

THE 100
Greatest
**GUITAR
HEROES**



Starring

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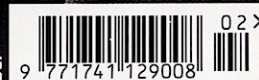
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UNCUT Legends

THE 100 GREATEST GUITAR HEROES

As with most things to do with the guitar, Jimi Hendrix was bang on the money when he said, "I wish they'd had electric guitars in cotton fields back in the good old days - a whole lot of things would've been straightened out."


Ever since the apocryphal story of Robert Johnson travelling down to the crossroads to exchange his mortal soul for infernal fretboard skills entered into popular mythology, there's always been something magical about the guitar and the people that play it. By way of tribute, *Uncut Legends* is proud to present *The 100 Greatest Guitar Heroes* - a star-studded celebration of all things six-string.

Over the following 140 or so pages you'll find the definitive countdown of this talismanic instrument's most inspirational proponents, as voted for by the staff and contributors of *Uncut* magazine. Seeing as how guitar heroes come in many shapes and forms - after all, there's no such thing as a typical plumber, so why should there be a typical guitar hero? - there was only one real

criterion for inclusion on this list: no matter their mode or milieu, each entrant had to have made the instrument their own.

As such, this isn't necessarily a round-up of the greatest guitar *players* in the world - while some of the musicians included here undoubtedly are, others aren't even the greatest guitar players in their own bands - but rather a run-down of the most influential, inspirational and iconic musicians ever to pick up a plank and carve out a chord. You may not agree with every selection, but there's no denying the stellar array of talent within.

So strap on, plug in, and revel in the glory of *The 100 Greatest Heroes*.


Dan Silver
Editor



72

Joni MITCHELL

The deceptively ingenious folk innovator who reinvented tuning

BY NIGEL WILLIAMSON

DID YOU KNOW?

Joni was scheduled to appear at Woodstock, but her manager made her turn back en route as "the traffic was too bad". She wrote "Woodstock" to make up for it.

Even some of her most straightforward-sounding folk-styled songs, such as "Both Sides Now" and "Chelsea Morning", were actually composed and played in open tunings. As a result Mitchell could create the most complex chords full of unusual consonances, dissonances and drones by the simplest fingerings, and the discovery became the foundation of her music.

Joni herself was once asked to describe her guitar style. "It's closer to Debussy and to classical composition, and it has its own harmonic movement which doesn't belong to any camp," she answered. "It's not jazz, like people think. It has in common with jazz that the harmony is

very wide, but there are laws to jazz chordal movement, and this is outside those laws for the most part."

By her own calculation, Mitchell has used 51 tunings in her songs over the years, each offering its own universe of different possibilities. She compares this continual changing to sitting down at a typewriter on which

the letters are rearranged each day. "If you're only working off what you know, then you can't grow. It's only through error that discovery is made, and in order to discover you have to set up some sort random element, a strange attractor, using contemporary physics terms. You're constantly pulling the rug out from under yourself, so you don't get a chance to settle into any kind of formula."

It's this that marks her out as such an extraordinary and unique guitarist, and it's fascinating to trace how her use of tunings and the freedom it confers has allowed her to grow ever more audacious over the course of her long career.

Mitchell plays chords so unconventional you'll think you've never heard them before

Mitchell's first five albums were essentially solo works, built around her guitar, dulcimer, piano and voice. But even here there's substantial growth. Her debut album 1968 featured some delicate finger-picking on top of her unusual chords, but by *Blue*, her fourth release in 1971, she was coaxing

A guitarist whose playing is always full of surprise and discovery, Joni Mitchell boasts a style that seems to stand outside the accepted conventions of folk, pop and rock music. Listen to her songs and you will hear chords so unconventional that you think you've never heard them before.

Specialist guitar magazines devote entire articles to analysing her tunings and unusual harmonic structures. At times her guitar doesn't even sound like a guitar at all. As the American magazine *Acoustic Guitar* once put it, "The way she tunes her strings to the way she strokes them with her right hand, is utterly off the chart of how most of us approach the guitar... the treble strings become a cool-jazz horn section; the bass snaps out syncopations like a snare drum; the notes ring out in clusters that simply don't come out of a normal six-string."

