

DOG EAT DOG

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A slick '80s studio sound, righteous anger at religious nuts, taxation and the famine in Africa – and a resounding commercial flop.



DOG EAT DOG was the first album of Joni's second marriage, to bassist Larry Klein who had worked with her on 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*, and all should have been idyllic in their Malibu home. But "things were piling up," as Klein remembers today, "and they combined to create an angry state of mind."

And how. Childhood polio after-effects surfaced; botched dentistry; a serious collision with a drunk driver. Then there were legal disputes – with her

ex-housekeeper, and the State of California to recover a 15 per cent 'wholesale tax' levied on her, Neil Young and other rock stars. Though Joni prevailed, it was at a cost, later admitting to being in consequence angrily (if perhaps belatedly) awoken to the injustices of the world as seen on TV in their "insular" domesticity.

The Ethiopia famine was unfolding, with Live Aid and We Are The World. Then there were the televangelists: "We developed an obsession with watching Jimmy Swaggart on TV," Klein remembers. "It was a

Lucky girl: Joni at the Grammy Awards, Shrine Auditorium, LA, February 26, '85.



TRACKS



Side 1

Good Friends

Fiction

The Three Great
Stimulants

Tax Free

Smokin' (Empty,
Try Another)

Side 2

Dog Eat Dog

Shiny Toys

Ethiopia

Impossible
Dreamer

Lucky Girl

theatre of strange human behaviour – the political environment was being influenced by these television evangelists with such huge audiences; meanwhile, they were all misbehaving.

“Focusing on these negative things in the world and in her personal sphere came out in the songwriting.”

To a sombre, stately tune, the song Ethiopia contextualised the famine within the global climate crisis, and Tax Free featured a televangelist – “tonight I’m going dancing with the drag queens and the punks/Big beat deliver me from this sanctimonious skunk,” Joni sang – in a ranting cameo by Malibu neighbour Rod Steiger. They knew Steiger (“a great character, angry in an interesting way”) from the local lunch counter attached to the pharmacy where the likes of Paul Newman and Jack Nicholson would pop in for a tuna sandwich; he was rewarded with a case of Chateau Margaux.

Although the most angry aspect of the sound of *Dog Eat Dog* was the mix – drummer Vinnie Colaiuta and guitarists Michael Landau and Steve Lukather returned from the previous album but this time bang in your face – what most jumped out in 1985 was that Joni had traded her guitar for the CMI Fairlight sampler. “She was interested in digital technology, curious about all of it,” says Klein. “I would be playing different records around the house, saying, Check this out. One of them was Thomas Dolby’s *The Flat Earth*.”

Not only did that album inspire Klein and Joni to learn Fairlight basics, but the couple recruited Dolby as “colourist”. This would cause further conflict when she butted heads with the English public school wizard du jour – in his memoir he repented he was “probably too much of a brat” – and then, suspecting him of manoeuvring to promote Dolby in the LP’s credits, Joni broke with Elliot Roberts, her manager of 17 years.

Despite the soothing presence of Michael McDonald duetting on Good Friends, James Taylor and sax legend Wayne Shorter, *Dog Eat Dog* sounded like Joni was using its own weapons to do battle with the modern world. Exemplifying the conflict between her artistic comfort zone and angry reboot was the album’s last song. “With Lucky Girl, the samples loaded up into the Fairlight in a screwy way,” says Klein. “She was sparked by that, so developed a song around this bunch of noises. It was sweet in the context of a lot of angry songs, a counterweight.”

Sweet indeed, as buoyant and lovely as anything Joni had ever written – but you couldn’t quite hear it for all the distracting noise. Nor could her album-buying public, *Dog Eat Dog* proving a resounding commercial flop. Would Joni change course? “I don’t think sales figures or reviews affected where she would want to go creatively on the next project,” Larry Klein recalls. “But it was painful.” ●

“Joni was angrily, if perhaps belatedly, awoken to the injustices of the world, as seen on TV.”