

Interview

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Molly Ringwald



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COVER:

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THIS PAGE:

MAXFIELD PARRISH, "THE SANDMAN," 1902, OIL ON CANVAS ON WHITE PINE PANEL, 21½" x 27¼". FROM
THE COLLECTION OF THE LATE ARCHIBOLD VAN BEUREN. "THE SANDMAN" AND OTHER ART AND
FURNISHINGS FROM MR. VAN BEUREN'S EXTENSIVE COLLECTION WILL BE AUCTIONED BY CHRISTIE'S
EAST AT A "HOUSE SALE" AT THE FAMILY'S MIDDLETOWN, RHODE ISLAND ESTATE.

Joni Mitchell

by
Guy D. Garcia

She is the once and future hippie child, both liberated woman and hopeless romantic, seductress and soothsayer, role model and trailblazing individualist. Joni Mitchell, the preeminent female poet-artist-singer-songwriter of the Woodstock generation, entered the world as Roberta Joan Anderson 41 years ago in the Canadian town of Ft. MacLeod, Alberta. Though best known for her undulating melodies and intensely introspective lyrics, her first professional passion was to be a visual artist. During her stint as a student at the Alberta Institute of Art, she took up the baritone ukulele and began commuting to Edmonton for weekend "folk hoots" at local coffee houses. In 1964 she moved to Toronto where she met and eventually married Detroit musician Chuck Mitchell. Divorced and living alone in New York City two years later, she rented an apartment in Chelsea and sang her songs in small clubs for as little as fifteen dollars a night.

In the winter of 1967, Mitchell was introduced to Elliot Roberts and David Geffen, two young show biz agents who would go on to become her manager and the president of Asylum Records, respectively. Within a year Mitchell had begun a new life in California, and David Crosby agreed to produce her first album, "Song to a Seagull." A rustic roost on the shoulder of Laurel Canyon's Lookout Mountain, Mitchell's house became a favorite hangout for neighbors like Mama Cass Elliott, John Sebastian, Stephen Stills and Neil Young. According to one popular version of rock history, Crosby, Stills and Graham Nash sang together for the first time during a party in her living room. Mitchell continued to paint and write songs, among them "Circle Game" and "Woodstock," a world-wise celebration of the Aquarian Age that became the anthem of the counterculture.

A brilliant trilogy of albums released during the 1970s—"Blue," "For the Roses" and "Court and Spark"—confirmed a growing musical sophistication and emotional depth in Mitchell's music, marking her transcendence of the folk rock label and signaling the first stirrings of a long love affair with jazz. In 1974, she appeared on the cover of Time magazine, which described her as "the rural neophyte waiting in a subway, a free spirit drinking Greek wine in the moonlight, an organic Earth Mother dispensing fresh bread and herb tea, and the reticent feminist who by trial and error has charted the male as well as the female ego." Unimpressed by the trappings of mainstream success, Mitchell pushed deeper into the realm of jazz-rock fusion with such albums as "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" (1975), "Hejira" (1976) and "Mingus" (1979), the result of a collaboration with the late jazz legend Charles Mingus.

The early 1980s proved to be a period of unabated personal and artistic expansion for Mitchell. Released in 1982, the "Wild Things Run Fast" album was critically hailed as an uncompromising return to Mitchell's rock and roll roots. Soon thereafter she married Larry Klein, an L.A.-born bassist who played on "Wild Things." Mitchell's painting evolved as well; last year her large impressionistic canvases were displayed at two separate exhibitions at the Manhattan nightclub-cum-art gallery Kamikaze. Meanwhile, Mitchell and Klein have begun recording her next album, which will feature the talents of English music wizard Thomas Dolby.

The oceanside dwelling where Mitchell has lived for the past two years exudes classic California cool—white walls and flagstone floors frame a tranquil swatch of sand and Pacific blue. Earth-toned Native American baskets and throw rugs are offset by several of her vivid, multi-layered acrylic paintings. Blonde hair loose around her shoulders, Mitchell offers her guest a glass of California Cabernet Sauvignon and reads a large, well-used ashtray before sitting cross-legged on the floor. As she speaks, her sentences are frequently punctuated by easy, slightly mischievous laughter.

