

Transcript

I Couldn't Throw It Out – Podcast Episode 3 – My Joni Mitchell Tapes – Part 2 of 2

THEME SONG EXCERPT: I Couldn't Throw It Out

I couldn't throw it out
I have to scream and shout
Before I turn to dust
I've got to throw it out
Before I turn to dust
I've got to throw it out

END OF THEME SONG EXCERPT

MICHAEL: Hello Sally Libby!

SALLY: Hello Michael Small!

MICHAEL: I hope you agree that one episode of our podcast was not enough to do justice to Joni Mitchell.

SALLY: There's never enough Joni.

MICHAEL: So that's why we're back for the third episode of our podcast, which we like to call I Couldn't Throw It Out. This time, I'm gonna seal the deal. I'll absolutely convince you why I could never throw out these four tapes of my 1985 interview with Joni.

SALLY: You don't have to work so hard. You had me with the first episode.

MICHAEL: But there's a very good reason to continue. Because – 36 years after I met Joni – I've finally decided to follow her directions. You may remember that I admitted to Joni what an amateur writer I was. And she responded with some advice that I saved for this episode. She told me about an early interview that she did with Cameron Crowe.

SALLY: Didn't he write Fast Times at Ridgemont High?

MICHAEL: Yes, and he also did a lot of writing about music. Remember the movie Almost Famous?

SALLY: Yup.

MICHAEL: It was based on his experiences as a teenage reporter for Rolling Stone. He's interviewed Joni many times – including a great interview last year in the L.A. Times. But she talked with me about the very first time that she spoke with him...

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *He gave it to me to read when he finished it, and I said, "Gee, I didn't tell this very well. In here for instance, this doesn't lead from here to here. There's a piece that I must have left out." And everything that I said I must have left out, he said, "Joni, you said that, but I took it out." So I said, "Okay, do me a favor. If you're gonna edit me, please because of the circulatory way that I get to the point -- but I digress, I digress, I digress, hopefully I get to the point -- don't edit me internally. Um. Take out a whole rap."*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: I don't think you followed her advice with the last episode.

MICHAEL: Well, there were lots of little bits. But I never edited out part of what she was saying. You heard each bit from beginning to end. This time, though, you're about to hear some of Joni's longer stories, not just short snippets.

SALLY: Excellent!

MICHAEL: Here's one that blew my mind. Joni's style of piano playing is so recognizable. When you hear the intro to songs like "River" or "Willie," you know it's Joni playing. How do you think she learned it?

SALLY: She taught herself.

MICHAEL: Guess again.

SALLY: Okay, she had strict classical training. Beethoven and Mozart.

MICHAEL: Well, one of those is almost right. Let's hear what she said.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *I was... I took piano at the age of 7 and 8. My piano teacher used to rap my knuckles because... I used to... I couldn't read very well. I was a very slow reader and I... but I memorized it and I really just wanted to interpret. I wanted to play by ear, which was considered ignorant in this town, which made pretensions towards classicism. It was a small town where most children studied classical something or other. So I have 1st and 2nd grade piano, I believe. And I found some things that even back there are pieces that I had written as a child. One called Robin Walk. You know, like at 7. I'd written out all the notes. So at that point I could actually write a piece and write the notes down. But um anyway, she, this woman I think had a secret crush on my father. She used to play piano and trumpet duets in these small town festivals with him. And she didn't seem to like me very much. And basically my piano lessons conflicted with Wild Bill Hickok and given the choice, I would rather listen to Wild Bill Hickock on the radio, and I quit it, you know.*

MICHAEL: So then pretty much what you do now, it's all self-taught. When did you start taking up the piano again, seriously?

JONI MITCHELL: *Ah... making the first record on, what song was it? Night In The City. There's a piano part on it. I remember David Crosby just going crazy because I had to hammer and chisel that that part onto it. Da-da-da-che-che. Da-da-da-che-che. I could hear it in my head but I didn't have the chops for it. So I mean, but I... Because I couldn't write it or tell somebody else how to play it, even though I didn't have the chops – I hadn't played at that point since I was, like, a mini bopper. So... just hammering and chiseling this part on.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

MICHAEL: Did you believe that? So many people imitated her style. And she just pulled it out of the air.

SALLY: I love the part about recording the song with David Crosby. She couldn't explain to anyone what she wanted. So... she just learned the piano in one easy lesson.

MICHAEL: Her training in writing is along the same lines. It took so much restraint for me to wait this long to share her next story. But I thought it should stand on its own. Way back in high school, I noticed that her first album was dedicated to Mr. Kratzman "who taught me to love words." I always wondered who he was. So I asked her. Turns out that he was her seventh grade English teacher. Here's what she told me...

