

The Music Center Presents: Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration

A Case Of You

Mitchell spoke to Cameron Crowe for a 1979 *Rolling Stone* interview in 1979:

"The *Blue* album, there's hardly a dishonest note in the vocals," she said. "At that period in my life, I had no personal defenses. I felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes. I felt like I had absolutely no secrets from the world, and I couldn't pretend in my life to be strong. Or to be happy. But the advantage of it in the music was that there were no defenses there either." "A Case Of You," benefits from the intimacy and lack of filter - enhanced by the spare instrumentation: James Taylor on acoustic guitar, Russ Kunkel on drums and Joni on Appalachian dulcimer.

All I Want

From *The Atlantic*: "Listen to the first line of "All I Want," the album's first track: "I am on a lonely road / and I am traveling" - Mitchell repeating that last word four times, leaning into it..."

Amelia

Mitchell (from 996 *Los Angeles Times* interview): "I wrote the album while traveling cross-country by myself, and there is this restless feeling throughout it...the sweet loneliness of solitary travel. In this song, I was thinking of Amelia Earhart and addressing it from one solo pilot to another, sort of reflecting on the cost of being a woman and having something you must do."

A Strange Boy

From Jonimitchell.com:

Mitchell's sometimes cruel, sometimes self-critical account of the affair she had with one of two men with whom she drove from L.A. to New England in the spring of 1976. One of the men was a former boyfriend from Australia, the other--the "strange boy" of the title--was an airline steward in his 30s still living with his parents. "He was psychologically astute and severely adolescent at the same time," she remembers. "There was something seductive and charming about his childlike qualities, but I never harbored any illusions about him being my man. He was just a big kid in the end." The relationship lasted only a short time, but its flaming early days in an uptight bed and breakfast are recounted in one of the album's memorable verses: "While the boarders were snoring/Under crisp white sheets of curfew/We were newly lovers then/We were fire in the stiff-blue-haired-house rules."

Big Yellow Taxi

Mitchell said this about writing the song to journalist Alan McDougall in the early 1970s: "I wrote 'Big Yellow Taxi' on my first trip to Hawaii. I took a taxi to the hotel, and when I woke up the next morning, I threw back the curtains and saw these beautiful green mountains in the distance. Then, I looked down, and there was a parking lot as far as the eye could see, and it broke my heart... this blight on paradise. That's when I sat down and wrote the song."

Blue

Rolling Stone review, 1971:

"...has the secret, ineffably sad feeling of a Billie Holiday song. Joy, after all, can be shared with everybody, but intense pain leads to withdrawal and isolation. "Blue" is a distillation of pain and is, therefore, the most private of Joni's private songs. The beauty of the mysterious and unresolved melody and the expressiveness of the vocal make this song accessible to a general audience. But "Blue," more than any of the other songs, shows Joni to be twice vulnerable: not only is she in pain as a private person, but her calling as an artist commands her to express her despair musically and reveal to an audience of record-buyers."

Borderline

Mitchell 2014 interview with *McLean's*:

"The song investigates why people divide. In Japan, they have a pecking order of smart and dumb according to blood. A man asked me what my blood type is because he thought I was A-type—which he said was "smart blood." It is human nature to pull rank one way or another. By principle or blood type."

Both Sides Now

Mitchell wrote "Both Sides, Now" in March 1967, inspired by a passage in *Henderson the Rain King*, a 1959 novel by Saul Bellow. "I was reading Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* on a plane and early in the book, Henderson the Rain King is also up in a plane. He's on his way to Africa, and he looks down and sees these clouds. I put down the book, looked out the window and saw clouds too, and I immediately started writing the song. I had no idea that the song would become as popular as it did."

Court and Spark

From *Pitchfork*:

Her 1974 commercial break-out, *Court and Spark*, found her backed by first-call jazz session cats L.A. Express. It was her official severance from folk music. *Court* is her most pop album and gave her three chart hits, going gold five weeks after its release. Mitchell's production features heavy and sudden multi-tracked swells of her voice that spike melodies like a choir of accusing angels and mimic strings and horns. Now six albums deep on the topic of love and loss, *Court* has a marked cynicism. It's a grown-up album about arriving at the intractable issues of adult love.

Coyote

From jonimitchell.com:

An upbeat, playful account of an unrepentant ladies' man {"He's got another woman down the hall, but he seems to want me anyway!"}} encountered on a roadhouse dance floor. Eventually the cad shows enough humanity to earn the songwriter's pity—and a one-night stand. "People considered it aggressive for a woman to be talking and acting this way at the time," Mitchell said. "They wouldn't have said it if it had been written by a man." The song is propelled by the explosive fretless bass of Mitchell newcomer Jaco Pastorius, a flamboyant jazz-rock legend whose life ended tragically with a drug overdose in 1987. "He was the bass player of my dreams," Mitchell said. "I can't imagine *Hejira* without him."

Don't Interrupt The Sorrow

Rolling Stone review, 1975:

In "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow," a poem of almost impenetrable mystery, she [Joni] voices the core of her vision. Among other things, the song parallels modern forms of female subjugation with both Christian and African mythology in imagery that is disjunctive and telegraphic:

He says "Your notches liberation doll"

And he chains me with that serpent

To that Ethiopian wall

Winds of change patriarchs

Snug in your bible belt dreams.

