

THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

# JONI MITCHELL

UPDATED  
**DELUXE**  
EDITION

EVERY ALBUM  
REVIEWED

CLASSIC  
ENCOUNTERS,  
REDISCOVERED

*A Case Of You*  
**JONI MITCHELL**  
THE FULL STORY

ARCHIVES  
VOL 1:  
THE VERDICT

HER **30**  
GREATEST  
SONGS

THE 2020  
COMEBACK

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**



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# “I’m a fighter, that’s what I do”

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At 76, **JONI MITCHELL** is back. There are no new compositions (at least “not yet”), but there is new writing and drawing, and a warm new embrace of public life, with appearances at gigs, plays and tribute shows. As Joni curates and unveils a new archive project (reviewed below), which reveals for the first time the first stirrings of her genius, *Uncut* also hears from old friends and intimates about Mitchell’s gathering strength since her 2015 aneurysm, and the “soulful” musical soirees at her house. “As she often says, she’s a dancer and a rock’n’roller at heart, and it’s that Joni that people see on those nights,” Cameron Crowe tells **ROB HUGHES**





Joni Mitchell at a piano, looking to her right at Sunset Sound in 1967 in Los Angeles, California.





JONI MITCHELL has lived in the same hilltop villa, overlooking the Bel-Air Country Club, since July 1974. Hidden from the street, with its own private drive, most of her creative life can be measured in its walls and spaces. Inside the six-bedroom house, built in 1930, there are musical instruments, mementos and small

sculptures. A baby grand piano sits in the living room. Strikingly, the walls teem with her own canvasses – landscapes, still lifes, studies of Picasso, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Van Gogh. And, of course, the original self-portraits used on album sleeves like *Turbulent Indigo*, *Travelogue* and *Both Sides Now*.

“I’ve been there many times,” David Crosby tells *Uncut*. “It’s kind of like a museum in that she’s got her paintings everywhere. And she’s a brilliant painter. So you walk in the house and you’re smitten. You have to struggle to remember to have a conversation, because your eyes are glued to this stuff: ‘Oh my God, look at that one!’”

Traditionally, Mitchell has guarded her privacy here with steadfast conviction. Interviewed by the *Toronto Star* in 2013, the place was likened to a refuge in which she lived in relative seclusion. “Yes, you can call me a recluse,” she said, “but I like living alone.”

Seven years on, however, her outlook appears to be changing. The arrival of the mouth-watering *Archives – Vol 1: The Early Years (1963-1967)* [see review p131] is the latest sign of renewed activity in the Mitchell camp. Having started on the project in 2018, it’s merely the first in a series of archival releases scheduled for the coming years.

Film director and screenwriter Cameron Crowe first visited Joni’s house in 1979, when Mitchell granted him a rare interview during his time as journalist for *Rolling Stone*. The pair have stayed in touch ever since, to the point where Crowe is now part of her trusted inner circle. Early this year he spent a couple of Sundays on the patio, talking to Mitchell about *Archives*.... Their warm, digressive conversations act as liner notes for the five-CD boxset, which contains nearly six hours of

unreleased gold – home demos, live recordings, radio sessions – from Mitchell’s formative days.

“Generally we’d be outside in her garden, which she calls Tuscany, because it has that vibe,” Crowe explains of their meetings. “She’s one of the greatest conversationalists ever. You could just go down any path with her and find yourself in an hours-long conversation about anything, much less her own stuff. So I’m always going to jump at a chance like that. The stuff on *Archives* is a miracle for any real fan of hers, because she’s not opened the vault on this early material before. And barely even discussed it. So the idea that she was going to focus on this period, inviting questions and thoughts and detailed work, was just fantastic. It was so much fun having permission to get into the deep tissue on some of these songs.”

Mitchell has been directing operations from home, aided by longtime friend and associate Marcy Gensic, and chief archivist Joel Bernstein. And when not busy with

“She decided that the cultural path of the moment was folk music”

CAMERON CROWE

this catalogue of rarities, she’s been spending much of her time, pre-Covid, either dancing with celebrity pals at a Burbank roadhouse bar or hosting regular hootenannys. These informal gatherings have featured everyone from Elton John, Bonnie Raitt and Chaka Khan to Harry Styles, Sam Smith and Brandi Carlile. “We’d get together about once a month,” says Carlile, who



Joni the “stunning blonde girl”, mid-’60s

helped organise them. “There’s so much joy and generosity involved. Joni sings too. She sounds *great*, clear and light-hearted.”

Crowe is ideally placed to note the shift in Mitchell’s life. “The atmosphere in the house is always warm and super creative,” he says. “When I first went there, it felt like an inner sanctum. But over time it’s only become more heartfelt. You’re never far from an instrument and there’s always a comfortable sofa to sit in. It’s not ornate. It’s wide open and it invites love.”

SINCE suffering a brain aneurysm at home in March 2015, Mitchell has gradually returned to public view. Chaka Khan and Judy Collins were among the first to relay encouraging news of their good friend’s improving health later that year, before Mitchell was spotted out and about at a Chick Corea gig in LA the following summer.

