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A revealing, lyrical book that uses Joni Mitchell's groundbreaking albums of the 1970s to explore the development of autobiographical songwriting.

Will You Take Me As I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period Details

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Paula says

An interesting and entertaining book about Joni Mitchell's Blue Period, from 1971 to 1976, beginning when she recorded Blue and ending with her recording of Hejira. Written by NPR contributor Michelle Mercer the book interweaves stories about Joni's life, her music, and her influences. The book was based on personal interviews with Joni and others and along with some in-depth research, all documented at the end. I especially liked the stories about Joni's experiences as she travelled with the Rolling Thunder Review, and was not surprised to learn that Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen were Joni's most significant singer/songwriter influences. This is definitely a different take on Joni than Sheila Weiler's Girls Like Us, which I also thoroughly enjoyed. I recommend reading them both. Thanks, Nan, for the loan. It got me through a tough work week!

Paul Bryant says

(This review is dedicated to my old friend Mrs K)

Talk about damaging admissions – this is the author speaking, on PAGE ONE :

When a guy seemed like a decent prospect there was one good way to find out. A true test of character. An absolute gauge of worth. "There's something I want you to listen to" I'd say... The guy usually intuited that Joni appreciation was a kind of foreplay. "That's good" he'd say. "But do you hear the lyrics?" I'd ask. "I mean, are you really listening?"

Well, I would have passed that test with flying colours and me and Michelle Mercer would have totally been an item except that sadly I intuit she would have failed my combined Incredible-String-Band-The-Shangri-Las-Captain-Beeheart triple whammy listening test. "You say you listened to the lyrics – okay, can you repeat back to me the first verse of Orange Claw Hammer?" How unlike the home life of our own dear Queen. I suppose, back in the day, she would have the Keeper of the Princess's Underthings to screen all potential shags by going through Debrett's Peerage and then having the Royal Philharmonic play them something by Elgar on the palace lawn. "Did you get the lyrics?"

I digress. It's because I'm trying to avoid talking about this book which means talking about Joni Mitchell and which means talking about what I call the ignominy of fandom. This is when your love for the artist is too great to be contained by the mere acts of watching/listening/reading, that just gets too passive, so it spills over into reading/watching etc ABOUT the art and the artist, then collecting stuff PERTAINING EVER MORE TANGENTIALLY to the artist, then connecting with other fans of the artist over the internet and babbling on, and maybe toppling over into the horror of completism. It's hapless, it's because you have too much love. Can't keep it to yourself. I should just zip it and listen to my JM stuff on my ipod and not read books like this.

Let's remember why Joni is great:

ELECTRICITY

The Minus is loveless, he talks to the land
And the leaves fall and the pond over-ices
She don't know the system, Plus, she don't understand
She's got all the wrong fuses and splices
She's not going to fix it up too easy

The masking tape tangles, it's sticky and black
And the copper - proud headed Queen Lizzie -
Conducts little charges that don't get charged back
Well the technical manual's busy
She's not going to fix it up too easy

And she holds out her flashlight and she shines it on me
She wants me to tell her what the trouble might be
Well I'm learning, it's peaceful, with a good dog and some trees
Out of touch with the breakdown of this century
They're not going to fix it up too easy

We once loved together and we floodlit that time
Input output electricity
But the lines overloaded and the sparks started flying
And the loose wires were lashing out at me
She's not going to fix that up too easy

But she holds out her candle and she shines it in
And she begs him to show her how to fix it again
While the song that he sang her to soothe her to sleep
Runs all through her circuits like a heartbeat
She's not going to fix it up too easy

What a soulful mash of metaphor, and a great tune too. And there's fifty more as good too, including two completely perfect albums (the first one and Blue). So yes, I'm a fan – up to Hejira that is.

But when I do my fanboy thing and read this book bad things happen. I find I don't like the Joni Mitchell in the books and interviews at all. She's (fan's - look away now) haughty, intolerant, self-obsessed, almost impossible to be with, a know-it-all and the living embodiment of the New Age with all its quiddities and crackpottery and potions and total belief in everything. Sorry, Joni. I love you but.

