



JEFF GOODE/TORONTO STAR

**Joni Mitchell:** Once a hopeful folksinger who almost starved on Yorkville Ave. in the '60s, **Joni Mitchell** came to town from her Bel Air house to appear in her first movie role, in a 10-minute segment of a nine-part anthology, *Love*, directed by Mai Zetterling. Back in '64,

Yorkville was a much different place than the chic street it is today. Then, the 21-year-old guitar playing girl from the Prairies found the doors of clubs closed to her talents because she could not afford a union card.

# Joni Mitchell's back in town

## Singer strolls on a street of memories and shrugs off bad times

By Kevin Scanlon Toronto Star

**Joni Mitchell** returns to Yorkville, the scene of her hardest times, and shrugs off the memories.

Too much has happened in the last 16 years for bitterness: Yorkville Ave., the young, vibrant, hippie heart of Toronto in the '60s, has evolved into a ritzy shopping area for trendies, and Mitchell, once a hopeful folksinger who nearly starved on that street, has grown into an international singing star.

"Yorkville is Chic-y-poo Lane today," she says with a hint of pity in her voice. "The Riverboat is a brass bed store. The quaintness is now slick."

### Different place

But in 1964, Yorkville was a much different place when flaxen-haired Roberta Joan Anderson, fresh from the Prairies, tried to break into the music business. The 21-year-old guitar-playing soprano found the doors of such clubs as the Riverboat and the Penny Farthing closed to her talents because she didn't have a union card.

"It was a tough time for me," she says with no acrimony. "I worked in the women's wear section of a department store and didn't have enough money to join the musicians' union so nobody would hire me in the clubs. I was always behind on my rent because I was making so little money. I was eating rice pudding and tomato juice."

To the young singer, Yorkville, later known simply as "the village," was both wondrous and frightening.

"It was a very difficult time in my life, very transitional. Everything was changing. You suddenly came

out of the nest into a world where you're forging new values. It was exciting — young, artistic, on the brink of a changing morality. But it was also kind of scary, after hearing all that drug propaganda, to be in the drug culture."

She did a bit of singing at a non-union club called the Half Beat before gathering the \$140 she needed to join the union. In 1965, she met Detroit folksinger Chuck Mitchell in the Penny Farthing and they married. Within months, the couple moved to Detroit. When the marriage broke up a year later, Joni moved on to New York and stardom.

For a year in Toronto, the singer had lived in a small room on Huron St. and later "in a tiny place over a Chicken Delight" on Bloor St. W. near Spadina Ave. when not looking for an outlet for her singing talent.

Last weekend, she walked along Yorkville Ave. and noted the slick changes.

"I didn't feel any remorse," she says. "It was different. They've restored the buildings, but back then restoration was a new coat of paint."

Mitchell is sitting in the Courtyard Cafe, the eatery frequented by visiting movie and music stars, less than three blocks from Yorkville. She is wearing gold earrings, a brown skirt, and a fawn-colored sweater with a tweed jacket — a far cry from the "schoolgirl outfits" she was forced to wear as a sales clerk so many years ago.

### Ginger ale drink

"I have not spent a lot of time here since 1965," she says, sipping from a glass of ginger ale. "The most striking difference is the skyline. The skyline has been radically altered and it's quite beautiful — those simple glass towers mixed with the old architecture. And the inner city is so alive. It's not like American cities, where most of the inner city is decrepit." She lives in Los Angeles.

She moves on to talk about Canada and Canadians after noting that her coldest audience ever was a Toronto audience.

"The whole country has an inferiority complex. They don't know if they're British or American. They're the country cousin to the city slicker. Toronto is the New York of Canada but it will never be New York."

A performer who didn't make it until she went south of the border, Mitchell remembers an incident several years ago at a club in Arizona where the bill was shared by two Canadians — singer David Clayton Thomas and comedian David Steinberg.

"David Clayton Thomas finished his set and came and sat with me, then David Steinberg came on. It was a very sparse crowd but Steinberg's humor was very sophisticated and they were missing it. But he was very good. Then David Clayton turned to me and said: 'He's so great, I can't believe he's from Winnipeg.' And he was serious. He was still carrying the chip on his shoulder — that Canadian inferiority complex."

### Loud laugh

Asked if she ever suffers from it, she responds with a loud laugh and says: "I don't have a national inferiority complex; I've got my own."

But those complexes will not be talked about by this very private woman who has bared her soul only in song on record albums such as *Clouds*, *Blue*, *For The Roses*, *Court And Spark*, and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*.

She is cautious and wary of questions which might lead into her private life. Mitchell has been the subject of more rock music gossip than a certain prime minister's estranged wife. Several years ago, the American rock music magazine *Rolling Stone* published a chart of her alleged lovers, a list which included musicians Jackson Browne, David Crosby, Graham Nash and James Taylor.

In Toronto to appear in her first movie role, which she wrote for the nine-part anthology called *Love*, she reluctantly agrees to the interview on the condition her private life not be discussed.

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Four hours into a day of shooting, the crew is ready for the first rehearsal. Filming, set for 9 a.m., has been delayed by a borrowed \$20,000 chandelier placed in the wrong position. It has taken four hours to move it and reset the lights.

"Quiet on the set, please. Very quiet," a voice shouts, and the card-playing, bored extras in Hallowe'en

costumes move forward to fill the space around the camera and watch the scene.

**Joni Mitchell**, acclaimed singer and songwriter, is making her acting debut in a 10-minute segment of a nine-part anthology, *Love*. She and co-star Winston Reckert dance slowly through the ballroom sequence as Swedish director Mai Zetterling calls out instructions.

"Joni, don't get the giggles now," the director says as the star laughs at something her dance partner has said. "Dance around the edges now. That's fine. That's nice," the director adds as the pair swirl through a slow-motion waltz. The star hums the music as she dances.

After the rehearsal, the star and the director discuss the scene in low voices but it is obvious to everyone on the set that there is some disagreement. The author-actress has a problem with Zetterling's direction of the actress-author.

"The writer should not be allowed on the set," Mitchell says with a smile after filming of the segment is completed.

"The director is there to interpret your words and you're going to lose something of your own vision in that interpretation," she says. "But I had to play the character because I knew that would be misinterpreted."

In the segment, for which she selected music by Miles Davis and Devo, she plays a rejected lover as well as a black man, though she would not divulge details of the story.

### Only film

The singer says *Love* will be the only film in which she appears as an actress. "It's a very physically self-conscious medium. The flick of an eyelash is a soliloquy in the movie industry," she says. "I would like to make films but not act in them. The experience was good and I'm a better actress than I expected."

At 37, the woman with a haunting, ageless beauty is halfway through writing a new album, has plans for a major art show, and hopes to move strongly into film-making, if the people with the money will let her.

Recently she completed work on a television concert special, a project in which she assumed the role of director.

### Correction

## Springsteen here Jan. 20-21

Yesterday's calendar gave incorrect dates for the Bruce Springsteen concert.

He will be appearing at Maple Leaf Gardens Jan. 20 and 21 but tickets are not yet on sale.

The Star regrets the error.