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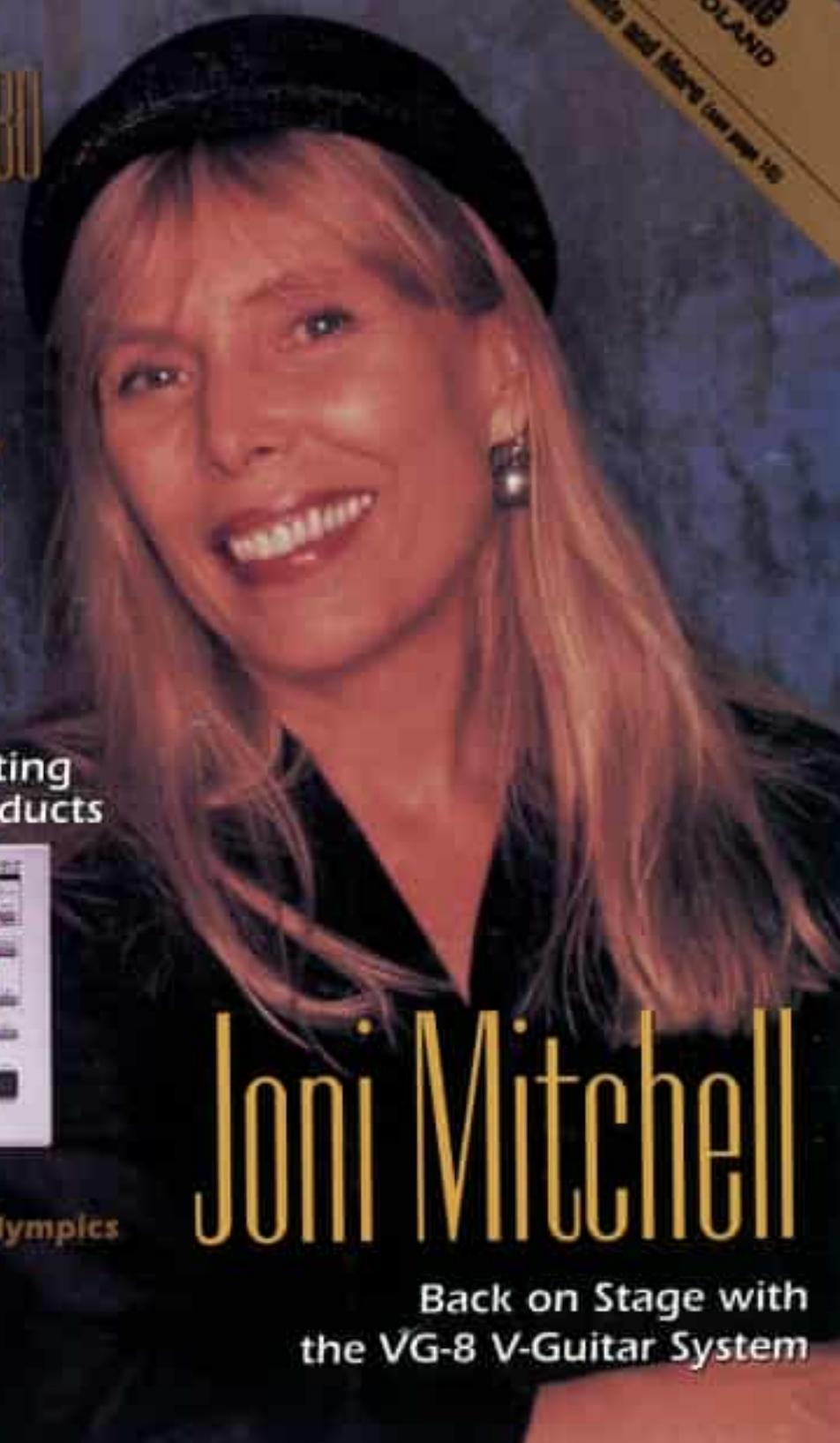
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Joni Mitchell

Back on Stage with
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FEATURES

What Did You Do With Your VS-880 Today? **36**by *Kenneth Peters*

Roland's VS-880 Digital Studio Workstation has been in the hands of musicians for a little while now. What are they doing with it? Matthew Sweet, 311's Chad Sexton and engineer Macasia Ryan give us a hint. And in case you were "Wondering" who got the very first VS-880, we'll clue you in.

