



Both Sides Now

In 2023 singer and songwriter Joni Mitchell received the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song from the U.S. government. It is a prestigious award because it is not for just one song, but for a lifetime of writing songs.

Joni Mitchell's best-known song is "Both Sides Now." She began writing it while flying in an airplane. She had a window seat, and when she looked out the window, she could see clouds below her. She thought about how she used to think clouds were beautiful – they looked like "ice cream castles in the air." But now, she wrote, "They only block the sun. They rain and snow on everyone." The clouds were like the obstacles she had faced in her life. "So many things I would've done, but clouds got in the way," she wrote.

When she got home, she continued writing the song. She wrote that her feelings about love and life had changed, too. She set the words to music and gave her song the title "Both Sides Now."

Joni Mitchell was 21 years old when she wrote "Both Sides Now." People were surprised at the age of the songwriter. How could someone so young have regrets about "so many things" she would have done? How could she already know both sides of love and life?

Most people did not know two facts about Joni Mitchell: She had polio as a child, and she had a secret daughter.

Joni got polio in the early 1950s, before there was a vaccine to prevent it. Her legs were paralyzed, and she was sent to a hospital 100 miles from her home. She was nine years old.

One day Joni told her doctor, "I want to go home."

"You can't," the doctor said.

"Why not?" Joni asked.

"Because you can't walk," he answered.

"Well, what if I walked?" Joni asked.

"You can't even stand up," he said.

"Well, what if I stood and walked?" Joni asked.

The doctor looked at the ceiling, sighed, looked down, and then left the room. He didn't think Joni would ever walk again. But she was determined. She kept trying to stand up until finally she stood up. Then she kept trying to walk until finally she walked. Joni was in the hospital for a year. When she went home, she was able to walk, but she was never able to run again.

Joni's next challenge came at age 20. She was studying art at a school in Calgary, Canada, when she became pregnant. Her boyfriend, who was also a student at the school, told Joni he wasn't ready to be a husband or father. Joni was on her own.

When Joni left the hospital with her baby daughter, she had no money, no job, and no home. (Her parents were 500 miles away and didn't know about the baby.) She quickly married a man she barely knew, but a few months later, they separated. Joni was on her own again. When her baby was eight months old, she did what she thought was best for her child: She gave her up for adoption. She didn't know who adopted her daughter, and she worried about her constantly.

So by age nine, Joni had already experienced the "win and lose" of life, and by age 20, she had already experienced the "give and take" of love. When she wrote "Both Sides Now" at age 21, she really did know life and love from both sides.

The song "Both Sides Now" was in the movie *Coda*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2022. The movie is about a fictional teenager named Ruby, whose

family makes a living fishing. Ruby wants to study music, and she has an audition to get into a prestigious music school. She sings "Both Sides Now" for her audition as her mother, father, and brother watch from the balcony. All three of them are deaf – Ruby is the only hearing person in her family – so she signs the words to the song with her hands as she sings. Ruby already knows both sides of life. She is 18 years old.

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