

THE SPECIALS

AND 40 YEARS OF 2-TONE!



MM

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"My gift was
born of tragedy"

**THE AGONY
& ECSTASY OF**

JONI MITCHELL

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Out of the city: Joni Mitchell blooms amid the blossom; (opposite page) on-stage at the Riverboat, Toronto, Canada, February 21, 1967.

JONI ON JONI: #1

Chelsea Morning

(Clouds, 1969)

"I wrote that in Philadelphia after some girls who worked in this club where I was playing found all this coloured slag glass in an alley. We collected a lot of it and built these glass mobiles with copper wire and coat hangers. I took mine back to New York and put them in my window on West 16th Street in the Chelsea District. The sun would hit the mobile and send these moving colours all around the room. As a young girl, I found that to be a thing of beauty. There's even a reference to the mobile in the song. It was a very young and lovely time... before I had a record deal. I think it's a very sweet song, but I don't think of it as part of my best work. To me, most of those early songs seem like the work of an ingénue."



Sun On YOUR WINGS

How the trials of JONI MITCHELL's youth fed the boldness of her early works, and the complexity of their sexual politics. By **VICTORIA SEGAL**.

WHEN CHUCK and Joni Mitchell returned to their Detroit apartment after their wedding in June 1965, he was too tired after walking up the five flights of stairs to carry his new bride over the threshold. She walked across by herself. It wasn't the first or last time that the former Joni Anderson would have to make her own way in the world. Four months earlier, she had given birth to a daughter she named Kelly Dale Anderson. Single and broke, her pregnancy spent scratching out a living in Toronto's folk scene and living off cheese spread and Hovis in a cheap rented room, she placed the baby in foster care. Two years later, her marriage to Chuck over, their stage partnership terminated, her child adopted, she moved first to New York, then California. Out on her own again, there were new thresholds to cross.

I Had A King, the opening song on Mitchell's 1968 debut album *Song To A Seagull*, turns this brief attempt at settling down in Detroit into the stuff of fairy tale, elevating the pain of divorce into the language of once-upon-a-time: "I had a king in a salt-rusted carriage/Who carried me off to his country for marriage too soon." The collapse of the domestic dream – "he's taken the curtains down" – is described with tremulous distress, yet there's also a steely refusal to look back: "I can't go back there any more/You know my keys won't fit the door." Rooted in reality – not least because Chuck Mitchell did in fact change the locks once his wife had left – it begins an album dedicated to forward motion and cross-country moves. Detroit to New York to Los Angeles: each stage is rendered as a quasi-mythical journey (complete with sinister Stygian boatman – or maybe just cab driver – on Nathan La Franeer). Side one is called I Came To The City; side two Out Of The City And Down To The Seaside.

In every way, Mitchell covered a lot of ground over her first three albums, *Song To A Seagull*

followed by 1969's *Clouds* and 1970's *Ladies Of The Canyon*. She didn't come from a place where freedom was a given, describing her mid-century Canadian childhood in the same way as compatriot Margaret Atwood did in her novel *Cat's Eye*: muddy, provincial, light on comfort, colour and diversion. No coincidence she started smoking at the age of nine. The polio she suffered – requiring hospitalisation 100 miles from her Saskatchewan home – left her with the physical weakness that would later shape the way she played her guitar, but also revealed a deep and precocious self-reliance. In 2014, she told NPR how she was determined not to burden her parents with her health issues: "I'm gonna have to drag myself up those goddamn stairs, one way or another.' So I did."

THE ATTITUDE would inform Joni Mitchell's early career: unwilling to cede territory to other folk singers, each one scrapping to stake out their bit of repertoire, she started to write her own songs. Following her move from Detroit to New York, their quality quickly won over the denizens of Greenwich Village. Buffy Sainte-Marie helped introduce Mitchell to her manager Elliot Roberts, while her songs were covered by Tom Rush, Dave Van Ronk, Fairport Convention and Judy Collins.

