Joni Mitchell - The Rolling Stone Interview

Compiled by Andy Owen

This is a fascinating conversation with Joni Mitchell from May 1991.

Joni is peerless as far as I am concerned. Nothing before or since even comes close. This will never change.

Ever.

She's up there on her own.

'Hejira' was a triumph. 'Hissing' only just behind. And Blue...

Words can never do them justice. Simply amazing pieces of work.

They will never be bettered.

I came across this interview in my files the other day. I found it totally absorbing- and worthy of sharing with you.

Joni talks about many things, including Madonna, Prince and the growing shallowness of music as she was finding it then.

God knows what she must think of it now.

It's not shallow. It's bloody underwater...

Anyway, here's the interview. Enjoy.

As anyone who's followed Joni Mitchell's career knows, she's never played it safe.

In fact, since her commercial heyday in the mid-Seventies, Mitchell has spent most of her time on the edge of pop music, exploring jazz and world music well before male rockers made it fashionable to do so.

"I paid a big price for doing what I've done," says Mitchell. "I started working in a genre that was neither this nor that. People didn't know where I fit in anymore, so they didn't play me at all.

And so I disappeared. I lost my ability to broadcast, my public access. It was worth it. I would do it all over again in a minute for the musical education.

But, of *course*, it hurt. Your records are like your kids. And you want to say, 'Don't bloody my baby's nose when I send him to school, because he's a *nice* kid.

You just don't *understand* him. He's a little different, but if you try, you'll like him.'"

Mitchell's latest album, the exquisite *Night Ride Home*, has turned out to be a rather popular kid, and rightly so, since it's an effort that recalls classic Mitchell albums – like *Blue, For the Roses* and *Court and Spark* – in its intimate, introspective power while still sounding entirely contemporary and vital.

"They're beginning to play me again," Mitchell says. "I guess the thing is patience."

Now forty-seven, Mitchell – who's also an accomplished painter – has led a distinguished and rather brave life in the music world, influencing artists as varied as Suzanne Vega, Sinéad O'Connor, Prince and Sting.

In person, she seems nothing like the fragile, chronically depressed hippie waif her music has sometimes suggested.

Happily married to respected bassist and producer Larry Klein for the last eight years, Mitchell appears radiantly beautiful and content these days, even exhibiting an easygoing wit.

When asked about her religious views, for instance, she says: "I kind of see the beauty of the teachings of Christ, you know, even though I turned Buddhist. And, of course, Jewish by *injection*."

Yes, Joni Mitchell – the queen of pain long before Sting became the king – has a fully functioning sense of humour. "Oh, yeah, when I was a kid, I was a real good-time Charlie," she says with a laugh.

"As a matter of fact, *that* was my nickname. So when I first started making all this *sensitive* music, my old friends back home could not believe it. They didn't know – where did this depressed person *come* from?

Along the way, I had gone through some pretty hard deals, and it did introvert me. But it just so happened that my most introverted period coincided with the peak of my success."

At that peak, Mitchell was, as she puts it, "the queen of rock & roll," a full-blown archetype for women in rock, as well as a thinking man's sex symbol who was romantically linked with James Taylor and Graham Nash, among others.

Yet over the course of two long interview sessions, there was little that was regal or off-putting about Mitchell's manner. In fact, the only time she refused to answer a question was when she was too busy playing Galaga.

How do you feel about the folks who resist your experimentation, who just want another *Court and Spark* or *Blue* from you?

This is what I think about those people: They want, they want and they *want*. However, if I actually gave them what they wanted, then they'd just get sick of it.

There's a telling moment on the *Miles of Aisles* live album, when the crowd's yelling for your hits and you sound exasperated. You say, "No one ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint a "Starry Night" again, man.' "

Well, the thing is, I *never* wanted to turn into a human jukebox. I haven't used all of my ideas yet. There's a possibility that I can continue to invent new music up into my eighties – like a legitimate composer. But I'm working in a pop field, and whether they're going to allow an older woman to do that is an open question. It requires a loyal, interested audience who believes in my talent.

How did the negative reaction you received for your more experimental work affect you?

The only way it affected me as an artist was that it made me recognize the inevitable – that the time comes for every artist when they fall out of favour.

People get sick of your name. People get sick of your *face*. It doesn't matter what you do. Recognizing those times, I would go even further out. I figured they're going to get me *anyway*, so I may as well stretch out. I often thought if somehow I could have had a new name and a new face, people would have flipped for every one of those albums.

Why do you think people wanted you to stay in your brokenhearted-waif mode?

