



"My goal is to get three songs written, by the end of this month (June)" Joni continues, "and get in the studio with Charlie. I want him to be there, if not for the complete project, to see some of it going into actuality. Four of the songs are ballads, very slow—and then there's some real be-bop blues, it's the freakiest thing. Six of them he wrote directly for me and he even attempted in his idiom to include some of my musical idiosyncrasies; I mean he would say, 'This is like something you do,' and I couldn't see it was like anything that I do!

"It's very demanding, in every way. And it's also peculiar to be setting words to someone else's vocal rhythm—everybody has their own rhythmic speech pattern—and the phrases are almost set up to be crooned, that's the kind of lyrics that were written for a lot of these old moon-June-croonisms, although there were some great old standards. But the problem is to take the knowledge of progressive pop writing and apply it to this old form."

The first song that Joni finished, "A Chair in the Sky," has a moody, sensuous sound, conjuring up images of the nighttime Manhattan skyline, with her voice full of emotion, capturing every subtle nuance within each bar.

*"The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time.
I'm trying to play the truth of what I am."*

Charles Mingus

The folk days of Laurel Canyon and the little house on the hill have blurred almost out of recognition, given the strides that Joni has taken since then with her musical development, each album advancing stalwartly forward for the last ten years. But that period was her breaking ground and she looks back on it with fondness: "That belonged to a time, in a way. I wrote a song called 'California'—it was written in Europe, and it was longing for that kind of creative climate where we did drop around with our songs to play, but that kind of thing happened prior to success. After success everybody became, whether they'll admit it or not, very much into their own particular creative process. For myself, as my work began to encompass other kinds of music outside of the L.A. circle, the people that I enjoyed singing with really didn't—or indicated to me that they didn't—like the harmonies that I added any longer. Their concept would be tight banks, and I would come in and sing; I would weave my melodies. I wouldn't come in on the downbeat. I'd already moved into an area which is more related to jazz, that is to say it's more expressive within the bar. There's more freedom within the bar where you come in and enter.

"I'm not a jazz musician but I need that creative freedom. That's why now I'm being sucked into jazz projects and working more and more with jazz musicians. I find I'm more understood there, and the heavier the player that I work with, the more easy it is to communicate. Because I'm illiterate; I don't have the number system nor do I have the letter chord system, I don't understand it. I'm a painter, I like to speak in metaphor: 'play me some semi-trucks going by,' you know, 'here we have the waves coming in, the keyboards should break like a wave, here's the pressure point'—by emotion and by remembrances.

"Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius—I would give them metaphorical instruction and they would thrill me, whereas musicians that are still in numerical/alphabetical reference-points would not feel the way it swelled or they would play something too repetitive through a place where the music was not repetitive—they couldn't feel the expression of it. Some of them even knew that and told me, 'Joni, get a jazz musician.' I'm working more in an improvisational way. Even though popularly I'm accused more and more of having less melody, in fact the opposite is true—there's more melody and so they can't comprehend it anymore. So I'm an oddball, I'm not part of any group anymore but I'm attached in certain ways to all of them, all of the ones that I've come through. I'm not a jazz musician and I'm not a classical musician, but I touch them all."

The music, John Coltrane once said, is "the whole question of life itself," and as a number of jazzmen have also emphasized, what you live and how you live becomes an instant, integral part of what you play each night, so that jazz is a continual autobiography, or rather a continuum of intersecting autobiographies; one's own and those of the musicians with whom one plays. And the great players are simple. "They're more intuitive," Joni agrees, "increasingly intuitive the greater they are. They have that knowledge if they need it, but they don't talk that way. They don't talk music too much—it almost breaks their heart to talk about it, it makes them angry and makes them play bad the next set, because it's very hard to explain, it's never accurate."

Joni's own evolution into working with and within the jazz framework came about gradually. "It started, I would say, back on *Ladies of the Canyon*," she explains. "There was one song, 'The Arrangement,' which was a predecessor (it was like a predecessor for 'Blue,' which came on the *Blue* album) which had a bit of that voicing—post-Stravinsky modern open-voicing—and in the chordal patterns, too. It's been very organic. It definitely wasn't rock 'n' roll voicing or movement."

*While you still have the time
You could get away and find
A better life, you know the grind
Is so ungrateful
Racing cars, whiskey bars
No one cares who you really are*

The Arrangement

Joni had been looking for a band because she was way behind everybody else in playing with musicians and going out on the road; she couldn't seem to make it happen. "The L.A. Express was a band intact and John Guerin and Larry Carlton were the musicians within that band who impressed me the most. Carlton because he was playing jazz with a country feeling—jazz and country being the most polar opposites. It was a criticism of Carlton that he was doing all these arced bends, which are very like pedal steel, and it turns out he's a weekend fly fisherman! So his long casting splash, I would say, is related to that. Everything's related, everything you do comes out.

