
JONI MITCHELL¹, “BOTH SIDES, NOW”²

Version: 13 September 2014; 5 November 2015; 4 March 2018

I REALLY DON'T KNOW CLOUDS – “FROM UP AND DOWN”

Rows and flows of angel hair³

And ice cream castles in the air⁴

And feather canyons everywhere

¹ On the Joni Mitchell website, her biography, written by Wally Breese, says: Roberta Joan Anderson was born on **November 7, 1943**, in Fort Macleod, Alberta, Canada. Her parents, Bill and Myrtle (Her father was a grocer, and her mother a schoolteacher), moved with their young daughter to North Battleford, Saskatchewan after the end of World War II. When she was 9 years old, Joni and her family moved to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the "city of bridges," which Joni has since referred to as her hometown.... At the age of 9, along with many other children at that time, **Joni contracted polio**. As she convalesced, she says she truly developed an artistic sensitivity; "A great sorrow hath humanized me." Thanks mostly to her mother's loving attention, she recovered from the often fatal disease, and returned to her life in Saskatoon."

² Lyrics © 1967 Gandalf Publishing Co. Printed from JoniMitchell.com. In *Wikipedia* under "Both Sides Now" it quotes Joni Mitchell when she describes the context when she got the idea for the song: "I was reading Saul Bellow's 'Henderson the Rain King' on a plane, and early in the book Henderson the Rain King is also up in a plane. He's on his way to Africa and he looks down and sees these clouds. I put down the book, looked out the window and saw clouds too, and I immediately started writing the song. I had no idea that the song would become as popular as it did."

³ "Cirrus" clouds look like this. They exist above 18,000 feet.

⁴ "Cumulus" clouds look like this. They exist below 5,000 feet. Know this about these two kinds of clouds already suggests an "up and down" viewing of her context as the plane flies between the cirrus clouds above the plane and the cumulus clouds below the plane.

I've looked at clouds that way.⁵

But *now*⁶ they only block the sun

They rain and snow on everyone

So many things I would have done

But clouds got in my way⁷

I've looked at clouds from both sides *now*

From up and down,⁸ and still somehow

It's cloud illusions I recall⁹

⁵ In other words, this is what the clouds, and the airy and dreamy world they constitute, appears to her to be like as the plane she is on flies there.

⁶ The adverb “now” plays a significant role in this song. Notice how Joni Mitchell punctuates (on her official website) the title of this song, “Both sides, *now*.” Remember that “now” modifies the associated verb, and not the noun phrase “both sides.” In other words, “I’ve looked at [up to this point in her life] ... [but] *now*.”

⁷ This is a tricky line, because “clouds” here have become metaphor. The question is how can these clouds “get in the way” of things that Joni “would have done”? I think that she means that “clouds” in this sense block the Light, that in her which allows her artistic vision to be apparent to her.

⁸ This is the first of three important “opposites” that Joni uses in the song to make her point. This *geometry* is important in this song: “up and down” (notice how this said in strophe three; it is then repeated in the closing strophe of the song). This pattern refers, I think, to “above and below” the clouds, or, on the one hand, to the life of vision and dreams and beauty (above) and, on the other, to the concrete reality of life lived on Earth (below). But at the root of Mitchell’s purpose is not geometry, but *dialectic* – a commitment to dwell inside “both sides” – of what is real; of what eventually proves itself to be not real. Living “both sides” is what gains her the insight she is writing about in this song.

⁹ Notice that it is not the clouds themselves that she recalls, but the *illusions* that clouds create. That is, *from above* in the plane clouds look so lovely and magical; *from below* on Earth, she experiences the clouds for what they actually are: sources of rain and snow ... and things that block the Sun’s light and warmth. Or perhaps what she is saying is that her commitment to live within dreamy visions (“the dizzy dancing way you feel”), preferring them to the grit of reality “here below,” kept her from accomplishing important things in her actual life. Notice that she that “I *would* have done” rather than “I *could* have done.”

