

This Tiger is Not Tame

Joni Mitchell

Shares From The Heart



In the title track of Joni Mitchell's new album, *Taming The Tiger*, she remarks upon the state of radio, and it's not very complimentary commentary: "As the radio blared so bland/Every disc a poker chip/Every song just a one-night stand/Formula music/Girlie guile/Genuine junk food for juveniles/Up and down the dial/Mercenary style."

I'd met Mitchell once before, when *Turbulent Indigo* was released. She was happy because there was finally a radio station in Los Angeles that played her music again. She played her first concert in a number of years for a live national broadcast, hosted by KSCA, in front of an intimate gathering at the Autry Museum. Sadly, three years later, with the release of *Taming The Tiger*, that station is no longer there to blare her music, and alleviate some of the blandness of the airwaves.

We sat together in the garden adjoining a suite at the Hotel Bel Air to talk, and I reminded her of the circumstances under which we first met. Keeping in mind the intended audience of this piece, I began by asking her about radio.

"Triple-A changed," she began. "It came up like a good idea and soon became a catch-all for every release...a place to dump everything they didn't know where else to put. It had an opportunity, I felt, for public service, to eliminate this concept of music as disposable. You know, to keep alive some of the things that maybe weren't exposed a lot to the public, but were worthy of further exposure. Case in point, you know, is me. Suddenly I was on the airwaves again so I was very happy, 'cause I hadn't had an outlet, I didn't fit anywhere until that and other Triple-A stations came along... It was closer to the old FM programming that I enjoyed—I miss that kind of radio."

She then asked me how ratings work, and I had the ridiculous task of trying to explain Arbitron to Joni Mitchell. I told her that they first contact you by phone, ask you (if they get that far) to keep track of your radio listening for a week by filling out a diary. After I satisfied her questions, basically confirming that programming and revenues all hinge on these numbers, her response was "That's tragic." She took it a bit farther and said, "So everywhere in the music business, we're building everything off of false measures. And the false measures are leading us into mediocrity."

We talked about the song "Taming The Tiger," and the line I quoted

eras didn't pander. I ran into this story about Beethoven. Beethoven had a friend who was an inventor. He invented the metronome. He also invented music boxes; they were big brass cylinders that played against little tongues and quite elaborate compositions could be played on them. So he came to Beethoven and hit him with an idea, which Beethoven turned down. He said, 'Well, the trouble with you, Beethoven, is you have no sense of showmanship. I mean, if you would just write a piece of music that contained things that were familiar to the people, I mean the people that are like...' and he's talking about the courts, people with money. 'They're like children, you know, they have all

Dylan and Morrison seemed to give the crowd what they wanted, the hits. She chose, instead, to focus on some of her lesser-known, possibly more challenging works. One of the explanations I had heard was that she wanted to play songs from albums that she hadn't toured in support of, songs that never had the opportunity to be heard live.

She also went back and released two compilations, but on her terms. The *Hits* album would come only if she could also put together a package of some that she felt had the merit, just never the exposure they deserved. Thus, *Misses*.

By now, you're likely recognizing the same determination and strength in

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above. She said, "At the time I was writing it, I was trying to like the radio. What I did was I started at one end of the dial, set it there for a couple of days and I listened, then I'd move on to the next. And it just made me madder and madder and madder...the formula got to me."

The formula, according to Mitchell, is what's hurt music and radio the most. "I don't think the best music could possibly make it onto the airwaves at any given time. You need at the helm, like the old days of radio, people who loved music and who listened broadly to a lot of different things. The best DJs were very broad audiophiles. And they played what they liked, so that you had a guy who was kind of an expert by his love of music."

I asked her if it was, perhaps, a matter of conditioning...the average person knows and likes what's familiar and comfortable, and so musicians are playing more to conditioning than art. "Yeah," was her answer. "So you pick your conditioning, but that is not music, you know. Music is the dictates of the muse to an individual. Not to say that the great masters of other

this money and they don't know what to spend it on. If you would just write a piece of music, stick a bit of French National Anthem in it, a little bit of the English National Anthem in it, we'll have it performed first in France and then in England and then we'll put out the brass roller, we'll make a mint, I'll cut you in.' Beethoven says, 'Oh, I couldn't.'

"Well anyway, he gets talked into it and he writes this crapola piece of music, which is a hit, and suddenly he's renowned in France, he's renowned in England. It must have been humiliating to him so that by pandering to the common denominator, by giving them the snippet of the familiar...You know, here's a man driven by the dictates of the muse to make these chords that describe his feelings in the same way as Van Gogh's colors described his feelings."

