

**Elvis Costello,  
Joni Mitchell,  
and the Torch  
Song Tradition**

*LARRY DAVID SMITH*

**PRAEGER**

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Westport, Connecticut  
London

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Larry David.

Elvis Costello, Joni Mitchell, and the torch song tradition / Larry David Smith.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-275-97392-1 (alk. paper)

1. Costello, Elvis—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Mitchell, Joni—Criticism and interpretation. 3. Popular music—Analysis, appreciation. 4. Long songs—History and criticism. I. Title.

ML400.S658 2004

782.42164'092'2—dc22

2003068713

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2003068713

ISBN: 0-275-97392-1

First published in 2004

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

[www.praeger.com](http://www.praeger.com)

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*In Memory of Edith Elizabeth Love*





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# Preface

This is the third volume of a continuing exploration into the practice of songwriting. Merging auteur theory and narrative criticism, I've examined one songwriter's career in terms of his narrative tendencies and professional negotiations (Pete Townshend), and I've compared two songwriters' contributions to the Woody Guthrie celebrity-singer-songwriter tradition of American song (Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen). Here I apply the technique to Joni Mitchell's and Elvis Costello's careers as I consider these two artists' lifeworks and their impact on the melodramatic love story known as the torch song. These books represent an effort to build a body of knowledge in a systematic way, so I occasionally use my previous findings regarding Dylan, Springsteen, and Townshend to make sense of my current observations. The auteur-narrative framework is a fine hammer for pounding away on the unique artistic role that emerged with the celebrity-singer-songwriter in the mid-twentieth century. The celebrity-singer-songwriter composite changed the musical world and, as this book hopefully demonstrates, shifted the content and style of specific musical genres.

Of course, I must pause to thank the many wonderful people who have contributed to this work. Heartfelt thanks go out to Glenda and Wayne Hall, Michael Holmes, Nicola Joss, and Pete Townshend. I would also like to thank the city of Memphis, Tennessee, for providing a magical workplace throughout this book's development. The stars align in a special way over the Holy City of American Music. Please, go there and feel it. Memphis features the world's greatest radio station (WEVL), a storied musical history, and some of the most colorful characters you'll ever meet (thanks, Richard Owen!). Thank you, Memphis! May your future be as bright as your past.

Speaking of special people and places, words fail my efforts to thank Eric Levy. Eric is more than my editor; he is a dear friend who truly cares about *me* as much as my work. Thanks, Eric. Maybe I can go to war for *you* sometime. And thanks to everybody at Praeger for their continued belief in these projects. A very special thanks also to Joni Mitchell, Christy Ikner, and all the fine people at Sony/ATV Publishing in Nashville. Another special thank you to Elvis Costello, Gigi Lam, and the people at BMG Music in Beverly Hills and London.

Finally. Finally. After using my experiences with her wonderful boogie-woogie piano playing to close my two previous books on songwriting, it is high time to give it up for the keyboard player. This one's for you, Mom. I bet they're dancin' all over heaven as you continue to play the devil's music Up There. Thanks for the continued inspiration. I think that it's fitting to dedicate a book on love songs to the greatest love of all: a boy's love for his mother. Bang it out, Momma. I can *still* hear you.

# Introduction

When music historians speak of the “love song” as a songwriting theme, their thoughts instantly turn to the troubadours of southern France and their pivotal contributions to that genre’s development. As eleventh-century popular music crawled away from the Church’s shadows and toward such secular notions as love and happiness, these Provençal poets paved the way. How important are the Provençal troubadours to art history? Consider Reverend H. J. Chaytor’s comments from his 1912 book, *The Troubadours*: “Few literatures have exerted so profound an influence upon the literary history of other peoples as the poetry of the troubadours.” There seems to be a strong case to be made in support of Chaytor’s claim. After all, the romantic poetry that flowed from the pens of French poets who dared to comment publicly on that which had been so private for so long was quite an artistic innovation as well as a literary invitation for “other peoples” to do the same. Just as Chaytor suggests, the troubadours appealed to more than their audiences’ hearts. They unshackled the literature of the Western world, initiated secular commentary on human affairs, and introduced music with a recognizable personality.

Though they typically concentrated on romance, Chaytor reports the troubadours’ subject matter included “Not only love, but all social and political questions of the age. . . . They satirised political and religious opponents, preached crusades, sang funeral laments upon the death of famous patrons, and the support of their poetical powers was often in demand by princes and nobles involved in a struggle.” Clearly, these celebrity tunesmiths were harbingers of free speech, daring to explore controversies and personalities that had heretofore been off-limits. While contemporary events may have captured their attentions from time to time (and lined their pocketbooks),

love dominated the troubadours' work. What made this poetry so timeless? James Wilhelm's answer is compelling: "Because these elements are . . . an essential part of the human apparatus, and by no means monopolized by Christians or members of any other religion or culture. One has every reason to believe, without checking, that natives in the jungle and Eskimos tell their beloveds that they will follow them over the hills and vales and any other appropriate parts of the local landscapes." Love knows no boundaries, and the troubadours charted romantic courses that transcended borders, creeds, or social affiliations. Assuredly, they chronicled "an essential part of the human apparatus." They told the stories of love.

The communicative practices through which the troubadours plied their trade were hierarchal in nature. Once more, we turn to Reverend Chaytor:

A famous troubadour usually circulated his poems by the mouth of a *joglar* (Northern French, *jongleur*), who recited them at different courts and was often sent long distances by his master for this purpose. A joglar of originality might rise to the position of a troubadour, and a troubadour who fell upon evil days might sink to the profession of joglar. Hence there was naturally some confusion between the troubadour and joglar, and poets sometimes combined the two functions.

Thus, from the outset, we have a division of roles as writers differentiated themselves from performers, singers aspired to the greater status that accompanied authorship, successful practitioners suffered at the hands of "evil days" (critics? industry pressure??), *poets* occasionally synthesized the two jobs, and competition was naturally rampant. Moreover, the potential conflict between pleasing patrons and satisfying creative impulses required writers to negotiate their financial conditions and their art's contents. From its beginnings, we see that the musical world was a complicated, competitive, and conditional place.