Joni Mitchell - Out of the Quicksand **40**by *Conner Freff Cochran*

Joni Mitchell nearly left the music business for good. Here she discusses what led her to that decision and how the Roland VG-8 V-Guitar System gave her music new life.

The Roland Electronic Percussion Store **46**

We've got kits, expansion options, accessories and just about anything else you would need for creating an electronic or acoustic/electronic hybrid drum kit. Check it out.



Roland Users Group magazine - V14/N2

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Publisher: Dennis Houlihan

Editor: Lachlan Westfall

Associate Editors: Chris Bristol and Paul Youngblood

Copy Editor: Erik Hanson

Art Direction/illustrations/Layout: West Desktop Graphics • Progress: ABACUS Printing & Digital Graphics, Inc.

Production Manager: Jo Corners

Production Assistant: Gia McClatchey

Additional Editorial and Production Coordination: Kellie Wilkie

Design Contributor: Mark Holley

Editorial Contributors: Steve Fisher, Tim Pederson, Stephanie Westfall

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JONI MITCHELL

OUT OF THE QUICKSAND

BY
CONNOR FREY COCHRAN

Make no mistake: we
came *that* close
to losing her.

After 27 years and
17 albums
(153 recorded songs
plus live versions),
a supremely discontented
Joni Mitchell was
on her way out the
music biz door...

"And with a lot of good reasons!" she says, now able to laugh about it. "I was up to my neck in alligators, so to speak. I was in a losing fight with a business that basically, you know, was treating me like an also-ran or a has-been, even though I was still doing good work. So I was frustrated. Okay, I thought, it's time to get out, this is no longer dignified. Everything about the business disgusted me; I just wanted to paint. Painting is where I started, and it was time to return. My gift was beginning to come in that department. I had hundreds of ideas... so the time was the time."

Things were so bad that she actually called up the producers of *Northern Exposure*, a show she adored, and proposed that they cast her for a guest appearance based on this storyline: *Joni Mitchell has quit show business, left all that L.A. craziness behind, and is driving through Cicely, Alaska, on her way to something better.*

Cut to the happy ending. Fortunately for the music-lovers of the world, things didn't turn out that way. With literally just a few days to spare, a bit of magic in the form of the Roland VG-B V-Guitar System made her change her mind.

This is not an outrageous statement. Consider this simple fact: Joni Mitchell's approach to the guitar isn't like anybody else's on the planet. Whereas most people are content to play in standard tuning, and a few brave souls venture into the occasional open D or E, at last count Joni's song list comprised 51 different tunings. 51! This is an extraordinary diversity of chordal structure and color... but it doesn't exactly make for an easy show. One of the big reasons Joni stopped touring in 1983 was that it had simply become impractical to either (A) change tunings between every song, or (B) carry enough

guitars and hire enough techs to handle it all backstage.

"My love of music was seriously impaired by this trap that I'd built for myself, which was that for compositional purposes I'd invent tunings. I'd tune to the numbers in a date, I'd tune to a piece of music that I liked on the radio, I'd tune to birdsongs and the landscape I was sitting in... all of which is great for composition, but *terrible* for performance. I'd work out these wonderful fresh harmonic movements, only it was a pain in the butt to perform and I felt like I was always out of tune. You kill the neck on a guitar in no time at all from changing the tension all the time."

So with the recording side of the business turning into quicksand, and the performing side of the business technically infeasible, what's a woman to do but put down the guitar, unpack the paints, turps and canvases, and get ready to say goodbye? That's exactly what Joni planned to do: one farewell set at the 1995 New Orleans Jazz Festival, and then on to better things.

