

A Cosmic Vortex at the Palms Playhouse

By Steve Ackley

*And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game*

- From Joni Mitchell's Circle Game

The Hotel Diamond, Chico, CA – The Present

The experience of waking up alone in a hotel room was certainly nothing new. But despite decades of doing so, there was still something a little sad about it—it didn't matter how nice or funky the place was.

Joni opened her guitar case, lifted the neck, and reached into the velvet-covered compartment in the back. She pulled out a cell phone and pressed the power switch. Nothing happened.

"Damn," she said. "I'm sure today is the day."

Checkout time was noon. The plan was to drive from Chico down to this little town named Winters, to play at a place called the Palms Playhouse. The following night she'd be in Berkeley where she'd close out her tour at the Freight and Salvage.

Joni had asked that this tour be made up of all small venues with just her playing solo. She figured this might be her last time out on the road and she wanted to revisit the past ... performing close to the crowd, playing her old standards ... Big Yellow Taxi, Chelsea Morning, The Circle Game ... swans songs to her devoted fans.

When she first saw Palms Playhouse, Winters, CA on her itinerary, she couldn't believe it. She thought it was just some flashback to a strange dream. Then she saw the date of the show—March 11—and she knew something magical was going to take place. There

was also the object she had been given. The thing she had always called "the future box." Concrete evidence of what had happened all those years ago.

After firing up her rental car, instead of heading south, Joni went north. *I've always wanted to see Mount Shasta. It's supposed to have mystical powers*, she thought with a smile.

Hours later, as the afternoon sun was reflecting an orange pink off of Shasta's southern face, Joni was leaning against her car strumming her old Martin. Her phone rang and she reached through the passenger window and picked it up and looked at the screen. It was her road manager. She clicked *ignore*, tossed it back onto the seat, and resumed playing her guitar.



Berkeley Community Theatre, Berkeley, California - March 11, 1972

Enveloped by the roar of applause, the young woman from Canada removed the guitar from around her shoulders, held it in her right hand, and took a bow. She turned around and looked at her friends ... David, with his big brown mustache, smiled and shouted, "Yay, Joni!" Jackson, standing next to him, joined the audience with enthusiastic applause, and Graham just gazed at her with sincere admiration.

She turned back to the microphone and repeated the words she had been saying all evening, "Thank you ... thank you!" Her clear eyes beaming with astonished gratitude.

Thirty minutes later, Joni was on the phone with her manager who was telling her that her flight from SFO to LAX had been cancelled due to weather. A heavy fog had enveloped the entire San Francisco Bay Area and flights weren't taking off or landing.

She had been feeling unparalleled joy only moments ago; now she was frustrated. She'd promised friends she'd be in LA tomorrow ... good friends she hadn't seen in a while ... there were plans to go to the beach, party, make music. She didn't want to be stuck in some hotel room shrouded in fog.

"You could drive," suggested her manager. "Or you could try the airport in Sacramento. There's a new airport there that opened up a few years ago."

Two hours later, Joni was in a cab heading west on Interstate 80. She'd received some general directions from her manager: take 80 east to 5 north. After you pass Sacramento, the airport is on the right—seemed simple enough. She related the directions to the driver who had never been to Sacramento, but who was grateful for the big fare.

As the cab crossed over the Carquinez Bridge, Joni looked out on the twinkling lights of Mare Island. She thought about what a magic night it had been. Four encores! She thought about her new found fame and how unreal it was.

She studied the back of the driver's head. He was a short Hispanic man named Ramon. He wore a yellow cab driver's cap and had his hair buzzed short around the sides. He seemed absorbed with the road.

When the cab came down over the hills down into the central valley, rather than the fog lifting, it got worse. A few miles down the road, Joni spotted a sign for Interstate 505. "That's it," she said to the driver. "That's the road we take."

For the first time since leaving Berkeley, the driver spoke up. "Are you chure," he asked with a thick accent. "I thought you said highway fibe."

"I don't know," said Joni with a bit of agitation. "It might have been 505. I think this is the road." She just wanted to get to LA ... sunshine and warm air.

They passed a sign for this place called The Nut Tree and then turned north onto I-505. *The Nut Tree*, mused Joni, who then began thinking about the words to that old Annie Ross song, *Twisted. My analyst told me...*

After about ten minutes of things just getting darker and foggier, both Joni and the driver concluded that they were indeed on the wrong road. "We need to find a place to turn around," said Ramon.