SOME JONI QUOTES FROM THIS BOOK WHICH ILLUSTRATE MY POINT

The stars were very intense and unusual at that time [when I was born:]. There were three grand trines over my birthplace so that was very unusual and you end up with a lot of gifts.

[talking about the women she grew up with:] They all smoked. They all channeled, they all had powers of one kind or another.

I went to a couple of shrinks... The first shrink just said "You can't shrink a genius". And I might add, "Or an Irish person". Certainly I'm unshrinkable.

If I'd been born into a tradition that had shamans in it, we would have recognised that the symptoms I was going through were the coming in of shamanic powers.

Alanis Morissette is not my favorite playwright, you know... she's just a preacher's brat in rebellion trying to shock Daddy like Madonna. I don't see her as a great thinker, a great woman, a great anything. (p158)

Jackson Browne is a mini-talent and he's also a phony... his whole thing is to make himself look sensitive and charitable. (p158)

I could write a really interesting book just about how mysterious life is." (p203)

And there's also the bit where Joni explains St Augustine, and exactly what his Confessions were all about, and how he ruined Christianity.

Michelle Mercer just – can't – quite – suppress – her - true – feelings in some passages (and I could not suppress a loud guffaw):

At such dinners Mitchell is accustomed to playing a kind of hip queen for her awed subjects... Mitchell's speech unfolds in paragraphs.. it's no exaggeration to say she's usually striving for truth or beauty as she talks...

She then details an evening where JM lambasted her in public for her erroneous comment that humour can be useful in some situations. If you're honoured enough to be asked to dinner with Joni, better watch your mouth kiddo.

JM exemplifies the problem of the modern music artist who gets successful. The first albums are drawn from the period when they were living life at street level. Those are the ones I love. Then when the money rolls in, the fourth album is all pink limousines and buckets of cocaine and truffles with good looking groupies sticking out of them. Boo hoo, this groupie has just snorted all the good cocaine and has now died! Hey you, give me my guitar made out of the True Cross, I feel a masterpiece coming on. I have shamanic powers you know.

I thought this book was a pretty good mix of biography and comment, was hopelessly conflicted on every possible level (Joni was a confessional songwriter, Joni was not a confessional songwriter) and was very critical of idiots who just want to gossip about which song is about Leonard Cohen and which one about Graham Nash - after such criticism Michelle would then tell you exactly which song is about which famous guy. Then again, this book got me interested in some of those albums I'd avoided as coked-out LA Weather Report diluted tuneless jazz tomfoolery. So I checked out what's supposed to be the most indulgent of them all, Don Juan's Reckless Daughter, ready to finish off this review with a flourish of too bad-that-Joni-she-pissed-it-all-away, such a shame. And - it sounds great! It sounds brilliant! I've been an idiot! I love Joni Mitchell! Michelle Mercer, email me now, I'm yours! I don't even care if you hate Captain Beefheart!

Mia says

Like all Joni fans, my relationship with her is soul deep & heartfelt. I love her. She is my mother - my sister. She is me.

My 1st Joni album was a gift from my high school boyfriend in the first, blushing days of our tumultuous relationship. I tormented him with my indecision and Joni was the sound track that weaved itself around us.

I became convinced the 1st time I heard Little Green that I was she - nothing else made any sense! I was the girl child Joni gave birth to and, heartbroken, had put up for adoption! My fourteen year old self rejoiced!

Joni was my mother! That explained how I had ended up in a family so devoid of all and any creativity, joy, longing, angst, soul....(14, remember)and I carried my secret about me like a cloak of protection from the mundane.

Eventually, I realized that, of course, Joni was not my mother. She was something much, much more. She was my muse ... my role model ... she sang my story in her songs and gave me a glimpse of a life that promised more than my mid-western upbringing would allow.

My high school boyfriend & I broke up for the last time when we were 24. He may not have loved Joni as I did but he introduced me to her & for that I will always be grateful.