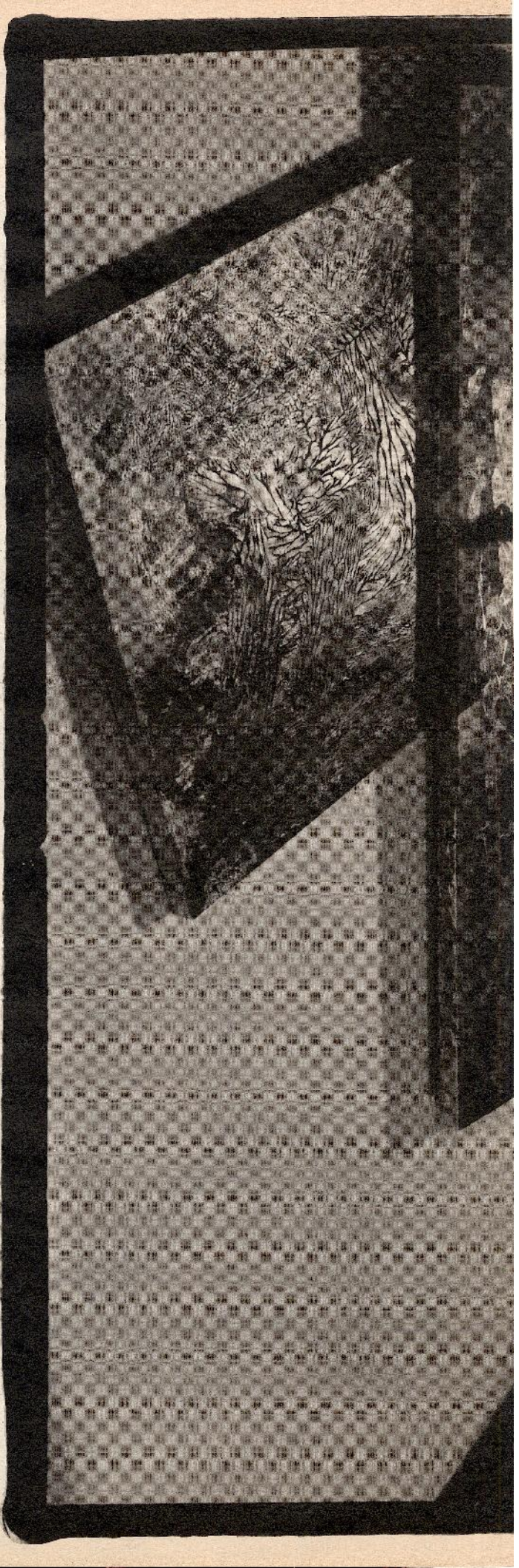
GUY D. GARCIA: Some of your work—the cover of Wild Things Run Fast, for instance—seems to be heading back, at least partially, toward a figurative style. Is that part of a conscious effort to reenter the artistic mainstream?

JONI MITCHELL: While I was working on the Mingus project, I also went to visit Georgia O'Keeffe, and I spent five days there. And that was inspiring. I began to paint after I left there. Georgia, you know, has an exquisite sense of design, tremendous sensuality and—though not all the time—not a lot of brush style. I don't mean to sound critical of her. I'm such a fan, you know, but she herself would say, "I'm not a very good painter, but I have a lot of nerve."

GG: Is it true that she once said you were one of the few people in the world who deserved to live?

JM: Well, she didn't put it quite like that. I'll tell you the story: People had been

JONI MITCHELL PHOTOGRAPHED BY MOSHE BRAKHA.
STYLING—MS. LOLA.



saying to me for a long time that I reminded them of a young Georgia O'Keeffe. And I didn't know anything about her, because at that time there was no book available on her work and I hadn't seen any of her paintings. And then Juan Hamilton was responsible for getting out a compilation of her work. Somebody gave it to me for Christmas. So the following year a friend of mine and I decided to visit her. I prepared a little package of presents for her: the *Hejira* album and a Christmas book of my drawings. Late in the afternoon we pulled up in front of Georgia's house. There was no doorbell, no real way to announce that you were there. So I went through this break in the fence, and there was a path that led around by her bedroom window. And through the bedroom window, I saw that she had the same luggage as I did, which I took as a good omen. You need a good omen when you're trespassing on someone's property. So I said, "Oh, at least we have this much in common." I came around the back of the house, and there she stood in the kitchen, with her black and white winter uniform on, and the "O.K." abstract pin. I saw her white hair and her black eyebrows. And as I came around the corner, she threw her head up into the air—like, in disdain—and disappeared. And I thought, "Oh God, I know exactly how she feels."

