Self-Obsession

*Travelling: On the Path of Joni Mitchell*, Ann Powers (438pp, hbck, Harper Collins)

I am all for personal reportage and an author being present in their work, but when I read a book about Joni Mitchell I expect it to mostly be about Joni Mitchell along with contextual/critical information. Unfortunately, Ann Powers for some reason has mostly written a book about her interpretation and response to Mitchell's work and also included a fictional version of Mitchell that Powers constructs from songs and some interviews with musicians and associates.

What's strange is that Powers claims the book isn't a biography, yet writes one, and also – quite rightly – at some points questions the idea of the confessional singer-songwriter that Mitchell was often regarded as the epitome of. This relied mostly on nonsense conceived by record company marketing executives who allied Mitchell (and others such as Carly Simon and Carole King) with confessional poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, and the rising tide of second-wave feminism, suggesting that women self-emoting was somehow original and empowering, whilst conveniently forgetting that song lyrics and music (however 'true' they are) are always mediated: by arrangement, the order of album tracks, album covers, live presentation, reintepretation, and what audiences choose to bring to or read into them.

Powers, however, mostly reads Mitchell's music as autobiography: where she was living, what she was doing, who she was in love or having a relationship with, rather than treating her songs as something to be discussed and critiqued on their own merit. The interesting thing about Mitchell's music (and that of many others') is how we listeners 'buy in' to them. How can a couple's 'our song' also be the same as thousands of others? How can Carole King or Joni Mitchell appear to speak for so many of us about love, or despair, or the break-up of a relationship? No, it's not that the song is real and actual and autobiographical and true, it's that it's a bloody good song that spoke to many in a certain time frame. *Zeitgeist* is a good term here.

Anyway, Powers rarely seems to separate the singer from her songs. She relates Mitchell's work to growing up ('Childish Things'), love and 'The Boys', to travel ('The Humming of the Wheels'), to marriage ('The Marriage' in fact) and emotion ('The Sorrow'), trying to make direct links between songs and events in Mitchell's life, but also writing pages about how she, the author, relates to all this stuff, how Mitchell facilitates her own discussion and understanding of these things. So Powers, too, has a female sorrow hidden away; she also has a loving husband we hear about, as well as previous loves and trips. It's excruciating stuff.

Better are some chapters where Powers actually gets to discussing how Mitchell's music changed from mawkish sentimentality to take on board a jazz sensibility and sense of experiment. While I wouldn't call much beyond the *Miles of Aisles* live double album 'fusion', this is Powers' name of choice, and allows her to pay some attention to the mature albums that spread from *For the Roses* through to the arguably one jazz album she made, *Mingus* and then *Shadows and Light,* the astonishing live album that followed, highlighted Jaco Pastorius' and Pat Metheny's musical abilities.

For me, the notion of fusion informing *Court and Spark* and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* doesn't really hold up (any more than Powers' suggestion that The Pretenders were a punk band!). These are clever and intriguing rock albums, skilfully played and lightly sprinkled with innovation, such as the pre-samplers loop of the Burundi Drummers on 'The Jungle Line'. *Hejira*, my favourite Mitchell album, is well-known as the result of a road trip across America, where Mitchell tried to be as anonymous as possible, hanging out at bars and motels, feeding the characters she encountered, along with long-established memories from elsewhere, into long, digressionary songs.

It's a masterpiece of an album, but like earlier albums it doesn't really gain anything from Powers linking specific names or places to specific songs. I kept wanting to shout at the book that IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S TRUE OR NOT. I don't care if a love song was actually about Stephen Still, Jackson Browne, Neil Young or Graham Nash, it's the listener's now; the song is alone out in the big wide world. Lyrics, like poetry, deliberately use words to suggest more than specifics, that's what metaphor and simile, rhyme and assonance, etc. are for; songs and poems are about themselves and the time spent listening to or reading them, not data or information or short narratives.

The one thing Powers does seek to engage with critically is the question of why Mitchell appeared in blackface on the cover of her strange double album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, adopting the character of Claude, who she had also become elsewhere. Powers kind of, almost, excuses her, saying things like 'Mitchell identified with Black men and sought intimacy with one, who remained her companion for three and a half years' but the problem is too big for that, in fact Mitchell's 'casual racism' is so big and awkward that instead of dealing with it by herself, Powers publishes several pages of a conversation with Michael Grier, an New York academic who tries 'to explain how she [Mitchell] got there but also call her on it'.

Grier is articulate and sensible, but unfortunately Powers wants in on the debate and wants 'to say something that, I think, reflects my own white entitlement.' Grier is perceptive enough to point out that 'this whole debate is in many ways about white writers and their own guilt', which Powers takes on board as a way to semi-justify Mitchell and also be complicit herself:

I don't think Joni Mitchell is nothing but a racist, or that her racism   
 strictly defines her. What I know about her and about myself is that   
 as white women, we can enact racism even at times when we think   
 we are being generous and full of affection. This is the condition of   
 our lives in a society based on such dehumanizing divisions. And   
 our choices can reinforce those hierarchies even when we think   
 we're eradicating them.

Well, that's alright then. I think. Or not. It's such a fucked-up world anything can happen, and we are all complicit. But now we've 'fessed up let's move on.

Time for a chapter trying to construct married life for Joni Mitchell, 12 years of domesticity and the start of a descent in to musical mediocrity, slick production and the inept adoption and use of synthesizers and other late 20th Century musical gadgets. Powers (of course!) loves all this stuff, but it's where Mitchell and I parted ways. I'm glad Mitchell has recovered from her serious illness but I can't say I have enjoyed her recent return to music making, especially the recent live appearances. More interesting are the archival boxes she has released, which have allowed an insight into the context and making of music, with demos and live performances accompanying the released versions of albums.

I keep coming back to the music. That, after all, is what Joni Mitchell made and gave to us, albums which sold or didn't, moved us or didn't move us, that we bought or ignored, liked or disliked. Many found and continue to find (the to my ears mawkish, dull and introverted) *Blue* a profound listening experience, others struggle with *Hejira*, many with *Mingus*, and lots of Mitchell fans are like me in that they can't be bothered with more than a couple of tracks on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* or at all with the later albums. But it remains an astonishing body of work, as music, as tunes and lyrics, as songs. *Travelling* does not engage enough with that for me, it's too bound up with Powers' attempt to record her personal engagement with the music and insert herself in to Joni Mitchell's story or Joni Mitchell's into her's. If only she had backed off a bit and kept her distance, this would have been a much better book. A bibliography would have been nice, too.

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(1408 words)