

Chalk Marks & Coffee Cups

Thus Spake Joni Mitchell

Joni Mitchell was at the end of a gruelling tour, not of concerts but interviews. For the last five months she had been touring the world doing little but face a continuous stream of reporters who asked the same questions in different accents.

Auckland was to be her last stop before returning home to California. However no sooner had she arrived here than Mitchell and her assistant went down with a bout of influenza contracted in Australia. After five days in bed they'd roused themselves for one final round of meet-the-press. The last interview of the day, of the tour, fell to *Rip It Up*.

In such circumstances it would be understandable were Mitchell to be a less-than-enthusiastic subject. In fact she proved the opposite. Over the course of two hours, and fortified by several cigarettes and constant cups of coffee, Mitchell held forth volubly on a wide range of subjects by no means confined to her music. She spoke about figures from Freud to John Coltrane to Reagan ("He's senile. He's an idiot."). She quoted Nietzsche and the *I Ching*. She pondered connections between the invention of the printing press and the witch trials, and she speculated on conspiratorial links between American televangelists and US foreign policy in Latin America.

Laughter

Yet despite the apparent seriousness of what was discussed her talk was constantly punctuated by generous and often self-deflating laughter. She mimicked the voices of Madonna and Bob Dylan and imitated anyone from French TV producers to Japanese journalists. She even vocalised instrumental sounds, including a badly programmed Fairlight synthesiser and a famous session guitarist mis-hitting his notes.

"I'm ranting on you," she grinned at one point during a tirade against journalists. "Once I get wound up! You wanted an interview and you're getting it. I knew I'd do this. I get mean on coffee you know. I'm a happy drunk but a mean coffee drinker."

Equally as fascinating as her steady flow of talk was Joni Mitchell's face. When frowning it became all hooded brow, cool eyes and those famous cheekbones. At such times her small hat seemed to suggest a monastic cap and she was very much the serious-minded artist in her mid-40s. Yet when she laughed the years fell away and, with Chaplinesque chapeau atop long blonde folkie haircut, there sat the fresh-faced troubador who had first bewitched her audience in the 1960s. (Mitchell herself may not concede such striking alterations in her looks but she does admit they have changed with time. "My face began to change when I really began to think. My eyes got more hawklike. They were much more attractive to men when they were soft and insipid and stupid looking.")

Her smiles are quite enchanting, and not merely to this (admittedly predisposed) reporter. Even *Rip It Up's* editor, not a devotee, was charmed, as was an initially un-

interested senior photographer from a daily paper. He'd just stopped by to get a couple of shots before going on to cover a race meeting. Yet he stayed for much longer than required, still not knowing who this strong, fascinating woman really was. Finally, having to leave, he almost bowed in offering his thanks and ventured to suggest that "Miss Mitchell, you really should smile more often." Back came a frown and a "What, with these teeth?" Then, the smile.

Chalk Marks

Of course one reason behind Mitchell's interviews was to publicise her new album *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*. But more than that the tour has served to mark her 20th year of recording. Initially however, she had felt no inclination to embark on such an extensive junket.

"I was empty. I had put all my energy into making the record. It took me two and a half years and a lot of thought and a lot of work. I was very proud of it. But the initial feedback I got on it was terrible. Nobody could recognise it. Everybody wanted it to be something other than what it was. It was depressing, and in that state I was expected to go cheerily into interview mode. I felt completely down and isolated. But as I began to tour, as luck would have it, those things that are empty fill up again. I feel I've grown a lot on this trip in certain ways. Whether it will manifest itself in my art I don't know."

What has proved instructive for Mitchell about the tour was gathering the perceptions her audiences have of her. One idea which followed her around was that she no longer writes intimately.

"While I'm not as introverted as I was in my 20s it's true. Listening to the early work again I realise that some of it is extremely internal. But because I no longer write from that particular place anymore doesn't mean that what I'm writing now is any less personal. Or less valid. It was almost like people wanted me only and forever to be this fainting Ophelia-like creature. Obviously one has to grow some teeth to survive. If I hadn't I probably wouldn't still be here."

