

# The man behind the ALBUM COVER



Moshe Brakha (above), photographer & Joni Mitchell from a recent Brakha session.

BY BYRON LAURSEN

After eight years," observes Lori Chapman, stylist for Israel-born commercial photographer Moshe Brakha, "I still understand him only about half the time."

Brakha, one of the leading names in album cover art, seems to be moving too fast for the English language. The two of them have worked out a truce, trading comprehensibility for momentum while Brakha pours his energies into a career based on up-to-the-minute imagery. Since Boz Scagg's 1975 album *Silk Degrees*, featuring a Brakha cover, turned multiplatinum, rock stars and their managers have beat a path down Brakha's phone wires. Paul Anka (*The Music Man* LP), The Ramones (*Leave Home*), Ritchie Havens (*End of the Beginning*) and Neil Young have been among his clients. Typically, stars come to Brakha to

modernize and intensify their image with his hyper-natural, close-lit, color-saturated style.

"I don't even have a business card," Brakha confides after jotting his number on a cadged slip of paper for an anxious rock group manager. We, Brakha and Chapman and I, have just trucked over from his mid-Wilshire district studio to a Beverly Hills sidewalk cafe. At the studio we looked over first yields of his current project, sessions with the eternally changeable folk-rock-and-maybe-jazz performer/writer Joni Mitchell. As a table is cleared for us, Brakha dashes across Robertson Street to use a pay phone, then scoots back. In black oxfords, white socks, black denims, a white Brooks Brothers oxford cloth button-down with tails flying free and a pomaded flattop haircut, he looks like a Fifties hotrodder with an Eighties twist.

"She's so easy (to work with)," says Brakha of Mitchell, "but she's still very opinionated."

Mitchell's early training was in art and she has painted nearly all of her own album covers. In fact, even with Brakha on the job she intends to paint the cover of this newest opus, *Wild Things Run Free*. She has always seemed rigorously in control of all aspects of her public image. While dozens of other singers have interpreted her songs, Mitchell seldom records songs written by anyone else but her.

"She was wonderful," says Chapman. "She was very receptive to everything we had to suggest. Essentially, we went through her closets and pulled out everything we liked. Compared with how she used to dress — berets and leather boas and all that — we went for an absence of detail."

"She needs strong visual," says Brakha. "Forget yesterday! She needs to remake her image up to contemporary fashion. Her past doesn't fear me!"

Their first session, at one of Mitchell's luxurious homes, left Brakha naggingly displeased. The next time, after setting up an elabo-

rate overhead shot that captures Mitchell and a slice of a piano's innards, Brakha felt he had some of the most successful images of his career. Still scheduled is a session of head shots and a series to be taken in and around Carnegie Hall, utilizing reflections from window glass.

"I told her she reminded me of Edith Piaf," Brakha says, imitating — to our waitress's puzzlement — the celebrated French singer's way of drawing her hands alongside her face while emoting. "She said that Piaf is one of her idols. So we became friends right away. Her hands have beautiful expression! Today we're supposed to do head shots, but I'm going to have her bring her hands up!"

Brakha's method is to spend long periods — up to four hours — setting up a camera angle and lighting situation, then to place his subject in that constructed universe and shoot quickly. Once he amazed an art director by expending only one roll of film on a crucial ad campaign. "I told him 'It's okay, we've got it,'" Brakha gloats toothily. First Brakha shoots shot after shot using instant film in order to "perfect" the setup. Then he switches the back of his Hasselblad camera to a 120 magazine and shoots conventional film. For color he prefers Kodak Ektachrome film and a magenta filter. Black-&-white is usually Kodak Panatomic-X or Plus-X pan film.

"I always use as much light as possible... usually three major lights," Brakha says. "That's how you build contrast and contours. I consider light the makeup of photography." Close lighting gives his photos a color-drenched, more-real-than-real look. Rich lighting also allows a tiny aperture setting. His favorite is f/22. This creates a strong depth of field, which means that foreground and background objects all appear in sharp focus. Again, the effect is hypernatural. "I want to get as much as your eye can see... and more," says Brakha.

"He always has to give things an extra twist," says Chapman.