Enter Fred Walecki of L.A.'s Westwood Music and the VG-B. Fred has been a fan, a true friend, and a supplier of fine guitars to Joni since she first hit LA thirty years ago. He was well aware of the problems she was facing... and a possible solution.

He called Roland and...

Nah. You don't want to hear *me* tell it. Let the poet speak for herself, as recorded at the Daily Grille in Brentwood over a meal of cappuccino, cranberry juice, minestrone soup, tuna melt, whole grain bread, shoestring potatoes, and two orders of fruit to go (hold the watermelon, add bananas).

JM: I think it was two summers ago that Crosby and Nash wanted me to tour with them. We went to dinner and then back to the studio where they were recording, and Graham Nash came up to me and said "Look, luv, I have this computer guitar and I've got 200 tunings in it." It had this computer screen on the side and he took this mouse and he went *zip* and up on the screen it said "Just Like This Train" [a song of Joni's from *Cover and Spark* which is in her "California Kitchen tuning" of CGDFCE]. Graham held this guitar under my nose, then pulled it away and said "When they make it for acoustic guitars, luv, I'm going to get you one." And then he walked off with it! So I went to Freddie and said "Freddie, I'm ready to join the computer age."

RUG: Graham's guitar was a custom-made prototype, though, wasn't it—an instrument made out of "unobtainium."

JM: Wouldn't you know it? But one week before my swan song in New Orleans, Freddie calls me up and tells me he's built up a prototype electric guitar for me, a modified Stratocaster with body work that he thought I would like—which I did, very much—and hooked it up to this Roland thing I'd never heard of called a VG-8. According to him it promised not only to hold all my tunings, but to give me access to all kinds of possibilities in keeping with the way I hear guitar, which is like a full orchestra, with the treble like a brass section and the lower strings like the viola, cello, and bass.

Joni Mitchell

Anyway, I went over the Sunday before the gig to see this thing demonstrated, and they started pitching me on what it could do. They put it into a kind of Strat sound, that's where we began, and I said "Okay, that's one." And they said "But, but..." See, they were trying to tell me all the things it could do, but I didn't want to know. I just wanted what I needed out of it—a couple of good sounds and a way out of tuning hell. I said "I'm going to play it next Sunday" and they said "What! You're going to play it next Sunday!?! So and so has it, and so and so has it, and they've been woodshedding for awhile." I said: "Next Sunday is my last gig. I'm going out with a bang. You know?"

RUG: And did you?

JM: *[laughs]* I met a man at the airport the day after the show who told me that he was holding people back in the audience, telling them "Oh no, really, she does things like this." Cause I started with "Sex Kills" [from *Turbulent Indigo*], playing this diabolical kind of Jimi-Hendrix/fuzztone sound, just for the hell of it, and I think a lot of people were quite annoyed.

RUG: Well, it was a jazz festival...

JM: Little Feat was on before me, actually. And it was arranged that I was going to use their sound guy, who had done his homework about the VG-8, because there wasn't going to be time for a soundcheck. Only he got

beat up the night before the gig! He was in the French Quarter and came out of a building, saw a guy beaten nearly to death with the assailant running off down the block, and he bent over to help the guy—only while he was kneeling over, the assailant came back and smashed his head in. So he went into the hospital instead of doing the show, and when I hit the stage...well, to make it short, I didn't start off with the bang or the mystery I'd intended. But it was exciting playing the VG-8! I got ten songs into the set without a tuning problem, which for me was heaven. And since the thing is in standard tuning, I had normal guitar player tuning problems, rather than the radical ones I typically have. The biggest problem was that I had these really wide, ducky shoes on, and I hit the footpedal to go into the tuning thing but went into the brain instead... so I was hollering to the boys in the wings, but they didn't know it. None of us knew it, not yet. But we got through, and some people were critical and some people were enthralled.

RUG: Listening to you, it sounds like you came back to life.

