And so she left the loving comfort of her domestic life with fellow musician Graham Nash in Los Angeles’s Laurel Canyon neighborhood, booked a single plane ticket abroad and plunged into the uncharted blue — the cerulean melancholy of Joni Mitchell’s ‘Blue’ at 50. If she stayed put, she might end up kicking the door off the hinges, too. “It’s like, I’d better not,” she concluded.

“And I thought,” Mitchell continued, “maybe I am the one that got the gene that has to make it happen for these two women.”
of the album’s title track, the aquamarine shimmer of “Carey,” the frozen-over lazuline of “River” — all the while staining her hands with the indigo ink of poetic observation and relentless self-examination.

Half a century later, Mitchell’s “Blue” exists in that rarefied space beyond the influential or even the canonical. It is archetypal: The heroine’s journey that Joseph Campbell forgot to map out. It is the story of a restless young woman questioning *everything* — love, sex, happiness, independence, drugs, America, idealism, motherhood, rock ’n’
roll — accompanied by the rootless and idiosyncratically tuned sounds she so aptly called her “chords of inquiry.”

Though she was just 27 when it came out, Mitchell had already done more than enough living to know how much suffering and sacrifice is required for a woman to rip up the traditional script and pursue freedom on her own terms. She knew about sleepless, second-guessed yearnings for domesticity, and she knew about grandmothers kicking the doors off the hinges. She knew, too, that motherhood would have been too difficult to balance with her artist’s life,
nakedly chronicling her decision to put her daughter up for adoption on the heart-stopping “Little Green.”

But the flip side of such pathos was that the woman born Roberta Joan Anderson and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, got to experience the sorts of things confined to most other people’s dreams. She got to learn what it felt like to fly.

Perhaps because of its title, “Blue” has an unearned reputation for being morose or even depressive. It’s not. From the opening moments of “All I Want” — composed on an Appalachian
dulcimer, which she carried on her European travels because it was more portable than a guitar — Mitchell is as fleet-footed and kinetic as one of Eadweard Muybridge’s horses. “Alive, alive, I wanna get up and jive,” she declares, her dancing feet rarely touching ground. “Blue” is a coming-of-age travelogue. Across this album she laughs with freaks and soldiers, and parties with fellow countercultural expats in Spain, France and Greece. All the while, as one does on even the most exciting vacations, she will wonder somewhere in the back of her
mind what’s going on at home.

By 1971, Mitchell’s restlessness manifested in more than just her lyrics. She felt confined by the fishbowl of celebrity — “I’m gonna make a lot of money, then I’m gonna quit this crazy scene” — but also by the formal structures of folk music, an art form she was beginning to consider too simplistic for her prismatic talents. “Blue” and its follow-up, “For the Roses,” would mark Mitchell’s last stop before her full immersion in jazz, a kind of music that allowed her, later in her career, the true freedom she always desired. Part of the
power of “Blue,”
though, is that it
sounds ill at ease
with genre,
transitional in every
sense of the word —
“only a dark cocoon
before I get my
gorgeous wings and
fly away,” as she puts
it on “The Last Time
I Saw Richard,” an
album closer that
rings out with the
inconclusiveness of
an ellipsis.

One tried and true
way to diminish the
power of a song,
especially when it’s
written by a woman,
is to focus too finely
on who it is “about.”
And while Mitchell
never tried to
disguise the handful
of famous ex-lovers
and musicians who
populate “Blue,” the
context surrounding
the album is merely a surface concern, distracting from the achievement of its song-craft and the oceanic force of its emotions. As James Taylor — romantically involved with Mitchell during parts of this album’s composition, and a guitarist on four “Blue” songs — told me over the phone, songs “sort of follow their own truth, which can be bent.”

Taylor said he knows better than to think of songs being “about” someone: “The song is about itself, really.” A few minutes later, though, he vividly recalled the impulsive Boston-to-Los Angeles plane
ride that he believes inspired Mitchell to write “This Flight Tonight,” leaving him alone on the East Coast and uncertain of their future. Universality and hyper-specific autobiography coexists on this record — one does not cancel the other out. “Blue” is vast enough to hold multiple truths.

“I was demanding of myself a deeper and greater honesty,” Mitchell said in the documentary, the kind that enters people’s lives and “makes light bulbs go off in their head, and makes them feel.” That kind of work “strikes against the very nerves of their life,” she said, “and in
order to do that, you have to strike against the very nerves of your own.”