Joni Mitchell chooses not to play to the common denominator.

A couple of months ago, we here on the West Coast were treated to a rare occurrence. Mitchell embarked on a short tour—it was a bill to savor: Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell.

Mitchell that I knew was inherent in her makeup, but came across so strikingly during our conversation. In fact, she came very close to retiring after recording *Turbulent Indigo*—disillusionment with the business of the music industry and an increasingly hostile press were two contributing factors. It was a new instrument, developed based on her request of a local merchant for something she could put a guitar through to make it sound like two guitars, that convinced her to change her plans. That merchant ran her idea by the Roland rep who, six months later, came back with prototype of the VG8.

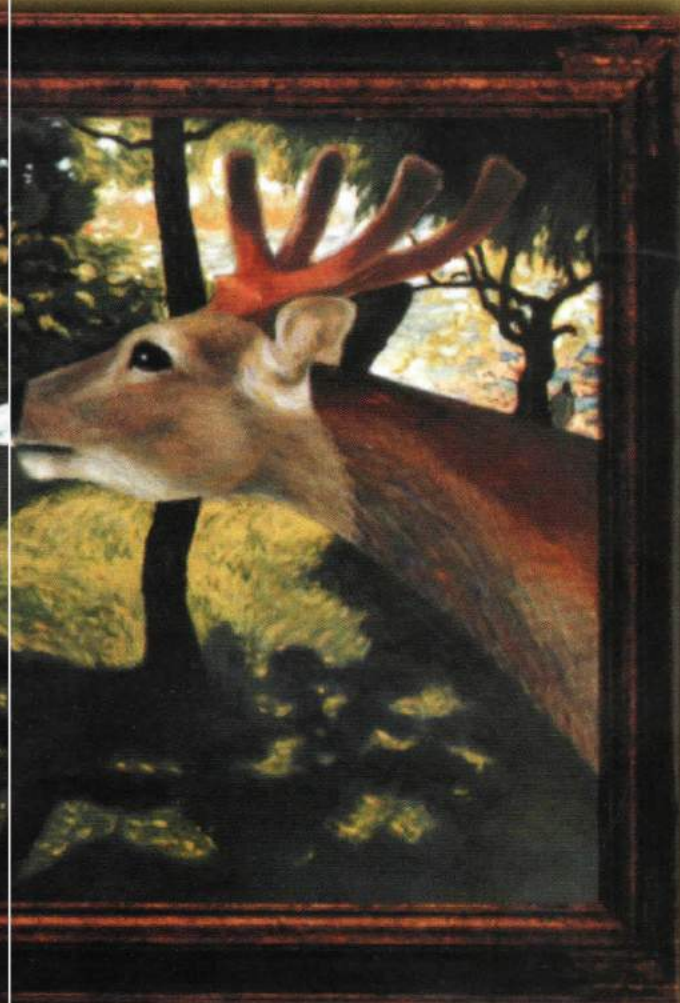
Mitchell's thrilled with it. "I nearly quit, and only the excitement with this new instrument has kept me in the business." Aside from the reverb and the jazz chorus, and other things that I, a non-musician, couldn't get a firm grasp on, the VG8 can store all of Mitchell's different tunings—the one thing that made touring so difficult for her. "That's the main thing. You know a lot of people may enjoy this instrument, but I'm the only one, as far as I know, that needed it. I mean, in order to go on, I needed somebody to invent

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something that I can go *dink, dink, dink*, that fast, from one tuning to another. [Before] it would take 15 minutes to get it into tune, and then the strings are still stretching, so I was always out of tune in performance, which drove me crazy. So yeah, it saved my life, saved my musical life, this instrument."

I'd always wondered about Mitchell's tunings, and she described how she aims for irony in song as opposed to melodrama; doing it by creating chords that are more symphonic to underscore the dramatic nature of her writing. I think she understood that she might have been talking a bit over my head when she said, "But to a lot of ears it's just Joni's weird chords, so a lot of people can't really perceive my art."

The thing about Joni Mitchell's music, though, is that it is art. You know by listening to her music, and listening to her talking about her music, that she sees it—drawing from her talent as a painter—visually. "But not by the normal staff," she explained. "I see it more in terms of color and line, you know, like, I want



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the line to enter here and I want it to get out here. When I play with other musicians, like Wayne Shorter, for instance, I cut him loose on 12 tracks and just let him scribble everywhere, but then I edit him. I know, like, I want something to come in here, I take what I think are the most beautiful scribbles that he did across this thing and some of them are just genius, I mean, they're just splendid...that he could lock into the design that astutely, you know, like my own hand.... It's collaborative, but it meshes together like classical composition."

