spend the rest of her life wrestling with, and singing about, love, as nobody had ever done before nor ever will again, but always inconclusively: "I really don't know love at all" was the crucial line in her song *Both Sides Now*. Her teen years, it turned out, had been a sunlit intermission.

"You're an expert on love," I say to Joni Mitchell as we sit in the arcade surrounding the veranda in that Spanish house that she has owned since 1974. She bristles. "Some of the reports of my promiscuity..." she starts to say, but I interrupt her.

"I didn't mean that, I mean you really are an expert in your songs." The bristling subsides.

"I have a scientific birthday, Madame Curie's birthday, and somebody called me an emotional scientist. That's what my interest is: to get to the heart of these things."

Her expertise is now compendiously demonstrated by 53 of her songs in a four-disc set called *Love Has Many Faces* — subtitled *A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced*, it's ready for the attentions of the right choreographer. They are all remastered and re-engineered versions of her album tracks. She tells me with some pride that, on one track, she went so far as to shift two bass notes that were out of time. Why not something new?

"Music is over for me, pretty much," she explains. "I can't sing; I don't want to. I want to paint, and I want to write. I can't tour, I can't travel, I'm sick; I

can fly two flights a year. I'm old. You have to know when to give up." OK, she is 71, but, sick or not, she does not look it. Her strange, unearthly beauty is undimmed. She is slim, upright; her hair is silky, and her extraordinary face is intact, with its wondrously high cheekbones and penetrating, curious eyes. Today, she is mostly in black — trousers, blouse, cardigan with patterned sleeves. Her voice, admittedly, is not what it was, but she rejects all suggestions that the cigarettes — she makes serious progress through a pack of American Spirit as we speak — are to blame.

"People say my voice got weary from years of smoking. Well, I'd been smoking for 15 years when I made my first record. It was other things that changed my voice."

One of those other things might be love, actually. Promiscuity is an unfair charge. She was — still is — one of the biggest stars of postwar music in the world, and she was what used to be called "a leggy blonde". Trouble found her in the form of Leonard Cohen, David Crosby, Graham Nash, Jackson Browne, James Taylor and many others. After Mitchell, she tried marriage one more time, with Larry Klein, bassist, producer and songwriter. It lasted 12 years, until 1994. Now? While showing me the house, she points to one of the paintings in the living room.

"That's my last boyfriend. All that's over now." She fiercely rejects the claim that the new box set

INTERVIEW | Joni Mitchell

» is an autobiography, even though it clearly is a musical outline of all that she has learnt and felt. She is allergic to anything as exact as an account of her life by anybody but herself, rejecting most of the books and articles that have been written about her. I ask her about a film of her life that was supposed to star Taylor Swift.

"I squelched [her favourite word] that! I said to the producer, 'All you've got is a girl with high cheekbones. It's just a lot of gossip, you don't have the great scenes.' There's a lot of nonsense about me in books: assumptions, assumptions, assumptions." She wants to keep herself to herself — "And if you care, don't let them know," she sang in *Both Sides Now*. At the same time, she does urgently want to be known for her art. It's a paradox, but not a surprising one, in an artist so complex, so original. Her music, though often covered, can never be replicated. The polio weakened her left hand, so she invented new guitar tunings and then new harmonics, new rhythms. She poured excess syllables into her lines, inspired, she says, by jazz horn solos. This was imitated by the likes of Sheryl Crow and Paul Simon. She says she stopped when she heard him doing it.

In range, originality and ornery self-belief, the only comparison is with Bob Dylan, who, in the 1980s, seemed to notice that in looking at her, he was, in a way, looking in a mirror.

"Joni's got a strange sense of rhythm that's all her own," he said, "and she lives on that timetable. Joni Mitchell is in her own world, all by herself."

That was probably the high point of the relationship. He once very ostentatiously fell asleep when her *Court and Spark* album was playing, and she continues to snipe at him. She does her finest bristle when I ask her how she feels about being called, as she often is, the female Dylan.

"I am much more original musically, and a much more original thinker."

She obviously feels underestimated next to the male stars. With some justification, she sees naked sexism in the way she has been patronised by other artists and the industry in general.

"I'm a woman in a man's world. There are hardly any women in my business. There are oppressive men and exploitative men. Georgia O'Keeffe used to talk about them — men this and men that — too. The men said, 'You can't paint New York City' — she did some fantastic paintings of New York City. It's all male-dominant, and you're always with them. I'm on the road with 21 guys, and I love men's company, don't get me wrong. Even when they're stupid lit-



Sideways step Joni Mitchell's 53 songs would score a four-act ballet that she has already illustrated

tle boys, I still like them. I mean, love the sinner, hate the sin."