Her first significant foray came in February 2017, when Crowe and author Daniel Levitin escorted Mitchell to Clive Davis’s annual pre-Grammy Gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. The A-list crowd (among them Jane Fonda, Stevie Wonder, Ringo Starr, Herbie Hancock and Michael Keaton) gave her a

## When Joni Met Jimi “It’s the greatest thing ever!”

DURING the conversations between Mitchell and Cameron Crowe that serve as liner notes for *Archives*, talk unexpectedly turns to partying with Jimi Hendrix after a show in Ottawa in early 1968. Mitchell was in residency at Le Hibou coffeehouse, while Hendrix and the Experience were across town at the Capitol Theatre. Hendrix’s diary entry of March 19 reads: “Talked with Joni Mitchell on the phone... I think I’ll record her tonight with my excellent tape recorder... Went down to the little club to see Joni. Fantastic girl with heaven words.” Crowe takes up the story: “Hendrix was in the front row of this club, taping her on a reel-to-reel, apparently



Hendrix, 1968

with stereo mics, and then the tape got stolen two nights later and the reel-to-reel machine, too. So somewhere in the world, if it’s not destroyed, there’s a bootleg of Joni Mitchell live, engineered and recorded by Jimi Hendrix! It’s the greatest thing ever.”

Four nights earlier, Mitchell met Graham Nash for the first time, at an after-show party when The Hollies played Ottawa. “Joni is moving through this club world and finding her way, attracting this little Pied Piper line of people who can’t take their eyes or ears off her,” adds Crowe. “It’s just an amazing time and it’s starting to explode during this boxset.”



Joni with ukulele  
in 1963, the year  
she recorded a  
rediscovered  
audition tape





Recording Song  
To A Seagull at  
LA's Sunset Sound  
Recorders, 1967





standing ovation. Judy Collins went further, making a tribute speech and performing “Both Sides, Now”, the song that carried her into the Billboard Top 10 in 1968, a year prior to its appearance on Mitchell’s own *Clouds*.

“It was very emotional,” says Collins. “Even though neither Joni or I had been on his Columbia label, Clive had a great feeling for her work and wanted to do something special by having me do that song for her. Joni and I sat around the same table and there were lots of people that we all knew. It was very much a homecoming event. Clive was beaming because he’d managed to pull this thing off.”

The 23-year-old Joni Mitchell who performs “Both Sides, Now” on *Archives*, from a Philadelphia radio station in March 1967, is brimming with raw enthusiasm. “It’s a very new song and I’ve been driving everybody crazy by playing it two or three times each night,” she bubbles. So new, in fact, that she’s still halfway through *Henderson The Rain King*, the Saul Bellow book that inspired it.

“This was a girl who was wandering around Greenwich Village, looking for somebody to notice her, looking for something to happen,” recalls Collins. “Then sometime in the spring of 1967, at three o’clock in the morning, my friend Al Kooper called me and told me about this songwriter he’d just met in a bar. He put Joni Mitchell on the phone and she sang me ‘Both Sides, Now’. And of course it changed both of our lives. It was a huge hit for me and a great favour to Joni too. We became friends. I’d go to her house, she’d play me all of her songs and I’d weep. I’m wild about her music, she was clearly an extraordinary talent.”

*“I was interested in how much she credits Leonard [Cohen]”*  
CAMERON CROWE

Kooper and Collins weren’t the first ones to notice her. For *Archives*, Saskatoon DJ Barry Bowman, struck by the “stunning blonde girl” who was paying her way at art school by modelling and singing in local coffeehouses, has bequeathed his audition tape. Bowman’s recordings for CFQC AM take place in 1963, when Mitchell is just 19. Consisting of old folk standards, they’re the earliest-known examples of Mitchell on tape, accompanied solely by ukulele. “She had a beautiful honeyed lilt to her voice that sounded like it came from another time,” observes Bowman in a short essay for the liner notes. “One day I recall saying she should have something to send to prospective bookers, agents or possible managers.” Bowman only rediscovered the master tapes by chance, when his daughter brought over an old box of reel-to-reels, more than 50 years later.

“When it came to *Archives*, the Bowman tapes became the holy grail,” contends Crowe, who became involved with the project a year ago. “It ➤



## Archives – Vol 1

### The Early Years 1963–1967

**Almost six heavenly hours of unreleased demos, radio sessions and live recordings**

**T**here’s a moment on *Archives Volume 1* where Joni Mitchell suddenly becomes Joni Mitchell. We’re at the start of disc two. It’s 1965 and she’s living in Detroit with her husband, fellow folk singer Chuck Mitchell. As a birthday gift for her mother, she decides to record a tape and send it home to Saskatoon. The first thing we hear is “Urge For Going”, a beautiful, lilting melody pinned to a painterly lyric about unforgiving winters on the Canadian prairies and the prospect of warmer climes.