Except that in Mitchell's hands, somehow they do.

Mitchell was a late starter on the instrument. As a child she had piano lessons and didn't buy her first guitar until 1964, when she was 20. At first she played in standard folk tunings, learning from Pete Seeger's *How To Play Folk-Style Guitar*. However, childhood polio had left her with a weak left hand and she began to compensate by experimenting with open tunings copied from old blues records, initially in G and D. As her songwriting developed, she grew more adventurous, creating her own unique tunings, several of which she cannot now remember.

The result is that even among her earliest compositions, only "Tin Angel" and "Urge For Going" are in standard tuning. Astonishingly, we have to wait more than 30 years for her next, "Harlem In Havana" from the 1998 album *Taming The Tiger*.



HULTON/CORBIS

Mitchell (right) with James Taylor (moustache)



extraordinarily rhythmic and percussive sounds out of the guitar with her right hand, perhaps because many of the albums songs had been composed on a dulcimer. By 1974's *Court And Spark* she was working with a full band. Many of her favoured musicians had jazz training and by *Hejira*, in 1976, she was working with the bassist Jaco Pastorius. His style revolutionised electric bass playing, but it was Mitchell's unique use of chords and sense of harmonics that enabled him to do so, while his singular approach in turn influenced Mitchell's guitar-playing.

When she came to record *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* in 1988, Mitchell had grown so bold she was recording 16 and even 24 guitars on some tracks. Never one to shy away from technology, and in the mid-'90s, she again showed her willingness to experiment

when she began playing a Stratocaster-style guitar with a Roland VG-8. A 'virtual guitar', it allows the strings physically to stay in the same tuning but alters the tones coming out of the speakers. Not bad going for a woman routinely dismissed a flax-haired folkie.

Indeed, Mitchell's image is about as far removed from that of the traditional guitar hero as it's possible to be. It surely also won't have escaped your notice that she is the only female to appear in

this list. Tellingly, when Mitchell began working with a full band in the early-'70s, she had problems with male guitarists who'd try to stamp their own personality over her music. "I'd end up trying to tell them how to play," she recalled many years later. "And they'd say, 'Isn't it cute? She's telling me how to play my axe, and I've played with James Brown.'" It was difficult as a female to guide males into playing what I wanted."

And while this is not the place to rehearse the familiar rant about the on-going sexism of rock'n'roll, it's worth pointing out that Mitchell's presence here is precisely because she is so different and plays in her own unique style. In other words, she's not competing with the boys because none of them play remotely like her. ♡

It's fascinating to trace how Mitchell's use of tunings allowed her to grow more audacious



WE'VE GOT A FUZZBOX
FIVE GREAT FEMALE GUITARISTS

MEMPHIS MINNIE

The original six-string siren. She ran away from home to play music in Memphis in 1910 when she was 13, which surely

outdoes even Courtney Love. And she was also one of the first to play amplified guitar in 1939.



BONNIE RAITT

Her father sang in the original Broadway productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* but Bonnie preferred the grittier sound of the blues and turned herself into an ace slide guitarist.



CHARLOTTE HATHERLEY

Chazza was just 19 when she joined Ash in 1997 but she's more than held her own

with the boys. If anything, her solo album *Grey Will Fade* outshone recent output from her day-job, proving Hatherley was a talented singer and songwriter as well as a powerful axe-woman.



of whip-thin college boys with social issues. It seems strong, intelligent women with social issues can do it too.

