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CONSTANT STRANGER: JONI MITCHELL, MY BIRTHMOTHER, AND ME

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: I'm addicted to Joni Mitchell. No, seriously, I'm obsessed. Let me put it this way: in the four years since I first discovered her, I don't think a single day has passed when I haven't listened to her music. She's been more or less a constant presence in my life. She sings to me first thing in the morning when I'm brewing coffee and making breakfast. Much to my roommate's chagrin, I can frequently be found belting "Big Yellow Taxi" or "A Case of You" in the shower. She provides the soundtrack of my commute. And she is often the last thing I listen to or think about when I'm lying in bed at night, trying to fall asleep. Sometimes I even pretend that I'm talking to her, unselfconsciously using her as a kind of fictitious sounding board to help clarify my own thought process. Of course I've never actually met her. She wrote most of her songs before I was born. So even though I feel like I know her completely—even though she's come to be a constant presence in my life—she's also been a constant stranger.

In the beginning, after one of my professors dropped a passing reference to Mitchell in class, I looked her up on YouTube and promptly binged on several of her albums in rapid succession. I didn't immediately love her music. I found her painfully expressive voice a little jarring, and the profundity of her lyrics, combined with the unfamiliarity of her arrangements, sent my head spinning. But despite my first uncertain feelings, there was something about her work that resonated deep within me—something mysterious that left me hooked and convinced me to keep coming back for more.

No other artist has impacted me as powerfully. Why, exactly, do I love Mitchell so much? Off the top of my head, I can think of many fairly obvious reasons. She's an incredibly talented songwriter—and, I have to say, incredibly underrated. When Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, I was indignant. I pulled a Kanye West. I was like, "Yo, Bob Dylan,

I'm really happy for you, I'ma let you finish, but Joni Mitchell is the greatest singer-songwriter of all time." And I do think that's true. Much as I revere artists like Dylan and Leonard Cohen—the two singer-songwriters with whom Mitchell is most often associated—they seem, to me, more properly to fit the (admittedly specious) category of “waylaid writer,” whereas Mitchell straddles the dash that is constitutive of the label “singer-songwriter” with near-magical grace and ease. Her work is innovative, daring, and always emotionally resonant. With the possible exception of *Mingus* (1979), one of her least accessible albums, Mitchell's experimentation never comes at the cost of the human essence of her work. Her lyrics are clever without being pretentious and philosophical without being esoteric. Most importantly, as that prolific poet, Q-Tip, once rapped, “Joni Mitchell never lies.” And then, as I already mentioned, there's her voice, which is so clear and revealing that it can accurately be described as translucent. Maybe people like Mitchell—talented, relatable, beautiful, and honest—are simply easy to love, although I can imagine that sometimes, like the rest of us, she can be pretty damn hard to love, too.

None of that necessarily answers my original question, though. Why do I love Joni Mitchell? And when I say, “I love Joni Mitchell,” do I really mean that I love her or do I only mean that I “love” her in quotation marks, the way a captivated audience momentarily “loves” a performer or the way a rabid fan “loves” a star? Gay men like myself are stereotypically notorious for pedestalling female celebrities. Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé are only a few examples of the goddesses enshrined in the pantheon so revered by gay male devotees, and thinkers as diverse as Camille Paglia, David Halperin, and Wayne Koestenbaum have interrogated the nature of the obsessive yet sexually disinterested gay male interest in powerful, talented, and beautiful women. Paglia's contention that gay men fawning over a celebrity are rehearsing the rites of eunuch priests before their Mother Goddess certainly is fun, but no one theory that I've encountered has ever fully explained my own sense of fidelity to the vibrant female personality. And there are many positive things to be said for this kind of psycho-spiritual relationship to one's favourite artist. As Zadie Smith observes in her essay on Mitchell, it enriches the individual by attuning his aesthetic faculties. Especially with respect to subcultures, I think it also enriches the collective by offering up a set of cultural lynchpins and touchstones. At the same time, however, I'm not ignorant of the potential pitfalls of treating a

flesh-and-blood woman like a commodity or an idol. I don't think I've ever felt the desire to own Mitchell, even if I own many of her records, but I do sometimes feel the urge to worship her, even if only in a camp, joking way. It's an urge I try to resist, as much because I don't think she'd appreciate that sort of adulation as because I'm wary of how strongly her artistic voice sometimes expresses itself through my own. I want to love Mitchell, but I don't want to be her. Right?

