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A conversation with Joni Mitchell

by Daniel Levitin

It's the summer of 1970 and all my friends have been buying Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's new album, "Deja Vu" non-stop. The last cut on the first side of the record contains a song that is all over AM radio, and we still can't get enough of it: "Woodstock." Somewhere in the middle of the song, one line reaches out and grabs us: "I seem to be a cog in something turning."

On dusty evenings for three weeks in August, we sat around a Manzanita-wood fire in the Northern California mountains, a hundred kids from 7 to 17 at summer camp. We sang the old camp standards heard at a thousand campfires just like ours: "Kumbaya," "They Call The Wind Maria," "Dona Dona." Then, as the sun went down, one of the counselors would bring out his guitar and teach us new songs, like "Blowin' In The Wind," "Both Sides Now," and "The Circle Game:"

> "Yesterday a child came out to wonder
> Caught a dragonfly inside a jar
> Fearful when the sky was full of thunder
> And tearful at the falling of a star
> ...
>
> And the seasons they go round and round
> And the painted ponies go up and down
> We're captive on a carousel of time..."

The smell of the fire, the dust on my face, and the sound of a hundred voices singing this song in unison are still vivid in my mind. I knew Joni Mitchell songs before I even knew who Joni Mitchell was.

Roberta Joan Anderson was raised in the small town of North Battleford, Saskatchewan. At 17 she moved to Toronto where she played and sang in coffee houses. After a series of successful shows in New York she was signed to Frank Sinatra's Reprise label in 1967. She married Chuck Mitchell, whose name she still keeps. Her early songs - "Both Sides Now" and "The Circle Game" were hits for other artists, which probably influenced the record label to let her produce her own albums starting with 1969's "Clouds," an unusual freedom for any artist in those days; and despite the consciousness-raised times, a very unusual freedom for a woman.

Her early albums were inappropriately dubbed "folk" by reviewers unable to hear beyond the simple

instrumentation to the more complex harmonic structure underneath. As Mitchell notes, "they just saw a girl with a guitar." For 1974's "Court and Spark" Mitchell brought in some of the best jazz musicians in Los Angeles, including Tom Scott and the LA Express, and brought lush arrangements to songs such as "Down To You" and "Car On The Hill." ("Car" featured such complex rhythms that notating its bridge has been used as a final exam question in theory classes at the Berklee College of Music.)

In the following years she worked with some of the best jazz musicians in the world, including Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Eddie Gomez, and Jaco Pastorius. Her explorations brought her into the jazz world, but at the cost of alienating many of her original fans. Yet the songs continued to grow musically and thematically, and the new players helped her to better fill out the harmonic complexities that had were latent in the early albums, but had always been implied. While many musicians search and grow over the years, it is rare that the public gets to eavesdrop on that growth, and even rarer that the growth results in such a corpus of continuous creativity. Her achievements across the last 30 years have been recognized by 9 Grammy Award Nominations, and 4 Grammy Awards [Jennifer: please check these numbers] including the "Best Pop Album" award in 1995 for her introspective and ambitious opus, "Turbulent Indigo."

Joni and I spent a rainy afternoon together in Vancouver, British Columbia, in April, 1996. She was gracious, funny, and fiercely intelligent. She was a lively conversationalist; she knew far more about poetry, literature, jazz and art than I do. She also does inspired imitations of the speaking voices of Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. I had the sense that she would have no patience for fools or the insincere; that she would have terminated the interview if I hadn't done my homework. Because she has spent so much effort trying to allow her own sincerity to emerge, I suspect she would not tolerate a lack of it in anyone else. I say "effort" because with sincerity comes vulnerability, and the emotional cost of sustaining vulnerability in modern society must be very, very high, both in business and personal relationships. In the last fifteen years or so she has tried somewhat to reduce her vulnerability, a move reflected to some extent in her lyrics. But in our two-hour conversation, she was entirely open and honest, and spoke about topics ranging from her creative process to her own vulnerability. I felt that she has a very deep sense of who she is, and I think that it is only from this kind of deep sense that great art can emerge.