They turned off onto a country road that ran alongside a creek. A sign with an arrow simply read: *Winters*.

"I need to make a phone call," said Joni. "Let's go to this town and see if they have a pay phone."

Ramon looked at his meter. The fare was already up to \$63. He informed Joni of this to which she said, "Don't worry about the money, ok? I just need to find a phone."

Fortunately, Winters was less than a mile off the Interstate. After crossing a white cement bridge, they entered into a little farm town. It was 2:00 in the morning and the place was completely shut down. They came to the main intersection, turned left, and parked across the street from this old saloon named The Buckhorn.

"There's nothing here," said Ramon.

"Wait," said Joni. "Look!"

"What?" asked Ramon.

"The fog is completely gone and the moon is out."

Ramon tilted his cap back a bit and looked out the window at the big full moon in the western sky. He said in Spanish, "Verdad. Dios mio."

"I want to take a look around," said Joni who then got out of the cab and stood in the street. She looked around at the buildings. There was nothing extraordinary about the place ... a hardware store, a bank, a coffee shop. Then she noticed on the upper story of one of the buildings, painted across a brick wall, the words *Opera House*.

Cool, she thought. I love these old turn of the century places. I wonder if I can get in.

Joni went back to the cab and grabbed her guitar case from the back. She told Ramon she wanted to take a look at the opera house. He reminded her about the fare and she told him again not to worry about the money. He just shook his head and waved his hand.

Joni studied the doors along the main street, trying to determine which one would lead up to the old opera house. She decided on one and went and tried it. It opened.

She moved inside the doorway and stood at the end of a long dark hall. She thought about going back and forgetting about it all, but instead found herself taking further steps inside. Suddenly, faint moonlight illuminated the other end of the hall. She went forward and, when she reached the end, to her left was a staircase.

She went up the stairs ... creaky, creepy, but exciting and compelling. At the top there was another hall going to her left, back towards the front to the building. About half way down the hall was the entrance to the theatre. Joni walked in and the entire place was filled with moonlight coming from the windows at the front.

This is too weird, she thought. When I looked at those windows from the street, they were boarded up.

Unlike what she expected to see, the place looked almost ready for a show. Seats were set up. A row of fresnels were pointed at the stage. The small theatre reminded her of some of the places she'd played in Canada on her way up.

Joni found her way to the stage and took out her guitar. She wanted to sing one song and then she'd go back to the cab and to the airport, and see that Ramon got a big tip.

She stood at the side of the stage and looked out at her would-be audience. It occurred to her it was after midnight—it was morning. She decided to play Chelsea Morning—to walk out onto the stage strumming, as she'd done the night before in Berkeley.



The Palms Playhouse, Winters, CA - The Present

It was 11 minutes before the show and the place was packed. Tickets had sold out within the hour after they had gone on sale—that had never happened before. As Dave Flemming, the manager of the Palms, looked around the room he was certain they were over capacity. But that was not his main concern. His main act—his only act—had not shown up yet. There were only minutes to go before show time and she had not shown up.

He turned to Bus Ferguson, Joni's road manager and asked for the twentieth time, "Where the hell is she?"

Bus, who was visibly sweating, answered for the twentieth time, "I don't know."

Joni was supposed to have been there at 4:00 for a sound check and to have time grab a bite to eat before the show started at 8:00. Bus had been pinging away at her cell phone all afternoon.

One text message came in around 5:00. It simply read: I'll be there. That was it.

"We're gonna have a riot on our hands if she doesn't show," said Dave. "Do you want to see 220 old hippies go ballistic? I don't."

Dave looked out over the crowd again. It was something he hadn't seen since he saw Dylan at the Greek Theatre in 2009 ... seventy year-old earth mamas in flowered prints, a stable of gray pony tails, a patchwork of tie-dye, old flannel, and faded denim. Everyone was well-lubed with local wine, cabanas, and IPA.

"Where's Joni?" one bright-eyed old gentleman asked Dave.

"She'll be here," Dave nervously assured him.

"I just wanted to see her before the show. To say hello," he slurred.

"Well, maybe after the show will be better," offered Dave.

"My name's Felix," he said. "You know I'm from Canada too ... Like Joni is."