Mitchell met another Canadian, Leonard Cohen, at the 1967 Newport Folk Festival. Their brief, intense affair would emerge in *The Gallery* (from *Clouds*), where Mitchell describes wearying of a collector of beauty, and the dream-like connection of *Rainy Night House* (from *Ladies Of The Canyon*). Cohen was once asked, "How do you like living with Beethoven?", a neat inversion of the old male-genius-female-muse routine. (He didn't, he would later admit: "Who would? She's prodigiously gifted. Great painter too.")

She was no unknown quantity, then, when David Crosby came across her playing the *Gaslight South* in Coconut Grove, Miami, in autumn '67. She accompanied him back to Los

Angeles, where he would produce *Song To A Seagull*. Yet she didn't want or need a producer at all for her second LP; *Clouds* was as spare and uncompromising as the debut. The Me Generation was in full bloom: she put her own painting of her own face on the cover and reclaimed the songs that other people had run with, including *Both Sides, Now*, and the luscious, liberated *Chelsea Morning*, with its oranges and butterscotch and talking "in present tenses".

Freedom, love, control, home: these are the themes that weave through Mitchell's early albums, sometimes appearing in bright splashes of poignant domestic colour – "eating muffin buns and berries" on *Sisotowbell Lane*, the "suppers in wallpapered kitchens" on *Michael From Mountains*, the babies and brownies on *Ladies Of The Canyon* – sometimes in the velvety language of folktale or legend: *The Dawntreader*, *The Pirate Of Penance*.

But it's *Song To A Seagull*'s closing *Cactus Tree* that describes the complex kind of liberation Mitchell desired most. Sliding into the third person, she becomes a "lady in the city" pursued by a string of men ("...and you know there may be more") with neat storybook characteristics: a drummer, a dreamer, one with a boat (Crosby). Yet she's scared that one will "ask her for eternity" when "she's so busy being free". Freedom, here, is a full-time job, all-consuming, all-important.

Ladies Of The Canyon found her more often at the piano, from where she sang the clash of art and commerce on *For Free*, yearned for a cosmic innocence on *Woodstock*, and mapped the passing of time on *The Circle Game* (with backing vocals from *The Lookout Mountain United Downstairs Choir*, or Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young). These were grander songs crystallising the themes of the moment. Her voice was demanding, not requesting attention.

Two film clips highlight the shift in presence and persona. In 1966, she appeared on Canadian folk music show *Let's Sing Out*, performing a version of *Prithee Pretty Maiden* from Gilbert & Sullivan's *Patience* with the presenter Oscar Brand. In light operatic character, she smiles, she lowers her eyes, she coyly holds her hands under her chin.

By 1970, however, Mitchell, in long yellow dress and long yellow hair, would be calling out 700,000 countercultural thrill-seekers at the *Isle Of Wight* festival for their inability to listen quietly to her music: "Listen a minute, will you? Will you listen a minute?" she shouts at the biblical masses, her voice rising angrily. "Like, last Sunday, I went to a Hopi ceremonial dance in the desert... and there were tourists who were getting into it like Indians and Indians who were getting into it like tourists and I think you're acting like tourists, man. Give us some respect!"

She was learning to be formidable, yet *Ladies Of The Canyon* had not let go of doubts about the balance between freedom and security. *Willy*, her love song for then-partner Graham Nash, is full of passionate uncertainty ("He says he'd love to live with me/But for an ancient injury"), and in *Big Yellow Taxi* a disappearing lover is just as much a threat to the emotional ecosystem as a parking lot is to a tree.

There was such a shift coming: a split with Nash, and an album that would rewrite the songwriter's job description. Mitchell said that she was "really a folk singer up until 1965, but once I crossed the border I began to write." With these first three records, she kept on pushing forward, over the threshold, and into the blue.

"FREEDOM, LOVE, CONTROL, HOME: THESE ARE THE THEMES THAT WEAVE THROUGH HER EARLY ALBUMS."

