

Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words: Conversations with Malka Marom. By Malka Marom (interviewer) and Joni Mitchell (interviewee). Toronto: ECW Press, 2014. xxv, 259 pp., illustrations. ISBN-10: 1-77041-132-1 ISBN-13: 978-1-77041-132-6

Many Canadians will remember the author of this book as the female singer in the duo, Malka & Joso, who introduced their audiences to the rich variety of folk music from around the world, singing in fourteen different languages on stage and radio/television programs during the mid-1960s. Being based in the Yorkville district of Toronto, Marom one night in 1966 at the Riverboat coffeehouse heard Joni Anderson Mitchell. Returning the next night to be again mesmerized by her songs, Marom gingerly asked Mitchell after her set if she could add some of her songs to her repertoire. Mitchell immediately wrote out the lyrics of “I Had a King,” “Night in the City” and “The Circle Game.”

Through the years, Marom remained fascinated about how Mitchell was able to express many of the same difficulties that she had had to face as a female singer/performer, as outlined in the informative introduction. Hearing that Mitchell was no longer granting interviews, Marom decided in 1973 to try to reconnect with her. That attempt led to the interview that forms part 1 of the book. Part 2 consists of the second interview done in 1979, while part 3 is an interview conducted in 2012.

The transcripts of these interviews are interspersed with the actual poems of Mitchell’s songs, usually after the interview passage has provided information about the person or incident out of which the subsequent text emerged. Also the book contains a number of reproductions of her striking paintings along with photographs. The only thing that is lacking is the sound of her distinctive voice and unique arrangements.

There are many passages in the book that do detail how she developed her music. Prior to reading this book, I had found the interview by Robert Enright (2001) to be the most enlightening in understanding Mitchell’s approach to sound.¹ This book presents further details about how she developed her numerous guitar tunings (69-74, 221, 235), and her use of sus(pension) chords (75). Her sensitivity to tunings and the resultant sounds that she wanted from various instruments comes across in discussions about why the bass or drums appear on some albums but not others. For example, Mitchell wanted the acoustic bass to be very resonant, but players were using “dead strings” (75) that were flat and toneless. Drummers were accustomed to placing a pillow inside their kit drum. When Mitchell would ask to have it removed, the drummer would often refuse since the resultant sound was not considered hip (76). Later she discovered that these practices had developed with the move to 33 1/3 vinyl format. Record companies wanted to place at least ten songs on a disc. Since bass sounds used up more space, producers tried to minimize the quantity needed by demanding skinnier sound (78).



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1. Robert Enright, “Words and Pictures: The Arts of Joni Mitchell,” *Border Crossings* 20, no. 1 (2001): 18-31.

Possibly because Mitchell's vocal range is naturally that of an alto (226-27), she found herself drawn to the sound of the viola. She discovered in Los Angeles that violas were not used in string ensembles that provided movie sound tracks. Spoken word is usually in the mid-range of what humans can hear, so violas were gradually eliminated from musical arrangements in order to not drown out the speaking voices (79).

From the earliest days of her career, Mitchell refused to follow given formulae for song hits (251). As a result, she mixed and produced all of her albums following her first one, *Song to a Seagull* (1968). As she says, "my music is music of inquiry" (p. 90). The book provides numerous examples of how she was slighted by industry executives and male musicians. It was only when she began to work with jazz musicians around 1973 that she could act on producing some of the sounds and arrangements that she wanted (44, 76-77).

The interviews indicate Mitchell's longstanding affinity for black culture (203). In addition to working with musicians such as Charlie Mingus, Mitchell also describes how she once dressed as a black man for a Halloween party in the 1970s (209-10). She completed the outfit by placing her rock award around her neck, which began a fad in the black community for wearing gold medallions (210)!² She also points out that the black writers appreciated and understood the album, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977), whereas Caucasian writers dismissed it (206). Referring to the McGill University ceremony granting her an honorary doctorate in 2004, Mitchell was most touched by the rap poem, "She's So Black," given by Greg Tate of the *Village Voice* (206).

Although Mitchell apparently does not ascribe to any nationalism in her creative output, she feels most at home at her British Columbia residence near Sechelt. She refers to the melody of "Magdalene Laundries" as reminiscent of that landscape (178). Fellow Canadians including Leonard Cohen, Emily Carr and Buffy Sainte-Marie have been strong influences upon her poetry, of which the album *Hejira* (1977) is particularly noteworthy in terms of its evolution. The description of her initial exposure to First Peoples in Maidstone, Saskatchewan, explains her subsequent references to, and affinity for, their experiences in songs such as "Cherokee Louise" and "Paprika Plains."

In short, this book presents numerous insights into Mitchell's creativity as a composer, painter, poet and singer. Generally well-edited except for a typo of "than" instead of "that" on page 65 and the surname not being provided for "Graham" on page 51, the book could have benefitted with the presence of footnotes and especially an index. For example, Joni Mitchell takes particular pride in the anti-war ballet, *The Fiddle and the Drum*, showcasing the dancing aspect of her songs, but it is not referenced as being created by Alberta Ballet (212).

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2. Neither the interview nor Marom makes it clear as to what she considered her "rock award." Mitchell had won two Grammy Awards: Best Folk Performer (1969) and Best Arrangement Accompanying Vocalists (1974).