Dave smiled, nodded, and, grabbing Bus tightly by the arm, slipped away.

They went back stage where a few of the crew were milling about. In chorus everyone asked, "Where is she?"

Dave looked at everyone sternly and said he did not know. "We'll give her fifteen minutes and if she's not here, we'll have to call the show."

The chorus then let out a unison groan. Dave turned to Bus and ordered him to keep calling her cell. "For the next 15 minutes, your job is to keep dialing and redialing. If she doesn't answer you keep dialing and redialing. Got it?"

Bus nodded yes and then went off to a quiet corner to work his phone.

At 8:15 the noise in the Palms had elevated to a frantic din of voices, interjected into which were intermittent shouts of "Where's Joni?"

Dave breathed deeply and shook his head in anger and embarrassment. He made his way out on to the stage and stepped up to the microphone. He signaled for the lights to be dimmed in hopes that it would lower the crowd noise. Thinking the show was about to begin, and their longtime friend and music icon was about to take the stage, the crowd only got louder. Dave continued to wave his hands to quiet the crowd. Sensing that something was off, the crowd finally quieted and Dave cleared his throat.

But, before a word came out, he heard the opening chords of Chelsea Morning coming from right side of the stage. And the roar of the little crowd enveloped him from the front.

Dave turned around and saw a beautiful young woman, strumming her guitar and walking onto the stage. It was Joni, but it was the Joni of old ... her long straight hair ... her granny dress with the flowered print.

Dave backed away from the mic, relinquishing it to the beautiful apparition.

Joni just stood there strumming, looking at the crowd with wide-eyes; the crowd looking back at her with the same. Finally, someone shouted, "We love you, Joni!" to which Joni smiled, shut her eyes and began to sing.

Dave made his way stage left where he stood next a crew member named Jimmu a sage-ish fellow wearing an old denim jacket and a cowboy hat. Dave turned to Jimmu and said, "It's her. It's the old her. She's young. How can that happen? How can that be?"

Jimmu answered, "It's like God or something. It's some kind of cosmic vortex. It's cool though. It's very cool."



The very instant Joni strummed her first chord, the crowd appeared. It was like walking through a doorway into a crowded room. Except there was no doorway. The crowd had just miraculously appeared. And what an interesting crowd it was.

They were all old people. Some of them were close to her grandparents' age. But they were wearing clothes like she and her friends would wear ... jeans, flowered cotton blouses ... tie dye.

Many of them had stunned faces. A few were crying. Joni noticed a lot of them had little black objects in their hands, about the size of bars of soap. Some people were talking into the objects. Others were holding them up and pointing them at her. After she finished Chelsea, the crowd went nuts. More of the objects were taken out and many of them flashed, so she figured they were cameras.

"Thank you," said Joni. "I don't know where I am exactly, but you are a lovely audience."

"Welcome to the Palms!" shouted someone from the back of the house.

"We love you!" shouted someone else.

This isn't really happening, thought Joni. Maybe I'm still asleep in the cab. The cab made her think of her song Big Yellow Taxi, so she began strumming the intro. She smiled at the crowd and said, "Hopefully I won't wake up halfway through the song," and she began to sing. As she sang she noticed many of the people mouthing the words.

After the song and the applause ended, a woman near the front shouted, "How can you look that way? How can this be?"

Joni looked down at the woman. She looked frightened. She asked her, "What do you mean?"

"You're in your seventies," shouted the woman, almost crying.

Joni stopped and studied the audience. They began to grow quiet. She then realized what was happening. But there was no way it could be possible. "I'm 29," said Joni. "It's 1972. I just played a gig in Berkeley last night. I got lost and ended up here."

The crowd stood and looked at her. The place was absolutely silent. Finally, one old lady came forward and stood at the edge of the stage.

"I was there," she said. "I remember that dress you wore. You look just like you did that night. I remember all the encores you took. I remember Crosby and Nash and Jackson Brown up on stage with your at the end. That was like 45 years ago."

"My God," said Joni. She gazed out on all the gray hair and wrinkles gathered in front of her—gathered to hear her play. She realized these people were all her fans. And they've been her fans all those years.

"I don't know whether this is real," she said. "But I know I'm here to play. Here's a song I've been working on."

Joni began playing I'm a Radio ... a song she hadn't yet performed in public. When she got to the chorus, everyone was singing along. *How can they know the words?* She thought.