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *He was completely against the grain. First thing he said to us, he said, "I'm gonna lay down some rules now. I don't have too many. One, you can chew gum in class." We went, "What? This is a rule?" And he said, "Providing you bring enough for everybody who wants some. (laughs) Two, you can wing chalk and brushes at the board. But the moment I enter the room, if I see one piece of chalk flying, I'm gonna strangle you. Three, this year, this is the most boring course that I've ever seen," he said, "...that I have to teach you this year. You know, it's gonna have nothing to do with your adult life. I can cram you for this in three weeks. You know, at the end of the year, before you go to exams, and you'll all pass with flying colors. I'm going to teach you what I know. I don't know very much. One thing that I know is Australia. I'm Australian. My name is Mr. Kratzman." And he wrote it on the board.*

MICHAEL: And you dedicated your first album to him.

JONI MITCHELL: *Oh yeah. I mean he was amazing. In the sixth grade -- he saw me pinning up drawings like for a P.T.A. kind of thing, and he came up to me, and he said, "You like to draw, hey?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well if you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words. I'll see you next year." I wrote a poem for him. I'll never forget this. It was called The Stallion. I wanted... I had such a crush on him. He was kind of good-looking, looked like Stewart Granger in my mind. You know, we had one gold tooth, and he cursed in class, and he was handsome and rugged, kind of. Just a great spirit and a recognizer of spirit. So I wrote this ambitious poem at the time, and it went...*

*Softly now the colors of the day
Fade and are replaced by silver gray
As God prepares his world for night
And high upon a silver shadowed hill.
A stallion white as newly fallen snow stands deathly still.
An equine statue bathed in silver light and with his nostrils to the wind...*

And dah, dah, dah. It was an epic poem about this band of horses and a stallion leading riders trying to capture him to a rocky grave, and all this. And I got this thing back, man, and it was circled all over with red. Cliché, cliché, cliché. Adjective: Equine -- good choice of words. Silver-shadowed: cliché And he gave me a B on it. And I read the kid's next to me got an A-plus and it was just terrible. And I stayed after school and I said to him, "Excuse me, but how do you give an A-plus to that, and you give me a B?" He said, "Because that's as good as he's ever going to write." He said, "You know, you could write much better than this. He said, "You tell me more interesting things when you tell me what you did over the weekend. How many times did you ever see Black Beauty?" That's what he said to me, "How many times did you see Black Beauty? Write from your own experience."

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: Okay, that's definitely a rarity. Hearing Joni recite from memory the poem she wrote in 7th grade.

MICHAEL: And the question about her teacher was a shot-in-the-dark for me. When I wrote the article, there was no internet. It was impossible to get any info on Arthur Kratzman. Now it's a whole other story. Joni gave him credit so many times that he even has a Wikipedia page. So now I know that he became the Dean of Education at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. In 2001, Joni was honored by a Toronto arts organization and they surprised her by bringing in Mr. Kratzman to present her award. Afterward, when she hugged him, she told him it was the highlight of her career. He died a few years ago though. He was around 90 (2015).

SALLY: Must have been hard for her to lose her mentor.

MICHAEL: Yea, and it's great reminder of how important teachers are. His encouragement made such a difference. And look at what she accomplished. Anyway, now that you've heard about one important person in Joni's life. I couldn't stop myself from asking her about another one. There's a song on her first album called "[I Had A King](#)" and it sure sounded to me like it was about her first husband, Chuck Mitchell. Turns out I got that one right. Same problem, though, when I tried to find out about him. Nothing, No Internet! So I had zero information when I asked her about it. On the other hand, I looked him up this week and there's a lot of info now. He was known when she met him as a folksinger. But he had quite an unusual range. During concerts, he sometimes sang songs by Kurt Weill and he read poems by Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot. And later, much later after he and Joni were no longer together, he played the lead in several productions of [The Music Man](#). So he got to sing "76 Trombones!" after singing with Joni back in the day. When she met him in 1965, they were both very good-looking. And impulsive, I guess. He proposed within a few days – and she said yes. She told me the story of the beginning, and the end, of their marriage.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *I was playing in a club that had a basement room and an upstairs room. The upstairs room was mostly imported talent, and I was playing downstairs. Somebody came running down to me and they said, "You know that song that you've been trying to get the words to? There's a guy upstairs from Detroit, and he's playing it." So I went up, and there was this fellow Chuck Mitchell playing this song, [Hey Mr. Tambourine Man](#). So he gets to the part, "Waiting only for my boot heels to go wandering." And he had rewritten this part and he himself wore these shoes which he called Magic Shoes. They were black sneakers with the white rubber on them. And I don't know whether he said "Waiting only for my sneakers to go wandering." But he changed this line, and afterwards I kind of chewed him out a bit. I said, "[How can you rewrite this? This is one of the greatest songs I ever heard](#), and you've changed all this?" Well, he couldn't relate to the lines the way they were. So he had rewritten them. We ended up getting into kind of this argument. The next thing we knew, we were enjoying each other's company. And soon afterwards, he wrote to me or called me, I can't remember, and invited me to come down and play in a club outside of Detroit. He got me work across the border. While I was down there, I met his family, and um soon afterwards I was walking down the aisle. So he and I became a folk-singing duo. We worked around the Detroit area for a couple of years, '65 to '67. In '67, it became apparent that in order for us to fit as a couple, that he would have to do tremendous Svengali-ing on me, which I was not about to have happen. So one night, I was playing cards after a gig at this club called [The Sipping Lizard](#). In... not in Ann Arbor. I forget the town but in northern Michigan. And in the middle of this game of Michigan Buck-Up, which was kind of a whist-oriented poker game, I said, "I'm leaving tonight. And a fellow at the table said he would drive me. We went to the place in Detroit, which was a fifth-floor walk-up. We rented a U-haul trailer, and I divided what I thought was 50% of the furniture. We carried it ourselves, chairs and all down five flights of stairs, loaded it into a U-haul trailer and headed off for New York City. (laughs)*

MICHAEL: Have you told this story? Like I can't even tell. Like is this something you feel "Oh I've told this... ? I've never heard it.