To prosper in such an environment, stylistic innovation quickly became necessary. Lyrical nuances, vocal tricks, instrumental prowess, performance skills, and thematic flexibility defined the troubadours and incited even more competition. Wilhelm charts the careers of seven troubadours who achieved celebrity status and established the creative baseline for those who followed. He begins with Duke William of Aquitaine, the world's first—and perhaps greatest—troubadour. William was quite a character. His voice represented "an outcry against the vulgar spiritualism of his day" as he decried "the hypocrites who tried to conceal their real selves under the cloaks of sanctity." William aggressively confronted the system and enjoyed himself, to everyone's annoyance. He may be the musical world's first rock-and-roll star. Next, we have Marcabrun (who "carried sermons to the court"), Jaufre Rudel (who challenged the "mournful and pessimistic" work of his time), Bernart de Ventadorn (who had "one of the best senses of humor in medieval literature"), the Countess of Dia (who "sang in measures that are compa-

rable with the best work of the men of her day”), Bertran de Born (who was a poet of war), and Peire Cardenal, who appeared toward the end of southern France’s glory age and chronicled its demise through dour, bitter poetry. What characters. What work. Wilhelm sums up their significance:

The troubadours did not leave us tourist guidebooks any more than they left candid memoirs of their sex lives or propaganda pieces about the superiority of women. They did, however, leave us their poetry, and this heritage binds them to us directly. Peire Cardenal cries out against the Church and conservatism in general in precisely the same way that Joan Baez and Bob Dylan are coherent spokesmen for modern liberal ideals. Bernart de Ventadorn manipulates the age-old tropes bequeathed him with the same sort of assured hand that Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart used in reworking the stock materials of their day. The Countess of Dia is quite comprehensible in the context of Billie Holliday [*sic*] and Helen Morgan; her torch may be less intense, but it is held equally high. Even in the consciously artistic work of the Beatles and the Supremes and our other modern troubadours from Liverpool and Detroit and Nashville, we can hear the age-old cries issuing forth in the same general atmosphere of hand-clapping, footstomping, and hilarity—call it “joy” or plain old “fun.”

Those “age-old cries” may involve joy, pain, fun, or despair, but when they stoke the fires of love, they report on an essential element of the human experience through the language and sounds of their times—stylistic tendencies that continually influence the art form’s maturation.

Just as quickly as the love song emerged, unimaginative songwriting dominated the genre. Wilhelm’s troubadours may have achieved stylistic notoriety, but mainstream writers wallowed in trite expressions and mundane metaphors. As twentieth-century songwriters massaged the love song, searching for some unique sentiment or insight, they encountered the same limitations that hounded their French predecessors. Philip Furia explains:

Such a constraint of subject matter put Tin Pan Alley lyricists in the same straightjacket as their medieval ancestors, the troubadours of Provence, who, after all, invented this thing called romantic love. To the modern reader, who looks to poetry for original insight, sincerely expressed, popular song lyrics, like medieval *chansons*, “all sound the same . . . sweet but bland repetitions of the few basic clichés of courtly love.” What such readers miss is the cleverness, the inventiveness and, in the best sense of the word, artifice, that displays itself by ringing endless changes upon what are indeed the tireddest clichés, the tireder the better for the skillful artificers of Provence. In the lyrics of Tin Pan Alley, similarly, we must listen, not for new ideas or deep emotion, but for the deftness with which the lyricist solves the problem posed by a song of the 1930s: “What Can You Say in a Love Song That Hasn’t Been Said Before?”



While many Tin Pan Alley writers searched for adroit ways to communicate “I love you in 32 bars,” a few pursued alternative formulas. One possibility involved the creation of musical hybrids that synthesized the strengths of existing genres into new forms. Furia describes one innovation that emerged from the prohibition era nightclubs in which Tin Pan Alley writers slowly transformed blues and jazz compositions into popular songs. The “hot tunes and torch songs” of the Harlem nightclubs “could sometimes inspire a talented lyricist to come up with a sensuously vernacular setting that set nightclub songs apart from theater or film songs of the period.” With that, the “torch song” was born.

Alec Wilder maintains the torch song arrived via Spencer Williams’s 1915 tune “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” and its “new, more personal point of view.” Such an outlook dismissed the tired clichés that dominated contemporary love songs in favor of personal melodrama and intimate detail. Furia writes how the torch song was refined by singers such as Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, and Peggy Lee, who learned how to give a song “the full-flame treatment.” One of the problems associated with this new genre involved the difficulty in collaboration since lyricists were brought in to devise words for already existing—and occasionally popular—jazz tunes. Consequently, the words often lacked development or inspiration. Though the compositional process was weird initially, the new genre prospered. Masterpieces such as Gillespie and Coots’s (of “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”) “You Go to My Head,” Brent and Dennis’s “Angel Eyes,” and Mercer and Arlen’s “One for My Baby” demonstrate the early torch song’s melodramatic power.

The advent of the celebrity-singer-songwriter changed everything. With talented innovators such as Jimmie Rodgers, Woody Guthrie, and Hank Williams, the composer-lyricist-performer roles converged into a single musical entity. The celebrity-singer-songwriter composite sparked the rebirth of songs with public personalities as it retrieved that tradition from the dusty court chambers that time forgot. To the extent that William of Aquitaine projected his personality through his thoughts about love, war, and gardening, Woody Guthrie would do the same. To the degree that Jaufre Rudel confronted his contemporaries’ “mournful and pessimistic” work, Hank Williams enriched his songs through his rebellious honky-tonk persona. Accompanying that musical evolution was the torch song’s liberation from the smoke-filled corridors of bar life and its introduction to radio, recording, and mass audiences. Smoke-free versions of Frank Sinatra renditions of Sammy Cahn songs were suddenly available to anyone with a phonograph or radio. Do as music does, mix it all together, and a new variation emerged: torch songs with celebrity personalities.