JM: It turned into the first performance in a whole new period. It's really fresh music that I'm making on this thing. Some of the stock sounds I've not heard anything like, and then when I put it into my tunings, which are unorthodox anyway...

RUG: Is anything a standout for you?

JM: I really like the brass sounds. Two of them in particular really translate well to my style of playing. It all comes down to that. For instance, I love the sound of a Les Paul. But it does not suit my style of playing at all. Other sounds do. The ripride created by passing chords works with certain sounds and not with others. But the VG-8 has got this enormous palette of sweetening colors... I prefer overdubbing with it to synth keyboard stuff, absolutely, because of the bending and everything. I never could work a portamento correctly, to get that loose bit of grease in there.

RUG: It's a rare keyboard player who can.

JM: But with the VG-8 it's right under your finger *[makes string bending noise]*. You know? Stacking brass now as a guitarist, I can bend the horns and they sound more like it's a natural lip doing it. They don't sound "synthy" to me—the brass sounds that are coming off this guitar... so I'm completely in love with it.

RUG: You're busy recording right now?

JM: Around the same time as the New Orleans gig, [producer] Daniel Lariot came to me and said "I've

found your drummer." So I've been working with this kid, Brian Blade, who really is my drummer for this leg of my music, absolutely. We're cutting a new album, just him and I. No bass. The tunings I'm using on the VG-8 have so much bottom on them they're into the mid-range of the bass, so they cover that.

RUG: Fred Walecki told me your new stuff sounded like "*Turbulent Indigo* on steroids."

JM: It sounds orchestral. People have been calling me a folk singer all these years, but I don't think they are hearing the harmonic form of these things I write. The way I've got the VG-8 set up, I've got my treble to the right and my bass to the left. So it is very sectiony. Listening to it I can hear exactly why bass players either frustrated me or thrilled me. Because the eccentricities of the bottom end of my music are now isolated, and they are answered

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by the horns over to the other side. With that separation I've been able to understand why I kept saying "No, no, you're making a picket fence out of the music!" Why do bass players have to come in and stay in? Symphonies aren't like that.

RUG: How are you proceeding?

JM: The first thing I cut was with a kind of a funny sound, a marimba-ish, hammer-percussive-cylophone-laughy-wood sound from a program called Rolling Mallets. The tune is a shuffle. It's about this black musical revue at the end of the mile-long midway that used to come to my town—my very first experience of music laid way back on the beat. Swinging, you know? But modularly it builds into other things. Now it's called "Harlem In Havana," but before we had a text for it we called it "Zulu Tango," because it was basically just mallets and a marimba kind of sound through the body of the thing, but then there are these areas that widen up into these swung sections. Kind of like you're driving along and you go into a city and then back out into the country and then into another city and back into the country: urban, African rural, urban, African rural... it's got a kind of folk structure to the A section and I don't know what you'd call it—big band, probably—through the C.

RUG: You talked about this song not having a text. How do you start? Are you coming from the sounds?

JM: All of the colors are in standard tuning. I wrote my first song in standard tuning decades ago ["Tin Angel" on 1969's *Cloud*] and then I left it. So this piece, "Harlem In Havana," is my second song in standard tuning. I wanted to get into those colors in the VG-8 [which at that time were only available in standard tuning; that has now changed] so I came up with this shuffle in standard tuning, but because I'd never played in standard tuning, really, it doesn't sound like standard tuning. It sounds like an open tuning.

RUG: This is your second song in standard tuning?

JM: Yeah.

RUG: How does it feel to be repeating yourself at this stage? Is this traumatic for you? Seriously, though, how have you kept track of all your different tunings?

JM: I didn't. I lost a lot of it at a certain point and I called Joel Bernstein [her long-time guitar tech] because I couldn't remember how I did them. Now I keep them organized by number. Like,

standard tuning is 55545 and you know that there is an E on the bottom. Most of these tunings, because my voice is getting lower and lower, have either a C or a B on the bottom. And one has an A, I think. So then, knowing what the bass string is, I can figure it from there if I know a tuning is structured as, say, 77325.