JONI MITCHELL: *Oh no. I never. This is not. Y'know, This is not...*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: So she gave you an exclusive. At least back then it was exclusive. I wonder if it actually happened that way or if it just came out that way in the story.

MICHAEL: There's got to be another side to it. But I've never found a record of Chuck's side of the story. Maybe he never told it.

SALLY: Maybe they both realized that an impulsive decision wasn't the best for either of them. How old was Joni then?

MICHAEL: She was just 21. The age when impulsive things tend to happen, right. Her life changed in a huge way in the next decade after her marriage. She told me about a turning point in her thinking that happened at the time of the [For The Roses](#). That's the one you gave me back in 1974...

SALLY: Aw, yeah. The gift that keeps on giving.

MICHAEL: Before she recorded that album, she went on a retreat to some land she bought in Vancouver. She went there to get away from the whole L.A. world, but she did invite a few L.A. types to visit – like David Geffen – to visit. During her isolation, she had one special moment. Now she's talked about this several times in interviews. But I still think it's worth hearing it again because it seems like such an important moment.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *When I when I left from L.A. to go up to the land while I was building my house, in the summer months, I lived in a shack that was on the property, with plastic in the windows and a Coleman stove to cook on. And I drew up well water. The land was undeveloped. There weren't even roads initially on it, but there was this shack that was accessible by boat. The people that owned it before had used it as a fishing cabin, and it was really run down. There were bats in the rafters and mice crawled over you at night. And Geffen came up to visit me one time and was horrified, said I deteriorated into a bag lady. But I was waiting for my... my spirit was trampled on. Actually, I wish I had known more about it at the time. It was the breakdown of an old value system and the rebirth of a new one. But actually, you know, to an onlooker, it was just a state of depression. Depression is really misunderstood in this culture, because this culture is so win-and-lose oriented. Anything that looks at all like a person is out of control is delegated to a loser position, and people are afraid of it, and they back off. Whereas, in fact, it's not popular. It doesn't look good, you know what I mean? It's a symptom of too much thinking and not enough thinking. So where you go, I had to isolate myself to do some more thinking. And the turning point was, you know, one day I dove off the rocks into this water, which is beautiful water -- I had purple starfish and yellow kelp all over.*

MICHAEL: SMALL: But cold water, I imagine.

JONI MITCHELL: *Not really. It's on the Japanese current. It's not much colder than it is out here in the summer and it's a lot warmer than it is, for instance, in San Francisco or Seattle. It's got a warming current to it. And as a result, it's got a lot of very tropical-looking sea life. It's really a beautiful piece of ocean. I came up and broke through the water, and the water was from eye-level was very like a black mirror and all the trees and everything were reflected in it and I broke through the water and I laughed out loud. You know, it was just joyous and I remember thinking, "Oh, here was this joy that came out." There was no witness. You know, there was no one to display your feeling good to. It was just feeling good for myself only.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: I wish I could have a moment like that.

MICHAEL: Oh come on. I know you've had some big realizations in your life. And they lead you to change things.

SALLY: That's true. But I didn't write any great songs. At least not yet.

MICHAEL: Funny you should mention people who write great songs. Remember my rant in the last episode about how ridiculous it is to always ask Joni about other famous people?

SALLY: Oh, that rant will be famous in its own right.

MICHAEL: Well that's unfortunate. Because I'm about to go against everything I said. When I listened to my interview tapes, I heard several great stories about famous people.

SALLY: If you don't share them, then you really are a hoarder.

MICHAEL: Well, before you call me any other names, here's a story where Joni explained her intermittent encounters with Bob Dylan.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *I've run into him for years and it's hard to say that you know him well. I know him definitely better from his work than I do from the in-person encounters that I've had with him over the years.*

MICHAEL: Is it mostly just like you'd be of the same party sort of thing or is it...

