NEW YORK

FEBRUARY 9–22, 2015

SPRING

FASHION

BY *Amy Larocca*

FEATURING

Joni Mitchell

THIS SEASON'S MUSE

AND

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RESURGENT: *Sienna Miller*
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The SPRING FASHION ISSUE 2015

Sienna Miller, page 137.

Photograph by Christopher Anderson

MAGNUM PHOTOS/NEW YORK MAGAZINE

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INTELLIGENCER

ON THE COVER: *Joni Mitchell. Photograph by Norman Jean Roy for New York Magazine. Dress by Lanvin. Necklace by Elsa Peretti for Tiffany & Co.*

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ON THE COVER: STYLING BY SIMON ROBINS/CLM; HAIR BY TONY CHAVEZ FOR SHOW BEAUTY AT TRACEYMATTINGLY; MAKEUP BY DEBRA FERULLO USING KEVYN AUCOIN AT TRACEYMATTINGLY.

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Issey Miyake coat, her own. Necklace by Elsa Peretti for Tiffany & Co.

JO

Singer, muse, implacable autobiographer.

BY Carl Swanson

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Norman
Jean Roy

ni

MITCHELL, UNYIELDING

XACTEMENT," says Joni Mitchell, happy that, after several hours of conversation and half a pack of cigarettes, I get it—at least this point anyway. "All my battles were with male egos," she says. "I'm just looking for equality, not to dominate. But I want to be able to control my vision. There are those moments when I wax feminine and I get walked on."

We'd been talking about record executives, and exes, and fussy by-the-book musicians who wouldn't do what she wanted. "Basically, at this time, I'm trying to fix my legacy. It's been butchered. It's been panned, and scanned, and colorized." To her several-million-strong crowd of fans, that might seem a strange notion. But exactly how she is celebrated is of special importance to her. To hear her tell it, most of her life has been spent in a state of revolt against other people's nonsensical ideas about how she should think or dress, what she should believe, and how she should play music. She mentions the guy her record company sent not long ago—"the burglar," she calls him—to root around her storage unit to cobble together a boxed set she calls a "turd," which she eventually got killed. She started the process over herself, the result being the booklike package sitting on the table between us: four discs, 53 songs, a thematically and not chronologically arranged memoir in music and words, exactly four hours long, called *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, a Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced.* It would be one long dance.

Mitchell was never at the top of the pops, exactly, yet her music, and some idea or memory of her, has endured. It can be difficult to be someone so famous—and so famously beautiful—and not feel the pressure of the sediment of time, to not be trapped in the amber of cultural memory. But her defiant relationship to her fame, her unwillingness to allow herself to be defined or even fully claimed by others, is precisely what has made her such a talismanic figure for so many, and for so long. Taylor Swift recently wanted to play her in a movie. (Mitchell says she put a stop to that: "I've never heard Taylor's music. I've seen her. Physically, she looks similarly small hipped and high cheekbones. I can see why they cast her. I don't know what her music sounds like, but I do know this—that if she's going to sing and play me, good luck.") Los Angeles's Hammer Museum honored her in the fall. (When they approached her, she said, "Look, let's lay our cards on the table. Really, you want to say a few nice things to me, but it's bait to get rich people to open their wallets for the museum. So I will do this for you. It's not that you're doing this for me. I will do this for you.") And, most recently, Hedi Slimane has made her one of the iconic faces of his spring campaign for Saint Laurent Paris, naming her a muse, alongside Kim Gordon, Marilyn Manson, and Marianne Faithfull, and photographing her wearing a floppy hat and a leather cape and holding a guitar, as if she still had that angelic three-octave range and it were still, and would always be for her, 1971. To judge by the rest of the fashion world this season, it just might be.

Not that she was an easy fashion idol even then. Ethereal blonde hippie goddesses were apparently expected to be more pliable in the '70s, and fashion darlings more mannequinlike. David Crosby once said that "Joni's about as humble as Mussolini," and Bob Dylan, with whom she had a complicated artistic rivalry, said she was "kind of like a man." Warren Beatty said she dressed like a senator's wife. (Though she tells me that Beatty "couldn't pull me and it pulled him into psychiatry. Because he was used to his pleasure.") "And Leonard Cohen said I dressed like a debutante," Mitchell says. "When I went out of the hippie thing, I started wearing Yves Saint Laurent, some more expensive clothes, I guess you'd have to say—still very casual, the way I wore them, since I wore them my own way. And Warren, who was going with Julie Christie at the time, said that my purse, which was Chanel, one of those quilted bags—a nice design. Julie carried a military bag, a khaki canvas bag. Warren just said mine was an unbecoming purse for an artist … *I have to give up my individuality to belong to the club?*"

Mitchell is seated across from me in an ocher-colored room of her 1929 Spanish Colonial house in the hills of Bel Air, drinking coffee. Classical music is playing. The problem with smoking American Spirits, as she does, is that they tend to burn out, and she occasionally has to pick them off the dish she uses as an ashtray and relight them. She wears gold jewelry. It's three o'clock in the afternoon, which is when she gets going.

