

Diverse Directions

"I'm waiting, I'm just waiting for that woman musician to come along like the Messiah. There's gonna be a woman musician in the next three or four years that's just gonna knock everybody's heads off . . . There's gonna be some girl who right now is maybe fourteen, and she's gonna blow everybody's mind. I just can't wait."

—Linda Ronstadt, 1974

In 1971, Carole King emerged from behind her songwriter shadow and spectacularly rejuvenated her singing career with the release of her album *Tapestry*, which topped the charts, as did its accompanying single, "It's Too Late"/"I Feel the Earth Move." The LP also included her song "You've Got a Friend," a number 1 hit for James Taylor (who also played on *Tapestry*), "So Far Away," which reached number 14, and a new version of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," an homage to King's girl group past. *Tapestry* was a huge success, remaining on the album charts until 1976, and earning King four Grammy Awards—Album of the Year, Best Female Pop Vocalist, Song of the Year for "You've Got a Friend," and Record of the Year for "It's Too Late." It became one of the biggest selling albums not only of the '70s, but of all time, selling in excess of thirteen million copies by the 1990s.

King's breakthrough as a solo artist coincided with the rise of a number of women singer-songwriters in the early '70s, who brought both softer music and more introspective lyrics to the rock scene. The singer-songwriter movement combined the acoustic instrumentation of the folk acts of the '60s with a pop sensibility, but the key difference between the two movements were the sentiments the music expressed: folk artists worked within an established genre steeped in a historical tradition, whereas the

music of the singer-songwriters came from an intensely personal perspective. Some singer-songwriters had roots in folk music, including Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, Janis Ian (whose first hit at age fifteen, 1967's "Society's Child"—produced by Shadow Morton—concerned an interracial romance), and Carly Simon, who sang in a duo with her sister Lucy in Greenwich Village folk clubs before finding success as a solo artist in the '70s with songs like "You're So Vain" and "Anticipation." Others, like Carole King, came from the pop realm, though until her breakthrough with *Tapestry*, King's greatest success had been as a songwriter.

King had been involved in a number of different musical ventures in the wake of the girl group era before launching her solo career. In the mid-'60s she started the Tomorrow label with her husband Gerry Goffin and columnist Al Aronowitz; the label released records by the Myddle Class, and a solo single from King ("Road to Nowhere"), but then folded. King divorced Goffin and married Charlie Larkey, bass player in the Myddle Class, and the two formed a new group, City. City recorded one album for producer Lou Adler's Ode Records label, *Now That Everything's Been Said*, released in 1969, which included an early version of "You've Got a Friend." But when the album proved to be unsuccessful, City broke up, and King and Larkey moved to Los Angeles.



Carole King
1970 at Queens College, New York (opening for James Taylor), Photo by Sherry Rayn Barnett

After moving to the West Coast, King initially concentrated on session work, playing piano on John Stewart's *Willard* album, James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* LP, and on two albums for the group Jo Mama. In 1970, she finally released her own solo LP, *Writer: Carole King*, on the Ode label, with Lou Adler producing the album. *Writer*, in addition to featuring new material, also had King digging back into her own songbook, as she would do on her subsequent albums, including a version of "Goin' Back," previously recorded by the Byrds, and "Up on the Roof," recorded by the Drifters. The album made little impression on the charts, but the stage had been set for *Tapestry*, which King

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recorded with many of the same musicians who had played on *Writer* and with Lou Adler again serving as producer.

Tapestry was released in early 1971, and upon its release King went on the road to promote it, touring as the opening act for James Taylor. But King soon graduated to headliner status when *Tapestry* began storming up the charts, remaining in the Top 40 for over a year. *Tapestry's* twelve songs, all written or co-written by King, combined contemplative lyrics with strong melody lines and King's gentle, expressive vocals. Her interpretation of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" emphasized the melancholy undercurrents that had been somewhat hidden by the "sha-la-la" vocals of the Shirelles' original version (she also recorded her own version of the Aretha Franklin hit "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman"). The album's uptempo numbers, such as the optimistic "Beautiful" and the down-home fun of "Smackwater Jack," added to *Tapestry's* varied mix of romance and realism.