KIRSTEN HERSH

Chief Throwing Muse and darling of the '80s American alternative scene, Hersh proved that

wistful, reflective rock music wasn't the sole preserve

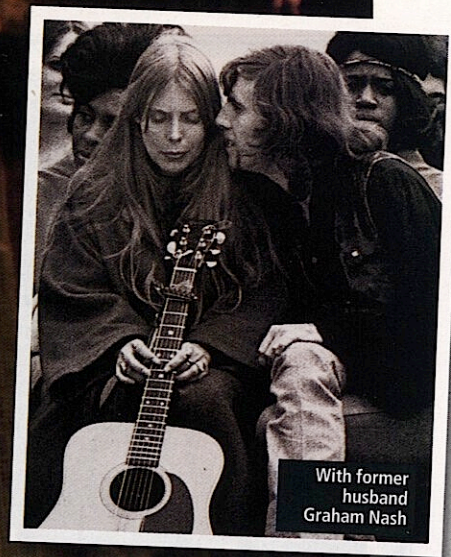
POISON IVY

With her Gretsch hollow bodied guitars and rare vintage 1958 Chet Atkins 6120, The Cramps' six-stringer's choice of instruments

is perhaps more impressive than her gloriously tasteless, schlock-rock playing. Or maybe that's just rock'n'roll sexism all over again...



HENRY DULTZ/CORBIS/REDUX (REX)



With former husband Graham Nash



PICKS

GREATEST RIFF: "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire", *For The Roses* (Asylum, 1972)
GREATEST SOLO: Amelia, *Hejira* (Asylum, 1976)
ESSENTIAL ALBUM: *Blue* (Reprise, 1971)
INFLUENCED BY: Stephen Stills, Jaco Pastorius; Charles Mingus
INFLUENCE ON: Rickie Lee Jones, Jaco Pastorius, KT Tunstall

HENRY DULTZ / CORBIS/RETNA

67

Nick DRAKE

Prodigious pastoral folkie whose immense talents went to waste

BY JAMES BAY

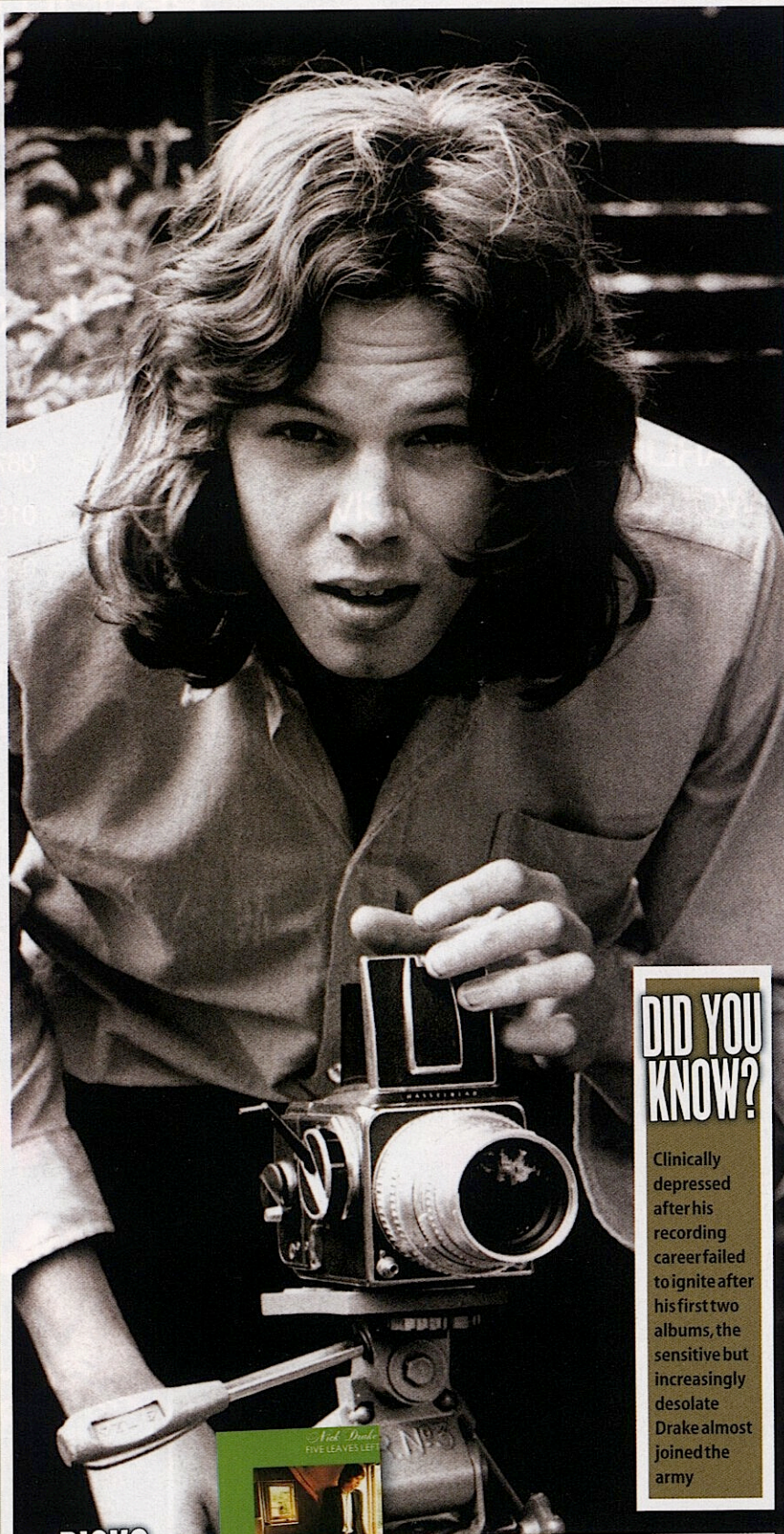
Born into a prosperous, artistic, middle-class family, the tall, Cambridge-educated Nick Drake seemingly had it all. A naturally gifted musician whose elongated fingers might have been designed to grapple decorously with a rosewood fretboard, he was a guitarist of prodigious ability who soaked up acoustic folk and blues influences, recasting them as elegiac English pastorals that recall the classical Arcadia of Vaughan Williams as readily as the folk guitar explorations of Davy Graham or Bert Jansch.