JONI MITCHELL: "I'm not that crazy about the dominance (and) sadism (of MTV).... It makes me heartsick—all dazzle and no lift."

But I kept going forward. The maid came to the door and looked at me as if I weren't too out of line. "Would you like to give them to her yourself?" she asked. And I said, "No, no, it's okay—I'll give them to you, you give them to her, because I understand her position," and we split.

So, anyway, we returned home and there was a bowl that my mail congregates in—sometimes I don't open my mail for long periods of time. So it's stacked up for months. Maybe it had even stacked up for a year in this bowl. And lying right on top was an ARTnews magazine, and on the cover was Georgia. I turned to the article on her and there was a page where they had blown up the print and what it said was: "So I asked Miss O'Keeffe if she could come back in another life, what would she come back as? And, without skipping a beat, Miss O'Keeffe replied, 'I would come back a blonde soprano who could sing high, clear notes without fear.'" Well, I read that, and I kind of trembled. I thought, there's something very mystical about this, my being drawn there, and leaving the record for her, and so on. And I thought, well, that explains why I went, and that's enough for me. Then a couple of days later, in came a postcard. It was *Crows Over Lake George*—the black crow against the blue sky. I flipped it over and it said, "Have we offended you in some way?"—Juan Hamilton." So I started digging through my mail, and I found all these postcards of Georgia's with all of these invitations to come and visit, and a home phone number, and a letter, and more. So I took the number. I called her up—

GG: This was after that first visit?

JM: This was after the first visit. I called her up, and she answered the phone. She said, "Hello," and I said, "Er—Georgia, this is Joni Mitchell, um, I just—I know it's a year after the fact, but I received all this mail and an invitation to come and see you. I would like to come and see you. I'm going to Mexico to see Charles Mingus"—who was down there at that time, you know, pretty much on the home stretch. "I'll be there for about three days. I would like to come and see you on such-and-such a date. Would that be all right?" And she said, "No." She said, "Well, you won't be getting out of there in three days." So I went down to Mexico, and sure enough, on the seventh or eighth day I called her and said, "You know, you were right. I'm stuck here, I'm having a great time, I'm not exactly sure when I'll be out." She said, "Well, there's a friend of mine who's here who would like to meet you. Could you make it here by next Saturday?" This was early in the week, and I said I'd try.

So I left Mexico—Montezuma was with me. I arrived in Phoenix and called her and said, "Look, Georgia, I can't make it at least until Saturday. I just have to hole up here for a few days." She said, "Well, please try to make it before Sunday, because the person who would like to meet you is leaving." So, after three days Montezuma returned me to the world and I went out to this restaurant and on the table were these plastic placemats of hot-air balloons going up into the air. I said to the waitress, "Where does this take place?" She says, "Oh, here." I said, "When?" She said, "Well, once a year." I said, "Oh, when's the next one?" She said, "This Saturday." So I called Georgia back, and I said, "I've got to see this, you know, I've got to see all these balloons go up on Saturday." And she sounded like—she didn't say anything—but there was this long pause at the end of the phone, as if she was thinking, "Oh, that sounds very dull." [laughs] "Why would you want to see that?"

Anyway, Saturday morning I got up at seven o'clock—which is very early for me—and went out to this dusty field to see these things take off. Well, they get up at four-thirty or five, and so by the time I got there nearly everything was in the air—there were about ten balloons on the ground. And I wandered around and I snapped all these pictures—I had a Brownie or some kind of cheap camera. I took all these pictures and I started off on the way to see her. By that time it was late afternoon, and all along the route to her place were these balloons that had left early in the morning. Some were still in the air, one or two were draped over telephone wires. The whole road was this colorful pageant, all the way, leading to her place. And I kept stopping, getting out of the car, wandering into the fields and talking with the people and taking more pictures with this cheap camera.

