THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

JONI MITCHELL

UPDATED
DELUXE
EDITION

EVERY ALBUM REVIEWED

CLASSIC ENCOUNTERS, REDISCOVERED

ARCHIVES VOL 1:
THE VERDICT

HER **30** GREATEST SONGS

THE 2020 COMEBACK

A Case Of You
JONI MITCHELL
THE FULL STORY

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**

"You can't help but be affected by her"

ROLLING Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story is a 2019 film by Martin Scorsese about Bob Dylan's 1975–76 tour of small auditoriums that served to confound expectations, no doubt to the delight of its ostensible subject, Bob Dylan. Rather than the kind of faithful music documentary in which the director had previously specialised, the movie became a sporadically amusing shaggy dog story in which Dylan insists he was directed throughout the tour by the mysterious "Van Dorp".

This wry and self-mythologising mood all gets a bit more interesting, though, when Dylan is observed checking out other artists. There's a great scene when Dylan watches Patti Smith and a stripped-down band punch through the curtain from poetry to electrifying rock'n' roll. Most surprising is what occurs at a low-key post-show hoot session at the home of Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot. Roger McGuinn's there. Dylan's there, of course, in another surprising hat. Centre stage, though, is Joni Mitchell. What she's about to play, McGuinn tells us for the benefit of the tape, was written for the tour, although from our vantage point in history we immediately recognise it as "Coyote", the opening song on Mitchell's sumptuous, drifting album *Hejira*, released in 1976.

There, the song is widescreen and graceful, and it's tempting to think that its effortless forward momentum derives to some degree from its place in the album's dramatic sound picture, piloted by Mitchell and the pulse of fretless bass. Here we are, though, self-evidently in Gordon Lightfoot's dining room (with McGuinn and Dylan trying to keep up on acoustic guitars), and the song is doing much the same – moving with speed and precision through a calm and self-defined space.

It's a scene that shows some of Mitchell's key attributes, not least her ability to put herself at the centre of things and assume artistic control. Hers has been a career that has helped define what might be possible as a singer-songwriter: a development from folk music to the utterly original self-expression of her early records, through jazz, orchestrations and beyond. Here, alongside in-depth reviews of all her albums, you'll read insightful interviews and meticulous reportage on her story. There's a choice of her 30 best songs, too.

When we asked him to contribute to that story, David Crosby – Mitchell's earliest and most constant champion – was unable to make a single selection, but instead simply went some way to explaining why he rates her above everyone, even Dylan. She is, he says, "probably the best writer of us all. I don't think there's any question. You can't help but be affected by her."

With her *Archives* set just released, and her recovery after her 2015 aneurysm going from strength to strength, now seems a great time to celebrate her work again. I hope you enjoy it.

John Robinson, Editor

EVERETT COLLECTION INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

contents


Joni at 75: a birthday celebration at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, LA, November 7, 2018

RODINECKENROTH/GETTY IMAGES

Joni at a shoot for *Vogue* magazine, New York, November 1968

BANDLAB TECHNOLOGIES

-2, 110 SOUTHWARK ST, LONDON SE1 0SU

EDITOR JOHN ROBINSON
WHOSE FAVOURITE JONI MITCHELL SONG IS *AMELIA*
UNCUT EDITOR MICHAEL BONNER
COYOTE
ART EDITOR MARC JONES
WOODSTOCK

SENIOR DESIGNER
MICHAEL CHAPMAN *THE JUNGLE LINE*
DESIGNER LORA FINDLAY *LITTLE GREEN*
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
MARK BEAUMONT *BIG YELLOW TAXI*
PRODUCTION EDITOR
MICK MEIKLEHAM *BLUE*
SENIOR SUB EDITOR MIKE JOHNSON
HELP ME
PICTURE EDITOR PHIL KING
BIG YELLOW TAXI
COVERS PRINTED BY GIBBONS UK LTD
TEXT PRINTED BY GIBBONS UK LTD

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

PRODUCTION & OPERATIONS

PUBLISHING PRODUCTION MANAGER
CRAIG BROADBRIDGE **DISTRIBUTED BY**
MARKETFORCE (UK) LTD, 5 CHURCHILL PLACE, CANARY WHARF, LONDON E14 5HU

CLIENT SERVICES

MANAGER, COMMERCIAL & PARTNERSHIPS
GEMMA LUNDY *GEMMA.LUNDY@BANDLAB.*
CHARLOTTE WORT
CHARLOTTE.WORT@BANDLAB.COM

BANDLAB TECHNOLOGIES

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER MENG RU KUOK,
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER IVAN CHEN,
UK COUNTRY DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF STRATEGY & PARTNERSHIPS HOLLY BISHOP
AVP, WEB TECHNOLOGIES
LAURENT LE GRAVEREND
AVP, COMMS & PARTNERSHIPS
LAUREN HENDRY PARSONS
SNR MANAGER, BRAND & GROUP STRATEGY
KRYSTLE HALL
MANAGER, CONTENT STRATEGY
ILIYAS ONG

JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES

"You could sense this inner confidence": Joni poses for *Vogue*, November 20, 1968

"She wanted to be a big deal..."

