

BY LIAM LACEY
The Globe and Mail
Toronto

WITH a brisk rap-tap-tap on the door, Joni Mitchell breezes into the hotel suite. She's wrapped in a teal trench coat, looking rather like a well-heeled shopper returning from a long day on the fashion hunt. Her face is drawn and made up, the famous blonde hair falls full to below her shoulders. Sorry, she says, as she settles down on the sofa. She's not quite herself this afternoon.

You see, she usually goes to bed at eight or nine — in the morning. Last night, in an effort to join the daylight crowd, she took a couple of sleeping pills. Her head's still fuzzy. Is there coffee? Good.

She holds up the CD cover of her latest recording, *Turbulent Indigo*, for inspection. The painting on the cover is a copy of Van Gogh's *Self-portrait with Pipe and Bandaged Ear*, the one where the blue cast of his eye is set level with the bloody-red horizon. But the face is not Vincent's, it's Joni's. Her wide-spaced, ice-blue eyes gaze out above the high cheekbones and severe down-turned mouth, the famous art martyr's bandage runs across the right side of her head. In person, her face calls to mind a pre-Columbian carving, not some post-Impressionist masterpiece.

"For the first 10,000 copies, we'll have a little ear that falls out," she says. A girlish peal of laughter follows. Then her face turns sombre again.

"You'd think the ears would be two or three cents each, like Cracker Jack prizes," she says. "But they're about 35 cents each, so we couldn't put them in every copy."

Does Joni Mitchell see herself as a kind of modern Van Gogh? Well, self-importance is certainly a prominent part of her makeup — along with a sense of mischief and the sort of calculation that lets her know exactly where the pennies go. If she has not gone down Van Gogh's path — of poverty, madness and suicide — she has at least made a career of bumping against life's sharp corners and nursing her psychic bruises with a blend of tenderness and resentment.

"A fine artist in a pop medium" is her description of her career, and she obviously is stimulated by the friction. The germ of her new recording comes directly from these collisions between fine and pop tastes. As a "fine" artist, she has followed her own muse, at least since the mid-seventies, often leaving her fans behind in jazzy experiments and synthesizer rock. *Turbulent Indigo*, by contrast, is already being hailed as a return to form, meaning a return to "popular" music, to the music "old" Joni Mitchell fans cherish.

Mitchell belongs in a long-standing American romantic tradition that, from Walt Whitman through the Beats, to Bob Dylan, exalts the individual poet's ego in a highly public way. Indeed, her old friend David Crosby once reportedly said that Joni Mitchell is about as "humble as Mussolini."

Thus, she can say, without a hint of irony: "I fancy I could have been a sort of Mozart, given the right opportunities and training. . . ." Or, "I'm always out of synch. I'm three or four years ahead of my time. It's the imitators who get all the attention."

She tells of a dinner conversation with Georgia O'Keeffe, the painter, in which O'Keeffe said, "I wish I'd been a musician, but I don't suppose you can do two things." And Mitchell replied, "Yes you can," O'Keeffe, Mitchell says, leaned forward and said in surprise, "Really?"

"She was 92 years old," Mitchell reports, "and for the first time she was given permission. I think permission is far more important to an artist than encouragement."

A listener is left nodding awkwardly and wondering at these displays of seeming egotism. Then again, aren't there male rock stars of less talent and greater arrogance whose overweening nature is sometimes pooh-poohed (or praised) as "attitude"? And isn't there a solid case for Mitchell's having a high



Joni Mitchell
in a rare
concert
appearance at
this year's
Edmonton Folk
Music Festival:
'A fine artist in
a pop medium.'

(SUZANNE
AHEARNE/The
Globe and Mail)

IN PERSON / With the imminent release of her newest recording, *Turbulent Indigo*, Canada's brilliant Joni Mitchell takes time to reflect on art, song-writing and the difficulties of being 'three or four years' ahead of her time

The passion of Joni

opinion of herself? Her influence on other musicians, after all, is both widespread and deep: Bob Dylan; Judy Collins; Fairport Convention; Gordon Lightfoot; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, hell, even Nazareth, have sung her songs and she has been the subject of one of the new ubiquitous "tribute" albums. Her songwriting and guitar work have been heralded by players and writers as diverse as Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, Prince, The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde, Suzanne Vega, Tori Amos and Jane Siberry.

The protective ego shell, the habit of constantly cheering herself up with affirmations, may also be a reasonable reaction to having her talent ignored and underrated. She does not yet, for example, rate a separate essay in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock*, although every male artist of approximately equal stature (not to mention doo-wop, bubble-gum and The Beatles' solo albums) does.

She has been the victim of some particularly nasty sexism at the hands of the rock press, especially in the early seventies, when Rolling Stone ran a chart of all her supposed lovers and declared her the "old lady of rock and roll." (Before an interview, a reporter must sign an improbable agreement: "The interview you will conduct is to remain of a

musical nature and is not to include any questions regarding Joni Mitchell's personal life, past or present.")

