

# CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM

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*It contained her career nadir in an ill-advised duet with Billy Idol but, sonically inspired by Peter Gabriel's new studio gadgetry, Chalk Mark... would put Joni back on track.*



**Prophetic:** Joni promoting *Chalk Mark* at the Sebel Townhouse, Sydney, May 30, 1988.

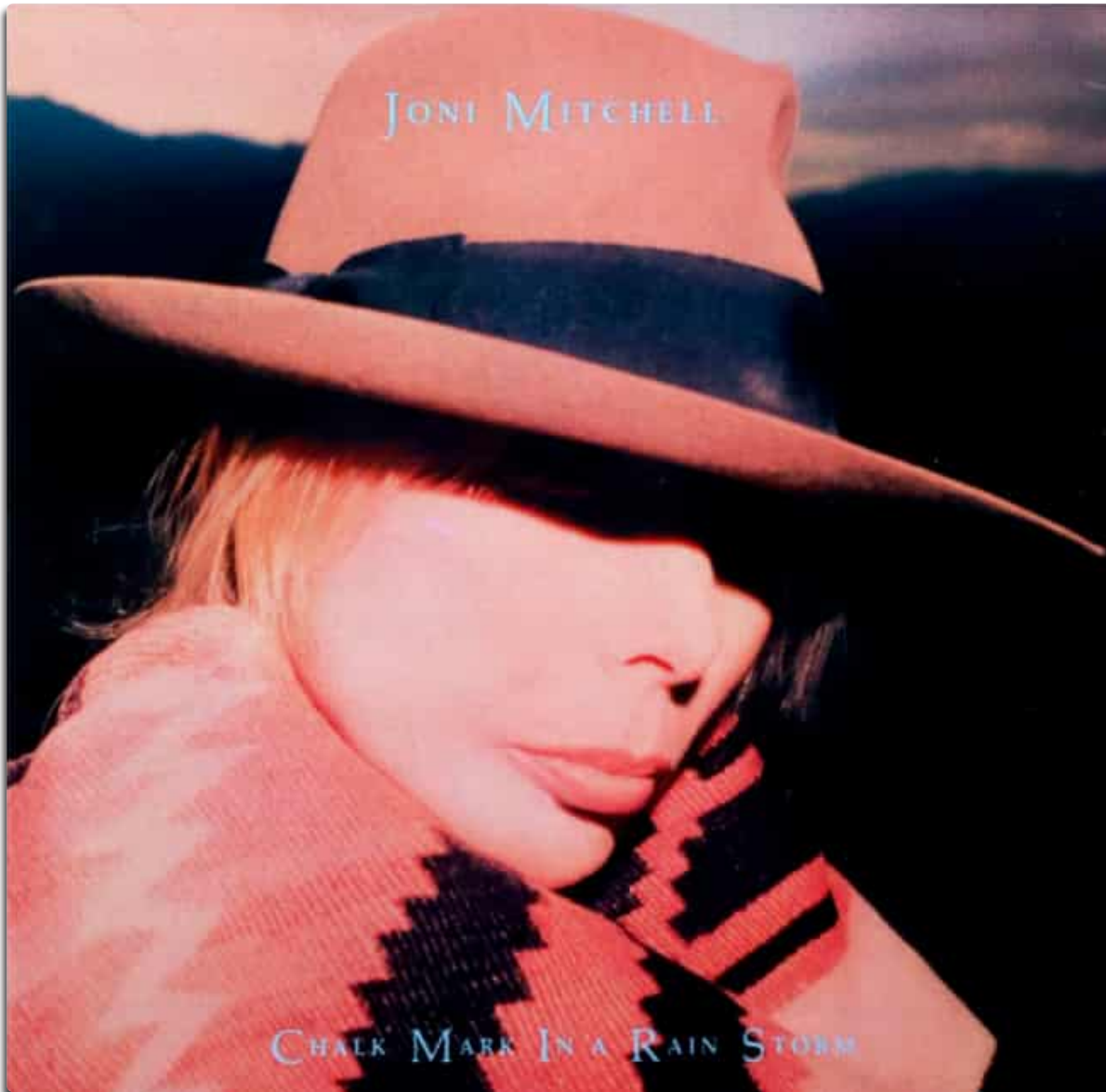
**N**OT EXACTLY A duets album, *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* nonetheless opened Joni Mitchell's music up to a wide cast of guest voices. While some proved to be simpatico – Don Henley, Willie Nelson, Peter Gabriel – the appearance of Billy Idol's comedy mugging on the MTV rock of *Dancin' Clown* ("C'moan! Wow! Woo!") may have further revealed Joni's soft spot for a rebel, but possibly marked the nadir of her recorded career.