Now 71, Mitchell has been ill for eight years, which she describes as a "survival blur." In fact, she's been sick throughout her whole life—polio, scarlet fever, dengue, abscessed ovaries—and now suffers from the skin disorder Morgellons, a "weird, incurable disease that seems like it's from outer space," which many doctors find mysterious, and which Mitchell has described this way: "Fibers in a variety of colors protrude out of my skin like mushrooms after a rainstorm. They cannot be forensically identified as animal, vegetable, or mineral."

A fountain burbles in a little garden visible through the window behind her, a patch of the paved-over L.A. urban flatlands sprawling in the further distance, mostly shielded by trees that, "bird-borne," as she puts it, sprouted and grew tall in the 40 years she's lived there. She also has an 80-acre place in British Columbia, which is where she paints, and her walls are covered in scenes from that country retreat. On the wall to her left is a painting she made of her cat, a calico named Nietzsche, in front of three vases of flowers, in repose but ready to pounce, somewhat like Mitchell herself.

The first target is the music business, which she has now quit twice, in 2002 and 2007, and which to her mind has always been fickle, greedy, and corrupt. The producers she encountered early in her career, she writes in the liner notes to the boxed set, "were tyrannical and trendy. They would have squelched my need for risk and invention. They would have straightened out all the quirks and oddities and steered me toward the dog race where the bigger profits were." It's just gotten worse. "Somewhere after 2007, around that time, I think," she

PHOTOGRAPH: JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

A portrait of Mitchell from a photo shoot for Vogue, *November 1968.*

says she heard, on the radio, a record executive "saying quite confidently, 'We're no longer looking for talent. We're looking for a look and a willingness to cooperate.'" The comment crystallized so much for her that she repeats it every chance she gets.

But she reserves particular animus for her biographers. I spot one recent book on a table, and she tells me she uses it as a doorstop. "There's no magic in those books," she complains. "They're all unauthorized, and they're all full of ridiculous assumptions and gossip." For some time, she's been struggling to write her memoir, to write against this fetid tide of false claims on her. She first tried to dictate it to someone, using a tape recorder. But that process "was like having a bad audience. So I don't think performance-wise that I told it well." Then she bought a computer and tried to use Dragon voice-recognition software, but "the damn Dragon cannot translate my voice into words. So it just sits up there gathering cobwebs." The liner notes for the boxed set took her all last summer to write, but it ended up being a kind of breakthrough. She wrote it "the way I wrote songs, longhand," though in the past she worried that, lacking the "girdle" of songwriting, she'd "get too writerly." "I can be very long-winded, and I can digress all over the place," she says. "I remember too much."

Mitchell's self-protective, self-defining stance goes far back. "My parents were of the Canadian tall-poppy kind of way of thinking, which is, you stick your head above the crowd, we'll be glad to lop it off," she says. But her drive to be not held back "forged my identity as an artist," she says. "You couldn't ridicule me into going into the box." When she was a child, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, her mother got her piano lessons, but she lasted only a year. Her teacher "rapped me over the knuckles for playing by ear and killed my love of music for ten years. I stopped playing piano. I stopped going to church. Around that time, I broke with the school system. I broke with everything." She once told Morrissey she considered herself a punk.

This obstinate streak continued, by necessity, after her college boyfriend got her pregnant, separating her further from the expectations of others. Besides, she was given bad information to start with. "In health, we learned the rhythm method. You can't get pregnant right after your period? Wrong. Everything I learned in school was erroneous, I think." She fled to Toronto and gave birth in secret, never even telling her parents about the child, whom she placed for adoption, until the story was revealed, against her will, in the 1990s. (She and her daughter were reunited in 1997, and she has two grandchildren.)

And the streak continues in conversation, where there are several things that Mitchell likes to make clear. The first is that she is not a confessional singer. Confessing to what, exactly? "Was Tennessee Williams a confessional playwright?" she asks. "The trouble is that I'm the playwright and the actress, and all of it—it's kind of like people that follow soap operas. They meet one of the characters on the street and say: 'You should've married her.'" Which isn't to say life hasn't inspired her writing—or at least her need to write. Take her first husband, Chuck Mitchell, a folksinger from Michigan. "There's an old saying. It says: If you make a good marriage, God bless you. If you make a bad marriage, become a philosopher. So I became a philosopher."

