

From all sides now

Now a grandmother, **Joni Mitchell** is older, wiser and just as opinionated. But her new album is a departure from her tradition of stark introspection

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It is four decades now since **Joni Mitchell** was designated DeMolay Sweetheart, poster girl for the youth offshoot of a Masonic organization in her Albertan hometown. Hands rising to form an imaginary cone above her head, she depicts her 16-year-old self sitting beneath a dryer within the pretend salon used to train those would-be hairdressers among the student body.

And while awaiting the unveiling of the kind of big, twisty beehive befitting her soon-to-be-confirmed status, she frets about an assignment she has to carry out for a creative-writing class.

It is a poem on any subject, and in blank verse. "So, awaiting inspiration, I pick up this copy of a movie magazine, Silver Screen . . ." Within it is an article on the reigning youth idols of the day, recently-weds Bobby Darin and Sandra Dee.

"And it's this really terrible piece, exposing their marital distress. I feel so sorry for them, but, well, suddenly I have my subject matter. I write my poem straight away!"

Mitchell says she hasn't so much as thought of it in ages, but still is able to dredge up from memory this piece of ancient coursework.

"The fish bowl is a world reversed," she recites carefully, "Where fishermen with hooks that dangle from the bottom up/ Reel down their catch without a fight on gilded bait/ Pike, pickerel, bass . . . the common fish ogle through distorting glass/ See only glitter, glamour, gaiety/ Fog up the bowl with lusty breath/ Lunge toward the bait and miss/ And weep for fortunes lost/ Envy the goldfish? Why? His bubbles breaking round the rim/ While silly fishes faint for him and say/ 'Oh my God! I think he winked at me!'"

Today, it is the irony contained within those teenage lines — and the preternatural insight into a celebrityhood she says she never sought — that amuses her.

"It's like the gods — or God, whatever — said, 'Yep, she's got a pretty good inkling of it. But let's have her experience it first-hand all the same!'" When she smiles or laughs, which is often, the face of the most accomplished, most extravagantly gifted woman writer-performer of the rock era lights up from within, appears as hopeful and free of guile as it must have been those 40 years ago.

But, Mitchell (still smilingly) insists, "I'm an old babe now. I'm easy to kiss off. I'm of an age when husbands run away with younger models. In the whole sex exploitation-ness of it all, I'm o-l-d. . ."

Hardly. She is 56. Which — and here's her point — means near-Jurassic according to the orthodoxy of the record industry. In capsule form, this is her career within it.

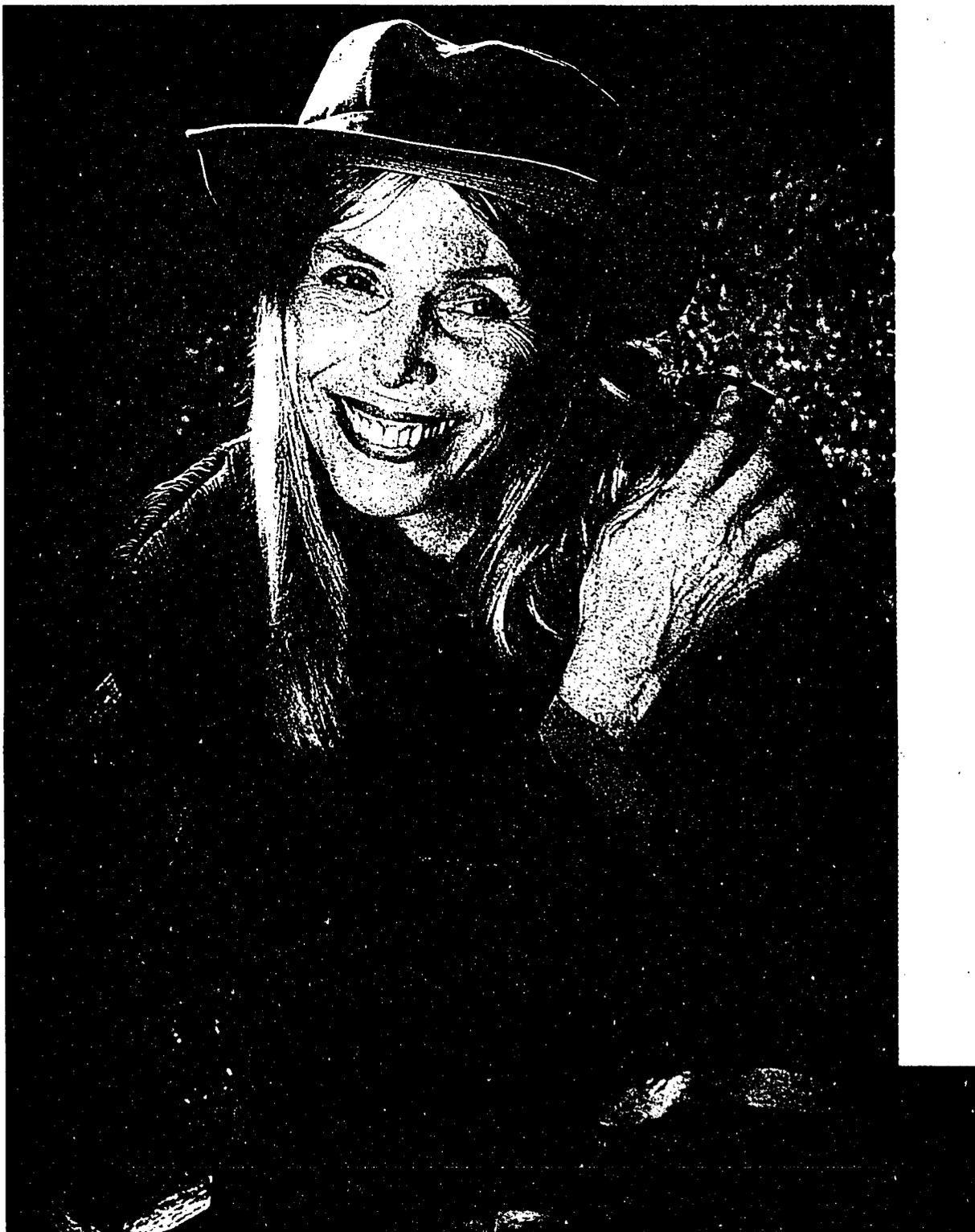
Lauded, loved, elected an icon of the era while in her 20s. Slapped in the face with the critical backlash — this despite delivering peerless, unlikely-ever-to-be-bettered work — in her 30s. Sidelined, largely overlooked, in her 40s. Then, finally, reappraised, invited back in from the critical cold by a rather red-faced taste-making elite on entering her 50s. For in recent years, praise, citations, trophies have rained down on her like confetti upon a bride.