It was but a blip, though. Instead, *Chalk Mark* found Mitchell, on what was her best album of the '80s, re-discovering her voice amid the omnipresent synths

and samplers and drum machines of the era. Made with the core trio of herself, co-producer, bassist and husband Larry Klein, and guitarist Michael Landau, it saw Joni herself pick up the guitar again after ditching it entirely on 1985's *Dog Eat Dog*.

Work on this record began in 1986 when Mitchell and Klein visited Peter Gabriel at his Ashcombe Farm home, near Bath, where he'd converted the barn to a studio and was putting the finishing touches to his commercial breakthrough LP, *So*. Gabriel offered Joni studio time and the result was the pair duetting as whispering lovers on *Chalk Mark*'s opener, *My Secret Place*.

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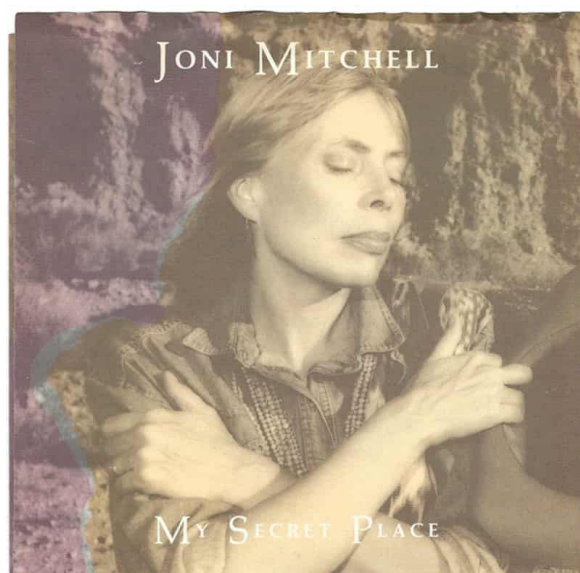


The more atmospheric parts of *So* seem to have been the template for Mitchell's 13th studio album, not least in the way she employed the same drummer, Manu Katché, whose polyrhythmic parts were then over-engineered in the gated, gunshot fashion of the period, ultimately dating the sound of the LP. The stripped-out production – a bit cold and thin, while weirdly glossy – was apparently more to Larry Klein's taste. "I would have made *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* denser but Klein stopped me," Mitchell claimed in 2007.

It was in its warmer, more layered passages that *Chalk Mark* was at its best. Number One tackled '80s money-grabbing and ladder-climbing over an angular drum machine beat and the hushed vocal support of The Cars' Benjamin Orr. An update of Bob Nolan's 1936 dustbowl country ballad *Cool Water*, with new couplets by Mitchell, became about pollution, and fittingly featured Willie Nelson. "Some devils had a plan," Mitchell sang, before Nelson responded with "buried poison in the sand". "Don't drink it, man," Joni warned him. The fact that the song's production echoed the urban noir of *The Blue Nile* made the overall effect all the more unusual.

Equally striking was the slow-burning *The Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms)*, which was based on the strange circumstances surrounding the singer's parents' meeting in Canada during the Second World

War (as foretold to Joni's mother by a fortune teller) and invited Wendy and Lisa (fresh from the break-up of Prince's *The Revolution*) into the fold. Elsewhere, there were plenty of other highspots – Henley's line-swapping turn on game-of-love study *Snakes And Ladders*, the portrait of a Vietnam vet suffering PTSD in *The Beat Of Black Wings* – to offer proof that, after a tough decade, Joni was right back on track. ●



## TRACKS



## Side 1

My Secret Place

Number One

Lakota

The Tea Leaf  
Prophecy (Lay  
Down Your Arms)

Dancin' Clown



## Side 2

Cool Water

The Beat Of Black  
WingsSnakes And  
LaddersThe Reoccurring  
DreamA Bird That  
Whistles