GG: Did you ever make it to Georgia's house?

JM: Finally I arrived in Santa Fe. I guess it was fairly late in the day. There was dust all over me from trucking around in these dirt fields. So I was debating: Should I go? Should I stay? Maybe I should wait until tomorrow. So I thought, well, the whole trip, including the time with Mexico, had been so plugged into the mystic. You know, omens became important. Superstition in its most colorful ways prevailed, you know, in Mingus' life. He was fighting for his life, fighting with the use of the mystic, since nothing scientific would work for what he had. So I was saturated in omens to begin with. . . . The previous three visits to New York, gypsies had come out of the woodwork, come to my table in restaurants, come up to me on the sidewalk, and told me, in the course of conversation, that my lucky number was eight, and I had always said to them, "No, it's seven." Because, when I was a kid, I used to always ask for bingo card number seven at birthday parties and win with it. It had always been my lucky number, and my birthday was the seventh. Anyway, I pulled out of a gas station with a full tank, and just then, a crow flew up in front of the window with a mouse—a road-hill mouse—in its beak. And—because of the Don Juan books and a relationship with a friend, where we regarded ourselves as People of the Crow, you know, the talking bird, the bird that lines its nest with shiny things—as the bird flew across the windshield, I looked at the numbers, the digits on the, . . .

GG: The odometer?

JM: Yeah! And it was straight eight's, all the way across, even the fast-moving number was on eight. So I thought, okay, this is supposed to be my lucky number. I don't know what eight means or anything like that. I will take that as a sign. I'll advance. So, instead of checking into a motel, I remembered that there was a bluff of trees, about two or three miles from Georgia's place, that we'd passed on the first trip. There was a little stream running through it, and in the winter I thought it would have some water in it, but when I stopped there it was dry. So I gave myself a spit bath, changed my clothes, and I pulled up to her door. As she opened the door she turned her head around, and before she said, "hello" or anything to me she said, "Juan, did you see what time she arrived at?" And apparently what had happened was, behind me, the sun had sunk behind the mountain—something had happened. Anyway, since she's a superstitious woman, my timing was, to her, fortuitous. So all this dawdling, and all of this color had brought me to her door at a time that she felt was right.

That night we sat down to dinner, and it was the most scrumptious meal—the homemade bread and fresh vegetables from the garden. Anyway, on the way I'd stopped in Santa Fe. There was one place that carried Indian artifacts, and I always stuck my nose in there whenever I passed through. They had some Heida rattles that were spectacular, and some Indian dance ankle bells. So I sat through the initial testing ground of dinner. It wasn't as unpleasant as I'm making it, but there was a certain tension, an element of trial. I excused myself at a certain point, because I had these things in the room. And I was dying to try them on, try on the ankle bells and the rattles. I asked Georgia where she wanted me to stay. She showed me two rooms. One room was really kind of nice. But she almost opened the door and said, "You can have this one," and slammed the door. She made it very clear that *that*, of the two rooms she showed me, was where she *didn't* want me to stay. And she put me up in her studio.

Anyway, she kept kind of loitering around the room, and these things were burning a hole in my . . . So I thought, what the hell, you know, I strapped the ankle bells on, and the rattles, and I let out a couple of chants, you know, leaping around the room. She stood there, leaning on her cane and looking at me, like, "Well, you're a curious visitor," you know? [laughs] And the next morning she woke me up real early. We had a beautiful little breakfast. I was dying to take pictures of her, because her costume was just so . . . She had on dress silver, this big wide belt, and this black Spanish flat-brimmed hat. She said I could take pictures, but sometimes the camera won't let me shoot. I mean, the pictures were all ruined by the fact that I almost felt like a sneak thief, trying to go for them. We took a long walk into the country and she was remarkably spry. A woman in her nineties, man, and she was clipping along this road. And I was chain-smoking all the way along it. And suddenly she said to me, "You shouldn't smoke!" And Juan said, "Georgia, that's unlike you to meddle in other people's affairs." And she stopped and leaned on her cane, with one hand on her hip, and she said, "Well—she should live." [laughs] And we continued on our walk. GG: On *Wild Things*, and now on the new album, you've gotten back into rock, maybe to a degree you never have before.