JONI MITCHELL: *We just had these cryptic exchanges for many years. It was almost like the first part of the dialogue happened in 1972 and the second sentence happened in 1975. One ongoing conversation, but a line at a time. At the Bangladesh concert, I ran into him, and I had just come back from the southwest. Southwest did something to my color sense. I saw color combinations there in the earth that were very thrilling to my senses. Just strange lavenders and smoky sages coming out of a bit-off old-fashioned inside-licorice brown-pink soil. And just my color sense has changed. I was very excited about it. So I went up and started telling him about all these colors I'd seen. He was studying painting at that time and what he said to me was, "When you paint, do you use white?" I said, "Yeah. I mix white" "'Cause if you use white it'll make your colors muddy." So that was like the year of Bangladesh. A couple of years later, there was a party on the Queen Mary for the Paul McCartney Wings tour. And we ended up at the same table and he turned to me and he said, "If you were going to paint something right now, what would you paint?" And I said, "Well..." I looked around and there was an old-fashioned kind of Queen Mary band in tuxedos playing at one end of the room. And there was a mirror ball in the middle. I said, "I would probably..." I went for the Toulouse-Lautrec vision, you know. Like the dance hall itself and the people dancing and the mirrored ball on the ceiling. And I said, "What would you paint?" And he said, "I'd paint this coffee cup." In the following year, he wrote, "One more cup of coffee for the road." And I wrote, "The mirrored ball begins to sputter lights and spin/you see the dancers..." So the funny thing was that those images showed up in our music in the next project. Um. Another time, I said to him, "When you write about God, what do you mean?" And he said, "Oh, it's just a word everybody uses." I said, "I know everybody uses it. But what does it mean to you?" And he never answered me. Three years later, I ran into him in a bar and he said, "Remember that time you asked me about God and the devil? Well, I'll tell you now." This was during his Christian period. So in other words, these dialogues about God and paint stretched on and on for many years,*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

MICHAEL: While we're on a roll, Joni's stories about famous people included some totally unexpected characters. Such as, Richard Nixon and John Wayne.

SALLY: What?

MICHAEL: Yup. There's this party in the 1970s party to honor the movie director John Ford. Listen to this!

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *You know who he is, eh? The filmmaker. He was an old old man and he died shortly after that. So there was a roundup of old Hollywood: Bette Davis, John Wayne. Nixon was presiding. There was a band all in the red and the brass. When Nixon was right at the podium, he tripped and his papers scattered all over the stage and came drifting down. There was an embarrassing pause and then a smattering of applause, you know. Just kind of... not heartfelt particularly. But, and when John Wayne took the podium, the room went nuts. I mean, there was really a contrast between the President and the Duke. So these things were kind of interesting to, you know, you paid money and you were on a mailing list*

MICHAEL: Well, I go to those types of parties, that's what, you know...

JONI MITCHELL: *They're spectacles, right? I used to go for a while to the Canadian Consulate. I was invited, being a Canadian resident. And those parties were smaller. And it was interesting to kind of interview politicians when they're drunk and find out what an impossible system it is, with vanities prevailing.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: I never really pictured Joni hanging out with politicians

MICHAEL: I got the impression that she has crossed a lot of unexpected paths. Other than Crosby Stills and Nash, which major Woodstock performer would you expect to find on her friends list?

SALLY: Hmm... Could it be... Country Joe and the Fish?

MICHAEL: Well, maybe. But I know she had a meeting of the minds with another performer - Jimi Hendrix. They met shortly before he died.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *I was playing in a coffee house in Ottawa called Le Hibou. There were two clubs, two venues. If you were folk, you played Le Hibou. If you were rock and roll, you played the Capitol Theater. And Jimi Hendrix and I had our first album out. He played the Capitol Theater, which finished earlier. The rock acts would... That's how I met Graham Nash when he played with the Hollies. They came down after their set at the Capitol to catch the last show at Le Hibou. I met Jimi the same way. In those days, they didn't have cassette players. So he had this big reel-to-reel recorder. He asked me if it'd be alright if he recorded my set. So he set this reel-to-reel recorder up on the stage and he sat there all night like, you know, dialing around with this machinery and recording. And we were staying at the same hotel, which was this big gray hotel with a green copper roof next to the Parliament, and his band and a bunch of us went back to his room to play back the show tapes from his show and from my show and to talk and discuss it. And the hotel manager kept coming. No matter how quiet we got the tapes, they kept coming and harassing us. Basically. I think they just couldn't put together a black hippie. They must have thought we were really wilded out in there. But actually it was like so... it was just musicology.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

MICHAEL: Another interesting detail: Jimi and Joni were more closely linked than you'd expect in terms of their art. They both wanted their music to change and evolve – which wasn't easy for either of them.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *What I know from that one encounter makes me really sad that he died. Because he encountered this hideous obstacle that any growing artist has to face. And that is, when you change, the fans don't like it. If you don't change, you're a one-trick pony anyway. You know what I mean? To live without change, what kind of life is that?*

MICHAEL: And he was wanting to change?

JONI MITCHELL: *What was happening was that Jimi came into the arena, the most flamboyant and amazing act of all, you know. Playing this guitar with his teeth and behind his back and wielding it like this giant phallus and just all fire unleashed. And one day he got sick of doing that and he had in his mind visions of big band arrangements and a more subdued performance. He just didn't want to do it anymore. He was sick of playing that. How would you like to play the same character for the rest of your life? Boring, you know? So that night he told me that he had ideas for this. But every time that he didn't really do all of this like energized peacock strutting, the audience would boo and hiss and yell. And they'd say, "Jimi isn't giving it to us. He's holding back." They'd take it personally, like he was mad at them or something. They wouldn't let him change.*

MICHAEL: So you didn't see him many times after that first time?