For people, and I'm among them, who find many of her lonesome, eccentrically phrased songs some of the most precise distillations of the curiously compelling problem of living with other people, it doesn't sound so far-fetched. "Why does it come as such a shock to know you really have no one?" she says. "If you're not ready for that, it's meaningless. If you're ready for it and you're in that space, you'll burst into tears, and actually, it'll make you stronger. You'll be able to accept that, accept your loneliness, when you're ready. Otherwise, it'll go in one ear and right out the other. It won't mean anything. It's all in timing. That's why I don't think my music is disposable."

Slimane photos aside, it's important to her that we not think of her as a girl-with-a-guitar folksinger. She was at first, in the '60s, but none of that material seems as vital to her—none of those early songs, including "Chelsea Morning" and "Woodstock," appear on the new boxed set. Her later experiments in jazz and classical music matter more to her, even if many critics were less supportive of them. Included is a great deal of her lush and elaborate work with the jazz group the L.A. Express as well as the London Philharmonic, carefully sequenced with some of her spare earlier numbers. Last fall, at the tribute to her at the Hammer, her friend Cameron Crowe quoted her as saying: "They'll crucify you for staying the same, and they'll crucify you for change. I'd rather be crucified for changing."

"By the giants, I'm considered a Charlie Parker," Mitchell says. "I'm an innovator." But by others, bothered by her intuitive tunings, and playing by ear, she was always criticized as doing things wrong. "That's the thing about innovation, it's scary. Plus I'm a girl. And I was kind of the 'It' girl of that time. In the '50s, I would not have been the 'It' girl, because my breasts weren't big

STYLING BY SIMON ROBINS/CLM; HAIR BY TONY CHAVEZ FOR SHOW BEAUTY AT TRACEYMATTINGLY; MAKEUP BY DEBRA FERULLO USING KEVYN AUCOIN AT TRACEYMATTINGLY

Dress by Lanvin.

enough. They came in late. In my 50s. Where were they when I needed them? But I have a flapper body. I would be great in the '30s. Even bodies go in and out."

Alliances come and go too. For instance, David Geffen, her onetime good friend and manager: She joined his Asylum Records in 1971, then followed him to Geffen Records in 1982. Her song "Free Man in Paris" was said to be inspired by him, and tells the story (as imagined by her) of a Geffen-ish man's ambivalence toward his budding moguldom. "Geffen said to me, 'Come on, you can write a hit.' So I wrote 'You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio' as a joke. It was my idea of a joke," she once told an interviewer. "I had a couple of hits, but it wasn't intentional. I was an albums artist, not a singles artist. And that's got nothing to do with the Hit Parade."

I ask her about a painting, visible in a vestibule, on the way to her laundry room, of a curly-haired man with a banana lodged vertically in his mouth; turns out it's Geffen, and she painted it. "Before he came out. He's never seen it," she says, before explaining: "He was using me as a beard. We were living together, and he'd go cruising at night. He was very ambitious to be big and powerful, and he didn't think he would be [if he was openly gay]." By 1994, the two had fallen out over her insistence that he didn't pay her enough in royalties.

MITCHELL LIKES TO TALK—and it might be strategic. She circles around man-made ecological disaster: "We continue to be kicked out of Eden, you know? It's the continuing expulsion from Eden." She talks with clear delight about her grandchildren, taking satisfaction in that one is "a thinker. He flunked grade 12. That's the proof, right?" And she talks about how things aren't as solid with her daughter: "There were easier reunions for other people. This was not easy. She had a lot of things to work out. You know, she had a lot of issues, and a lot of blame, and couldn't understand my circumstance, and didn't want to in the beginning."

And we talk, in a roundabout way, about her discomfort at being a pawn even of Joni Mitchell revivalists—the Hammer folks, Slimane. She likes Slimane's clothes—"not innovative, but really good to wear, the kinds of things I've worn at one time or another in my life," she says, back when "I wore the model-size 8. Well, I'm a 10 now. You know, I'm spreading." She taps her belly and smiles.

"He did shoot me in very harsh light," she confides. "But we haven't had any complaints about it. Maybe it was even good for the culture. Who knows? A 71-year-old fashion model with overt wrinkles because of the bad light."