Here we consider two celebrity-singer-songwriters who write of “social and political questions,” who satirize “political and religious opponents,” and, occasionally, who advocate “crusades,” all the while consistently mining the rich vein of human relationships—exploring what the natives in the

jungle, the Eskimos, hippies, and punks call “love.” By bringing their celebrity personalities to their work, Joni Mitchell and Elvis Costello created more than songs about this or that; they generated a public dialogue about their subjects in a manner that transcends the context of performance or means of reception. Like the troubadours of old, they brought personalities to their work in a fashion that made it original and memorable. Unlike the troubadours of old, they performed their work before international audiences who instantly praised or damned their efforts. The threat of “evil days” was ubiquitous. Their creative-commercial challenges were constant. Their responses to their artistic situations created bodies of work as daring as any Provençal poet’s. And their efforts brought *personality* to a song form that had previously known only a *context*. The results may not be as musically precise as the lyricist-composer-performer composition, but they involve distinctive artistic signatures nonetheless. The following pages use auteur theory and narrative techniques to examine Mitchell’s and Costello’s oeuvres in terms of the stories they told throughout their careers, the stylistic tendencies that organize those expressions, and their subsequent contributions to the torch tradition. Joni Mitchell’s Earth Mother manifesto and Elvis Costello’s Citizen Elvis editorials represent narrative superstructures through which these writers cast tales of love, war, peace, politics, fashion, fascism, and house pets in a manner consistent with their stated artistic philosophies and creative goals. In so doing, they advanced the concept of the celebrity-singer-songwriter, created an extraordinary body of art, and contributed to the torch song’s thematic development. We begin with peace, love, freedom, and The Garden of Eden just off Sisotowbell Lane.



## PART I

# Joni Mitchell

### INTRODUCTION

The December 16, 1974, issue of *Time* features as its cover story an article on the “women of rock” with an emphasis on “Rock ‘n’ Roll’s Leading Lady”—Joni Mitchell. The article concentrates on Mitchell, but also contains interviews with Maria Muldaur, Bonnie Raitt, and Linda Ronstadt as well as commentary on the careers of female artists Carole King, Carly Simon, and Wendy Waldman. David DeVoss paints a grim picture of the Rock Women: “Caught in the wink of a photographer’s lens, they stand together smiling, rock-’n’-roll women in sequined chiffon and funky jeans. But they pay dearly for success. The rock business is a road business. Once the euphoria of the first room-service sirloin evaporates, they inherit a numbing chronology of concrete tunnels, cold buffets and limousine-driving dopers.” DeVoss’s cynicism is just warming up: “It is a life where one is seldom alone but usually lonely. There are plenty of men, but they are mostly grinning sycophants or lecherous disc jockeys. Yet it is almost impossible to retire; the thrill of recognition quickly becomes an opiate.” Among talk of Simon’s and King’s disdain for the “rock life,” Raitt’s commitment to a modest lifestyle that stresses her music, and Ronstadt’s commercial success, DeVoss shares an account of “dinner at Joni’s” in which rock’s leading lady prepared “three meticulously cooked courses” that were eagerly consumed while the “spiced apple dumplings cool on the sideboard.” Not only does Mitchell cook a mighty fine meal, but her boyfriend leaves the table to grab a beer and watch a football game while our hostess cleans her kitchen.

This was the leading lady of rock.

In December 1974 Bob Dylan was hard at work in Minneapolis, Minnesota, recasting much of what was to become *Blood on the Tracks*. Dylan was,

no doubt, the “leading man” of rock since he had that year completed the most profitable tour ever staged to that point in popular music history. His comeback album, *Planet Waves*, the “Tour ’74” experience with The Band, and his highly anticipated new record certainly placed him atop the musical world. Yet could you imagine *Time* sending a correspondent out to Dylan’s house to watch him mow the lawn, fix his kid’s bike, or wash the car? Could you imagine *Time* cooing over the toy chest Dylan just finished in his woodshop as his wife stops by to pick up the credit card to go shopping at Victoria’s Secret? Do you get my drift here? As Mitchell complained to David Wild in 1997: “They tend to lump me always with groups of women. I always thought, ‘They don’t put Dylan with the Men of Rock; why do they do that to me with women?’” She has a compelling point.

DeVoss opens his exposé on rock’s leading lady in this fashion: “When Myrtle Anderson’s daughter Joan lived at home in Saskatoon, Sask., she was a rebel. She danced the wicked twist, ignored her math, spent Saturdays sketching Indians and communed only with her celluloid idol James Dean. But Mrs. Anderson’s girl turned out different from most of the teen-agers living for the rock-’n’-roll scene. She learned to play the guitar and discovered that she had a fluent talent for words.” He describes Mitchell as a “creative force of unrivaled stature in the mercurial world of rock” who represents a “focal point for elegance in a profession of rumpled informality.” According to the *Time* reporter: “Everyone seems to know Joni. She is the rural neophyte waiting in a subway, a free spirit drinking Greek wine in the moonlight, an organic Earth Mother dispensing fresh bread and herb tea, and the reticent feminist who by trial and error has charted the male as well as the female ego.”

This was the leading lady of rock.

This is Joni Mitchell’s problem. While DeVoss opens the piece with a genderless description (young Joan was a rebel, admired Dean, played guitar, and wrote songs), he gradually drifts into a sexist portrayal that is apparently unavoidable. Rock men also cope with cold food, sycophantic personalities, cheap people, and boredom. Rock men may also be refined, popular, free-spirited, and nurturing. What, then, is the point? The fact that Joni Mitchell was the first female to excel among the growing number of celebrity-singer-songwriters is the most obvious explanation. From that vantage point, her gender is unavoidable. She was the first of her kind.

