

Q&A



JONI MITCHELL

One of music's greatest singer-songwriters creates an inspired box set

JONI MITCHELL IS AN EIGHT-TIME Grammy winner and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer who's influenced everyone from Courtney Love to Taylor Swift. So it's only fitting that her new box set has been crafted with care. It isn't her first retrospective, but *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, a Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced* is something special.

The 53 tracks on these four CDs were painstakingly selected, sequenced and remastered by Mitchell herself. Together, they form a loose four-act narrative about love in its many forms. Perhaps most important, they tell the tale of an innovative poet who's spent 40-plus years defying expectations. On each disc, listeners get Joni the '60s

folkie, the '70s jazz-pop explorer, and the '80s synth-pop dabbler, to name but three of her artistic guises, and they're all mixed up in nonchronological order.

Though Mitchell, 71, has retired from making music—she's been battling Morgellons syndrome, a rare skin condition—the box set has the feel of a new work. In addition to conceiving the story and track list, she penned the liner notes, which open with a tale of Mitchell hanging with some hip-hop artists at the Grammys. One of the rapper's makeup artists tells her, "Girl, you make me see pictures in my head." From there, Mitchell unfurls a narrative that includes chance meetings with actor Iron Eyes Cody and

some random guy whose homemade tape of howling wolves was just what she needed for the song "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey."

This is an especially thoughtful set.

I put a lot of thought into it—I guess because I'm a frustrated filmmaker or playwright. That's why I had to start the liner notes with, "Girl, you make me see pictures in my head," which is a wonderful way to receive your work. I consider that the greatest compliment, that I connected with her. When people used to read books, you'd have to see the pictures in your head. Now, with television, movies and the internet, the images are spoon-fed. You don't have to use your imagination anymore.



'I enjoyed making songs. But really, that wasn't the interesting part of my life.'

Jonathan Elvey/Cathy Images

Henry Diltz

Any surprises as you put it together?

Oh yeah. I sequenced and sequenced, and as I listened to it, it was like a film. I'm a film editor, also. I'm following along, and suddenly, I get thrown out. And I go, "OK, that song's not in the right place. It should keep pulling you in." Robert Altman had a film called *Secret Honor*. I must have watched it 10 times. And toward the end, there's a scene that always throws me out. There's probably about four or five minutes where I don't know what happens. I met him once, and I said to him, "I really like that film *Secret Honor*"—because he took a lot of flack for it—"but toward the end, there's a place I keep getting thrown out." He said, "I know exactly the place you mean."

You avoided chronological ordering.

The people who were going to do the box set—because I was ill—were going to do it chronologically, which would be a crime against this catalog. A crime against it! Some people, they love my 24-year-old thing, when I could hold a note for days, and they put down the later singing, when I have no soprano voice left and I'm an alto. When you put those side by side, to me, they're characters in a play—and both are delivering their lines very well. There's a great emotional read on them. It's not all about belting and hitting high notes and all those vocal calisthenics by which singers are measured. I don't believe I've ever been honored as a singer, and yet I'm a very interesting original singer. To take it out of chronological order and put it in different styles—as characters—breaks down some of that stupid prejudice.

In the liner notes you talk about the importance of talent.

If you're born with it, you can polish it. It used to be that, in my parents' generation, people would say, "Oh no. I can't carry a tune." They seemed to be more rational. Now you've got a generation where nobody seems to know they're no good. You can see it on these talent shows. The judges will tell them, "You're no good," and they'll argue. "I know I'm good," they'll say. How do you know that? You're not talented. Where does that delusion come from? Why are these people becoming more and more deluded?

Talent alone won't make you sample the sound of a cigarette machine, as you did on "Smokin'!"

Well, I guess I'm a genius. That's the difference. Genius is more flexible. I've worked with a lot of very talented players—

geniuses are very rare, in my opinion. Many are called geniuses but aren't. John Lennon was not a genius. He was talented, but I didn't see any genius there. You take a talented player, and he listens to the music and sits down with a lead sheet—you write down their part—and he gets his first take. Then you need a second take to polish it up, and maybe the third one to get it perfect. I worked with the London Philharmonic. Everything took three takes. They're starting just by reading. The first one is kind of ragged, the second one is better, and the third is all we get. It's all we can afford. The third take, it's pretty good. The same thing with talent: You give them opportunity, and it sounds pretty good.

Not so with geniuses?

You get a genius like [jazz saxophonist] Wayne Shorter—we'd do 12 takes, and he'd never repeat. I'd give him 12 takes, and I'd watch him crawl across the music and explore. Every time he plays, it's entirely different. Conceptually, he'll keep changing

I'd love to write songs, but I can't really sing—the disease has attacked my sinuses and my high end is gone. You have to know when to quit.

So many wish you wouldn't.

I got a letter from a kid that said, "Joni, I don't care if you croak like a frog. Just keep doing it." People still want to hear what I'm thinking, I guess. I don't know. Maybe I'll do something. The box set took a lot of energy. I'd like to write my memoirs to counter all of the stupid books that are just gossip and full of ignorant assumptions.

Will you write a memoir?

The music business was just my straight job. I enjoyed making songs. But really, that wasn't the interesting part of my life. The interesting part was a lot of synchronicity, like the Iron Eyes Cody and wolf stories in the liner notes, which were just really mysterious. That's the stuff that, as a frustrated filmmaker, I would like to get down in a book. More like short stories—like the liner notes. These are stories



Onstage in L.A., 1993

'With television, movies and the internet, images are spoon-fed.'

and running new ideas all the way along. One of the traits with genius is confusion of ideas, and also a nose for magic, being quick on your feet.

Do you still write songs?

It may come back, but I've been ill since 2007. From 2009 through 2012, I was extremely ill. I've been pulling out. I'm not as sick as I've been, but I'm still kind of fragile.

nobody knows. Even if they've heard me tell them a few times, they wouldn't be able to tell it right. If I don't get those down, an incredibly interesting part of my life won't be recorded.

—Kenneth Partridge