

The original idea was that Joni Mitchell would hold a press conference during the afternoon before her Auckland concert. And although he'd probably get to pitch a few questions along with all the other reporters, the fan felt disappointed. Dreamer that he was, after one and a half decades of devotion he wanted to meet the lady personally.

Besides, he knew how wary Mitchell was of the press. Only recently she had been reported as saying:

"They often look on the celebrated person with animosity. You feel like you're going into enemy camp . . . and you've got to be on guard all the time — which doesn't lead to a very good exchange."

Then the press conference fell through, or rather there was mention of her meeting press after the concert instead.

Half an hour before midnight the hotel lounge was filling up: tour entourage, record company people, radio people, press, local scene makers — all buzzing about the concert, picking at the food, clutching their drinks and keeping an eye on the door for her arrival. Yet ten minutes later Joni Mitchell was able to enter the room largely unnoticed. In contrast to the elegant white suit she'd worn on stage, Mitchell was dressed in black dungarees and windbreaker with a dark baseball hat hiding her flowing blond hair. Flanked by manager Elliot Roberts and husband-bassist Larry Klein, she slipped quietly behind a coffee table and on to a low wall-side couch.

The fan was quick enough to secure one of the four lounge chairs enclosing the other three sides of the table and found himself seated alongside Klein. (On stage the bassist looked like a very handsome cross between Elliot Gould and Phil Lynott. Up close the only qualification is that he's a lot younger than both.) The fan's initial impulse was to lean across and begin blurting to Joni his excitement about her performance. But the woman slumped over there scarcely seemed the gracefully moving chanteuse who'd just enraptured a packed theatre for two hours with her beautiful voice, poetry and music. This woman, her faced lined with fatigue, was hunching down into her jacket as if reluctantly resigned to sitting through yet another after-show bash. Underneath the long-brimmed cap her eyes concentrated on a chicken leg, holding it as if in defence against any would-be interviewer's microphone.

The fan settled back in his chair. Okay, he was meant to be a reporter, but he'd only been

"... the press. They keep going 'She's forty now; she's forty now'. I'm young."

playing that game for five years or so; his involvement with Joni Mitchell went back fifteen and he'd rather lose an interview than cause her any annoyance. Instead, after a couple of minutes and a club sandwich, he started chatting to Klein.

"Loved the show. Wonderful. How was it for you tonight?"

"Really good. The audience felt very warm and responsive." Klein's drawl was pure California.

"I got a very strong impression of Joni's hand at all levels of the presentation, from the programme design right through to the stage layout. She did design those drapes over the stage didn't she? They were very effective."

At the mention of the drapes Mitchell raised her head and looked over. When she leaned on Klein's shoulder and began to speak the fan felt almost afraid to acknowledge her.

"You like them, huh?" she said through a mouthful of food. "I originally just drew the design with a marker pen on paper. They were originally to be in neon but that would be too difficult to carry. So we switched the design over, got them sewn up and then figured out how to backlight them to have the same flexibility. With lighting you can pick out sections — a rural landscape, a city scene, whatever."

By this stage the fan had dropped his piece of paper containing all the carefully prepared questions and he couldn't remember one of them. Instead he repeated the same question he'd asked Klein.

"Good. Very good. The only thing that was difficult for me was that, because of them recording it and the videotapes running out after every few songs we'd have pauses whereas I tend to see the show like a play with a dynamic going on. It threw me off a little bit. We've got it up to a well-paced thing. There's still some flexibility though."

"Your voice sounded very good tonight, a lot stronger than the breathy, flutty tones of the early albums."

"Yeah it's pretty good. I'm singing at a loud volume because of the band. I don't want them to play down to me. I want to sing up to them. I think it's the strongest singing I've ever done in my career. I've got one weak spot in it though; right in the break between chest tones and head tones it sometimes thins out. I only



hit that spot in two songs and if I don't compensate by pushing twice as much air through, sometimes nothing comes out. There's a couple of worn threads there at the moment — but that's the dues for a rock'n'roll singer you know."

