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A SOPRANO HAS NO CREDIBILITY: JONI MITCHELL AND THE ROCK PRESS (1968–1978)

Anne Karppinen¹

Introduction

Have you ever noticed how much more important is the sound of a woman's voice than what she says with it? (Williams 1969)

We often read old magazines and newspapers in order to find out what the world was like 'back then': what people did and what they looked like; what their opinions were, and how they expressed them. Yet it is easy to forget that these pages do not mirror reality – or history – exactly as it happened. Rather they are the result of a long process, a chain of choices. Even in the free-thinking sixties, structures of power existed just as they do today, and even within countercultural rock magazines people made decisions that excluded some artists and glorified others.

As the focus of my research is the Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell (b.1943) – one of the most successful female artists of her time (both in terms of record sales and critical acclaim) – it is particularly salient to pay attention to her press reception. In the course of this article I will look at the way Mitchell is represented in the rock press during her 'peak' period of 1968–1978, and with the help of feminist theory and Critical Discourse Analysis attempt to shed some light on processes of power and uncover some reasons behind the policies of choice. From the beginning rock music has been a site of many struggles, despite – and because of – its loud rejection of old rules and authorities. Inevitably, in the place of the discarded father figures, new ones were erected; rock maga-

zines in the late sixties and seventies may have embraced counter-cultural ideals² but they were run by white, well-educated, middle-class males.

Whereas in the early sixties writings about popular music mostly served the music industry – amounting to little else than news and gossip – by 1965 some magazines already ran rock articles of the more 'serious' type. 1966 saw the launch of *Crawdaddy!*, which is often cited as the first serious rock magazine, and was followed within a year by *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*. All three advocated countercultural values; Jann Wenner, the founder of *Rolling Stone*, wanted his magazine to cover music but also youth culture generally (Shuker 2008,166). Following the example of New Journalism, rock critics experimented with a style resembling fiction, often opting for a subjective viewpoint, a free prose style that relied on impressions rather than facts, and incorporating dialogue and colourful description into their texts. (Weingarten 2005,7)

From early on, rock journalists were considered "gatekeepers and arbiters of taste" (Shuker 2008,161), people who sorted out worthwhile artists from the indifferent ones, saving the consumer the trouble of doing it themselves. Although Roy Shuker (2008,169) suggests that rock critics do not exercise as much influence over consumers as literary or drama critics (the control of airplay, for instance, is more important), many record buyers rely on the critics when they are interested in "exploring the byways of fresh talent, new musical hybrids or the back catalogue". The power to define what constitutes worthwhile listening was even more considerable in the sixties and seventies when alternate media (fanzines, private/pirate radio stations) were few and far between.

Although the rock press has from the beginning sported certain biases, this is not to say that all rock writers are men, or misogynists, or middle-class – or that they condone the values of their peer group. As Norman Fairclough (1995b, 47) reminds us, media discourse is a site "of complex and often contradictory processes, including ideological processes." Ideology is not a constant and predictable presence in all media discourse, but rather weaves in and

out of texts in different guises. The sheer amount of data included in my research guarantees a certain heterogeneity of views and voices.

Furthermore, although certain critics and even individual record reviews have attained a near-legendary status, they do not function in a vacuum. As Marcia J. Citron (1993,181) observes, the critic has to take desires of audiences and readers into account when forming his or her opinion – although this does not mean that the critic has to pander to the common taste. A common culture nevertheless brings the tastes of rock writers and readers closer together, whether they realise it or not. One has to also bear in mind that the reader is not a passive receptacle who automatically accepts everything s/he reads, or even partially agrees with the critic.

Data

My data consists of articles and reviews (mainly the latter) culled from Internet databases for the wider purpose of my PhD research; most Joni Mitchell-related material comes from jonimitchell.com and its now-defunct sister site jmdl.com. Another major source is rocksbackpages.com, which has a wide selection of rock articles; rollingstone.com and time.com have also provided a fair number of reviews discussed below. In all, there are eighty-two reviews of Joni Mitchell's albums dating from 1968–1978³. As comparative material, I have collected reviews dealing with her contemporaries, both men and women; these articles number a hundred (55 reviews of female artists, 45 of male). In their choice of material the databases are not overly selective: most reviews come from mainstream American and British rock magazines of the period (*Rolling Stone*, *Crawdaddy!*, *Creem*, *Melody Maker* etc.), but there is also material from newspapers and weekly magazines such as *Village Voice*. Thus I have worked with all the material I could find, especially in the case of Joni Mitchell.