My adoration for Joni has never ended and to Ms. Mercer I say "Thank you!" for reminding me that there are so many reasons why I love her.

*Sad note - just days after posting this, I learned that my H.S.B.F. had passed away after a courageous battle with cancer. He was a gifted musician ... a dreamer ... a drifter ... a poet and I will never forget.

Lindsay says

Skipped school and went to Harvard Square in 1969 to see James Taylor - he was the warm up act for Joni Mithcell. I've been her biggest fan ever since. So, the book was a no brainer for me to pick up and read almost straight through.

Like most items about Joni, it's a bit disjointed and wanders back and forth between illumination, tell-all, and the author's personal take on the material. Good read for a fan - hardly a stand alone portrait.

Robert says

In my late teens and into my early twentysomething years I was all about Joni Mitchell, who really fulfilled a need in my angsty artfag soul. Later on I discovered the music of The Smiths and Morrissey and then later after that The Magnetic Fields and Stephen Merritt, all of whom more specifically and literally spoke to and about artfag angst, supplanting Joni somewhat. But she always remained a sort of hero to me. I wanted to have all those romances with famous artists and musicians on the mythic highways and byways she sang about and then have to go heal my wounded-but-undaunted heart in isolation in Greek caves, or in my own private cottage in British Vancouver, just like she always did – what boy/girl wouldn't? That was my kind of artist's life, for sure! However, judging from the interviews she's given in the last 10 years or so, Joni has curdled into an annoyingly arrogant, petulant, bitter crank, deflating most of my previous hallowed notions of her. (With the fabulous life she's gotten to live, how dare she complain so damn much about overdue Grammy awards and being compared to inferior talents like Alanis Morrissette, etc, etc? Cry me a river, Joni Mitchell!) Still, she boasts a healthy handful of musically and lyrically brilliant albums from the early to mid seventies to her credit, including Hejira (definitely her masterpiece, IMHO), For the Roses, Court and Spark, and of course, Blue, plus a half dozen other good to very good titles – myself, I'm partial to Turbulent Indigo, Ladies of the Canyon, and her big "Fuck You" to the Reagan years, Dog Eat Dog. I listened to and dreamed through all of those records a zillion times back in the day and still enjoy a healthy listening-to-Joni

cycle every so often. I really enjoyed this book, Michelle Mercer's detailed overview of the most creatively fruitful period of Mitchell's career (roughly 1971 to 1977). Mercer gives really good, erudite song analysis, and only occasionally descends into fangirl mode – there is an embarrassing index called “Stuff Joni Mitchell Likes or Loves” in the rear of the book, which comes across as more than a little Tiger Beat-ish. We're all guilty of that sort of thing sometimes though, and overall, I say most true-Blue Joni Mitchell fans ought to take pleasure in this one. Now excuse me, time for my apples and cheeses.

Bert says

Usually the best test for any book about music is that you immediately want to go and listen to those old albums again, and the fact that i didn't do that whilst reading this probably says something. Partly it says that Joni comes across as incredibly conceited in this book, and partly it was because I was listening to KISS.

I learnt that Joni really likes quoting things that other people have said about how great she is. Like the time she went to see a shrink and he tells her 'You can't shrink a genius.' Which is sad, though i guess not too unexpected, as what makes Blue in particular such a stark and moving album is that it is so self-indulgent. Same goes for For The Roses, which is a bit of a neglected classic, a bit like KISS' Dressed To Kill.

It does seem kind of futile writing a biographical book about a bunch of albums that are already about as autobiographical as you can get, but i liked the digressions, on the nature of confession, the Beats, and i found the back story to Hejira interesting, it's an album that i haven't heard, and now i want to. Mercer's stance on Joni was a bit all over the place, kind of acknowledging her narcissism ('Mitchell is accustomed to playing a kind of hip queen holding court for her awed subjects.') but unable to distance herself as a fan enough to be anything other than gushing about the music. She even admits to using Mitchell's music as a test for prospective boyfriends, to see if they 'get' her. Fwightening.