For the past five decades, “Blue” has been passed down like a ceremonial rite, a family heirloom, a holistic balm for the rawest kind of heartbreak. To mark its 50th anniversary, The New York Times asked 25 artists and writers to speak about its enduring power. These are edited excerpts from the conversations. — Lindsay Zoladz

Turn autoplay on
played on four songs, “A Case of You,” “Carey,” “California” and “All I Want.” Those were songs that Joni had written while she was traveling the previous year, and she wrote most on an instrument called a three-string dulcimer, which is a very mobile and very simple instrument. But it left me a wide-open opportunity to pick whatever chords would work with the melody and her spare accompaniment on the dulcimer. That was great fun for me.

The engineer was Henry Lewy, an old colleague of Joni’s. He was the person on the other side of the glass, and if we were
pitching, he was catching. His ear was really important, and he really had us keep it simple. Some of the songs had some percussion, but basically it was two or three instruments and Joni’s voice: very few elements clouding it up. It’s a minimal kind of accompaniment that you want, just to give you a sense of the song, harmonically, and then you can really focus on her voice and her attitude and all of those things that make this such a great Joni Mitchell album.
James Taylor’s guitar playing, in those tracks he’s on — it’s got a weird sound to it. If you were recording an acoustic guitar today, you would go, “Well, that’s too bright and it’s got no reverb or resonance on it. Let’s soften it up. Let’s make it a little darker, warmer sounding.” And yet it was exactly right for what she was singing, and it cut through in this way that was definitive, and yet didn’t overwhelm her. And if you hear that guitar sound right now without hearing anything else, you would go, “Oh, that’s from ‘Blue.’”
She produced it herself. There weren’t women producers then. And she didn’t try a lot of different musical arrangements. So it was very singular. There are few albums that change your life. “Blue” came out when I had just turned 16 and it came at this fulcrum of going out of childhood — feeling all the passion of what I wanted to do with my life, and the urgency and the fear and everything, and then “Blue.” This is a weird thing to be a revelation, given my childhood and my family, but I understood for the first time that a woman could be a songwriter. She just
laid it out in these almost journalistic lines that were still so poetic, so dark, and I thought, “That’s what I want to do.” I probably would not be a songwriter had it not been for “Blue.”

BRANDI CARLILE (musician)
When I was in my early 20s, T Bone Burnett tried to play “Blue” for me. This is something I’ve since talked to Joni about many times, and she thinks it’s hilarious. It got to the lyric, “I want to talk to you, I want to shampoo you,” and I was so averse. I was like, “Ugh, turn it off, that
is the most sappy, feminine …” At the time, toughness was really important to me. I wanted to have a wide gait and electric guitar and scream and yell. For years, anytime anyone asked me about Joni, I would say, “Yeah, I’m not much of a fan.”

Then I met my wife, who is a Joni Mitchell mega fan. We were driving up in northern Michigan and we brought albums to play for each other. She was playing “Blue.” And I was laughing about the lyric, and she got upset and insulted by that, and she wanted me to go deeper and understand what it was that I was so averse to. I was like,
“It’s just silly, it’s not tough, it doesn’t mean anything.” And she was like, “Do you know what ‘Little Green’ is about?” She told me, and played me the album and didn’t talk to me for like two hours. She made me take all that in. It was really profound for me. Because not only was I totally falling in love properly for the first time, I was having to re-evaluate what I thought “feminine” meant. And that being tough is being vulnerable and expressing yourself, even things that are really hard to say.
ARLO PARKS (musician)

What I love so much about this song is that it is full of contradiction and conflict. There’s a real sense of exploring what it means to be present and alive in a moment. The first time I heard it, I misheard that line that goes, “I want to be strong, I want to laugh along.” I actually heard it as “I want to laugh alone.”

And for some reason, this song took on the meaning to me of wanting to be free and wanting to be in love and wanting to belong to somebody. And there’s the detail in the second verse:
“I want to talk to you, I want to shampoo you.” That’s just such a funny, sweet reference to caring about someone in the most specific ways. There’s this whole arc, this whole story line — the idea of a mutually destructive relationship: “Do you see how you hurt me baby/So I hurt you too/Then we both get so blue.”

