

# Joni Mitchell seeking to regroup with return to mainstream rock

BY ROGER KAYE  
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Although her albums have continued to sell respectably over the years, the music Joni Mitchell has recorded during the past decade rarely has made its way to the radio airwaves.

Mitchell's avant-garde musical experimentation that began in the late 1970s alienated most mainstream radio programmers and probably cost her some of her fans, too.

Although she still retains a loyal following, it has been a decade since one of her albums, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, went gold (for sales of at least 500,000).

The 44-year-old native of Alberta, Canada, last reached the Top 10 on *Billboard's* album chart with 1975's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

And her last major hit single was 1974's *Big Yellow Taxi*, which was a live remake of a 1970 studio hit.

Mitchell traces the beginning of her commercial decline to *Mingus*, the 1979 follow-up to *Don Juan* that featured the singer-writer performing some of the final compositions of jazz bassist-composer Charles Mingus.

And although Mitchell is proud of that effort along with the others that followed, she has decided to move back into the mainstream with her latest album, *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*.

The new album, which features an all-star lineup of backing talent, is unquestionably her strongest — and most commercial — recording in years.

Her customary cerebral approach to lyrics is still present. But she combines those with lots of pop hooks that should put this gifted writer back on the radio in a big way.

Mitchell already is receiving some air play with *Snakes and Ladders*, which has moved to the No. 37 position on *Billboard* magazine's album rock tracks chart.

The track features the vocals of former Eagle Don Henley on a song that Mitchell considers a "soap opera"

## Review: Album

### Joni Mitchell

*Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*: 10 tracks including *Snakes and Ladders*, *Dancin' Clown*, *My Secret Place*, *Cool Water* and *A Bird That Whistles*

about climbing the corporate ladder. She plays the part of "an air-brushed angel" while Henley is a "young-fogie financier."

Mitchell also considers another of the album's tunes, *Dancin' Clown*, to be a musical play with a cast of characters.

So for that one, she cast Billy Idol as a bully named Rowdy Yates and Tom Petty as a shy boy named Jesse.

Other guest artists helping out on the album are Benjamin Orr of the Cars, Steve Stevens of Billy Idol's band, Willie Nelson, Thomas Dolby, jazz man Wayne Shorter, Wendy & Lisa (Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman, formerly of Prince's Revolution), Indian actor and spokesman Iron Eyes Cody and Peter Gabriel.

The album — the 15th of her career and her first since 1985's *Dog Eat Dog* — was produced by Mitchell and her husband, Larry Klein.

It was recorded at nine studios in Los Angeles and England, including Gabriel's Ashcombe House in Bath.

Gabriel's duet with Mitchell on the ballad that opens the disc, *My Secret Place*, may be the best bet for a hit single.

Eight of the 10 tracks on *Chalk Mark* are originals written either by Mitchell or in collaboration with Klein, the bassist in her band who became her husband in November 1984.

Also included is a revised version of *Cool Water*, the Sons of the Pioneers classic Mitchell remembered from her childhood. Nelson takes the part of "Ol' Dan, the desert rat" in Mitchell's updated reading of the campfire standard.

*A Bird That Whistles*, the concluding track, is a new arrangement of the traditional *Corrina, Corrina*, a song that Joe Turner helped popularize in the 1950s.

A decade later, Mitchell began singing folk music in coffeehouses in Calgary. After moving to Detroit, she caught the attention of fellow folk artists with her compositions. And in 1967, Tom Rush became the first to cover her material when he recorded *Tin Angel* and *The Circle Game*.

However, it was Judy Collins who gave Mitchell her first smash by recording *Both Sides Now*, which became a Top 10 hit in 1968.

That same year saw the release of Mitchell's debut album, *Songs to a Seagull*, which was produced by David Crosby. In 1970, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young scored a big hit with the Mitchell-penned *Woodstock*.

Those hit covers by other artists coupled with a series of her own classic albums like *Clouds*, *Ladies of the Canyon*, *Blue*, *For the Roses* and *Court and Spark* established Mitchell as one of the most respected singer-writers of the rock era.

And although her latest album isn't likely to score big points with the MTV generation, *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* should hit home with an adult audience that appreciates Mitchell's thoughtful brand of rock 'n' roll.

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