

THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

JONI MITCHELL

UPDATED
DELUXE
EDITION

EVERY ALBUM
REVIEWED

CLASSIC
ENCOUNTERS,
REDISCOVERED

A Case Of You
JONI MITCHELL
THE FULL STORY

ARCHIVES
VOL 1:
THE VERDICT

HER 30
GREATEST
SONGS

THE 2020
COMEBACK

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**

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DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

RELEASED 13 DECEMBER 1977

The secret gem at the heart of Joni Mitchell's career.
Watch out for the tequila-anaconda!

BY JON DALE

JONI Mitchell went to ground for most of 1977. She'd booked a European tour, which was subsequently cancelled; she claimed exhaustion, though she was also deep in the steely grip of her new music, collaborating again with Jaco Pastorius and John Guerin, but also feeling out the possibilities with other, new musicians. She was inching yet closer towards jazz, her songs sometimes now seemingly impenetrable blocks of composition, at other times broad watercolour sweeps of landscape from a painter's brush. Keeping a low profile, when she did move through the world, Mitchell was more inclined to adopt personae, to explore the possibility of being something 'other', manifesting the reality of the Cartesian calling, "masked, I advance". All of this led to the thorny thickets of song that make up *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, a double album where her music can take full flight, with all the risk and trepidation that entails. It's an album that has long divided critics. At the time of its release, the reception afforded to *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was often chilly, sometimes brutal: in *Rolling Stone*, Janet Maslin reported that "[the] best that can be said" for it was that "it is an instructive failure". Mitchell's period of critical immunity had long since passed, with *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* the place where it all started to break down. Interestingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the more overt nods toward jazz and other black musics that seemed to sour critics on Mitchell.

Over time, though, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* has been recognised as an album for those who quietly

quest, who ask questions of the possibilities of music, and of the limitations built into the form by its economic and industry grounding. Björk has long been an advocate for the album's riskiness and openness, mentioning that she'd learned both *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Hejira* "by heart" in her teenage years: "She was creating her own universe; she wasn't a guest in a man's world. I liked music that was more modal, more chromatic. There is more room for the singer to improvise."

As with all of Mitchell's albums from the mid- to late-'70s, after the commercial peak of *Court And Spark*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* has created its own cult, made up mostly of fans who recognise the potency of Mitchell's vision at its most extended. Part of that 'extension' comes of yet deeper immersion in jazz, but a particular kind of jazz – Mitchell seemed keen to position herself closely alongside jazz fusion, one of several arcs the music had taken since its heated engagements alongside the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Though she'd broken up with drummer John Guerin, he's across the album, his playing at a confident peak. The wide tone of Jaco Pastorius's bass – at times, you feel like you could ride a semi-trailer through it – is as omnipresent as it was on *Hejira*, but here it's far more part of the landscape, unlike on *Hejira*, where its intimate tussle with Mitchell's guitar gave the album much of its sonic depth.

Mitchell also called on a number of Pastorius's colleagues from his jazz fusion group Weather Report. Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira, who'd recently ►

JONI MITCHELL

Don Juan's
Reckless
Daughter



A double album where
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that entails

appeared on albums by Chick Corea, Hermeto Pascoal, Flora Purim and Danilo Caymmi, brought his fluency with South American rhythms to bear on the album. Two other percussionists, Alejandro Acuña and Manolo Badrena, were also part of the extended group: Acuña had recently guested with Lee Ritenour, while Badrena had appeared on Moreira's solo album *I'm Fine, How Are You?*, and George Duke's jazz-funk set *Reach For It*.

The real revelation for Mitchell, though, was percussionist Don Alias, who'd played with Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Nina Simone, Tony Williams Lifetime, Elvin Jones, John McLaughlin and Lalo Schifrin, while a sometime member of Pastorius's Big Band and Blood Sweat & Tears. Alias would become Mitchell's romantic partner, and just as importantly, a creative sparring partner who could teach her much about jazz. Alias recalls his initial scepticism at being invited by Pastorius to appear on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* dissolving when he heard her play, later marvelling, "What a genius of a musician Joni was! And intuitive! And eloquent!"

The depth and articulate wisdom of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* came about thanks to this confluence of musicians, with Mitchell's writing stretching yet further from the extended songforms she'd explored on parts of *Hejira*. But if that album had an almost wintry chill, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was vibrant, and carnivalesque at points, and indeed, one of Mitchell's inspirations, reportedly, was a visit to the pre-Lent Carnival in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, when the streets run rife with the various *escola de samba*, or 'samba schools' – dancing clubs grounded in their local community. As with several of Mitchell's previous albums, there's a sense with much of the album of a skin being shed, of Mitchell questing to find a new self, to suspend the internal monologue of her own identity and live vicariously through unpredictable encounters with the other.