Fifty years on from her debut album, *Uncut* tells the story of **JONI MITCHELL**'s remarkable rise to fame, from the Newport Folk Festival, via New York clubs, to the hillside cottages of Laurel Canyon. From her first recordings, as **GRAEME THOMSON** uncovers, there were intimations of the complex greatness of the work to follow. "She was stunningly good, right off the bat," **DAVID CROSBY** tells him. "I was amazed."

JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

FOR David Crosby, the impact was immediate and far reaching. When he walked into the Gaslight Café in Miami's Coconut Grove in the autumn of 1967, he encountered for the first time the willowy Canadian he still regards as "the best living singer-songwriter we have". On the cusp of 24, Joni Mitchell had already composed songs like "Michael From Mountains" and "Both Sides, Now", flawless miniatures crafted from complex guitar figures, personalised poetry and intricate, unusual melodic twists. "She was stunningly good, right off the bat," Crosby tells *Uncut*. "I was amazed. Amazed by her, of course, but also that there wasn't a gigantic crowd of people saying, 'Holy shit, did you hear that!'"

Though Crosby was astonished not only by Mitchell's gifts but her relative obscurity, her career was slowly gathering momentum. Throughout 1966 and 1967, from the Newport Folk Festival to London's Speakeasy, from New York's Bitter End to the hillside cottages of Laurel Canyon, a growing band of influential artists had been turned on to her talents. Leonard Cohen, Judy Collins, Tom Rush, Fairport Convention, The Incredible String Band, Dave Van Ronk and Buffy Sainte-Marie had all fallen under her spell, long before she made her first album. They recorded her songs, championed her to friends, and lobbied record labels.

Rush, a folk veteran who had already been around the block and back, "was absolutely blown away" when he heard her in a Detroit club in 1966. When Judy Collins first met Mitchell in her Chelsea apartment, in May 1967, "She sang me all her songs in her living room, with the candles burning, and I sat there and wept. She sang me 'Both Sides, Now', 'Little Green', all these fabulous songs. It was staggering. She was very ambitious, but it was a fresh ambition, without an edge to it. She was in for the whole enchilada. She wanted the whole thing and she was going to get it." The following year, Collins helped her on her way, giving Mitchell a mainstream hit with her zestful version of "Both Sides, Now". Crosby, meanwhile, went on to produce her first album, *Song To A Seagull*.

Fifty years old this month, *Song To A Seagull* is not merely the first, remarkably assured, intimation of Mitchell's genius; nor simply the deeply satisfying fruition of several hard years playing, writing and touring. Dense, intimate, poetic, sentimental, pensive and unerringly beautiful, the LP initiated an entire sensibility and style to which generations of artists have cleaved. "Try to imagine hearing Joni Mitchell for the first time without having heard any of the 200,000 singer-songwriters who subsequently copied Joni Mitchell!" says Joe Boyd, another friend and supporter from that time. "She was just unbelievably impressive."

As Crosby points out, perhaps the most impressive part is that Mitchell "was not in full flower yet. This was still just the beginning." It's

> *"It was a fresh ambition, without an edge to it"*
> JUDY COLLINS

not so much that she outgrew *Song To A Seagull*, more that Mitchell resolved to build palaces from its potential, chasing down every one of its strands in her later work. The poeticised biography of "Michael From Mountains" and the title track were honed to a devastating point on *Blue*'s intimate confessionals; "Marcie" is a warmly drawn character study of the kind Mitchell perfected on *Ladies Of The Canyon*; the dazzling melodic leaps of "Cactus Tree" and "The Pirate Of Penance" foreshadow the groundbreaking twists of *Court And Spark*; the hard swing of "Night In The City" eventually led to a deep immersion in jazz, on *Hejira* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Listen closely to her debut and the vast terrain Mitchell will go on to explore is laid out like a map. "The first album was like 'Notes I Will Continue Further'," says Mike Heron, of The Incredible String Band. "She was already aware of where she was going to take this stuff afterwards."