DeVoss also exposes Joni Mitchell’s relationship to her work. When he reports that our leading lady “believes in a male muse named Art” and that “Art” represents her “shrine of creativity,” he reveals an artistic attitude that never, ever wanes. When Mitchell told DeVoss “I feel like I’m married to this guy named Art . . . I’m responsible to my Art above all else,” she demonstrated her dedication to her creative work. Whether she is painting, drawing, knitting, or playing music, Mitchell pursues an artistic agenda that may—or may not—agree with the commercial industry that markets her

work. She is responsible only to her Art. She is as relentlessly rebellious as any artist at any time.

One thing is certain: Joni Mitchell is neither the greatest female singer-songwriter ever, nor the greatest right-handed female singer-songwriter, nor the greatest blonde right-handed female singer-songwriter; rather, she is one of the greatest singer-songwriters, *period*. Though widely misunderstood, her songwriting and sonic innovations blazed new trails for musicians to follow. *After* Joni Mitchell, writers freely probed their personal experiences or their individual perceptions as a pathway to expressions that embellished those insights for their audiences. *After* Joni Mitchell, “world music” emerged as an essential element of the musical landscape. Joni Mitchell’s pioneering songwriting and musical innovations exist independently of her gender, and to qualify her contributions in those terms is more than misleading, it is downright insulting.

Evidence of her success exists in the recognition Mitchell has received over the years. Her many awards include *Billboard*’s Century Award, the National Academy of Songwriters’ Lifetime Achievement Award, the Canadian Governor-General’s Performing Arts Award, the Swedish Polar Music Award (the first woman), election to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the ASCAP Founders Award, the Orville H. Gibson Guitar Award, election to the Songwriters Hall of Fame, Grammy Awards, Geminis (Canadian Emmy), the Saskatchewan Recording Industry Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award, and more. Though she has not received the academic or journalistic attention of her Rock Spouse (Mr. Dylan), all the musical world pales in comparison to Dylanology, anyway. Biographers Karen O’Brien and Brian Hinton join scores of dedicated fans and their prodigious web sites to build an impressive account of one of popular music’s more frustrated legends.

The following chapters chronicle a songwriter who dared to probe her life experiences for useful insights that she could share with others. She saw *that* as her “job.” More often than not, these sentiments massaged the frail conditions that surround romantic relationships. In so doing, Mitchell revised and extended the torch tradition’s melodramatic imperative by associating a personality with those intimate offerings. Her “confessional” songwriting—regardless of its autobiographical qualities—changed the practice of songwriting in general, and embellished the torch strategy in particular. That her accomplishments are so often characterized by her gender is unfortunate if for no other reason than that Mitchell herself disdains the practice. That outlook is evident in a story she shared with Chip Stern when she described her greatest compliment: “You know, in my entire adult life, my favorite compliment—and I think a true compliment should be inspiring, not just flattering—was received from a blind black piano player. And what he said was ‘Joni, thank you for your music—it is genderless and raceless.’”

While her music may prove to be “genderless and raceless,” its emotional depth invokes the torch tradition’s melodramatic sentimentality in a

compelling fashion. To be sure, her “confessional” writing style is a fundamental element of the torch formula. Furthermore, Mitchell’s status as a celebrity-singer-songwriter elevated the author’s role in these emotional renderings. Unlike Billie Holiday or Frank Sinatra, once Mitchell bled onstage, her audience followed her home, hoping to watch her bleed more in private and, therefore, enrich their own lives through her sacrifice. In many respects, Mitchell’s tale is an odd story that offers meaningful insights into artist-audience-industry relations. Although her art may be genderless, our Earth Mother’s story is dominated by gender. When considered together, Mitchell’s life and art demonstrate the emotional power of the torch song—a power with serious consequences for artists and their art.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Artist

Joni Mitchell's life story is a fascinating tale of potent prophecy, brutal illness, righteous rebellion, inspired determination, frustrated celebrity, and bitter indignation. These traits float in and out of Mitchell's life, and at times dominate her biography. Occasionally, these qualities overlap in powerful ways, as in the case of her inspired battle with polio, or her predictable musical pioneering, or her wrathful reactions to celebrity hypocrisies and industrial abuses. The one constant ingredient in all of these matters, however, is her *intensity*. Joni Mitchell's career is a testament to a creative passion that defines her very being. For one who emerged in an era of peace and love platitudes and their nondirective philosophies, Mitchell is a fierce artistic force with little patience for personal, interpersonal, or commercial compromise. From the moment of her birth, it seems, Mitchell has been driven by her muse and its restless need for diverse expression—regardless of the personal or professional consequences. These characteristics have spawned musical innovation, personal sacrifice, professional recognition, audience admiration, audience rejection, and industrial recrimination in varying fashions. Though born with an undeniable talent, Joni Mitchell has endured an unrelenting battle for artistic freedom and integrity.

Let us begin our story with potent prophecy and the wonderful tale of “tea leaf” prognostication, Canadian style. When schoolteacher-turned-bank teller Myrtle “Mickey” Marguerite McKee accompanied a friend to high tea at Regina's finest hotel, she humored herself by allowing a gypsy to read the tea leaves that adorned her empty cup. When the gypsy announced that Miss McKee would be married within a month, bear a child within a year, and die a long and agonizing death, well, what could she do but laugh? It was wartime (1942–43), and eligible bachelors were few and far between



across Canada's great plains. Chalk one up for the gypsy: Myrtle met Flight Lieutenant William Andrew Anderson within two weeks of the reading, married him almost immediately (within the required month), and gave birth to his child, Roberta Joan Anderson, on November 7, 1943 (within the allotted year). Fortunately, as of this writing, Myrtle has lived a long and prosperous life with no sign of the third prediction in sight. It appears she works quite hard to take care of herself. Can you blame her?