If some people had their way, they'd just want me to weep and suffer for them for the rest of my life, because people live vicariously through their artists.

And I had that grand theme for a long time: Where is my mate? Where is my mate? Where is my mate? I got rid of that one.

For a while it was assumed that I was writing *women's* songs. Then men began to notice that they saw themselves in the songs, too. A good piece of art should be androgynous.

I'm not a feminist. That's too divisional for me. I'll tell you one thing that's pretty arrogant. This guy came up to me at some public event once, and he said to me, "Joni, you're the best *woman* songwriter in the world."

And I went, "*Ha*," and kind of snickered. And he insisted, "No, you are the greatest *female* singer-songwriter ever." And I walked off. And he thought it was because I was being modest [*laughs*]. But this whole *female* singer-songwriter tag is strange. You know, my peers are not Carly Simon and these other women.

Who are your peers?

I don't know, who are they?

Are they people like Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan?

No, those people were points of departure for me. Leonard didn't really explore music. He's a word man first.

How big an influence was Dylan on you?

I wrote poetry, and I always wanted to make music. But I *never* put the two things together. Just a simple tiling like being a singer-songwriter – that was a new idea.

It used to take three people to do that job. And when I heard "Positively Fourth Street," I realized that this was a whole new ballgame; now you could make your songs literature.

The potential for the song had never occurred to me – I loved "Tutti-Frutti," you know. But it occurred to Dylan. At first I thought he was a copycat of Woody Guthrie.

For a while his originality didn't come out. But when it hit, boy, oh, boy. I said, "Oh, God, look at *this*." And I began to write. So Dylan sparked me.

Dylan made a pretty interesting comment regarding you a few years ago.

Oh, I remember. He was talking about how he didn't like seeing women onstage, how he hates to see them up there whoring themselves.

So he was asked, "Well, what about Joni Mitchell?" And he says something like "She's not really a woman. Joni's kind of like a man." [*Laughs*]

The thing is, I came into the business quite feminine. But nobody has had so many battles to wage as me. I had to stand up for my own artistic rights. And it's probably good for my art ultimately.

I remember early in my career somebody wrote that my work was "effeminate," which I thought was pretty odd. So over the years I think I've gotten more androgynous – and maybe become an honorary male, according to Bobby.

But he's born on the twenty-fourth of May. My mother, Queen Victoria and Bobby were all born on that date. I always think that birth date is the day of the extreme moralist.

So you weren't offended?

In a way he's right. Music *has* become burlesque over the last few years – video's done that.

Every generation has to be more shocking than the last. But at a certain point you've got to reel it in because decadence ultimately *isn't* that hip. Our country is going down the tubes from it.

It's rotten to the core. And I think women can be more than decorative. I mean, it's the same old thing actresses have been saying all along, that there are no good roles for women. Well, there are women creating their own roles, but they're creating such *shallow* roles.

I wonder why.

Yet someone like Madonna can be seen as a feminist hero because she's exploiting her own sexuality rather than being exploited by some man.
That's an interesting idea, but what's the difference between her and a hard hooker, you know?

Who's being exploited there? She's revelling in herself, too.

But she can take it. I guess that's what it is. It's just being able to take it, you know.

But would you agree that Madonna is the current archetype for the female performer?

Well, she's a great "star." She's got that whore-Madonna thing built in [*laughs*].

She's like a living Barbie doll but a little bit on the blue side. There's always been that type of female. There's always been a market for it, but the danger is that she thinks she's a role model.

And it's a *terrible* role model. It's death to all things real.

How do you feel about another new queen of rock, Sinéad O'Connor?

I like Sinéad. She's a passionate little singer.

And I understand her saying, "I hate this job." It's a *horrible* job. People don't realize how horrible it is.

Making music is great. The exploitation of it is horrible. And I think you've got to be hard as nails. Maybe that's where Madonna has the edge on us.

Maybe she doesn't think it's horrible. I think it's degrading, humiliating – so does Sinéad. Whereas Madonna's above being degraded or humiliated.

She *flirts* with it. And perhaps that bravado is in some ways to be applauded; but at what cost to her soul, is my question.

Is there a part of you that would like to be the queen of rock & roll again?

Well, let's examine what my possible motives would be.

Do I want more fame? No, I like that I can walk around.

Do I need more money? So far, so good.

But then again, I have a lot of people on my payroll. I have to pay my manager a salary, because I can't give him a percentage – it's a percentage of nothing. But now that we've got a studio in our house, we can cut some of the expenses.