Like its companion piece “Born To Take The Highway”, it’s the kind of vividly poetic, deceptively simple sketch that Mitchell shaded to perfection in the coming years. While we don’t know whether or not her mother liked the tape – though in the liner notes Mitchell calls her mother “a terrible critic of my music” – these songs bear the early hallmarks of Joni’s greatness.

*Archives – Vol 1* is full of revelations. The first disc of this five-CD set starts with her earliest known recording to date, as teenage art student Mitchell singing “House Of The Rising Sun” for a Saskatoon radio station in 1963. The standards that follow – “John Hardy”, “Fare Thee Well”, “Nancy Whiskey” and so on – may feel overly formal in places, but are just as elegantly rendered. She’s slowly finding her feet by the time we move forward a year, to the Half Beat in Toronto. The songs are still trad-arr, but Mitchell is already telling stories and experimenting with tunings.

Her own songs are emerging too, as is the narrative of her life. “Day After Day”, here in its demo form for Elektra’s Jac Holzman, is written while pregnant, on the train to the Mariposa Folk Festival. She’s told her parents she’s going there to become a musician, although the story is actually just a ruse to avoid telling them about her condition.

There are spots on Canadian TV’s *Let’s Sing Out* in ’65 and ’66, where she unveils the exquisite “Night In The City”. The onset of Mitchell the songwriter is mirrored in the subtle shifts in vocal emphasis, her voice now occupying a lower register more frequently, as if feeling more at ease in its surroundings.

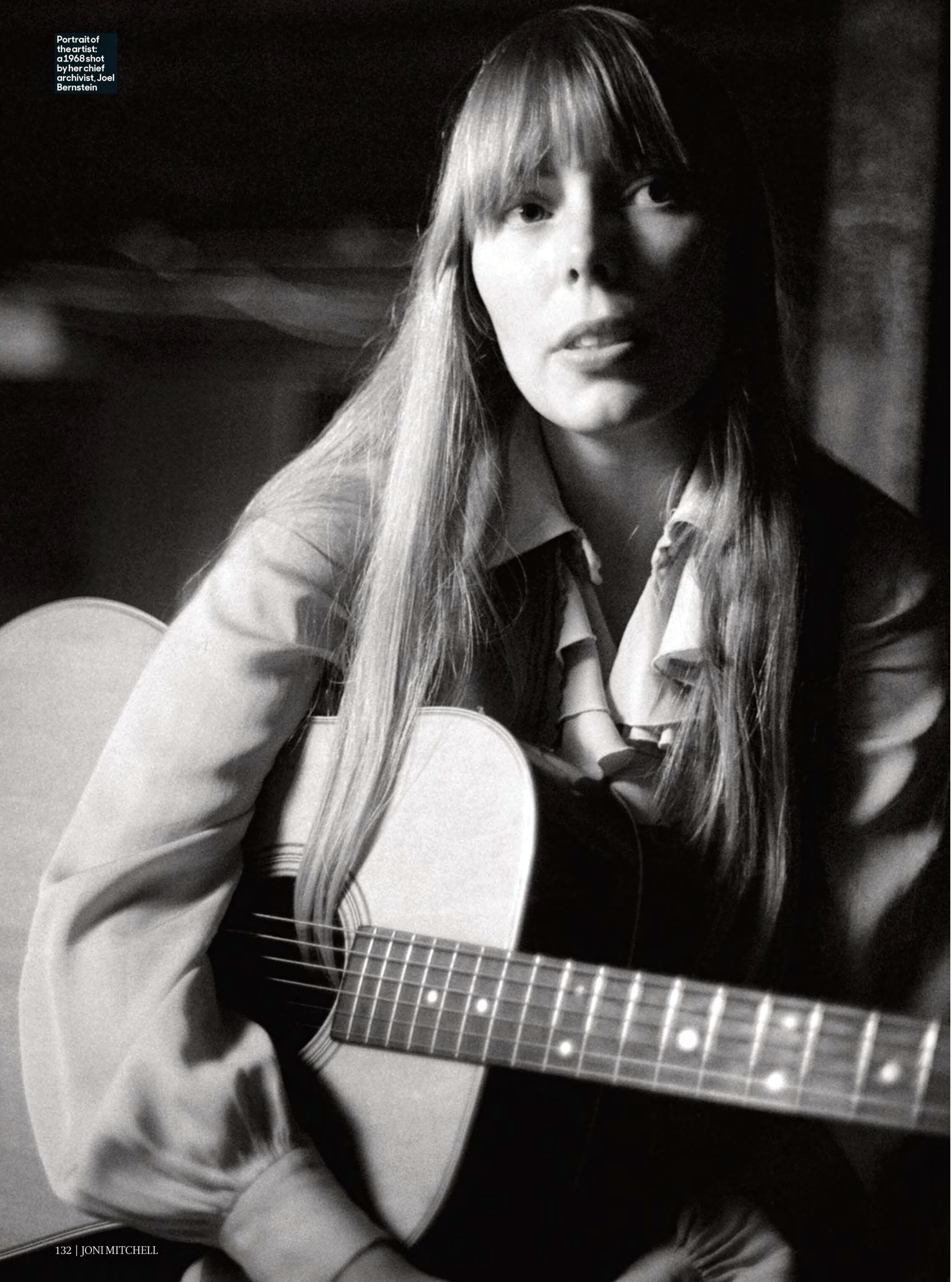
Mitchell’s growth as an artist has accelerated by the time she pitches up at Philadelphia’s 2nd Fret in November 1966. She cites Bob Dylan and David Blue in the preamble to the lively “What’s The Story Mr Blue”, one of her formative revenge ballads. “The Circle Game”, inspired by (but thematically opposed to) Neil Young’s wishful “Sugar Mountain”, makes its appearance later in the same set. And just over six months later, on Philadelphia radio, we’re treated to a luminous cover of “Sugar Mountain” itself.