Then came the double-blow of Mercer harshly laying into the freaking awesome Dan Fogelberg whilst openly admitting liking (gag) free jazz! Screw you Mercer! This was followed by Joni herself slating the godlike Jackson Browne, by which point i felt like i was being personally attacked, I felt a wave of rage consume me which could only be alleviated by cranking up Strutter from KISS' first album.

Mercer is at her best when she traces the transitions in Joni's approach to autobiography through these albums, and not when she's slagging off the dreamy Fogelberg. Mitchell's progress from the raw openness of Blue to the more knowing distance of the later works is revealed as a conscious response to the unwanted fame and attention, as an artistic form of renewal, and as a result of Joni snortin' too much coke-a-doodle-doo. So, will i take you as you are Joni? Yes, i guess so, but maybe I only love you when you're sad.

Diane says

I've been a fan of Joni Mitchell's for over 35 years. The first album that I was introduced to was the 'Blue' album. The author had alot of information to share which would be of interest to fans. It appears that she did her research.

Andrea says

I was a huge Joni Mitchell fan as a teenager, and as I've grown older I've been disappointed over and over again by what a vain person she is and how she holds a grudge. She has no problem disparaging others (I don't think she has ever said anything positive for example about Joan Baez or Judy Collins, with whom she was sometimes lumped early in her career). Her views of smoking are astounding - not that it is a habit but that it is a GOOD habit.

This book, which is not that well written as noted by other readers, makes that yet clearer. I will continue to enjoy her music, especially her earlier music (which Joni scorns, I know), and will remind myself to separate the music from the person.

I suggest "Girls Like Us" for a better view of this time and the rest of Joni's career.

Lauren says

This book is more fan journalism than a definitive book on Joni Mitchell's "Blue period." The author leans on sweeping admiration for Mitchell and then ungraciously knocks other singer-songwriters (Carly Simon, Jackson Browne). These two techniques do little to affirm the author's position. The final chapter on Mitchell's likes/dislikes seems totally out of place and I wonder why it was inserted. Sometimes you just have to kill your darlings. If it doesn't work its way organically into the narrative, why create this awkward chapter?

Just go ahead and read Sheila Weller's *Girls Like Us*. Everything of major interest in *Will You Take Me As I Am* was already covered in *Girls Like Us*.

Judy says

The minute I heard about this book, I purchased and read it. By that you can know that I am a dedicated Joni Mitchell fan and have been since I first saw her perform in an Ann Arbor coffeehouse in 1967. There is a dearth of biographies on Joni that are based on actual interviews with the artist herself. Biographies of a living artist written only by rehashing magazine interviews make for unsatisfying reading. I would rather read the articles themselves and in fact many can be found on the official Joni Website.

Michelle Mercer has been writing about music and musicians for a decade and producing spots on NPR for almost as long. Her concentration is jazz and in 2004, she published a biography about saxophonist Wayne Shorter (*Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*.) Wayne, who has played on some of Joni's albums, got Michelle an introduction to Joni, which led to Mercer spending hours and days with Joni, getting her own answers to her own questions.

The result is a book that feels at once based on solid Joni scholarship as well as a feeling of intimacy with this woman of heart and mind. The writing style is very much rooted in the music criticism genre though Mercer is clearly as much of a fan as I am. There are fabulous stories about the author's life as it intersected with her love of Joni's early albums.

She writes that at eighteen, "When a guy seemed like a decent prospect, there was one good way to find out.

A true test of character. An absolute gauge of worth." She would proceed to play the "Blue" album. She'd watch carefully for the guy's reaction, draw him out with questions. " 'How do you like the music?' I'd ask. Meaning: can we disappear together to another time and place? A soul mate would hear the ingenuity of Joni's chords, the novelty of her song structure."

Any Joni Mitchell fan has a similar story. When I found out that my husband knew every word of the lyrics on "Blue", I was certain he was the right man. I watched my best music girl friend's future husband fall in love with her as my friend performed Joni song for about an hour in my backyard one summer evening.

