



Sing with Courage:

**Overcoming Performance Anxiety
through the Intimate Style of Joni
Mitchell's Early Works**

The Vulnerability of Honesty

In the late 1960s, Joni Mitchell appeared on stage with an unguarded honesty that was both her greatest strength and her deepest vulnerability. While many artists of her time performed behind layers of persona and distance, Joni seemed to balance precariously between openness and self-protection. Her songs were diaries and confessions—sharing them made her vulnerable.

One of the most striking examples came in 1970 at the Isle of Wight Festival, one of the largest gatherings in music history. The atmosphere was volatile. The crowd—over 600,000 people—was restless, cynical, and increasingly hostile towards the organizers with an anti-establishment mentality, the performers experiencing the brunt of it. When Joni walked on stage with her dulcimer, she was greeted not with silence but with heckling. During her set, a man climbed up onto the stage, disrupting her performance. Her face tensed; her voice trembled as she asked the crowd, "Listen, a person trying to do something good can't always be strong, you know?"



More on The Isle of Wight Moment

It was August 29, 1970. Nearly six hundred thousand people were gathered on the English coast — a restless sea of faces, tents, and flags. The festival was in turmoil: technical failures, exhausted crowds, and anti-commercial protests had turned the air electric.

Joni, just 26 years old, had agreed to move her set to an earlier slot, trading the magic of twilight for harsh daylight. Later she would call it "a feminine cooperative streak." But when she walked onstage, guitar in hand, she realized the crowd was not listening.

Halfway through Chelsea Morning the murmuring swelled into heckling. She faltered, stopped. Her voice cracked with frustration:

"Listen a minute, will you? Will you listen a minute! It's very hard to come out here and lay something down when people don't seem to understand."

📄 *"You know, maybe I'm kinda weird, but when I'm sitting up here playing, and I hear all those people growling out there and people saying, 'Joni, smile for Amsterdam,' and stuff, it really puts me up tight. I forget the words, and then I get nervous, and it's really a drag." — **Joni Mitchell, reflecting on audience reactions during her performance at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970***

The footage captures a remarkable transformation. Instead of fleeing, she spoke to the audience as though they were one person. She admitted her nerves, her fear, her wish for connection. Then, quietly, she began My Old Man.

The crowd softened. They began to listen. What changed was not the technical conditions but her willingness to be seen trembling and continue anyway. That is courage in its purest form.

Turning Confrontation into Connection

It was a fragile moment that could have ended in retreat. But she didn't leave. Instead, she took a breath, sat back down, and began to play "My Old Man" at the piano - a song filled with tenderness and calm. The crowd slowly quieted. She had turned confrontation into connection. Later, she reflected on that night, saying that performing in front of so many people felt like "being naked in front of a mirror that talks back." The Isle of Wight became a symbol of courage under pressure—a lesson in composure, vulnerability, and emotional integrity.

Joni's seeming unease wasn't limited to massive festivals. In her early television appearances, such as on The Dick Cavett Show shortly after Woodstock, her demeanor was introspective and fragile. Between songs, she fiddled with her guitar, eyes downcast, sometimes smiling shyly as if unsure she belonged in such a bright studio. Cavett's compliments seemed to embarrass her more than please her. Her tone was gentle but uncertain, her small talk hesitant—like a poet caught between two worlds, one internal and one public.





Using Sensitivity as Art

Joni's shyness wasn't in the ordinary sense. It was a deep emotional sensitivity to being seen. She later admitted that the intimacy of her songwriting sometimes made her feel "too exposed," as if she had handed over pieces of her soul to an audience that might not handle them with care. Yet Joni's genius was not in overcoming this sensitivity—it was in using it. She turned her inner tremors into art. During smaller performances, such as her 1969 Canadian coffeehouse sets, she often paused between songs to tell quiet stories. In one, she reflected on loneliness while traveling and the fragile friendships that form on the road. The audience listened silently, drawn closer by her honesty. What could have been a moment of nervous rambling became instead an extension of her music—proof that vulnerability, when shared, can disarm and enchant.