Does it make you reconsider the idea of continuing with a rock lineup?"

"Oh no. The only questions on that come from the press. They keep going 'She's forty now; she's forty now'. I'm young. I was a late bloomer." Her laugh, if it weren't so husky, would almost be a giggle.

The fan, acutely conscious that Mitchell could lean back away from him at any moment, searched for a sensible question. Instead he talked about himself.

"Aaah," he began, "there's a lot of people who've measured out certain stages in their lives to Joni Mitchell records, who feel an emotional involvement there. So they tend to have perhaps a lot of preconceptions about you. Does that ever worry you?"

"No, not any more. Really all it means is that the changes I've gone through have been shared in common. That's what my optimism was when I wrote the songs coz if they were only my changes then I was just standing up there with my clothes off. Obviously I don't know what feelings occur when one of my songs goes out into a hall — what exactly the associations are."

"Do you ever look back on any of the words you've written and wish you hadn't exposed yourself in quite the way you did?"

"I never feel embarrassed about anything I've written. It goes out from me but it hangs there. Witnesses draw it through their own life or, if they choose to reject it, bounce it back. If they relate to it we must have something in common."

"What's the matter with feeling good? Is feeling good not hip?"

The fan suddenly, luckily, recalled a comment he'd made earlier to his wife: that Joni Mitchell rarely addressed her songs to women, nearly always to men. He remembered his wife's reply and now addressed it to Mitchell.

"Judging from the songs, one might conclude that you relate better to men than to women. Would that be true?"

Mitchell's manager, who until now hadn't been paying much attention to the conversation, looked sharply at the fan. Mitchell herself paused a moment before replying.

"In life I think I always have, yeah. I got the distinct impression as I was growing up that men enjoyed each other's company and women didn't. And I was always a tomboy. I played better with boys than I did with girls. There was always one boy who used to break down my huts in the backyard and stuff but girls used to do really vicious things to me. They'd traumatized me for as long as I could remember. I always felt safer with boys, although I do remember crying when hanging out with boys because there were just some levels you can't get in on with them. My experience in the school system with girls was that a lot of their friendships amounted to conspiracies. They would conspire to the exclusion of other girls. I suppose men can be the same way."

"But," she continued, lighting one of the long, dark cigarettes she'd smoked on stage, "I do have some girlfriends, girls to share things with, who can keep a secret; people who, if say, they have any envy for you at any given moment, can spit it out and not fester. Men, women — I have no prejudice one way or the other. I just somehow found myself able to be more myself with men."

"Has that made it easier for you to cope with a life in this business?"

"I suppose so. I'm travelling with eighteen

men. Larry and I," she snuggled into his arm, "we couldn't have a better friendship. We're the best of friends. I think it has to do with spirit somehow." She looked down at the way she was sitting, sprawled with legs flung out and laughed. "I never learned to sit like a girl. I guess if you strip away woman's mannerisms, the ways they're taught, there's probably not that much difference between us. There's so much cultural imposition."

By now the fan had begun to realize that he was indeed getting something like his long-desired interview. With an approaching confidence he replied and again found manager Roberts' gaze turned fixedly on him.

"Yet despite all this," he suggested, "your work seems suffused with a sentimental cynicism towards men."

Mitchell considered her cigarette a moment and then looked up.

"I guess that's fair. Yeah, that's a pretty good description. About people in general probably. It's just that I write mostly about men. There's a dissatisfaction with the quality of the relationship. But it's not that I'm always scolding bad boys you know. Often I'm the anti-hero. Rather than big victims in my songs I see little failures, descriptions of shortcomings. You know it's like:

You don't like weak women, you get bored so quick

You don't like strong women 'cause they're hip to your tricks.

That applies to both sexes. Now that we know each other's weaknesses is the game going to get dirty or what? Does familiarity indeed breed contempt?"

"A large proportion of your audience tonight was women, including a fair number of gay women. All the women I know who are familiar with your work, besides relating to the way you articulate their feelings, see you as a figure of strength."

