

Lady Of The Canyon

Revived, **JONI MITCHELL** is gradually returning to active service. As a new boxset sheds light on the earliest parts of her career, Rob Hughes investigates her latest, remarkable endeavours. “She’s living a very full and creative life,” says one confidant. Stand by for hootennanies, visits from Chaka Khan and Eric Idle and nights spent dancing in roadhouse bars...

Photoby **VIVIEN KILLILEA**



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 are decorated with her own canvasses – landscapes, still-lives, 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!’”

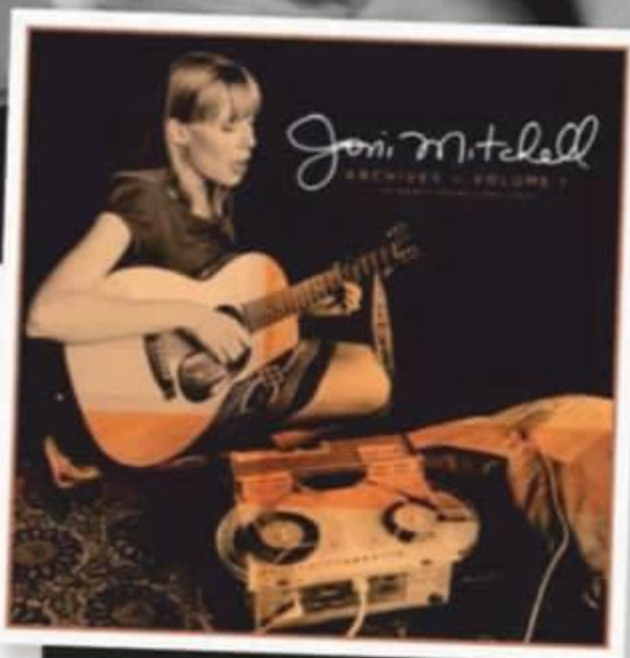
Traditionally, Mitchell has guarded her privacy here with steadfast conviction. She has likened the place to a refuge in which she lived in relative seclusion. Seven years on, however, her outlook appears to be changing. The arrival of the mouth-watering *Archives Volume 1: The Early Years (1963-1967)* is the latest sign of renewed activity in the Mitchell camp. Begun in 2018, it’s the first in a series of archival releases scheduled for the coming years.

Film director and screenwriter Cameron Crowe first visited the 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 Volume 1*. 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. “The stuff on *Archives Volume 1* 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, was just fantastic.”

Mitchell has been directing operations from home, aided by longtime friend and associate Marcy Gensic and chief archivist Joel Bernstein. When not busy with this catalogue of rarities, she’s been spending much of her time, pre-Covid, either dancing at a Burbank

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



“ARCHIVES IS A MIRACLE FOR JONI FANS”

CAMERON CROWE

roadhouse bar or hosting regular hootenannies. 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. “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 Los Angeles the following summer.



With ukulele, circa 1963

With David Crosby during the recording of her first album, 1967



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 coffee house, 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 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."



Jimi Hendrix: Mitchell was a "fantastic girl"

Her first significant foray came in February 2017, when Crowe and author Daniel Levitin escorted Mitchell to Clive Davis' annual pre-Grammy Gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. The guests – including Jane Fonda, Stevie Wonder, Ringo Starr, Herbie Hancock and Michael Keaton – gave her a 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 before Mitchell released it on *Clouds*.

"It was very emotional," says Collins. "Even though neither Joni nor 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 Volume 1*, from a Philadelphia radio station in March 1967, is brimming with 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.

"She was wandering around Greenwich Village, looking for somebody to notice her," 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'. Of course it changed both of our lives. She was clearly an extraordinary talent."

Kooper and Collins weren't the first ones to notice her. For *Archives Volume 1*, Saskatoon DJ Barry Bowman, who first encountered Mitchell when she 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 was 19. Consisting of old folk standards, they're the earliest known examples of Mitchell on tape, just voice and ukulele. Bowman only



rediscovered them 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," explains Crowe, who became involved with the project a year ago. "It 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. I think she also consulted with Neil Young, who suggested they do it chronologically."

However tentative these earliest recordings sound – whether it be covers of "House Of The Rising Sun", "Dark As A Dungeon" or "Deportee (Plane Wreck At Los Gatos)" – Mitchell still exudes confidence and a steely resolve. Especially on stage, where she engages the audience with stories between songs. She's also structuring her set lists 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 ➤

JONI MITCHELL

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' 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."

