JONI TAKES A BREAK

Jim Marshall

"Inside I'm thinking, 'You're smiling phoney. You're being a star.'"

BY LARRY LeBLANC

TORONTO—Canadians are stunned by the vague, awesome level that Joni Mitchell has reached. She was the least-known of the Toronto group of folksingers of the Sixties.

Joni returned to Toronto, this summer, to appear at the Annual Mariposa Folk Festival on Toronto Island (15 minutes by ferry from downtown)—her first public performance in more than six months. She has an undisputable genuine affection for the Mariposa event. One reason is it is possible to find a degree of privacy here among old friends. In the afternoon workshop she freely doodled a dulcimer, smiled, and hummed in rhythm with her hands.

She appeared shortly before eight, backstage, dressed in a short robe, belted loosely around the middle which clung without tightness to all of her. In the shelter of the trees along the lagoon we talked. The sun was gone, there was a shadow all across the grassy prairie-like opening and a small cloud of insects hovered over.

A few feet away Gordon Lightfoot sat on a park bench and said how great it was to be a spectator for a change. David Rae, who at last is emerging from the relative obscurity of guitarist to Lightfoot, Ian and Sylvia, and Joni, were there, cheerier than ever. Jack Elliott, with significantly smiling eyes, pulled his broad-brimmed cowboy hat over his forehead, put his thumbs in pockets and waited his turn at the bottle being shared by Mississippi Fred McDowell, J. B. Hutto and Lightfoot.

Joni sat watching, curiously and quiet, nodding hello now and then. With her chin resting on her crossed legs, she seemed just a little self-conscious, but most inwardly serene. So perfect with high soft cheekbones, great bright blue eyes, bittersweet blond hair dribbling down past her shoulders; she has a broad smile worth waiting for and a tremendous vanilla grin which makes her always magical.

Carefully, almost cautiously, she picked the words to describe self-exile from the pop scene.

"In January, I did my last concert. I played in London and I came home. In February I finished up my record. I gave my last concert with the idea I'd take this year off, because I need new material. I need new things to say in orde to perform, so there's something in it for me. You just can't sing the same songs.

"I was being isolated, starting to feel like a bird in a gilded cage. I wasn't getting a chance to meet people. A certain amount of success cuts you off in a lot of ways. You can't move freely. I like to live, be on the streets, to be in a crowd and moving freely."

She confirmed that she was still uneasy of the great army of photographers scrambling around her, of the crowds fawning on her at every turn, wanting something, wanting to touch her. In the center she worked hard to smile constantly, answer the seemingly endless questions, and make that magic.

"It's a weird thing," she said solemnly. "You lose all your peripheral view of things. It has its rewards but I don't know what the balance is—how much good and how much damage there is in my position. From where I stand it sometimes gets absurd, and yet, I must remain smiles, come out of a mood where maybe I don't feel very pleasant and say 'smile.' Inside, I'm thinking: 'You're being phony, you're smiling phony. You're being a star.'

"I was very frightened last year," she said quite directly, wiping some hair out of her eyes. "But if you're watching yourself over your own shoulder all of the time and if you're too critical of what you're doing; you can make yourself so unhappy. As a human you're always messing up, always hurting people's feelings quite innocently. I'll find it difficult, even here. There's a lot of people you want to talk to all at once. I get confused and maybe I'll turn away and leave someone standing and I'll think—'oh dear.'

"I've changed a lot," she said. "I'm getting very defensive. I'm afraid. You really have to struggle."

She paused, frowned and laughed. She leaned forward, suddenly, and said: "I feel like I'm going to be an ornery old lady."

Last January she made the surprise announcement of her self-imposed retirement, and canceled two important gigs —in New York's Carnegie Hall and Constitution Hall in Washington. She took a vacation instead.

"I've been to Greece, Spain, France and from Jamaica to Panama, through the canal. Some of my friends were moving their boat from Fort Lauderdale up to San Francisco. I joined them in Jamaica and sailed down through the canal. It was really an experience.

