

ZERO

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CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST LIFE AND THOUGHT

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VOL. III

JOHN ASHBERRY
GREGORY BATESON
JOHN CAGE
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JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI
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Volume III

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Cover photos by Joel Rubiner

JONI MITCHELL

*"My goal is to make
modern American music."*

AN INTERVIEW

Malika, a Canadian journalist, conducted this interview originally for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It was broadcast over radio—interlaced with Joni Mitchell's music and comments from her engineer and assistant Henry Lewy. This version has been edited from those tapes.

INTERVIEWER

Some of your earlier songs in the 60's had a charm in that people could sing them. Now your songs seem too difficult to whistle or sing. Do you miss that?

MITCHELL

If I went on creating whistle songs I would bore myself to death. I'm exploring something else now, I'm trying to find something fresh. America is the great spot on the planet for music because of its rich ethnic heritage. I would like to explore some of that mixed heritage. My goal is to make modern American music. Americans like everything to be homogenized, like Velveeta cheese. Their music is homogenized, their beer is watered down, their bread is white cloth and Charlie's Angels set the standard of beauty. I don't want to be homogenized.

A while back I began experimenting with a wordier—less symmetrical song form. (The melody became irregular from verse to verse, as the lyrics became more conversational.) I was criticized for that and I thought that was peculiar because it was so different and interesting. The melody and the words were freer to fall on the beats or bunch up in between. Critics said the melody was gone and there were too many words. To me it sounded fresh.

INTERVIEWER

Does it bother you when, say, Linda Ronstadt has so many hits, and Dolly Parton,—do you think, well, why shouldn't I have those hits—do you want to flex your muscle?

MITCHELL

I don't feel in competition with them. I feel we're doing quite different things. Their records are produced for exactly that purpose, to make hits. Sometimes when I hear a comment about, "You remember Joni Mitchell from the 60's?" that hurts my feelings, because I think, God, it's not like I've been dormant all this time, I've been growing and exploring, more than most people in the business. So on that level I have pride, and whenever you have pride you can get hurt.

INTERVIEWER

Do you want to have a hit?

MITCHELL

A hit would be fun to have but I would rather come to it accidentally than formulistically because I really don't like formula hits. If I had a hit it would be a long shot. I would love for a long shot to come in, but that's not of main importance to me. "Court and Spark" was a successful album commercially, it had several singles.

But when my next album, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," came out, people really couldn't relate to it. It's a much better album than they realized at the time. Women found it very confronting. Women suddenly didn't like me very much. For a very simple reason—prior to that most of the songs were first person descriptions of my own personal struggle. So while they could relate to that struggle, they also had a way of keeping it at arm's length. Some women didn't like the mirror that the new album held up. A lot of it was a description of the trapped housewife. That's not a rock 'n' roll topic to begin with. I had gone too far outside the boundaries. The hissing of summer lawns refers to the late

afternoon in the summer when everybody on nice neat streets has their sprinklers going.

"Hejira," the next album, was more accessible, people seemed to like that better. Once again it was an extremely personal thing, the story was back on me, which seemed to make most of my audience more comfortable. They'd rather hear about my trials than be confronted with their own.

And then another year went by, and I did "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" and we included on the album an eight-minute percussion cut and a lot of people really didn't like it. They said I was a little self-indulgent. I suppose it was. I indulged myself in presenting a piece of music that I loved but had a minor role in. I was participating in it, though. I was the crow and the owl in the background. It was such a beautiful night in the studio and there was so much enthusiasm and they played that piece of music for me as a gift. Something that had that much energy on the spot would communicate to a few people, even if it was only the Puerto Rican drummer from some tiny club in New York, that eventually I would meet and want to play with. There were no A.M. hits on these albums.

INTERVIEWER

How did your most recent record of the music of Charles Mingus the jazzman and composer get started?

