

“For the Roses”--Joni Mitchell (1972)

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Essay by Shawn Colvin (guest post)*



Joni Mitchell, producer Larry Klein and Shawn Colvin, c. 1991

In 1969, when I was 13 years old, a much older (15) and wiser woman issued me an edict at church camp: listen to Joni Mitchell. I took her sage advice and bought Joni’s second and most recent album, “Clouds.” My musical world changed forever. I found my idol, the artist I fervently aspired to be, and that has never changed. It seemed within reach because Joni was a woman, a woman who not only equaled but, to a large extent, surpassed her male counterparts, a quadruple threat: superlative songwriter, singer, guitarist, and pianist, and a brilliant painter for good measure. To me she completely embodied the purity of a true, natural-born artist.

In short order I found her debut record, “Song To A Seagull,” and consumed it. That album cemented my ardor. I’d never heard any musician who spoke to me like Joni. In 1970, she released “Ladies Of The Canyon,” and then, in 1971, “Blue.” I was first in line at the record store for both of them. My love for her work deepened with every album she put out.

Then came “For The Roses” which was released in October, 1972. There was a photograph of her on the cover, seated on the ground, a verdant waterfront landscape surrounding her. This was near her cabin in British Columbia, a place she acknowledges as having anchored her during the writing of “For The Roses.” She is dressed in lush green velvet and blond Frye boots (I immediately procured a pair). Up until then she had painted or drawn all her album covers except for “Blue,” which offered a blurry close-up photo. But now here she was, looking straight into the camera, her face nearly transparent, her gaze childlike and pure, the very furthest thing possible from a pose. Genuine. Without artifice. There was more. Upon opening the album package, we see her pictured literally head-to-toe naked, back to the camera and standing on a rock, staring out across that same water. I remember feeling not shocked but honored. None of this seemed really surprising to me, actually. Joni Mitchell was nothing if not vulnerable, an exquisitely open book. But these visuals signified a possibly even deeper level of readiness to reveal herself. I put the vinyl on the turntable and set down the needle. I wasn’t wrong.

“For The Roses” is, at its core, an unflinching chronicle of a romance, from its explosive inception to its crushing dissolution. Joni’s honesty is breathtaking. Every baffling, contradictory, heart-wrenching nuance of a once glorious but now broken relationship is explored.

“Electricity,” “Blonde In The Bleachers,” and “Lesson In Survival” by turns embrace the intense thrill of falling in love, of jealousy, longing, and betrayal, resignation, sorrow, letting go, and of healing--sometimes all in the same song, like “See You Sometime”:

*...Where are you now?
Are you caught in some crowd
Or holding some honey
Who came on to you?
...It hurts, but something survives
Though it's undermined
I'd still like to see you sometime....*

*...I'm feelin so good
And my friends all tell me
That I'm lookin fine.....
..no need to surrender
I just wanna see you again....*

*...It seems such a shame
We start out so kind
And end so heartlessly....
... when the hopes got so slim
I just resigned
But I'd still like to see you sometime
I would sure like to see you...*

In “Woman Of Heart And Mind,” Joni takes an achingly objective look at herself in love (from both sides now) with such simplicity and poignancy that it might be my favorite among the lot, although I’ll likely regret that statement in the next paragraph since “For the Roses” reveals gem after gem from start to finish. And lest we think the record is without whimsy let’s not overlook “You Turn Me On (I’m a Radio),” a playful, flirtatious come-hither that is pure pop.

What’s particularly amazing to me is that not all the material adheres to what we might think of as your typical coupling. “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” (ok, maybe this one’s my favorite), for example, *is* pure romance, but between two unexpected lovers: a junkie and his seductress--heroin. And contrary to what one might expect from such a story, the song is flat-out sexy. In “Judgement of the Moon and Stars (Ludwig’s Tune),” Joni lovingly consoles Beethoven, who became completely deaf at the age of 44. The title track, “For The Roses,” is a cautionary tale about the deep lure of what we’ve now come to know as the “star-maker machinery” and the treacherous relationship between fame and artistry.

It is surely a universal truth that any relationship bound by the passion and intimacy we call love is intensely complex, an overwhelming task to wrestle down on paper or canvas, in film or music. With “For The Roses,” Joni Mitchell pretty much nails it in 12 songs.

When I listen to this album (and I know it by heart, so to speak), I am so grateful for Joni Mitchell’s intrepid heart and her unwavering willingness to tell me, with candor and integrity, what she is truly feeling as she weathers what I can only describe as a disintegration of self that happens to me when my own heart is broken. I have a partner in, and a witness to, my grief. This companionship heals me, for Joni has created music and words so incredibly exquisite from such deep, deep sadness. So there must be hope, and another album on the horizon. I’ll be at the record store, first in line.

Shawn Colvin is a Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter. She has released 12 albums starting with "Steady On" in 1989. Her single "Sunny Came Home," off the album "A Few Small Repairs," was named "Song of the Year" by the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences in 1997.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.