There’s something about the guitar that feels like an animal, just running around. I think it weirdly mirrors the way she sings, “Traveling, traveling, traveling, traveling.” It feels like she was trying to hold onto something or keep up with something, and she’s journeying within
herself. Her melodies are often so meandering and free, and explore different parts of her range. There’s a playfulness and a real confidence, and a strength to the way that she sings. Although there are moments of fragility, she always seems very sure of herself.

DANIELLE HAIM
(musician, Haim)
[Sings] “When I think of your kisses my mind seesaws …”

ESTE HAIM
(musician, HAIM)
Haim) I always thought it was “my mind sees stars,” like in cartoons when they get knocked unconscious and there's stars going around their head. Danielle actually corrected me.

Danielle Haim I always wanted to be the girl with the boyfriend and never was. This is what I would put on and be like, “Oh my God, I want to wreck my stockings in some jukebox dive, do you want to dance with me, baby?” Just the idea of a fun partner to go out and dance with and have fun. So
many things happen to you when you’re 18. You’re still a kid but you’re also considered an adult. Having “Blue,” and especially this song — it’s this idea of I’m about to have my freedom and I can do whatever I want. There’s such a free feeling to the song. She’s on this open road. To me, it sounds like she has the keys to the car and she’s ready to go with her partner-in-crime next to her.

We all started out playing drums, so rhythm has always been something we put in our melodies. With Joni, her rhythms are so unique and can be super intricate, putting so many
words in a phrase. I think that was a huge eye-opener, when we started learning her songs. Even just the way that she plays guitar or the dulcimer, it’s very rhythmic. It’s almost a percussion instrument with changing chords.
when she would write them in the house, that involved me. “My Old Man,” “River.” She finished the album after we parted, but for many months I saw her there writing this stuff. It was a fascinating process to see, I must confess. It’s as if she tore her skin off and just released all her nerves into music.

I was repairing the house in Laurel Canyon, I was actually laying the kitchen floor when I got a telegram from Joan saying that our affair was over, officially. And she put it in a very interesting way. She said, “If you squeeze sand in your hand, it will run through your
fingers.” I thought, got it. And that was it.

After I processed everything that happened to Joan and I, it took me a couple years, but I then sat down, smoked a big one and really listened again to the record. She is an incredible songwriter, and when she pours her heart out into a song, and it’s about you — it’s this combination of sadness and delight. “Blue” still makes me sad.

DANIEL LEVITIN (producer, neuroscientist, author) Very few artists have
accomplished what she did, which was to burrow into so many people’s sense of self. Joni got right into people’s emotional centers in the brain.

For “My Old Man,” there’s a piece of sheet music out there that calls one chord a G-sharp minor 13th. But any chord like that, you could name it three different ways. What she and I talked about for one of my books was this state of ambiguity that she had always tried to retain in the chords. Until she found Jaco Pastorius for “Mingus,” every bass player insisted on knowing what the chord was, so that they could play the root, because that’s
what they were taught to do. And she didn’t want any roots because, like trying to define something with a word, that pinned it down. In “My Old Man,” there’s a lot of points where you don’t know if she’s playing a major or a minor, because she leaves out the third. That’s powerful.

**STEPHEN STILLS**

(musician) Nobody ever found the right root. I would find the bottom of the chord quite easily, as a matter of fact. It was instinctive with me. They’d always choose some middle
note and decide that was the root, but it wasn’t. It was part of the melody. The trick was to get down to the bottom, as a bassist is supposed to do.

DANIEL LEVITIN There are two regions of the prefrontal cortex — pars opercularis and pars triangularis — that have to do with resolving linguistic and musical ambiguity. It hears something ambiguous and it’s trying to solve it. You get neurons firing, and that’s engaging you. You don’t want to leave the experience. You want
to stay there to figure it out. And then adjacent to all of that is an area that processes your sense of self: “Who am I in the world, and do people like me, and who is this person I’m encountering? And do they like me?” And I think the bond is how so many people see themselves in Joni’s lyrics. That sense of self becomes bonded to her.

RENÉE FLEMING (musician) I sang “My Old Man” in a live concert, because it’s perfect for a soprano voice. There are a lot of octave jumps, and
that’s not usually the realm of pop unless you’re a virtuosic singer. She really had that extreme vocal range.