Mitchell shrugged. "I've led an independent life. I think that's the only thing."

"Well, how do you relate to the title 'feminist'?"

"I disassociate myself from a lot of that. It's too militant. A lot of feminists don't really like men. I like men; I like their company and that separates me from a lot of the feminists I've met — movement feminists, that is, not household feminists. It's not that I'm unsympathetic to a lot of the difficulties women encounter, it's just that I've never felt the need to organize."

At the last question Mitchell's manager had lent over and, frowning, told the fan to 'wind it up'. He then stood up and went in search of a drink. The fan took this chance to ask Mitchell her reactions to public reception of her new album *Wild Things Run Fast*.

"The people seem to like it but some reviewers want to dismiss it. There's been two main criticisms. One is that it's kinda like *Court and Spark* but it's not so innovative. Well, for a start that wasn't in any sense genuinely innovative because everything on it had been done in the classics and other fields. It's just that it was new for pop music. Its newness wasn't all that recognized at the time anyway. The new album is fresh which to me is as good as innovative."

"The other thing is some critics say they like me better when I'm miserable. In other words they think I'm somehow deeper when I'm unhappy. I think some of these new songs are, ah, deeply light in their descriptions of joy. What's the matter with feeling good? Is feeling good not hip? I'm happily married and I'm really glad to be writing about feeling good. Critics have a tendency to think that anything regarding feeling good is a cliché because it's so simple. The statement of joy is always brief because you don't go on and on about it like you might when you're feeling bad. And people call that simplistic. But I think that 'Underneath The Streetlight', for instance, is a joyous song that has something to it. It's not hackneyed."

"You've never been quite that direct about it before."

"Certainly. For me to write 'Yes I do, I love You' that simply is definitely new. It's like . . . you know that line in 'Both Sides Now' about longing to say 'I love You' right out loud. That was kind of prophetic in a way because till now I've never been able to say it without qualifying it."

Fascinated, the fan hadn't noticed that Elliot

"Mingus took a lot of energy. It was harder than if I'd done my own music"

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Roberts had returned. He plunged on. "After thirteen albums, don't you ever worry that the muse may depart?"

"Oh yeah, constantly. Elliot'll tell you that. I tell him all the time that I'm dried up. You go through dry spells. It's inevitable, like seasons. It doesn't rain all year. And Mingus took a lot of energy. It was harder than if I'd done my own music, chiselling my words on to someone else's melodies, especially such complex melodies, saxophone solos and so on."

The lines around her eyes creased into a tired smile but Roberts was standing there glowering. He pointed at the fan then pointed to the door. Reluctant to depart the fan tried one more question as he rose.

"Considering the various musical styles you've adopted, which do you think has been conducive to the best poetry so far?"

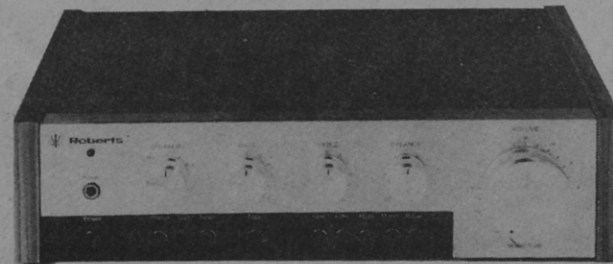
Again Mitchell smiled. "I would say some of my best poetry is on *Hejira*. It's the most original in a lot of ways. Some people like the classicism of some of the earlier stuff, its density perhaps. I like the more open, conversational style just as well. But with the new album; the more it gets back towards rock'n'roll the more neat the song structure has to be. In my act of craving more rhythm the songs became more structured that way and so the lyric had to be reeled in."

By now Elliot Roberts was standing beside the fan miming beating his head. With effusive statements of gratitude the fan stumbled away from the table and out of the lounge.

Moments later, standing by his car, trying to collect his dazed impressions of the previous half-hour, he noticed a couple walking hand in hand across the road towards the hotel's cabins. As they passed underneath the streetlight he could see that it was Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein.

Peter Thomson

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