"On the plane to Greece we — I travelled with a friend, a poetess from Ottawa — met a man who was studying in Berkeley. He was a fairly wealthy Greek, very into the family. They're very family-oriented people. He invited us to his home for supper. In that tradition, his sister, cousins and aunts were there. It was very formal. They had a maid who brought the dinner and prepared all the national dishes of Greece kinda in our honor.

"From the peasant on up, when they have guests in the house, they're hospitable and lay on their best feed. Then he took us to a couple of nightclubs with Greek musicians playing. It was a very sophisticated introduction to Athens. Not sophisticated like New York sophistication, but on that level of their culture.

"He would always say, 'We must be spontaneous. The Greek is spontaneous. Let us dance, drink some wine, throw the gardenia to the singer'."

She giggled, bringing to her freckled and tanned face a smile that almost closed her eyes. She remarked she was delighted with Crete. It was a beautiful country, she said.

"I hiked in boots through the fields

Crocuses bloom before the snow melts

It's very rugged, very simple, so basic. People live from the land much more. The seas are very small, very countryish. Peasants walked donkeys. There were very few cars.

"Even the poorest people seem to eat well: cucumbers and tomatoes, oranges and potatoes and bread. They ate that well. They lived in concrete huts with maybe one or two chairs, a bed where the family slept and a couple of burrows and chickens."

After a brief pause, she added, "To me, it was a lovely life, far better than being middle class in America. I lived for five weeks in a cave there. The only trouble was it was very commercialized. The magazines were writing it up. As a result, you had a lot of prying tourists all of the time. Even that was kinda funny, because most of the people living in the caves were Canadians, Americans, Swiss and French. They'd say, 'Oh, here come the tourists.' It was kinda funny, the Greeks being the tourists."

Then she described the Matelau surroundings: "It was a very small bay with cliffs on two sides. And between the two cliffs, on the beach, there were about four or five small buildings. There were also a few fishermen huts.

"The caves were on high sedimentary cliffs, sandstone, a lot of seashells in it. The caves were carved out by the Minoans hundreds of years ago. Then they were used later on for leper caves. Then after that the Romans came, and they used them for burial crypts. Then some of them were filled in and sealed up for a long time. People began living there, beatniks, in the Fifties. Kids gradually dug out more rooms. There were some people there who were wearing human teeth necklaces around their necks," she said with a slight frown.

"We all put on a lot of weight. We were eating a lot of apple pies, good bacon. We were eating really well, good wholesome food.

"The village pretty well survived from the tourist trade, which was the kids that lived in the caves. I don't know what their business was before people came. There were a couple of fishing boats that went out, that got enough fish to supply the two restaurants there.

"The bakery lady who had the grocery store there had fresh bread, fresh rice pudding, made nice yogurt every day, did a thriving business; and ended up just before I left, she installed a refrigerator. She had the only cold drinks in town. It was all chrome and glass. It was a symbol of her success.

"Then the cops came and kicked everyone out of the caves, but it was getting a little crazy there. Everybody was getting a little crazy there. Everybody was getting more and more into open nudity. They were really going back to the caveman. They were wearing little loincloths. The Greeks couldn't understand what was happening."

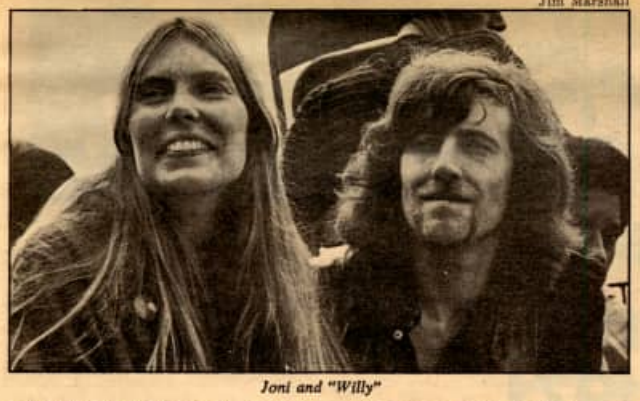
Sadly, she confirmed she didn't find much privacy there.

