

## A critical discography

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You can accuse **Joni Mitchell** of many things, but complacency is not one of them. Over the course of her 25-year recording career, Mitchell has appeared in many musical and lyrical guises: earnest folkie, eclectic pop star, aspiring jazzbo, musical dramatist, political pundit. Not all those guises have fit well, but the transformations make Mitchell one of the more interesting and unpredictable survivors of pop's baby boom era.

She is also one of the few artists who has never released a greatest hits record, although one is reportedly in the works as a result of her new deal with Warner Bros. Still, it is debatable whether any hits package could capture the variety of



Mitchell's career, or, if it could, whether it would be the most cohesive listening experience.

**Joni Mitchell (1968):** Mitchell enjoyed success as a songwriter even before releasing this first record,

originally titled *Song To A Seagull*. Her work had been covered by Tom Rush, Buffy Sainte-Marie and, most notably, Judy Collins, who eventually took *Both Sides Now* to No. 8 on Billboard's Hot 100. But if Mitchell had arrived as a songwriter — she was confident enough to leave both that song and *The Circle Game* off this debut, produced by David Crosby (of Byrds and Crosby, Stills and Nash fame) — she seemed unformed as a performer. Mitchell tries on various voices — some fit (*Night in the City*, *Cactus Tree*), some don't (*The Circle of Penance*) — and Crosby offers little more than off-the-rack folk production. ★★

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# Blue established Joni Mitchell as quintessential singer-songwriter

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**Clouds (1969):** What a difference a year makes. Mitchell takes over as producer, and her singing seems less mannered and more confident. She still a folkie at heart, strumming away on an acoustic guitar, but there is a promising pop drive and lyrical directness to songs such as *Chelsea Morning* and *Both Sides Now*. ★★

**Ladies of the Canyon (1970):** Mitchell plays piano as well as guitar and paints a postcard from the fading days of the counterculture, with a nod to Woodstock and the rich hippie lifestyle of L.A.: Some of the songs here have not aged well — the title track's portrait of what critic Ellen Willis called "the 'complete hippie chick'" is a bit of a relic — but the album shows both Mitchell's increasing sophistication (*The Arrangement*) and her ability to combine pop playfulness with smart lyrics (*Big Yellow Taxi*). ★★★½

**Blue (1971):** Frequently cited as Mitchell's masterpiece, *Blue* established her as the quintessential singer-songwriter. Recorded in the wake of her split with lover Graham Nash, *Blue* offers a bittersweet tally of the emotional wreckage of love, longing and leaving. More than 20 years later it still has resonance. ★★★★

**For the Roses (1972):** While not as enduring as *Blue* or as commerci-

ally successful as *Court and Spark*, *For the Roses* remains an important part of Mitchell's career, if only as a transitional album in her continued move away from folk music. Tom Scott provides subtle accents, Bobby Notkoff adds strings and Mitchell, sounding bruised by love but wiser for it, stretches her melodic lines out even further than on *Blue*. ★★★★

**Court and Spark (1974):** Still her most commercially successful record, it is also her most playful and fun. Mitchell lands hit singles with a soul ballad about commitment anxiety (*Help Me*), a rockin' little number about hooker/hoser love (*Raised On Robbery*) and a tip of the hat to record mogul David Geffen (*Free Man in Paris*) and covers Annie Ross and Wardell Gray's spoof of psychoanalysis (*Twisted*). Even Scott and the L.A. Express, usually purveyors of schlock jazz fusion, sound good here. ★★★★

**Miles of Aisles (1974):** Well, you can't keep a schlock jazz fusion band down for long. This survey of early material has its moments, but Scott and company revert to form. ★★

**The Hissing of Summer Lovers (1975):** After years of baring her soul and the lives of her pals, Mitchell takes a closer gander at the rest of the world, notably suburbia (on the title track and *Harry's House* — *Centerpiece*) and writes a catchy little

love song to rock and roll (*In France They Kiss on Main Street*). Musically, she continues to take chances, setting *The Jungle Line* to drums from Burundi and heading off into the stratosphere with the hymn-like *Shadows and Light*. Not all the chances pan out, but Mitchell's melodies and insights stand up. ★★★

**Hejira (1976):** Out with the L.A. Express, in with great jazz bassist Jaco Pastorius and guitarist Larry Carlton. Mitchell seems to have sensed the passing of the years. Songs such as *Amelia*, *Furry Sings the Blues* and *Song for Sharon* muse on mortality and maturity, and there is a haunting atmosphere created by the interplay between Pastorius's silky bass and Mitchell's cool, melancholy voice. ★★★½

**Don Juan's Reckless Daughter (1977):** Oops. A double album that could have been a single, this unfocused, flabby effort is Mitchell's first major misstep. It also marks the beginning of rough period in her career. ★½

**Mingus (1979):** An ambitious experiment and the logical culmination of Mitchell's flirtation with jazz, this collaboration with the brilliant bassist and composer Charles Mingus, completed after his death, never really lives up to its promise. Mitchell sounds intimidated and, save for her reworking of Mingus's tribute to saxophonist Lester Young tribute, *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, she never really swings. ★★½

**Shadows and Light (1980):** Another crack at a live album, but this time she gets players with a little more taste. Pastorius, Michael Brecker, Pat Metheny and The Persuasions join Mitchell as she reworks recent material and tosses in a cover of Dion and the Belmonts' *Teenager in Love*. Easily the better of the two live sets. ★★★

**Wild Things Run Fast (1982):** It sounds like a return to pop, but it's a self-conscious return, as signified by *Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody*, in which two middle-age lovers recall their wild days together. Still, with a weird cover of Elvis's *You're So Square* and love songs such *You Dream Flat Tires* (guest vocalist: Lionel Richie), it's more fun than anything since *Court and Spark* and Mitchell's voice sounds as lovely and expressive as it ever has. ★★★

**Dog Eat Dog (1985):** Joni discovers current affairs, a curious choice for someone who recently boasted of not having read a newspaper in years. Her targets are pretty obvious — money-grubbing evangelists, evangelistic money-grubbers and corrupt politicians of various stripes — and while she seems to be having fun with her new synthesizer, the electronics sometimes make the album sound gimmicky. ★★

**Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm (1988):** I'm sure casting an album like a movie seemed like a good idea at the time, but shouldn't there be a warning on the cover if you're going to give Billy Idol a cameo? More politics (native rights are good, war and yuppies aren't), more synths (New Age washes this time) and a pleasant MOR single in *My Secret Place*. Willie Nelson shows up for a nifty version of *Cool, Clear Water*. ★★

**Night Ride Home (1991):** Mitchell rediscovers the acoustic guitar, strikes a balance between social commentary and personal retrospection and comes up with her most approachable, most relaxed album in more than a decade. She looks back on adolescence with both a bemused fondness (on *Ray's Dad's Cadillac* and *Come in from the Cold*) and quiet horror (on *Cherokee Louise*), sings of a society on the rocks with wit and empathy (on *The Windfall*, *Passion Play* and, to a lesser degree, on her adaptation of Yeats' *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*) and offers some tough love songs. After the fussiness of much of 1980s work, the cleaned-up and sparse production is a welcome relief and a promise of good things to come. ★★★★