Having said that, Mitchell's approach to this on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* moves from the touristic gaze into something far more problematic. Her adoption of blackface, dressing up as a pimp, sometimes known as Claude, but eventually gifted the name of Art Nouveau, feels particularly inexcusable given not only her ransacking of the wide and varied aesthetics of black musics as the backbone of her music during this, her most experimental phase, but also the intense growth of cross-cultural awareness that had resulted from the Civil Rights movement. If you're being generous – which one would be inclined not to be, given blackface and brownface's place as an oppressive sociocultural force in American history – you could say it's a way of exploring the complications of identity. But it leaves a bitter taste: while it's clearly not born of malicious intent, it's still off-base, uncalled for.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"On *Don Juan...* she has fallen from the tightrope and, although she always climbs back up, her performance is distinctly patchy... With commendable adventure she has spread herself over four sides of this album, but she has neither moved forward nor consolidated the success of *Hejira* and ...*Summer Laws*."

MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, DECEMBER 24, 1977

"Yet another set of clothes for the uncrowned empress of the popular song. Half dependable and immediately enjoyable, half empirical and as yet largely unfathomable. Me? I want to learn to love it."

ANGUS MACKINNON, NME, DECEMBER 24, 1977

It's all the more of a shame that Mitchell would present this on the front cover of the album, for *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is the secret gem at the heart of her career. On the album's most rigorously developed and considered song, the side-long, 16-minute "Paprika Plains", Mitchell reminisces over her early years, painting a lyrical tableau that weaves together romantic recall of the prairies of her childhood, of the First Nations peoples of Canada, while also mulling over the results of an encounter with Bob Dylan, at a party on the Queen Mary. As Mitchell later recalled: "After a long silence he said, 'If you were gonna paint this room, what would you paint?' I said, 'Well, let me think. I'd paint the mirrored ball spinning, I'd paint the women in the washroom, the band...' Later, all the stuff came back to me as part of a dream that became the song 'Paprika Plains'."

The song itself, episodic in structure, dips into an extended orchestral lacuna where an arrangement from Michael Gibbs – whose arranging career, at that point, included work for Uriah Heep, Peter Gabriel, Stan Getz, and, *uh*, The Goodies – catches some of the nostalgic strangeness of the compositions of American mavericks Charles Ives and George Crumb. Wayne Shorter's saxophone in the song's final quarter is spirited and quietly fierce, echoing the economy he must have learned from playing with Miles Davis: one of his other engagements of the year was Steely Dan's *Aja*, another complex, rigorously thought-through set of songs. Mitchell felt she'd found a kindred spirit in Shorter, not least in the similarly poetic and visual ways he discussed music: "Before he started to play sax, he said to me, 'It's like we're in Hyde Park, and there's a nanny with a baby in a boat on the pond, just nudging it, her hand's nudging it.'"

The structural experiments of "Paprika Plains" make way for the disarmed, percussive explorations of "The Tenth World" and "Dreamland", which take up much of the third side of the album. A worthy exploration of the polyrhythmic possibilities inherent in Mitchell's lineup on the album, with "The Tenth World" a collectively composed/improvised piece, there's something that doesn't quite hold together on these songs. Later covered by Roger McGuinn, "Dreamland" unpacks the colonial and the carnivalesque at the heart

of the cultures that spirit through the album, but the real joy in the song is the way Mitchell's voice twines with Chaka Khan's, both in intimate consort across a threshing thread of percussion.

Elsewhere, the music is a bit less diffuse, the songs more recognisably Joni in storyteller mode. The opening "Overture", with a chorus of Mitchell singing siren-drone over meandering guitar and gut-bending Pastorius bass, leaps into "Cotton Avenue"'s skipping, tensile rhythm, a perfect accompaniment to Mitchell's hymning of the titular strip in Macon, Georgia: "*That's where I'm going to take myself tonight/With a spit shine on my dancing shoes*". The stealthy prowl of the song slides into the anxious clip of "Talk To Me", where Mitchell's plea for the intersubjective encounter comes burdened with her cultural capital – Chaplin, Bergman, Shakespeare ("*Willy The Shake*") all fly past in her quick-spin stutter. "*You spend every sentence as if it were marked currency!*"

What catches the ear and mind about Mitchell's lyrics throughout *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is the passing viscerality of their observations, the way she signs her songs in blood and body, from the drunk self in "Talk To Me" who's busy "*[pissing] a tequila-anaconda/The full length of the parking lot!*" to the dancefloor revelation of "Paprika Plains", where a mature Mitchell spots the target of her ardour "*through the smoke/With your eyes on fire/From J&B and coke*". When she dials back this intensity, as on the acoustic mourn of "Jericho", the songs benefit from the way Pastorius punctures their lassitude with paper-punch bass, that wide, rangy tone swimming through reverb.