"I just kinda took it anyway. Well, because the people living in the caves were all Canadians and Americans and young. So it wasn't there. I didn't meet any Greeks.

"When I first got there I found I was carrying around a sketch pad, pens, paper. I was all prepared should inspiration strike in any shape or form—'I'm going to do something with my time'."

She agreed things rarely happen that way.

"Well, I somehow felt like I do sometimes about photographers. When I was in Jamaica with my friends, we went up into the mountains, suddenly we stopped



Jim Marshall

Joni and "Willy"

in this village. It was beautiful and primitive. We all got out, jumped around, cameras up to our eyes. I thought from their point of view we must've looked like creatures from outer space, real monsters. I got into 'capturing the moment' as kind of a rape. Even with a pencil or a brush. It was just an attitude I had at that time. I couldn't do anything really until I got away from Crete. When I got to Paris and back into the city, with time to reflect, I began to realize differently."

Like most Canadian artists she was discovered only after other artists began recording her material. A much-needed punch was given to her early reputation (mostly Canadian) when Tom Rush picked up on "Urge For Going" during a gig in Detroit.

Judy Collins noticed a distinct Canadian feel, a more old-fashioned bouquet than American. Canadian composers seem to write closer to nature, away from the competitive rush.

Commented Judy: "There are lots of writers who write good material but there seems to be feeling about Canadian writers that is a very special feeling. I sing Joni's songs because I like them immensely. There doesn't seem to be anyone quite as good. Her lyrics are exquisite and it all fits together."

As the composer of strange autobiographical songs like "Urge For Going," "Michael From Mountains," "Both Sides Now," "The Circle Game" and "Chelsea Morning," she gained the respect, friendship and endorsement of the music world before recording them herself.

New York gave her the inspiration to write the songs on her first album *Songs To A Seagull*, produced by David Crosby. The cover had fine pen-and-ink drawings, and Joni's picture was on the back, from a fisheye lens on a New York backstreet.

The songs inside had lots of grace notes, showed trickling-light and beautiful melodies. They dealt with people like Nathan LaFrenier, the crass, hardbitten cabdriver; Marci, Joni's Canadian girlfriend, who moved to New York the same time as her; and Chuck Mitchell, Joni's old man who carried her off to the country for marriage too soon.

The original cover for *Clouds* showed seasons with a castle and a moat. She had become depressed with it, left it, and only finished it when boyfriend Graham Nash encouraged her.

Song structures were simpler, more reminiscent. Clouds came on in "Both Sides Now" as "rows and flows of angel hair/ And ice cream castles in the air/ and feather canyons everywhere." "The Fiddle And The Drum" offered subtle comment on war.

Ladies of The Canyon is the most overtly autobiographical of all Joni's albums. "For Free" expresses thoughts on the way her musical life has been rolling:

> Now me I play for fortune
> And those velvet curtain calls
> I've got a black limousine
> And two gentlemen
> Escorting me to the halls
> And I play if you have the money
> Or if you're a friend to me
> But the one-man band
> By the quick lunch stand
> He was playing real good, for free.

She wasn't at Woodstock, but her song shows she was alive to what went down there. "Willy," the soft, still, brooding ballad was written about her relationship with Graham Nash. "Big Yellow Taxi" received saturation airplay in Canada, and was covered Stateside by the Neighborhood. And she finally recorded "The Circle Game," which she'd written years ago in Toronto.

The cover of *Ladies of the Canyon* is the simplest of the three albums. There is a fine, one-line profile of Joni and a homely watercolor of Laurel Canyon. Like the other illustrations, its mood perfectly fits the contents of the album. "The drawings, the music and the words are very much tied together," she agreed, coiling and uncoiling the ends of her belt, occasionally looking at the ground and slowly rolling the pebbly earth.