Is she grateful? Actually, not very. "When you're truly honoured, it's humbling," she allows. "But, when you're insincerely honoured, it makes you — makes me! — arrogant. The last thing I want to do is go to these award ceremonies and appear cocky but, unfortunately, that tends to have been my response in a lot of cases. It brings out the wrong side in me."

"Someone coming up to me on the street and saying that they love what I do? That kind of reaction is not coming out of a sense of appropriateness. That is coming out of kindness. Which is wonderful, if embarrassing for both parties. We're strangers, after all, and a lot of times those people are so earnest and overwhelmed that they look as if they're going to implode."

"The only possible response is to give them a good hug, which I do. And that makes for a very real and sweet encounter. Those people whom I've hugged on the street — they're the honours and the good reviews."

Was there no pleasure to be taken, then, in the double whammy of Grammys which her



Joni Mitchell at the Bel Air Hotel in 1996, above. Right, a spirited self-portrait that depicts her with companion Don Freed: 'My 50s are my favourite period since my teens!'

KEN HIVELEY/Los Angeles Times

1994 release, *Turbulent Indigo*, was rewarded? Or in her induction (belated, she felt) into the U.S. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? And why is it that only the oddest, most unexpected tributes (recently, she accepted a statuette from Sweden's King Carl Gustav, given for outstanding achievement in the field of music) seem to have tickled her fancy?

Leading me out on to the patio of a suite within the Bel Air Hotel, Mitchell attempts to explain why. It seems that this rehabilitation all started with an honour bestowed upon her by Billboard, the Bible-like U.S. trade weekly.

It was titled The Century Award and was — though doubtless not conceived as such — something of a consolation prize for being undervalued but still around. "And once I accepted that, a kind of copycat-crime scenario unfolded," she says, searching within the pleated folds of her Issey Miyake outfit for a Bic to light the first of the afternoon's many cigarettes. "There was this rash of others which, I felt, didn't do honour to my work. It was as if the establishment-thinking was, 'Okay, she's been kind of overlooked — we should give her something.' Yet they didn't quite know why, beyond the fact that other people were doing it. It was as if my time had come again, yet without there being anyone sufficiently knowledgeable around to explain what it is I do, why it is that I might be worthy. So the honours rang hollow. I found myself not grateful. Frankly, the fact of them



made me sad."

What might cheer her, then? Well, possibly the fact that a tribute album is in the making, one featuring not the kind of wishy-washy-white-girls-with-guitars that it has been her fate ever to be linked with, but by talents as robust as those of Stevie Wonder, Etta James, Chaka Khan and Janet Jackson.

