

(((JONI MITCHELL)))



ONI MITCHELL'S INDUCTION into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is an event worthy of both celebration and reflection, a chance to finally dismiss some conventional wisdom about this unconventional artist and to acknowledge her unparalleled influence as a singer, songwriter, musician, poet and producer. I doubt I'm alone in relishing the sweet poetic justice in our honoring the woman *Rolling Stone* crassly dubbed "Old Lady of the Year" over two decades ago as one of the preeminent artists of this century. ∞ THIS INDUCTION fortuitously coincides with a renewed interest in Mitchell's past work and her latest in a long line of artistic triumphs. In her first masterful, luminous works of the Nineties – the acclaimed *Night Ride Home* (1991) and the Grammy-winning *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) – Mitchell brings a lifetime's personal and musical

experience to artistic fruition: "Night Ride Home," "Come In From the Cold," "Nothing Can Be Done," "Two Grey Rooms," "Turbulent Indigo" and "The Sire of Sorrow (Job's Sad Song)" stand with her best. Whether Mitchell hits or misses, she invariably keeps her promise. She dares, she learns, she grows, no matter what the price. In doing so, she preserves our faith that those values the very best rock & roll embraces and inspires – vision, honesty, integrity, innovation, courage and eloquence – will not only endure but prevail.

Roberta Joan Anderson was born in Fort McLeod, Alberta, Canada, and grew up an only child in the small prairie town of Saskatoon. From early childhood, she painted, wrote poetry and composed what she called "little melodies I heard in my head." At age nine she contracted polio. Years later she vividly recalled fighting the terror of paralysis by defiantly screaming out Christmas carols in the polio ward. The disease also shaped her music: A

residual weakness in her left hand prompted her to experiment with open guitar tunings, now a hallmark of her unique guitar style. (And because her repertoire now includes over fifty such tunings, Mitchell recently began working with the Roland VG-8, a computerized guitar that has eliminated the practical problems of retuning and given her new sonic territory to chart.)

Although she loved to dance to rock & roll as a teenager, she was soon swept up in the more cerebral waters of the early-Sixties folk music wave, teaching herself to play ukelele and guitar. After a year of art school, she moved to Toronto, home to a burgeoning folk scene. There she married folksinger Chuck Mitchell and began performing and writing her own material. By 1967, the couple had divorced, and Mitchell, living in New York, became a familiar voice on the East Coast folk cir-

Joni Mitchell, looking and sounding radiant in the 1990s





career. Instead, she continued, and these albums proved merely the first leg of a remarkable musical journey.

Court and Spark (1974), on which Mitchell first fronted a band, is a dazzling blend of her increasingly lean, sophisticated songs (“Just Like This Train”) and the jazz-tinged “weird chords” (her description) that define her style. The most commercially successful album of her career, *Court and Spark* is also remarkable for the many ways in which Mitchell defied public expectations (with, for example, the spirited rocker “Raised on Robbery,” the intricately arranged “Car on a Hill”). It’s easy to forget what a dramatic departure – what

At left: Taking a break in London’s Hyde Park, 1970
Below: Performing at Radio City Music Hall four years later

a risk – this was. Never again would she bridge so vast a stylistic chasm between albums. From this point, every release (excluding 1979’s *Mingus* and two live albums in 1974 and 1980) would follow a complex but clear progression.

cuit. The release of her all-acoustic debut album, *Joni Mitchell*, in March 1968 coincided with a growing interest in her songs among other performers. “The Circle Game” was recorded by Tom Rush, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Ian and Sylvia, among others; and “Both Sides Now” became a Top Ten hit for Judy Collins in 1968. Later, in 1970, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s version of her “Woodstock” became their biggest single.

Mitchell came into her own, commercially and musically, with 1969’s *Clouds* and 1970’s *Ladies of the Canyon*. Here she chronicled both her presumably personal experiences (“I Don’t Know Where I Stand,” “Conversation,” “Willy”) and the Zeitgeist of her times (“Chelsea Morning,” “Morning Morgantown,” “Woodstock,” “Big Yellow Taxi”) in a clear, vibrant folk-rock style. On some of the lesser-known tracks (“That Song About the Midway,” “Rainy Night House,” “The Priest”), however, you hear her bending folk-rock convention, stripping away the frills and refining the romantic outsider perspective that would inform her later work. *Blue* (1971), her emotionally raw, riveting paean to romantic longing (“All I Want,” “Blue,” “River”), is one of the best albums in her oeuvre and one of the best in rock. Uncomfortable with pop stardom, Mitchell completed *For the Roses* (1972) with retirement beckoning, a fact that may account for its incisive take on the music business and fame (“For the Roses”), piercing introspection (“Lesson in Survival”) and the literally made-for-radio “You Turn Me On, I’m a Radio.” At this point, with her stature as a singer/songwriter assured, she might have never emerged from her Canadian wilderness home and gone down in history with a brief, brilliant five-album