The subtitle of this book is Joni Mitchell's Blue Period; the dust jacket shows an early picture of Joni with guitar and a band of transparent blue in the same hue as the "Blue" album. What you get as the reader is just enough biography to enhance Mercer's analysis of the songs on Joni's albums from "Blue" to "Hejira." If you know all those songs, word for word and chord for chord, as I do, it is fascinating. The balance between music writing and transparent Joni worship is pretty much perfect. For extra spice she adds the occasional acerbic Joni quote.

I could hear the songs as I read and for all of us who long to spend time hanging out with Joni personally, there is a feeling of doing so. That is Michelle Mercer's gift. She got to get it straight from the creator and she has generously shared it with us.

Richard says

I had the great fortune to read the uncorrected proof of Michelle Mercer's forthcoming book. *Will You Take Me as I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period* and I can tell you that you are in for a real treat now that it has been published.

I read a lot of books about music and this one is really distinguished by the high quality of the writing. Mercer breaks with strict chronology that makes run-of-the-mill music criticism so uninteresting. Her discussion about "confessional" songwriting is fully informed by the literary history of confession from Augustine to Robert Lowell. There is a wonderful Joni monologue on Augustine--one of many fascinating excerpts from Mercer's original interviews.

For me, she really captures the core appeal of the records that she focuses on--<1>Blue through *Hejira*--blending memoir and biography with criticism in useful ways. The book really took me back to my own personal connections with the music. While I like gossip as much as anyone else, this book has none of the prurient interest of Sheila Weller's book; rather, it captures the intricate essence of the music. It has a meditative quality that reminded me precisely about how I felt when I was coming of age with Joni's music. I didn't care about who her boyfriend was; I wanted to know, "How does she understand so well the way I feel?" This book goes a long way toward exploring that question, summed up in the quotation from Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar" that serves as the book's epigraph:

And they said to him, "But play you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar,
Of things exactly as they are.

The book so exceeded my expectations that I couldn't put it down till I finished it.

Nan says

"The way a composer experiences nature can be heard in his music. When someone from the Canadian flatlands, like Joni Mitchell or Neil Young, puts native landscape into music, it doesn't come out like it does in the music of Beethoven or Vivaldi. Flatlanders' early perceptions of landscape are not set so far apart from themselves. So landscape in the music of Young and Mitchell is at once more subtle and manifest, because their feelings for the land have a sound less distinguishable from their feeling of the land itself."

This was one of my Mother's Day gifts from Tom and Matthew. I am half-way done with the book, and I am really enjoying it! The book is artfully written, thought-provoking, and is not your typical biography written by a "star struck" author. It tries to present Joni and her music, in all its complexity, as it really is. I highly recommend it to any Joni fan out there -- and to anyone who likes to think about art, perspective, and interpretation.

Chris says

When Joni Mitchell thinks about confession, two things come to mind: witch hunts and Catholic priests. To be held up as the exemplar of confessional songwriting is not her preference. This comes through clearly in Michelle Mercer's study "Will You Take Me as I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period," considering Mitchell's career from the release of her album "Blue" in 1971 through the 1976 release of "Hejira."

What distinguishes this work from standard celebrity profiles is that it reads like a collection of cultural essays. We learn about Mitchell's Canadian childhood alongside an examination of how landscape affects musical style. Mitchell's relationship with Leonard Cohen comes during an analysis of the difference between songs and poetry. We see how Mitchell's childhood bout with polio led to her creation of unconventional chord arrangements, her "chords of inquiry." A discussion of St. Augustine is used to demonstrate her thoughts on confessional songwriting.

"Will You Take Me" is also a work of literary criticism. Mercer references Plato's allegory of the cave and Sylvia Plath, James Joyce and Annie Dillard. She does not shy away from tangents, some successful, as when she links the dogma of folk tradition to T.S. Eliot's criticism; and some not so, such as dips into associative logic and Foucault. As she explores the distinctions among confessional, autobiographical and personal writing, Mercer uses her subject's own words (she conducted a trove of interviews with Mitchell) to illustrate her thesis that Mitchell helped make the personal songwriters of the late '60s and early '70s the literary successors to the Beats.