"I ramble a lot," she warned me before we began. But it is a coherent rambling, the inevitable product of an active mind; of having had an interesting life and thought carefully about it. And she has had some amazing experiences to talk about. The little girl with the guitar from the small town of North Battleford, Saskatchewan wrote a song that defined my generation.

In an industry that throws around the word "art" like a frisbee, centered in a town where valet parking is considered an artform, Joni is the real thing, an artist. In person, and in her repertoire, she makes a convincing case that her art is driven more by a desire to express herself than a desire for any of the accouterments of pop stardom. Her music has followed her own artistic explorations; it is personal because she makes it for herself, and connects to so many because it is so free of artifice. In the pop idiom, this is not easy.

1. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

DL: You've co-produced nearly all your albums; a long string of them with Henry Lewey, more recently with Larry Klein. How did you get into production?

JM: Well, [David] Crosby produced my first record, and then for the second record, the record company

brought in a "real" producer. And after that album, it became apparent to me that if I worked with this guy it would kill my love of music...after that, I just took over myself.

DL: You were considered one of the "new folk" musicians at that point.

JM: Right. The thing is, what I was doing was not really folk music, it just looked like it superficially because it was a girl with a guitar. But if you actually listened to the music - the musical content was really coming out of a pop base in a certain way and also a classical base in another way.

I had been exposed to a lot of adjudicated classical music in the small town that I grew up in. A lot of the children that I knew were classical music students; that was just how music was expressed in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. There was pop music on the radio but nobody locally played it; it was just the classics. People studied voice, and they studied piano...

DL: As you did?

JM: Well, briefly. I took a little bit of piano but my love for it was killed because I wanted to create and that concept was foreign to them.

DL: Did you study voice when you were growing up?

JM: No. But everybody was always singing in my town.

DL: Your vibrato is just natural?

JM: Well, I sang a lot. Everybody sang in our town. There was an adjudicated choral competition, I sang in the church choir, I sang descant. that explains the kind of melody that I like, which takes long interval leaps. It was hard for a lot of kids to make those jumps of fifths and so on.

2. Isles of Miles

DL: You've recorded with some of the best jazz musicians in the world. How come you never worked with Miles [Davis]?

JM: Oh, I would have loved to. I approached him many a time.

DL: Was it because you are white?

JM: I originally thought that, but that wasn't it. When Miles died we went to an art opening, his brother Eugene was there, his son and one of his wives, Shirley, a lot of people were there. And I said to his brother Eugene,

"Miles would never play with me because I was white." And Eugene said, "No, Joni, it wasn't that. It was because you are a singer.

Miles would say (whispers, imitating Miles' voice) 'Singers! [contemptuously] They got words to do it with. I don't have words. I've got to do it without the words.' "

I said, oh God, if I'd known that when he was living I would have just stayed out. I would have approached him differently. I would have given him the bare track [without vocals on it] because see, a lot of my taste in music comes from loving Miles. I tried everything. I bribed him, I was at his house one time...

DL: His beachfront place in Malibu?

JM: Yeah, he liked my painting and he'd seen this print that a mutual friend of ours had and he called me up, (whispers) 'Joni, I like that painting that you did. Nice colors. I want to come over and watch you paint.' So he would talk painting but he wouldn't talk music with me. He never would talk music.

DL: So you knew him?

JM: A little bit. I approached him on many occasions to play with me see, and he wouldn't play with me. When he died, his son inherited his record collection, and he said to me, "Joni, did you give Dad all your records?"

I said "no, on a couple of occasions I gave him just a tape that I wanted him to play on and an art print to bribe him, or something (laughs)..."

He said, "well he had all your records. And at the end he moved your print from the bathroom up to the side of his bed."

And I thought he must have just been getting ready play with me when he died.

I went to see him four days before he died, along with Wayne Shorter and a whole group of us. He was playing at the Hollywood Bowl, and I walked into the dressing room, and Miles had his hand on Wayne's shoulder and he was talking music to him.