These are the kinds of surprises that give *Archives Volume 1* its dazzle. However slight, the minute-and-a-half of improvisation that closes Michael’s Birthday Tape, from May 1967, offers a tantalising peek into Mitchell’s creative process. A month later, at home in New York City, she records a run of soon-to-be breakthrough songs: “I Had A King”, “Chelsea Morning”, “Michael From Mountains”.

She takes these compositions to Canterbury House in Ann Arbor that October, the show spread across the rest of disc four and the whole of disc five. Mitchell’s second set at the venue begins with another remarkable new tune, “Little Green”, the moving hymn to the daughter she gave up for adoption. In this context, given her absurdly high quality quotient, it’s perhaps forgivable that underrated gems like “Carnival In Kenora” never made it onto record. For most artists, this boxset would mark the plateau of an entire career. Mitchell was just getting going.



Portrait of  
the artist:  
a 1968 shot  
by her chief  
archivist, Joel  
Bernstein





was the perfect place to start for Joni. From there it was filling in the various phases and collecting some of the private tapes, many of which came from Joel Bernstein, who she gave most of her stuff to in the '70s and '80s for safe-keeping. Joni told me that everybody felt the loss of Elliot Roberts, her old manager [*who died in June 2019*], in a big way. She said Elliot had always wanted her to consider doing this and she figured out a way. Previously, in *Love Has Many Faces* [2014's career-spanning comp, divided into four thematic CDs], she'd done her own kind of mix and match with her stuff and I thought that worked really well. She had such a clear vision of how she wanted to do that material. But I think *Archives* became a novel thing when she consulted Neil Young and he said, 'OK, why don't you try the straight-up, chronological path?' And they really got into it."

**H**OWEVER tentative these earliest recordings sometimes sound – whether it be covers of "House Of The Rising Sun", "Dark As A Dungeon" or "Deportee (Plane Crash At Los Gatos)" – Mitchell still exudes an inner confidence and steely sense of resolve. Especially on the live stage, where she engages the audience with stories between songs, buying time while she fiddles with a temperamental new tuning. She's also structuring her setlists deliberately, allowing themes to develop, each song speaking to the next.

"She's mixing and matching," says Crowe. "'Here's the beginning of a relationship, here's the end.' So she's already curating. But she's really working these rooms. If you listen to the club stuff, she's firing on all cylinders. She's also really good with the camera. She was a model, originally, and I talked about this with her a bunch. So when she does these TV shows back in the very early days, she kills it. And she's *still* that person. I remember the first time she went to Clive Davis's pre-Grammy party. Clive was announcing her and I saw the spotlight moving around the room, looking for her. As Joni saw it coming, she lifted her chin at this perfect angle to meet the spotlight. I was like, 'Damn!' She's always had that striking charisma without ever playing overtly into it."

Certainly, that same easy charisma is evident on *Archives*. Mitchell is still a work in progress as she winds her way from Saskatoon radio and Toronto club dates to small shows in the States, but she's never less than riveting company. Her rate of acceleration is remarkable too. "Joni didn't even have a career, but was apparently so striking that they were doing articles on her early on, as an influencer," says Crowe. "They're like, 'Let's write about this woman, because we can't take our eyes off her.' She never presented