"It was good experience to play with a band that was intact rather than to fit it all together. It was good for the time. Now, some of the criticism of that band, which people said to me at the time, I would have to agree with. Not all of it, because it was a prejudice based on 'all jazz is the Johnny Carson Show.' It was a prejudice based on a certain kind of ignorance.

"In the meantime, since I have been playing with more masterful players, that is to say true artists who don't think in terms of commercial consideration, who just play gut-level and that's it, it's an entirely different experience. And since I began to play with them, I mean as a singer, I feel I'm a much better singer. If I was a better singer last year than I was the year before, I'm five or six times better a singer this year for the work that I'm doing on Charlie's music. You know, I can go almost anywhere that my range will take me; my pitch has improved, my confidence has improved—I really feel free now as a singer. But I still don't have my facility on any instrument. They're, to me, just tools for setting up a reference for my voice to float on. I'll probably never master those instruments, although there is a growth. The guitar, especially, is growing. The piano—all of a sudden I went through a breakthrough period last year where I sat down and off the top of my head, I couldn't play anything wrong. What I mean by that is that if I hit what would be called a wrong note, a dissonance, I would repeat it and it would sound fantastic—like where a dissonance was simply another statement and was not a wrong note. You know, lay on it; you hit a dissonance—well lay on it!

"So the improvisational, the spontaneous aspect of this creative process—still as a poet—is to set words to the music, which is a hammer and chisel process. Sometimes it flows, but a lot of times it's blocked by concept. And if you're writing free consciousness—which I do once in a while just to remind myself that I can, you know, because I'm fitting little pieces of this puzzle together—the end result must flow as if it was spoken for the first time."

"Paprika Plains," an unwinding slice of autobiography and dream sequences which takes up a whole side of the double album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, is an unusually complicated and ambitious example of this building process: "Oh! A lot of shuffling went on," Joni confirms. "There were Indian grass chants in the middle of it, there were a hundred and one different ways that I approached that. More so than anything else on the album. The instrumental passage in the middle just poured out."

It is early afternoon in Los Angeles; the house is quiet, apparently deserted. A stone fish pond graces the central courtyard, white flowering wrought-iron gates delicately guard the arched front door. Above the stone arch is a circular sculptured eagle, and miniature potted palms bask on either side of the entrance. The house sits on a hill, flowers around everywhere; Icelandic poppies, potted geraniums in full bloom. It is Joni's spirit defined in texture, color, and shapes.

After a while Joni appears. She had been working all night on one of the Mingus songs and had finally gone to bed at ten in the morning. But she looks relaxed in a simple white blouse and white pants, her blond hair slightly curled. We sit in the kitchen, the creative heart of the house. She had been working on one song; the first and last parts were happening but she couldn't get them to cross over, couldn't get the middle to connect. It is frustrating to her, being blocked on a part of a song like that, because she never knows how long it will take to work itself out. "I like a song to be either a soliloquy or a movie, a whole drama where characters butt up against each other and people change their minds," Joni explains as we sit down at the butcher-block table. She picks up little Harlow, her Persian cat, from a nearby chair and places the cat gently on her lap.

The kitchen is small but light, with windows looking out onto pots of flowers; yellow and blue ceiling beams echo the colors in the pattern of the floor tiles. A second song for the Mingus project has been completed and Joni is evidently pleased with it; it is a song which resulted from the recent stay in Las Vegas and is called, tentatively, "Fools Paradise." She sings it slowly in a soft, jazzy voice:

*I'm down to a roll of dimes
I'm stalking the slot that's hot
I keep hearing bells around me
Jingling the lucky jackpot . . .*

"Charlie likes it," she says. "Turns out he used to be a slot machine addict." Joni muses: "Any place you go can cough up a song if you're hot on the trail."

&

Anthony Fawcett was born in London, was an art critic there for three years before joining Apple as John Lennon's personal assistant; after that he worked as Stephen Stills' European advisor and in 1976 Grove Press published his book, *John Lennon: One Day at a Time*. He now lives in Los Angeles, New York and London but not at the same time. Henry Diltz, born in Kansas City, Missouri, was a founding member of the Modern Folk Quartet 15 years ago; he started taking pictures of his L.A. music friends in the late 60s and was official photographer for Woodstock and the Monterey and Miami music festivals. His photographs have appeared on 80 album covers plus the covers of *Life*, *Rolling Stone*, *Cash Box* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He's currently recording an album with the recently reunited MFQ.