So this time I'll be able to actually make a little money off the record.

Is it safe to assume the last few didn't?

All the records that I've made with Geffen have cost a lot of money, and they haven't recouped, which is dangerous, because you're maintaining the integrity of your product, but you're becoming indebted to the company store.

And just before Christmas the worst happened – in the selling and the reselling of the company, the accountant deemed that two of my albums hadn't sold and they dropped them: *Wild Things Run Fast* and *Dog Eat Dog*.

I raised a bit of a stink, and with [Geffen Records president] Eddie Rosenblatt's help, God bless him, they were reinstated. But they almost bit it because they had horrendous press.

Unfortunately, the press influenced more than we would hope it would. There are people who are afraid to stick their necks out and like something without being told it's hip. And that's gotten increasingly worse over the last two generations.

There has been a general decline of independent thinking and integrity.

Do you think you have any obligation to your record company to be commercial?

Well, the thing is that I'm kind of a figurehead over there. David Geffen and I are old friends.

I mean, he was my agent. We came out here in the California gold-rush time. Geffen on one arm and [former manager] Elliot Roberts on the other.

I have a good relationship with both Eddie and David. I think they've been fair to me. Since they reinstated my two records, I'm happy. And the creative freedom has been a great luxury. I appreciate that.

Because I don't think this stuff dates that much, you know. Probably the one that will date the most ultimately is *Dog Eat Dog*.

That was me looking out at what was going on in the world because nobody else was.

How else has the business changed since you started?

The thing's just got bigger and bigger. When I started out, rock & roll was in small theatres.

There was no arena rock. Woodstock had not happened. The possibility of mass exploitation had not occurred to anybody.

It was a small, intimate forum with loyalties.

Think of Elvis. *I* sold more records than Elvis.

Not after his death. But when I was the queen of rock & roll, I sold more than he did when he was the king of rock & roll.

So now the thing is huge and international, and soon we'll be hearing from the market in China, for God's sake.

The bigger the bucks, the bigger the greed, the bigger the crap around it.

Is the audience any different?

People knew what a song was back then. Which they don't know anymore.

Dylan said to me: "I don't know. I used to know what a song is, but I don't know anymore."

And part of that gets beaten out of you, because we make this music and we put it out, and the critics have gotten into the scheme of, like, reducing *Wild Things Run Fast* to I Love Larry songs.

You know, this flippant, stupid way that they have of tearing things down. That song "Love" does not deserve to be reduced that way. U2 flipped when they heard that. Among the musicians it's comprehended occasionally.

But the business is kind of painful at this time. It's disintegrated into a bunch of crap. And what made America great was ingenuity, new ideas. But it kills; it now eats its young alive and its old, its middle-aged.

You know, it eats the good ideas alive. It's like America is Las Vegas now.

I take it you're not big on Vegas?

I turned down $1 million to play in Las Vegas for one night because it was the kiss of death to me.

It was a symbol of corruption. What happened was, that no contemporary rock was going to Las Vegas.

And the youth of that town – and there's a lot of money in that town – complained, "Daddy, Daddy, no one is coming into our town," so they built this big hall, but nobody would open it.

So they figured if they could get Dylan or me, the ice would be broken and everyone else would follow suit. I wouldn't do it.

Of course, people do now. And you also have Dylan playing West Point.

Well, during the Vietnam War I played in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, to soldiers coming and going. I played in Charleston, South Carolina, to the Navy. I wasn't really a militant, a peacenik.

Because I had contact with soldiers and their dilemmas.

You haven't toured in many years. Does the idea of hitting the road interest you at this point?

Well, I've had a lot of illness in my life.

My body is fragile at this point. I had polio as a child, so my back is weak. The last time I toured was in 1983, with a fantastic band.

Major musicianship. We were smoking. We toured for nine months. And the weight of carrying a guitar, especially an electric guitar – well, if you see footage of that tour, you can see the pain on film. There is nothing I can do about that.

Also, I enjoy playing with really top musicians. They have to get paid, but I don't. So what happens is, when I take a great band out, I don't draw a big enough house to make it profitable, so I go in the hole – and come back injured.

I can't do that again. Plus, I'm the recipient of a lot of bad press. There's got to be something in it for me.

But do you miss being onstage?

No, I don't miss it. I like working in the studio.

I don't need it to know who I am. And it's just so physically hard.

What do you think motivates someone like Dylan to spend year after year on the road?

Well, he'd rather play music probably than do anything else. He doesn't relate well to people.

He probably feels most himself out there.