Since I also presumably don't want Mitchell for a lover, is it possible that I love her like a mother? It's true that, for whatever mysterious reason, I've always gravitated towards older women. Growing up, I cherished my closeness with my mother, my aunts, and my grandmothers. When I arrived at elementary school, I not only suffered separation anxiety but also refused to make friends with kids my own age, clinging instead to the female teacher on supervision during recess in an attempt to gain some special shred of attention. And I don't lack for real-life maternal figures. I already have a mother and a stepmother. I'm also adopted, so I even have a birthmother. *Trust* me, I don't need any more mothers. But it is true that when I listen to Mitchell—and I'm far from alone in this—I feel like she wrote her songs just for me and that she is singing them just for me, much the way an infant feels himself to be the whole extent of his mother's world—the sole object of her love and affection. Obviously, Mitchell didn't write her music specifically for me any more than a mother exists specifically for her child (unless you're taking an exclusively Darwinian perspective), but, to be honest, like the narcissistic babe, I don't much care. I recognized myself in her songs, or created some part of myself out of the person I believed her to be, and that, I suspect, is why I love Mitchell: because, like a mother—or, even more, like a birthmother—she both is and is not responsible for who I am today.

It's no coincidence, I'm sure, that Mitchell herself is personally familiar with the (lack of a) relationship between birthmothers and their forfeited children. In 1964, when she was only 21, Mitchell dropped out of the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, where she was enrolled as an art student, and moved to Toronto to become a professional folksinger. However, career ambition wasn't the primary motivation behind her move. What she couldn't tell her parents at the time—what she felt she had to hide from them—was the fact that she was pregnant. Mitchell discussed this time in her life in an interview on CBC's *Q*:

[E]verything was changing; movies were getting sexier, it was very confusing to be a young woman then; what's right, you know? [...] And the pill was not available. So there were a lot of unwedded children born in 1965. More than could be adopted. [...] The right thing to do to protect your parents was to get out of town, go into a home, [but] all the homes were full, you know. So it was very difficult to survive. At the time I had her, I was destitute, you know. And there was no way I could take her out of the hospital into a blizzard, with no job, no roof over my head.

Out of this trauma came one of my favourite Mitchell songs, “Little Green,” from her most famous album, *Blue* (1971). When the album was originally released, all of the songs received fairly unanimous critical acclaim with the possible exception of “Little Green.” The reviewer for *Rolling Stone*—who, I think it's worth pointing out, was a dude—wrote that “The pretty, ‘poetic’ lyric is dressed up in such cryptic references that it passeth all understanding.” I admit that it took me a while to figure it out, too, although I'm proud to say that I never adopted such a dismissive tone. In the song, Mitchell is a “child with a child pretending / weary of lies [she] is sending home” to her parents. Once I knew a bit more about Mitchell's story, I realized that the song was a love letter to her only daughter—the child she gave up—whom she refers to as “little green” and wishes a “happy ending.” Being adopted myself, this realization struck me like a revelation. That was probably the moment when Mitchell and my birthmother first became associated with one another in my imagination. Mitchell obviously didn't write or sing this song for me, but I don't care. It feels like she was writing and singing it just for me; in fact, it even feels like she was writing and singing it in place of, or as a metaphor for, my birthmother.

In 1997 a strange and remarkable series of coincidences led Mitchell, who had publicly announced that she was looking for her daughter, to be reunited with Kilauren Gibb, who was actively searching out her birthmother. Thanks to a combination of non-identifying information Gibb had obtained from her adoption agency, and thanks also to the anecdotal evidence of a Toronto friend-of-a-friend whose ex-boyfriend had lived across the hall from Mitchell in a Huron Street boarding house in 1965, Gibb was able to sleuth out her birthmother's identity. She reached out to Mitchell, sending off a copy of her birth certificate, and the two were shortly thereafter reunited amidst a crush of international press and attention. One com-

mentator wrote, “The story reads like a fairy tale.”

I don’t know if I’d ever want to meet my own birthmother. The thought fills me with anxiety. It’s true that, in her absence, I lack certain factual details: what she’s really like, for example, and what our relationship would be like if we ever met. But I’m compensated, instead, with fictions that have come to be fundamental to my very identity. While these details may not be factual, they don’t strike me, for that reason, as necessarily untrue. To be fair, I feel the same way about Mitchell. I feel like I know her well, but it isn’t the real Mitchell I know—it’s my fantasy of her, which I created out of her music, paintings, and interviews. If I met her, I would run the risk that my fantasy might fall apart. They say you shouldn’t meet your idols—that it’s safer to admire them from a distance—because what if you met them and they weren’t what you imagined they’d be? What if they were a disappointment? What if, in short, my story didn’t have a fairy-tale ending? What if, against all my hopes and dreams, I learned that Mitchell really *wasn’t* my birthmother?