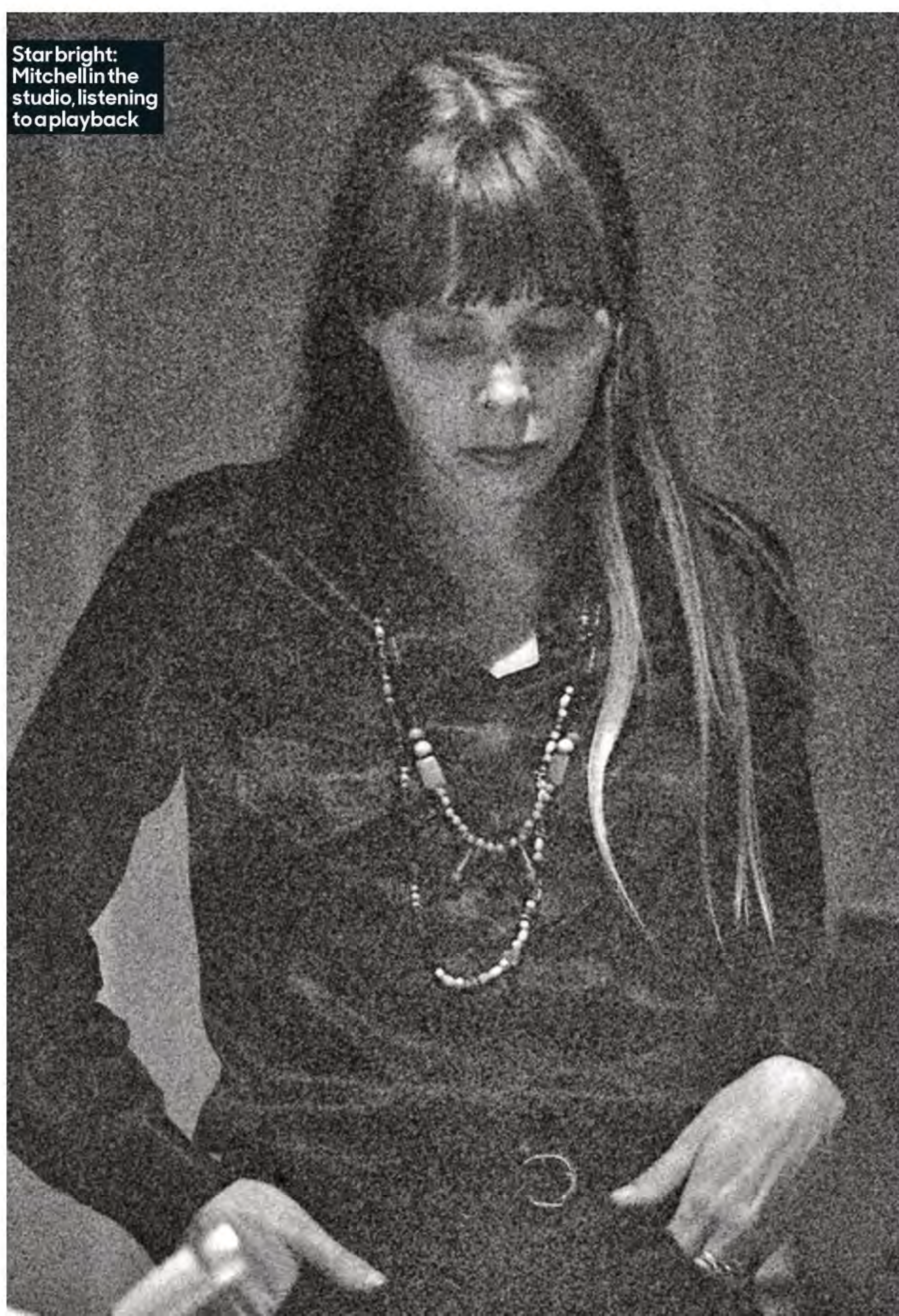
herself as a female ideal or anything like that, but she decided that the cultural path of the moment was folk music. So she chooses that when painting

"Our parting was painful, but we've remained friends"

GRAHAM NASH



"An outpouring of love and affection": Mitchell and friends onstage at Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration, November 7, 2018



Star bright: Mitchell in the studio, listening to playback

is still her first language. She's exploring folk music and learning in these different clubs and environments. It's great to see in the liner notes that she's not out partying, she's there to be a student and a workhorse."

"The things that stand out for me on *Archives* are the intros to the songs, because it's the exact same person I'm hanging out with up there at her house," observes Carlile. "She giggles and laughs a lot when she speaks. The other thing I noticed is that, when she's singing traditional folk music, she stays in the upper range of her voice, in a falsetto. But when she starts writing her own songs, she starts getting into her lower register. So you hear this kind of guttural woman emerge into the world."

The liner note discussions are illuminating. Crowe used the opportunity to pose questions about her early years that he'd never felt able to ask before. Mitchell recalls being flown 100 miles to hospital for treatment of polio, which she contracted aged nine. Looking down from the plane, the towns resemble a succession of "jewels on the black prairie".

Her mother, Myrtle, calls her a quitter when she ditches piano lessons. In 1965, after Mitchell has moved to Detroit, she makes a birthday tape for her and sends it home. One of its songs is the extraordinary "Urge For Going". Rather than fostering maternal approval, however, Joni reveals that Myrtle "never showed much pride in me, ever. It was only criticism... She was a heckler... She wanted me to be Doris Day or something like that."