The prophesied one was born in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and her description of her hometown to *Billboard's* Timothy White says much about the eyes through which she views her world: "Fort Macleod was coming out of the Great Depression and into the war, so every house was weathered-out and derelict-looking with no paint on it. There had been a drought, too, so gardens were nonexistent. Some of the people who had no money for paint would try to brighten things up by stuccoing their houses with chicken feed and broken brown glass, and blue bottle glass." There she describes her earliest memory: "Above my crib as a baby was a roll-up blind. This was a poor household, and they had those kind of blinds that came in beige and dark green. This one was dark green, and it was perforated and cracked in a lot of places from frequent rolling. I can remember lying in my crib, seeing the filtered little stream of light and the fluffs of dust floating in it. I was 1 ½, and that's my earliest memory." The attentive youngster with a sharp eye for detail accompanied her parents to Calgary, back to the Regina area, and finally to a new house in Maidstone, where her father obtained work as the manager of a small grocery. While growing up in Maidstone, young Joan viewed the world from a window that overlooked the railroad tracks, and she would await and greet the daily train as it passed through. Years—actually decades—later, the train's engineer recalled his daily wave from the fair-haired maiden perched above the tracks. All indications suggest the Andersons were a small, happy family laboring to make ends meet in post-war western Canada.

Eventually, the family landed in North Battleford, where Mr. Anderson managed another grocery in the same chain of stores (OK Economy). Music emerged as one of the family's principal forms of recreation: Bill played trumpet in the North Battleford Kinsmen's Band, the family enjoyed a small but invaluable record collection, and a department store listening booth provided a dream station for young Joan's imagination. Mitchell told Dave DiMartino that there were five records played in heavy rotation in her house: two trumpet-based recordings for her father (Harry James and Leroy Anderson), a *Clair de Lune* record for her mom, and a couple of children's records. The real musical adventure involved the department store booth, where the youngster listened to her beloved Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and the varied sounds of the day. Joining Rachmaninoff on Joan's hit list was French singer Edith Piaf. She described her first encounter with Piaf for Robert Hilburn in 1991: "I remember the first time I heard her. It

was a recording of 'Les Trois Cloches'—'The Jimmy Brown Song'—and my hair stood on end. Her voice just thrilled my soul."

Artistic expression (e.g., drawing, painting, pressed-flower scrapbooks) and imaginative games (e.g., dressing up, role-playing) were what the kids had in North Battleford, and Joan was an active participant in her own way. She described her childhood for Jenny Boyd: "I was a painter always—I had difficulty playing with the other children in the neighborhood, just because my games they couldn't get in on. . . . Since mainly the kids were athletic . . . they were hardy, robust, physical, not very creative." She recalled the "creative people" in the town "studied classical piano or classical voice, so I had a lot of friends who were considered the singers."

Although Joan naturally aligned herself with the creative people in her town, Karen O'Brien writes of her continual efforts to join the "athletic" kids and their raucous games. In particular, she wanted to play "cowboys and Indians" with the boys, but was frustrated by her relegation to predetermined "girls' roles." In defiance, she persuaded her parents to purchase a Roy Rogers outfit that she felt would guarantee her admission to the game on her terms. She would not be denied. She refused to occupy her designated place. She did what she felt was necessary to overcome an unfair situation. She laid the foundation for her life.

Boy games aside, art was an essential part of Joan's youth. O'Brien claims she wrote her first song at age seven (titled "Robin Walk"), and her experiences with a neighbor heightened her artistic fantasies, as she related to *Maclean's* Malka Maron in 1974:

I always had star eyes, I think, always interested in glamour. I had one very creative friend whom I played with a lot and we used to put on circuses together, and he also played brilliant piano for his age when he was a young boy. I used to dance around the room and say that I was going to be a great ballerina and he was going to be a great composer, or that he was going to be a great writer and I was going to illustrate his books. My first experience with music was at this boy's house, because he played piano and they had old instruments like auto harps lying around. It was playing his piano that made me want to have one of my own to mess with, but then, as soon as I expressed interest, they gave me lessons and that killed it completely.

Lessons would always prove difficult for the pugnacious personality who preferred individual eccentricity over systematic instruction. From the outset, Joan Anderson carried her Roy Rogers outfit wherever she was challenged by the status quo. If the rules denied entrance, those rules were tested. Her initial piano lessons offer a concrete example of this lifelong penchant for rebellion. She told Penny Valentine:

I was constantly rapped on the knuckles at piano lessons because I'd listen to what the teacher played and I'd remember it. So I never learned to sight

read properly and she'd bust me on it. I'd fake it—like I'd read the music and it wouldn't be quite right, there was a certain amount of improvisation in it. And she'd say "those notes aren't in there." That kind of killed my interest in piano for a good 15 years or so. From the beginning I really wanted to mess around and create, find the colours the piano had buried in it. You know, I always feel like such an irresponsible creature.

Here we have the crux of Joni Mitchell's creative worldview: "Find the colors the piano had buried in it." This innocent comment captures her career as none other. Her musical life has been dedicated to that simple ambition.

Whether irresponsible or irrepressible, Joan Anderson experienced her life's greatest challenges early on as she battled poor health. Her extensive 1995 interview in *Billboard* chronicles how her appendix burst at age three, her bouts with German *and* red measles, her experiences with chickenpox *and* scarlet fever, and her recurring tonsillitis. None of these medical happenings compare to her 1953 bout with polio. The landmark *Billboard* interview captures Mitchell's recollections in sharp, characteristic detail:

I vividly remember the day I got polio. I was 9 years old, and I dressed myself that morning in pegged gray slacks, a red and white gingham blouse with a sailor collar, and a blue sweater. I looked in the mirror, and I don't know what I saw—dark circles under my eyes or a slight swelling in my face—but I said to myself, "You look like a woman today." After I got outside, I was walking along with a school friend, and at the third block I sat down on this little lawn and said, "I must have rheumatism," because I'd seen my grandmother aching and having to be lifted out of the bathtub. I complained a bit more but still went and spent the day in school. Next day I woke and my mom said, "Get up, come!" I said, "I can't." She didn't believe me and yanked me out of bed, and I collapsed. They rushed me to the St. Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon. The infectious part of the disease lasts two weeks, and it twisted my spine severely forward in a curvature called lordosis, and then back to the right in a lateral curve called scoliosis, so that I was unable to stand. One leg was impaired, but the muscles didn't atrophy, so there was no withering, thank God. I was put in the children's ward, and with Christmas rolling up it became apparent I wasn't going home. Someone sent me a coloring book with pictures of old-fashioned English carolers and the lyrics to all these Christmas carols. I had ulcers in my mouth that they'd come and swab [with] an antibacterial solution called gentian violet and they'd leave the swabs behind, so I used the swabs to color the carolers purple. And I sang the carols to get my spirits up. My mother came with a little mask on . . . and put a little Christmas tree in my room with some ornaments. The first night they allowed me to leave it lit an hour after lights out. And I said to the little tree, "I am not a cripple," and I said a prayer, some kind of pact, a barter with God for my legs, my singing.

