

THE SPECIALS

AND 40 YEARS OF 2-TONE!



MM

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22-PAGE SPECIAL!

"My gift was
born of tragedy"

**THE AGONY
& ECSTASY OF**

JONI MITCHELL

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Come in from the cold: Mitchell, interviewed in 1988; (opposite) with James Taylor at Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, November 7, 2018.

JONI ON JONI: #9

Night Ride Home

(Night Ride Home, 1991)

"That's a sweet song that was written in Hawaii when Larry and I were driving along on the fourth of July to this house we had rented. There was this big moon and the clouds moving across the island so quickly. Everything looked so magical... even the white line on the highway. It was as if someone had sprinkled fairy dust all around... It's interesting how people hear your sad songs and think you must be miserable or whatever. They don't think William Shakespeare was miserable just because he wrote about tragedy. I see myself as a singing playwright and an actress and I try to make plays that are pertinent to our times... I fully experience my anxiety and my grief, but that doesn't mean I don't also have a lot of fun."



SHADOWS And Light

How JONI MITCHELL's melodic mojo returned in autumnal splendour, and the reckless daughter stayed strong in the teeth of troubles. By **MAT SNOW**.

FEW OF THE war baby musicians who emerged in the '60s and bestrode the '70s survived the '80s without a midlife crisis.

Joni Mitchell was no exception. For this great generation, turning 40 was bad enough, only for MTV to arrive just in time to screen every wrinkle of youthful genius turning stately elder; worse still, shiny new digital sounds rendered the familiar glued wood, tube amps and spring reverb old hat overnight. Fresh faces, fresh ears and fresh ideas challenged the old guard to get with the programme or fade away.

Already shaky from the commercial disappointment of 1979's *Mingus*, Mitchell let three years elapse before releasing *Wild Things Run Fast*, the first album in a trilogy where she did battle with the '80s and mostly lost.

Like many a summer holidaymaker, Mitchell was to return from a Caribbean sojourn unsuitably in love. The chief object of her misplaced affections were a threesome bearing "rhythmic hybrids": The Police. Released in 1982 and stylistically straddling both the jazzy pop of *Court And Spark* and Sting-tinged AOR, *Wild Things Run Fast* boasted two wonderful songs in Moon At The Window and Chinese Café/ Unchained Melody, and a carefree mood consequent upon Mitchell's marrying the session bassist Larry Klein, aged 26 to her 38.

Then a series of disasters struck. A trio of health issues: latent polio symptoms; dental "butchery"; a serious collision with a drunk driver. Her housekeeper sued her for assault, claiming \$5 million, and Mitchell in turn sued the State of California to recover a 15 per cent tax levied on her, Neil Young and other rock stars. She prevailed in both disputes but at a cost, admitting to being angrily (if somewhat belatedly) awoken to the injustices of the world.

Dog Eat Dog (1985) and *Chalk Mark In A Rainstorm* (1988) railed at environmental, social and moral degeneration with an overlit,

Fairlight-heavy sound and an arsenal of guests ranging from Rod Steiger to Billy Idol. In a blizzard of busy grooves and inconclusively outré chords, melodies seldom snapped into focus, so Mitchell's intricate, deeply felt lyrics seldom took wing.

Later explaining that "it was a very painterly approach to music," Mitchell the art student would, in the next decade, benefit by more firmly separating her painterliness (her artworks were now commanding both respect and high prices) from her musicianship. "Major chords are the primary colours," she explained upon the release of 1991's *Night Ride Home*. "The album is mainly variations on the key of C, a lot of C major. It's a very sunny, friendly modality." Just as '80s turbo-production fell from fashion, so did Mitchell rediscover her melodic mojo, displayed with room to breathe in soundscapes melding her crisp, clean acoustic guitar with discreet natural and digital coloration. Come In From The Cold, the title track and Slouching Towards Bethlehem, adapting W.B. Yeats's poem The Second Coming, were highlights of an album glowing with wistful, dreamy sensuality.