She’s been a touchstone my entire adult life. I’m sure I wanted to be her: that she wrote everything, that this was personal to her. It was very uncomfortable to be a feminist at that time, when it was not a positive word. And Joni Mitchell was just living it. She didn’t talk about it. She just lived it. You felt that she went her own way.
COLLINS (musician) I was always intrigued with “Little Green” because it is a story that touches my heart. It’s all about the relationship between mothers and children. She gave up a child; I knew because it was, let’s say, bandied about between a few women that I knew and a couple of guys in New York who were very close to her. But it’s something that she was not talking about at that time, openly. And after “Blue,” I think writing the song must have created a window through which she could see that it was more than all right to talk about. It was essential to talk
about. And then she was able to discover her daughter and have a relationship with her. It's a disaster followed by a miracle, which is what we love in songs, don't we? I recommend it to everybody who's ever had any thought about their own control over their lives.

DAVID CROSBY (musician)

The one that was a surprise for me was “Little Green.” It expresses a vulnerability in her that I did not think she would be willing to do in front of the world, and I was about Joni Mitchell’s ‘Blue’ at 50 - The New York Times
amazed that she did. She doesn’t pull her punches, man. And she doesn’t pull her punches on *herself*, either. She understands that she's caused pain. She's remarkably honest about herself and everybody else involved. But she weaves her own love life in with other stories and then tells it to you on three levels at once.

**MUSTAFA (musician)**

What she taught us through her catalog is how to honor every feeling. “You’re sad and you’re sorry, but you’re not ashamed.” She
found a perspective that allowed you to find a pride or a hope in any sorrow or in any joy, or in things that you’re deflecting or resisting. It’s almost like Joni, through her music, granted me permission to feel everything. There’s such a rich melancholy, but then the melancholy was so beautiful that it was something that you wanted for yourself as well. Outside of the music, in real time in reality, it may not be something that you’d ever want to associate with yourself. But Joni made everything feel beautiful. She’s telling truths that people haven’t
confronted yet, like love and hope and sorrow all happening at once. And she just finds a way to help someone navigate it. She was almost like the rapper of folk music. The narratives were so rich and so colorful. It is all incredibly beautiful, but it felt like stream of consciousness, like a freestyle. It feels like there's no editing between her and the song.

CORINNE BAILEY RAE (musician)

Carole King had a child early, and she used to drop the child off in the day care at Joni Mitchell’s ‘Blue’ at 50 - The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/20/arts/music/joni-m...
the Brill Building, which I think was probably just a kind of playpen behind the reception desk or something. And then she and her partner would just go upstairs and work all day. Because they had to work and that was their job — songwriter. But if you want to be Joni Mitchell the touring artist, at that time that requires you to not have a baby with you. I can't imagine the sort of emotional wrench of feeling like, “I’ve got all this music inside me and I want to free it, and I want to travel, I want to see the world, I want to fall in love.” I can’t imagine that, but also: “I have this child, and I have to
look after them and protect them.” I feel like that must’ve been a weight for her, in terms of feeling like for herself she had to have made the right choice. It has to pay off. She has to make it work. She’s not thinking, “I wonder if I’ll make it now.” She must be thinking, “I have sacrificed this; it has to be a huge achievement in order to balance out that sacrifice.”

JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND (musician) The year I graduated college I was living in the city with my friend Nancy, and we
listened to “Blue” all the time. We were trying to make it in New York but not really able to accomplish anything on our days off because we would drive down to the Jersey Shore to take care of her mom, who had cancer. Her mother was the person I based my character Kiki off, years later. Our favorite song on the album at the time was “Little Green,” we’d just listen to it over and over. One time we were stoned and Nancy was like, “A little green, that’s all we need — just a little money, honey!” Obviously we all know what the song is about now, but it was weird how, to us,
that song became about money.

But then when I was listening to the record more recently, I realized that so much of the record is about money. She’s always talking about things and, you know, in “River,” “I’m gonna make a lot of money, then I’m gonna quit this crazy scene.” It’s about rich hippies, basically. “I’ll put on my finest silver”; “Rent me a grand piano/and put some flowers ’round my room.” I read a biography where Graham Nash talked about all the beautiful things she had in her house because she had such exquisite taste. Even now, when she makes appearances, she’s
basically always wearing Issey Miyake. I mean, she's a classy broad.
Whatever I was playing, I just wanted to get inside the song and play something that helped and didn’t hinder. If I thought about anything, it was just, you know: “Do no harm.”

