

Joni Mitchell and me: My heart, her brain

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Joni Mitchell and I go back a very long way—almost a half century. At least I go back with her; she knows me from Avram. After a long interval, during which the singer did not appear in public, there she was this past summer, back on the luminous stage of the numinous Newport Folk Festival. My wife (also a fan) and I watched transfixed at the YouTube set featuring her along with a whole bevy of younger artists—Brandie Carlile, Marcus Mumford and other rising stars. Watching Joni get back on the horse, several years after recovering from a cerebral aneurysm, I was reminded of my first encounter with the famous singer/songwriter.

Speaking of rising, as miraculous as was this almost messianic return, my geriatrician eye was sobered regarding how she had *not* quite fully come back. Of course, these are just observations from afar. I have not examined her and do not know more about her medical history than is to be found in the public record and/or as recounted by Mitchell herself, now age 78.

All this takes me back to the first decade of my unrequited romance. Speaking of passion, I first fell in love with folk music when I was just 14 and by my 15th year was old enough to go downtown to the then slightly seedy, now quite tony Yorkville neighborhood in Toronto to hang out at the folk clubs. Back in the day, there were two main venues—The Riverboat and The Penny Farthing, the former too expensive for me and the latter more open to new acts and with a less burdensome cover charge.

It was 1965 and Mitchell had just moved to my native Toronto from Saskatoon in western Canada (I can still hear her distinct accent in interviews) (Figure 1) She was as poor as a church mouse and had just given up her daughter for adoption - later alluding to this painful loss in her evocative song “Little Green.” (Listen here:

https://www.google.com/search?q=little+gree+youtube+Joni&rlz=1C1GGRV_enIL784IL784&oq=little+gree+youtube+Joni&aqs=chrome.69i57j0i22i30.17011j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:a7b1846e,vid:HTxUrDtoPP0; accessed December 24, 2022).



FIGURE 1 Joni Mitchell, Toronto, 1964. Source: <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2020/10/18/before-she-went-to-new-york-and-became-famous-joni-mitchell-played-the-half-beat-in-yorkville.html>

At the Penny Farthing the MC told us we were about to enjoy two different female acts by a pair of women, who were also close friends. Out came Vicky Taylor with the long flowing brown hair which was of course *de rigueur* for folk singers back then. Taylor offered a set which I remember enjoying but no more than that. It turns out that she went on to a career in music but never reached Mitchell's heights. Taylor now lives in Colorado, a well-regarded multi-instrumentalist who performs with an all-female band adorably named "The Mother Folkers." (<https://www.mother-folkers.com/index.html>; accessed December 24, 2022).

Recently Mitchell reminisced about her friend, offering that "Vicky was a folk singer, and she was very kind and very generous to me, which I was not used to ... Yeah, she wasn't competitive or vicious, like some of them. The folkies were so competitive. She was really nice, and she was dating Neil [Young] at the time."¹

Next up was "... a new talent, all the away from Saskatoon." Out stepped a mere slip of a girl with long blond hair, a thin face with high cheek bones and buck teeth. Very quietly she started strumming on her guitar in an unusual open tuning. I was in love! I remember being fascinated by her long thin fingers and how she moved them over the neck and sound hole of her instrument. The singer's voice and overall gestalt were unforgettable; I sat transfixed. The fact that today I can still recall the whole scene so vividly attests to the magical power of her muse. This was Joni Mitchell, aged 22—more than a half century ago. She went on to endless fame as a musical star and I to gentle obscurity as a geriatrician. (Disclosure: I do dabble in the folk genre as lead singer in "The Unstrung Heroes").

After that spellbinding performance, I never saw her in person again. But it turns out that this gig was not my only connection to the famous chanteuse. Dr Ted Tulchinsky, a close medical colleague today, back in the day ran The Louis Riel Coffee House in Saskatoon where Mitchell was a waitress in 1962. The not yet famous singer asked Ted if she could perform and "he thought she had talent" giving her some of her earliest exposures. And there is also my other close Saskatoon-born and raised friend Patty Puterman (née Landa) whose cousin-in-law, the late Stephan Dewar of Canadian TV fame, gave Mitchell some of her first guitar lessons. So, with all these connections, it is understandable that I was pretty blown away watching this great artist as she climbed unsteadily back on stage this past July.