What a story! Notice the little girl's tenacity as well as the artist's sharp attention to detail. Can *you* remember what you were wearing on *any* morn-

ing of your ninth year on this earth? Her drive. Her spirit. Her personal strength. All of these lifelong traits are rooted in this pivotal life battle with one of the most dreaded of all diseases. Sources report how the youngster endured deep massages and scalding compresses, yet she managed to fetch good from evil and paint with the swabs left behind after treatments. Her interview with Cameron Crowe discusses her principal coping mechanisms:

I guess I really started singing when I had polio. . . . I was nine, and they put me in a polio ward over Christmas. They said I might not walk again, and that I would not be able to go home for Christmas. I wouldn't go for it. So I started to sing Christmas carols and I used to sing them real loud. When the nurse came into the room I would sing *louder*. The boy in the bed next to me, you know, used to complain. And I discovered I was a ham. That was the first time I started to sing for people.

Young Joan wisely struck a personal deal that if she could walk, she would sing. She described her pledge to Chip Stern: "I kind of made a promise to my Christmas tree, that if I could get up and walk that I would pay it back somehow. So when I got out of the hospital I joined the church choir. . . . I don't think I lasted too long in the choir, but I did learn to smoke there." Years later, she looked back on the experience and its impact on her life for Robert Hilburn: "I had a strong will. But also, being so confined, I think I developed an inner life. I'd imagine all kinds of stories and pictures and scenes in my head—just look at the ceiling and think it was a screen."

After spending her tenth birthday and Christmas in the hospital, Joan returned to North Battleford, where she joined her mother (remember, an ex-teacher) in a vigorous battle to regain her health and continue her education at home. When Joan was eleven, the family moved to Saskatoon. There her determined recovery continued, she excelled in her art classes, and, apparently, she survived her remaining schoolwork. The biographers tell us about influential teachers such as Arthur Kratzman (who instructed the youngster, "If you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words") and Henry Bonli (whose last name inspired the shift from "Joan" to "Joni" since she admired his signature on his paintings), who shaped the emerging artist in powerful ways. In high school, Anderson's passions were music, writing, and fashion. She joined a creative writing group that met after school, she painted props for school plays, she wrote a fashion column for the school newspaper, and—in an extremely clever move—she drew portraits of renowned mathematicians for her math teacher and created charts for biology classes as a way to negotiate her way through classes. She described her school years for *People's* Michael Small:

I was always the school artist. I did the backdrops for plays, illustrated the yearbook and the school newspaper and wrote a little column called Fads and

Fashions. I'd advise people to paste silver stars on their blue suede shoes, or I wrote that girls should wear their father's ties to school. . . . I used to lie up at night and listen to the Hit Parade under the covers. Then in the morning, I'd drag myself to school. But I couldn't see what school had to do with my adult life.

That attitude manifested in her grades. Although her writing demonstrated her creativity (she penned a poem titled "The Fishbowl," in which she portrays the horror of celebrity life for her tenth-grade teacher), her course work more than suffered. Her resourcefulness, however, enabled her development outside the classroom. She collected albums by winning dance contests (a *major* victory for a polio victim), made a Christmas card in exchange for Miles Davis records, and painted a mural for a jazz enthusiast who paid her with jazz recordings. Through it all, an industrious, resourceful, determined personality was systematically formed. Her friends referred to her as a "Good-Time Charlie" (according to a 1991 interview with David Wild), and her love of Chuck Berry-style rock and roll facilitated her intense desire to dance, as she related to Chip Stern in 1995:

That became kind of my reason to be. And specially the jukebox at the Avenue H swimming pool and the jukebox at the CM Lunch, which was on the west side of town, where I was forbidden to go. . . . Then there was this group of guys: They were my dance partners—we used to call them Ocean's 11. Three or four of them went to New York City and came back with scruffy little goatees, and berets and striped T-shirts. . . . We used to go out in the bush and drink beer and put our cars in a circle and turn all the radios on at once and dance wildly in the stubble.

Among the revelry, she attended her first concert, featuring Ray Charles, and overcame her reluctant parents' concerns about her attire, according to a 2002 interview with Wild: "I went and bought some rhinestones, and I clipped rhinestones down the side of my slim jims, they called them, these black pants. And I borrowed my dad's jacket. My mother wasn't going to let me go out of the house dressed like that." Another memorable occasion involved a promotion for a Johnny Cash recording, as Cash recounted in Colin Escott's book on Sun Records:

Dan Bass, the promo man for Quality Records . . . set up a Teenage Queen contest in every city. I flew into a new city each morning and did radio and television interviews. Then in the afternoon I signed records at record shops. My last promo appearance of the day, before the arrival of the Teenage Queen contestants, was to draw a name out of a box at a large department store's record counter and name the Teenage Queen and the runner up. . . . In the city of Saskatoon, the Teenage Queen died tragically, leaving the runner up to be enthroned. That runner up was already writing songs and singing. Her name was Joni Mitchell.

Though it is doubtful that she was writing, singing, or calling herself “Joni Mitchell” at that time, such an event must surely have fed those “star eyes” in an inspiring fashion.