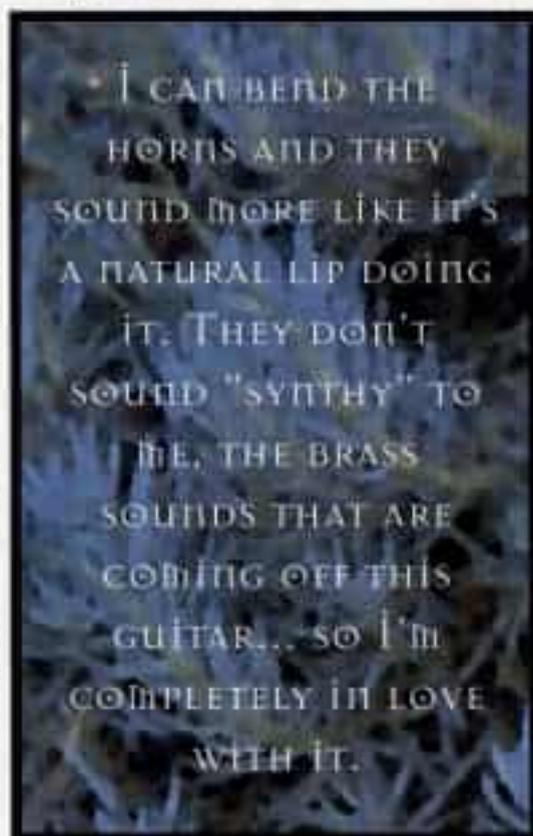
RUG: Another thing Fred Wulecki told me is that he once asked you about a particular tuning and you told him it was the first six notes of "Starlight Gets In Your Eyes."

JM: It was. I used to go over to David Crosby's place and play his guitar, putting it into one of my tunings, and then he'd pick it up and say "Oh, the Martians have been here."

RUG: You've come back to life as a musician in a very significant way. Is the VG-8 really that big a part of it?

JM: It's a major part of it, for the sounds and because it eliminates the tonality problems. Freddie thinks I have perfect pitch. I don't. I think I have intermittent perfect pitch. I have spells of it. Which is horrible, because there are no perfect tones out there and you get driven crazy by the undulations. I'll go put my heroes on—I'll play Miles, and his pitch is all over the place. When I have these problems where I become pitch sensitive, I can't get things in tune. Some people can't hear it. When that happens it's kind of like you're going crazy and you're doing it alone. On *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* there is a track called "Paprika Plains." The year before that album was done I was really ill. I was in bed for a year. And as I got well I called up the engineer that I worked with, and I said "Henry, I'm playing the piano better than I should be. I can't hit

a wrong chord. We've got to go into the studio and capture it." I told myself that C was the mother key, and I'd get a little figure going and wander off, and when I got back down around C again I'd resolve into this figure and then I'd wander off yet again... and in the wandering, even dissonance sounded good. Hit it twice, three times, make it part of the music. This was done at the end of January. In August of the same year I wrote the song, and we inserted this improvised and recomposed section into the middle of it. Jaco Pastorius suggested this arranger from the Berklee School of Music, whose name escapes me now, and he wrote some strings for it which we recorded in this church in uptown Manhattan. At the date I was going crazy because the strings began and ended over piano parts I recorded in August, but they sailed across the piano parts I recorded in January—and in between January and August that piano was tuned several times and it just wasn't quite the same. This meant the strings went out of tune as



JONI MITCHELL

they sailed across the splice point. I told the arranger we had to take a slight space there so the drones wouldn't pull apart... and nobody but me in the session could hear it. Nobody! Time goes by. The record comes out. Still nobody can hear it, but I go crazy every time I play the track. Finally Charles Mingus is dying, he sends for me to work on what became the *Mingus* project, and I go to visit him. I go up maybe 40 floors to get to his apartment. I'm meeting this man for the first time, and he's in a wheelchair with his back to me. Then the wheelchair comes around and almost the first thing out of his mouth is "The strings on 'Paprika Plains'—they're out of tune." And I said "Yes! Thank you very much, they are!" [laughter]

RUG: *Mingus* was a brave and brilliant album, but it cost you.