JONI MITCHELL: *He died shortly after that.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: That story explains why people ask Joni about other celebrities. It's a whole new perspective I never would have imagined.

MICHAEL: Sure, and I can tell you that back in the 1970s, Joni made another musical affiliation that gave me quite a surprise. She recorded an album where the melodies were all written by the jazz performer Charles Mingus.

SALLY: I remember that. But, um, I don't think I actually heard the album.

MICHAEL: Why am I not surprised? Of course, I shouldn't talk. I struggled with that album. You may remember that my dad was a big jazz buff. So of course I had to hate anything that related to jazz. For me, it was like Joni going over to the other side, the parent side. Now I listened to that album recently and I really like some of the songs, especially one called [The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines](#). It's about a guy at a casino who can't lose at the slots while the person whose narrating the song is going broke. One of the lines goes like this...

*He got three oranges, three lemons, three cherries, three plums
I'm losing my taste for fruit
Watching that dry cleaner do it
Like Midas in a polyester suit*

I love those lyrics. Every time I hear them. Here's the story of how that Mingus tune and Joni's words and singing were united...

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

MICHAEL: He had basically been listening to your records and he knew he was sick and he wanted to do this project with you? Is that... ?

JONI MITCHELL: *Mm hmm. The story as near as I can gather, went like this: When he discovered that he was dying, he called a friend of his who was an Italian and he said, "Danielli, you know, I want you to come over here and talk to me about God." And Danielli said to him, "You're calling the wrong person." He recommended that he get T.S. Eliot's *The Quartet* and read that instead of talking to him about God, right? So Mingus got *The Quartet* and he got this brain wave. And I don't know how, I guess Danielli was instrumental in it. Maybe Sue Mingus, Charles's wife, was instrumental. How I came into it, I don't know. But what he wanted me to do with this. He was going to set *The Quartet*... He was going to write a piece of music to be played by a full orchestra, and then with a layer of me playing acoustic guitar against that, he was going to have an Englishman with an Oxford or Cambridge... with a well-educated voice, speaking bits and pieces from T.S. Eliot. And I was in the tradition of the Baptist church to translate T.S. Eliot into the vernacular. In the Baptist church, you have one guy reading from Biblical text and another guy saying, "And then the cat went... and he said, 'Lazarus, man, get your skinny bones up off there.'" Why he chose me to be this colloquial voice, I don't know, and what his influences were, I don't know. But that was the way he saw it. So I went out and I got *The Quartet*, and I read them, and I looked at them with the view of condensing it and I thought I couldn't do it. I called him back. I said, "You know, I'd rather paraphrase the Bible than paraphrase this." Because it already seemed clean to me. I mean, I felt that I could see what had truly been inspired verse and what was connective tissue between these things. But the way I explained it to him, it's like, "How would you like it if I took one of your bass solos, a four-minute bass solo and condensed it down to half a minute? You know, you're cutting out the connecting links." I just had to pass on it. So then I get a call from him a while later and he says that he had written some music for me, and he called it *Joni 1, Joni 2, Joni 3,4,5,6*. So he kind of tempted me into it that way. So I said, "Well, send me the music." So he sent me this stuff that was just a piano player, playing with a metronome going in the background, and I started trying to parquer words to this stuff. And I wake up in the morning, I was doing this out at this beach house of a friend of mine – so I'd wake up in the morning and my foot would be going back and forth under the covers like the metronome tempo. I listened to it so much. And it was driving me nuts. And a lot of the melodies were so long and so complex that they were... it was like having to learn arias, especially "*Goodbye Porkpie Hat*." It was a lot of melody to memorize to begin with, to get it fluid enough to begin seeing the way English falls against it.*

MICHAEL: Was *The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines* based on his experience as opposed to yours?

JONI MITCHELL: *Fiction. But when I played it for him, turns out that he had really been lucky in Vegas on the slot machines and totally identified with it.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: Another Joni Mitchell song that isn't about Joni Mitchell.

MICHAEL: Right. Unfortunately, Mingus died of ALS before the album came out in 1979. But Joni delivered big-time with the project. I listened to it yesterday, and it's really engaging – not at all the way I remember it from back then and... The sound is so different from the album she recorded when I was interviewing her which was called *Dog Eat Dog*, and speaking of that album, I have a strange sense that you want just ONE more celebrity story...

SALLY: (accusing) Mind reader!

MICHAEL: Yea, I know you kinda well at this point. So there's this song called "[Tax Free](#)" which required someone to overdub the voice of an evangelist preacher. Here's what happened when she looked for someone to play the role...

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *First, I approached friends of mine to do it. And I received a variety of negations. One person that I asked to do it said he really felt that evangelists... he didn't want to blow their cover, that they deserve to earn a living. The second refusal was on the basis that he had already said enough anti-Christian, he'd made enough anti-Christian statements to the press and he was sick of seeing himself in that role. Um, I asked Nicholson to do it. It was during ball season. And he had good excuses. But as a favor, finally, he said yes, that he would do it. So he came down to the studio with Art Garfunkel in tow. And the guards didn't recognize him and wouldn't let them in to the studio. So he and Garfunkel spent half an hour going around the building looking for a rear entrance, which they never found. So that never came about.*

MICHAEL: So you thought he just didn't show up?