Certainly this pleases Mitchell, who sees it as no coincidence that so many of her celebrity champions — add Seal, jazz diva Cassandra Wilson and The Artist Formerly Known as Prince to the list — are black.

"Comparing new women artists to me robs

us both of our individuality. And, while I mean no offence to the personalities involved, it's frequently the case that their art is not innovative and my influence barely perceptible."

"The blacks though . . . they make it their own. I say to Prince, 'Wow! that's an interesting chord! Where'd that come from?' And he'll say to me, 'It comes from you!' See, this business is, generally speaking, white male operative. Hence, it likes to lock me in with a lot of girls who've sold a lot more than me, but who don't have nearly the gift."

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The white media, too, is guilty of this lazy, generic stereotyping, she feels. "Whereas the black press links me right in there with Miles [Davis] and Santana. It sees someone who's still evolving. It knows a long-distance runner when it sees one."

Were she not to have truth on her side, she would be a monster, an ego run riot. As it is — the depth, emotional acuity and linguistic virtuosity of her lyrics, the pioneering musicianship, that voice — she barely begins to state her case. A new album, to be released in Canada next week, is titled *Both Sides Now*. The best-known version of the title track, written by Mitchell when she was just 21, is cloyingly sweet — the 1970 hit by Judy Collins. Its author recalls hearing the song reclaimed some time later by veteran cabaret artist Mabel Mercer, then in her 70s.

"She was a chansonnier, a storyteller, a mentor of Sinatra. And she just sat there in this black lace gown with a red sash draped on the bias and recounted it. I went to her backstage afterwards and, without identifying myself, said stupidly, 'Oh, but you brought such experience to the words. It really does take an older person to bring them to life.'

"Whoops! Who was this whippersnapper implying that she was ancient? Even though I understood enough to write the lyric when I was young, theatrically speaking it was hard for an audience to relate to a mere girl singing it."

These 35 years on and in its new version, *Both Sides Now* provides a kind of state-of-the-emotional-nation speech to conclude what is a collection of classic love songs — 10 modern standards originally made famous by such deities as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole — and two of her own compositions revisited. The arrangements are lush, cinematic, sometimes even Wagnerian. The playing, including solos from jazz luminaries Herbie Hancock, Mark Isham and Wayne Shorter, is peerless. And so are the singer's own vocal performances — closer in essence to Holiday or Sarah Vaughan than to Linda Ronstadt or Carly Simon, peers who have also ventured into the standards market previously.

According to the record company handout, the CD's choice of material is intended to trace the arc of a modern romantic relationship, "from initial flirtation through optimistic consummation, metamorphosing into disillusionment, ironic despair and, finally, resolving into a philosophical overview of acceptance and the probability of the

'Come here,' Mitchell tells the reporter. 'You need to be given a hug.'

ALBRI MCCOY/LOS ANGELES TIMES



The new, huggable

Joni Mitchell

cycle repeating itself."

And how positively it all starts out . . . *You're My Thrill! At Last! Comes Love!* But then, with a full nine songs still to go, love's young dream gets slapped in the face with a wet fish. Track four? Only the accusatory, I'll-take-the-moral-high-ground-while-you-take-the-moral-low-ground bundle of joy that is *You've Changed!* Hardly a cheery take on things, is it, Ms. Misery? Mitchell giggles delightedly, rocks back and forth in her chair.

"Well, that's the nature of romantic love, isn't it? That kind of love is based on insecurity and, the moment it is secured, things go awry. There's the moment of declaration — 'I love you!', 'I love you, too!' —and then, boom! Perfection has been reached, and it's all downhill from there. Suddenly, you're in the funny world of 're-lat-ion-ships' where things have got to be 'worked on.'"

It was Cher who struck dread into the hearts of fortysomethings by declaring that being in one's 50s sucked. You had to "work" harder and longer for diminishing results, she said, albeit with reference to body maintenance. On this purely superficial level, we might imagine that Mitchell, who modelled as a teenager, loves clothes, and has maintained an elegant public profile these past 30-odd years, will be in agreement.

"No! No! My 50s are my favourite period since my teens!" she says. "My 20s were just god-awful. I wouldn't go through them again for anything. I lost my daughter [Kilauren, given up for adoption]. Fame hit me, and I was not a fame-seeker. Then I spent my 30s working my way out of the god-awfulness of my 20s. And as for my 40s.

She lights another cigarette, exhales into the accelerating dusk, then motions dismissively with her hand, as if shooing these decades away.

"Being over 50 is good though. If you've lived with any sense that you're here to be educated, then hopefully you have achieved some self-knowledge by the time you reach this age. Throughout your youth, there's all that seeking. Who am I? Where's Mr. or Ms. Right? It takes up so much time and creates so much personal frustration."