One aspect which drew my attention early on (and which also contributed to the direction of my research) is the sheer volume of articles and record reviews about Joni Mitchell available online. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, she was a visible presence in the media even as early as 1968; she had already received attention as a songwriter and a performer; her manager and record company promoted her untiringly. Secondly, as a songwriter she was part of the up-and-coming trend, which rock magazines were eager to explore (and to exploit). Thirdly, the unofficial website jonimitchell.com has been encouraging people to send in articles from magazines and newspapers, and to have them typed by volunteers.

Although the Internet databases make a researcher's work easier in many ways (in terms of instant availability and easy and inexpensive access), the electric, often text-only format also poses some limitations. In my analysis of rock criticism, one aspect is totally missing: the visual. In many cases it cannot be determined how visible these articles are in the magazine (i.e. are they mentioned in the cover, or relegated to the back without a further mention), how much space they take up, how they are illustrated and how the illustrations are captioned.

In my forthcoming PhD, I will delve into the textual politics of rock papers with more detail, concentrating on aspects of agency, authenticity, and canonisation. In this article, I have chosen to concentrate on one of the most pivotal aspects of a female singer-songwriter's skill: her voice, and the kind of representation it receives in the record reviews.

The singer not the song: the changing voices of Joni Mitchell

*A great deal of nonsense has been written about
Joni Mitchell, some of it by Joni Mitchell herself.
(Fetherling 1977)*

Contrary to common belief, few rock critics spend a lot of time in actually assessing what they hear. Rather, they often discuss the phenomena surrounding a particular artist or album – Joni Mitchell’s changing lovers or Bob Dylan’s motorcycle crash, for instance – and thus contribute directly to the way the artist is subsequently perceived. The nuts and bolts of composition, arranging, singing, and playing are often shunted to the side in lieu of the non-audible aspects of music-making. Using the definitions of Lucy Green (1997, 5–6), music critics are thus interested in the *delineated* meanings of music, and not in its *inherent* meanings as such.

An inherent musical meaning has to do with the interrelationships of musical materials (notes, pauses, cadences): the bits which give a listener a sense of ”whole and part, opening and close, repetition, similarity, [or] difference” within a piece of music. (Green 1997, 6) Inherent meanings are culturally constructed, genre-bound, and dependent on the listeners’ competence. Yet they are the things we *hear* – unlike the delineated meanings, which are a collusion of more complex processes. The delineated meaning carries all the cultural and personal weight a piece of music has gathered around it. For example,

[a] piece of music might cause us to think about what the players were wearing, about who listens to the music, about what we were doing last time we heard it, if we have heard it before. (Green 1997, 7)

Green goes on to state that the discourse of popular music, and particularly that of rock journalism, indeed deals with ”everything but the inherent meanings of the music”, and pays special attention to topics of the body and corporeality. (p.39) I would add that the latter is particularly true of discourses on women artists.

In the light of my data, there appear several reasons why rock writers shy away from discussing the inherent meanings of music. Firstly, few rock critics have actual training in music theory – and even those who do are not encouraged to flaunt their technical skill in fear of alienating their audience. Secondly, following the tradition of New Journalism, sixties’ and seventies’ rock writing tends to be subjective – charting the experiences of one listener, instead of trying to generalise – and rather impressionistic – capturing moments of being, rather than mapping out a broad landscape of appreciation. This is not to say, however, that rock criticism did not come to generalise certain aspects of music or to set standards. Whatever the aims of the countercultural generation, by the end of the seventies mainstream rock writing had settled into a comfortable terrain, complete with its own canonical values and preconceptions about credible and authentic music.

Whereas a reader is hard pressed to find analysis on playing and composing techniques – and indeed even the music itself – in contemporary record reviews, there is one aspect on Joni Mitchell’s albums that never fails to attract attention: her voice. In itself, this is not surprising, as singing is already present in the very name of the genre she represents. Moreover, the quality of a lead singer’s voice naturally attracts attention whatever the genre – after all, most of us are tuned to the communicative properties of the human voice. Speaking and singing are familiar modes of expression to listeners, whereas playing an instrument is a more specialised ability and therefore more difficult to discuss and appreciate. Furthermore, singing has in our Western culture come to be associated with femininity (see e.g. Green 1997,32–33, Bayton 1997,42, Cohen 1997,32) – as well as the greatest musical performance opportunity available for women; most female rock and folk musicians of the sixties and seventies were known primarily as vocalists (Janis Joplin, Grace Slick, Joan Baez etc.).