Joni Mitchell's path reveals a truth many artists struggle to accept: that discomfort on stage does not signal failure, but authenticity. Her trembling hands, long pauses, and faltering words were all part of her humanity—and it was this humanity in her early years that drew listeners closer rather than driving them away.

"At the time... I took a lot of flak if anything - people thought that it was too intimate." — Joni Mitchell, in an interview with Elton John

Turning Fear into Connection



Presence Over Perfection

Performance is not about perfection—it's about presence. When fear rises, the goal is not to suppress it but to turn toward it.



Listen Inward

When the world grows loud, the artist's courage lies in choosing stillness. Listen to your heart, to the song, to the still small voice that brought you here.



Emotional Leadership

Joni modeled a kind of emotional leadership—anchoring herself in honesty when the room grew restless.

Joni Mitchell's discomfort was never her weakness—her performances remind us that stage anxiety and self-doubt can coexist with brilliance. She never tried to erase her anxiety. Instead, she allowed it to live within the music, shaping her tone and her pacing.

For those learning to sing or speak before others, Mitchell's approach offers a profound model. Performance is not about perfection—it's about presence. When fear rises, the goal is not to suppress it but to turn toward it. When Joni faltered, she didn't mask it with charm or bravado. She breathed, tuned her instrument, or told a story. She allowed her humanity to stay in the room.

During the Isle of Wight set, her plea—"Will you listen?"—was not only directed at the audience. It may have been a reminder to herself: listen inward, to your heart, to the song, to the still small voice that brought you here. When the world grows loud, the artist's courage lies in choosing stillness.

Carrying Fear Gracefully

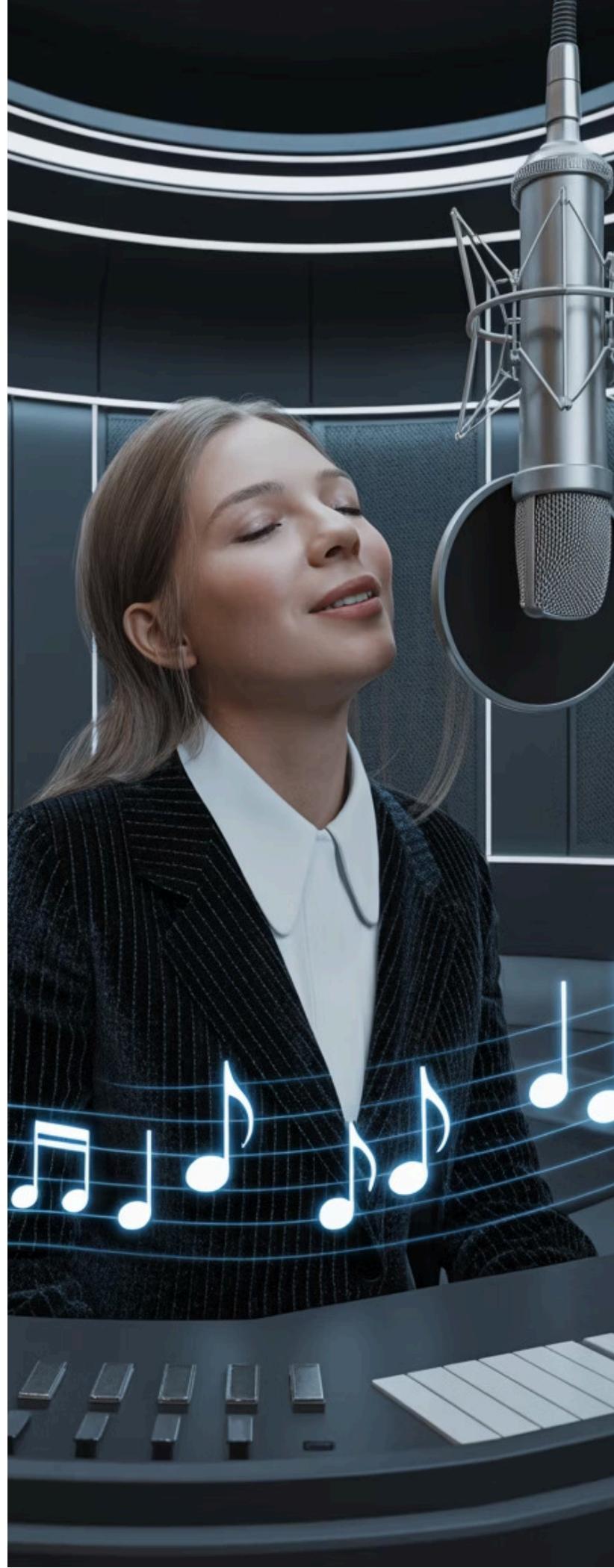
For performers seeking steadiness, the journey begins small. Sing for yourself first. Then for a single trusted listener. Perform in a garden, a quiet kitchen, a seniors home, or a local open mic. Gradually widen your circle of courage. Each step, each audience, becomes another mirror in which you learn to remain whole.