The first entrant within the Significant Others category of Mitchell's own CV was Brad MacMath, a photographer with whom she studied at a Calgary art college. Then came an early marriage, in 1965, to folk singer Chuck Mitchell. Later, after settling in Los Angeles, the fledgling star was linked first with former Byrds member David

Crosby, who produced 1968's *Songs to a Seagull*, her debut album, and then to Graham Nash.

Those who subscribe to the theory that great art is born out of personal struggle have noted with satisfaction that the ebb and flow of these and other romances coincided with the writing of a series of albums wherein she took the confessional songwriting art to new and still unconquered peaks. For evidence, listen to *Blue* (1970), *For the Roses* (1972), *Court and Spark* (1974), *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975) and *Hejira* (1976). For Mitchell it was a golden period creatively, and one in which her prolificacy was matched, amazingly, by the very highest, most questing standards.

A second marriage, to bassist and record producer Larry Klein, brought a prolonged period of stability, lasting from the mid-80s through to their breakup after 10 years together. Ha! those theorists have exclaimed. The work she produced during their years together (characterized by lyrics which looked outward, rather than in) was just not as compelling. Though divorced now, she and Klein have remained on good terms, and he continues to work on her records.

After their parting, she became involved with Don Freed, a singer-songwriter. *A Smile is the Best Face-lift* is the title of a song she wrote about their early courtship and, appropriately enough, she grins widely when I ask if they are still together.

"Yes. He's lovely. He's wonderful." It is as much as she will volunteer about them or him.

In Mitchell's case, achieving any sense of closure with the past came to be dependent on tracing the

child she had given over to the Canadian authorities when she herself was just 20 years old. Kilauren Gibb (she takes her surname from the Toronto couple who became her parents) was born from the singer's relationship with MacMath. The eventual reunion between the two women in 1988 was loaded with emotion. For Mitchell, there was the additional shock and thrill of finding that she was already a grandmother. Gibb, still based in Canada and a former model, was by then divorced from the father of her son, Marlin, now six, and last year had a daughter, Daisy, by a different partner.

"It's been wonderful and oh, it's been everything," says Mitchell. "I love my grandson. Love him. But my daughter is a difficult girl, you know? Mother-daughter — it's a very hard relationship, and she's going to have to forgive me."

Once upon a time, all of this

might have been grist to the lyrical mill. These days Mitchell is more circumspect. She is no longer inclined to be confessional or introspective in song. Nor does she wish to continue the train of social comment that has run through her later albums. With the release of 1998's *Taming the Tiger*, she fulfilled a contractual obligation to deliver to Warner Bros. only collections of original material, thus making possible the cover version concept of *Both Sides Now*. And, for the time being at least, there will be no new, self-written material.

"You ask how I feel about America as she is these days. Well, one of the reasons I'm not writing is that I'd rather not say. I can be a very harsh critic, so I've decided to take a sabbatical until I can be nice again!" And she laughs again, but shortly.

"I don't want to be a prophet of doom. I don't even want to get started on it all in conversation here and now. But I admit I feel impotent in the face of much of what we've allowed ourselves to become. It's a crass and corrupt world. The sediment has risen to the top."

As daylight fades and the sky above Bel Air turns a deep, expensive blue, I remember the name of performance artist John Kelly. I had read a report of one of his shows, which included him singing — in full Joni drag — an early Mitchell song, *The Circle Game*, while a rubber chicken revolved endlessly on a turntable.

"Tell me about him," I urge her. Mitchell melts.

"It was in this tiny club. I had prepared myself to be roasted, caricatured, but what I found instead was one more kindred spirit. For a start, we have a very kindred wardrobe! For the first set, he was young Joni, for the second Joni in LA. And I liked both dresses! He was very me!"

"Beyond that, it was not . . . what I expected. It was dreamlike, weird, kind of like being dead and going to your own funeral. He sang *Shadows and Light* a cappella and, oh! And the audience was so cool. There was one girl who looked from time to time to see my response, but mostly they acted like I wasn't there. Until, after three encores, it became clear he wasn't coming back. Then they all turned and held their lighters aloft and towards me."

"You see?" I tell her. "You're loved. People live their lives with your music as a soundtrack. I have."

The smile I am rewarded with could be that of the DeMolay Sweetheart, 1959. "Come here," Mitchell commands, rising from her seat. "You need to be given a hug."

— *The London Times Magazine*.



This double *Joni Mitchell* self-portrait (front view, left, and rear view, right) serves as the cover art for her new CD, *Both Sides Now*, an album dedicated to her daughter, Kilauren Gibb.