So for the time being, at least, I have no plans to track down either my favourite singer-songwriter or the woman who gave birth to me. I’m content merely to be who I am, floating adrift of any known genetic or biological roots. On the one hand, this is probably because I have an adoptive family that has given me a dense familial-historical context and, accordingly, a fairly strong sense of self. On the other hand, this is also because I think it would be unwise to invest too deeply in my own ego. I can’t control where I come from any more than I can control where I’m going. The past and the future are out of my hands. All I have is the opportunity to meet myself anew each morning.

Mitchell’s lyric in “Down to You,” a track off her album *Court and Spark* (1974), speaks of “things that you [...] told yourself were true / lost or changing as the days come down to you [...] / constant stranger.” In a nutshell, this song is about loneliness, the need for illusion that it inspires, the path to identity that fantasy sets us on, and the disillusionment that can ensue when we learn that we are little more than the sum total of the fictions—whether chosen or, all too often, chosen for us—that we have allowed to write our lives. The song is about how we are all constant strangers—not only to one another, but also to ourselves. There’s also a hint of irony in the notion of a constant stranger: how can something that never changes possibly remain strange? But if it’s an ironic notion, I don’t think it’s an ersatz irony; rather,

it's a paradox that Mitchell is presenting us with—one that helps to explain our modern sense of identity.

As you can probably tell, I've spent a considerable amount of time—some might say too much time—thinking about the influences and experiences that have made me who I am today. What I've observed is that somewhere between what I know and what I don't know—or between what I believe to be true and what I believe to be false—things get mixed up. At certain points in my life, I have literally forgotten who's who and what's what. For example, after I broke up with my first real boyfriend—the only man I've ever loved both romantically and spiritually—I often needed to remind myself, when wearing something he might've worn or listening to music he would've loved, “No, you aren't him, you're *you*.” I'd even go so far as to say that, if I dig deeply enough, there can seem to be so little difference between what actually happened to me and what I've made up that I lose track. I'm not saying the truth of who I am isn't out there somewhere; I'm just not sure that it necessarily has anything to do with the facts.

At first it was disorienting, and it made me not a little uncomfortable, to realize how much of my identity is, in this sense, fictitious. Yet I have, over time, come to accept that we are all composite figures—unique in the same way that every constellation is unique, but unoriginal insofar as we, too, are pieced together out of other stars and other lives. One of Mitchell's most famous lyrics comes to mind: “We are stardust [...] / and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.” It is, of course, from “Woodstock”—the penultimate song on *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) and the anthem that defined the ethos of Mitchell's free-love, flower-power generation. But, as Paglia observes in her brilliant essay on “Woodstock,” the idea of “getting back to the garden” may be the loveliest fiction of all:

In the hesitations and ravaged vibrato of her recording of “Woodstock,” Joni Mitchell confides her doubts about her own splendid vision. [...] This “Woodstock” [as opposed to the raucous, unreflective cover by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young] is a harrowing lament for hopes dashed and energies tragically wasted. It's an elegy for an entire generation, flamingly altruistic yet hedonistic and self-absorbed, bold yet naïve, abundantly gifted yet plagued by self-destruction. [...] The entire power of “Woodstock” is that what is imagined in it is not achieved.

Ironically, given her reunion with her own daughter, it is thanks to Mitchell's music that I have come to terms with the tragicomic futility and, ultimately, the needlessness of trying to make my own Edenic return—whether to my birthmother, to my ex, or to any of the “Liams” that I used to be. What Mitchell has taught me is that a certain shift in perspective is necessary. Instead of looking for an answer to the question of where I come from, I ought to realize that I already am, and always have been, the answer to a question that I can never know. There is a terrifying freedom in this perspective, but also a certain comfort, for although we are all indebted to our influences there is no single, ossifying determinant—no forever and eternal “*Thou art that*”—to limit us to our yesterdays.

That's what I've learned from Mitchell and, through her, from my birthmother. And that's why I love them, even though they're only fantasies to me. They troubled me with the gift of myself, or at least some part of it, and they blessed me with the perspective to accept that self as a fictional reality, a truthful lie, and a constant stranger.