

Joni

"I was at a Hopi snake dance a couple of weeks ago and there were tourists who acted like Indians and Indians who acted like tourists. You're just a bunch of tourists."

—Joni Mitchell, *Isle of Wight Festival*, 1970

On a snowy March night in 1974 I'm doubled over the beveled lip of the stage at the University of Colorado Fieldhouse. Patchouli, ditch weed and b.o. have replaced the oxygen, and I'm thinking of passing out when the house lights suddenly flicker off, and the slow clapping of three thousand hippies and teenage girls behind me switches to a roar. A tight round spotlight opens on the stage. There's a flash of silhouette to the left and Joni Mitchell, in marcelled waves and a slinky ankle-length 40s evening dress, moves quickly from the wings, furiously strumming a jet-black Martin guitar. Even before she gets to the microphone she's singing, bellowing almost. "Look out the left the captain said! The lights down there that's where we'll land! I saw a falling star burn up above the Las Vegas sands!" Her face, its mythic bone structure flattened under the spotlight, looks radiant, the eyes paranoid, the grin an overbit rictus. I'm tripping lightly, but there's an unmistakable foreboding in her voice. She's not come here tonight with news of Morgantown.

and

Creamy Pumpkins (memoir); July 19th, 1974: The kicking at the back of my seat stops, and when I turn I see rows and rows of Dana Gillespie, Tony DeFries, Ian Lloyd, Cyrinda Fox, Anton Perich, Udo Kier, Jane Forth, Tally Brown. There are girls in chrome shags, boys with sheer tops. Illuminated by the stage light bleed, they're deep turquoise, then quickly red, then gold. I'm staring, quite startled. Cyrinda's arms wave in the air. "David!!" And now everyone is standing and screaming. I turn back to the stage as the star levitates skyward via hydraulics. Rumbling, deafening, infinitely low bass tones, clouds parting over banks of mellotron horns, and a brutal 4-note guitar figure slithers off the stage. "It's safe in the city, to love in a doorway"—molech!—"To wrangle some screams from the door." *Diamond Dogs*' black heart is "Sweet Thing/Candidate." He's crooning it draped over the rail of a swiveling catwalk 18 feet above the floor of Madison Square Garden. "Now isn't it me, putting pain in a stranger. A portrait in flesh, trails on a leash." I'm closed off on all sides by the forcefield of hands wafting adoration in the air. "If you want it, boys, get it here, thing. 'Cause hope, boys, is a cheap thing cheap thing." Slowly the song sheds skin after skin until there's only a scrape of distorted guitar and funeral drums. The pace picks up, a rush of debasement. Hundreds of glazed eyes tilt to him. "I guess we could cruise down one more time. With you by my side it should be fine. We'll buy some drugs and watch a band! And jump in the river holding hands!"

Two old friends

I've been thinking about Joni and Bowie recently, in that period of *Court and Spark* and *Hissing of Summer Lawns* and also *Diamond Dogs* and *Station To Station*.

There was actually a point in the 70s that I would get them mixed up, get their lyrics confused. There was such a lot of paranoia that they were observing. Personal and global.

I saw them both perform in 1974.

That would be *Court and Spark* for Joni?

Right, and *Diamond Dogs*. I want to go deeper on that subject, but first let's talk about the work in this show. Have you had a chance to look at the jpegs I sent?

Quickly. I was intrigued with almost everything, which is unusual.

Oh, good. Well, in this exhibition most of the work references the period between *Blue* and *Hejira*. It's all over the map intent-wise. The organizing question, I suppose, is why have all these artists made art about Joni Mitchell in the last few years? From straight-ahead portraiture of Joni, to self-portraiture as Joni, to photographs of John Kelly who performs live sort of *inside* Joni. Becoming her.

I saw him do that some years back. What I thought was interesting was that he divided the show into conceptual Joni eras, pre- and post-LA. Which seemed smart, but also maybe a bit VH-1. But what he did with that was brilliant. John Kelly was probably a young gay boy listening to Joni Mitchell. I don't think he grew up with the albums coming out once a year like teenage updates the way we did. The show felt authentic, but kind of received at the same time.

Right, most of the artists in this show are working with ideas of Joni Mitchell at least one generation removed. Of course it's important to remember that because of the miracle of recorded sound, they all have direct access to her work.

I have the images in front of me

OK, let's look at each one, and expand on some ideas as we go along.

In numerical order?

Yes. 1. This is Mark Chamberlain, it's a 10-by-9 watercolor.