This was unusual, because Miles never talked music; he ordinarily didn't give a lot of instruction. After the show I asked Wayne what they were talking about, and Wayne said that Miles was kind of passing the baton to him. He must have known he was gonna die ...

DL: A spiritual guy like that would know, I guess...

JM: Yes, and he didn't even look sick that night, I didn't notice anything about his energy that was failing or abnormal. But, anyway, he basically told Wayne, as near as I can figure out because Wayne is a very cryptic speaker sometimes, that he was one of the last giants left and that he was undervalued and he shouldn't let people undervalue him ... he kind of gave him a pep talk but there was more to it than that. I heard little bits and pieces of it but I really wanted to be a fly on the wall for that conversation (laughs).

Miles has always been one of my inspirations. My favorite band of Miles is on the Nefertiti album with Ron Carter on bass, Wayne Shorter on saxophone, Herbie Hancock on Fender Rhodes, and the 16-year old Tony Williams on drums. That's some of my favorite music in life! I've played with all that band with the exception of Ron Carter. I basically got that band together for my Mingus album.

The song Nefertiti is unusual for a jazz piece; the structure of the arrangement is the simplest of folk song forms -- verse, verse, verse, verse, verse -- there's not really an "ABC" structure to it. Wayne and Miles are playing the melody in tight unison in the first verse. (Sings melody). So you can hear, the melody begins

with a note of inquiry and it ends with a note of inquiry, leaving it wonderfully unresolved. Then boom, it starts off again. With each module that they go through, Miles and Wayne shift slightly off sync with each other. So they're still playing the melody but it's like a silk screen, it's like they...

DL: Timing-wise, rhythm-wise...

JM: They begin to phrase individually, more so with every take, while still playing the melody. It's an usual piece of music. The melody is so unusual in the first place and they begin to shadow each other - they even clash sometimes. And the bass as I recall is pretty much just anchoring, it's not doing anything too showy. Herbie is scattering colors in, little punctuations. As the song progresses, the drums become more and more and more expressive. When I hear that piece of music, it always evokes this image of late at night in New York City; some guy is coming up from China Town and he's pissed off and drunk and he's knocking over garbage cans and yelling like all the way up town (laughs). It's like that. There's an increasing kind of anger. It's a remarkable piece of drumming.

At the time that I first fell in love with Miles' music my music bore no resemblance to it. As I went along as a songwriter, it leaked more and more into the way that I would voice cords and so on but not necessarily the way that I would move them.

I don't think Miles ever became uninteresting, but I think that over time his bands became less interesting. It began to take him longer and longer on stage to find his inspiration because he was so pure... he'd stand there for half an hour until he heard a riff that he felt like playing. So he'd stand there a long time waiting for something to feel, I think.

DL: With a less interesting band, it would be harder for him to pick up on something to play...

JM: Mmm-hmm. Miles has been a big inspiration, but I never copied him. I picked up a lot about how to voice chords, but not necessarily how to move them. Miles' music is so full of space, but I know it's true that my stuff is choked with words. There's a favorite piece of Miles' from much earlier called "It Never Entered My Mind." At the end of the piece he draws a flat note. He goes out totally flat for I don't know how many bars. The power of that pitch for inducing melancholy is amazing.

DL: No words, just one note. Singularly among instrumentalist for me, I hear him talking to me when he's playing.

JM: Yes, that's exactly it! He is playing words with notes! We did a jam one time, Herbie and Wayne and a bunch of people. It was a medley of two of my songs, "Hejira" and "Furry Sings the Blues." And the band was so star-studded, so jam-packed and my words were taking up so much space, that I remember being disappointed when I first heard it and wishing we could have done a second take. Now we had two saxophonists, two drummers, two vocalists, me and Bobby McFerrin - it was like a Cecil B. DeMille Production! And I felt there was no room for anybody to get in because my damn words were choking it. So here were two horn players and, well with Bobby singing you have basically three horn players in this jam - where are they going to get in with all these words?

DL: Your songs do have a lot of words, but I don't see that as a negative; it's just a different style. Miles would play very spare lines most of the time and Cannonball was the perfect foil for that. In vocal music, that "wordiness" is certainly a valid form: look at Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. Your lyric writing is

something like Hendrick's.