Something most people don’t really give her enough credit for is that she’s a great rhythm player. I mean, if she played drums, she would be a great drummer. If you just listened to any one of the songs, listen to “Carey,” the rhythm of it is right there. There was a conga in the room at Studio C at A&M Studios, and it had a torn head, so it couldn’t be tuned up. It was a tumba,
actually — it wasn’t a conga, it was a little bigger than a conga. And it just had this beautiful low tone and it happened to work. It sounded good in the track.

STEPHEN STILLS
I just remember finding the songs incredibly challenging, and then I would relax and suddenly realize that it was actually quite simple. You found something that fit, and stuck with it. Playing bass on “Carey” was a matter of happenstance, because I actually could understand the underpinning in all
those weird tunings.

I was absolutely mad for her. She just had this thing that was ethereal and gorgeous and down to earth and loving and hard-core. And dedicated to her art. I thought she was a great painter. I’m thrilled to have known her in my life. She was lovely with me and treated me with the utmost respect. One time we were at a party and she came up behind me and then she starts running her fingers through my hair, which is very soft and fine. And someone said, “Joan, what are you doing?” And she said, “I’m reacquainting myself with Stephen’s hair.” With a look that said,
don’t ask another question.

JUDY COLLINS One of the lines is “My fingernails are filthy, I got beach tar on my feet.” Who would write that in a song, but Joni Mitchell? It’s an amazing turn of phrase.

GRAHAM NASH I didn’t enjoy “Carey.” It’s not fun to have your old lady off on some Greek island with another man. But I did get the kitchen floor done.
then. You know, “acid, booze” and “grass.” I had just been dumped into that whole world, being a young adult and taking a look around. It was still very enticing and very intoxicating. I hadn’t seen a lot of people, except Hendrix and Janis Joplin, fall by the wayside from the lifestyle. I was only 21 and she was holding a lantern to what was going to happen to me in my life. She was like a slightly older sister just showing me the way.

There’s heartache and vulnerability and weariness in her voice, even though her soprano is so achingly beautiful.
There was something very haunting and eloquent and vulnerable about the way that she voiced her chords and the way that she accompanied herself, and just the way her voice breaks. And there's not one note out of place. She doesn't gild the lily in one note of her singing or her playing. Aretha and Joni probably had more to do with teaching me how to sing a ballad and break someone's heart than anyone I can imagine.

CHAKA KHAN (musician)
When I heard “Blue,”
it was a blue album, a blue offering. It seemed like she was missing home. All of her offerings have been road work, in a way, to me. It was a good piece for me to listen to when I got off the stage and back on the tour bus, and I’ve got on my nightgown and I’m lying on the bed and the bus pulls off in the night. She’s been such a part of my life in that way. She’s been a companion.

The song “Blue” was another lifesaver for me. On the road, many times I contemplated just throwing this [expletive] in the pail. Once or twice, I thought about ending it all. I was that depressed. And she
pulled me back.

I just felt like I knew her before we met. People think they know me, too, because of the songs I put out. When you share with people, you do give them a part of yourself. They wouldn’t want to walk in these boots, but they do know you in a sense. But she doesn’t give a damn. She just tells it like it is for her, and that is something rare. It’s hard to talk about yourself, to share like that. A whole new generation of kids are hearing her, which is so good, because her music is so heady and it’s so — I mean, she’s the only artist that sent me to a dictionary.

[Laughs]
RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

(musician) I’ve sung many of her songs now, and each one is its own wild journey that you have to completely dedicate yourself to. There’s no tossing off a Joni Mitchell song. And arguably, “Blue” is one of the summits. I was actually quite afraid of singing it for a long time. I was set to, for her 75th birthday, and it was really daunting. Not so much because it’s so difficult but just because of her interpretation. It’s so unique, personal and kind of dramatic. It’s almost like a sled that you get on, and then you just go
down the hill and hopefully not fall off.