The first song of her own, "Day After Day", is tied into her difficult relationship with Myrtle. It's written en route to 1964's Mariposa Folk Festival in Ontario, where Mitchell is planning to watch Buffy Sainte-Marie. "Joan is pregnant at the time, but doesn't want her mum to know," explains Crowe. "And she wants to keep working. So she basically tells us that she concocts a career and a mission to go to this folk festival with ➤

JOEL BERNSTEIN: SULLIVAN MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES; VIVIEN KILLICK/GETTY IMAGES



the father of this child. And she's going to use that as a ruse, she says, to get out of her hometown. That points you to 'Day After Day' as the first *real* Joni song, because she writes it on the train."

Crowe revels in the unexpected details and shifts of conversation for *Archives*. A discussion about Mitchell's resentment at being labelled a folk singer leads to mention of Chuck Berry, her favourite songwriter early on. She then recounts meeting the rock'n'roller in a Florida hotel, when she and Graham Nash are in town for the Miami Pop Festival. Hotel management, not being the biggest admirers of travelling musicians, tell them they'll have to share a bathroom with Berry.

"It was a kind of funky hotel, but Joan and I weren't bothered," recalls Nash today. "We were in love and didn't care where we were. At one point, I'm in the bathroom and Chuck walks in. He goes, 'Y'know, there's only two things to do here in Miami – eat hamburgers and fuck.' Trust me, when you're stood peeing next to Chuck Berry, you remember that vividly." Later, Nash and Mitchell decide to roll him a joint. Knocking first, they enter the bathroom, only to find Berry and a girl about to have sex. "So we excused ourselves," notes Joni with casual coolness, "and went back into our room."

Another, more significant, encounter concerns Leonard Cohen, who became her lover for a while. He and Mitchell share a bill at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1967, where Joni is knocked sideways by his rendition of "Suzanne".

"That was the first person I admired," she tells Crowe. "He made me feel... my writing, I thought, was so immature. He was an adult. 'This is how adults write.'"

"Hearing 'Suzanne' kind of sent her into the deeper waters and all that would come later," reflects Crowe. "I was really interested in how much she credits Leonard in our interviews. It made me wish he'd talked about her more. I never read him on the record much on the subject of Joni."

TWO months ago, Mitchell invited David Crosby round for dinner. The pair were an item for a while back in the day, hooking up after Crosby had seen her at Miami's Gaslight Café in September 1967. Four weeks later, as heard live on *Archives*, Mitchell has already acknowledged him in song, as the free-spirited sailor of "Cactus Tree", "*bearing beads from California*".

"There were lots of other girl singers around, but they weren't anywhere even *close* to Joni," Crosby recalls. "She was spectacular. Back then when I first met her, the voice had maybe a whole other octave on the top and she was just learning what to do with it. But you could tell right away that she was special – the chords she picked, the way she juxtaposed the melody over them. And, of course, the words. I thought, 'Oh my God, here comes the next wave.' And I just wanted to be with her. But I had to get used to the fact that she was going to write songs *to* me and *about* me. She did that with 'Song To A Seagull' and 'Cactus Tree'. Then later on, when she wanted to get rid of me, she said goodbye in 'That Song About The Midway'."

Despite the hardships of the past few years, Mitchell remains the same person she ever was, according to Crosby. "You can never count her out, because this is a very tough woman," he states. "She took a big hit and she's fighting her way back."

The Song To A Seagull sessions: Crosby and Stephen Stills confer as John Sebastian plays the harmonica



"There were a lot of girl singers around, but none came even close"

DAVID CROSBY

And she's the best singer-songwriter I ever encountered in my life. She's painting again, because I've seen her, and I want to hear the music that lives inside of her too."

In February 2018, she and Crosby attended David Geffen's 75th birthday bash in LA. The place was packed with Hollywood celebrities. "There were only five musicians there – Joni, Elton, Bruce, McCartney and me," says Crosby. "Everybody else was much bigger than me. I was so happy to see Joni there, she gave me a huge smile. We don't always get along, but I do love her, man."

Unsurprisingly, given his public falling out with his ex-CSNY partner, Crosby didn't make it to Neil Young's secret wedding to Daryl Hannah that August. Mitchell was invited though, as was Stephen Stills. Three months later, on November 6 and 7, she was centre of attention in her own right, when a whole bunch of big names played two shows at LA's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion for 'Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration'.

The starry lineup included Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Graham Nash, James Taylor, Rufus Wainwright and Brandi Carlile. Looking immaculate in platinum braid, black bolero hat and long red coat, Mitchell accepted a birthday cake from her guests and joined them on stage during an all-star rendition of "Big Yellow Taxi".

"The outpouring of love and affection was unprecedented," recalls Nash, who sat at the piano to perform "Our House", the CSNY song he'd written to bless their romantic union in the late '60s. "During the last chorus, when the audience sang along, I turned my head to the right to see her in the front row. And she was smiling and singing along too. That was an incredible moment for me, personally – to see Joni, at 75, singing the





song that I wrote for her 50 years ago.

"After the show, everybody wanted to come up and shake her hand and tell her what she meant to them," Nash continues. "I was at the table with Joan and James Taylor and she looked so happy. When the crush of people had lessened, I went up to her and asked, 'Have you got anything coming? Any new songs?' She looked at me with that Joni Mitchell thousand yard stare and said, 'No, not yet.' I really loved the fact she said not yet."