JONI MITCHELL: *And later when I talked to him, he said he didn't really like the idea of knocking Castro that much in the speech. Anyway, so I thought, "Gee, this is gonna be a controversial song." I got, like, one guy won't do it because he's sympathetic. One guy, because he's sick of talking about it. Another guy, because he doesn't want to take any potshots at third-world leaders. And when we asked Rod Steiger, we didn't know him.*

MICHAEL: SMALL: Did he know who you were?

JONI MITCHELL: *Well, we'd met over at the local coffee shop a few times. As a matter of fact, every time I saw him, my hair was always wet. I would have just gotten out of the pool or out of the shower and I just sitting, drinking my coffee. He used to pass me... every time he passed me, he'd feel my head to see if my hair was wet. So, I mean, we were acquaintances at this point. But still, it was Rod Steiger. He was someone I saw, but not someone that I knew. And I was timid to approach him. Then we saw The Pawnbroker on TV. And we said, "Oh this guy is such an incredible actor. We've got nothing to lose, but to ask."*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: That story makes me think that Joni's world was actually as magical as I imagined. She just runs into Jack Nicholson and Rod Steiger...

MICHAEL: Well, bearing that in mind, I think we've reached the point where, it would be dishonest of me to suppress yet another low moment in my interviewing technique.

SALLY: Oh boy. Here we go.

MICHAEL: Yes, at the time of the interview, I felt compelled to ask Joni about a few specific people – including James Taylor and Jackson Browne. It never even occurred to me that she might have been romantically involved with either of them at some point, or that their relationships might be complicated. Even if it was just that, I somehow had in mind that she would have these buddy stories about them, and she was just waiting for me to arrive so she could share them.

SALLY: How do you spell "naïve"? Is it m-i-c-h-a-e-l?

MICHAEL: Yea, I think it is. I can't believe I have the nerve to do this but listen to the absolute stupidity of my question.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

MICHAEL: And the other thing is, I know that... well, James Taylor is on your new album. And so you must have known him forever and you've also known Jackson Browne forever. And if you have any great story about just either your friendship or about something that you've done together either recently or in the past, I would love, you know, to... I'm just particularly interested in that, because I'm really interested in their music too. And I don't know, it could be something you'd want to think about. But, like, I know that I have a Tom Gammill story. He's like a friend of mine. And if anybody asked me, I'd have a Tom Gammill story right away. But I don't know if it's hard with people like these or whether you're still in touch with them at all.

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: I don't know what to say. You mentioned your friend Tom to Joni Mitchell? Like this would help her come up with a story?

MICHAEL: It shows you how important Tom was in my life. When it didn't work the first time, you know what I did? I actually mentioned him again.

SALLY: Why didn't you mention me?

MICHAEL: Well, I didn't want to go too far with my bragging.

SALLY: How did Joni respond?

MICHAEL: How would any generous person respond? She diverted us to a different topic in a very elegant way. And when I came back to it again, which I did, and asked her more about her celebrity friends, she said, to me *"People are people. You should quote me on that because I used the name of your magazine twice."*

SALLY: Oh! Joni's funny!

MICHAEL: Yeah. I did ask her about other things that weren't celebrity oriented you know. We talked about high school. Oh wait, you know that.

SALLY: Oh yes. We covered that one.

MICHAEL: In great detail. I also asked about how she writes songs. Which lead us into a discussion about the way music reviewers make assumptions about her life based on her lyrics. One writer really got it wrong. So Joni took action.

INTERVIEW AUDIO STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *You think of the art of writing a song is like a crossword puzzle, you know? Which in a way it is. It's puzzling out... when things like that come, since the form requires brevity, carving through the voluptuousness of possibilities -- and find something like that -- ding, de-ding, ding -- is really the greatest reward about the process. Cause then you throw that out and they go... and they reduce all of that to "She was really depressed when she wrote this." First of all, how do you know? I mean you know, because sometimes the psychic state of the artist as described by the press can be so erroneous. Like, you know, way out on a limb. How do they know?*

MICHAEL: Are there any cases you can remember where somebody said you're really depressed when you wrote something and actually you meant it as a cheerful song or something?

JONI MITCHELL: *Oh yeah, I called one girl one time. This girl, she wrote this thing, and she said... I forget what album she was reviewing -- but she had it completely backwards, completely backwards. She said this album was conceived in a certain mental state and this other album was conceived in another mental state, and it was completely backwards. And I called her up and I said, "Don't you think you're going out on an awful limb? Do you ever expect that the person whose psyche you're describing in public with such authority might actually be reading it and thinking how far off... and you're saying it like it's a fact, you know?" Anyway she was in an office with other writers and she hung up the phone after I talked to her and she said to the person next to her, who told me later what she said: "Well anything that takes that much explanation... Obviously she didn't write it clearly enough in the first place." But I just had to call her on it. To say, "nyah." Like, stick to... Look at the words. Bounce your own life off against it. Either it bounces nicely... Say you hate it, but don't say I was in... Write about what you know. All you know is how it strikes against your life. You don't know how it struck against my life. You can't imagine! You could just be so far off base.*

INTERVIEW AUDIO ENDS

SALLY: If Joni ever hears this – which is highly unlikely – I hope she doesn't feel the urge to call you up to tell you how we got it wrong.