I really don't know¹⁰ clouds at all¹¹

I REALLY DON'T KNOW LOVE – “FROM GIVE AND TAKE”

Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels

The dizzy dancing way you feel

As every fairy tale comes real

I've looked at love that way

But *now* it's just another show

You leave 'em laughing when you go

And if you care, don't let them know¹²

¹⁰ We need to be careful about how we hear “I don't know” in this song. I think that we must guard against assuming that this statement is cynical. In fact, “not knowing” what we thought that we had known is an expression of humility in the face of new experiences that challenge what we had thought was true. It is not easy for a person to be disabused of a cherished conviction about reality. People would rather, it seems, *make the conviction correspond to reality* by making themselves live an illusion rather than accept a transformation of their viewpoint.

¹¹ It is not clear to me what it is that she does “not know” about clouds “at all.”

¹² There is bitterness here that anyone understands who gives much of himself or herself to others, and at a high level of competence. Here is the riddle: for an artist to perform her songs, and in the way that she means them and from which experiences of life that she wrote them, she *must* care for those to whom she is singing them. For her not to *care* for her audience, or not *need* them to understand the truth and beauty she seeks to give them, is unworthy of her own creations. Yet through her long experience on the road, and through so many performances, she wonders whether it is worth feeling the hurt of crowds who want to escape from life *down here*, retreating into “clouds” of illusion *up there* – escaping into the music – rather than being in communion with the artist, *really knowing what she means* in her songs.

Don't give yourself away¹³

I've looked at love from both sides *now*

From give and take,¹⁴ and still somehow

It's love's illusions I recall¹⁵

I really don't know love at all

I REALLY DON'T KNOW LIFE

Tears and fears and feeling proud

¹³ What she appears to refer to here in these two strophes is what it felt like when she first started to perform her songs for crowds, and remembering the applause she received, and how all of that approbation made her feel. But now she knows that it is a demanding life to be live a Gift, performing her songs, knowing that the crowd never really knows her, the artist, at all ... and honestly they do not really want to know her. Instead, the crowd wants to be entertained (I think of that exilic Psalm, "Our captors said ... play us again those songs of Zion!"), or to be caught up in someone else's greatness ... so that they do not have to become great themselves. But for certain, they do not want to grasp the price of her life's experiences, what she had to be willing to pay to write her music and lyrics – to tell the truth. I am thinking of a lyric here that she might have been thinking about in relation to the lack of real care in the people who listen to her performances: "They really, really don't know me ... at all."

¹⁴ "From give and take" is now the second statement of importance (the first was "from up and down" in the third strophe). This "give and take" expresses for Mitchell the riddle of Love for her as a writer and performer of her music. That is, what is she to do with the fact that she *gives* so much of herself to others in her songs and her performance of them, and yet she experiences her audiences as simply *taking*, and unceasingly taking what she offers them ... and giving in return *not themselves*, but only applause. Should she continue, she wonders, "to care ... to give herself away," not counting the cost, or should she not do that, protecting herself from *disillusionment* – "don't give yourself away."

¹⁵ Why is it, she might wonder, that she tends to remember Love's disappointments more than Love's gifts in her life? Notice that her statement that "I really don't know love at all" is not necessarily cynical, and probably should not be assumed to be such. Instead, it is a real question for her: What is Love? What should I do with the Love that I feel for others, for the world? Why is it that Love – the profound self-giving in it – is so often ignored as the gift to others it is, or that is simply "consumed" by others and not reciprocated? Why do I think this question that Mitchell asks is not cynical? *Because the existence of this question appears to us inside this beautiful, self-disclosing song, which itself is her act of Love, expressing her willingness to share with her hearers something deep and vulnerable in her soul* – "I really don't know ... at all."