You've been painting for years, but more recently you've started having shows and selling your work for the first time. Has that changed the process for you?

Well, I sold paintings when I was in high school to dentists, doctors – small time. I'm an okay painter.

But the art world is just the same as the record business. I was preparing a show to go to London, one of the curators comes over and he sees this stuff, and he begins to joke: "There are four different styles. The critics are going to eat you alive over there."

I said, "Look, don't worry about it." So I'm holding his hand and I'm thinking: "Wait a minute. I'm an artist; why am I holding the curator's hand here?

He's worried because I'm painting four styles that there's something wrong with that. It's not a negative thing, it's a positive thing. It's an appreciation of a wide range and the possibility of a hybrid. I may be onto something."

Professionally speaking, who are your heroes?

Most of my heroes are monsters, unfortunately, and they are men.

Separating their personalities from their art, Miles Davis and Picasso have always been my major heroes because we have this one thing in common: They were restless.

I don't know any women role models for that. But Picasso was constantly searching and searching and changing and changing. Even I have favourite periods of Miles, but I would always go to see him in any incarnation.

Because he's managed to keep alive.

I *thrive* on change. That's probably why my chord changes are weird, because chords depict emotions. They'll be going along on one key and I'll drop off a cliff, and suddenly they will go into a whole other key signature.

That will drive some people crazy, but that's how my life is.

When you started throwing jazz chords into the mix, you lost a lot of people.

See, in a certain way, I was the first to go into the forest of jazz from pop.

They pressed about ten copies of the *Mingus* album, I think. There was no outlet for it. With that album, I became a person without a country. I was considered an expatriate from pop music.

Meanwhile, the jazz folks thought, "Who *is* this white chick?" They saw me as an opportunist come to exploit Charles. Whereas, in fact, Charles sent for me. In jazz circles they still complain about it, that what we did was not Mingus's music.

Well, of course it wasn't; it was a collaboration. It was not mine either. We had to meet somewhere in the middle with integrity.

Was it frustrating for you to watch someone like Sting cover similar territory and get a lot less flak?

To me, Sting is like James's [Taylor] and my baby [*laughs*].

In all fairness, let me say if you are really a musician – and not just a pop star – sooner or later you are going to want to play with the greatest.

Why *not* play with the best musicians available, right?

You co produced *Night Ride Home* with your husband, Larry Klein. How did you two meet?

We met on the *Wild Things Run Fast* album. He played bass for me. I was kind of lonely at the time. And I actually prayed...I don't pray that often.

And I prayed an embarrassed prayer. I said: "Look, God, I know I don't write, I don't call. However, I don't need that much. All I need is a real good kisser who likes to play pinball."

So two days later, Klein said to me, "How would you like to go to the Santa Monica pier and play video games?" And I looked up at the sky, and I said, "Close enough."

And he said, "I beg your pardon?" And we never looked back. We've been together ever since. So I look at it as divine intervention.

You've been quoted as describing *Night Ride Home* as being "middle-aged love songs."

Well, somebody asked me what the album was about. I just said that flippantly, because it was only half-written at the time.

And middle age does come up in a song like "Come In From the Cold," and "Nothing Can Be Done" has a passage from the *Desiderata*.

Like *Desiderata* says, surrender gracefully the things of youth – which is good advice. But it's easy for him to say. He was a monk, you know. He wasn't in show business.

I saw this great interview with Paul Newman recently, and he said if actors knew more about literature and less about makeup, they'd probably have longer careers. And it's true.

If I must desperately protect my youth in order to have credibility, then I have no dignity, and the whole thing is stupid, and I may as well quit. On the other hand, perhaps I can write material that's suitable for this period of my life.

Sinatra has had a long run. It remains to be seen who among my generation will be allowed that. And it's hard, because a lot of the young listeners can't seem to make up their minds, and the direction that they're getting is so bad, so shallow.

How do you feel now about the songs – biggies like "Both Sides Now," "Big Yellow Taxi," "The Circle Game" – that made you a star?

Let's not call them my biggies. Let's call them the most gregarious of my children. "Big Yellow Taxi" – I like the life that it has. I didn't intend it to be a children's song, but it has become one.

This third-grade teacher in New Jersey has his kids illustrate that song every year, and he sent me this year's batch, and they were charming.

"Both Sides Now" is probably the song that's been the most gregarious. Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra sang it. It's been recorded in many different genres and all around the world.

I saw a translation of it come back through the Chinese. It had gone to China, been translated into Chinese calligraphy, then been translated back out into English. And it came out "Joni's Theory of Relativity."

