

Joni Mitchell & Graham Nash - the love affair that will never die

Written by Andy Owen



It was just after lunch on a clear winter's day.

Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash came out of the restaurant in downtown LA, hand-in-hand, as was their way.

They had driven down from their home in sleepy Laurel Canyon, just a few miles above this incredibly busy area on Sunset Boulevard.

As they were walking towards their car, Joni stopped outside an antiques store and stared intently through the window. "What's caught your eye, darling?", Graham asked her.

"I love that vase. It's beautiful. I'm going to see how much it is." They both went into the shop and a couple of minutes later came out, with Joni excitedly clutching her new purchase.

Arriving at their house, they walked up the path and opened the door.

Graham said "I'll light the fire, you put some flowers in the vase."

He lit the fire. Then he walked over to the piano and composed 'Our House', later to become a CSNY classic, from the Déjà vu album.

Joni and Graham were very much in love. They had been, from the moment they set eyes on each other.



Nash became famous as one of the Hollies.

They were a great band and had tremendous success.

His unmistakable high harmony on most of their hits, was a key element of their sound.

At the same time, Mitchell was an up-and-coming folk singer.

In 1967, their paths crossed. From that moment, both their lives were about to be changed forever.

Earlier that year, Joni had met David Crosby – a founder member of the Byrds. He had seen her perform and was smitten by her and her songs. He invited her back to Los Angeles to meet all of his friends.

They had a brief fling, but it quickly fizzled out.



Joni became unhappy with Crosby, who treated her as his prized possession and showed her off to his friends. Joni was having none of it. She later told her biographer David Yaffe – *"It was embarrassing. He treated me as if I was his discovery."*

Crosby had told Nash about this 'amazing lady' who wrote and performed magical songs. Soon after, fate took over when she was introduced to him after a Hollies gig in Ottawa, Canada.

"Joni and I hit it off immediately, and I ended up in her room at the Chateau Laurier - and she beguiled me with 15 or so of the most incredible songs I'd ever heard," Nash wrote in '101 Essential Rock Records'.

"I fell in love with her, right there and then. She touched my heart and soul in a way that they had never been touched before."



They started dating and when the Hollies tour was over, Nash flew back to the UK, as he knew he had some life-changing decisions to make.

He had become disillusioned with the Hollies for quite some time and had been looking to move on, musically. The moment at Joni's house convinced him that he had to leave the band.

Graham takes up the story:

"It was August 1968, and the Hollies and I had come to an impasse. We had grown up together and enjoyed incredible success, but we were growing apart.

The same with my marriage: Rosie was off in Spain chasing another man, and I was in Los Angeles, the city that already felt like my new home, to visit Joni Mitchell, who had captured my heart.

For just a moment, I hesitated. Sure, I was an English rock star - I had it made. I had co-written a fantastic string of hits with The Hollies. I was friends with The Stones and The Beatles.

You could hear me whistle at the end of All You Need Is Love."

But he went with what his heart and mind were screaming at him to do.

He quit the Hollies (which caused quite a stir in England, I remember it very clearly), quit his marriage and got on a plane to LA, to stay with Joni at her house in Laurel Canyon.

He arrived on an August evening in 1968, as the sun was sinking in the western sky, bathing the Hollywood Hills in a golden flush of summer.



The cab crawled up Laurel Canyon and stopped in front of a small wooden house on Lookout Mountain Avenue.

Inside, lights glowed as he approached the front door.

He had no luggage at all. Just his guitar case.

He heard two male voices coming from inside...

That instantly made him question what he was doing there - leaving his country, his marriage, his band - and, effectively, his past life - all at once.

As he mentioned a few years later, he was still just a kid from the north of England and at that precise moment, standing outside Joni's house in Laurel Canyon - he felt he was out of his element.

The two male voices he heard, belonged to David Crosby and Stephen Stills.



He had never met anybody like Crosby and he didn't like him much.

He was an irreverent, funny, brilliant hedonist, who had been thrown out of The Byrds the previous year.

He always had the best parties, the best drugs, the most beautiful women - and they were always naked.

Stephen was a guy in a similar mould. He was brash, egotistical, opinionated, provocative, volatile, temperamental - but immensely talented.

He was a very complex guy and a little crazy.

He was also without a band, having just left Buffalo Springfield, one of the top LA bands, with a strong following.

They were having dinner with Joni.

"I wasn't too happy about that", said Nash, but he became more chilled as the evening wore on. Very soon, something magical was about to happen - and one of the greatest bands in rock n' roll history was to emerge from it.

At one point Crosby said to Stephen - *"Hey, play Willy (Nash's nickname) that song we were just doing."*

It was a song called 'You Don't Have to Cry.'

Nash listened to it intently. He said, *"That's a great song - play it again."*

They played it again and in two short listenings, he knew he had it and could add something very special to it.