JM: Because they had finally grown players who were ambidextrous. Or bilingual. I mean they could play both rock and jazz authentically. Before that, the two camps were like Catholics and Baptists—not to discredit the earlier work, because everything develops the way it's supposed to anyway. I mean, if I could've found them, Mingus wouldn't have called me out, maybe, you know? And that was a great adventure. It really was—it was just great.

GG: It seems that the current connection between art and music, between "high" and "pop" culture, is stronger than it has been in a long time. A lot of the most interesting new musicians, like Talking Heads, went to art schools just like you did.

JM: Yeah, art school bands. There wasn't such a thing then. Well, like Georgia said when I went to visit her, "Oh, I would've liked to have made music, but you can't do both." And I said, "Oh, yes you can." She leaned forward on her elbows and she said, "Really?" And I could just see her going out to get violin lessons or taking up the accordion.

GG: Did you know that Prince is an admirer of yours? He has apparently put your name on some of his albums.

JM: I met him once or twice. He sent me flowers at the studio. I like some of his songs. I haven't seen *Purple Rain* yet, but I think he's another one of those "lifers." He's driven like an artist—his motivation is growth and experiment as opposed to formula and hits. He goes out of his way to be shocking and everything, but I think he's a sensitive kind of character under the pimpmobile act. But I don't really know him.

GG: Despite all the musical changes you've gone through, your lyrics have remained very personal and confessional. There was a time when the theme that predominated in your music was the search for love and happiness. You're married now. Has that affected your work? Does it change the angle from which you approach your music?

JM: Yeah, it does. The last album, I forget how many times it used the word "love." I never counted them, but I saw one criticism of the album that the word love just made (the critic) sick. They counted the number of times it was used, you know? [laughs] It was a discredit, you know? "Yecch—she used the word 'love,' yecch." Because that sentiment is not particularly popular at this time. It isn't dazzling enough—too tender a notion for the times. This album that I'm working on now has a lot of social observation. I don't think the word "love" comes up in it so much. I have a built-in place where I give and receive love. I mean, you still have to nurture it, right? But I wouldn't write any nurturing songs. Maybe I'm too close up on it to describe it. I've always been better at the anatomy of the crime, anyway—what went wrong. [laughs]

GG: What do you think of MTV?

JM: We're not zoned for it, so I've never had it in my home. I'm completely intrigued by moving pictures. I'll watch anything. If it moves, I'll watch it. I get hypnotized by it like fire, image to image. I'm not that crazy about the dominance, sadism. Sometimes it kind of makes me heartsick—all dazzle and no lift.

GG: The videos for the new album—what direction will they take?

JM: You know what I would really like to do? I would really like to do a video with Bergman. I haven't approached him yet, but there are a couple of songs on the album that I feel he could illustrate very well. In his case I could turn it over to him completely, and he could just lead me around by the nose. But I don't take instruction very well. I've had the luxury of making my own decisions, you know? But there are some people whose judgment, I think, would be . . . I would gamble on their absolute simpatico enough to turn it over. [laughs]

GG: How does it feel to finally be getting some recognition as a painter after all these years of being known primarily as a singer-songwriter. Is it sort of a vindication?

JM: Well, it's fun for me because kids come up to me at restaurants—you know, kids. [pause] I don't feel like an adult yet, so I don't know why I call them "kids." I guess it's because I think I should. [laughs] Anyway, when these people come up and say, "I really like your painting," I really enjoy it. Especially if they specifically single things out. But for years—almost like a schoolmarm or something—the "apples" I've received on tour have been people's creative efforts. You know, when you get the things coming back to your dressing room, among the flowers are people's poetry, people's drawings. I don't know what kind of artifacts come backstage for other people. Usually the note contains something to the effect of "If you can do it, I can do it, too." Which is great, you know? I mean, I like the idea that if you make something, it makes other people make something, too. □