MITCHELL

As near as I can figure out, it started when Charles Mingus learned that he was ill. When Charles discovered that he was dying, he decided to reacquaint himself with God, so he called up this friend of his and said, "Come over here, Danielli, I want to speak to you about God." And Danielli thought, "He wants to speak to me about God, he's got the wrong person." So Danielli went to a bookstore and he picked up a book of T.S. Eliot, and he referred Mingus to "The Four Quartets." Charles read the book, couldn't understand all of it and would discuss it with his wife, Sue. She ran a magazine in New York called *Changes*. Anyway, he came up with an idea for a record. As he described it to me, a

very classical kind of music would be overlaid with a duet between a bass and a guitar, and he wanted me to play the guitar. On top of that there would be a very educated Oxfordian voice reciting T.S. Eliot. And interspersed with that I would sing Eliot translated into common English. Mingus' analogy was that in the modern church someone reads from the ancient text while side by side someone else shouts it out in common English or in street language. And so that was to be my role, the interpreter of the text. So I read "The Quartets," and found that I couldn't do it. I called Charles back and said, it's as if I were to take three notes from your favorite bass solo and say, this is Charles Mingus' music. I just can't condense T.S. Eliot down that way, you've got the wrong person.

So that was it. About a month went by and he called me back again and said that he'd written six melodies for me. I went to see him, and when I came through the door of his apartment, all I saw was this hulking figure from behind in this wheelchair. When I came around in front of him, whoa, man! His face was glowing! This beautiful face, full of the devil and beautiful light, with sarcasm and humor around the mouth, a face capable of expressing many emotions. He played me the melodies, and to tell you the truth, the music seemed to belong to another generation. It didn't seem fresh to me; the music belonged to the fifties. It seems like I had been through it, which is odd considering I was never a jazz singer. But anyway the force of his personality made me think, "Well, I'm going to try this." So he gave me a tape with six melodies which he called "Joni 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6." And we went through a lot of his old material looking for two more songs figuring it would take eight songs to make an album.

INTERVIEWER

What illness did he have?

MITCHELL

He had Lou Gehrig's Disease. I forget the technical name for it, but it's a deterioration of the nervous system. First he

was paralyzed, then his speech began to go, and finally his ability to swallow. That was in January, and he died shortly after that. He just wasted away. But he had a great capacity for fun, and all the way to the end he found something to enjoy. I stayed with Charles and Sue in Mexico for 10 days. He enjoyed his daily ride in the van. It was the only place he slept easily. He enjoyed eating out. He fluctuated between optimism and a disappointed resignation. It was an emotional visit. Coming back from there I went to see Georgia O'Keefe—another memorable and inspiring time. Then I went to New York to work on the music but I was completely blocked. It wouldn't come out of me. Instead I began to paint and every day for fourteen days I did a painting. They were not in my usual style. They were reminiscent—at least to me—of O'Keefe's—except they had people as their subject matter and Charles was one of the recurring figures.

Now I knew that Charles was soon to die. Till then I felt he might bail out of it somehow. Time was precious. I wanted him to hear it finished. These melodies were almost operatic to me. It was like learning an aria. They had so much range—more range than I had ever sung in—and being musically illiterate it was a lot to memorize. Some parts of it just wouldn't stick, as if they were beyond memory. I couldn't comprehend some of it at first. Something that I had dismissed as sounding idiomatic was much more difficult than I thought, and challenging.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know why Mingus chose you for this project? Have you got any ideas? Did you ask him?

MITCHELL

No. A friend of his turned him on to my records and he was critical of some things about them, because Charles was critical of music, period. He was very opinionated about music. But he did come to the conclusion that I had a lot of nerve, and I think probably he liked nerve more than just about anything. I think also that he wanted to ensure himself

being remembered, through a larger audience. So I think it was partially his ambition speaking, certainly some musical respect, and we had some things in common.

INTERVIEWER

From what you tell me this project was very difficult to bring to fruition. Why did you invest so much love and effort? Why were you so stubborn to continue?

MITCHELL

Experientially, even though we come from different backgrounds and he expressed some emotions more overtly than I did, I felt very kindred to him. I was surrounded by people who thought it was an odd coupling. Charles had been stereotyped as a violent person. Most people would say to me, "Oh, he's such an angry, hostile man. He's a racist. A racist and a melancholy folksinger." We seemed odd to onlookers. Nobody really thought that the project would come to anything. Many times I thought I couldn't do it, that I was really the wrong person for the job, and if I could have thought of the right person to turn it over to, I would have. But overall I felt that it was meant to be, since for the last four years I've been sticking my big toe into the lake of jazz, and Charles pushed me right in. It was a great education, a great opportunity to study with a great teacher.