JM: Oh, very much so. In high school I had "Lambert, Hendricks and Ross: The Hottest New Sound In Jazz." I was very influenced by that, that was my Beatles.

[Joni covered two of their songs, "Twisted" on Court & Spark and Centerpiece on "Hissing of Summer Lawns"].

3. Blue and Purple Rain

DL: From your first album in 1968 up through "Hejira" in 1978, there's an optimism -- an undercurrent of optimism in most of your songwriting -- even the more serious and introspective songs. Since then, and starting with "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter", the optimism seems to have been...

JM: Eclipsed?

DL: Yes. And around the same time the songs became less about your personal experience -- there was less "I". Was this conscious?

JM: Yes. I did make a conscious lyrical shift to "you," which is a device that Dylan used for a lot of his autobiographical stuff, I suspect. That has a certain amount of self-protection built into it.

DL: Were there experiences around the mid-70s that caused you to put up a wall? To guard yourself more?

JM: Well I had no wall then and I still really have no wall. But I was at my most defenseless during the making of "Blue." Now to be absolutely defenseless in this world is not a good thing. I guess you could say I broke down, but I continued to work. In the process of breaking down there are powers that come in, clairvoyancy and ... everything becomes transparent. It's kind of an overwhelming situation, where more information is coming in, more truth than a person can handle.

So it was in the middle of all this that I wrote the "Blue" album. It is a very pure album; it's as pure as Charlie Parker. There aren't many things in music that pure. Charlie Parker played pure opera of his soul - especially the times that he was extremely sick. He had no defenses. And when you have no defenses the music becomes saintly and it can communicate. As one group of girls in a bar that accosted me put it (laughs), "before prozac there was you," and especially that album. Somehow it had more power than an aspirin for the sufferer, and I think part of it is because it's extraordinarily emotionally honest; I had no defenses. But you can not go around with no defenses; so defenses had to be built.

DL: And one of them was this lyrical shift.

JM: Yes. I tried with Dylan's device to switch from "I" to "you" on Hissing of Summer Lawns but people didn't like it. In my case, the device failed because people said suddenly, "why are you pointing at us?" In other words, with the "I" device - which wasn't a device, it was just a way I wrote - when I said "I" the listeners could see themselves in it if they wanted to but they could always say "it's her" because of the "I".

DL: It's safer for the listener...

JM: It's safer for the listener. I have a friend who was raised on my music and I've been trying to get him into Dylan. But he doesn't like Dylan because he says Dylan is preaching at him and that's the "you" device.

I still write a lot of personal songs. But "Blue" was, I gather, shockingly intimate for the time.

DL: I'd say not just "Blue" but the two albums on either side of it, from "Clouds" up to "Hissing". There was something not just in the songwriting but also in the vocal delivery that made a lot of people feel like you were singing just to them. They're sitting home in their room listening to your records and they feel a very intimate connection to you, like you're singing only to them.

JM: Well, that's one of the tests for schizophrenia, isn't it? "Do you hear people speaking to you from the media?" (laughs)

Unfortunately a lot of people holed up their room, and, yes, they become obsessive because of that intimacy.

Prince was one of those people (laughs), oddly enough, who holed up in his room with "Hissing of Summer Lawns."

DL: He heard you singing just to him?

JM: Well I don't know about speaking just to him, but he became quite obsessive about "Hissing."

DL: How do you know this?

JM: Because he told me.

DL: How do you do that as a singer and as a writer? How do you get that sincerity?

JM: Well if it sounds sincere, it's because I have a really fine jive detector. I'll give you an example. Let's talk about Mingus for a minute.

Okay, so Mingus gives me these six melodies and he flattered me by calling them Joni One, Joni Two, and so on. Of the six melodies, two stood out to me and the other ones sounded kind of idiomatic to me, and I couldn't really grab onto them. But the one that interested me the most was the first one that I wrote words to and it was called "Chair in the Sky". I said what do you want on this one? And he looked at me really wryly and he said (in a deep voice) "I want you to write about all the things I'm gonna miss when I'm gone."