MITCHELL had already done her fair share of living by the time Crosby caught up with her. Born Roberta Joan Anderson on November 7, 1943, she was raised in Saskatoon, a compact Saskatchewan city stranded in the vast plains of central Canada. At the age of nine, Mitchell contracted polio and started smoking. By the autumn of 1967, she had already ended her first marriage and, unbeknownst to almost everyone around her, had given up her daughter for adoption two years earlier. This was no ingénue. "She had already lived," says Boyd, who met her for the first time in July 1967. "She had the appearance of this sweet innocent little girl, but when you got to know her, it was clear that she was very grown up and clear-eyed. She knew how good she was. She wasn't overbearing about it, but you could sense this inner confidence."

Her musical instincts were always eclectic. Though she briefly studied classical piano as a child, she resisted formal tuition. *Song To A Seagull* is dedicated to Mr Kratzman, her English teacher at Queen Elizabeth school in Saskatoon, "who taught me to love words", and told her, "If you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words." The advice unlocked something profound in her understanding of what was possible in her writing.

As a teen she had more modest aims. She first learned to express her musicality with a ukulele and a Pete Seeger songbook. Soon she graduated to guitar. Though one of the legions enthused by the folk boom of the early '60s, Mitchell also loved the works of Miles Davis, Édith Piaf and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Beginning in 1962, she began playing at parties, coffeehouses and hoots in Saskatoon, Calgary, Regina and Edmonton.

In 1963 she enrolled at the Alberta College Of Art And Design in Calgary, moonlighting regularly at The Depression club, before dropping out and moving east to Toronto in June 1964. The move was, in part, a reaction to the fact Mitchell had become pregnant by her college boyfriend. The father, Brad MacMath, left for California before the birth of her daughter, Kelly Dale Anderson, in February 1965. "Literally penniless" in Toronto, in June she married Chuck Mitchell, a jobbing folk singer, originally from Michigan. She later described the union as a "marriage of convenience". The intention was to raise the child together, but Mitchell felt she could not adequately provide for her daughter, and later in 1965 put Kelly up for adoption. This personal drama remained a secret to even her closest friends for much of her life, though she scattered clues in plain sight in her songs, notably "Little Green", eventually released in 1971 on *Blue* but written in 1966: "*Child with a child pretending/Weary of lies you're sending home/So you sign all the papers in the family*

Tuning in Where did Mitchell's dazzlingly unusual guitar chords originate?

It's been suggested that childhood polio forced Mitchell to find more agreeable chord shapes, which led to her inventing new tunings. The early influence of Buffy Sainte-Marie and Tom Rush also played a part. "I always tuned my guitar all sorts of funny ways, and she had seen me play at Mariposa," says Sainte-Marie. "It was something we had in common, but I don't know whether she got it from me." "I showed her some open tunings," says Rush. "I was using a good many, but she took them to Mars! I remember having to call her up when I was trying to learn 'The Circle Game' and asking, 'How do you make that chord?'" He laughs. "David Crosby claims he taught Joni open tunings – I haven't argued with him." Crosby concedes, "I learned a whole shitload about tunings from her, and songwriting in general."


Buffy Saint-Marie: "It was something we had in common"

SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES; TONY RUSSELL/REDFERNS

Recording debut album *Song To A Seagull* at Sunset Sound Recorders in Hollywood, 1967

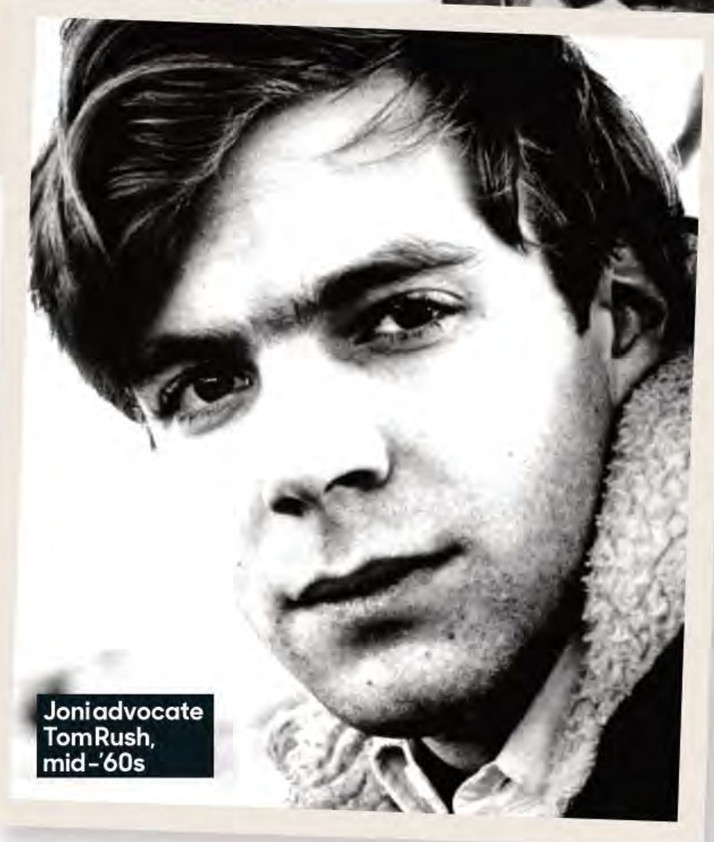
name/You're sad and you're sorry, but you're not ashamed, little green/Have a happy ending".