MICHAEL: I'd still be happy to hear from her.

SALLY: Maybe you should share your number.

MICHAEL: Nah. With my luck, I'll just hear from 1000 scam artists who want to fix a virus on my computer.

SALLY: Does your computer hold any other stories? Or is that it?

MICHAEL: Come on. You had to know I'd save one more. From our last episode, you MAY remember that Joni was proud of the song called "[Furry Sings The Blues](#)."

SALLY: With the amazing lyrics about the pawn shop.

MICHAEL: Right! This song tells the story of her visit to see a jazz great on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee – which gives background to the song lyric...

AUDIO INTERVIEW STARTS

JONI MITCHELL: *There was such a bizarre incident, anyway. You see this badge? I had been... Starting on Rolling Thunder, just as kind of an exercise to amuse myself, I'd been playing this game with cops, like to beg, borrow, steal a badge off of a cop in every city that we went to. So when I went out on my own tour, I kind of continued the game. And in Memphis I hit on this cop who turned out to be... he'd been the photographer or forensic guy or something on Martin Luther King's case. And he was a real cop. I mean he didn't.... "Yes ma'am." Monotone. A "yes ma'am," monotone kind of guy. But anyways, he kind of liked it when I hit him up for a badge because apparently it's Elvis Presley's town and Elvis used to flirt with the cops there too. And there was something... Inadvertently, I had stumbled onto a tradition. So we made a deal that he would get me a piece of cop paraphernalia in exchange for an autographed record. So we picked him up in the limo the next day and we took him down to this record store. And he was really deadpan. But you could feel sitting next to him that he was getting a kick out of it. So he said that we should really go and see Beale Street since it was a street that was "under consideration." The inner city of Memphis was being destroyed. Ball-and-chain wrecking equipment all around for reconstruction. But when they got into these two blocks on Beale Street, these balls and cranes were suspended, considering whether or not they should destroy it. So in the middle of the inner city, with rubble cleared for blocks all the way around it, like a ghost town, were these three blocks of history, all old from Beale Street in its heyday. These old clapboard buildings. The Daisy. I'd have to think of the song now to...*

MICHAEL: Was there Furry or did you make that up?

JONI MITCHELL: *No, this is all true, the way this went down. I mean, it's hard to capture everything again in the shorthand of a song. So we drive down this, this ghost town. I mean literally a tumbleweed rolls across the street and everything is boarded up. The Old Daisy Theater. It's all clapboarded and all of the side painting is fading out. There are three thriving businesses left in this ghost town. One is a new structure called the Daisy Theater, which had two violent machine gun movies playing. Double bill. "There's a double murder at The New Daisy." The old girl, the Old Daisy across the street has this wooden constructed clamshell entrance, just beautiful woodworking, you know. But it's all boarded up and dilapidated. There's a statue of Handy standing there next to the Daisy Theater and there's two pawnshops. Everything else is a ghost town boarded up. And these two violent movies playing, and two pawn shops. To suck the last few dollars out of the ghetto. And in the window of the shops are all these blue and pink lens, cheap sunglasses and gaudy watches and drum kits and cheap guitars all with their pearly kind of finishes on them. So we get out of the limo and out of this one pawn shop comes this guy with a stogie out of his mouth, just kind of like a stereotype pawnbroker guy in olive green gabardine slacks, a maroon jacket, a navy blue shirt, I think his tie... A dark-colored shirt, his tie was like a royal blue with red squiggles all over it with a stogie out of the side of his mouth, balding, with cowlicks going back. And he says, with his cigar clenched in his teeth, "Joni Mitchell?" And I'm thinking, now how would this guy... aside from the fact that it had to be the limo or something... I can't believe this guy is calling out my name! And I just said to... Oh. The cop has said to me, "You should really go and see Furry Lewis while you're here." "Oh, I'd like to go and see him. How do you go and see him?" "I'm not sure," he says. So we go into this pawn shop. In the back of the room is a younger guy who's assistant to this guy. This is how he knows my name -- who's been to the concert the night before. So I say, "Gee, we'd like to go and see Furry Lewis." He says, "He's a friend of mine, I'll take you up there." The young kid says. He said, "All you have to do is, you have to bring him a fifth of... You have to bring him his favorite booze and his favorite cigarettes." So we went up to visit him, and the song kind of documents what happened. Furry was senile and inadvertently at one point during the visit, I insulted him. Meaning to communicate, which we talked about earlier, to make a connection, I said to him -- you know, he plays in open tunings -- I said, "I play in open tunings too." At which point Furry got really defensive, snarled at me, "I can play in Spanish tuning!" As if people had probably laughed at the amazing quaintness of his discovery. At some point, it had become a symbol to him of his ignorance, and he'd learned to tune his guitar the Spanish way. So he was defensive about it and that was... at that moment, he didn't like me. So like... but how do I get that into the song?*

AUDIO INTERVIEW ENDS

MICHAEL: This just one person's opinion. But I think she did get that story into the song. You can decide for yourself by listening to it. We have a link to the song at throwitoutpodcast.com

SALLY: I'll be clicking there. I'm so glad to hear so many stories from Joni -- without the baloney.