The first song born was a bit of a rumpelstiltskin puzzle. I said to Charles, "What do you feel this piece of music is about?" He said, "Well this is about the things I'm going to miss. And the things I wish I'd done." And I looked at him and he looked at me, and I thought, you must have a million pieces of music left in your head unfulfilled. Plus the adventure of life is slipping away. So it wasn't too hard for me to project and put myself in his shoes. If I was going I would certainly miss the music, and I would miss the possibility of further romantic encounters. So I figured it would be music and women for him. I should have included food. He loved to eat.

He gave me a copy of his book, a very psychoanalytical and carnal autobiography. An oddly spiritual book. Beautiful. In

this book there's a meeting with a woman who is to become his wife, and she asks him what he would do if he had to do it all over again. And he says that he would come back bigger and better than ever. That the next time he wouldn't even consider love, he would just be really hard about everything, he'd just be in it for the bucks. He'd just be ruthless. Next time he wouldn't even have a heart. And at the bottom it says, "And if she believed that, she never would have become my wife." Charles liked to put you on. So I incorporated this attitude into what otherwise would be a very sad song, because it deals with his realizing that his life is coming to an end and he is stuck in a wheelchair in this skyscraper in Manhattan. The song's called "Chair in the Sky."

INTERVIEWER

Did Charlie hear it?

MITCHELL

Charlie loved this one. I sent him a tape as soon as it was written. The performance was sincere but flawed. At the end you hear me admit I blew it—one passage of the melody! He liked that tape the best. I should have put it on the album. I polished it up and lost something. I cut it too slow and that brought out the sadness of it.

The next one that I worked on was an old song called "Goodbye Porkpie Hat." This was a tribute to Lester Young. He was a saxophone player, a great horn player who wore a porkpie hat, a little hat with a small brim like Porky Pig wore. It was a popular hat in Harlem. You still see a lot of guys wearing these little short-brimmed hats, but it seems like Lester Young never took his off, so he became associated with this hat and people called him Porkpie. Charles assailed me with dozens of stories about him, but somehow or other I didn't feel like I could just be a historian and take Charles' point of view, I had to be in the song. I had to be able to experience something about it firsthand, and it was extremely frustrating because the inspiration wouldn't come. One night I was riding back on the subway in New York with Don Alias. We have lived together for two years. He's a

black man. It is a rare thing for us to be persecuted for our relationship. Now Lester Young, on the other hand, was married to a white woman, and he played a concert someplace in the South and they loved him at the concert, but then as soon as he got back to his hotel with his wife, they ran them out of town, violently. I felt that was an important detail as it contrasted with our experience. I can't remember why, but we decided to get off the subway two stops early. We came up on 50th Street. Smoke was coming up from the manholes. A block away a crowd was gathered. We headed towards it and when we got there two little black boys were doing this robotlike dance and there was a whole group of black men standing around, mostly pimps, it was in that part of Manhattan. Now we looked up and on the marquee it said Porkpie Hat Bar. So here's a place where Charles' song, which is famous ("Goodbye Porkpie Hat"), had spawned a bar, and the bar had spawned an audience for two black kids dancing. So in a way I thought, these two little kids, one could be a Charles and one could be a Lester, they're the generation coming back up, they're the continuance of this whole thing. So I wrote this incident into the song. I wanted to get the past, which was Lester, and I wanted to get Charlie in the song, too. So I got us all in there, and as a result, to me it's a very successful song, it has something immediate to say rather than just being a historical point of view. It has a past, a present and a future.

Charles Mingus was a man who had an enormous emotional spectrum. Charles' book is called *Beneath the Underdog* and it opens with the statement, "I am Three." He proceeds to describe what those three are: one of them is the strong one, the observer, the detached one, the one that people call the god or the master in yourself, the non-judgmental part. The second one was a very open, almost naively childlike, innocent personality. That's an unsung aspect of his nature, the part that would trust almost blindly, and get screwed and lose faith. The third part he's famous for, of course, because it was the most colorful. If he got annoyed at somebody playing on the bandstand with him, he

wouldn't tell them after the gig, he'd break down the music right there and say, "You're playing the wrong chord. This is the right chord." He's been known for socking a guy right on stage for playing something he felt was wrong. There are even accounts of him going out into the audience swinging. John Guerin said Mingus was a man who could clear a room with his fists or his eyes. He had a very expansive emotional spectrum and maybe this was why his music was so great and so difficult to play, because so many players couldn't give him enough emotional variation.