Separating from Larry Klein the day before the first studio session, the plangent *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) in part returned to the anguish of the '80s, a prominent theme being the abuse of women, her compassion stirred by encounters with victims in British Columbia where she had one of her four homes. The Sire Of Sorrow (Job's Sad Song), Not To Blame, Sunny Sunday, Sex Kills and The Magdalene Laundries added to her canon of great songs. A renaissance seemed well underway.

HAVING PRODUCED a new album like clockwork every three years ever since *Mingus*, Mitchell let 1997 come and go empty-handed; instead, that March her daughter, given away for adoption in 1965, got in touch. Now Kilauren Gibb, she also presented Joni with her grandchildren. "I've had pain and

joy in my life but nothing like this," Mitchell said. Though some songs on 1998's *Taming The Tiger* sounded like a somewhat forced continuation of *Turbulent Indigo*, it's mostly an intensely emotional album probing love, and not just romantic, with the autobiographical Face Lift recounting a row with her mother. And among the most poignantly beautiful songs of her entire career, the heartbreaking Man From Mars, commissioned for the 1996 film *Grace Of My Heart*, was inspired by the disappearance of Mitchell's beloved cat, Nietzsche, who was to reappear after 18 days just as she finished the recording.

But her voice now had an audible wobble and dip in range. It transpired she had nodes, a misaligned spine from polio, and a compressed larynx. Rest and alternative healers restored most of her power and range for her next two albums – contract fulfillers, she claimed, requiring no new songs but which sounded very much like labours of love.

Sumptuously orchestrated by Vince Mendoza for up to 71 musicians plus jazz legends Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, *Both Sides Now* (2000) was a suite of standards, including You're My Thrill and Stormy Weather, which charted the progress of romance from flirtation to resignation. Two of the 12 songs were Mitchell classics – the title track and a majestic A Case Of You – and *Travelogue* (2002) gave 22 more catalogue gems the same widescreen treatment. There was a touch too much portentousness, perhaps, to the rebooted Woodstock, but otherwise the songs were refreshingly defrosted from their familiar settings, highlights being *Hejira's* Amelia and *Mingus's* God Must Be A Boogie Man.

And that, she announced, was that. Coming up to 60, she had nothing more to say in song nor any further inclination to deal with the record business and public scrutiny. But if, as she claimed, the reappearance of her daughter depleted her songwriting drive, perhaps the rumoured friction between them sparked the noodling at the piano at home in British Columbia from which four songs swiftly flowed, thence a whole album. Where since the '80s Mitchell had angrily castigated environmental exploitation and degradation, *Shine* (2007) bestowed upon our suicidal folly the blessing of serenity. The hushed and hallowed title song itemised humanity's overdrawn account with a loving beauty that accepted it all without fear or rage, as did If I Had A Heart, Bad Dreams Are Good and Strong And Wrong. Let us at least go to our doom gracefully, she seemed to say.

Which is where life interceded. The mysterious Morgellons disease floors sufferers with agonising itching, memory loss and fatigue, and Mitchell ascribed her increasing reclusion to the problem. Then, in 2015, she was found collapsed with a stroke, and though she is reportedly relearning to walk, remains frail. To mark her 75th birthday in November, Graham Nash and James Taylor hosted an all-star concert in Los Angeles where Norah Jones, Chaka Khan, Diana Krall, Kris Kristofferson, Emmylou Harris, Glen Hansard, Rufus Wainwright, Seal, Los Lobos and more performed from her songbook in celebration – saying 'I love you' right out loud.

Robed in red, grinning with delight, Mitchell was resplendent. Suddenly, some sort of comeback – her most cussed yet – did not seem beyond the realm of possibilities. Who would bet against it?



"A SERIES OF DISASTERS STRUCK: LATENT POLIO SYMPTOMS; DENTAL 'BUTCHERY'; A COLLISION WITH A DRUNK DRIVER."