Despite all the fun, Mitchell conveys mixed emotions about her formal education. In 1972, she told Penny Valentine: “It’s like I came through the school systems completely unscathed in a way, and completely unlearned in another way. Which makes me feel terribly ignorant.” On another occasion, she offered this detailed account of her schooling to Cameron Crowe:

I was a bad student. I finally flunked out in the twelfth grade. I went back later and picked up the subjects that I lost. I do have my high-school diploma—I figured I needed that much, just in case. College was not too interesting to me. The way I saw the educational system from an early age was that it taught you what to think, not how to think. There was no liberty, really, for free thinking. You were being trained to fit into a society where free thinking was a nuisance. I liked some of my teachers very much, but I had no interest in their subjects. So I would appease them—I think they perceived that I was not a dummy, although my report card didn’t look like it. I would line the math room with ink drawings and portraits of the mathematicians. I did a tree of life for my biology teacher. I was always staying late at the school, down on my knees painting something.

Notice the intense rebellion, the focused determination, and clever resourcefulness of our “Good-Time Charlie” as she pursued *her* agenda within the context of one of society’s major institutional environments.

Anderson’s emerging musical tastes involved jazz (Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross’s *The Hottest New Sound in Jazz* was an early and permanent favorite) and, of course, Chuck Berry-style rock and roll. Interestingly, she dismissed the emerging folk trend as boring, “pseudo-intellectual nonsense” (according to O’Brien). Then, things changed, as she recounted for Sankey Phillips in 1977:

I went to a coffeehouse to hear some jazz, because my friends were interested in jazz and I was kind of curious to find out what it was all about—I was still a rock and roller, teenybop go-to-the-dances-on-Saturday-night type. Anyway, that night there was no jazz, there was this terrible folk singer. I didn’t enjoy it at all, but I kept going down there. . . . And I found there were some things I liked. I liked a group that was very Kingston Trio-ish; they were local, and they were very amusing—it was really funny to hear comedy in music. I wanted the leader to teach me how to play the guitar, but he wouldn’t, so I went out and bought myself a ukulele because my mother thought that guitar . . . she thought that guitar music was sort of associated with country and western, which was sort of hillbillyish—so she said “No guitar!”

Despite her mother’s protestations, her interest was piqued, the introverted portion of her personality revealed itself, and the aspiring artist discovered yet another avenue for her expressive needs.



While saving money for college, Joni Anderson modeled, worked as a waitress, and eventually found herself on stage at the Louis Riel coffeehouse in Saskatoon with her baritone ukulele. She taught herself to play guitar thanks to a Pete Seeger instructional record—which she no doubt played while wearing her Roy Rogers outfit and, once again, denied the boys their chauvinistic prerogatives. As she mastered the instrument, she encountered difficulties with her left hand as the result of her polio. Consequently, she developed an unconventional method of playing that relied on a host of unique tunings that would one day be her sonic trademark.

With these events, Anderson walked off the dance floor, turned increasingly introspective, and embraced folk music and its emerging lifestyles. While performing at a party, she was noticed by people who worked for a television station in northern Saskatchewan (Prince Albert's CKBI-TV); they promptly enlisted the beautiful, poised blonde to perform on a half-hour variety program. Anderson agreed, and played six songs on her ukulele. As the saying goes, with that, a star was born.

Anderson ventured to Calgary and the Alberta College of Art in the fall of 1963. There, predictably, she rebelled against her teachers' methods of instruction, performed in coffeehouses, and dated fellow art student Brad MacMath. The couple left Calgary in the summer of 1964 and traveled to Toronto. During the journey, O'Brien reports, Anderson wrote her second first song ("Day After Day"), attended an annual folk festival (the Mariposa Folk Festival), and obtained a sales job in the women's wear department at Sears. The bohemian couple lived a communal lifestyle, sharing living quarters where and when they could. The \$160 musicians' union dues required to work the Toronto folk circuit was a huge—seemingly insurmountable—burden and prohibited Anderson from playing the city's more profitable venues. Therefore, she obtained scab work where she could—typically, for scab wages. MacMath apparently tired of the hippie lifestyle and left a pregnant Anderson to struggle in Toronto. Kelly Dale Anderson was born on February 19, 1965, and her mother faced the possibility of raising the child in less than ideal conditions. Since her family and friends back home knew nothing of the pregnancy, Anderson dealt with her situation to the best of her ability. In June 1965, she met a 29-year-old American folk singer from Detroit and, after a 36-hour courtship, Charles Mitchell proposed to the young mother. Implicit in their arrangement was the understanding that Kelly—currently in the care of temporary foster parents—would join the couple once they settled in Detroit. Married and living in Detroit, the new Joni Mitchell quickly discovered that her new husband had no intention of raising Kelly, a situation that forced Mrs. Mitchell to allow her daughter to be permanently adopted. Contrary to Charles Mitchell's comments or uninformed gossip, Joni Mitchell did *not* abandon her daughter for her career. Her concerns for her child's well-being dictated the decision—

a pivotal life happening that would haunt her for the next 30 years. She stated her case for Edna Gundersen:

I was very stoic about it. I blocked out the day that I signed the papers. I must have been quasi-hysterical. It says in the file that it was "very difficult for mother emotionally." I don't even remember. I was made to feel ashamed, but I don't have any guilt about that loss and the ugly gantlet of opinion you first walk through. I couldn't find another way. I had no money to put a roof over my head or feed myself, let alone buy diapers, and no one to ask help from. And I was wildly independent. I married [folk singer] Chuck Mitchell, and he said he didn't want to raise another person's child, so I had to give her up.

Few life events compare with such an experience. Mitchell's agony would continuously surface in her work.

Young Kelly was not the only birth from early 1965; Mitchell's song-writing emerged along with the infant. In the video *Woman of Heart and Mind*, Mitchell reports Kelly's birth inspired her pen: "I started to develop my own private world, and also because I was disturbed." After hearing Bob Dylan's "Positively 4th Street" later that year, the enterprising artist placed another iron in her creative fire. In the *Woman* video she explains that she always loved the "crooner era" but felt the words were too simple. She preferred writing with more "poetic description"; therefore, she was attracted to the "more storytelling quality of Dylan's work." She continues: "Bob Dylan inspired me with the idea of personal narrative . . . he would speak as if to one person in a song . . . such a personal, strong statement. . . . His influence was to personalize my work." So, once she heard "4th Street," she acknowledged "that was the key" that "opens all the doors . . . we can write about anything." Her response was not to copy Dylan, but to use his technique to her own ends: "The thing that I was reluctant to let go of was the melodic, harmonic sense. Whereas Dylan . . . you could speak in paragraphs, but it was for the sacrifice of the music. You get the plateaus upon which to speak. So it was my job to distill a hybrid that allowed for a certain amount of melodic movement and harmonic movement but with a certain amount of plateaus in order to make the longer statement . . . to say more."