I’m a big opera fan, so I love a good aria, I love a good death scene. I think it’s one of her more theatrical songs. It’s like a little staged presentation. What was interesting about it for me, having suffered from addiction myself, it was nice to sing something from the perspective of the other person, living with the addict. The person who has to pick up the pieces and doesn’t necessarily succumb but is around for the journey, and what they go through.
SHORTER (musician)
Whatever she did, she didn’t give up her style of singing. She didn’t try to copy the blues, or modern jazz and all that. But she was there; she knew what was happening. And then she called me to play with her, and when we started talking, she talked like a painter. And she played sort of like that.

JAMES TAYLOR That was written after we parted company. I find that difficult to separate from the way I feel about the song. It’s a darker song. “Crown and anchor me/Or let me
sail away.” I can’t tell you anything other than that it has a deep impact.
does make a lot of sense to me. The kind of roving quality — kind of globe-trotting but not finding it, not finding what is missing from the core of you — “California” has that. It’s a more light and sprightly song than some of the others on the record. Even though it’s kind of a dark and dour record, I feel like it’s an adventure record. And that song encapsulates that for me.

RENÉE FLEMING In “California,” she’s singing in head voice, as a young person. She probably helped me develop
my voice, because as a fan I was singing along with her all the time in high school. I would harmonize up above her. It was really a true soprano voice. And yet she had a full range — I’m sure it was two-and-a-half octaves. Probably because she was a smoker, and with the constant touring, her voice dropped significantly to the point where, when I finally met her at a party, she said she only had three pitches. And I said, yeah, but we want to hear those three pitches.
Weyes Blood) My mom is a gigantic Joni Mitchell fan, so I grew up with that always on in the background. I covered “California” in a talent show in second grade. We figured out a way to do it karaoke style. [Sings in a baby voice] “Sitting in a park in Paris, France …” I remember singing that song and feeling like a real California girl. I think it was a contest and I did not win.

EMILY SALIERS (musician, Indigo Girls) There’s lots of darkness on the album, but you get her whimsy in it
too. There’s that sparkle and that almost tongue-in-cheek thing that Joni has. “Who did the goat dance very well.” That’s not exactly universal, but you’re just enthralled by her stories.

BRANDI CARLILE

There’s some relief and some letting yourself off the hook when you know you’re never going to be Joni. You’re like, “You know what, I can play this in C and I don’t have to do that crazy-ass chord that would take me nine fingers to play. I can do this like me, and it’s OK because
nobody’s trying to be Joni.” Particularly on “California” or “All I Want,” it wasn’t just lyrics or chord changes I was writing down. I was writing down breath. Nobody can really sing it like Joni without integrating her breathing into the lyrics. She did it naturally, but that was really hard, figuring out how to sing it and keep my breath.
I'd built a house on Martha’s Vineyard, and I hadn’t taken her there yet. And for some reason, maybe just that her instincts were extremely good, she split. Instead of carrying on with me, she booked a flight back to Los Angeles.

But what can one expect at the age of 23 in terms of a lasting relationship? At least from my point of view, I had a long way to go before I was suitable company for anyone, really. That was a hard lesson to learn. When I hear songs from that album, it definitely takes me back. It’s the clarity of hindsight. I think the world of her, and always will. I’m grateful for the time we had.
BRANDI CARLILE I never really had as much appreciation for “This Flight Tonight” as I should have until I had to learn how to play it on guitar, with that string tuned way down and then bending it into pitch while you’re playing it, to keep it in tune, which is what she did too. It’s such a hard record to play. But it doesn’t feel like heavy lifting when you’re listening to it.

PETE AGNEW (musician, Nazareth) When “Ladies of the Canyon” came out,
“Rainy Night House” was one of our favorite songs of all time. People kept saying “the heavy metal band Nazareth,” and we were going, “have you actually heard us?” We used to listen to all sorts of stuff, and most of the things we listened to we probably ended up covering. We always stole from really good people. When we did “This Flight Tonight,” it was just a beauty, you could make it totally different. At first we were being funny about it, but then we thought, this sounds great, this could be a killer track. It became one of the biggest hits that we ever had.
We were at the beginning of an American tour, and we went into A&M Records in L.A. and were telling them that we were releasing “This Flight Tonight” in the U.K. that day. They said, “Oh, well that’s good because Joni’s in the studio right now, would you like to go and say hello?” So we said to her, “We’re just releasing your song.” And she said, “With a rock band?” And we went, “Yeah, would you like to hear it?”

