



A Parking Lot in Paradise

The first time Joni Mitchell visited Hawaii, she arrived late at night. When she woke up the next morning, she went to the window and opened the curtains. In the distance, she saw palm trees, green mountains, and white birds flying low. It was paradise! But when she looked down, she had a very different view. Below her was the huge, ugly parking lot of her hotel. She immediately sat down and began to write a song. "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot," she wrote.

Later she added more verses to her song. In the second verse, she wrote, "They took all the trees, put 'em in a tree museum." In the third verse, she asked farmers to stop using the pesticide DDT. (The pesticide was effective at killing insects, but it was harmful to birds. It is now illegal to use it in the United States.) The last verse of the song was personal, not political. She wrote that the man she loved left in a big yellow taxi. But the theme of all four verses was the same: "You don't know what you've got till it's gone."



In 1969, about the time Joni Mitchell wrote her song, several environmental disasters happened in the United States. In January there was a huge oil spill off the coast of California. People were shocked and angry when they saw photos of beaches and birds covered with oil.

In June there was a fire on a river in Ohio. Factories along the river were dumping oil into the water, and early one morning, the oil caught fire. These two events in 1969—the oil spill and the fire on the river—got people's attention. More and more people joined the environmental movement, and Joni Mitchell's song "Big Yellow Taxi" became its anthem.