To say "I love you" right out loud¹⁶

Dreams and schemes and circus crowds¹⁷

I've looked at life that way

But now old friends are acting strange

They shake their heads; they say I've changed¹⁸

Well something's lost, but something's gained

*In living every day*¹⁹

I've looked at life from both sides *now*²⁰

¹⁶ I find this strophe challenging to decipher. I think that she is getting at how earlier in her life it was somehow easier for her "to say 'I love you' right out loud." She did not say it frivolously then, but perhaps she was just too caught up in "tears and fears and feeling proud," and so she did not really understand what actually "I love you" means, and entails. Perhaps *now* she is slower to say "I love you right out loud." She has learned that people are often not worthy of such a gift, and so she has learned to be more circumspect.

¹⁷ This line seems to parallel the earlier "Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels."

¹⁸ As Plato expressed with such depth, and feeling, in his famous Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of his *Republic* dialogue: a person who has begun to recognize the illusion that so many call "life," and has finally gained the inner strength no longer to accept to live that illusion, is for that person also to accept the loss of many friends, even members of his or her own family (Jesus warned about this), who are unable to bear the presence of a person who has seen the truth – the "illusions" – and who has begun to live "strangely" in their perspective – "they shake their heads; they say I've changed."

¹⁹ Here is the deepest point of wisdom in the song. It seems a small insight, but actually there is something very great in it, something that goes very deep to the core of our human personhood, our identity as a *being* "*in-between*"; as in-between Life and Death; between matter and spirit; between sinner and saint; between the unchangeable and constantly changing; between knowing and not knowing; between considering and deciding; between being awake and asleep; between being saved and beloved of God and still unaware of this fact, not knowing how to embrace what in fact we have been given to be.

²⁰ Suddenly at this point in the song we understand that "looking at life from both sides" is what has caused Mitchell to begin to understand what real Life must be. Yet she *now* knows more about *what real Life is not*, than what it is. And as we know from Philosophy, it is not a small advance in knowledge of Life to have learned, up close and personal, what Life is not. Perhaps only then does a person begin to ask a real question of God, and of herself – "What is Life?" "How ought one, if she the answer to that, to live it?"

From win and lose and still somehow

It's life's illusions I recall²¹

I really don't know life at all

I've looked at life from both sides *now*²²

From up and down and still somehow

It's life's illusions I recall

I really don't know life at all.

A CONTRAST – OVER THE RAINBOW

Somewhere Over the Rainbow, composed by Harold Arlen, sung by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (released in 1939). “Dorothy Gale is swept away from a farm in Kansas to a magical land of Oz in a tornado....” Notice how this song, so longingly, piercingly sung by Judy Garland in the film, never gets to the wisdom that Joni Mitchell achieves when the latter sings “Both Sides, Now” in her year 2000 album, *Both Sides, Now*. Yet, Dorothy’s journey from Kansas to Oz eventually leads her back home to Kansas, which is that film’s version of “both sides.”

Somewhere over the rainbow

Way up high,

There's a land that I heard of

²¹ For a person to be able to discern how much of illusion is what we call “life,” and the price we pay (why would we want to?) to make those cherished illusions remain, is a for a person to have come a long way towards understanding the “life” very many people call Life – the actual unreality or downright falseness of a “life” like that. And then for that same person to realize that she herself invested years of her life in living a life of illusions generates in her a sadness that for a time is hard to shake. This is what she implies when she says that *now* – when she say and wrote the lyrics – “it’s life’s illusions I recall.”

²² The wisdom Joni would eventually gain, revealed in the way she sings and orchestrates the same song in her album in the year 2000, is expressed in the title. Finally it is not about deciding between the world “above” and the world “below”, but is learning to live the tension, learning that our lives work *both sides* ... not one or the other ... *now*.

Once in a lullaby.

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.

Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far
Behind me.
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me.

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly.
Birds fly over the rainbow.
Why then, oh why can't I?

If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow
Why, oh why can't I?