Related to her aneurysm, postoperatively she could neither sing nor play at all but actually managed to teach herself from scratch how to play guitar again—by watching her own YouTubes! Recently queried about losing her ability to speak and walk, or even to rise from a chair Mitchell described this experience as "a return to

infancy."² Her observation reinforces my instruction to medical students about the many parallels between infancy and old age. As I point out, "Children grow up; older people grow down."

Although I would love to be able to play the instrumental for "Just Like This Train" as well as did Mitchell on the festival stage in July, the sad fact was that *she* could not now play it as well as she had before her illness. (Listen here: https://www.google.com/search?q=joni+mitchell+just+like+this+train+newport&rlz=1C1GGRV_enIL784IL784&oq=Just+Like+This+Train+newport+&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i22i30l2.11024j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:ad90d600,vid:F8PfszWA-Y4; accessed December 24, 2022) This rendition sounded like a very talented student learning the riffs. And my observation should come as no surprise given her neurosurgical history. Unrelated to that emergency, as pointed out on her website: "The last time Joni performed with guitar in hand in front of a paying audience was 8,660 days ago, on her 55th birthday."

As can be gleaned from the public record, complicating her recent medical history, Mitchell suffered from polio at age nine and was even hospitalized for several weeks. According to The Rolling Stone describing the 100 best guitarists of all time, "The secret to Mitchell's daring guitar work is that she uses more than 50 different tunings. Mitchell devised the alternate tunings to compensate for a left hand weakened by childhood polio. In time she used them as a tool to break free of standard approaches to harmony and structure."³

Just a few years ago, the singer/song-writer herself connected these two medical challenges across more than seven decades. In response to a query about how she was managing since her aneurysm, "Yeah, because once again I couldn't walk. I had to learn how again. I couldn't talk. Polio didn't grab me like that, but the aneurysm took away a lot more, really. Took away my speech and my ability to walk. And, you know, I got my speech back quickly, but the walking I'm still struggling with. But I mean, I'm a fighter. I've got Irish blood! [long laugh] So ... I knew, 'Here I go again, another battle'."¹

But to my geriatrician's eye she had only partially recovered her gait; for one thing, it remains unsteady, at least as can be observed last summer in the first of the Newport festival videos. When coming onstage, Mitchell is helped along by several companions. My rehab-attuned eyes would recommend a three-pronged rubber tipped cane or perhaps even a walker. A chair is placed tactfully and carefully behind her; Mitchell falls heavily into it (see Figure 2 and: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiloeONLq6k>).⁴

To my musician's ear, this great artist's voice had also returned, but again, only partially. While she does not miss a note, Mitchell's lower range is much more

FIGURE 2 Brandi Carlile (right) introduces Joni Mitchell for a special Joni Jam at the 2022 Newport Folk Festival at Fort Adams State Park, RI. *Source:* Carlin Stiehl for Boston Globe via Getty Images.



preserved than the upper, as is often the case with the maturing female voice. But to my musician ear, even considering the normal aging process, this was not quite the Joni Mitchell of yesteryear.

There was one more noteworthy phenomenon relevant to illness and aging that I observed. And this was the deep love and clear respect shown to this senior (in more ways than one) artist by the younger and far healthier musicians on the stage and how they deferred to her voice, singing along on every piece but never overshadowing Mitchell's.

In a lovely gesture that a nonmusician might not catch, Brandi Carlile kept discretely adjusting Mitchell's mike so that it was always in the position to best pick up her voice. Most performers automatically do this themselves; but with Mitchell's hands firmly clasped onto the arm rests of her throne-like chair, apparently, she did not seem to notice the out-of-place mike.

Ageism and ableism deftly conquered—at least in this case.

My musician heart has reveled in the artist's return to the stage. My more rational geriatrician brain has observed an amazingly successful, albeit incomplete neurological rehabilitation. Still, in our field, we do not look for perfection but rather how to take a straw off the camel's back. To paraphrase Winston Churchill's riposte from another time and place, "Some straw, some camel!"

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

The author received no funding for this work.

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How to cite this article: Clarfield AM. Joni Mitchell and me: My heart, her brain. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 2023;1-3. doi:10.1111/jgs.18370