Considering the subjective style of the rock critics, their reactions to Mitchell’s voice are rather predictable: instead of discussing the technical aspects of her singing, the writers report their own

reactions and the reasons which provoke them. And indeed, there is much about Joni Mitchell to provoke her critical audience. Despite the fact that she is a proficient vocalist with a remarkable range and technique, her singing is rarely regarded as an advantage to the overall sound of her records. Rather, sometimes it seems that the "pristine shrillness" with which she sings does not suit her material. Although the singing style of an artist is due to choice the same way their guitar technique is (in that it is bounded by physical restrictions and possibilities, but also very much a matter of practice and selection), many writers consider Mitchell's soprano a somewhat unfortunate accident, or else an independent presence:

Sometimes it's the voice of a little girl, all pink and clean and full of wonder. The voice of innocence. And sometimes it's the strong and slightly melancholy voice of a woman, a voice that's hurting a little. It's fascinating – the voice of the woman who has grown up and knocked around without losing the little girl inside her. It belongs to folksinger Joni Mitchell, and it has never sounded more appealing that it does on her first album, *Joni Mitchell* [a.k.a. *Song to a Seagull*]. (McFarlane 1968)

In the light of this review, Mitchell does not have control over her delivery: her voice comes and goes at will, sometimes appearing as a girl's, sometimes as a woman's voice. It *belongs* to her, as if a detachable object, not an inherent instrument. The voice itself is foregrounded in all its fascinating qualities, but the singer herself is only mentioned at the end of the paragraph, almost as an afterthought. What comes across very powerfully, of course, is the femininity of the voice.

The degree of femininity, however, caused problems to other writers besides McFarlane. Mitchell's music with its folk overtones might represent all things pure and girly; however, her lyrics often turn this surmise on its head, leading critics to find convoluted ways to explain the correlation between how she sounds and what she actually sings. It is not rare to find allusions to Mitchell's 'girly' voice, and her 'womanly' way of life – which serves as an evidence of the difficult conceptual juggle the critics performed.

In fact, music writers have been rather fond of this approach for some time:

[T]he divine songstress with that perfect bearing, that air of all dignity and sweetness, blending a childlike simplicity and half-trembling womanly modesty with the beautiful confidence of Genius and serene wisdom of Art, address herself to song.

Only the slightly dated syntax reveals that Mitchell may not be the singer discussed here. The review, which originally appeared in the *New York Tribune*, and is quoted by Simon Frith (1996:32), is written about the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind in the 1840s. Styles of music may have changed drastically in a hundred and twenty years – styles of writing surprisingly little. What the 19th century criticism and 1960s rock writing also had in common is the foregrounding of a woman's appearance before her musical talents.

A childlike voice is pure, unaffected – and high-pitched. Therefore a woman who produces such sounds appears just as unthreatening as a songbird. Yet in reality few singers are natural-born; singing is a communicative art, and in order to communicate effectively, one must learn at least the basics of voice production, whichever style one chooses. Thus a singer like Mitchell – and like Jenny Lind – incorporates elements of cultivation in her voice: that "half-trembling modesty" and "melancholy" only comes with practice. The critics are more inclined to attribute such skills to age and experience – hence the girly and womanly qualities can exist side by side during the slow process of maturation.

The early reviews (1968–1970) emphasise the purity, clarity, and organic quality of her voice. Although not everyone is impressed with her technique (it is described variously as shaky, monotonous, and wailing or keening), most critics – used to female folksingers as they were – find her voice at least tolerable, and label it with romantic, natural adjectives. The anonymous reviewer of *Time Magazine* (1969a) is in awe of her "fluty, vanilla-fresh voice with a haunting, pastoral quality"; Jim Frenkel (1968) finds her "exquisitely sweet" on the whole, and her voice ranges from "husky and rich" to the "silken". Mitchell voice – disembodied as it

is – is unthreatening and ladylike, and also balances her world-weary lyrics by taking the focus off her body.