Shortly after the marriage, Chuck and Joni moved to Detroit. They rented a fifth-floor walk-up apartment on Ferry Street and scored a residency as a duo at the Chess Mate club. Their repertoire was orthodox – folk-based, from Dylan to Eric Anderson, with a smattering of Brecht – although Mitchell had already started to write. Her first attempt, "Day After Day", was an account of life on the road that she wrote while en route to the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1965. "*Miles and miles of railroad track/Night after night/The humming of the wheels...*" Soon, they were pouring out.

It was in Detroit, in the spring of 1966, that Mitchell first entered the orbit of Tom Rush, the New England folk and blues singer who frequently passed through the city on the circuit. "I was playing the Chess Mate, and Joni came in," Rush recalls. "This little slip of a girl. She asked the owner if she could play a guest set so I could hear some of her stuff. She had been in a duo with Chuck Mitchell, and had just started writing songs. I think performing the songs for me was one of the first steps out of the duo – and the marriage. She got up and did four tunes, and knocked me off my feet. When she got off stage I asked if she had any more songs. She said, 'No, but give me a minute,' or words to that effect."

At the time Rush was overdue delivering his next album for Elektra, and was eager for original material. "A few weeks later she sent me a tape of six songs, all of which were dazzling. One was 'Urge For Going', which she sang the very first night. Just before the last song on the tape she apologised, saying, 'I've just finished writing it, it's not much good, I'm so embarrassed...'" The song was "The Circle Game", one of Mitchell's simplest, sweetest and most effective early compositions, tracking the evolution of a boy into a man. Rush ended up naming his next album – delayed until 1968 – after the song, and also included "Urge For Going", Mitchell's powerful, elemental ballad, inspired by the harsh Saskatchewan winters. He still performs both songs today. "They're universal," he says. "As long as winter comes, 'Urge For Going' will be a great song; as long as kids grow up, 'The Circle Game' will be a great song."

Early influence Judy Collins, here on stage at the Newport Folk Festival, July 1967



Joni advocate Tom Rush, mid-'60s

"I played her cassette for literally everybody"

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

As well as playing regularly at the Chess Mate and Living End in Detroit, and making frequent visits back to Saskatoon and Toronto, Mitchell opened for Rush at several shows in New England during May and June '66. "I had her do a couple of songs, trying to introduce her to a wider audience," says Rush. "The audiences loved her, of course, but it was hard to get the industry to wake up. I remember trying to get labels interested in her. Jac Holzman at Elektra turned her down, saying she sounded too much like Judy Collins. She did a bit. At that point, Judy was a big influence on her, but so what? Listen to the songs – Jesus! I couldn't get him interested. I also tried Columbia. It baffled me."

Buffy Sainte-Marie was another champion. Mitchell admired the Saskatchewan Cree and had made a pilgrimage in 1964 to see Sainte-Marie play at the Mariposa Folk Festival, near Toronto. Later she sought her out, armed with demos of her songs.

"The tape was good, and quite fancy," says Sainte-Marie. "'Song To A Seagull' was on it, and 'The Circle Game'. She was a great lyricist, writing about original things, and she played good guitar. I thought it was better than anything I was hearing around town, but she wasn't getting anywhere with her career."

TOM COPI/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY

A case of you Five great early Joni covers

TOM RUSH "Urge For Going"

THE CIRCLE GAME, ELEKTRA, 1968

Rush's unhurried, contemplative, rough-hewn reading has the powerful economy of prime Tim Hardin. Also featuring songs by James Taylor and Jackson Browne, the album is a landmark in the embryonic singer-songwriter scene.

FAIRPORT CONVENTION "Chelsea Morning"

FAIRPORT CONVENTION, POLYDOR, 1968

The B-side of their first single, "If (Stomp)", and a light, energetic, rhythmically inventive joy. The vocal switch between Judy Dyble on the 4/4 verses and Iain Matthews on the waltz-time breakdowns is great, too.

JUDY COLLINS "Both Sides, Now"

ELEKTRA SINGLE, 1968

Different from the *Wildflowers* album version, sharpened by David Anderle's new mix. Drums, harpsichords, vaulting strings and Collins' clarion vocal accentuate the ache and the wonder, as Mitchell's introspective contemplations are transformed into a rushing folk-pop classic.