Nash has been over to visit his ex-lover three or four times in the last couple of years. "We talk about what happened to her and I, how our lives changed and where we moved on to," he says. "I don't think either of us have any regrets about it, we just realised that it was the right thing to do at that time. Our parting was painful and sad, particularly for me, but we've remained friends."

**M**ITCHELL'S return to the wider cultural milieu has manifested itself in various ways. Sometimes she's been absent while others have honoured her, as when old ally Eric Andersen picked up a Lifetime Achievement gong on her behalf at Montreal's International Folk Awards last year. Or when Tourism Saskatoon held

an all-day celebration to salute their greatest export in the form of a newly named riverfront – Joni Mitchell Promenade – in June 2018.

Altogether more spectacular is the footage of her in *Rolling Thunder Revue*, Martin Scorsese's documentary about Bob Dylan's famous travelling circus of 1975. Mitchell has written a luminous new song on the road, "Coyote", and plays it at Gordon Lightfoot's house, with Dylan and Roger McGuinn on acoustic guitars. It's a potent reminder of Mitchell at her dazzling peak, cutting through the chaos with nimble, clear-eyed acuity.

Not long after the film's Netflix debut in June 2019, Mitchell began popping up at more events. There was a Blondie gig at Santa Barbara Bowl, followed by the San Diego premiere of Crowe's stage-musical version of *Almost Famous*, which required the leads to sing her classic break-up ballad "River".

"At intermission I went to find her and she was just glowing at our play," Crowe recalls. "Afterwards she stayed at this party in the courtyard, outside the Old Globe Theatre, for three-and-a-half hours. And posed for every picture with every actor and all their friends. And it was not duty. It was just bringing her kind of love. She said, 'This is better than the movies!'"

A month later, Brandi Carlile and her band paid tribute to guest of honour Mitchell by performing *Blue* in its entirety at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA. "It was more than just scary," confesses Carlile. "I actually went to a hypnotist beforehand, so that I could get through it. I do a lot of teasing myself around Joan, joking around. I'd tell her I'm a country station, I'm a little bit corny, and Joni would just say, 'Don't be silly, it's just another party. We're going to have fun.' But what I couldn't get past was how difficult the songs were. *Blue* is seen as one of Joni's most truthful, but also simpler, albums. But there's not one fucking simple thing about it. The time signatures are complicated and the notes she chose to sing couldn't be more intimidating."

Carlile's friendship with her had deepened over the previous year, since appearing at 'Joni 75'. "Whenever I see her, Joni never looks anything less than a million fucking dollars," she says. "Her hair is gorgeous, her makeup is perfect and she's always wearing some funky, hip outfit. She's honest about how she feels from day to day. She never tries to entertain anyone, but she is very warm and generous with her time. You get the feeling that she's holding so much of herself to herself."



Playing at  
Canterbury  
House in  
Ann Arbor,  
October 1967



One night after dinner at Mitchell's place, she continues, "Joni got to talking about her desire to have music in her house. She wasn't making any promises about touching an instrument, but they were there and sometimes she wished that people were playing them. So she suggested a jam, or a series of jam sessions."

With Carlile and Marcy Gensic at the helm, they set about finding players. Carlile brought along Andrew Hozier to the first one, arriving at the door with an orchid and a bottle of champagne. "I was so nervous," she says. "It felt like an elaborate prank. Joni has this radiance like a cat, where you get the feeling she could take you or leave you, but you almost wouldn't want it any other way. We were just kind of stunned to be there. So we wind up in the living room, where Hozier plays an old Irish folk tune and I start singing 'Helplessly Hoping' by Crosby, Stills & Nash. Apropos of nothing, Chaka Khan walks into the room, sits down and throws a harmony over it. I'm thinking, 'What the fuck!' And right behind her comes Herbie Hancock, who promptly sits down at the piano and starts playing. My brain is exploding at this point. I look over at Joni and she's just laughing, because she can see us squirm and look sufficiently shocked."

This impish sense of glee seems to be a guiding principle behind the jams. Crowe remembers Elton John being "blown away by how Joni takes such

## "She's not arrogant enough to care about her legacy"

BRANDI CARLILE

delight in everybody playing music". Crowe watched from the sofa on New Year's Eve as Mitchell played host to Eric Idle, Chaka Khan, veteran publicist Elliot Mintz and various girlfriends and helpers. "They're not huge gatherings, but they're very soulful ones," he observes. "She'll have longtime friends like Sharon Kemp, Leslie Morris, Herbie Hancock, Kathy Bates and Rosanna Arquette. And sometimes very old friends from Canada. It's an eclectic mix of people she tends to have a long history with. But sometimes someone like Harry Styles will slip in there. Everybody lets loose. As she often says, she's a dancer and a rock'n'roller at heart, and it's that Joni that people see on those nights.