Taming The Tiger has actually been completed for a while, but it was held back for about a year, so Mitchell's anxious to let people know it's here. But she hasn't just been sitting around waiting to release it.

Just about two years ago, the daughter she gave up for adoption in 1965 was returned to her. "My roommate at college, who also was an unwed mother and should know the stigma at that time and the disgrace of it, sold me to *The Enquirer* for her personal gain. That's how it started," she told me about the awful way the story came to light. But it all turned out for the best. "In the final wash, you know, I always meant to call Lori and say, 'Thank you.' Because after the initial pain of it, it sped up the processes and it probably, I don't know how long it would've taken, but there's no way I could've found Kilauren. She would have had a hard time finding me, too, without this."

So, after the story broke, Mitchell began actively looking for her daughter. There were about 30 young women all claiming

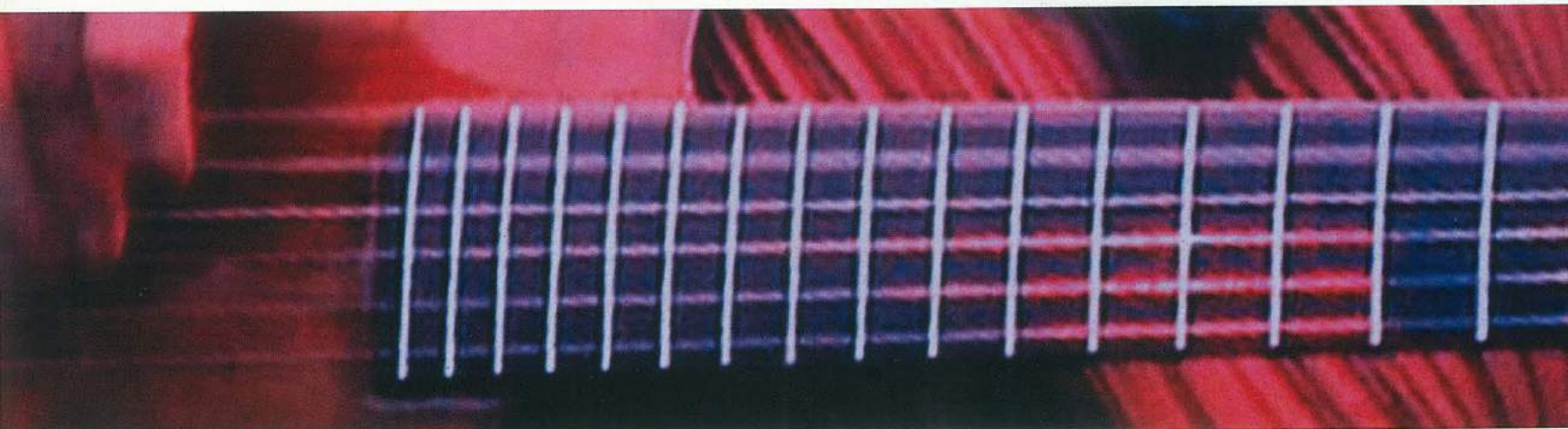
her, she explained, "so there was a sorting process that had to be done, but she's my kid alright." Getting connected with Kilauren "was difficult at first...but we came through all of it, it made us closer. There are difficulties coming out of the blue, especially with me being, you know, a public person. Although Kilauren was a model from 14 to 27, and so she had been around the world and she'd had her own taste of celebrity and that all helped." In terms of art, Kilauren apparently inherited her mother's painting talent and drive.

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The song, "Stay In Touch," on *Taming The Tiger*, Mitchell says, "applies, although it wasn't written specifically, it's almost prophetic, because it applies very well to this kind of a union."