Down To You

Paste Magazine, 2017:

With spiraling, interwoven orchestration, *Court and Spark*'s "Down To You" rightly won a Grammy for Best Arrangement Accompanying a Vocalist in 1974. With Mitchell's quintessentially raw self-awareness, the lyrics almost certainly seem to be a reflection on her own character and the thrill she finds in new lovers. But, like the true poet she is, she never explicitly states to whom she's speaking, which allows listeners to insert themselves and their imaginations into the song.

Dreamland

Village Voice review, 1977:

In "Dreamland," Airto's drum becomes the beat of a pep rally where the chant is a jingly montage of racist images and quasi-ads, and the result is Mitchell's greatest third-person song: a frightening, funny parody of how television and advertising corrupt ideas by turning them into commercial products with a putative erotic value. This is stuff Mitchell knows to her bones. Sexual corruption may be *the* metaphor for material corruption, and Mitchell makes the most of it, warping every syllable into a

hooker's come-on, obviously enthralled by the rotten opulence she excoriates. She is herself, after all, one of the ultimate products of imperialism: a jaded Hollywood star.

For the Roses

Joni Mitchell's introduction to the song at Carnegie Hall on February 23, 1972:

"This is another new song. It's called 'For the Roses,' and it comes from the expression, 'to run for the roses.' You know what that's all about: that's when you take this horse and, you know, like he comes charging into the finish line, and they throw a wreath of flowers around his neck, and then one day, they take him out and shoot him. It's kind of a macabre thing to say, isn't it, I guess?"

Nothing Can Be Done

The New York Times, March 17, 1991

"Oh I am not old/ I'm told/ But I am not young," Joni Mitchell sings in "Nothing Can Be Done," from her new album, *Night Ride Home*. "Must I surrender with grace/ The things that I loved when I was younger?" she asks. "What do I do here with this hunger?" Ms. Mitchell's stoic reply to her own question, repeated almost like a mantra throughout the song, is simply: "Nothing can be done."

Raised On Robbery

The New York Times review, 1974:

Not all of Mitchell's songs focus solely and inwardly on love. She's fine at telling tales too, like the fast and racy "Raised on Robbery" about a prostitute vainly attempting to make a sale in a bar.

River

Washington Post:

James Taylor, who knows the song better than just about anybody aside from Mitchell, said in a 2006 interview with the *Post* that "I don't know why it's suddenly getting picked up as a Christmas song. But some things just become identified as seasonal songs, and this is now one of them." At the time, Taylor had just released *James Taylor at Christmas*, which included "River" — a song he'd first heard decades earlier, when Mitchell played it at her home in Los Angeles in 1970, shortly after it was written. "Most Christmas songs are light and shallow, but 'River' is a sad song," Taylor said. "It starts with a description of a commercially produced version of Christmas in Los Angeles . . . then juxtaposes it with this frozen river, which says, 'Christmas here is bringing me down.' It only mentions Christmas in the first verse. Then it's, 'Oh, I wish I had a river I could skate away on' — wanting to fall into this landscape that she remembers. "It's such a beautiful thing, to turn away from the commercial mayhem that Christmas becomes and just breathe in some pine needles. It's a really blue song."

The Boho Dance

Rolling Stone review, 1976

Images of entrapment and enslavement (an artist to his patrons) also inform "The Boho Dance," set in New York. Inspired by *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe's clever diatribe against the art world establishment, this recollected dialogue depicts the hypocrisy of a scene that only pretends not to be thoroughly commercialized.

The Magdalene Laundries

From Songchops.com:

On her 1994 album *Turbulent Indigo* Joni Mitchell has one of the most descriptive, powerful songs you'll ever hear. She crafts a first person story about a young girl incarcerated in one of Ireland's Magdalene institutions — The Magdalene Laundries for being over twenty, unmarried and attractive. The song is an exceptional example of taking a news topic and finding the human side that speaks of the injustice, but never sounds like it's a protest song — it never talks at the listener, takes a position and pounds at it. It simply takes a first person account and uses elegant metaphor, figurative language and prosody to bring the speaker's situation to life.

Two Grey Rooms

Mitchell wrote a wordless vocal melody and instrumental accompaniment for the song in 1982 during the sessions for her album *Wild Things Run Fast*. She titled it "Speechless" as lyrical inspiration for the song escaped her until 1989 when she encountered the story of New German Cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who, amid the repression of Germany's antigay Paragraph 175 laws, was left broken-hearted by a male lover in his youth. In a 1996 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Mitchell says of the song: "*It's a story of obsession ... about this German aristocrat who had a lover in his youth that he never got over. He later finds this man working on a dock and notices the path that the man takes every day to and from work. So the aristocrat gives up his fancy digs and moves to these two shabby gray rooms overlooking this street, just to watch this man walk to and from work. That's a song that shows my songs aren't all self-portraits.*"

Woodstock

From pbs.org interview with David Yaffe, author of Joni bio *Reckless Daughter*:

As rock and folk musicians from around the country headed to Woodstock in August of 1969, Mitchell stayed behind. She was scheduled to perform on The Dick Cavett Show the day after the festival ended and, nervous that her return home would be delayed, her agent David Geffen asked her not to go. Bitterly disappointed, she followed the legendary festival from afar and wrote the song "Woodstock," a song that held tremendous emotional weight for her. "The lyrics are not really a celebration, especially when you hear the way she sings it. It's a dirge," Yaffe said. The first few times she performed it, she "burst into tears, because it brought back the intensity of the experience and was so moving," she told Yaffe.

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