While her writing flourished, the Mitchells performed around the Midwest, Canada, and the American east coast. New compositions such as "Urge for Going" and "The Circle Game" appeared on stage and during radio interviews as the musical world took notice of a formidable talent with impressive looks. By late 1966, O'Brien tells us, Mitchell's "days as a folkie interpreter were over" as she focused on her songwriting and performed her original compositions before a more than receptive audience. Performers such as Tom Rush, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Ian and Sylvia, Dave Van Ronk, Canadian country singer George Hamilton IV, and English folk-rock act Fairport Convention performed and recorded Joni Mitchell songs. By all



accounts, Mitchell's Canadian roots fed her pen, as she told *Sounds*: "The land has a rich melancholy about it. Not in the summer because it's usually very clear, but in the spring and winter it's very brooding and it's conducive to a certain kind of thinking." In a 1966 article by the hometown Saskatoon paper, an unnamed reporter elaborates on that thesis:

Much of Joni's material was inspired by her impressions of life on the Prairies. The haunting lyrics of "Urge for Going", she explained, stemmed from the effect the bitter western winter has on prairie residents, and their wish to escape the cold. Another song, "What Will You Give Me", describes in nostalgic terms the longing of a prairie native who is far away from home, in a moment of regret. The Mitchells both agreed Saskatoon and the Prairies contained much that was esthetically beautiful, and Joni said she hopes to continue writing songs based on her Saskatchewan background, and her love of the flat western landscape.

(On other occasions, Mitchell claimed "Urge" chronicles the dying folk music scene.) As the writing prospered, Charles Mitchell offered his greatest contribution to his wife's life when he encouraged her to form her own publishing company to protect her work. It was a decision that would guarantee Joni Mitchell's financial security.

The Mitchells ended their marriage in early 1967 and Joni relocated to the Chelsea area of New York City. It was a lonely, trying time hawking her wares on the road, as she recalled for the *Los Angeles Times*:

It was a lonely job. You'd go into a town and have nothing to do except the shows and then you'd be on the road again, but it was good in a way because it gave me the time to write. I learned the purpose of melancholy too . . . that grieving and sorrow are highly underrated in this culture. In a 9 to 5 job, you are not allowed to really savor your emotions, but on your own, you have time to live with them, and I was on my own. I wrote a lot of the songs that appeared on the first three albums during that time.

Mitchell resisted securing a manager for some time, but her arrival in the Big Apple prompted her to consider Bob Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman, as a possible choice. When that failed to materialize, Mitchell eventually turned to Elliot Roberts for management. Roberts—an enterprising manager of comic acts—was associated with music entrepreneur David Geffen. In 1974, Roberts offered his first impression of his new client for the aforementioned *Time* cover story: "She was a jumble of creative clutter with a guitar case full of napkins, road maps and scraps of paper all covered with lyrics." Though Mitchell had strong reservations about securing the services of "Mr. Ten Percent" due to her ever-present feelings of rebellious, self-supporting determination, she relented and hired the fun-loving Roberts. Mitchell needed a recording contract, and Roberts approached a number of

New York-based record labels in pursuit of an arrangement that granted complete creative control to his client (including album cover design). *This* was a prodigious request that eventually found a home on the west coast and the Los Angeles-based Warner Brothers label. Roberts's leverage was enhanced by the number of artists recording Mitchell's songs, but it required special concessions to grant *complete* creative control to an unproven artist. Roberts told O'Brien: "That was the hard part. They were not used to anyone saying, 'It has nothing to do with the money, we need creative control.' We had a long-term goal, Joan had a long-term goal and knew how her record should sound. She hadn't learned the craft yet but she knew she was going to."

With an unusual recording contract, an enterprising and dedicated manager, and a stable of strong songs available, Joni Mitchell and rookie producer David Crosby set about the task of constructing a debut album. Mitchell met Crosby while performing in south Florida and they became personally and professionally involved; hence, when he expressed an interest in producing Mitchell's first album, his request was granted. Crosby—an accomplished musician—implemented a nondirective production strategy that allowed Mitchell free rein over the material and its arrangement. Such a plan not only appealed to an artist with strong memories of piano teachers and their strictly applied rulers, it also initiated a lifelong solo act in the recording studio. Crosby represents Mitchell's first—and last—"producer"; the determined, rebellious art student would forever bake her cake and eat it, too (there are only a few exceptions to this rule). Few artists are as strong-willed as Joni Mitchell. Although she met Henry Lewy during these original sessions and initiated a long-term relationship with the engineer, she would refrain from securing an official producer for her records. She explained her stance to Karen O'Brien:

If you're in art school, nobody would come up and put a mark on your canvas. It is my work and be damned if anybody is going to put a mark on it. Whatever your reason to make it something else, it isn't my music and if it isn't my music, then I'm being slapped by my piano teacher again. You're going to kill my love of it and it won't go the distance. I knew what a good performance was, so in order to protect my music for the second time, I worked with just an engineer. He's like a print puller.

Future strategies aside, Crosby entered the studio with a plan. With the current folk-rock trends dominating the contemporary music scene, Crosby was determined to keep the "rock" out of Joni Mitchell's "folk," and he succeeded. While production problems plagued the project (e.g., tape hiss, poor levels), Crosby overcame them and *Joni Mitchell* or *Song to a Seagull* was issued in March 1968. The album, dedicated to Arthur Kratzman, has ten songs divided into two parts ("I Came to the City" and "Out of the City and