I'm sorry, it's ravishing. Is that the artist's face?

I'm told that it is.

On the cover of *Hejira*, Joni has plucked eyebrows and mascara, which make her face imperious and blank. She looks like a model having an argument with the photographer. Mark Chamberlain has deep-set eyes that turn the same expression into something quite different, equally unreadable. There does seem to be more sorrow. I love this.

My eye goes to the fingers and the cigarette. Until I saw this I'd never noticed how they echo the photo of Duchamp in drag as Rose Selavy.

Yep, no doubt it took time to get her digits just so. Chamberlain is also maybe aware that on Joni's next album she posed in drag and blackface.

2. Jason Villegas, and this is fabric on canvas, 6-by-6.

Inches? It seems so much larger. I know his work, and especially like the portraits. Here he's working from Jack Robinson's iconic photo, I think 1968, in which she's wearing a kind of Mexican peasant djalaba (*laughs*) and is sitting uncomfortably on the floor.

Villegas did a great drawing of Costello Tagliapietra. This is more like his Michael Jackson, though. He's cross-wired Robinson's iconic *Life* magazine folksinger image with something more paranoid.

It's almost like a Pettibon. It could be the cover of *Tripping Corpse*! I'm used to gay men thinking of her as sister-goddess, which is just lazy journalism. Bravo, Jason Villegas, for letting the cocaine in.

3. Melanie Schiff. It's a C print, 50 by 60. Do you know her photos?

Yes, she's from here [Chicago]. First off, what I love is that it acknowledges that the *Blue* cover is one of the hardest artifacts of the 70s. You find them at thrift stores in every imaginable state—warped, ripped, boiled, braised, scribbled on, covered with roach burns. I like that here it's just dead, blotto.

***Blue* is the Joni Mitchell record that most people are familiar with. Which is kind of strange, because it's also when her songs became considerably darker. The bemused rural sarcasm starts to shade into L.A. cynicism on this album. Hence this is the period that rivets me.**

Melanie Schiff has built a reputation for the way she manipulates light in her photos. I can see why, looking at this one. Also, Joni Mitchell plus swimming pool generally equals Los Angeles, but what's great about this image of abandonment and rot is that it could easily be Wichita. Which, of course, is one of the key points of *Blue*.

It's around the time Joni's friends and people in the music industry were starting to use junk, and she was running as fast as she could from Graham Nash, etcetera. Where did she finally land to write *Blue*?

Ibiza, I think. Formentera and Malibu.

Here are some words from *Blue* that you could say were like billboards along my teenage highway: "Stay with him if you can. But be prepared to bleed"; "The jealousy, the greed is the unraveling. And it undoes all the joy that could be"; "All romantics meet the same fate someday. Cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark cafe."

You forgot "Acid, booze, and ass. Needles, guns, and grass. Lotsa laughs." [*laughs*]

She famously did not consider herself a feminist. But these songs about love are more accurately songs about men. The complex arrangements and open tunings and vocal prowess are all in the service of a penetrating, harrowing take on men.

Well, for balance I'd have to say that alienation of other stripes are in there too. I still wince at the lines we just quoted, but also the bored way she sings "They won't give peace a chance. That was just a dream some of us had."

4. Abbey Williams. This is the video.

Oh, nice segue. She's singing that very line in the piece, while all these people shop around her for, what, furniture?

Yeah, it was shot in Ikea. Apparently it took some time, as she kept getting chased out by security.

It would appear that security are the only ones who gave a shit. What's striking is that in every shot she's so thoroughly hunkered down, too. She doesn't appear to be trying out the goods, or even waiting for someone. There she is singing "California," this wail of alienation and malaise, and how perfect that everyone is ignoring her. It's the brass tacks of it.

I haven't been able to get it out of my head.

I'd like to see more of her work. That's just killer. Is there any other *Blue*-oriented work?

Yes. 5. Chris Bogia.

Now, by the materials list, I'm given to believe that the album cover is yarn on wood.

The eyes are walnut, and the tears are blown glass. Chris is interested in expanding the decorative in unprecedented ways.

When you say that, I think of Jim Isermann. This seems more devotional, though.

It's from a series of album covers by female musicians. There's also a performative version, where he and other

men assume these hard-to-read naked poses as part of the installation.

The tears and the 60s hippie eyes are a nice touch. I assume this is about Joni's goddess aspect?

No, I don't think so. It's more about examining gay domestic spaces.