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE "Song To A Seagull"

FIRE & FLEET & CANDLELIGHT, VANGUARD, 1967

A quietly haunting reading that deftly negotiates Mitchell's complex guitar lines. Buffy's flinty voice and raw emotion brings a crisp clarity to one of her most serpentine melodies.

GEORGE HAMILTON IV "The Circle Game"

THE GENTLE COUNTRY SOUND OF GEORGE HAMILTON IV, RCA VICTOR, 1968

Continuing his transition from mainstream country to a folkier sound, the "Abilene" star follows up his hit cover of "Urge For Going" with a lovely, lilting version of Mitchell's much-recorded standard.

Sainte-Marie recorded her full-bodied tilt at "The Circle Game", as well as "Song To A Seagull", on her fourth album, *Fire & Fleet & Candlelight*, released in July 1967. Like Rush, she also attempted to get industry figures interested in Mitchell – with remarkably little success.

"I'd started carrying her cassette around with me, and I played it for literally everybody: for Vanguard, for Blue Note," she says. "It was amazing, the lack of interest! People in the entrepreneurial side of the music business are there for a lot of reasons, but big success is probably the main one, and they couldn't hear it with Joni.

"It was an old boy's club in those days," she continues. "The whole Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie folk scene was very homogenous, very vanilla. The same three chords. Simple songs in predictable chord patterns. Bob Dylan broke the mould with some songs, but even though people like Tom Paxton, Judy Collins and Phil Ochs were writing great words, the music often was not very original. What I loved about Joni was that there was a sense of the music coming from the person, not somebody trying to get into showbiz."

Despite the industry's indifference, word of Mitchell spread among fellow writers and artists. Ian & Sylvia took a rather polite swing at "The Circle Game" as the opening track on their 1967 album, *So Much For Dreaming*. Veteran country singer George Hamilton IV had a Top 10 country hit with "Urge For Going". Pleased as Mitchell was that established performers were seeking out her songs, Rush sensed it wasn't enough for her.

"She wanted to be on stage. I remember thinking at the time, she really had a fire in her belly. She wanted to be a big deal. I also remember thinking at the time, she's going to be a big star and it's not going to make her happy. Fame and money are two things of which there is never enough."

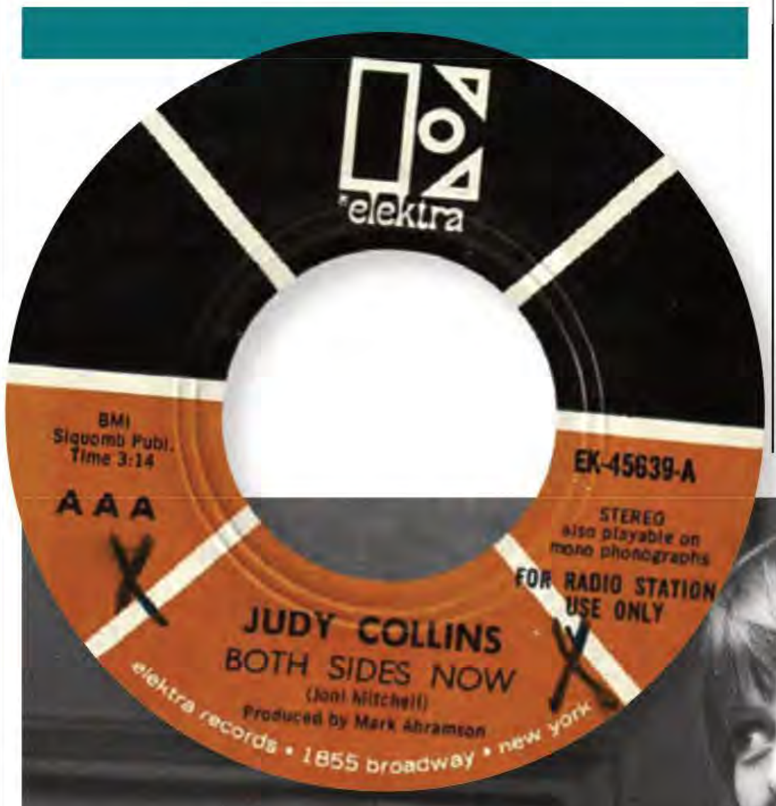
Mitchell's marriage ended early in 1967. A brief but intense affair with a folk singer from Colorado, whom Mitchell had met the previous November at The Second Fret club in Philadelphia, hadn't helped an already shaky union. The liaison resulted in the outstanding "Michael From Mountains", one of the earliest examples of her ability to romanticise her lovers in song as free-spirited muses. The Mitchells' musical partnership dissolved around the same time; their final show together was in May 1967.

