
Joni Mitchell – and Jazz/Old Rock/Folk Music at the Piano

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by Dean Sam Candler

I suppose that my own musical style is jazz/old rock/folk. Sometimes it's much more jazz. Other times, when a guitar is around, it's old folk. But piano is my instrument, and I love it when people are actually listening to jazz. At the [parish retreat at Kanuga](#) on Memorial Day weekend, the odds are that I will be playing piano a bit—maybe a lot!—during a full and fun time. I hope many of you join us.

Then, on Memorial Day itself (May 30), we celebrate "[Chill on the Hill](#)," a lovely concert and fundraiser for our outreach projects ("Cathedral Without Walls" – with that night's proceeds going to mission work in Haiti). That evening, we will gather in the church parking lot with picnics and friends, and we will host one of the great local cover bands in our area: Yacht Rock Revue. They are really good, and I am looking forward to hearing them again, and dancing! The Wall Street Journal even wrote about them last year!

But the first act at "[Chill on the Hill](#)" will be me. Yes, someone has to open, and it is fun to be the dean who also plays the piano and sings. I usually tell people that I am rather like an organ grinder's monkey. The monkey doesn't have to be very good; it's the spectacle of the thing that is entertaining. So it is when the dean of the cathedral plays piano and sings.

As I prepare, and in reviewing all sorts of song possibilities, I am reminded of the occasional poetic beauty of 60s and 70s rock and folk music. Well, it wasn't all poetry; but some of it really was.

I pause, in particular, to remember the beauty of Joni Mitchell. If I had my choice, and if I were better, and if I were a woman, I would sing nothing but Joni Mitchell songs. I understand she is ill these days, which makes me want to pay tribute to her even more.

Most people remember her well-known song, "Both Sides Now," a reflection on what we think we know, and what we don't. "I've looked at love from both sides now, and ... I really don't know love at all." For me, "The Circle Game" was even better, tracing the growth of a young boy through the seasons of life: "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."

But the first of her songs with which I fell in love was "Rainy Night House," a meditation on a man who took her to his mother's house one night; that man, apparently, was actually Leonard Cohen, a "refugee from a wealthy family." She, on the other hand, was "from the Sunday School," and "sang soprano in the upstairs choir."

She sings a song about a priest, who "took his contradictions out / And he splashed them on my brow / So which words was I then to doubt / When choosing what to vow." When I sing that song, I have to change the gender of the priest to a woman! I don't have to change the gender when I sing, "I Was a Free Man in Paris."

And it was she—not Crosby, Stills, and Nash—who wrote the great anthem, "Woodstock," with the quite religious refrain, "We are stardust, we are golden / and we got to get ourselves back to the garden." (In fact, however, Joni Mitchell was not even at Woodstock. Her boyfriend, Graham Nash, was. Such is the poet.)

No matter what generation we are a part of, each generation has its good popular music. Good music of any generation has good poetry in it. And good poetry is always spiritual. Good music and good poetry are both spiritual; they help us to see

something of God in the world, something holy in the world. And, here's to Joni Mitchell, a poet and musician, par excellence.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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