Joni Mitchell as a kind of kitchen god for gay men has been going on since the 70s. She still represents for the radical faeries and the organic beardies, and she's making inroads into the design bear world now, too. I don't know how much they listen to the later stuff, the experimental jazz and the scolding ecological lectures.

I support the cynical old schoolmarm Joni. I love when they asked her opinion of Gaga. "The mission of every sociopath is exposure." But I also dig Laurel Canyon Joni, doing coke at Mama Cass's.

I would go all the way back. Back to the bootlegs of her playing folk clubs in Winnipeg and Philadelphia and Florida, where David Crosby first saw her. "Eastern Rain" and "Carnival in Kennorra" and goofy patter in between. She was singing in her stately art song voice, but it was these playful portrait sketches and teenage memories of Saskatchewan. It's very reminiscent of Bowie doing things like "Gospel According to Tony Day" and "God Knows I'm Good." They both could have gone off in any one of a hundred directions at that point.

6 and 7. Erik Hanson. There are two oil paintings here. Erik is the artist that I'm most familiar with in this show.

You turned me on to his work and I am an unabashed fan. He's the best at delineating my own relationship to pop stars and the music. I'm glad he's doing Joni Mitchell.

These paintings are not like any he's done before, yet they still encourage you to discover context. First off, the one titled "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" makes me think of Frank Perry's *The Swimmer*, with Burt Lancaster attempting to swim across his suburban town, one back yard pool after another. Then also the lyric from the song: "He put her in a ranch house on a hill. She could see the Valley barbecues from her window sill."

Oddly enough, she mentions a "diamond dog, carrying a cup and a cane" in that song. Well, I can understand your connecting all of this to Frank Perry, the most dystopian American director of the era. I always think of *Hissing* as Joni's response to Joan Didion, and it was Perry who directed the film version of her book *Play It As It Lays*.

I don't know if you remember this, but when she toured to promote *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* she wore a tacky stretch-knit pants suit onstage and had her hair done up kind of strangely. Lily Tomlin was doing a housewife character around that time, and there was a feeling of masks and impersonation going on. Again, Bowie's influence was being felt.

This second painting by Erik Hanson has all the feel of that in it. The high cheekbones and the one eye different than the other. It seems to fix like a flashbulb a permanent impression of someone in that particular time and place, in Southern California. The washed-out portrait songs like "Edith and the Kingpin" and "Shades of Scarlett Conquering"; the zonking of all these otherwise impressive people by drugs and feathered hair. (*laughs*)

The most unusual and least visible strand that runs through this kind of portraiture is the subject's own very public biography. Or maybe I should say discography. Any art you try to make about Joni Mitchell, that's hidden in plain sight.

I was going to say something about the chronology of the album covers, and then the same with the iconic photos, almost more than the music itself. Especially with the current remastering/re-issuing/box-set fad going on, that's how the artists in this show have experienced it. Then there are the *Behind The Music* anecdotes, half remembered, that give pop figures this kind of holographic context that we usually reserve for symbols. We are in some infinitesimal way contributing to that right now.

To me, the most astonishing track on here, among many astonishing tracks, is "The Jungle Line." The Alice Coltrane-y bass synthesizer, and the field recording of Burundi drummers, and that totally weird, cut-up lyric connecting Rousseau with Harlem, waitresses, and heroin.

Oy, again with the heroin. Some of her best songs, though. She herself got into coke a lot more in 1974 and '75, especially when she met Mick Ronson on the Rolling Thunder Revue, he being at loose ends after Bowie fired him. Actually, that would be around the time you saw her.

I have to say, that concert is still among the most powerful I've seen. It was difficult to tell what was going on, like watching someone maintain really well on acid. She had I guess the beginning of her L.A. Express touring band with her, and they were so precise, which she seemed to love so much that it distracted her. It got between the usual audience and performer thing in an interesting way. Stylized. But she changed around all of the arrangements, and it was like I'd never heard the actual songs before, just wax-coated versions until then. Thick, gloomy. And she was speed-rapping in between about politics. This was just before Nixon resigned.

Did you see Bowie later?

Yeah, Joni Mitchell was March 1974 in Boulder, and Bowie was that July at Madison Square Garden. There was a continuation of this feeling of disconnection and apocalypse in that show, too. I remember he came on to "1984," with an enormous futurist set of skyscrapers and this 15-foot-high cock spurting blood. It was very hot in New York right then, and every disturbed person imaginable wandering the streets. *Diamond Dogs* didn't feel remote then and there.