"It's like taste. It changes and reflects in everything you do creatively. I never get frustrated to where I'll say—'quit writing.' I come to dry periods where either I feel I don't have anything new to say or feel like I'm repeating patterns."

Her expression became serious when she spoke of the kind of material she wants to sing now: "Like now I don't really want to write. The kind of material I want to write—I want it to be brighter, to get people up, to grab people. So I'm stifling any feelings of solitude or certain moods I might ordinarily develop into a song. I steer away from that now because I don't want that kind of material to perform."

Has her writing passed its complicate stage?

"Well," she answered, "I don't notice what I'm doing so much until I've done it and then look back at it. At the time, you're really not aware you're doing it.

"In order to be simplified it has to be honed down more. It takes a lot more polishing for that simplicity than it did for anything complicated. I do a lot of night-writing. I need solitude to write. I used to be able to write under almost any condition but not anymore 'cause I have to go inside myself so far, to search through a theme.

"First of all I'll write something down and then I think: 'Oh, I like how the words sound together but it doesn't say anything.' When I finish a new song I take it and play it for my friends who are fine musicians and writers. I'm very impressed by their reaction to it. If they like it, I'm knocked out. I guess I write for those people. They're really my audience.

"My music now is becoming more rhythmic. It's because I'm in Los Angeles and my friends are mostly rock and roll people . . . and being influenced by that rhythm . . . I've always liked it. When I was in Saskatchewan, I loved to dance."

Joni's father, in the Royal Canadian Air Force, was stationed in Fort Macleod during the war. Joni was born there as Roberta Joan Anderson. The Anderson family moved when her father was transferred to bases in Calgary, and then Yorkton. Following the war, her father worked for a grocery chain in North Battleford. Her mother taught school. Joni was about six, and started school there.

Joni's loving memory of the fresh prairie air and budding things stems from the prairie kingdom that stretched at her feet. The flat prairie of Saskatchewan, a have-not province plagued by droughts and wavering wheat prices, holds things that must be seen and touched: crocuses spreading a mauve mist along railway ties before the last patch of snow was melted; wheatfields merging into a wave-surfaced golden ocean; and telephone wires strung like popcorn.

The family finally settled in Saskatoon —a small, dry, proud town right in the middle of the sea of wheat and atop the potash swells sprawled pleasantly along the high east bank of the South Saskatchewan River. The town is sober to the point of dullness. It was founded 88 years ago by the Ontario Methodist Colonization Society, which dreamed of creating a teetotaler's paradise far from the corrupting influences of civilization.

Joni grew up straight: won trophies for bowling, liked to swim and dance. She took art lessons, and, for drama presentations or dances, Joni always pitched in to provide the decorations. Polio at age ten brought her close to her mother, who taught her at home for a few months before she was well enough to return to school.

At Mariposa, she looked back and gave credit to her 7th grade teacher at Queen Elizabeth public school for getting her interested in writing.

"He encouraged us to write in any form that we liked," she said. "Even at that age I enjoyed poetry, the structure of it, the dance of it, to essays or any other form. His assignments were very free like that. He'd just tell us to write something."

The teacher, Dr. Kratzman, is surprised that Joni dedicated her first album to him. He remembers her as "a blond, bright-eyed kid. Very receptive to ideas. I can see her now, in the back seat of the second row."

"Later on, in the 10th grade," Joni reminisced, "I joined an extra-curricular writer's club. Again I wrote poetry, because there wasn't much poetry assigned in the writing class. I really haven't read too much except for assigned readings in school. Even then, I only read the quota of books on the program. I've been more of a doer, especially painting. Any free time I have, I'd rather make something."

And she loved to dance and listen to music: "I guess I liked the hit parade in those days 'cause I was looking at it from the view: 'Can you dance to it?' There wasn't much to the lyrics, although 'Get out in the kitchen and rattle those pots and pans,' that's great music, great. I love 'Shake Rattle and Roll,' the Coasters, Chuck Berry. I've been with rock and roll from the beginning, and it's just starting to come out now."