I count ten cigarette butts on her plate, and dusk is upon us. Her Tiffany lamps snap on. She sets down her coffee mug and says she hasn't caught my name. "Is that Scandinavian?" There are many things that Mitchell is interested in, and race and ethnicity—and the borderlines between them—are among them. "I'm a little schiz-y," she says. She was born Roberta Joan Anderson (her parents thought she'd be a boy, and when she turned out not to be, they feminized her name). Her father was Norwegian, and "my mother was born Irish, French, and Scottish and is kind of hot-blooded but repressed."

She thinks her ancestors were probably Sami—"a native population that follows the reindeer herds up above the Scandinavian countries. They're the European Eskimos, but they have very high cheekbones"—though the idea appalled her father, who was "bigoted against Indians." Meanwhile, her cousin told her that their name (which incidentally is not spelled with the usual Norwegian *e*) had been changed from Abramson when they immigrated. Which leads to her cousin's theory (not that Mitchell buys it): "Maybe a Jew escaped from Siberia and fell in with the Sami for a couple of generations, and then spun off into Norway." But her real point is this: "I wish I had every blood. Then I could tell everybody off and not be a bigot."

She mentions that she feels she has a shared identification with black men. "When I see black men sitting, I have a tendency to go—like I nod like I'm a brother. I really feel an affinity because I have experienced being a black guy on several occasions."

I ask her what she means. "Well, did you ever see the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*?" A friend who had come over to let her Jack Russell terrier out brought the album in. The 1977 album cover (with a $2 sticker on it) features an odd little dance party with her in a dress and top hat in the middle, a young kid in a tux to one side, and several birds flapping around the middle distance. Oh, and on the left is a leaning figure who looks like a comic extra from a blaxploitation film. "That's me. The black guy in the front."

How'd that happen? "I was being butchered by a dentist who was capping my teeth—and he was my dentist for about 12 years and one day he said, 'Oh, you've got the worst bite I've ever seen. You have teeth like a Negro male.'" That bit of casual racism started her thinking. The next thing that happened was that she had to go to a Halloween party, and was trying to think of what to wear, when she saw a guy on Hollywood Boulevard "diddy bopping," as she puts it, down the street in his blue jogging clothes. She gets up and shows me—an irregular strut, one leg shorter than the other. "And he says, '*Mmm, mmm, mm*, you looking good, sister, you looking good.' My mother always told me to stick up my nose, but I couldn't help it, I broke out into a big grin. And he kept going and I was trying to imitate his walk. I said, 'I'm going to go as him.'" The costume, and the disturbance it caused ("Are you at the right party?"), was such a success she decided to spring it on the guy shooting her album cover, whom she found bossy and annoying. "I brought it in a bag," she says. "I could do the makeup in about four minutes, and then I step out of the curtain. I just stood there till they noticed me. I walked really showily, going, *Heh heh heh.* It was a great revenge. That was all to get his ass. To freak him out. I had to keep him on the defensive."

I ask her what she is going to do next, but she won't tell me. For now, she's hoping that people buy her boxed set, with her self-portrait on the cover. To that end, she gives me a Joni Mitchell tote bag with one of her paintings on it to carry my things home in. Get the word out.

Love Has Many Faces is not a hits jamboree. It isn't here to satisfy easy expectations; it's here to complicate her legacy and reward patience. She worried over it so much that the songs on disc two are in a different and, to her mind, better order from the one printed inside the book; she switched them late in the process, wanting us to see what she sees there, in the context she wants for them, not the one furnished by gossip, naïve adoration, and record sales. But it's hard to fight being something to so many people, no matter how careful her instructions. Her website, which is a bit out of date, catalogues 116 references in books (from *Fight Club* to *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* to *The Official Preppy Handbook*; missing is Meghan Daum's defense of Mitchell's late work in *The Unspeakable*) and 47 in films (from *Alice's Restaurant* to *Vanilla Sky* to Emma Thompson declaring in *Love Actually,* "Joni Mitchell is the woman who taught your cold English wife how to feel").

There are, of course, the appropriations she appreciates. She recently got a letter from a criminal lawyer in New Jersey who wrote her: "I'm sorry you had to go through all this pain to be our salve. My job is so hard. Right now I'm sending a guy to prison … and he's soul dead, and he'll go in, and come out, and go in again. My job is so hard that sometimes I think I'll go down, down the dark ladder and never get out, but then I think, you know, only a phase: 'before I get my gorgeous wings and fly away.'" It's a line from her song "The Last Time I Saw Richard." "So he's able to take out of my music that it's okay to go down, and you don't have to stay there. So it's been very useful to this man, this criminal Italian lawyer in New Jersey. It was a revelation to me." ■