Joni played for close to two hours during which she exchanged comments with the audience. But she didn't ask too much. She knew she wasn't there to get info on the future. She was there to bless these old friends ... to give them back something from their days of innocence. She had also been brought there to see that there were years and years still in front of her in which she would be loved.

Like the night before, she ended with Circle Song with the audience all joining in on the chorus.

After she was done, she went to the edge of the stage and touched her old friends. One cute old guy with tears in his eyes caught her attention. He told her his name was Felix and asked if he could take a *selfie* with her.

"A what?" asked Joni.

"A selfie ... I just want to take my picture with you," he explained.

Joni knelt down and put her hands on Felix's shoulders as he leaned back against the edge of the stage. He held his black box out at arm's length and shot the picture.

Joni asked, "Can I take a look at that little box of yours?"

Felix handed to her.

Joni still had her guitar strapped around her neck. "Let me go put my guitar down," she said and she quickly headed back stage with Felix's phone in hand.

As soon as she passed the curtain, the entire place went dark.

Joni ran back out on stage, but the audience was gone. Not only were they gone, but the front windows were boarded up and the floor of the entire theatre was covered with old dusty appliances and piles of boxes.

Suddenly a voice broke the silence. It was Ramon. "We need to get out of here."

Joni turned to see him standing in the doorway. "Before the cops come. We need to go.

"I found a payphone and call my dispatcher. I know how to get to the airport."

"Ok," She said sadly. She then remembered the phone. She looked and she still had Felix's phone clutched in her hand. It was dark and lifeless, but it was there. It had not been a dream.



Southbound on Interstate 5 - The Present

As Joni drove down the empty interstate at dusk, she thought about that magical night 45 years ago. *TONIGHT. It was tonight.*

She looked at the clock. It was a quarter to 9:00. *There was still time ... still time to get there by the end of the show.* She drove faster.

In the seat next to her was the dead phone she'd been given all those years ago -- *the future box*. She glanced down at it and pushed the power button. This time it came to life.

An hour later Joni was driving into Winters. The dead little town she'd stumbled into in the middle of the night so many years ago was now alive with wine bars and restaurants and tanned t-shirted couples holding hands and laughing as they strolled along the sidewalks.

Turning onto Main Street, Joni saw the old Buckhorn Saloon on the corner, now a bustling steakhouse, and across the street, there it was ... the Palms. The old Opera House sign was still hanging on the second story wall. The windows were brightly lit.

She slowed and rolled down her passenger window. She could hear loud cheers from the upstairs. A car was on her bumper, so she had to move on. But just as she did, she could hear the first few strains of Circle Song begin. The show was almost over.

She parked further up the street and walked back. People passed her but did not recognize her. She was an old lady now. She tightly held Felix's phone in her hand. It had been buzzing ever since she'd turned it on. Every time she looked at the screen there was a new message...

I can't believe that's her.
Where did you get those pics?
Quit shittin' me, Felix.
Nice photoshopping!

In front of a bank across the street a half block away from the Palms, Joni stood, looking up at the windows. After the last song ended there was a huge uproar of applause and cheers. Then suddenly, the place went dark and the sound gave way to an audible collective gasp.

When the lights came back up there was the sound of quiet turmoil. Then ... nothing.

Moments later, she saw them ... the same crown she had seen 45 years before—the earth mamas, the denim—all filtering out onto the street. Beneath the lamp poles she could see them laughing, hugging each other, conversing with great animation. She withdrew into the shadows of a small parking lot and continued to watch. One couple passed within her earshot. The man was speculating to the woman about holograms.

They all slowly filtered off to their cars and homes and present day lives. Some went into the Buckhorn for drinks. Finally, she saw him ... one lone figure emerging onto the street. It was Felix.

He moved in her direction, staying on the opposite side, walking past a yogurt shop and a little clinic, in front of a hardware store, to just across from where she was.

Joni crossed and approached him as he reached the corner.

She wasn't sure what she expected. It was the old her now. After seeing her in her prime, would he even recognize her?

Just a few feet away he turned and spotted her. He didn't move; he just stared.

"I forgot to give you your phone back," she said.

Felix smiled and Joni handed him the phone.

Ignoring time and reason, and with an enormity of love, the two embraced.

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