Indeed, the lack of corporeality makes Mitchell unthreatening as a singer. Compared to Janis Joplin or Laura Nyro, her voice, although high and potentially irritating, conforms to the standards of female sound in its self-possessed silkiness. Whereas Mitchell exhibits great control in her music as well as her appearance – and is lauded for them – Joplin and Nyro are frightening in their lack of restraint. Jon Landau (1968) of *Rolling Stone* states this very explicitly: "What [Nyro] mainly needs now is little more self-restraint and control. It will come." Others are less benevolent; Don Heckman (1971a) is irritated by the fact that "[t]he few moments in which [Nyro] seems to expose genuine feelings almost always are shattered by outbursts of phony histrionics --." The out-of-control woman is not an embodiment of authentic rock feeling: she is either out of her mind, or faking it. The perhaps harshest comment comes from Lester Bangs (also of *Rolling Stone*), who, in his lengthy obituary of Janis Joplin, deprives her of all agency – over her career, appearance, and most obviously, her behaviour.

-- Joplin was almost totally helpless, a true waif adrift in the world, and after a certain point anyone with enough interest in the pop scene to read this paper could have sensed it. Many did, I suppose. Others just remarked on how her singing got worse, more raspy and out of control all the time, and wished that damn yammering bitch would just go away. (Bangs 1972)

Bangs deftly disengages himself from direct criticism by allotting the opinions to nameless "others"; yet, the irritation which permeates the piece is mostly directed at Joplin herself, and the star-maker machinery which is ostensibly to blame for her death.

The shrieking singer-songwriter

Towards the mid-seventies, rock music had begun to fracture: the old division between folk and rock was no longer feasible as new genres were born constantly. Among the new appellations emerged

'the singer-songwriter': a sensitive, self-sufficient artist who was clearly folk-influenced by did not shy away from electric instruments and exotic influences. Mitchell, who fitted into the singer-songwriter slot rather painlessly, was also in the vanguard of musical exploration. In 1973, she began to move towards jazz fusion – something which showed in her singing style as well.

Mitchell's change of style made the critics at least dimly aware of the possibilities of vocal genre-shifting; yet, for a singer to learn a new technique, and for the press to notice and perhaps even approve of it can be a lengthy process. On *Blue* (1971), Mitchell still pitches her voice to its highest reaches, prompting critics comment on her "nervous, slightly weird soprano" (Reilly 1971) and "fragile, haunting voice that skitters thru her songs like an elusive butterfly" (van Matre 1971). As Mitchell decides to drop her haunting high notes, there is a collective sigh of relief from the critics; in 1973 Toby Goldstein rejoices in that "[t]he sometimes shrieking indulgence of past years has all but vanished", and in 1977 Kristine McKenna is happy to find Mitchell's "yodelling octave jumps" gone. Yet sometimes the transition is more firmly in the ear of the listener. Folk vocalising was now considered passé, and those still adhering to it were either embarrassingly old-fashioned or just plain annoying – shrieking, yodelling folkies of yore.

Robert Christgau (1973), in his thoughtful review of *For the Roses*, is also glad that Mitchell has abandoned her "reedy" and "thin" voice, which tempted him "to classify Mitchell somewhere behind Collins and Baez, a second-rate folkie madonna". So smitten is he with the metaphor that he repeats it soon afterwards:

The pretty swoops of her voice used to sound like a semiconscious parody of the demands placed on all female voices and all females, the demands that produce phony folkie madonnas and high-caste groupies. This music is more calculated, more clearly hers, composed to her vocal contours not on the spot but with deliberate forethought.

Mitchell's new style, for Christgau, represents true artistic control: his language, however, does not. She is given agency neither as a singer nor as a writer: the passive last sentence gives the credit to

her *music* – which matches her voice – and not to the composer herself. Yet a passive stance is better than being a folkie madonna: that is merely putting oneself in the spotlight to be looked at – perhaps as a route to becoming a high-caste groupie. Despite his sympathetic tone, Christgau's options for women in rock are either/or; credibility is hard to gain, whereas the alleys of sexuality are always open for exploitation – barring perhaps the few female auteurs such as Mitchell, who has explored both options and arrived at a compromise of sorts.

The fact that Mitchell has worked on her new voice is not apparent in the mid-seventies reviews; indeed, it is still the voice itself – the disembodied presence – that does most of the work, sometimes soaring unrestrainedly, sometimes struggling with Mitchell's complicated melodies. Don Heckman (1971b) hears the voice "reflecting the influence of James Taylor"; it "slips and slides, moves in and out of the rhythm, plays with words and announces her maturity as a performer." In Robin Denselow's (1974) view, the voice has "lightness as well as intensity and copes admirably with the musical gymnastics of her writing". Despite its increasing versatility, her voice has not lost its organic qualities, either: "That jazz-tinted contralto swoops like feathers floating in stillness, like thick honey in your gut." (Malamut 1974) With the passivity of a mirror and the dexterity of a nightingale, her voice however does not reflect so much Mitchell's unthinking skills as the preconceptions of her listeners.