JM: It was a terrible career move. I was warned that it was a terrible career move, too. My management was able to foresee that. I could not believe that, so I proceeded anyway. I just couldn't believe that I was going to be excommunicated, which is what happened. I was basically viewed as a traitor.

RUG: Nobody who thought they "got" you could get it, at the time. The boundaries were higher then. Jazz was jazz, rock was rock, folk was folk... and you were supposed to be a "folkinger."

JM: Charles called to me from his death bed and I just had to do that, for my own education in music. Back then I didn't even like Charles's music. It was blues-based, and I wasn't into the blues. And it was cacophonous. I became a fan, of course, but there were a lot of jazz guys saying "Hey, you don't even like his music. Why'd he send for you?" But I really liked *how* so much. I liked him the moment I met him. The moment he heard that out-of-tuneness. And he was so wry and mischievous. I loved his personality and his glowering and the whole emotional spectrum that he had. I really enjoyed the time that I knew him, which was brief. So it was absolutely the right thing to do in the long run. But... I lost my airplay for how many years? Nearly 20. From 1977 until I finally got back on the airwaves for *Turbulent Indigo*.

RUG: Are you producing the new album yourself?

JM: Well I always have. I did thirteen albums without a producer. I didn't even put a producer on there, so everybody assumed it was my engineer. But if you have a good engineer, it's like he's your print-puller. I'm a painter—no one's going to be putting strokes on my canvas that I don't want there. *Dog Eat Dog* is really the only exception, and that was a difficult project in that I had a new husband who was young and ambitious and a new engineer who was young and ambitious and Thomas Dolby, who was supposed to set up colors—but behind my back had been given the position of producer by my manager—who then became a tyrant... that was a very difficult record to make. I can't even really tell myself what I played, looking back. The sounds... like I say, they weren't necessarily of my choosing. The one that I wanted was always three twiddles back. There were three male egos, young and scared to be unhip. You can't be scared to be unhip. Hip is a *herd* mentality.

RUG: Which is anything but the way you make music.

JM: I knew very young that hip was a herd mentality. That it was something mutually-agreed upon and fairly safe, but not imaginative, necessarily, or explorative. That's been my whole battle. When Jaco Pastorius came along I was trying to make a Jaco out of local bass players, and they were telling me that I was unhip. "Change your strings!" Nope, nope, no. Hip was to have dead strings. Just like it was hip to go with the dead kick drum. I tried and tried to get the pillow out of the kick drum so I'd have a nice big flappy sound. On the new record Brian Blade is playing this thing called Big Bertha on the bottom; it's a marching drum. Killer! Brian, ironically, is closer to Krupa, where my love lies. All of that dead '60s stuff... I just don't like that

sound. I like bass sounds like old upright acoustic basses. The swimming pools in my hometown had jukebones, and four blocks away the bass is all you could hear. But in the '60s, when I started making my music, the whole rhythm section was telescoped into the back of the mix.

RUG: That's the "pasteurized rock" thing. You're supposed to rock 'em, but not too hard.

JM: Yeah! [makes thudding drum sound] What kind of a dance move can you do to that? It's too tight! All this "rock and roll will never die..." I mean, rock and roll died so many years ago. I crack up when I hear these rock guys going [dimmed voice] "rock and roll will never die, maaaan"... 'cause the roll went out of it [a long time ago]. There was that little shoulder thing left over from the swing era in Chuck Berry, and even though it was starting to funky- and

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vertical-up a little bit, it still was rolling. But after that?

RUG: You mentioned Jaco. You and he figure prominently in the history of another Roland product, the Jazz-Chorus amp.