For the record, Mitchell recently separated from her husband, the producer and bassist Larry Klein, and has been seen in the company of Don Freed, a singer-songwriter from Saskatoon. Before Klein, Mitchell had involvements, variously, with jazz drummers John Guerin and

Don Alias as well as singers James Taylor and Graham Nash, among others.)

Yet somehow, resolutely led by her muse or ambition, Mitchell has prevailed in a male-worshipping world with her ego more than intact.

And sometimes the clashes between Joni Mitchell's large sense of self and the world's edges cause creative sparks. In the spring of 1991,

Mitchell was invited to her hometown of Saskatoon to deliver the keynote address to the Canadian Conference of the Arts symposium on Arts in Education. The title of the conference, chosen with self-conscious irony, was Educating Van Gogh. The conference was held in the cradle of North American socialism, attended by teachers and administrators who regarded arts edu-

cation as social engineering.

Joni Mitchell, the self-regarding chronicler of the so-called Me generation, was an inspired choice. She spoke without notes — and, unsurprisingly, out of her own experience. Perhaps with Van Gogh's example in mind, she suggested "discouragement" might actually help artists. If exposure to the arts were all that mattered, then Florence would be full of artists. As inadequate as her education was, she said, she thought it was probably as good as it could have been.

Some delegates at the conference found her views refreshingly provocative; others treated them as about as welcome as a hailstorm at harvest time. A few walked out, then spoke bitterly to the press the next day about the pampered pop star and her "stream-of-consciousness" ramblings.

Mitchell, who had been generous with her time and praise for her hometown, felt betrayed.

"What did they want?" she asks in exasperation. "Was I supposed to clear my throat and shake my jowls like John Diefenbaker? Of course, art has to come from emotional disturbance. The ignorant demand that we all conform, but the truth is, we're all mad . . . as long as this thing called 'I' is still ranting."

Please see MITCHELL — C8

Mitchell prevails in male-worshipping world with ego intact

• From Page C1

"Why would they bring me there as an authority and then walk out on me because I was not qualified?"

She saved her response to this perceived indignity for the new record, to be officially released on Tuesday. There's no mistaking the source of the title song, *Turbulent Indigo*, or its sarcasm: "You wanna make Van Goghs/ dress them up like sheep/make 'em out of Eskimos and then if you please make 'em nice and normal. ... What do you know about living in Turbulent Indigo?"

The "turbulent indigo" refers to the raging sky above the wheat field in one of Van Gogh's final paintings, akin to what she calls the "necessary chaos you need to begin creating."

Her fascination with Van Gogh is long-standing (on her *Miles of Aisles* live album from 1974, she chastizes the audience for screaming for her hits, saying that no one ever told Van Gogh to paint another *Starry Night*). You hear resonances of it when she talks about her own career as "a misfit," as someone "ahead of my time" and "misunderstood." At the same time, don't read her work as strictly autobiographical.

"Poets who last must write in their own blood, or their writing is bloodless," she says. "But it's impersonal and personal at the same

time. It's certainly not 'confessional,' which is such an odd word to use and always seems to get pinned on me."

Why is the misunderstanding so persistent with her work, you ask. As usual, Mitchell is not at a loss for words. She quotes Friedrich Nietzsche from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, on the falseness of poets, who "muddy the waters to appear deep."

"That's something I try not to do. The Canadian culture in which I was raised, with its British base, is very emotionally detached. To speak clearly is somehow seen as equivalent to talking your clothes off in public. In the pop world, it's another thing. In that culture of posers — Michael Jackson singing *I'm Bad*, for example — to tell a human tale, instead of serving the pop machinery, is upsetting to people."

Contrary to the image of her as a poet of loneliness, Roberta Joan Anderson, — born almost 51 years ago (on Nov. 7) in Fort McLeod,

Alta. — considers herself a "fundamentally happy person." Her parents, with whom she maintains a warm relationship, met during the war (the story of their romance is told in the wistful song, *The Tea Leaf Prophecy* (Lay Down Your Arms) on 1988's *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*).

Her childhood was blemished by only her family's frequent moves and then, at nine, when she was struck by polio. These notes of dissonance to her life, she has said, are reflected in the dissonant chord voicings in her music. That early "brush with death" also made impatient with society's obsession with differences and hierarchies.

Her passions were rock music — listened to late at night from Texas radio stations sending their signals high and wide into the northern sky — and painting, an important discipline in late fifties and early sixties Saskatoon. At nearby Emma Lake, an internationally renowned summer art school was founded where Clement Greenberg, the noted New York critic, praised Saskatchewan painters as the world's best outside of New York City.

Mitchell had hoped to study with Ernest Lindner — a painter and teacher who had first helped draw Greenberg's attention to Saskatchewan — but by the time year Mitchell finished high school, Lindner was on sabbatical. She enrolled at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary, where she says colour field painting and abstraction had taken over.

She was "one of about four students of 150 who had the eye-hand co-ordination to draw well," which she says was a stigma; she was told she was too commercial. She is still irked by the fashionable orthodoxies that rule art education. "I go to the institutes around Los Angeles. It's the same story. The hip always come in herds."