It sounded amazing, because it was in the studio. She and Henry [Lewy, the engineer] were absolutely tickled, you could tell they weren’t just being
polite. She made us a cup of tea, and we sat around for a wee while, and away we went. The next year, one of the guys from the record company in London came up to see us and said, “You’re going to love this, I went to see Joni Mitchell at the New Victoria Theater, and she said, ‘I’d like to open with a Nazareth tune.’” Tell that to your grandchildren! It was such a great nod to get from such a wonderful woman.

BETHANY COSENTINO
(musician, Best Coast) When I listen
to Joni, I feel like this beautiful, magical siren is telling me a story and I tune in instantly because everything about her is captivating. Her songs feel like her life force. One of my favorite moments on “Blue” is in “This Flight Tonight,” when the song suddenly kicks into this weird, kind of lo-fi part where it feels like she’s singing through a radio. It’s almost a – dare I say – punk moment, because it just feels so weird and cool and unexpected. Shortly after that happens, the song ends and goes directly into “River,” with its heartbreaking beautiful piano intro, and it feels like proof
that Joni can do literally anything. My mom, the person who introduced me to “Blue,” bought me a vintage Joni letterman jacket off eBay for my birthday several years ago and I hung it on the wall in my bedroom next to my bed. It makes me feel safe, like an angel is watching over me while I sleep.
as though I slid into a pair of — you know the feeling? You slip into a comfortable shift that actually fits you and you know you’ll be wearing it for the rest of your life. And it was so welcome because I had not attempted it. I hadn’t discussed it with anybody. I hadn’t listened to her sing it for years and years. But it was in my mind.

EMILY SALIERS In “River,” there’s not so much specificity of names and images. “River” is just about anybody and everybody.
CORINNE BAILEY

RAE She'll do that thing where she’ll rush lines, she’s got so much to say. She can just spill it all out. She is thinking about the meter, but she just kind of skates over the meter. “River” is a brilliant example. She does this thing with time that’s really rare. Kendrick Lamar does it. It’s like, OK, here we’ve got one bar. He might say one word or he might somehow fit in like 25 words. It’s almost playful. She as a singer is able to stretch time. It’s like the ideas are coming so fast, like when a friend is talking excitedly.
She’s written the song, and here she is in the recording studio doing it, but it feels like it’s just come into her mind in that moment and she’s tripping over the words.

NATALIE MERING The piano arrangement for “River” sounds like a river. And when she sings “I would teach my feet to flyyyyy” — the music actually flies. She’s really good at that, kind of doing the fourth-dimensional songwriting thing where the lyrics, the music and her voice are all sinking into the same concept. It’s
very transporting. She can really carry people along on a journey.

DAVID CROSBY I think it’s arguably the best singer-songwriter album that ever got made. I’m a singer-songwriter, and I was her old man for a year, which was daunting. But I’m deeply into her music. I watched her write it, I’ve written with her, I love her to this day, I think she’s the best of us. But that record, some of those songs, I just don’t know how you could beat ’em. “River”? Holy [expletive]. I
remember the first time I heard it, I felt like quitting the business and becoming a gardener.

The music is where she’s just vastly superior to Bob [Dylan]. I think Bob’s as good a poet as she is, maybe. They’re both brilliant poets, but she’s 10 times the musician and singer that he was.

**GRAHAM NASH**

“He loved me so naughty/Made me weak in the knees.” It makes me smile. I mean, as a man, that’s an incredible compliment coming from such a beautiful woman.
BEJAR At some point it became a Canadian Christmas standard. [Laughs] That's a whole other thing. It really sums up how depressing, or how bitter and nostalgic and just sad a Christmas can be. How it can make people feel way more alone than bringing them together.

TAYLOR It's a great Christmas song — a Canadian living in L.A. and trying to figure out Christmas. I remember my first Christmas in Los Angeles. It was
weird.
time when I was young and I just was like, what am I doing? You’ve had no success, you have a dream for your life and you just have to figure out a way to keep going, not being afraid of changing, not being afraid to walk away from things. Whatever you have to do to get to where you know you're going. It’s somebody who’s singing about the time in their life when they weren’t sure they were going to make it.

**PERFUME GENIUS**

(musician) “‘A Case of You’ was on the ‘Practical Magic’
soundtrack. My mom used to play that soundtrack in the car. I was a teenager. But I just remember thinking how beautiful that song was and how strange it was. I remember trying to listen to Joni Mitchell then, trying to follow up, and I just didn’t get it until I was an adult. But a lot of the “mom music” is the stuff that’s held up, to me. More than, like, “dad music.” No offense.