In Joni's world, courage did not mean silencing fear—it meant carrying it gracefully. She once said, "I sing my sorrow, and I paint my joy." In that single phrase lies the essence of creative bravery: to bring forth what trembles inside us and offer it to the world.

Her example shows us that the artist's path is not just about performance mastery, but self-acceptance. The trembling voice, the shaky hands, the awkward pauses—these are not flaws, but living evidence that the performance is real to you.

And so, for those who stand on small stages or large, for those whose hearts race before the first note—remember Joni. Remember the Isle of Wight. Remember the silence that followed her words, and the calm that returned when she played again.

Sing anyway. That is the courage that moves mountains!



Singing with Courage

The Courage to Be Seen

Joni Mitchell once said that she never set out to be a performer; she simply wanted to share songs that felt true. In the early coffeehouses of Toronto and Detroit, she sat cross-legged with her dulcimer or guitar, her eyes down, her fingers searching for the shape of a feeling. The tremble in her voice was part of that search.

Performance anxiety is often framed as an obstacle to overcome. But perhaps, like Joni, we can reframe it as a messenger — a sign that we are touching something honest. The heart races because it recognizes that what's about to happen matters.



The story of Joni Mitchell's vulnerability on stage — particularly at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970 — is a testament to the idea that nervousness and grace can exist in the same body.

Turning Discomfort into Dialogue



The Baptism

After that concert, Mitchell said, "They fed me to the beast." But she also said something else: "It was a baptism."



Transparency as Bridge

To stand in front of a sea of strangers and remain yourself is truly courageous. The Isle of Wight performance became one of the first public examples of an artist refusing to hide behind polish. Her transparency became the bridge.



Inviting Listeners In

For any singer, there comes a moment when the song feels too exposed. You can either armor yourself — or invite the listener in. The difference is presence.

Presence means allowing your humanity to stay visible, even when your voice shakes.

The Myth of the Fearless Performer

People imagine confidence as a kind of steel. But confidence, in its mature form, is permission.

Joni Mitchell's quiet poise was not born of arrogance; it was the serenity of someone who had accepted her imperfection. Watch her in early television clips — the soft laughter when she forgets a lyric, the shrug, the small smile. These gestures are a conversation with the audience that says, *I trust you enough to show my humanity, and I am moving on.*

The Inner Stage

Before you sing to others, sing to yourself. Mitchell often practiced alone in hotel rooms, listening for the way her own voice resonated against wood and windowpane. She once described writing as "solving the puzzle of feeling."

The inner stage is where you learn to believe your own tone. When you rehearse, listen not for the cleanest note but for the truest one — the note that sounds like you thinking aloud.





When Nerves Become Music

At their best, nerves are energy in search of direction. The racing heartbeat that precedes a song can become the pulse that carries it. Mitchell's voice often carried a trembling edge; she never flattened it out. She let it shimmer.

Try reframing your thoughts:

- The dry mouth is the desert before the first rain.
- The quickened breath is the wind that stirs the melody.
- The shaking hands are simply electricity seeking ground.

Every artist must learn to conduct that electricity rather than suppress it.

Connection over Perfection

When Mitchell sang "Both Sides Now" that afternoon, it was after a long, tense silence. The crowd — once restless — began to listen with reverence. She did not demand applause. She simply opened a space.

Perfection is sterile; connection is alive. The most haunting moments in live music often occur just after a mistake — when the performer laughs, breathes, and keeps going. That's when the audience exhales, recognizing their own fragility in you.