One of Mitchell's most famous songs was written about an event she never made it to. But she did get to Woodstock this summer, to participate in A Day In The Garden. It was everything she had hoped it would be. "It was wonderful. It was a very warm audience and you know, coming down the West Coast, the criticism that was levied against me again and again and again was that I didn't do my earlier material and that it was too jazzy, right? Well, when I got to Woodstock, there was a banner about eight feet long that said 'Joni's Jazz,' and all these heads up above it, you know. And they applauded my players, 'cause the musi-

erty has a very, very strange karma to it, you know, but it's benign, it's not dark. It's protective of this particular plot of land. There was a fire—my neighbors burnt their house to the ground and I was on the road, but a friend of mine saw the fire and stopped. And while he watched, late summer with the grasses all dry and everything, the fire billowed, burnt the house six feet away from mine...and it charred my door, broke my windows, bubbled my paint and caught on the roof and was just about to take off and burn my house down when the wind shifted radically and blew it all the other way. When the Stones were in there, there was a dead tree house in the backyard, and one night in a high wind, it went and it snapped at the root...and it went to fall on the baby's room, it would have gone through the roof, you know, but the wind shift-



cians I'm carrying are of a fine caliber and they responded to them beautifully. They didn't seem to have any problem with the music. It was really a thrill. And my daughter and my grandson were there, and my daughter said it was the best day of her life."

There's obviously a sentimental side to Joni Mitchell, and I saw more of it when I asked her about one of my favorite places in Los Angeles. When I bought my first home, about three years ago, it was a little cottage in Laurel Canyon, and I told her how I used to boast that I was one now of the "Ladies of the Canyon." Even though she isn't living there right now, she still has the spirit, and the fondness for the place. And she's filled with stories about it.

"When we first moved out from New York, [David] Geffen and Elliott [Roberts] and all of us, we came out in a herd," she began. "We all moved onto Lookout Mountain. At the time that we arrived, Tom Mix's house, which was across from Houdini's house, was occupied by Frank Zappa, and my house looked down on Frank Zappa's pond, which had ducks on it, which I drew on the back of the cover of *Ladies Of The Canyon*. The view in my skirts is across the street looking up to Wonderland Avenue, and that house with the turrets on it, Chaka Khan occupied. I got really sick at one point, my mother came to visit and she looked out the window one day and there were all these ducks going around and, like, Zappa's groupies completely nude floating around on the raft, you know. But the house I had was charmed, it was just a tar paper roof kind of cottage built by a black piano player in the '20s, but it was really, really a charming place."

Ron Stone, now President of Gold Mountain (manager of Bonnie Raitt and many others) lived there for years, raised his family there, and wanted to buy it from Mitchell, but she never sold. "It's charmed," she said "...apparently there's an Indian burial ground next to it and I never felt any bad vibes at all...the prop-

erty has a very, very strange karma to it, you know, but it's benign, it's not dark. It's protective of this particular plot of land. There was a fire—my neighbors burnt their house to the ground and I was on the road, but a friend of mine saw the fire and stopped. And while he watched, late summer with the grasses all dry and everything, the fire billowed, burnt the house six feet away from mine...and it charred my door, broke my windows, bubbled my paint and caught on the roof and was just about to take off and burn my house down when the wind shifted radically and blew it all the other way. When the Stones were in there, there was a dead tree house in the backyard, and one night in a high wind, it went and it snapped at the root...and it went to fall on the baby's room, it would have gone through the roof, you know, but the wind shift-

ed at the point of the break and threw it against the break in the opposite direction. So anyone who ever lived in that house experienced that something protects that spot."

She obviously feels safe there. "If everything else fails, I'm going back in that house, you know. It's a great house for a little old lady and my upkeep would be minimal. I would be able to afford it, even if they rob me again like they did in the '80s, I would still have it, so it's my safety valve, kind of."

As I prepared for this interview with Joni Mitchell, I spent a lot of time with *Taming The Tiger*, a wonderful new album which shows her as creative a light as ever, and more accessible than she's been in a long time. The reviews seem to be exceptionally glowing. On the two-hour drive to Los Angeles from San Diego, I listened to the new album, then decided to revisit the Joni Mitchell I grew up with, and sang along to just about every song on the *Hits* disc.

I told her that I love revisiting the past through music, but Mitchell's response to my inquiry along those lines was simply "I don't look back."

I realized just how lucky I was to have seen her when she toured last spring. As for what's next, she says, "I want to cut an album of standards and I'm excited to do that right now. So I think I'm gonna go straight back into the studio and then I'd like to tour with symphonies. 'Cause I got a taste on the 'Stormy Weather' review [Herbie Hancock's *Gershwin's World*] of singing standards with a big band, there's been so much controversy about my music, they love it, they hate it, you know. I'm sick of white boys saying that there's no melody here and it's too jazzy there, you know. I just want a break from it for a while, I'm gonna sing old standards, just be a singer."

Well, that may be what she wants to do, but Joni Mitchell will always be much, much more than just a singer. ✂