It should be noted that the terminology concerning Mitchell's vocal range is as varied as the range of writers. Although the categories used in classical music are not compatible with the practices of rock (or even folk), many reviewers class her as a soprano to begin with, and later on as an alto (or even contralto, the lowest female voice). The problem with even this kind of loose categorisation is that over the ten-year period discussed here, the actual reach of Mitchell's voice changes very little; it is only the way she uses it (i.e. timbre) that changes.

A good illustration of this are the two versions of 'Rainy Night House', one from *Ladies of the Canyon*, the other from the live album *Miles of Aisles* (1974): in the earlier version, Mitchell's delivery is straight and folk-influenced: she establishes the undulating melody line and alters it very little over the song; nor does she use much ornamentation or shading. The main point of interest is a 'choral' passage in the second verse, in which she sings "I'm from the Sunday school / I sing soprano in the upstairs choir"; this is followed by a wordless four-part harmony ranging from the A below middle C to the D above it (not a particularly wide range). True to her recording practices, Mitchell sings all the parts herself. On the live cut, recorded in the same key with her band the L.A. Express, she gives a different rendition with many improvisational-sounding departures from the original melody, and sliding and vibrato. Her tone is warmer and decidedly jazzier in its dexterity. When it comes to the "Sunday school" part, instead of a backing chorus she breaks into a startling new melody which reaches all the way up to A5.

The unnatural jazz singer

The mid-seventies was a time of constant change and experimentation for Mitchell. Her 1975 album *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* proved rather controversial; critics panned the album partly for its musical daring, and partly for the lyrical opaqueness which was considered too radical a departure from her singer-songwriter subjectivity. As rock writers had a lot of material on their hands, the focus momentarily shifted away from her singing. The annoyance at the music, however, sometimes also colours the comments on her voice; John Rockwell (1975) of the *New York Times* calls her vocal performance "schoolgirlish and dull" and chastises her for using the "same vocal mannerisms" (which he does not specify) over and over. He for one considers Mitchell's folk voice her 'natural' one, although he gives her credit for having added "certain tricks of vocal coloration" (1975) to her arsenal; in the review of *Hejira*, Rockwell (1976) is relieved now that her "increasingly mannered dalli-

ance” with jazz singing is over, as it is audibly premeditated – and therefore pretentious. As the reviewers remind us, Mitchell is not a ‘natural’ jazz singer.

But who *is* a natural jazz singer? Very few writers touch on this subject – and when they do, they infer that the ultimate jazz voice is possessed by vocalists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday – black female singers of the big band era. In his unabashedly academic review “An End to Innocence: How Joni Mitchell Fails” (1977), Perry Meisel takes apart every aspect of *Hejira*, including Mitchell’s voice. At first he gives some tentative credit to the “lean and true” quality of her singing; however, in his view the only reason the listener now pays attention to the voice is the record’s “simple dearth of melody”. The real issue Meisel has with her ‘jazz’ singing is that it is not anything of the sort:

Despite its expressive flexibility Mitchell’s voice is about as far removed from anything like real jazz singing (especially Ella [Fitzgerald]’s or [Sarah] Vaughan’s) as her romanticism is from the Romantics themselves. Joni’s voice doesn’t get you in the crotch or gut the way real blues heartthrobbers do. Mitchell lacks the element of swing as plainly as she lacks a direct kind of sexiness --.

Just why Mitchell – a thirtysomething white Canadian singer-songwriter – should sound like a black urban jazz (or blues) veteran does not concern Meisel. Just as her lyrics are removed from the Romanticism of Wordsworth and Keats (but still showing their indirect influence), so is her singing separate from the likes of Fitzgerald and Bessie Smith.⁴ However, the failure of her voice to sound black is for Meisel Mitchell’s worst failure as an artist: being a white woman she is hollow, and therefore her art is also second-rate. The review is explicit in its racial essentialism: only the blacks, it seems, can sing the blues – and as they embody the blues, they need only to open their mouths to express it. This view is something Mitchell also condoned, by creating an alter ego called Art Nouveau – a black pimp – who appears on the cover of *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*.