The Courage to Keep Refining

Anxiety does not vanish after one brave night. It returns, like tide. Mitchell's later tours — *Blue*, *For the Roses* — still contained moments of visible tension. But she grew a ritual around them: tuning slowly, breathing, speaking to the crowd as if they were guests in her home.

Refinement is not perfectionism; it is the ongoing conversation between fear and craft. Each performance is a rehearsal for the next.

Honing Your Craft



There comes a moment in every musician's life when practice turns into something quieter and more mysterious — when the fingers no longer chase perfection but begin to remember on their own. They become 'comfortable' in their performance.

Watch Joni in her later years as she fingerpicks *Cactus Tree*. Her hands move like brushes, painting sound, never once glancing down. She looks instead into the room — at faces, at space — utterly at ease. That is what it means to have become fluent in your own language. It is not mastery for its own sake. It is familiarity born of devotion and commitment.

True practice is a love affair with repetition. You begin with awkwardness, the clumsy phrase, the misshapen chord. Then something subtle happens: the song begins to live in your hands. The more time you spend there — patient, listening, returning — the more the nerves begin to dissolve. What once felt like fear turns into readiness.

Building a Home Inside Your Music

Don't practice to conquer anxiety; practice to build a home inside your music.

Each day, return to your songs the way one tends a garden. Touch each note as though watering roots you may never see. Some days you'll play with lightness, others with exhaustion — both are useful. Over time, you will begin to notice that the song is no longer something you perform but something you inhabit.

And then, begin to practice the whole story. Create your show — your playlist — as though it were a journey from first greeting to final goodnight. Step into your performance room as if it were a small stage. Imagine your audience already waiting, kind and curious. Play your songs in the order they wish to be heard. Move from one to the next without interruption. If you feel drawn to speak, say a small sentence — a doorway between two worlds. Keep going until the last note fades, and when it does, say "thank you," or simply smile and bow your head.

This simple ritual — practicing the show from start to finish — will soften the edges of fear. Each run-through makes the space more familiar, the silence less sharp. What once felt like exposure begins to feel like presence.

Perfection is never the goal. Ease is. Ease comes from long, gentle persistence.

One day, you'll find yourself mid-song, eyes no longer fixed on your hands but on the audience before you, and you'll realize: you are not performing anymore. You are sharing. That is when craft becomes art.



Singing with Courage Journal

Journal Page: Seasons of Mastery

Theme: Becoming at Home in Your Own Performance

Season One: Learning the Landscape

(3-4 months) Before mastery comes belonging. This season is for learning your songs as if they were rooms in a house. Play them often, softly, without trying to perfect them. Notice how your hands begin to move on their own, how certain melodies feel like breathing.

Reflection Prompts:

- Which songs feel like home, and which ones still feel like strangers?
- What happens when you close your eyes while playing?
- How does your body respond when a song feels effortless?

 **Practice Focus:** Learn your songs until you can look away from your instrument and still find your way.



Seasons of Mastery Continued...

Season Two: Shaping the Show

(3 months) Now, begin to see the journey as a whole. Choose ten songs and divide them into two sets — two chapters of one story.

Play them from start to finish, once a week, no stopping for mistakes. Let one song breathe into the next, as if you're turning pages in a book.

Reflection Prompts:



- Which songs naturally lead into one another?
- Where does the energy rise? Where does it rest?
- How would you describe the feeling of your "first hello" and "final goodnight"?

 **Practice Focus:** Run your full show as a living story — even if no one's watching.

Season Three: The Quiet Rehearsal

(2-3 months) Invite the world in — but gently. Play for one or two kind souls. Let them be your mirror, not your judges. Notice how your body changes when you are seen.

Each run-through will settle the nerves. Stillness will begin to feel like presence, and what once trembled will begin to hum with life.

Reflection Prompts:



- How does it feel to be watched with kindness?
- When did you feel most yourself while performing?
- What changed in your breath between the first and last song?

 **Practice Focus:** Invite small audiences — family, friends, even your reflection — until the act of sharing feels natural.

