

Tracking down an elusive runaway

TIGER, TIGER

One of her best albums in years is out this week, but Joni Mitchell's still at odds with the music industry.

STEVE MORSE
The Boston Globe

Joni Mitchell's new album, *Taming the Tiger*, has a frank confession in the title track. "I'm a runaway from the music biz," she sings, and then goes on to criticize "formula music" on the radio, labeling it "junk food for juveniles." Don't expect to hear the song soon on any Top 40 stations.

"I've had to run away in order to keep the poet alive," said Mitchell in an interview from Los Angeles. The new album, released in Canada and the United States this week, is her first since 1994's *Turbulent Indigo*, which won two Grammy awards.

The reclusive Mitchell, whose painterly folk-jazz and hippie background have influenced contemporary acts from Jewel to Fiona Apple, swung back into view recently with a West Coast tour with Bob Dylan and Van Morrison; and with a well-received appearance at the "Day in the Garden" concert at the original Woodstock site in New York. Later this month, she and Dylan will roll into Ontario for a pair of concerts together, in Toronto on Oct. 29 and Ottawa on Oct. 30. Mitchell also has a pay-per-view TV concert, called *Taming the Tiger: An Evening with Joni Mitchell*, coming Nov. 6 on U.S. pay-TV.

Mitchell released a book of poetry last year, *The Complete Poems and Lyrics*, which is to be reissued in paperback next month with the addition of lyrics from *Taming the Tiger*. She's also contracted for two more books: one a compilation of her paintings, the other an autobiography. "I probably have five novels in me — if I was a novelist — just based on personal experience," said the fifty-four-year-old native of Canada.

She has been buoyed by a recent reunion with her daughter Kilaura (whom she had given up for adoption 33 years ago while living in Toronto), though this personal joy has been tempered by Mitchell's continued frustration with the music business, which caused her to consider retirement in recent years.

"I've got a painter's eye for innovation in a business that thrives on second- and third-generation copycats," Mitchell said. "I've got the wrong mentality for the game. I don't play the game well. I'm not a politician, which more and more has become a required quality in my business."

"Also, I dislike being pigeonholed. I make unorthodox music, so that creates marketing difficulties for me. And there are prejudices levied at me because of my interest in jazz."

Taming the Tiger probably won't solve those marketing difficulties, but it's one of her best, most accessible albums since her peak in the seventies with the influential discs *Blue* and *Court and Spark*, which yielded the hits *Help Me* and *Free Man in Paris*.



Joni Mitchell, in a detail from a self-portrait: "I've got a painter's eye for innovation in a business that thrives on . . . copycats." JONI MITCHELL

She takes some political shots in the song *No Apologies* ("Lawyers and loan sharks are laying America to waste"). She applies her poetic eye to the meditative *Harlem in Havana*, about a carnival midway populated with eccentric characters. She turns soothing in *Stay in Touch* ("Let light hearts remake us . . . let the worries hush"), but turns feisty in the uptempo *Lead Balloon*. It's about nervously spilling a drink on a boyfriend she's trying to impress, noting in detail "the tequila trickling down his business suit." Other standouts are the wisdom-filled *Face Lift* ("Happiness is the best face lift," she sings) and the upbeat *My Best to You*, a blessing to her audience.

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In concert in 1994, left, and 1969.

Mitchell dislikes being 'pigeonholed'

MITCHELL from page D1

"My true fans are open to me," said Mitchell. "And I got into this business to be an artist, not a pawn of business. So I have to fight for the right to inspiration."

While it would seem natural that Mitchell would do more touring to back the new record (she hasn't toured the East in 15 years), she's feeling inspired to make an album of forties and fifties standards instead.

"What I'd really like to do is not tour this album, but go immediately into the studio while I'm fired up and do an album with a big orchestra. That would be a thrill of a lifetime," she said. "My roots as a singer lie in standards, really. I know the words to many of them — and I know all the melodies."

Toward this end, she just sang on

two George Gershwin songs for Herbie Hancock's new album, *Gershwin's World*. She joined Hancock, Stevie Wonder and saxophonist Wayne Shorter (who also plays beautifully on her album) for "loose, late-night sessions. We did *Summertime* and *The Man I Love*. I loved it."

Mitchell's jazz affinities have taken her a long way from her hippie folk-singing days. She almost laughs at that era now. "I came into folk music as an arts student to make some pin money, because it was so easy," she said. "So I entered the arena as a folk musician and all these years later, I still get called a folk musician, but that's not where my roots are. In less than six months, I was a professional folk singer. That's how easy it is to cop those chops."

Mitchell later dove head first into

jazz, during the making of *Hejira* (1976) and *Mingus* (1979), in which she set lyrics to Charlie Mingus's melodies. But the reception *Mingus* received also helped her turn sour on the music biz.

"At the time I did my *Mingus* project, I lost my airplay. And for 25 years, I've been dismissed as too jazzy," she said. "It's kind of like being blacklisted for a long time."

"The white press has had a problem with my jazz influences — and it's always been levied against me. Generally, they're hostile and frightened. I don't know why. Whatever it is, I can't expect to be understood or reviewed sensibly in the bulk of the pop camp. . . . I'm tired of being flunked by Rolling Stone [magazine]. I hear they're going to flunk me again on this new album. I can take it, but it's just stupid at this point."