As ever, Mitchell is a perceptive observer when it comes to affairs of the heart, and the tensions of giving in to romance that mark "Jericho" – re-read here from its live incarnation on *Miles Of Aisles* – finds an unexpected echo in the bitter tiredness of the ageing couple in "Otis & Marlina". The closing "The Silky Veils Of Ardor" acts as both warning and bittersweet reflection, Mitchell seeming to sing to and from her former self – "*I am a poor wayfaring stranger...*" – before singing of the bald realities of love: "*If I'd only seen through the silky veils of ardour/What a killing crime this love can be/I would have locked up my heart/In a golden sheath of armour*". It's one of two songs on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* that gesture most clearly back to Joni of the past – its acoustic melancholy is like an update of "Blue"; the title track, perhaps the album's highlight, with Mitchell's jangling electric guitar sucked into the vortex of Pastorius's pulsing, depth-charge bass, while Mitchell unspools an almost endless, hypnotic stream of language, feels like *Hissing* and *Hejira* in miniature.

Songs like these, and the cutting honesty of "Off Night Backstreet" – "*Maybe I'm just kidding myself when I say I love you/I don't*

Björk has long been an advocate for the album's riskiness and openness

Don't look back:
at the Roxy in
West Hollywood,
January 30, 1977



know... I wish I felt nothing!" – sometimes feel like umbilicals to a former Joni. Tellingly, they are all placed at the end of the album, after the listener has navigated what, at times, can feel like forbidding terrain. *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* has a unique cast within Mitchell's career – it's a set of songs that, more so than any other of her albums, denies any ease of entry, or ease of identification. It offers little as clear as the cartographies of the heart that mark *Blue* and *Hejira*, nor *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*' psychogeography of the modern city. But what it offers, in all its gnarled experimentation, its open ends, its avenues, backstreets and roads lesser travelled, is a music thinking and breathing as it unfolds, moment to moment, spirited in its embrace of risk, evasive in its lover's grasp, before you. ●

TRACKMARKS DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER

1	Overture – Cotton Avenue ★★★★★	Studios, Hollywood; orchestra recorded at Columbia Studio C, New York, Basing Street Studio, London	shakers, backing vocals on "The Tenth World"), Alejandro Acuña (congas, cowbell, shakers, ankle bells, backing vocals on "The Tenth World"), Manolo Badrena (congas, coffee cans, lead vocal on "The Tenth World", 'in spirit' on "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter"), Aírto Moreira (surdo), Larry Carlton (electric guitar on "Otis & Marlena"), Michel Colombier (piano on "Otis & Marlena"), Chaka Khan (backing vocals on "The Tenth World" and	"Dreamland"), Glenn Frey (backing vocals on "Off Night Backstreet"), JD Souther (backing vocals on "Off Night Backstreet"), Bobbye Hall ('in spirit' on "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter"), El Bwyd (the split-tongued spirit on "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter"), Michael Gibbs (orchestral arrangements, conductor on "Paprika Plains" and "Off Night Backstreet")
2	Talk To Me ★★★★★			
3	Jericho ★★★★★			
4	Paprika Plains ★★★★★	Produced by: Joni Mitchell		Highest chart position: UK 20; US 25
5	Otis & Marlena ★★★★★	Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, piano on "Paprika Plains"), Jaco Pastorius (bass, bongos on "The Tenth World", cowbells on "Dreamland"), Wayne Shorter (soprano saxophone), John Guerin (drums), Don Alias (bongos, congas, claves, snare drum, sandpaper blocks,		
6	The Tenth World ★★★			
7	Dreamland ★★★			
8	Don Juan's Reckless Daughter ★★★★★			
9	Off Night Backstreet ★★★★★			
10	The Silky Veils Of Ardor ★★★★★			
Label: Asylum		Recorded at: A&M		