By then Mitchell had moved to New York, to an apartment at 41 West 16th Street in Chelsea. Not long after her arrival, she ran into Al Kooper, latterly Bob Dylan's organ player, who initiated a new, valuable introduction for Mitchell.

"I got a call in the middle of the night, around May 1967, from Al Kooper," Judy Collins recalls. "It was three in the morning. Al said, 'I followed this girl home and she writes songs.' He put her on the phone and she sang me 'Both Sides, Now'. That was my initial encounter with Joni. I would not have known her to see her, but I knew 'The Circle Game' and I knew that there was someone called Joni Mitchell around the clubs in the Village. She was almost completely unknown. It was surprising, because she was already an attractive singer with some very good songs. Tom Rush was very enthusiastic about her. Tom really discovered her."

The following morning, Collins visited Mitchell's apartment. Like everyone else on the scene at the time, she was permanently song-hungry. "We were finishing an album of mine called *Wildflowers*. We were almost done, but I went over to her apartment and she sang me all her songs, including 'Both Sides, Now' – and that was it."

> *"She sang me her songs, including 'Both Sides, Now', and that was it"*
>
> JUDY COLLINS



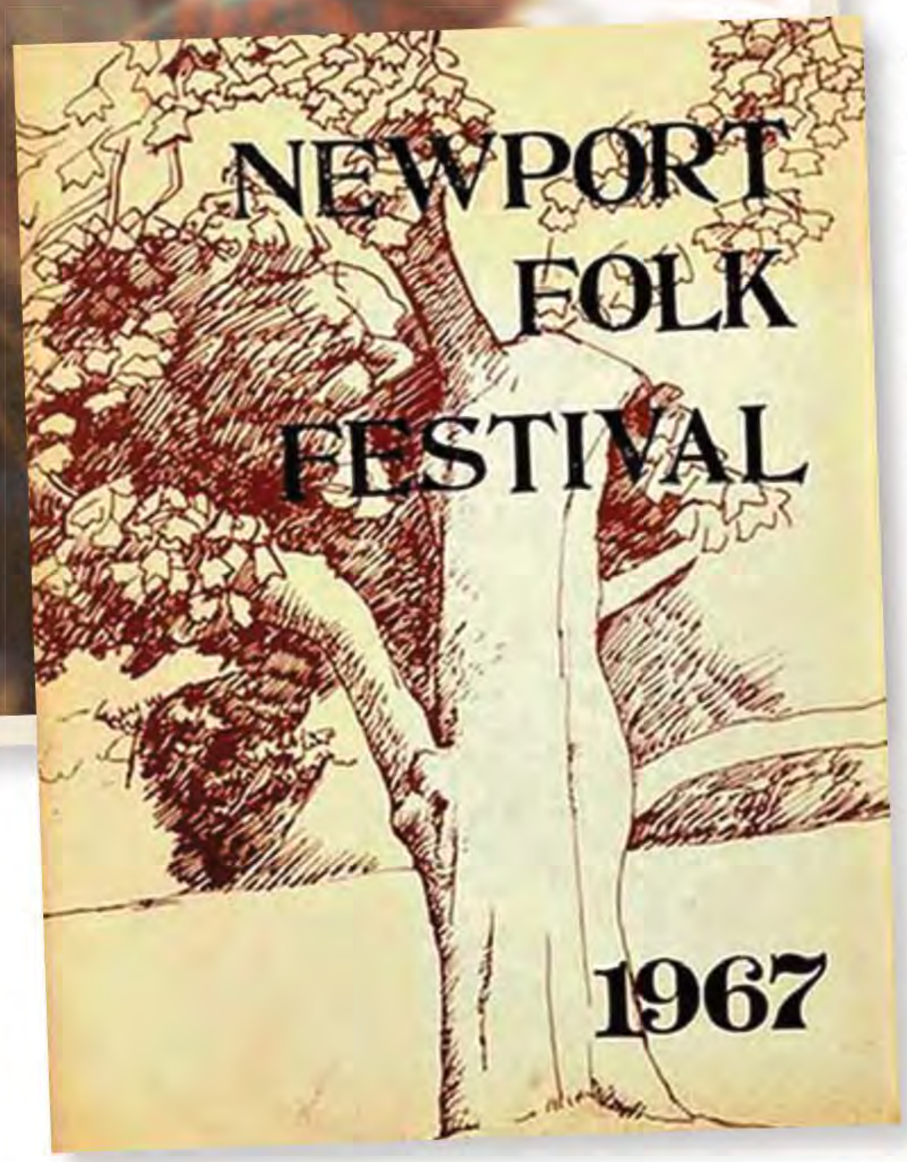
Written in March 1967, during the death throes of her marriage, "From Both Sides, Now", as it was initially titled, was inspired by Saul Bellow's 1959 novel *Henderson The Rain King*. "There's a line in it that I especially got hung up on," she said. "[*Henderson*] was flying to Africa and searching for something. He said that in an age when people could look up and down at clouds, they shouldn't be afraid to die. And I got this idea: 'From both sides now.'"