"Circle Game" closes eighth-grade graduation exercises around the country, and that's a great function for it. The thing that I'm seeing now is a lot of these songs are going into college texts for analysis.

I'm appalled at what is being selected to be studied at the college level. I would say that those songs should be analysed in grade 5. Songs like "Hejira" or "Furry Sings the Blues" or "Passion Play" are pieces that have more literary value and are more thought provoking. Let them teach those at college level.

How conscious were you that you were expanding the vocabulary and range of rock music?

I knew that I wanted to write literature in the pop arena, and in a way, I was really punished for it. Even by John Lennon. He told me that I was "a product of my own over-education" – and remember, I only have a twelfth-grade education.

He said: "Why do you let other people have your hits for you? You want a hit, don't you? Put some fiddles on it." He said this about *Court and Spark*, mind you.

Perhaps because you wrote "Woodstock," a lot of people associate you with the Sixties, even though you came into your own in the Seventies. To them you were sort of...

Spokesperson for a generation?

Right.

That Woodstock girl, yes.

How do you feel about younger people who romanticize that era?

I worry about it more than I relate to it.

What I have seen, and I don't know whether it's the fault of education, but the generations are getting more and more bland in a certain way.

I met a kid the other day who was a self-admitted yuppie. He was in some financial position, and inside this yuppie was this hippie dying to get out.

And he was very romantic about the Sixties. He and I had an argument kind of late at night, because he was really praising us. And I kept saying to him, "Yeah, but we *failed*." And he kept saying: "Yeah, but at least you did something. Like, we did *nothing*."

I said: "Look, the thing is, don't just ape our movement. Don't do hippie poses. Look at us. Admit to yourself that we only took it so far. Build from where we left off."

I know my generation – a lot of them, they're getting old now, and they want to think back fondly, they want to kid themselves. A lot of them think, "Yeah, we were the best." That's the kiss of death. That's non-growth.

And also that's very bad for the world.

So what do you think when you see some female folk singer copying your look and sound?

I think, "Why don't you get your *own* shit?"

Remember, when I first came out, I appeared to be a spin-off of something that was going out of vogue, which was like a poor man's Baez or Judy Collins.

The old thing was folk, and the new thing was folk rock. Nobody wanted to sign me, because I appeared to be part of this old thing that was dying, but musicians could see that I was a musician.

Judy Collins obviously helped your cause by covering "Both Sides Now." But how did Joan Baez react to you as a new kid on the folk block?

Oh, she was horrible. She was always super-competitive and threatened by me.

Your name always comes up as a big influence on younger musicians. Is it safe to say you're a musician's musician?

Sure, musicians understand it more. I mean, only the Salieris know who the Mozarts are [*chuckles*].

Of the biggest artists around now, who would you consider innovators? Springsteen?

That's folk carpentry. Bruce Springsteen is a very nice craftsperson.

Prince?

No. An innovator must change what went before.

Charlie Parker was an innovator. Jimi Hendrix was an innovator. Miles Davis was a sound innovator.

I don't think Prince is an innovator. He's a great hybrid.

Was it gratifying to have Prince publicly acknowledge his love of your experimental work?

Yeah. To me that was a case of the open mind of youth.

One instance of the closed mind of youth was at the 1986 Amnesty International show at the Meadowlands, in New Jersey. You were put on the bill between U2 and the Police. You went out there and did a few of your lesser-known songs. The crowd got ugly and started throwing stuff at you. It was painful to watch.

I went on as a pinch hitter. I was filling in for Pete Townshend.

Well, the thing is, that crowd was throwing stuff all day. It just happened that by the time I got out there, they'd had a lot of practice. Their aim was getting better.

But I remember thinking that you could have made things easier on yourself by just playing a song people might have heard before.

Oh, I picked the *perfect* material – "The Three Great Stimulants," which addressed the cause. Well, *nobody's* there for the cause.

That's heartbreaking.

And in the back room, the managers are squabbling over position. They're kicking U2 out of their rightful spot to put the Police on top with their reunion, and it's *ugly*.

And I did a song called "Number One." And there's a line in it like "Win and lose/Win and lose/To the loser go the heartsick blues/To the victor goes the spoiling/Honey, did you win or lose?"

And in the middle of it – if you see the videotape – my face kind of lights up.

I'm thinking, "Holy *shit*, if they stone me now it will be *great*.

It will be so fitting."

But those big charity shows always end up being competitive situations, and I'm not the sort of person who likes competing against other people.

Me, I'd rather just compete with myself, you know.

I'd rather play pinball...