Drake's short, sad life is well-documented – the English maverick who dies Chatterton-like, probably at his own hand; his genius unrecognised, his mind black with depression. Drake had some reason to be miffed: he hardly sold a record during his lifetime and few mourned when he died in November 1974. Yet, with the subsequent endorsement of guitar eminences like Tom Verlaine and Peter Buck, Drake's plummy-voiced disquisitions on autumnal melancholy have been ushered to a permanent place at British rock's high table.

Yet even Drake has his critics. Some find his lyrics precious, others balk at the luxuriant string arrangements Robert Kirby dripped over two of Drake's three albums. But even the naysayers genuflect before his guitar playing – a rich, mesmerising lattice of fast fingerpicking and plangent chording that seems to hover ineffably between the intimacy of the acoustic folk-blues tradition and the graceful toll of English church bells.

Drake's eloquent six-string vocabulary actually owes its resonance and harmonic depth to a litany of exotic open tunings, but he was a versatile stylist too, essaying jazzy 5/4 shuffles and hymnal progressions on debut album *Five Leaves Left*, chiming baroque-meets-Elizabethan counterpoints on the succeeding *Bryter Layter* and wintry picking on his stark swansong, *Pink Moon*.

Three decades since his untimely death, Drake's ability to wrench both eggshell fragility and soaring, symphonic emotion from humble steel and wood remains unsurpassed.



DID YOU KNOW?

Clinically depressed after his recording career failed to ignite after his first two albums, the sensitive but increasingly desolate Drake almost joined the army

PICKS

GREATEST RIFF: "Time Has Told Me", *Five Leaves Left* (Island/

Hannibal, 1969)

GREATEST SOLO: "One Of These Things First",

Bryter Layter (Island/ Hannibal, 1969)

ESSENTIAL ALBUM: *Five Leaves Left* (Island/ Hannibal, 1969)

INFLUENCED BY: Josh White, Jackson C

Frank, Bob Dylan
INFLUENCE ON: Peter Buck, Mark Eitzel