There's an obvious — though probably not to her — connection between her anger at the behaviour of men and her love of black music: sexism equals racism. She became, in her middle and late periods, very much a jazz musician, impressing the likes of Charlie Mingus, about whom she made an album.

"I think," she announces grandly, "in the 20th century there was very little white genius, but there was a lot of black genius. I don't like rock music: it's militant and it's white and it doesn't have any joy in it. I just picked up black time somehow, there was something about it my body liked. I think like an African. I

never counted one-two-three like a white person."

She is an outsider — she always was — but perhaps the feeling has intensified now that she is old and alone in that huge Bel Air house, not singing. Isolation and a feeling of being underrated make her a bit too scathing about music other than her own. To make her point, she performs sarcastic, satirical versions of America's *A Horse with No Name* and, bizarrely, the Chordettes' *Lollipop*, announcing finally: "Until my generation is dead, there is not going to be any fair adjudication of this crap."

She tells me that, while in her Canadian home, she made herself listen to one music radio station a day, and found nothing of value after six days. "There's not much talent in this generation, and what there is wasn't that good in the first place. People of my dad's generation would say, 'Oh, I can't carry a tune' — they used to know they were no good. Now everybody tells people they are great, whatever happens. People are crappy and they don't know it — the delusion mushroomed."

She says she now listens only to Debussy and Duke Ellington. But this could be just old age speaking; more interesting is her dismay at her own generation. She wasn't, she insists, ever a hippie. "I was in it for the costume show," she says and, indeed, it was her hippie-chick style that helped spread the floaty, flowery, San Francisco look around the world.

"The hippie values were not mine, they were naive, they had no place, they were childish; the politics were stupid. When they became a large minority, the straights noticed, grew their hair long and took over."

She also says she was never a feminist, seeing it as just a way for women to adopt the mores of men. She adds that she sees "grace in the servitude" of the wife at home, perhaps an insight into what she occasionally felt she wanted for herself. But, to bring this story back home to her new box set, what was really wrong about her generation was love.

"How do you do it? How do you love? That's the question my genera-

tion couldn't seem to answer. My generation were conspicuously narcissistic, and it never got any better. They moved further and further into isolation, and now they just twiddle their thumbs and stare at a screen. The males of my generation were immature, the Peter Pan thing and the narcissistic refusal to become a responsible adult, which was massive." (Joni doesn't twiddle her thumbs. She has no internet, no mobile phone, and communicates with the world through one landline.)

As she says all this, I realise that she is — like Dylan (she'll hate that) — a brilliant social historian. At one point she thrills me when she says the 1950s were all about the kid getting the car. It was a new space outside the home where, like Joni and Ray, they could make out. But it was also an infinite space, the kids could travel. In fact, the whole four-disc set is social history, from 1950s teen innocence through the multiple pressures of the 1960s to the disappointments of the 1970s and 1980s. And finally? Well, the last chapter is called "If you want me I'll be in the bar". A lot hangs on that "want".

She talks a lot about her illnesses. She says she has Morgellons syndrome, which seems to attack her from many directions with multiple symptoms. It tends to be self-diagnosed, and doctors regard it as delusional. She has given up on them and resorted to Chinese medicine.

Whatever the cause, feeling ill is itself an illness, and I suspect she has a syndrome of the soul rather than the body, but it is an artist's soul and many of those are sick.

She takes me round the vast house full of her (very good) paintings. It is cluttered, but in a well-arranged, beautifully kept way. We end up staring across the valley from her terrace. Below us is a huge swimming pool, which, she says, she can no longer afford to heat. As I leave, she flings her arms around me, giving me a huge hug. This seldom happens, and never in LA.

Perhaps she has never been as happy as she was in those days when she was making out with Ray in his dad's Cadillac. Which is why, thinking back on our meeting, I was suddenly overwhelmed by that image of them dancing on the veranda 50 years later. It reminded me, yet again, of *Both Sides Now* — "Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels / The dizzy, dancing way you feel" — and of the timelessness of all the faces of ordinary love. □

Love Has Many Faces is out tomorrow on Rhino

@BryanAppleyard

Music is over for me.
I can't sing: I don't
want to. I want to paint

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The artist formerly best known as a musician The self-portrait on Joni Mitchell's box set of remastered songs



Sideways step Joni Mitchell's 53 songs would score a four-act ballet that she has already illustrated