After he died I wrote a song for him—"God Must Be a Boogeyman." I cut it 3 times with great bands, but it didn't have that thing that makes your mouth fall open, that makes you laugh when you hear the way two notes butt up against each other. The final version, the one on the album, happened spontaneously—effortlessly. Jaco Pastorius came down to the studio one night while I was mixing. He just wanted to play. So we changed the strings on our instruments—pulled a couple of chairs up to a mike and bam—we had it—first take.

It is easier to say what something isn't than what it is. I knew what I didn't want but couldn't articulate what I wanted. Affection, I guess that's pretty close. Charles showed me affection—kind of sweetness. That's what the music had to be—sweet and sad and sometimes funny—always alert and spontaneous and creative and above all memorable because no one wants to be forgotten in death.

INTERVIEWER

Who do you consider your peers in music today, Joni?

MITCHELL

Well, let's talk about certain kinds of like-mindedness. Right now the group Weather Report, to me, is making the most interesting music. In my working with them now, while I feel a peer to them, I also feel a student to them in some ways. Not that I'm detracting from my own accomplishment, but I think of them as real musicians, and I think of myself as a painter. Although I do have a fountain that

seems to be deep and well-stocked, a continuing fountain for melodic invention, which I don't think will run out, the ideas that these musicians work with seem advanced to me and certainly they are advanced in virtuosity. Yet, I feel that they're my peers, OK? Leonard Cohen was a teacher of mine; Bob Dylan certainly inspired us all. Miles Davis taught me something about singing. More and more what he taught me is coming out. People think it sounds a little like Billie Holiday, but it's really from Miles more than Billie—pure straight tones, holding straight lines, very little vibrato. Maybe he learned it from her.

I always kept Miles and his music, especially his lyrical period, in the realm of music that I would play for myself, but I never thought of it as attainable. And now I'm playing with most of the players that made up that music with him. So that sound has come back to me through my appreciation of it many years ago.

What women inspire me?

Billie Holiday yes, Edith Piaf is a great singer. And there is an Egyptian singer, named Um Kalthoum. A great singer. She has an ability to express such deep powerful inner feminine strength.

INTERVIEWER

A common criticism of the troubadours of our age is that because of their opulent lifestyle, they are not very much in touch with the general public. The general public by and large searches for meaning and purpose, for success.

MITCHELL

I'm still searching for meaning and purpose. You know people have a funny idea that success, luxury, is the end of the road. As a matter of fact many troubles just begin there. They're just of a different nature. In my life I've experienced poverty, the middle class, and now extreme wealth and luxury. And that's difficult too.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about being a woman. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have observed in this business, the music business, that

the men seem to have stronger muscle. There are more men selling records than women selling records. They seem to get promoted more. Yet you are one woman powerful in a world of men. Do you find that you're treated as a woman differently by your fellow troubadours? Do they say, "What is this woman doing among us?"

MITCHELL

There was a time when I felt that the press and the men had categorized me safely into a nice little group of women and I felt it was too obvious. The women were still mostly being shaped by a man. They had a producer who chose their material and directed them. They weren't in control of their own creative destiny as I was. But neither are most men. I've been very fortunate, my growth has been slow. I learn something from each project and try to relay that in the next one. I learn from my mistakes, what I thought was weak, not what the critics thought. They dismissed a lot of what I thought was my growth and praised a lot of what I thought common about my work. I disagreed with most of them. So I had to rely a lot on my own opinions. Not to say that I wasn't constantly soliciting advice and mulling it over, but what stuck to my ribs ultimately was my own decision. I feel that has to do with the way I was raised by my men friends in my teens; they always challenged me to keep up with them, and then teased me when I did, or almost did. I don't feel like a woman in a man's world so much now. I feel I not only do get the respect that I wanted, but now I also get the difficulty that accompanies it. Sometimes men compete with *me*, and I have to work that out to make myself and them comfortable.

All your life you get what you want, but then you get something else with it, and then you have to work on making that work.

JOHN MITCHELL



—photo by Norman Seeff