It was an early case of what would become a classic Mitchell approach: circling a subject in its entirety, seeking changing perspectives, rarely taking a settled view. Her husband had sneered at what he regarded as the song's naïve sentimentality, but Mitchell knew she had a winner. "I've been driving everybody crazy by playing it twice and three times a night," she ➤

CENTRAL PRESS

Outside the Revolution Club in London while touring *Song To A Seagull*, September 18, 1968

"We swapped things": Mike Heron (left) and Robin Williamson of The Incredible String Band, December 3, 1968



said, days after it was written. For Collins, too, "it was an instant wow. I was just blown away."

When *Wildflowers* came out later that year, it included Collins' version of "Both Sides, Now", as well as "Michael From Mountains". The former, however, did not become a hit single until the end of 1968, after being remixed for radio "three or four times", according to Collins. "It didn't happen overnight, it took a long time for the whole country to get it."

A MARQUEE listing in the folk calendar, the Newport Folk Festival enjoyed a hefty reputation as a career-making platform. The 1967 festival, held from July 10 to 16, didn't make a star of Mitchell, but it did foster some significant connections. Judy Collins exerted her influence as a board member at the festival to get Mitchell to appear on the afternoon of Sunday, July 16, and to contribute to a workshop called 'Songwriters And The Contemporary Scene'. Collins was keen to acknowledge the existence of a handful of post-folk artists who were moving the tradition forward, composing their own material in an acoustic framework. "This was the logical next step," says Tom Rush. "The songs were much more sophisticated lyrically and musically, but they weren't totally alien."

"I wanted Joni on it immediately," says Collins. "I just thought she was incredibly gifted, but I had a very tough time pushing the idea, because nobody was interested, including my cohorts, Pete Seeger and Peter Yarrow. Can you imagine? They were all interested in the old-timey music, the tradition."

Having got her way, Collins introduced Mitchell on stage for a short set that included "Michael From Mountains", "The Circle Game" and a new song, "Chelsea Morning" – a rapturous greeting to a life of freedom and possibility in New York. She was welcomed with polite indifference by the audience – on departure, according to contemporary reports, there was "a tumultuous and prolonged standing ovation". "She stood out a mile," says Joe Boyd, a Newport veteran whose latest discovery, The Incredible String Band, also played on Sunday afternoon. "It was hugely impressive."

Also participating in the songwriting workshop was Leonard Cohen. Backstage, he and Mitchell met and bonded, swiftly embarking on a love affair that had a profound impact on her writing. That Sunday evening in Newport, a party was held in one of the grand "cottages" that grace the well-heeled Rhode Island town. "I have this vivid memory of Robin [*Williamson*], Mike [*Heron*], me and Joni way out in the backyard, under a tree," says Boyd. "Her singing some of her songs, them singing some Incredible String Band songs, chatting and talking. She was very smart and interesting, and interested in every kind of music."

"We swapped things," says Heron. "I think it was probably Robin's complicated tunings she was more interested in rather than my 'Hedgehog Song'! They had a lot in common."

This cultural exchange led directly to Mitchell's first visit to Britain, in late August 1967. An American based in London, Boyd had received a letter from Mitchell requesting help with finding a publishing deal in Europe. "She was very organised for someone who didn't have a record contract," says Boyd. "Quite self-contained and determined. She was ambitious, but not in a Lady Gaga way. It was a nicely balanced, integrated determination to the get the music out there."

To this end, she had already formed her own publishing imprint, Siquomb, a scion of Warner/Chappell Music. "Although she wasn't known as a performer, it was public knowledge that she had signed a publishing deal for more money than anyone from her generation," says Simon Nicol of Fairport Convention, early adopters of Mitchell's music. "Such was the confidence they had in her."

In London, Mitchell stayed with Boyd in his airy flat in Westbourne Terrace. Her welcome was

"Her tunings were all over the place, which was new to me"

SIMON NICOL

Joe Boyd on stage at the ISB's Albert Hall concert, 1968

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/GETTY IMAGES

Mitchell interpreters Fairport Convention in 1969

inauspicious. Boyd's flatmate and partner in his fledging production company, Witchseason, was Todd Lloyd, a fellow American who had recently bailed out Michael X, the British Black Power leader. "The police were not amused by this, and at 6am the night after Joni arrived, the Flying Squad arrived at the door with a search warrant for 'guns, ammunition and seditious literature'. We had to stand in the hallway in our bathrobes in the cold while they searched our flat. That was her welcome to the UK!"