As to the crotch-grabbing qualities of her voice, there are fellow critics whose opinions are exactly the opposite of Meisel's. Stephen Holden (1977) is convinced that *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* has Mitchell dishing out "advice like Madam Eve presiding in the great American whorehouse". In addition to applying the rather oblique appropriation of the madonna/whore stereotype, Holden hears in her voice "a hooker's come-on, obviously enthralled by the rotten opulence she excoriates." The sexuality inherent in her singing is no more of the 'pink and clean and full of wonder' variety, but of a tainted, sinful kind. Another, somewhat similar viewpoint is expressed by *Rolling Stone's* Ariel Swartley (1977), who hears *Hejira* in terms of Mitchell's (apparent) sexual confidence:

Where she once sounded simply ethereal, she now introduces a sexual roughness which she uses with precision. In fact, her voice is often flexible enough to create the continuity and the climaxes that her melodies lack.

With the 'inorganic' jazz voice comes also a more sensuous listening experience, at least for some listeners. However, one must also bear in mind that while Mitchell's voice changed over the years, so did her material and the very culture around it. What was expected from a young folksinger in the mid-sixties was no longer applicable to a more mature singer-songwriter of the seventies.

Restraint to the rescue

If Mitchell's voice sometimes lacks authenticity, directness and drive, what kind of singing do the rock critics prefer? We can at least get some idea of this by looking at the reactions to the male singer-songwriters of the same era. Male singing is a contested area (as many theorists have noted, just as singing comes 'naturally' to women, it also tends to feminise men); however, in my data at least it is the women whose vocalising is more problematic: they tend to sing inauthentically, while the men set the standard for a valid singer-songwriter voice.

Economy seems to be the key to a good vocal performance, and according to the critics, male singers excel in it. Just as Laura Nyro is chided for her "overreaching" soprano (Marsh 1976), James Taylor receives praise from several reviewers for his "restrained delivery" (Landau 1969 and Edmonds 1970), "subdued singing" (Scoppa 1975), and "flat, undemonstrative style" which nevertheless belies great emotion (Gerson 1971). Although Taylor communicates "extreme agitation and angst" (Scoppa 1975), he does so in a sophisticated way which spares the listener's eardrums. So too, does Paul Simon, who ever "assured vocally" is capable of fancy singing, but usually chooses "straight" deliveries, "restrained and supple, bowing as they should to the material" (Holden 1973). When singing of one's personal turbulences, it is better not to underline the experience by showing too much emotion.

As the persistent cultural myth would like us believe, men are of the mind and women of the body, and this view is recycled in the reviews in different guises. Randy Newman – an intellectual songwriter if ever there was one – may not be in possession of one of the most mellifluous voices in rock, but that hardly matters:

World-weary and rasping, his remarkable voice conveys much the same extramusical dimension that is transcendent in the last Billie Holiday records, where even the shallowest material is vocally transmuted into a life-and-death proposition. Though Newman is not an intuitive stylist like Holiday, but a very calculating interpreter, the effect is still quite similar. (Holden 1972)

Where Holiday is "intuitive", Newman calculates – and does so to a remarkable effect. The control over the material – and indeed the listener – eclipses everything else, even the trivialities embedded in the music. Neil Young has much the same effect on his audience; he is in possession of his image and sound, and is able to alter it at will. "[H]e has forged his style by translating his vocal limitations into a metaphor for the tense, desperate, angry persona --" John Rockwell (1975) opines, in the same review in which he brands Mitchell schoolgirlish and dull. Whereas she still inhabits the innocent world of folk, too timid to move forward, Young confidently

strides onto new challenges, forging his weaknesses into interpretative strengths on the way.

Bob Dylan, another vocal chameleon of the singer-songwriter era, seems to exist outside and above any rules. Following his comeback in 1968, the critics seem to be happy that he is singing at all⁵; a review in *Time Magazine* (Anon 1969) alludes to his trademark nasal whine – or the lack thereof – by remarking that "Dylan is definitely doing something that can be called singing." The same review celebrates his "brassy" new tone, and especially its economy: "[s]inging, he never makes a move that is not absolutely necessary." Minimalism, not melisma, rocks. A communicative singer knows his limits: too much emotion or ornamentation is only embarrassing. When Dylan drops the country voice around the turn of the decade this is seen as a move towards something even more direct and authentic. A *Rolling Stone* critic celebrates the return of the "raspy, rowdy glory" of Dylan's voice (Ward 1970); indeed, its power is such that it makes the writer literally whoop for joy. In this way Dylan is always one step ahead of his critics, making moves which are regarded both daring and credible – whichever his direction.