Living the Craft

Season Four: Living the Craft

(Ongoing) Mastery isn't the end of practice — it's the beginning of freedom. By now, your show lives inside you. You can walk into a room, tune your guitar, and begin — without armor, without performance — just presence.

Keep refining, keep noticing. Each time you play, you'll discover a new colour in your voice, a new softness in your phrasing, a new courage in your silence.

Reflection Prompts:

- What does "mastery" feel like to you today?
- Which small habits keep you grounded before performing?
- How has your relationship with nerves changed?

 **Practice Focus:** Return to your show as often as you need — not to perfect, but to remember.



To master your show is to befriend your own voice, to let it speak with confidence and curiosity. It's not about perfect control, but about trust — trust in your preparation, in your instincts, and in the story you are telling. Each time you play your set, from the first note to the final goodbye, you deepen that trust. And slowly, inevitably, your audience will feel it too — they will lean in, settle, and rest in the space you've created with your music.

- ❑ **And finally, remember this:** play, sing, and create just for you. Let the music be your companion, your expression, your joy. Don't shape it to please anyone else, and don't give a thought to judgment. Your art exists for your heart first, and everything else is a gift. Step into that freedom, and let yourself be fully, unapologetically alive in your music.

✨ Choosing Your Songs and Shaping the Story

Think of your show as a river — it has a beginning, a flow, and a place where it rests. Your set list is the current that carries both you and your audience.

Tips for Choosing and Ordering Songs:

Begin with a welcome

Your first song should open a door — something familiar, gentle, or grounding that lets you settle in and lets your audience breathe with you.

Build a quiet arc

Let each song lead naturally to the next — perhaps through a shared mood, a key change, or a lyrical thread.

Midway, bring light

A playful or upbeat song halfway through your set can refresh both your nerves and the listener's attention.

Closing

End with something that feels like a benediction — a song that leaves peace in the air.

Tell a story

Between songs, one or two sentences can weave meaning: a memory, a reason, a glimpse of where the song came from. Keep it simple, short, but real.

Remember — a performance is not a display; it's an invitation. You are leading your audience through the weather of your inner landscape, and they will trust your steps if you walk them gently.

My Show — Two Sets, One Story

Set One: Opening the Door - your first set of songs

Break then Set Two — your next set of songs

 A Sentence Between Worlds

(Write the small lines you might say between songs — something that bridges one feeling to the next.)

Reflection Prompts

- How did it feel to imagine a real audience while you played?
- Did one song feel like a turning point — a place where the story shifted?
- Where did silence feel alive rather than empty?
- What did "goodnight" mean to you at the end of your show?

 **To rehearse your show is to rehearse your calm.** Each passage from song to song becomes a familiar path, and the more you walk it, the softer the ground becomes beneath your feet. Presence, like music, is learned by returning.



Just Keep Singing and Playing

There comes a moment, somewhere between practice and performance, where the two begin to blur — where what once felt like rehearsal becomes simply you being yourself in sound.

Joni Mitchell found that moment again and again. From coffeehouses to concert halls, she learned to let her voice carry her music, filling every space with presence, sincerity, and artistry. Her courage was not in silencing her nerves, but in embracing them as part of her performance. Each song, each performance, was a conversation with honesty and mastery.

And now, that conversation is yours. Your stage to begin with may be a living room, a porch, a small gathering of kind eyes — but the invitation is the same: to step into the light as you are, to share something authentic, and to trust that authenticity will resonate.

The work you've done in these pages and in the bonus journal part 2 — the reflections, the quiet run-throughs, the mindful rehearsals — are the foundation of real artistry. Every note, every phrase, every carefully chosen pause strengthens your craft and builds confidence.

Keep shaping your show, your craft, your calling.

And if you ever need guidance or inspiration, know that you are not alone. You can continue learning songs, refining technique, and exploring the intimate style of Joni Mitchell through my site at thelastlivingshepherdess.com.

For questions, encouragement, or to share your progress, feel free to reach out via email — I would love to hear from you.

May your musical journal be a beautiful one filled with strength and courage.

Avigail, The Last Living Shepherdess

"I'm not nervous anymore. I feel like you're my friend now."

— *Joni Mitchell, indicating a sense of comfort and connection with her audience ~ Covina Interview*