TWO months ago, Mitchell invited David Crosby round for dinner. The pair first met when Crosby saw 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 even *close* to Joni," Crosby recalls. "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 is still 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. She's painting again, because I've seen her. I want to hear the music that lives inside of her, too."

In February 2018, she and Crosby attended David Geffen's 75th birthday party in Jimmy Iovine's \$60 million Malibu home. "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. 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, for *Joni 75: a Birthday Celebration* at Los Angeles' Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The lineup included Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Graham Nash, James Taylor,



"She's always had that striking charisma": with Cameron Crowe in San Diego, September 27, 2019



With Pete Townshend, Elton John and Taron Egerton at *Rocketman: Live in Concert* at LA's Greek Theatre, October 18, 2019

"THE DREAM INTERVIEW"

Cameron Crowe on his history with Ms Mitchell

"JONI Mitchell was always the dream interview," explains Cameron Crowe, who began writing for *Rolling Stone* in 1973, aged just 15. "But she never did any and that was really well known in the world of journalism. One night, I'm interviewing Bonnie Raitt in the dressing room of the Troubadour, with my sister Cindy, when the door opens and somebody walks in. I'm still looking at Bonnie, but everybody else is looking past me. I casually turn and see Joni Mitchell, who appears to have walked straight off the cover of *For The Roses*. She sits down and starts to participate in this interview with Bonnie Raitt. I'm freaking out. It all grew to the point where, six years later when she wanted to discuss *Mingus*, [manager] Elliot Roberts called me and said, 'Joan would love for you to do this interview.' We've stayed in touch ever since. I was just lucky to be there when she was ready to talk in 1979, with a kind of widescreen technicolour memory of where she'd been and where she was going. She's the best interview I ever did at *Rolling Stone*."

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 a massed 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 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 loved the fact she said *not yet*."

Nash has visited his former partner three or four times in the past couple of years. "We talk about what happened to her and me, how our lives changed and where we moved onto," he says. "Our parting was painful and sad, but we've remained friends."

MITCHELL'S return to the wider cultural landscape 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 Saskatoon saluted its 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 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".



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

BRUCE GLIKAS/WIREIMAGE; VIVENKILLILEA/GETTY IMAGES FOR THEMUSICCENTER; PETE TOWNSHEND



"I was so nervous":
Brandi Carlile
with Mitchell

"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 Los Angeles. "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. 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.'"

Carlile's friendship with Mitchell had deepened over the previous year, since appearing at the *Joni 75* event. One night after dinner at Mitchell's place, she says, "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

"THERE'S NOBODY LIKE HER"

Judy Collins on her forthcoming Joni Mitchell tribute album

"I RECORDED Joni's 'River' for last year's *Winter Stories* [Collins' most recent album].

I don't know why I'd never done it before, because the minute I started singing, it was clear that it was meant for me. I've always been spellbound by Joni's writing. Her songs are like a bouquet of flowers that are imperishable. I'm going to put 'Cactus Tree' on this new Joni Mitchell album that I'm doing. I sing that one at concerts and people just go nuts. Listening to Joni is like going to a watering hole that you love especially well. Or going to the museum, spending a couple of hours with paintings that you love and just embracing them again, breathing in the air, smelling the flowers, talking a walk through these songs. There's nobody like her."



Folk buddies:
Mitchell and
Collins at Big Sur
Folk Festival, 1968

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 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. "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."

DURING 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 for public consumption. *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 Volume 1* 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 a glass of wine and a quiet night with Joni and listening to her talk about these projects," says Carlile. "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 Crowe, *Archives Volume 1* isn't merely an archaeological 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. "Maybe it's unloaded some baggage that she might have had about those early songs. 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. But what you hear is a sparkling young artist finding her way."

Speaking to *The Guardian* earlier this year, 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 Volume 1* 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. She's an astounding woman."

"She has a pretty strong therapy programme and she's been doing a lot of walking," discloses Crowe. "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." 🎵

Archives Volume 1: The Early Years (1963-1967) is released by Rhino on October 30

REVIEW



ARCHIVES VOLUME 1: THE EARLY YEARS (1963-1967)

RHINO

9/10

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

THERE'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 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 Volume 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.

Playing at Canterbury House in Ann Arbor, October 1967