Though King had another seven Top 20 albums in the decade (including the number 1 LPs *Carole King Music* and *Wrap Around Joy*) and single hits with the songs "Sweet Seasons," "Jazzman," "Nightingale," and, in 1980, a number 12 hit with another of her girl group classics, "One Fine Day," *Tapestry* proved to be the high mark of her solo career. Though King remained active in the recording studio, releasing an album each year throughout the '70s, she rarely toured, and cut back on her live appearances as the decade progressed. By the late '70s, King had moved to Idaho, in part to escape from the pressures of L.A.'s music scene, and primarily limited her live work to appearances at benefits. But though King's subsequent records may not have had the impact of *Tapestry*, that album's phenomenal success helped to pave the way for the female singer-songwriters that followed.

Laura Nyro, like Carole King, also withdrew from the rigors of the music industry in order to avoid being reduced to, in her words, a "commodity." Though Nyro's records did not attain the sales that King's had, she was also an acclaimed songwriter, providing many artists with the Top 10 hits she could not attain herself. Born Laura Nigro in the Bronx in 1947, Nyro began writing songs as a child and was also an avid reader of poetry. She later attended New York's High School of Music and Art and sang in local clubs in her teens. Her first album, *More Than a New Discovery*, was released on Verve in 1966 when she was nineteen, and the following year she performed at the Monterey Pop Festival, though the experience did not pay off for her in the way it had for Janis Joplin. Her performance was low-key in comparison to the high energy offerings of Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the Who, and received only polite applause.

But back in New York, Nyro's fortunes in the music industry changed when she met David Geffen, then working as a music agent for the Ashley Famous agency in New

York. Geffen had been impressed with a tape of Nyro's Monterey performance and quit his job to become her manager: "Anyone who sounded that good and had such a public disaster had to have something going for her," he later explained to *Vanity Fair*. Geffen then brought Nyro to Columbia, who signed her; her first album for the label, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* (which she co-produced), was released in 1968.

Nyro's records embraced a wide variety of musical styles coupled with lyrics of intense poetic imagery. Her dramatic vocals soared from a bluesy, gospel wail to a whisper, usually at the most unexpected moments. As a result, Nyro's music ultimately proved to be too eccentric to find more than a substantial cult audience: "The fever pitch at which she performed was ultimately as frightening as it was impressive," wrote critic Janet Maslin. Clive Davis, then-president of Columbia, attributed Nyro's reluctance to compromise musically as the reason for her failure to break into the rock mainstream. "When she finished an album, it was clear that one or two changes in a particular song could produce a big single hit," he wrote in his autobiography, *Clive: Inside the Music Business*. "But she refused to let me make them." The number of artists who had hits when they covered her songs clearly demonstrated the commercial potential of Nyro's material: the 5th Dimension had Top 30 hits with "Stoned Soul Picnic," "Sweet Blindness," "Blowing Away," and "Wedding Bell Blues" (which went to number 1), Blood, Sweat and Tears had a number 2 hit with "And When I Die," Barbra Streisand had a number 6 hit with "Stoney End," and Three Dog Night had a number 10 hit with "Eli's Coming." But Nyro herself had only one Top 40 entry, when the album *New York Tendaberry* reached 32 in 1969. Her records ultimately became showcases for songs other performers could transform into hits.

New York Tendaberry, released in 1969, was a brilliant fusion of rock and jazz influences primarily held together by Nyro's voice and the piano, occasionally filled out by multi-layered horn arrangements. "I had all this musical energy and I was exploring writing. And song form. And realities," she later told *Musician*. Nyro's next album, 1970's *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat*, utilized a diverse array of musicians, including members of the Rascals and guitarist Duane Allman. *Gonna Take a Miracle*, released in 1971, paid homage to the classic girl group songs of the '60s and was recorded with the newly rechristened Labelle, then in the process of leaving their own "Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles" girl group days behind. But after the release of *Gonna Take a Miracle*, Nyro "retired" from the music business in 1972, and moved to New England, married (she later divorced), and had a child. Frustrations with the business side of the music industry had precipitated Nyro's "retirement": tensions between Nyro and Geffen regarding his sale of her publishing company to Columbia, and a dispute over whether Nyro would remain with Columbia or move to Geffen's newly-established label Asylum

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led to a split between the two. Nyro was also uncomfortable with "the whole fame trip" of being a performer. "When I was very young everything happened so quickly for me," she told *Musician*. "I hadn't really contemplated being famous. I was writing music, I was just involved in the art of it at that young age. Then, when it all happened, I did not know how to handle it."