The things that draw you in are just tiny little moments, like the “O Canada” part. And how that sudden shift is what gets stuck in your head and why you keep listening, not because of some repeated chorus. It’s
really brave — all the little choices, the intensity of it, the push-and-pull. There are so many songs that I listen to that I’m not surprised at all anymore when I hear them or I don’t wait for one little moment of a song I’ve heard a million times. With that song in particular, I do wait for all those little shifts and jumps.

DAVID CROSBY

There’s a reason 90 different people have covered “A Case of You.” It’s because it’s one of the best songs you’ve ever heard.
I wasn't used to being stabbed by a song. It's almost like someone tells you a joke, and you're set up, and then you have the rug pulled out from underneath you. Just the first stanza, thinking about love being lost: “I am as constant as a northern star,” and she's saying, “If you want me I’ll be in the bar.” I loved that game playing. This is where I’m going to be. The longer you take, the more inebriated and detached I’ll become. And I’m making it your choice. It’s a power play on my part — it’s now your
choice to find me.

She’s such a brilliant writer, so with “A Case of You,” there’s all these liquid or drinking metaphors all the way through. I like the idea that when you’re in these deep relationships it’s just a blurring of boundaries between what’s you and what’s them. What are your thoughts and what are their thoughts? She talks about, “Part of you pours out of me,” and I remember the idea that you can sort of imbibe someone to such a point where sometimes you’re talking, and their opinions come out. Or sometimes you’re reaching for something universal, but it’s a very
specific and particular experience you’ve had with them.

JUDY COLLINS In “A Case of You,” she says that she’s a lonely painter. She lives in a box of paints. And she says, “‘Love is touching souls’/Surely you touched mine/’Cause part of you pours out of me/in these lines from time to time.” So that’s also a reference to somebody. And I’m always thinking it must be Leonard [Cohen], but who knows? It is interesting the way so much of this material rubs against
with and creates the sparks out of what was going on in L.A. at that time, in that golden era. And with all of those incredible men, with many of whom she had affairs. She beat my list.
Such a mood she sets with that song. The piano intro goes on and on. And then the way that it’s sing-talky in parts — the song came so much to life because it wasn’t structured like the verse-chorus way songs typically are. There’s a lot of fluidity to the lyrics. Her ability to sing-talk and not have everything be so metronomic, and yet still be able to rhyme the lines so that they had that structure to it — that is unique to her.

Amy [Ray] and I were in high school, just starting to play together. I listened to that album incessantly, but somehow together we got hooked into
that song. We were dreamers. We were musicians and we lived through songs and lyrics, so that song really sparked our imaginations. Particularly the line “I’m gonna blow this damn candle out.” It was so fierce. We didn’t have a lot of women singer-songwriters back then, and she’s so strong in her voicings. It’s like, I don’t want anybody coming over to my table. I’m going to go on in my own path. We were babies, but it reflected a way that we might feel in life. Anything that had to do with cafes and talking in the dark night, or drinking or any of that stuff. Just the
dark, romanticized adult world.

GRAHAM NASH I love Joan to this day. I don’t think you can be in love with Joni Mitchell and experience life with her and not love her forever. I think she’s a genius. I keep coming back to the thought that this was all over 50 years ago, half a century ago. And that music is still turning people on. That music freed women in a very deep way. When Joni Mitchell was pouring her heart and soul into the music, every woman knew exactly what she was talking about. And it freed
female artists to start doing that.

CHAKA KHAN I want to get her singing again on something. Her voice is so beautiful right now. You can hear the time in her voice, you know? You can hear the richness and it’s just so beautiful and full and deep. I’ll get her to sing, for sure. She’s a masterpiece.
Robinson/Getty Images; Robert Knight Archive/Redferns; Martin Mills/Getty Images.

**Song previews provided by Spotify.**

**Produced by** Caryn Ganz, Gabriel Gianordoli, Christy Harmon, Alicia DeSantis, Jolie Ruben, Tala Safie and Josephine Sedgwick.

**Correction:** June 21, 2021
An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of an English photographer. He is Eadweard Muybridge, not Edweard.