In Saskatoon, she didn't show much interest in playing until her last year in high school. She bought herself a ukelele, taught herself the rudiments of guitar playing from a Pete Seeger do-it-yourself manual, and took to hanging out at a coffee house called the Louis Riel.

In the Saskatoon club, Joni met up-and-comers like Joe & Eddie, and Bonnie Dobson, who wrote "Morning Dew." She began playing a baritone uke, taking it everywhere and going plunk-a-plunk every time she learned a new change.

At a weiner roast, a TV announcer from nearby Prince Albert heard her sing and asked her to appear on his program. She only knew four or five songs, but it came off all right.

Then she went to the Art School of Calgary because she wanted to become a professional illustrator. She worked for nothing at The Depression, the local coffeehouse.

"She looked just tremendous," John Uren, the club's owner, recalls, "with all that blond hair. I brought Peter Elbing in from Toronto. And he listened to Joni and said she could sing. She met a lot of people. Will Millar was around. He's one of the Irish Rovers. It was a good scene in those days. And Joni was part of it. She did more for the uke than Tiny Tim."

She migrated East at the end of the first school year to see a Mariposa Festival. Although intending to return to college, she found work in Toronto and stayed with only a hint of what she would find. She worked as a salesgirl to earn the $140 union fee so she could perform. She began writing her own songs (about four a week) and made the rounds of long-shuttered clubs.

She was hired at the Penny Farthing, one of several clubs in Yorkville Village which has been the early training grounds for Jose Feliciano, The Irish Rovers, and Neil Young. While she was playing in the basement section, Chuck Mitchell and Loring James came into town and played upstairs.

Joni was a strange young girl in those days—an all-around golden girl, running around discovering life for the first time. Playing and singing on Yorkville Avenue, she was part of the early scene. Walk down the street, during an evening then, and you'd hear David Clayton-Thomas, Bonnie Dobson, Jack London and the Sparrows (later Steppenwolf), Gordon Lightfoot, the Dirty Shames, the Stormy Clovers, Elyse Weinberg or Adam Mitchell (who joined the Paupers). Buffy Ste. Marie wrote "The Universal Soldier" in Yorkville. Phil Ochs wrote "Changes" there, too.

Her short marriage with Chuck Mitchell was described in "I Had A King": "I had a king in a salt-rusted carriage/ Who carried me off to his country for marriage too soon." Their show was pasted together like a collage. Chuck played heavy Brechtian material ("while he sings them of wars and wine"). They did a handful of Gordon Lightfoot songs. But basically, Joni did her own thing and Chuck did his.

With help from friends, the two broke New York, worked the Gaslight Cafe on MacDougal in the Village, and gained some recognition. Next they made the Toronto-Philadelphia-Detroit circuit.

Gradually the breaks started to unfold. Bernie Fiedler at The Riverboat coffeehouse booked her and other clubs followed. Canadian Broadcast Corporation producer Ross McLean got her to compose the title theme of CBC's *The Way It Is*. Television and radio engagements followed.

After Tom Rush and Judy Collins performed her material, her own career moved in full swing. She moved to New York, where she met her managers Elliot Roberts and Joel Dean. They put the finishing polish on her act, got her a Reprise recording contract, and sent her out on tour.

Her personal life became a series of interruptions. But she accepted it with a certain quiet gratitude even when it bore down on her with an overpowering weight.

She retreated to her isolated, woodhewed home in Laurel Canyon, about three miles north of Hollywood's Sunset Strip and immeasurable social light years away from Canada. Surrounded by stained Tiffany glass windows, oak-beam wooden floors, a Priestly piano, a grandfather clock, and a black cat named Hunter, a nine-year-old tom; she read her rave record reviews and equally enthusiastic stories about her public appearances.

But, she said, just about every songwriter reaches a point where he feels uncomfortable.

"The experiences I was having were so related to my work. It was reflected in the music. I thought I'd like to write on other themes. In order to do this, I had to have other experiences."