Mercer plays with the idea of Mitchell as modern-day St. Augustine, describing how they both take on dual roles of protagonist and narrator. A recurring theme is that Mitchell has suffered from her audience's inability to separate these identities. A coexistence of wisdom and misanthropy, exemplified when Mitchell reveals she hates Augustine, is characteristic of the persona she develops here. At one point, Mitchell mentions the impetus behind her revelations in song: to show fans "who they're worshipping."

Mitchell, who has a reputation as being somewhat imperious, seems irritated that the world may never recognize her work as an incarnation of the Great American Novel. However, the question of lack of humility cannot help but involve her identity as a woman. Many men who are notably pompous are often seen as charming -- Mick Jagger, Kanye West, Norman Mailer -- but Mitchell's ego can come across as irksome. For example, she attributes her inability to remember people's names to not having enough room in

her mind for proper nouns because of all her ideas.

In general, gender appears to be a fraught area for Mitchell; she is especially critical of other female artists. Mercer describes how differently Mitchell was treated when engaged in the same pursuits as her male contemporaries. There is a tension in the book between not wanting Mitchell to be seen as the female mascot of her generation and Mitchell's continual desire to be "one of the boys": Graham Nash, James Taylor, Leonard Cohen, Jackson Browne and Neil Young. But although Mitchell insists on being seen as a simple tomboy who prefers the company of men, her more than platonic relationships with many of the "boys" complicates the issue. Mercer seems to imply that Mitchell used the loss of men's love as her muse.

Mercer's role is inconsistent in a way that serves almost as a formal tribute to Mitchell. The author fluctuates between being absent from the text, objectively relating events, and being very present, interjecting personal narrative and subjective criticism. A tale of a camping trip Mercer took with an ex-boyfriend and his father becomes a screed against Dan Fogelberg as some kind of sellout bogeyman. Mercer clearly enjoys language play and appreciates Mitchell's lyrics; sometimes the author's metaphors are so strange as to be strikingly effective: The song "Sisotowbell Lane" has "the atmosphere of Louisa May Alcott's 'Little Women' crashing a Dungeons & Dragons game." With few exceptions, Mercer stays true to her intention to focus on the literary merit of Mitchell's force of lyric and melody.

Fortunately, Mercer doesn't take her subject or herself too seriously. She addresses nuances of Mitchell's art that have not been adequately recognized but does not lionize her. Rather, Mitchell is revealed as a complicated woman for whom being widely liked is both anathema and a great need. It's not clear whether Mitchell doesn't care how you take her or cares too much.

- Originally appeared in the LA Times on 5/24/09

Michelle says

This was well-written criticism on the second part of Joni Mitchell's career and by far my personal favorite period. Her lyrics are in my opinion worthy of being called poetry and that is not often found in popular song. I prefer artists to evolve and change. I am particularly fond of watching and hearing growth and development and the chances that great artists take. Did you hear THAT all you music execs out there? Please don't feed me crappy no-talent music that you feel is just your way of making a fast buck because I WILL NOT buy it. It is a shame how the music industry treated Joni Mitchell. The woman is light years far more talented than most who are producing music today. The way her music wraps round her lyrics to push off into flight is amazing. And I do have to agree with Joni Mitchell that it really is best to interpret her songs according to your own experience rather than knowing all the personal information that caused her to write them. It is far more freeing and allows you to see many more layers at different times in your life. I liked that the aspects of her life that were discussed were not treated as mere gossip but possibly less could have been exposed.

Christina says

In Will You Take Me as I Am, Michelle Mercer chronicles Joni Mitchell's Blue period in the early 1970s. Gifted at rendering the life of a talented musician, the author motivated me to want to buy Mitchell's album, Blue. Her music and life came alive on the page. Invoking the Canadian prairie and the caves of Greece, two

of her homes, and traveling from Joni's early years to her later career, Take Me is an honest, irresistible read.