"That's really a great song - please do me a favour and play it one more time."

Almost reluctantly, they did, but this time, Nash added a high harmony.

At the end, they just looked at each other.

Crosby said, *"What the fuck just happened?"*

Nash summed it up perfectly later, when he said: *"The world fucking changed from that moment."*

It certainly did.

Not just for them.

For all of us.

And Joni was the only witness to that magical epiphany.

Graham moved in with Joni and the relationship deepened.

Joni had a great little place, built in the 1930's by a black jazz musician.

It had knotty pine, creaky wooden floors, a couple of cabinets full of beautifully coloured glass objects - and Joan's artwork leaning discreetly here and there.



Very soon after his arrival back in LA and the life-changing moment at Joni's house, Crosby, Stills and Nash were signed up by Atlantic Reprise on a lucrative contract - and they started recording their first album.



(Neil Young would not join the group until the second album).

During this time, Joni was emerging as a hugely respected musician in her own right and was becoming very popular. The word was out.

By 1969, she had planned to attend and perform at Woodstock, but had to pull out because of scheduling conflicts.

CSN did their first live performance at the event. It was a total triumph.

Graham described the lead up to the concert.

"We flew up along the Hudson River - and then Woodstock came into view. David said it was like flying over an encampment of the Macedonian army. It was more than a city of people - it was tribal. Fires were burning, smoke was rising, a sea of hippies clustered together, shoulder-to-shoulder, hundreds of thousands of them.



John Sebastian of the Lovin' Spoonful met us. We went straight to his tent at the right-hand side of the stage and got incredibly wasted.

It was such a tumultuous, smoke-ridden moment, that it's hard to remember everything as it went down, but we played for an hour and we could hardly hear ourselves."

The sound of the audience was enormous, their energy thrumming like an engine. We knew we had done well. We could sense it. As we left, Jimi Hendrix was launching into The Star-Spangled Banner."

When he got back to Joni after the festival and told her of the experience and the atmosphere, she wrote the song, 'Woodstock'.

CSNY would cover it on 'Déjà vu'. It also later became a worldwide hit for Matthews Southern Comfort.

Graham and Joni's relationship became idyllic. They were totally besotted with each other, inseparable and clearly deeply in love.



While they were living together in Los Angeles, Graham saw her genius at work writing some of the songs, including 'A Case of You'.

"I distinctly picture in my head, her writing at her piano in our house in Laurel Canyon that we shared for a couple of years." he said. "From the moment I first heard her play, I thought she was a genius. I'm good at what I do, but genius?"



The 'Blue' tracks that are specifically about Nash – 'My Old Man' and 'River' – cover their relationship from opposite ends of the spectrum.

On the former, Mitchell sings about a domestic bliss that doesn't "need no piece of paper," while the latter is a break-up lament about losing "the best baby that I ever had."

When asked about it, Nash insists that he never felt as if she bared too much about him and their relationship. "*No, I never did,*" he said. "*It was only admiration for her ability to do that.*"

In fact, he added, it was "tremendously courageous" for her to reveal so much of herself – and yes, her love life – at the time. "*She was not feeling particularly strong,*" he said. "*She had a lot of questions about her life and how it should have gone, maybe.*"



But Joni was happy.

In the documentary *Woman of Heart and Mind* she said:

"I had sworn my heart to Graham in a way that I didn't think was possible for myself.

He wanted me to marry him.

I'd agreed to it."

But, pretty soon after that, something happened.

Whether it was the totality of the commitment that frightened her, only Joni can say. But it certainly looks like that was a big part of it.

Her feelings for Graham were incredibly strong, but she was concerned that her musical ambitions, (which were significant), might be affected by becoming a wife and having a traditional lifestyle.

"I just started thinking, my grandmother was a frustrated poet and musician. She kicked the kitchen door off of the hinges on the farm," she explained. "*I thought about my paternal grandmother who wept for the last time in her life at 14 behind some barn, because she wanted a piano and said, 'Dry your eyes, you silly girl, you'll never have a piano.'*"

Her first marriage to another musician, Chuck Mitchell, ended because of musical differences resulting in her career exploding.

She was fiercely ambitious and clearly feared artistic regression if she married Graham. She realised that she valued her artistic freedom over romantic love. *"I thought, maybe I'm the one that got the gene that has to make it happen for these two women," she said. "As much as I loved and cared for Graham, I just thought, I'm gonna end up like my grandmother, kicking the door off the hinges, you know what I mean? It's like, I better not."*

The way she ended the love affair, was cruel and heartless.