DL: Wow! That's a difficult assignment.

JM: Well, I wrote it as best I could, and when I recorded it I recorded two takes. In take one, I had interpreted two notes toward the end -

DL: Two of his notes, because he wrote the music -

JM: Right, and I was sure he would rap my knuckles for that, so I recorded another take. Take One he loved - he wanted to send it to the moon in a capsule. The reason that take affected him in that way was because when I sang it, I sang it only to him. But when I sang Take Two, I was singing to a greater audience. And he could perceive the difference. I can perceive that difference.

DL: In your own singing?

JM: Absolutely. So in answer to your question, what I consider great singing is between the singer and God, not an audience necessarily, I mean there are exceptions, there are showy, fun songs that will accommodate a certain amount of winky-wink, nod-nod from the stage, but on these intimate things you almost have to sing with a method acting kind of way - you have to find your sincerity like an actor does. Like Meryl Streep. You have to sing from the heart.

DL: Can you do that on stage?

JM: I can do it. I can go into myself and find it there.

I can do it anywhere unless I have a heckler; I'm real sensitive I need a quiet house. Many a time I've had to stop and say oh come on I can't do this if you're doing that, because it will throw me out of myself.

4. Poets like us

DL: You said "great singing is between the singer and God." Are you actually singing to God?

JM: Well, it's something like that. I don't know. I don't really call in spirits or deities, or anything. I just quietly center myself; I sober myself.

I just know that this is a very mysterious place we're in, and I hardly ever use the word God. As a matter of fact I asked Dylan one time, "what do you mean by 'God,' 'cause if you read the Bible, I can't tell God from the devil half the time! They seem to me to act very similarly."

And Dylan said, "Well, it's just a word that people use."

I said, "yeah, but when you use it, what do you mean?" And he never answered me.

DL: Were you talking to Dylan during his Christian phase, his orthodox Jewish phase or...

JM: Prior to all of it. Then, a couple of years later, when he went through his Christian period prior to his Judaic return, he came up to me and said, "remember that time you asked me about God and the devil? Well I'll tell you now," And he launched into this fundamentalist crap, and I said "Bobby, be careful. All of that was written by poets like us; but this interpretation of yours seems a little brainwashed."

"Poets like us..." he said. He kind of snickered at that.

But there certainly is a creative spark whether or not it has gender or personification. And I thought, when I write, I could go back over it and say "Joni wrote that, Joni wrote that, ohhh, divine intervention, Joni wrote that, Joni wrote that..."

DL: What's a line that was divine intervention?

JM: Oddly enough, most of "Shadows and Light" but I know that would seem like blasphemy to many.

DL: It's some beautiful poetry though.

JM: Thank you! But philosophically it is a kind of secular humanism, if you're a fundamental Baptist or a Catholic: these are really dangerous thoughts. I am forbidden literature on a lot of church lists because I

raise doubt, and because I'm opposed to blind faith.

DL: "Blindness, blindness and sight...

JM: I know the power of blind faith and it's a beautiful power. Don Juan in the Casteneda books has a beautiful, unifying line: I believe, not because I care, but because I must.

DL: Do you have the self awareness that you are one of the best at sincerity?

JM: Yes, I do know that. I know because I can't hear it except in primitives, in primitive music.

DL: You don't hear it in some other singers?

JM: Not much pop music.

DL: You don't hear it in Bob?

JM: Well, I do hear it in Bob, absolutely, Bob can connect up to his stuff really sincerely. In that way he's a great singer. And then he puts his jive in where it belongs. Bob's a great singer.

5. Pastorius didn't play polka-dots.

DL: How do you approach recording a new song? Do you make demos?

JM: In a sense I never make demos because the demos are always incorporated into the final piece. It varies from project to project but for many albums, I would lay down my voice and piano, or voice and guitar. That's my sketch. From that I know where the "height" has to come in, and where the "depth" has to come in. I imagine my cast of characters, my guest performers, and I add them last.

DL: How much do you direct them?