JM: When I got my first electric guitar my style of playing didn't translate that well to it. I tended to slap the strings, which reads well on an acoustic but didn't read well on an electric. It just made a little electronic bloop, almost like an engineer's edit error. So to get a wide enough swath I doubled my electric parts when I recorded my album *Hojira*, but I didn't double them carefully 'cause I was listening to Miles Davis's *Nefertiti* at the time, and there's a place where Wayne Shorter and Miles start out playing in unison and then they drift like a silk-screen. It's just beautiful; they get a little off with each other, but it doesn't tangle, ever. But I couldn't get the same sound when I was performing. And there were only a few footpedals available at the time. There was the orange one and the blue one and the green one... so I went to Freddie and asked "can they come up with anything to make a guitar sound like two guitars?" Freddie went to Roland and pretty soon they came up with a prototype amp for me that did just that.

RUG: This was in the mid-'70s.

JM: The first gig I took it to was a rally of some kind, just a couple of weeks before I performed in the Band concert that was filmed for *The Last Waltz*. I was in the back room and I had my new amp that I was so excited over because it did exactly what I needed it to do, and Jaco comes in. "What's that?" he asked. "That's my new amp." He unplugs me, plugs his bass in, and goes "Oh wow, this is what I've been dreaming of." Then he points at his own amp and says, in his gentle voice, "I'm not playing through that piece of junk; I'm playing through *this*." And he would not back down. This is what killed Jaco, really. He was just the most willful creature. He would not bend. Jaco later had the nerve to say to me "Joni, you know you really have to take more control of your sessions." I said, "Easy for you to say!"

RUG: Control is what it's all about sometimes, though. You had some rough years in there. All those alligators.

JM: Yeah, I guess. It's hard to think of it now. Even my gardens were dying. The '80s were particularly difficult for me, between illness and greed. Everybody close up on me betrayed me for money. Everybody. There was not an exception. From the government of California to my bank, everyone robbed me. My business manager. My personal manager. My housekeeper! So I

got to look at a pretty bleak pocket of human nature. But I don't want to get into the "Poor Joni" thing because I'm quite happy as a person. Also, in all fairness, travail in a lifetime, in retrospect, is an opportunity. It tempers you. The harder the better, I say, because this time I'm going through a good pocket and so I'm able to appreciate all of the phoenixes that rose out of all the travail I went through. For one thing, all of that ugliness woke me up politically. Is that such a good thing? I don't know. Up until then I was more interested in matters of spirit—that is to say the whole range of human nature—then I was in politics. I was appallingly out of it. You wouldn't believe how out of it I was. I just was not interested in worldly things for quite a long time. So there was some maturation, some adult-making that came out of a lot of that battering, so to speak.

RUG: But you moved out of that.

JM: Finally I got so low I did a mock portrait of myself with my ear cut off, like Van Gogh [see the cover of *Turbulent Indigo*] and set the story of Job to music. I exorcised a lot of my grief in the last couple of projects.

RUG: It paid off. After the VG-8 helped you decide to stick around the music business a while longer, things really started to shift. You even won two Grammy Awards, one for art direction and design, the other for best pop album of the year.

JM: Those were not lonely wins. In both cases, I got to stand up there with a dear friend, Robbie Cavolina and I got to go up for the design, and [ex-husband and bassist Larry] Klein and I got to go up together for the music. It was sweet to have companions up there. Winning is lonely and isolating, unless you like envy—and I don't. It's

like the evil eye.

RUG: Still, it's great to see you once more getting the airplay and recognition you deserve.

JM: It was exciting. It was a good record, we were proud of it, we were proud of ourselves as people... I was so giddy I didn't see the show. ❧

Connor Freff Cochran is a long-time music journalist and serious Joni Mitchell fan. Over the years he has been a consultant to various music technology companies, a BBC television science reporter, a comic book and magazine illustrator and a graduate of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College. Lately he has focused his creative energies on writing screenplays and recording new songs.