Greater praise is yet to come. In 1979 Dylan released his religiously charged album *Slow Train Coming*, which at least metaphorically brought many critics to their knees. One of the most ecstatic reviews comes from Jann Wenner (1979) of *Rolling Stone*, who regards the album with great reverence, even fervour. Thus is it not surprising that even Dylan's singing is raised above the reach of mere mortals:

Bob Dylan is the greatest singer of our times. No one is better. No one, in objective fact, is even very close. His versatility and vocal skills are unmatched. His resonance and feeling are beyond those of any of his contemporaries. More than his ability with words, and more than his insight, his voice is God's greatest gift to him.

Wenner writes persuasive prose, and his choice of words is bold if not ludicrous. Rock writers tend towards subjectivity and rather grandiose style; Wenner, on the other hand, calls on a higher au-

thority in his piece, first declaring the "objective fact" that Dylan is the greatest singer of our times, and right after that, asserting apparent divine influence in his voice. This kind of highly emotional language remains with the reader, and helps to canonise an artist. After all, who are we to argue with God?

Conclusion

Jimi Hendrix is the quintessential rock guitarist, as much as Bob Dylan is the quintessential singer/songwriter and the Beatles are the ultimate rock band. (Rollingstone.com/artists/jimihendrix)

With the introduction of the Internet, its various fan pages, free radios, and streaming services, it would seem that the era of the gatekeepers is at an end. However, the structures they erected still remain: ideas of authenticity and credibility, as well as the pantheon of musicians who have made it to the canon persist to this day.

A heterogeneity of views and material does not equal fair representation. When the entire societal structure is slanted with certain biases, even texts which seem neutral often contain value judgements. In this light the countercultural stance of many sixties' and seventies' rock magazines only serve to mask a conservative representation of women – and often no 'masking' is even intended. As many feminist music historians have shown (see f.ex. Citron 1993, Frith 1996, Green 1997, etc), female musicians have been belittled by the music press as long as there has been one; their efforts have been trivialised, their choice of instruments curtailed, all for the sake of some vague value structure calling for modesty and daintiness from its women.

Yet, even more powerful than ridicule is the tactic of total disregard: pretending that women composers and performers simply do not exist, or do so in remarkably small numbers. In narrowing the sample, the few women who do get written about come to represent an exception; paradoxically in them are then vested all the powers

and potentialities of the female sex. If they succeed, they do so because they are exceptional and man-like; conversely, if they fail, they do so because they are feminine. A no-win situation thus created effectively keeps women out and at the same time reaffirms the supremacy of masculine values and male creative subjectivity.

It is no wonder, then, that at times Joni Mitchell has denied both her femaleness and her whiteness. In a world in which women do not make credible rock music, one can either accept the fact, and move on to more 'feminine' genres, or find alternative routes to one's artistic expression. Fortunately, by showing the way with her music, she has empowered others to question the premises of rock appreciation.

ENDNOTES

¹ I am working on my PhD, which focuses on the early work (1968–1977) of Joni Mitchell, as well as the reception of that work by the contemporary rock press. In my research I employ feminist theories of sexual difference, Critical Discourse Analysis, as well as various linguistic, literary, and (auto)biographical approaches.

² Which in themselves tended to be dismissive of women, blacks, homosexuals, and other minorities. For further discussion, see f.ex. Reumann 2005, Sirius 2004, Marwick 1998, and Echols 2001.

³ *Song to a Seagull* (1968), *Clouds* (1969), *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970), *Blue* (1971), *For the Roses* (1973), *Court and Spark* (1974), *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975), *Hejira* (1976), and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977).

⁴ Mitchell's voice has deepened since the 1970s, however, and now bears a distinct resemblance to Sarah Vaughan's. The more gravelly quality of Mitchell's singing has been variously attributed to a natural ageing processes, deliberate training – or, perhaps most persistently – to her habit of heavy smoking. The truth lies most likely somewhere in the junction of all of these.

⁵ Following Dylan's 1966 motorcycle accident, there were persistent rumours that he was badly injured, insane, or at least had lost his voice. Dylan refuted this notion on his following albums by developing a more mellow vocal style than the one he had so far cultivated on his records.

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