

Review *Television*

'American Masters' properly emphasizes the early career of Joni Mitchell

Toward the end of tonight's *American Masters* on PBS, Joni Mitchell laments, "There is no 'growing ... gracefully' in the pop world. Basically, the reason I'm so unruly in this business is 'cause I never wanted to be a human jukebox."



Jonathan Storm
Television Critic

The archetypal female singer-songwriter, Mitchell connected with the spirit of a generation in the late '60s and the '70s, but then she left most of her fans behind, as they clutched tender records and memories, while she journeyed off to sing with foreigners and Charles Mingus.

"Joni Mitchell: Woman of Heart and Mind" follows her entire trip, from the 1940s front-room picture window overlooking the highway in Maltstone, Saskatchewan ("Here they come," she says she thought. "Where are they going?"), through her Grammy awards for striking but unpopular music in the '90s, to her reunion with a long-lost daughter, and life as a now-59-year-old grandmother.

Airing from 9 to 10:30 on WHYY (Channel 12) and jammed with historical

performances that underscore her otherworldly music and the ethereal-princess appearance that she came to loathe, it properly emphasizes her early career, and is sure to bring throat lumps and sniffles to viewers of a certain age.

In "Heart and Mind," VIII executive Bill Flanagan, who created the series *Legends*, tries to explain it: "People didn't just love her the way people love the Rolling Stones or Motown. They really felt, 'This woman, by the light of this record player, is looking into my soul.'"

It's a musical month at *American Masters*, one of the shows that still distinguishes PBS from the crowd of cable channels chipping pieces away. Putting bookends of a sort on pop music in the second half of the 20th century, the series will profile Muddy Waters, father of the Chicago blues, on April 23. Like tonight's episode, that one turns up miles of old footage plus interviews with the star's contemporaries that put the viewer intimately at the center of a legendary scene.

Tonight's program also intertwines an interview with the star herself.

She reveals her poetic gift: "Some nights, if you listen to the rattles of your own head, it's more linguistically colorful or eccentric than other nights."

She talks about her process: "Depression can be the sand that makes the pearl. Most of my best work came



Joni Mitchell in a photo taken for her 1972 album "For the Roses." Tonight's show on PBS could bring lumps to the throats of viewers of a certain age.

out of it."

She explains her motivation: "They were putting me on a pedestal, and I was wobbling," she says, describing how she came to make the landmark album *Blue* in 1971. "Since I was a public voice and I was subject to this kind of weird worship, I thought they should know who they were worshiping."

"It was naked, pulsating, great poetry," New York Times music writer Stephen Holden says. "*Blue* just went to a level of psychic pain and honesty that no one else has ever written before and no one else has ever written

since."

Susan Lacy, the writer, producer and director, has amassed a flock of famous commentators: Tom Rush, James Taylor, Eric Andersen, David Crosby, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Graham Nash, one of her legendary loves; David Geffen, her agent; ex-husband Larry Klein. Sady, the other great and long-lasting Canadian pop iconoclast, Neil Young, doesn't show. Maybe *American Masters* (which has always been flexible with the *American* part) will do a whole program on him.

To the Joni fan, tonight's program

tells nothing new; to someone unfamiliar with her, it tells everything. It is a celebration of the woman and her art, containing rich history and excerpted performances of 35 tunes.

My favorite moment is her 1969 TV appearance, with Crosby, Stills and Nash, on *The Dick Cavett Show*. The boys showed up, unscheduled, the day after their performance at Woodstock. Mitchell, booked in advance, had missed what she called "the biggest event of my generation" because she was afraid she couldn't get back in time for the TV show. "My heart was just breaking," she says in the interview.

Then she tells Cavett, "I wrote a little song," and starts singing: "I came upon a child of God ..."

"She contributed more toward people's understanding of that event than anyone there," Crosby says.

She has contributed so much toward so many people's understanding of so many things.

"That was always my optimism," she says at the end of "Heart and Mind." "That if I described my own changes, through whatever the decade was throwing at us, that there were others like me."

"And it turns out that there were."

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