Frustrated, she turned to folk music, with the ukelele, and then the guitar. First came gigs at The

Depression Coffeehouse in Calgary, then a visit to Toronto in 1964 and a brief marriage to a folksinger, Chuck Mitchell, with whom she moved to Detroit. By 1967, divorced and working solo, Mitchell moved to New York City and signed her first record deal. In the next three years she became responsible for a series of songs — *The Circle Game*, *Chelsea Morning*, *Both Sides Now*, *Woodstock* and *Big Yellow Taxi* — that helped define the giddy, twirling, expansiveness of the late sixties. The Joni Mitchell cult was well under way.

Critic Timothy White, a longtime Joni Mitchell champion, has already declared *Turbulent Indigo* "a Blue for the nineties." Released 23 years ago, *Blue* marked the beginning of her most intense "confessional" period. She also began to shed the folk/pop lightness for more sophistication, with longer melody lines, more ambitious lyrics and complex harmonies.

Blue was an attempt, Mitchell subsequently said, to change the momentum of her career. By doing the distinctly un-pop star move of advertising her own loneliness, regret and anger, she sought to undermine the worshipful following that had begun building around her. She became the quintessential "singer-songwriter," charting her personal growth over a series of albums, "living on nerves and feelings," as she wrote in one song. Paradoxically, *Blue* sold well and

remains one of her best-loved recordings. Indeed, if you feel the need for a good cry, *Blue* delivers.

In her early years, she had been intimidated by trained musicians. By the mid-seventies, she considered them her peers.

Crafting her own brand of jazz rock, she hired and worked with some of the best jazz and fusion players in the business, including Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny and the late Jaco Pastorius. The notoriously difficult jazz artist Charles Mingus became her friend. Not surprisingly, musical, rather than lyrical, exploration became her focus, and many of the fans were left behind. In 1982, Mitchell married again and began to pursue her painting more seriously.

There were only three Mitchell albums in the eighties. Hampering her output was a tax battle with the U.S. government, which claimed

back taxes representing 15 per cent of the millions she had earned between 1970 and 1977. She remains convinced that Ronald Reagan's government was deliberately persecuting counterculture figures, just as Richard Nixon's administration did in the early seventies. Her most political album, *Dog Eat Dog* (1985), was a direct result of her anger with Washington.

She pulled through in good financial shape. Mitchell is by no means naive about the world of business. She is proud of the fact that even in the heyday of coffee houses and crash pads, she maintained a pleasant apartment and kept a bank account. Significantly,



she was one of the few major pop artists who never surrendered the publishing rights to her own songs, despite record company blandishments and arm-twisting. She also

took creative control of the look of her recordings' packages, often featuring her own paintings on the covers. Twenty-five years since she first came to public attention, Joni Mitchell remains very much her own woman.

Turbulent Indigo truly does have the sound of Joni Mitchell's music from more than 20 years ago. There is the propulsively strummed guitar, the catchy melodies, the carefully composed lyrical vignettes. But these are not the songs of a young woman, or even love songs in any romantic sense. Mitchell's characters carry on, to use Robert Frost's words, a "lover's quarrel with the world." In *A Sunny Sunday*, a woman sits in her home, shooting at the street light outside to help her decide her future. The day she hits it is the day

she leaves. Another woman, in *The Magdalena Laundry*, laments her stay in a home for unwed mothers. Mitchell sees the album as "portraits of women in various degrees of dissatisfaction, or impending change in their lives."

In *The Sire of Sorrow* (*Job's Sad Song*), Mitchell uses words taken directly from several translations of the Book of Job "sung in a woman's voice, which I don't think hurts it."

"Some people think the song is about me," she observes. "Then I tell them God wrote it. It's extraordinary how people assume that the narrator of a song is really me. A journalist told me the other day that *Raised on Robbery* was the beginning of the acknowledgement of my sexuality. I was astonished. The song is a kind of musical play, song about an Indian hooker coming on to a guy in the Empire Hotel. I can assure you, that is not how I pick up my men."

"The songs, I believe, have a function in the world. You know, I love to dance and escape as much as anyone does, but you have the choice of either escaping or confronting things in your life. I'm the only songwriter among my peers who hasn't dried up, so I guess I've still got something to solve or prove. Most of the men I know are in it for the money or women, and if those are your motivations, you cannot last."

She pauses. "You know, I live a peculiar life. I hear funny things from people."

Two girls I met once said something wonderful to me. They said: 'Before Prozac, there was you.' So perhaps it's a case of misery loves company. Then there was a blind black piano player who gave me one of my favourite compliments. He said my songs are 'raceless, genderless statements.' All my optimism goes toward bringing down these lines of difference between people."

Yet another time, she recalls, a young man approached her and told her that she was his girlfriend's favourite songwriter. "How does it feel," he asked her, "to be the world's greatest female songwriter?"

She levels her piercing blue-eyed stare to see if the qualification has registered.

"I don't think he really understood," she says, "why I didn't feel flattered."