JM: It depends on the performer. Wayne Shorter is a great metaphorical thinker, and he composes from metaphor, as do I. So I can tell him things like 'you're the bird!' He's a pictorial thinker. And he plays off lyrics well.

For the first eight albums or so I was directing bass players and annoying them to death with it. I wanted them to stop putting dark polka-dots all over the bottom and instead to treat it like symphony. When you listen to a symphony, the bass is not always in, it gets light and airy for awhile and then *boom*, it anchors again. And most bassists go plodding along there at the bottom like all pop music does. Finally someone said "there's this bass player in Florida, he's really weird, you'd probably like him..."

DL: Jaco!

JM: Jaco. So Jaco was a natural for me, we were on the same wavelength as far that went.

In later years, I got addicted to perfect time. I would build kind of a skeleton track of programmed drums ... I'd set up the high hat pattern and set up the low end with Larry [Klein]'s help on the Fairlight. Then we'd play the part to a real drummer and have them play it, to loosen it up and put some grease on it. We did "Chalkmark in a Rainstorm" that way, for instance.

DL: You talked about a recording verité. But there's a thing that I love in modern recordings, which is that you can create something that would never exist in the real world.

JM: Yes.

DL: You can put a pair of mics on each end of a piano, and then pan them so that one mic's all the way to the right and the other's all the way to the left. Sitting at home in your living room with the speakers ten feet apart it sounds like the piano is ten feet wide!

JM: I have a new guitar and the way I have set the sounds up is the three bass strings go to the left speaker and the treble goes to the right. Now I have always heard the treble as my "brass section," and if you listen to it closely it's just like this train...it's moving like a triad of muted trumpets because that's how I'm hearing it even though it's an acoustic instrument.

DL: So suddenly the guitar sounds ten feet wide...

JM: It's an orchestra...

DL: ...And your head's in the middle of it.

JM: Yeah - I like that.

6. Up on old Beale Street

DL: What has been your happiest moment in music?

JM: When I wrote "Shadows and Light," which came out intact, verse by verse by verse with no rewrites; that was a thrill.

Also, when I wrote "Furry Sings the Blues." When the second verse came that was a thrill 'cause it all just poured out at once.

In the lyric I'm trying to describe this cop. Like I was robbing cops at the time for sport and...it was kind of a social exercise that I was doing. I tried to get the badge off this cop who turned out to be the photographer at Martin Luther King's assassination; he was a very, very humorless cop, he was. And basically what I was testing with this game with the local police force was, like, how much humor they had, how overtrained they were, how quick on their feet they were, a lot of different things. Well anyway I hit on him and he and I ended up in a barter situation, a trade, and so we picked him up in a limo and took him to this record store and he said "before you leave town you've got to see this."

Well, downtown Memphis was completely demolished. It was a pile of rubble, all but three blocks. And there were wrecking cranes standing around in all this shale just dangling and ready to go while the city fathers or somebody contemplated the fate of these three blocks, which was Old Beale Street and which had all of this black history. On one side of it were all of the old buildings and the other side of it was all contemporary -- pawn shops and a modern theater and a statue of W.C. Handy...

DL: And you wrote that wonderful line, "...pawn shops glitter like gold tooth caps..."

JM: It was hard to describe this ghost town in the middle of the intercity. And driving in the limo, I swear to God the way I remember it, a tumble weed went across the street (laughs). And there was this guy standing out front of the pawn shop, and you look at him and this guy had to be named Barney. And he recognized me, but this guy should not have recognized me, it didn't make any sense that he recognized me, culturally speaking. And the reason that he recognized me was because there was a younger guy that worked for him in the store that had been to the concert the night before. So he took us over to see Furry Lewis. So braving together this street with the visit to Furry Lewis...you're looking for the words to fit into this form. When the second verse came out, "Pawn shops glitter like gold tooth caps/in the grey decay they chew the last few dollars off old Beale Street's carcass/carrion and mercy, blue and silver sparkling drums/ cheap guitars, eyeshades and guns aimed at the hot blood at being no one/down and out in Memphis, Tennessee." That was a thrill.