Nyro continued to record sporadically, releasing *Smile* in 1976, *Nested* in 1978, and the live set *Season of Lights* in 1977 before "retiring" again. Nyro released two subsequent albums and died of ovarian cancer on April 18, 1997. While none of these albums achieved great chart success (though Melissa Manchester's version of "Midnight Blue" from *Smile* gave Manchester her first Top 10 hit), they did challenge industry conventions about the necessity of releasing records on a regular basis. In 1965, a top-rated act like the Supremes was releasing five albums and six singles per year, but by the late '60s, artists were taking longer to record albums, and the old constraints were beginning to be stretched. Of course, record companies preferred the resulting album to be a blockbuster success, but artists like Nyro were demonstrating that a core audience—like the audience that continued to buy Nyro's records and attend her infrequent shows—could be cultivated and would remain faithful to a performer despite the lack of a constant flow of product.

Joni Mitchell, who enjoyed her greatest commercial success during the '70s singer-songwriter era, had started out as a folk singer, though as she told *Rolling Stone* in 1979, "I was only a folk singer for about two years, and that was several years before I ever made a record." After the release of her first record in 1968, Mitchell soon moved beyond the singer-songwriter genre (or, as she called them, "art songs, which I liked best") and crossed a variety of musical boundaries throughout her recording career. Born Roberta Joan Anderson in Fort McLeod, Alberta, Canada, in 1943, Mitchell grew up listening to early rock & roll artists like Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, and Elvis Presley, but initially had a greater interest in art, and attended the Alberta College of Art with plans of becoming a commercial artist. But while at college she began playing the ukulele, then moved to guitar, teaching herself with help from a Pete Seeger instruction record. Soon music became more of a priority than art, and after attending the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto in 1964, she moved to Toronto and began playing in local clubs and coffeehouses. The next year she married Chuck Mitchell, and the two moved to Detroit, where she continued to build a following. After her divorce in 1966, Mitchell moved to New York, then settled in Laurel Canyon, outside L.A., in 1968.

During her stay in New York, Mitchell had made a number of important contacts, including Elliott Roberts, who became her manager, and David Geffen, who would later sign Mitchell to his Asylum Records label. She also met David Crosby, who pro-

duced her self-titled debut LP for Reprise Records in 1968. Initially, Mitchell's success on the singles charts was due to her skill as a songwriter, rather than as a singer: Judy Collins took Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" to number 8 in 1968, and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young had a Top 20 hit with Mitchell's "Woodstock" in 1970. But Mitchell's second album, *Clouds* (which included her own version of "Both Sides Now"), became her first record to land in the Top 40, and also won that year's Grammy for Best Folk Performance. *Clouds* was also the first album Mitchell produced (she has produced or co-produced all of her subsequent records); most of her albums have also utilized her own artwork and paintings for cover art.

Mitchell's subsequent albums, *Ladies of the Canyon* and *Blue*, released in 1971, each charted progressively higher (with *Blue* becoming Mitchell's first platinum album, selling over a million copies) but at the end of the year she took a break from live performance. Her success had come as a surprise—she told *Rolling Stone* she thought of her music as "a hobby that mushroomed"—and she was displeased with Warner Bros.' marketing of her image, taking exception to an ad for her first album that referred to her as "99% virgin." "A man in the promotion department criticized my music for its lack of masculinity," she complained. "They said I didn't have any balls. Since when do women have balls anyway? Why do I have to be like that?" She was also annoyed when her songs that detailed broken romances became subjects for guessing games; after *Rolling Stone* drew up a diagram tracing Mitchell's alleged love affairs, giving her an award as "Old Lady of the Year," she didn't grant the magazine an interview for eight years.

