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### **A Case of Her: Channeling Joni**

John Kelly moves audiences and the singer herself with 'Paved Paradise'

By Matthew Gilbert, Globe Staff

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John Kelly says 'Paved Paradise: The Songs of Joni Mitchell' is 'about getting at the essence of something.' John Kelly says "Paved Paradise: The Songs of Joni Mitchell" is "about getting at the essence of something." (josef astor)



You won't see "Joni Mitchell" on Commercial Street in Provincetown, handing out show leaflets to tourists alongside the drag Cher, Barbra, and, yes, Susan Lucci. With her yellow hair, her tilted beret, and a billowy outfit right off the cover of "Hejira," "Ms. Mitchell" appeals to far more rarefied tastes. When she beckons,

only the fanatics queue up, eager to hear sweetly edgy trills, lines of wisdom, and some homespun stage banter, eh?

And anyway, this Joni isn't strictly a drag queen, evoking one shining icon during year after year of hot Cape Cod nights. She is John Kelly, an Obie-winning New York actor, singer, and dancer whose long list of stage credits extends to "Orpheus X" at the American Repertory Theatre and "James Joyce's The Dead" on Broadway. She is a man who pays camp-free homage to the "woman of heart and mind," as Mitchell has called herself, with a performance of Mitchell songs that's as moving as it is funny, as sincere as it is droll.

Impersonation? Drag? Cabaret? Kelly no longer tries to define his show, "Paved Paradise: The Songs of Joni Mitchell," which the Theater Offensive is presenting at the Boston Center for the Arts Thursday through Nov. 4.

"Believe me, I was lip-synching Maria Callas recordings at the Anvil [gay bar in New York] in punk drag in 1979," he says recently during a visit to Harvard Square, speaking in gentle tones that barely hint at his piercing Joni-esque tenor. "That's how I started. I was hanging out with all these amazing drag performers. But I'm trained as a dancer and a visual artist and now as a singer. . . . And so still I'm always grappling with the semantics of it."

Most people are surprised to learn that the late Divine, the diva in John Waters movies such as "Hairspray," did not consider himself a drag queen so much as a character actor. Kelly, too, feels he just happens to be crossing genders as Joni: "A Barbra Streisand queen or a Cher queen, they're very defined, and when they don't do it well enough, it's not working. I really don't look like Joni. It's an acting thing. I change the way I walk, I change my face, my nose tends to feel smaller when I focus on my mouth. . . . But it's not really looking like her and not always even sounding like her. It's more about getting at the essence of something."

Kelly relishes the thought of people coming to "Paved Paradise" expecting "clown drag" and crude camp: "I can play a game with the audience. And clobber them. You think you know this? OK, I'll move you. I'll make you cry." Certainly there is humor and caricature in the show - at times, Kelly throws male husk into vocal acrobatics that even early-era Joni might not have tried, and his between-song chatter is hysterically earnest. And yet the effect of "Paved Paradise" is quite reverent and affectionate. Midway through his rendition of, say, "Rainy Night House," sung in Mitchell's register, the poetry of the song emerges to hold us transfixed.

Joni sees 'Joni'

No less a critic than Joni Mitchell herself has been surprised by the impact of Kelly's cabaret tribute. "I was braced for a lampooning," she told The New York Times after seeing "Paved Paradise" in Manhattan in 1997. "I didn't expect to be so touched. I cried in two places." Mitchell, who took her own foray into cross-dressing as a black man on the cover of her 1977 album "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," is now one of Kelly's biggest fans.

Indeed, Mitchell and Kelly have become friends, too. She has seen his show three times and presented him with a dulcimer, and they've had much conversation over the years. "She does most of the talking," Kelly says, smiling. "We talk about painting, and politics a little bit, and Miles Davis. She talks about her dreams a lot. She can be goofy. And very warm."

That first time Mitchell saw Kelly perform, Kelly knew she was in the audience. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done," he says. "I saw myself getting scared. And I said to myself, Don't do that, just do your job. Don't change anything. That would have been the dangerous thing, to feel like I had to adjust. . . . And she loved it."

Mitchell watched the show from the back of the house. "Every time a cigarette would light up," he says, "I could see her."

After the show, he saw her walking down the hall backstage and had a moment of panic, taking off his wig and then putting it back on. "And she said, 'Let me take off my jacket so I can hug you,' and we held each other. . . . That night, it was us checking each other out. And her trusting that I wasn't making fun of her or dishonoring her in any way. Especially with all the stuff surrounding the gender thing - there's such a history of people making fun, or parodying, or spoofing."

Mitchell told Kelly that seeing such a heartfelt reflection of herself was an emotional experience. "She really got it," he says. "During 'Shadows and Light,' she was standing up yelling 'Bravo!' During 'The Circle Game,' she was sobbing and swaying and holding the hands of her friends. She said it was like Huck Finn in the choir loft watching his own funeral."

It started at Wigstock

Kelly began his Joni journey in the mid-1980s at Wigstock, a drag festival in the East Village of New York, where he could indulge his love for what he calls "the beautiful classical lyricism" of Mitchell's songs. "For me it was always about wanting to sing her music," he says, "but then, OK, this is a dragfest. Do I then do the visuals? Yes, of course. But my first impulse was not to dress up like her but to sing her music."

Now, 20 years later, two decades that Kelly has also filled with dance projects, performance art, video installations, and acting, Kelly says he's nearly ready to do the show without a costume and wig. "The drag has gotten distracting and annoying at certain moments," he says, "especially as I get older. . . . I take this piece really seriously. I like going from comedy to tragedy. I'm dead serious about it when I do it."

He has his eye on a number of Mitchell songs he hasn't performed yet, including the haunting "Silky Veils of Ardor," the vocally challenging "Borderline," and a song from Mitchell's new album, "Shine," called "If I Had a Heart." Over the years, Kelly has pulled out songs from all eras of Mitchell's career, although he has tended to stay away from her more heavily produced 1980s material.

The evolution of Kelly's shows has coincided with a renewed appreciation of Mitchell's genius since the release of "Turbulent Indigo" in 1994. Underappreciated after she traded in her folk-chick persona in the 1970s for more sophisticated musical horizons, Mitchell became a forgotten pop pariah - a "chalk mark in a rainstorm," to borrow the title of her 1988 album.

But she has returned to celebrated icon status, and her reputation and her career have soared thanks to more albums, touring, TV appearances, gallery shows, and a ballet collaboration. Oh yes, and the worship and skill of one particularly loyal fan, who looks nothing like her and yet still manages to capture and convey that fierce Joni spirit.

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