Well, New York alienation was moving through Joni's songs in that period as well. "Harry's House," with its image of a

helicopter landing on the roof of the Pan Am Building, “like a dragonfly on a tomb.” And “The Jungle Line” with its “Pretty women funneled through valves and smoke.” The Factory vibe in “People’s Parties.” I get all of that in [Erik’s] portrait.

8. Christina Empodocles. It’s wax pencil on paper, 14 by 14 inches. Titled “Waikiki Shell 6-28-72.”

I’d not known her work before, so I went online and looked at a number of drawings. She’s done these stacks of tickets before. It seems like a project to do with memory and close-reading objects of memento, or...

In this case I was told that they were purchased on eBay. The concert at the Waikiki Shell was one of only a dozen that Joni played in all of 1972. Which is more than 1971, when she played live maybe four times the entire year. Do you have any idea what she was up to?

1972? Recording *For the Roses*. Ummm, bringing in horns, electric guitar, synthesizers. Basically re-inventing her sound template after the enormous success of *Blue*. Except for the first album, *Song to a Seagull*, *For the Roses* is my favorite Joni Mitchell album.

It might be mine as well. “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” is visionary, musically and lyrically. The prairie jazz suite of “Lesson in Survival” and “Let the Wind Carry Me,” with their arguments and revelations. In film terms, it’s like Casavettes. I think it was right about then that Kris Kristofferson admonished her for revealing so much of herself. Oh brother.

Let’s move on to 9, 10 and 11, by Keith Mayerson. Watercolors, and I don’t have sizes on these. 9 is from the cover of “For the Roses,” obviously. I think in some ways his work is the most tuned in with the limitations of using an iconic subject like Joni. He only attempts to interpret his own experience of her.

But look how much he’s able to get from that strategy, if it is one. His hand is terribly confident. Most definitely Keith Mayerson has a personal relationship with Joni Mitchell. (*laughs*)

Number 10 is titled “Joni (Paprika Plains).” Number 11 is “Joni (Blue).” They’re so subjective that I started to wonder if he works from memory.

These are gorgeous. If you lived with them they would shape-shift over time. I have the book he collaborated on with Dennis Cooper, *Introducing Horror Hospital*. Also really compelling, but in a completely other way.

“Paprika Plains” refers to a song on *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, which probably has the most art-directed cover of all her records. As you said earlier, she appears on the front as a black male pimp.

I’ve never understood what that image meant. You try to square it with the album title and it gets even stranger. The songs were probably the most—if one can still use the word—Dylanesque that she’d yet written, with this cast of random, louche characters. Overlaying that was a vibe of ecological and social rot, and annihilation. Mushroom clouds. Keith Mayerson’s “Paprika Plains” would seem to be an illustration of one of the few pastoral moments that appears in an otherwise pessimistic song with the same name.

I want to look at these two photographs of John Kelly in Joni drag. Numbers 12 and 13. 20 by 30 inches each. They were both shot the same day in December of 2010, one in Austin, Texas and the other in Marfa, Texas. John did his final Joni Mitchell performance at Marfa.

I read that and was disappointed. These photos are curious. They look to be taken by Kelly himself, with his arm extended to the camera. Is it a play on “Shadows and Light”? Are they maybe from a longer series of documentation photos of himself wherever he does a Joni show?

But drag is generally camera-ready. As an act of self-revelation it likes to come across itself later, not just in a mirror now. So I imagine these as captures along the road.

And again there’s an aura of unease. It’s as if no one trusts the toothy, smiling Joni Mitchell, so they have to change her. Because they know better. They listen to the songs!

There’s a performance by Rachel Mason scheduled for the opening of the show. I’m sorry to miss that, as she’s pretty interesting. And then there’s one more piece that I just sent you, by Rupert Goldsworthy.

I have it. How was this made?

It’s a t-shirt transfer onto the canvas, and then flasche and auto body paint. 30 by 40.

It’s stunning. It’s got the presence of a Billy Al Bengston. I love how the buildings are blotchy and the color of mimeograph ink, and the anaconda and the bushmen have long left. I’d love to see this one in the flesh.

The text panel is sweet. I have a memoir in a box somewhere about being stuck in Topeka one summer in the 70s, living in someone’s basement. All I did was go to my job, hang out at this hustler bar that was in a quonset hut, and listen to the Scott Walker album I’d found at a Goodwill store. In his text Rupert describes himself at 18: “Masturbating, smoking pot and listening to Joni were my main pastimes.”

Too bad you didn’t know each other then. (*laughs*) You could have hung out, playing “Don’t Interrupt the Sorrow” over and over.

Yep. With lightning bolts painted on our faces.