Pure joy. It's 'Raised On Robbery'-style Joni. For people wondering what she's been up to, she's living a very full and creative life."

**D**URING the process of compiling *Archives*, Mitchell also decided to revisit a handcrafted project from late 1971. Informally titled 'The Christmas Book', it's a compendium of drawings and watercolour paintings, interspersed with poetry and handwritten lyrics, that she gifted to a select group of close friends in the wake of *Blue*. "It's a beautiful thing," says Nash. "I actually have two original copies and one of them is signed to me."

Mitchell dug out hers, added several pieces that didn't make the original cut and reproduced the whole thing as faithfully as possible for public consumption. The resulting *Morning Glory On The Vine: Early Songs And Drawings* was published in October 2019, complete with a new, Joni-penned foreword. It's an exquisite piece of work. Moreover, it suggests that, for Mitchell, the disciplines of poetry, music and visual art are interchangeable, a fluid cycle of nourishment and inspiration.

It's tempting to draw the conclusion that *Archives* and *Morning Glory On The Vine* are evidence of Mitchell, at 76, starting to tend her own legacy. But it may not be that simple. Or even strategic. "I've spent a lot of time just going up to the house, having





Joni at 75: a birthday celebration live at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, LA, November 7, 2018



a glass of wine and a quiet night with Joni and listening to her talk about these projects,” says Carlile.

“And she’s not arrogant enough to care about her legacy. This is just a way of putting something beautiful in the world. It’s her interpretation of what she can do now, drawing attention to things she’s done in her life that she’s proud of. It’s got very little to do with ego.”

For Carlile, her visits to Mitchell’s house are revealing on an unspoken level too. “It’s a really rich space,” she explains. “There’s not just art on the walls, she’s also painted beams and cabinets and doors. And there are orchids everywhere, almost on every surface. The only sign that you’re in the home of the greatest living songwriter is that you see instruments in one room. There are no displays of grandiosity anywhere else that have to do with music or songwriting. It actually stands out like a sore thumb that there’s a Grammy on show. But when you read it you see that it’s been given to her for album artwork. And that’s when it clicks. You realise that she’s not intentionally making a statement, but she’s holistically an artist, well beyond her legacy or what some of us might imply.”

For Crowe, *Archives* isn’t merely an archeological

dig. It’s an opportunity for Mitchell to reassess and confront her feelings about her younger self. “I think it’s brought her a real sense of humour about that period,” he offers. “And maybe it’s unloaded some baggage that she might have had about those early songs. It brings her joy now, which I’m sure is invaluable.

Joni listened very carefully to that stuff in her living room and warmed to the young artist she heard singing those folk songs. I think she’d been very hard on that initial phase, in no small part because the folk community had been tough on her. She was so beautiful that she had to work extra hard to prove herself to some of the hard-bitten folk types. I think they saw her more as this kind of ingénue. But what you hear is a sparkling young artist finding her way.”

**S**PEAKING to *The Guardian* earlier this year, Mitchell’s former beau James Taylor teased that she may be “coming back musically”, fuelling rumours that she was writing and recording again. Neither Crowe nor Carlile, however, have seen any evidence so far. Rather, Mitchell’s energies have been directed elsewhere. “She’s been so into the *Archives* project and *Morning Glory*,” says Carlile. “It’s been very much a labour of love for her and the closest people in her life. None of this could have happened without Joni’s approval, enthusiasm and love for it all. She’s been in the wars,

she’s had a hell of a recovery and it’s just been unbelievable. She’s an astounding woman.”

In light of all the tributes in recent years, Carlile believes that Mitchell is finally aware of the sheer depth of hero worship and admiration that the world has for her. “She’s tickled and perplexed by it,” Carlile offers. “She knows that she has very few contemporaries and that she might be the best there’s ever been – and she detests false humility – but I think she’s only just beginning to grasp how beloved and how important she is to our generation of followers. You see this twinkle that’s like, ‘Holy shit, that’s right, I’m Joni Mitchell!’ come across her face every now and then. She’s an absolute light in the world.”

“People appreciate her so much and I think she enjoys it,” agrees Crowe. “Because you don’t realise that, for a lot of her life, she’s been pushing against obstacles and sometimes prejudice. I’ve seen her in situations where they say, ‘And now, the greatest *female* singer-songwriter alive!’ Why are we saying ‘female’, guys? That’s something that she’s had to deal with. And you don’t see it, because the size of her genius obscures a lot of that. But if you look closely, not everybody was like Prince, writing her fan mail.”

As for the future, Crowe is convinced there’s a whole lot left. “She has a pretty strong therapy programme and she’s been doing a lot of walking,” he says. “And she dances too. She’s somebody who’s fought her way back, just like she fought her way back from polio as a child. It’s like she said when we talked: ‘I’m a fighter, that’s what I do.’ She did a wonderful line drawing for *Archives*, which I think shows that it’s all coming back to her. Nothing in her genes seems to accept being vanquished, so we’re just going to keep getting Joni for many years to come.”