"Travelling around I've had a request to write more love songs, preferably of the suffering order. In Japan they were relentless. They wanted to break up my marriage." She laughs and takes another sip of coffee. "People really want me to get miserable so they can have some songs they like. They have an appetite for conflict only of a romantic nature, when there are so many other kinds."

And it's conflict of the social and political kind that have taken an increasing prominence on Mitchell's last two albums. While concerns such as environmental pollution have appeared in her work since the early days — one thinks of 'Big Yellow Taxi' and

PHOTOS BY TIM RAINGER



'Banquet' — the recent songs are far more angry and direct.

Urgency

"Perhaps it's the urgency I felt regarding the topics on the last two albums. I just found the 80s in America to be such an alarming time, the collapse of the dream for many — the small businessman, the farmer. We were watching capitalism turn into a casino as the high-roller business school wizards took over."

She now considers some of the songs on 1985's *Dog Eat Dog* as almost prophetic: "The writing on the wall. When I wrote about some of those things people didn't care for it. *Dog Eat Dog* came out before the Iran/Contra scam and before the fall of the TV evangelists. My function has always been I'm both sensitive enough and tough enough to not just be geared towards popularity, I'm

geared to telling it like I see it. In the early days, when I was expressing my internal feelings, others weren't doing that. Then once I started expressing how I saw America crumbling others didn't want that."

Mitchell has also experienced the sharper edges of 80s capitalism at first hand. "I've just had two of the roughest years of my life with people trying to make a quick buck out of me. My housekeeper sued me. The State of California beat on me for money and I sued them. (I won but they might contest it.) I was ripped off by a bank. It woke me up. I used to feel my terrain was matters of the spirit and that they didn't go together with politics."

Yet she bristles at the suggestion that in turning from matters of the heart to political concerns the songwriting may become less universal, more limited in audience identification. "The Beat of Black Wings' is a song about war, period. Regionalism is not in that song, it's in the journalism that accompanies it. People read the journalism and decide that's what the song is about and don't hear the song itself anymore. The songs will hold up. You've got preachers in this culture have you not? Check them out against 'Tax Free.' You've got greedy businessmen don't you, your own dark little entrepreneurs? Check them out against 'Dog Eat Dog.'"

Ripening

If sections of Mitchell's audience are questioning aspects of her recent work from the lyrics' subject matter to her increasing use of guest vocalists — she believes she has no choice but to risk their disapproval. "It disappoints me but I have to do it anyway. The music is closer to my vision now but people don't know that. They keep lamenting but I'm better than ever. I can hear it. I know I am. And so I should be. You know rock and roll is a youth-oriented thing but I'm not a rock and roller. I'm a musician. I'm in my ripening age and yet I'm being dealt with as if I'm in my decline."

Such pugnacious self-confidence has stood her in good stead ever since she first set foot on a stage in the mid-60s. From the outset Mitchell acted as her own agent and insisted on maintaining her own publishing rights. "I'm an independent cuss. By the time my known career was beginning I thought it was at an end. Every record contract offered me was slave labour. I knew that fame was fickle and I realised people had got me confused with Joan Baez and Judy Collins. Although I came after them I was still a girl with a guitar so I got lumped in with them."

She credits David Crosby, producer of her first album and at that stage a folk-rock superstar, with hearing the essential uniqueness in her music and refusing to turn her into "the current thing." Moreover the fact that Crosby brought the record in under budget pleased the company, with the result that "they've pretty much left me alone ever since. And even though the last couple of albums have been very expensive to make. They took a long time, and with 48 tracks running that's high rent district you know. In spite of the fact that I'm not a platinum selling artist and their profit margin was severely wounded, they still haven't sent an A&R man to breathe down my neck."

Bushy Egos

Talking to Mitchell one definitely imagines any A&R man would have his work cut out trying to impose the company's will. The woman's ego is, by her own definition, "a bushy one." She shrugs. "Art and ego are synonymous. You've got to have a big ego to be a performer. To try and hide it is ridiculous. There's nothing more disgusting to me than false humility. Some of the most amazing artists were outrageous egotists. Look at G B Shaw. Acts of ego of a certain order are not unattractive to me."

She discusses her friendship with the late Jaco Pastorius in these terms, speaking

"I've always hated live albums"

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