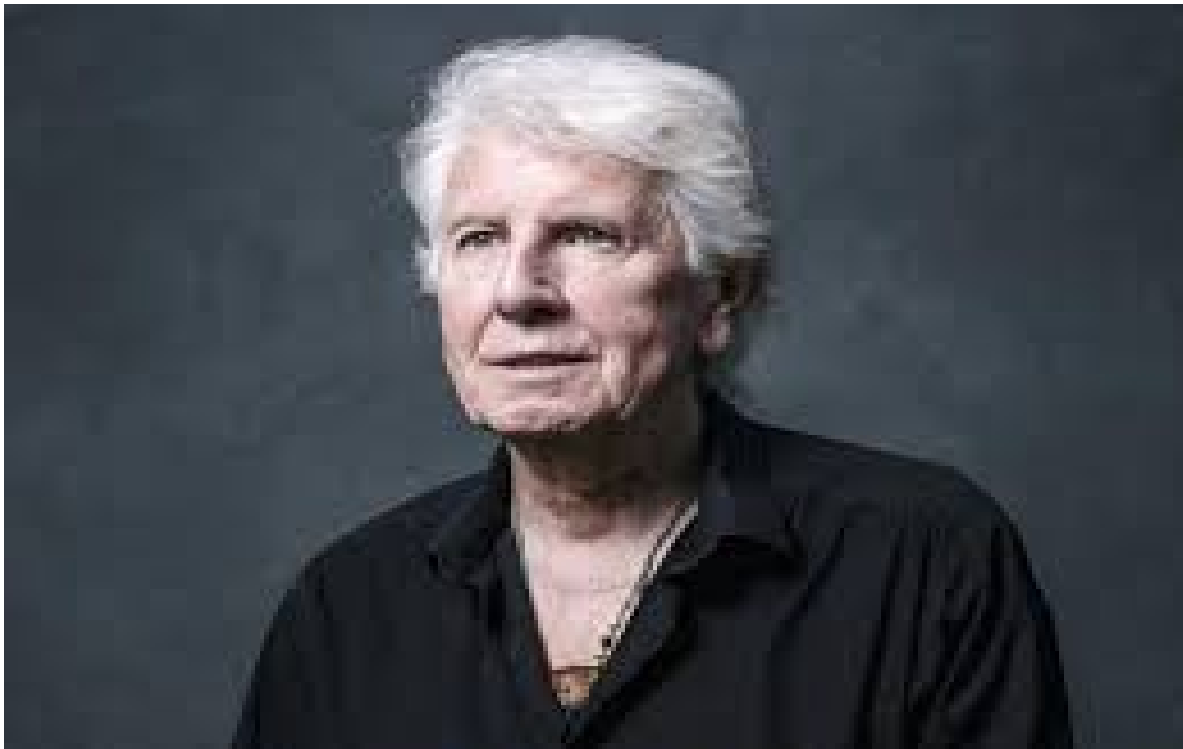
In 1970, she sent Graham a telegram from Greece, where she was on a short vacation. It simply said:

**"If you hold sand too tightly in your hand, it will run through your fingers.
Love, Joan"**

Graham Nash was laying a new kitchen floor in his house when it arrived.

He was totally and utterly devastated.

Graham still has love for Joni. I think he always will.



Several songs on Joni's album 'Blue' are about Nash and their relationship. He says that listening to the album now, gives him a strange mix of emotions.

He is flattered that Mitchell once wrote about him, making her "weak in the knees" on 'River'.

Nash told The New York Post, *"When I first heard the album, I realised that our love affair had come to an end - and that's a very sad feeling for anyone who's in love with anybody - but particularly because it's Joni and me."*

"People said that we literally lit up the room when we both were in it. They would say, "Holy shit – what is the glow around these two people?""

Our love was very warm, very tender and very deep, and it's one of the reasons why listening to 'Blue' still tugs at my heartstrings."



"I still feel a couple of emotions that shouldn't go together: One of them is sadness - and the other one is incredulity of how brilliant she is."

Russ Kunkel - the top session drummer - had heard some of the "Blue" songs at Mama Cass's house before he ended up playing on the record.



He says he'll never forget hearing the line in 'A Case of You' for the very first time:

"As soon as I heard that lyric, 'I could drink a case of you - and I would still be on my feet', it was one of those moments where in your brain you go...

...the person that wrote this is, like, of the highest degree."

Patrick Milligan, producer of the Joni Mitchell 'Archives' series said this about Blue:

"It was such a hugely influential record and remains a real touchstone for everybody."

"I think it's because it is so honest, that it's so timeless."

If you have never heard 'Blue', make it a priority to listen to it.

Get it *today*.

You must.

Because it is a masterpiece.

As a perfect close to this amazing but rather sad tale, it's wonderful to know that Graham and Joni are still in touch.

"I've sent her flowers for her birthday, every year for the last 50 years."

In a way, I suppose it's fair to say that their love affair continues today, with 'Blue' having immortalised it.

"All these years later there's a part of my heart that still loves Joni Mitchell," he said.

"Once you're in love with Joni Mitchell...you're in love with her forever."

