

Los Angeles and Southern California have an indigenous imagery which has spawned a music in many ways linked to the ecology of the land. This environment, and its lifestyle, have shaped the lives and work of the musicians and singer-songwriters who are the subjects of my book, *California Rock, California Sound* (from which this Joni Mitchell feature was excerpted).

Artists continually grow and evolve, often outgrowing their environment. Many of the musicians to whom Henry Diltz and I talked (Eagles; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; Linda Ronstadt, etc.) feel that having used this place, they are now looking towards New York, or to America in general. It is hard, though, to let go of L.A., this city of extremes and curiosities, glamour and myths. The plasticity of the signs, the billboards and the neon, vying for attention with the panoramic sunsets and twinkling hills. An amorphous, jangling mish-mash of elements, the rhythm of the concrete freeways—this is the synthesis of Los Angeles.

Joni was interviewed and photographed for the book in both Nevada and California. She was working night and day on a set of songs which jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus had written especially for her; she was very excited by this project and discussed it in detail. In our talks she also emphasized how important her painting had become, and how it was interrelated to her music.

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I am a painter first," Joni Mitchell has emphasized to me at the very beginning of our talks and it becomes clear that although she has always drawn, sketched and painted for as long as she can remember, her painting has taken on a new importance in her life these last few years—to the extent that her recent canvasses are intricately interwoven with the music she has been creating. During the period that Joni was writing and recording *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, she simultaneously worked on a large painting which depicts in pigment some of the same themes, metaphors and imagery of that album. "I can do songs on a square canvas," she said later, "and I can have the same symbolic diary in this medium as in the other."

Conversely, Joni's music, which is always in a state of flux, always moving forward, now incorporates many painterly characteristics, like a Picasso canvas where everything is pared down to the spaces in between objects, distilling the work into multi-faceted planes and the core of meaning. What is left out is for the others to put in.

"You see, the way I write songs now," Joni explains, "is around a standard melody that nobody knows, because that way you can get your words to have their organic inflection so that when you emphasize something you go up or you go down. Or if you want to put ten syllables in a line that in the next verse is only going to have three syllables drawn out through those bars, you have that liberty. As a result you can't write one lead sheet and put the four verses on it, every verse has to be written out individually—it's all variation on a theme."

Out in the desert, the sun casting its last golden rays on the red-rock mountains in the distance, Joni is feeling like a free spirit, laughing, happy, enjoying the tranquility of the landscape. The Joshua trees are flowering, ripe with juice for the first time in twenty years, and the cacti, too, are in bloom. Joni seems in harmony, both with the elements and with herself—flatlands, wide open spaces, being an inherent part of her and her music.

The dustless azure of the open sky is broken only by some frail cirrus stripes which echo the vastness of the desert floor. As she talks, Joni wanders barefoot among the chollas and the bright yellow poppies, the wind blowing through her hair and silk shawl. Her face is radiant; tan and sensual, at the same time showing a certain maturity which defies description because it is emotive but touches on the primitive; a Georgia O'Keefe, earth-oriented quality.

Joni sits on a rock, looking up at the sky meditatively. "Lightning storms; how are Californians going to relate to that?" she says. "They're not an institution in your life like they are for flatlanders, you know." She talks with fondness about the long distances and the prairies of her Canadian youth. That is one of the reasons why she can easily relate to the work of other artists whose oeuvre has grown out of similar flatland environments—artists such as O'Keefe and Boyd Elder.



JONI MITCHELL

Excerpted from the book
California Rock, California Sound
 By Anthony Fawcett, Photos by Henry Diltz

"Back in my hometown
 They would have cleared the floor
 Just to watch the rain come down!
 They're such sky oriented people—
 Geared to changing weather . . ."

Paprika Plains.

Blue neon strips of fluorescent light echo a Chinese motif atop the hotel opposite our window, with mauve mountains and grey sky washing together in the distance. Back from the desert and the Red Rock Mountains we are now in the heart of Las Vegas, where Joni has been staying for a few days. Down in the lobby the jangling fruit machines are continually at fever pitch, the ring of the jackpots rising above the cacophony.

"I've been trying to win this coyote, over at the bowling toss," Joni informs us. "The fun is worth it, it's better than putting silver dollars into those one-armed bandits!" She explains the games intently, a winner's glint in her eyes. Two hundred and twenty points each game wins you a monkey, and thirty-six monkeys win you the coyote. Her room right now, she laughs, is a menagerie of monkeys. "But I'm not leaving here without that coyote," she adds confidently.

Joni's speaking voice is soft, rounded, with an unusual, wide, mid-plains accent. She walks the line between glamour and sophistication, and a down to earth, country quality. Charles Mingus called her a hillbilly. Joni "gets some smokes" and we sit down in the back of the restaurant to talk more. She is at this moment very excited about and involved with a new project:

"All of a sudden I'm finding myself now in a very interesting project with Charlie Mingus. He's given me eight of his songs to sing and set words to, which is odd because I've never set words to anyone else's music. He's given me a lot of arranging—choice of musicians—he's given me a lot of leeway. What I'm having to learn is the rudiments of be-bop and everything, and the odd part of it is, the timing is so perfect, it's just natural to me. The songs are difficult to write, but the one and a half that I've finished are a more natural vehicle for me to sing, in some ways, than many of my old songs. His music is forties, early fifties, that kind of idiom—ballads, very Billie Holidayesque except they have a lot more range than she could sing. Some of them are about two and a half octaves—it's a lot of notes. There's a possibility that I might do some things with double-basses and voice and saxophone. I want to try in some way to take the piano and vocalist thing off of it, so that it'll have a new sound to it. It's such good music—you almost gotta trick it into being modern without being gimmicky in a way, so more people don't just see it as a stereotype and say 'Order me a vodka collins, it's a girl in a cocktail lounge.'"

There are six new tunes which Mingus has written for Joni, and two old ones, "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" and another which she has to choose. He gives them to her in piano form—there are no titles: "I asked him what was on his mind when he wrote them. He's dying of cancer, and for one of them he said, 'The things I wish I'd done and the people that I'm going to miss.' It's a very delicate subject matter. He's in a wheelchair, so he can't actually play his part on it."

Mingus' first idea involved T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets." He started composing a piece for classical orchestra, bass and Spanish guitar, interspersed with readings. Where they broke in stanzas he wanted Joni to condense it and sing it. She tried but soon gave up. "It was easier," she told him, "for me to condense the Bible than T.S. Eliot because you don't want to tamper with the beauty of his expansiveness, you can't distill it down." So then Mingus composed the songs.

"Charlie's into cacophony, multiple melody and contrapuntal overlays," Joni explains, "which I mess around with too, and somehow or other he liked what I did. I got a message through a friend and I called him up. The first time I talked to him was so warm, there was no barrier at all. And when I got to know him and read his book I understood why. He's a romantic and very spiritual man—very eccentric with a big chip on his shoulder, which has kind of devoured him all his life. It's very bewildering, this combination, you know, but it's very beautiful."