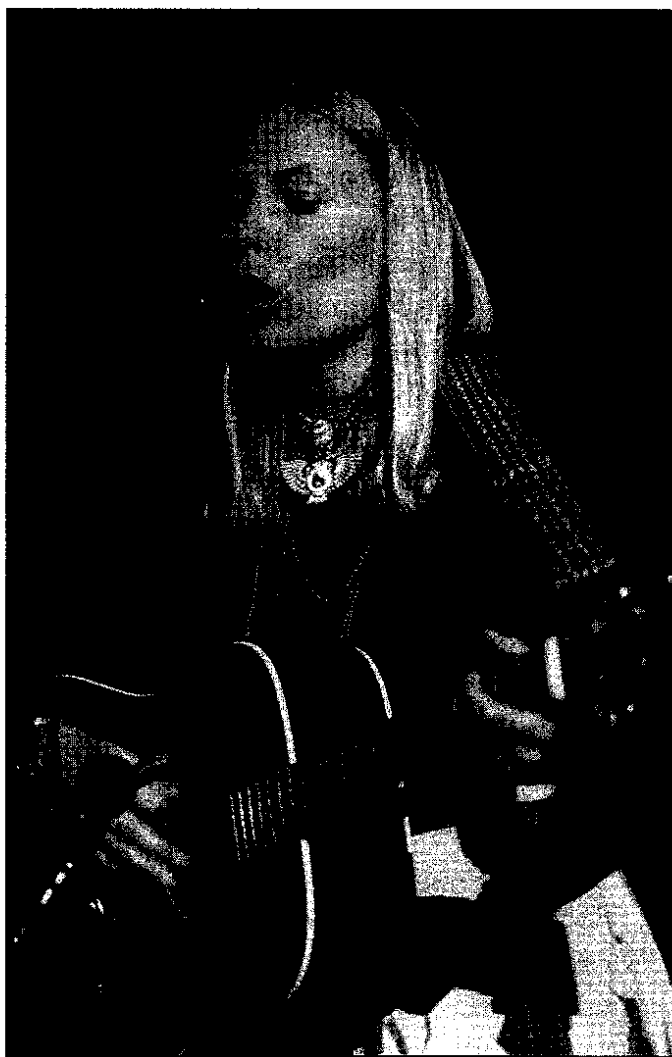
By the early '70s, Mitchell's music had progressed from her previous acoustic-based work, and with *For the Roses*, released on the Asylum label in 1972, the jazz and rock influences were readily apparent. The album also contained Mitchell's first Top 40 single, "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio," which reached number 25. Lyrically, Mitchell's songs had always been more literate compared to other singer-songwriters of the time, and they drew favorable comparisons to Bob Dylan's work as early as 1967, when a reviewer wrote, "She plays Yang to Bob Dylan's Yin, equalling him in richness and profusion of imagery and surpassing him in conciseness and direction." *Court and Spark*, released in 1974, continued the integration of rock and jazz and became Mitchell's most successful album, reaching number 2 on the charts and yielding two Top 40 singles, "Help Me" (which reached number 7) and "Free Man in Paris." Mitchell's tour in support of the album, which featured a full band, was met with enthusiastic response and the resulting album, *Miles of Aisles*, reached number 2 on the charts, and a live version of "Big Yellow Taxi" reached the Top 30.

Mitchell's response to the success of *Court and Spark* and *Miles of Aisles* was to pursue—in the opinion of her fans—a radical new direction. *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, released

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in 1975, drew even more heavily on jazz rhythms and, lyrically, moved away from the confessional introspection of her previous work. She also experimented with seemingly unlikely juxtapositions: "The Jungle Line" combined the Moog synthesizer with Burundi drumming, years before other pop artists would utilize similar "world beat" rhythms in their work. The album still reached number 4 in the charts, but was critically panned at the time of its release. Mitchell's next albums, *Hejira* (1976), *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977), and *Mingus* (1979) continued her exploration of jazz until, as she said in 1991, "I started working in a genre that was neither this nor that. People didn't know where I fit in anymore, so they didn't play me at all." *Mingus*, recorded with jazz bassist Charles Mingus (who died shortly before the project was completed), perplexed people in both genres: "I was considered an expatriate from pop music," she told *Rolling Stone*. "Meanwhile, the jazz folks thought, 'Who is this white chick?'"

Mitchell's recorded output during the '80s (when she signed with David Geffen's new label, Geffen) was limited to four albums in comparison to the nine she'd released in the '70s, but Mitchell remained more interested in developing as an artist as opposed to blatantly cultivating commercial success. "You have two options," she explained to *Rolling Stone*. "You can stay the same and protect the formula that gave you your initial success. They're going to crucify you for staying the same. If you change, they're going to crucify you for changing. But staying the same is boring. And change is interesting. So of the two options, I'd rather be crucified for changing."



Joni Mitchell
November 1976 at Winterland, San Francisco,
Photo by Peter Stupar