

“For the Roses”—Joni Mitchell (1972)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



Original album



Original label



Joni Mitchell

Renowned musician John Mellencamp, who, like Joni Mitchell, is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, once said that there was only one female *artist* in modern music. And that artist was Joni Mitchell.

Mitchell (born 1943 in Fort McLeod, Alberta, Canada) has had a long and highly influential career. Since her debut in 1968, Mitchell has recorded and released a startlingly number of classic albums: “Court and Spark,” “Blue,” “Ladies of the Canyon,” “The Hissing of Summer Lawns” and more recent works such as “Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm” and “Both Sides, Now.” But even amongst these masterpieces, there is something to be said for her “For the Roses.”

Released in 1972, “For the Roses” occurred in the Mitchell lexicon between her albums “Blue” (1971) and “Court and Spark” (1974).

Seventy-one’s “Blue,” Mitchell’s fourth album, is widely considered one of her best works. Certainly it is the work which, up to that time, most resonated with critics and audiences. It reached #15 on the “Billboard” charts and has for years figured prominently in every magazine and website’s retroactive list of “top,” “best,” and “greatest” pop albums of the past century.

“Blue”—which included the Mitchell compositions “Carey,” “Urge for Going,” “River” and “The Last Time I Saw Richard”—was a deeply personal work, much of it charting a recent breakup with a long-time love (rumored to be Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young).

For “For the Roses,” Mitchell continued to mine her personal life for the album’s 12-song song cycle. Though nothing can be proven for sure, five of the album’s cuts are said to be about singer-songwriter James Taylor, a then recent Mitchell ex. Along with the title track, these cuts include “See You Sometime” and “Lesson in Survival.”

But, as melodious and memorable as those above songs were, “For the Roses” was about more than just love and loss. Stylistically, “For the Roses,” along with containing more examples of Mitchell innovative, customary chord progressions, would also mark Mitchell’s first overt foray into jazz, a genre that, for the next several years, would come to dominate her art. A considerable number of “Roses’s” cuts showed a strong jazz influence including “Barangrill,” “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire,” “Let the Wind Carry Me,” “Electricity,” “Woman of Heart and Mind,” and “Judgment of the Moon and Stars.”

Mitchell’s next album “Court and Spark” would continue her exploration into jazz and jazz fusions. And her album after that, 1975’s “The Hissing of Summer Lawns,” would be the artist’s

first full jazz recording. It would be followed by other jazz-oriented works--“Hejira” (1976); “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter” (1977); and “Mingus” (1979).

“For the Roses” would also mark Mitchell’s first popular chart success. Though she’d always had her followers, and others (notably Judy Collins with “Both Sides Now” and “Woodstock” by the aforementioned Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young) had had hits with her compositions, “Billboard” success of her own recordings had, so far, largely eluded her. That changed with the fall-winter 1972 release of “Roses’s” “You Turn Me On I’m a Radio” which reached number 25 on the pop chart.

When the song “You Turn Me On” made the charts, it achieved its original purpose. Mitchell has since disclosed that she had only composed it because the CEO of her new label, David Geffen of Asylum, asked her to write something “radio-ready” for the new album. (Geffen would later be the subject of one of Mitchell’s most famous songs—“Free Man in Paris”--which appeared on “Court and Spark.”)

If “Radio” was written “on demand,” it nevertheless still has the power of original and meaningful art. Rock critic David Marsh has said of it:

[It’s] the one indisputably great single of the singer/songwriter movement, a simply magnificent unification of airy folk-pop melody and confessional language amidst the quasi-populism of Top 40 metaphors....

Sung with an ache in her throat that comes from just where you want it to—her heart—what makes the record so fine isn’t just its sly, slick and wicked put-downs to her deejay lover, but Mitchell’s conviction that broadcasting her passions and discontents will work. And so it does.

Other tracks on the album emerged more organically. As always, Mitchell followed her own muse, regardless of where it may have lead. The majority of the album’s songs were composed at a newly-built cabin that Mitchell had just constructed in British Columbia. The resulting cache of titles was innovative in musical styles and took chances lyrically. Mitchell had battled down some difficult emotions (depression and lingering grief over a baby she had had and put up for adoption several years before) just before commencing with the “Roses” writing sessions. Per usual, she channeled all of them into work. Mitchell was also heavily influenced by Nietzsche, whose novel “Thus Spake Zarathustra” was a talisman and constant for her at that time.

Existentialist musings inform the album’s lead-off song “Banquet” which says: “Some get the gravy/Some get the gristle... and some get nothing/Though there’s plenty to spare.” Women’s roles and obligations are pondered in “Woman of Heart and Mind”: “I am a woman of heart and mind/With time on her hands/No child to raise.” Women’s relationships—specifically mother and daughter—are addressed in “Let the Wind Carry Me.” The equally autobiographical “See You Sometime” and “Blond in the Bleachers” deal with the nature of fame. “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” is about addiction.

Some of “Roses” inspiration was also derived from nature and can be sensed in “Let the Wind Carry Me,” “Lesson in Survival” and “Electricity.” The songs may have been born from one particular act that proved to be a potent and necessary breakthrough. Mitchell related what she did one day:

I jumped off a rock and into this dark emerald green water with yellow kelp in it and purple starfish at the bottom. It was very beautiful, and as I broke up to the surface of the water, which was black and reflective, I started laughing. Joy had suddenly come over

me, you know? And I remember that as a turning point. First feeling like a loony because I was out there laughing all by myself in this beautiful environment. And then, right on top of that was the realization that whatever my social burdens were, my inner happiness was still intact.

Communing with nature was certainly evident in the album package design for “For the Roses.” Gone was the intense, moody close-up that served as the cover of “Blue” and even the colorful, painterly compositions Mitchell herself often painted for her covers. Instead, Mitchell was reborn botanically. On the cover, she is seated mountainside, surround by rocks and flora. Inside was a surprising and, at the time shocking, shot of Mitchell naked from the back and posed before the ocean. Much like the songs inside, it is the artist stripped bare.

Upon its release in 1975, “For the Roses” was acclaimed as another Mitchell masterwork. The “New York Times” sang its praises as did “Rolling Stone” who wrote:

Love's tension is Joni Mitchell's medium — she molds and casts it like a sculptress, lubricating this tense clay with powerful emotive imagery and swaying hypnotic music that sets her listener up for another of her great strengths, a bitter facility with irony and incongruity. As the tiny muscles in your spine begin to relax as they are massaged by a gorgeous piano line or a simple guitar or choral introduction, you might get quietly but bluntly slammed with a large dose of Woman Truth.

As the lead purveyor and provider of the quintessential solo artist with a guitar in her arms and a song on her lips, Joni Mitchell has influenced a generation of other musicians who follow in her footsteps: John Mayer, Jeff Buckley, Kurt Cobain, Prince and others. Mitchell has had a tremendous influence on female musicians in terms of her composing and the honesty of her lyric writing. Some who have acknowledged their debt to the “Lady of the Canyon”: Sarah MacLachlan, Shawn Colvin, Alanis Morissette, Aimee Mann, the Indigo Girls, Mary-Chapin Carpenter, Ani DeFranco, and Natalie Merchant.

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