Viewed in this light, Mitchell’s subsequent – and less “popular” work – is anything but mysterious. *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975), *Hejira* (1976) and *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* (1977) represent some of Mitchell’s most exciting, fully realized music. Reviewing the initial critical response to this triad nearly two decades hence, it’s difficult to understand exactly why these albums – and Mitchell – incurred such wrath. *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, glistening with *Court and Spark*-style jazz pop, contained just two “experiments”: the Burundi-drum-dominated “Jungle Line” and the haunting synthesizer piece “Shadows and Light.” Thematically, the ground was familiar Mitchell turf: the title track embellishing the theme first explored in *Ladies of the Canyon*’s “The Arrangement”; “The Boho Dance” revisiting “For the Roses” and *Ladies*’ “For Free.” The joyous “In France They Kiss on

Main Street" could have been a hit single. Yet rather than judge songs like "Edith and the Kingpin," "Shades of Scarlet Conquering" and "Harry's House/Centerpiece" on their own merits, some listeners felt jilted, as if her shift in perspective from first person to third person was some betrayal of the singer/songwriter-listener bond.

In its groundbreaking sound, *Hejira* deftly framed *Blue*-period introspective revelation against subtle, almost unworldly jazz-washed tones. Partially because she composed *Hejira*'s songs on guitar while traveling the country, its open, panoramic sound – infused with Jaco Pastorius's prominent, liquid bass lines – evokes shifting landscapes, the hum of engines, a restless wistfulness. "Coyote," "Amelia" and "Refuge of the Roads" show Mitchell the songwriter tilting brilliant and elaborate metaphors to reveal multiple facets, shaping every note to reflect, magnify and illuminate her words.

The double-album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is more notable for Mitchell's pioneering – and then greatly misunderstood – forays into world music. It met resistance, despite such ambitious, wonderful songs as "Talk to Me" and "Dreamland." Mitchell's collaboration with jazz bassist Charles Mingus, begun, at his behest, shortly before his death, produced *Mingus*, the album Mitchell has said left her "without a country." Still, it went Top Twenty, a powerful testament to her fans' faith in her vision.

Ironically, the Eighties – when many acclaimed and commercially successful artists clearly exhibited or explicitly cited the influence of Mitchell's Seventies work – was for her, a time of transition, with *Wild Things Run Fast* (1982), *Dog Eat Dog* (1985) and *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm* (1988). None of these albums reflects a single theme or style, yet each shows Mitchell warm-

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B Y C H R I S S I E H Y N D E

Authenticity is the quality I think best describes Joni Mitchell. The fact that she possesses the most gorgeous voice ever, plays guitar like a man (figuratively speaking, of course) and is a master songwriter, all come second to the authenticity that (like blood through an Ace bandage) seeps through everything she does. Many women in the last twenty years have played Joni Mitchell records during childbirth. I believe it's some kind of phenomenon. Why do they do it? Probably because people appreciate the truth more than ever when going through major life events. We have total faith in this woman. She's never fucked us around or tried to get our attention to serve her own means. In fact, we get the impression that she finds fame more than a bit bothersome and would rather be left alone to go off and paint pictures. Still, millions of us wait for her. We want her authenticity to lend a sense of credence to our lives. She makes us feel better, and if you think about it who doesn't love Joni Mitchell? Nobody I know.

ing up again, seeking a new balance between self-revelation ("Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody") and biting social commentary ("Tax Free," "Ethiopia"), classically structured songs ("My Secret Place") and bold new sounds ("The Reoccurring Dream," "Dancin' Clown").

Over these three decades, Mitchell's accomplishments are obvious, but in following her unconventional path, she continues to distinguish herself in other, even more important ways. She has traversed a wider musical spectrum than all but a few popular composer-performers. And even though that journey has brought her both pop success and wounding rejection,

she courageously, unfailingly forges ahead. It's easy to imagine a lesser artist strip-mining her most popular work, recycling old diamonds until the reverse alchemy of greed and security turns them to coal. Instead, Mitchell bravely dreamed and created even rarer gems glowing with her passion, crystallized in her perfection and craft. This is why even the albums dismissed by critics in their time still sold hundreds of thousands of copies, why they are so often cited as influential by other great artists and why they still shine, command our attention and inspire us.

For her music, for her fierce dedication to her art and for the shining example she sets for anyone who dares commit words to paper, song to tape, brush to canvas, we thank Joni Mitchell and welcome her to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