MICHAEL: Me too. I loved hearing Joni's stories again. It made me so happy to relive the time I spent with her.

SALLY: Have you heard anything about how Joni's doing now? I know she had a brain aneurysm. Is she okay now?

MICHAEL: The aneurysm was in 2015, and from what I've read, her recovery has been difficult. I've been pretty worried about her, and I'm sure thousands of people have been worrying the same thing. On the other hand she bounced back from polio as a kid and she seems determined to bounce back from this too. Did you see her on the Grammys this year?

SALLY: I just saw pictures.

MICHAEL: As usual, she looked really cool – and she seemed really happy, she did need a little help to getting across the stage from her physical therapist. But, that seems par for the course. Then there was the MusicCares concert. They named Person of the Year. At that one, she even got on stage and joined a group singing "[Big Yellow Taxi](#)."

SALLY: How much would you pay to have been there for that?

MICHAEL: I'm just happy that I was there in 1985. And now, I will ceremoniously put my interview tapes into my box of treasures. And I think I'm gonna keep that forever. Also, I have in there the advanced cassette of her [Dog Eat Dog](#) album, with Joni's name written on it in her own handwriting. How's the for memorabilia?

SALLY: Whoa

MICHAEL: Yea, I wish this Joni marathon could last. But it's time to move on.

SALLY: Can you give a hint of what awaits in the next episode? Will we go from the sublime to the ridiculous?

MICHAEL: Oh, you ruined the surprise! I have another interview tape here on my desk. Not exactly what I'd call a highlight. In fact, I kind of wish I didn't have to remember it at all. But I reached into a box and I pulled it out and there it was. So I've gotta deal with it. This is the interview I did with Jennifer Beals the year that she starred in [Flashdance](#).

SALLY: (singing) What a feeling!

MICHAEL: Irene Kara would be so happy to hear you sing that. Because you just proved that she's the only one who can really sing it. Anyway, back to Jennifer Beals. She was not at all excited about being interviewed by PEOPLE Magazine. So I picked the worst tactic for trying to change her mind.

SALLY: I can hardly wait to hear it.

MICHAEL: Good, because you don't have much choice. And for those who do have a choice... we hope you'll join us anyway for the next episode of... SALLY?

SALLY: [I Couldn't Throw It Out!](#)

THEME SONG EXCERPT

MICHAEL: Thank you from the bottom of our Joni-lovin' hearts for joining us today. If you're craving more info, I urge you to check out [jonimitchell.com](#). I have no affiliation with the site – I'm just a fan – and I'm tellin' ya, they do a great job. You can also catch up on Joni's best and least-known songs by checking out the list on our website, [throwitoutpodcast.com](#). If you happen to be on Apple Music, we'll give you a link to a playlist where you'll hear it all with no extra effort. SALLY, what else?

SALLY: How 'bout a reminder that you can hear all the present and future episodes of our podcast on our website – [throwitoutpodcast.com](#) – AND you'll ALSO find us wherever you listen to podcasts. Except we're not on Spotify – for the same reasons you've already heard from Neil Young and Joni. If you feel the urge to give us a generous rating on Apple Podcasts, we'd be grateful beyond words.

MICHAEL: Thank you, SALLY! For your efforts, you have earned the right to wallow in our theme song, performed by Boots Kamp, Jen Ayers, and Don Rauf, the leader of our favorite rock band Life In A Blender. You'll find a playlist of their catchiest songs on our website.

SALLY: Okay. I'm overdosing on self-promotion. Are we done?

MICHAEL: We are. And I have three words for ya: See ya Sal!

THEME SONG: I Couldn't Throw It Out

Performed by Don Rauf, Boots Kamp, and Jen Ayers

Music by Boots Kamp and Don Rauf

Lyrics by Don Rauf and MICHAEL: Small

Out here in Nancy's – her big garage
This isn't a mi- This isn't a mirage
Decades of stories, memories stacked
There is a redolence of some irrelevant facts.

But I couldn't throw it out
I have to scream and shout
It all seems so unjust
But still I know I must
Before I turn to dust
I've got to throw it out
Before I turn to dust
I've got to throw it out

Well, I couldn't throw it out
I couldn't throw it out
I'll sort through my possessions
In these painful sessions
I guess this is what it's about
The poems, cards and papers
The moldy musty vapors
I just gotta sort it out.

Well I couldn't throw it out
I couldn't throw it out
I couldn't throw it out
I couldn't throw it out

END OF EPISODE 3

Reviews

Our Theme Song

How We Did It

Coming Up

Share a Story