Mitchell later recalled "doing all the usual tourist things" during her short visit: negotiating Piccadilly Circus on a double-decker red bus; going to Hyde Park and "soaking up all sorts of speeches"; playing Monopoly; visiting a Wimpy burger bar. She met a woman called Marcie who inspired a new song. After returning to the US, for a time she performed a whimsical and not terribly funny rewrite of "London Bridge Is Falling Down", in which she imagined The Beatles buying the bridge and painting it in psychedelic colours.

As well as setting up a meeting with Essex Music, The Who's publishers, to discuss a European publishing deal, Boyd also introduced Mitchell to Fairport Convention, whom he was producing and managing. They were gearing up to record their self-titled debut album, which featured two Mitchell songs: "I Don't Know Where I Stand" and "Chelsea Morning"; the follow-up, *What We Did On Our Holidays*, included another, "Eastern Rain". "We knew about Joni," says Ashley Hutchings. "We had our fingers on the pulse, even though we were very wet behind the ears. The very first demo we recorded was 'Both Sides, Now', which never came out."

Here, memories diverge. Simon Nicol remembers Mitchell playing her material for the band in Boyd's flat. Ashley Hutchings recalls meeting her alone and being given a demo tape. "It was a teatime rendezvous in west London," says Nicol. "We sat around for an hour and she ran through a few songs. She performed flawlessly. Her tunings were all over the place, which was new to me at the time; she was making all these wonderful internal resonances. She was so finished, as a performer and a singer, and then you had all this wonderful meat on the songs."

"I'd gone to Joe's flat to talk business," is Hutchings' recollection. "He said, 'Oh, Joni Mitchell is in the front room, do you want to speak with her?' She was standing by the window with her back to me when I came in, and turned around to say hello. She was very friendly, and seemed young. She had heard about us, and was very supportive. It was a lovely experience. She didn't play. I clearly remember a small demo disc with a white label that we got hold of. They were great songs. The music and the lyrics were both ➤

The ballad of Joni & Len

AFTER meeting and falling for each other at Newport in 1967, Mitchell and Cohen were briefly the golden couple of Canadian folk. They co-hosted the Mariposa Folk Festival later that summer, although it was Cohen, 33, and already an admired poet and novelist – not to mention a man – who received most of the coverage. Cohen influenced Mitchell profoundly. At Newport, she was bowled over by "Suzanne", a song which, she said, "set the standard", forcing her to raise her game and "plumb the depths of my experience". At her request, Cohen gave her a reading list that included Camus' *The Outsider*, the *I Ching*, and Hesse's *Magister Ludi* and *Siddhartha*. Mitchell memorialised their romance in "The Gallery" and "Rainy Night House": "*I am from the Sunday school/I sing soprano in the upstairs choir/You are a holy man/On the FM radio*". "There wasn't much relationship other than the boudoir," was her retrospective take. "He was so distant, and so hard to communicate with."

Let's tryst: with Leonard Cohen backstage at the Newport Folk Festival, July 1967

GEMS/GETTY; DAVID GAHR/GETTY

A kiss from lover and producer David Crosby while recording *Song To A Seagull* in LA, 1967

"Falling for her was like falling into a cement mixer..."

DAVID CROSBY on Joni's goodbye song

"THAT Song About The Midway", from *Clouds*, is widely thought to be about Leonard Cohen, but David Crosby offers a different interpretation. Crosby vividly recalls first hearing the song as their relationship dissolved in 1968.

"We were at Peter Tork's house – it might have been Stephen Stills' house by then – and the whole of our gang was there, maybe 20 people. I had met Christine Hinton, and fallen for her, and Joni and I were on the rocks. Anyway, we were all sitting around eating dinner, and Joni kind of storms in forcefully, plonks herself down, and says, 'I've got a new song to sing you.' We're all like, 'A new Joni song? Yippee!'

"She sat down and sang 'That Song About The Midway', which was her goodbye song to me: '*Doing your hunting from the air...*' That's me, being a Byrd. It was a pretty forceful goodbye!

She finished the song, looked up at me – everyone was sitting there aghast – and then sang it again. Ha ha ha! Just in case I didn't get it the first time. Then she packed up her guitar and left. Falling for her was a little like falling into a cement mixer. It's been a rocky friendship, but I had dinner with her a month ago, and I still love her."

MICHAEL OHCS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

very, very good, but if you want me to put my finger on why we were drawn to them, it was the lyrics. We sought out songs with really good lyrics, and hers were peerless. There was no-one as good as her at that time."

She may or may not have performed informally for Fairport, but Mitchell definitely played a handful of shows while in the UK, notably a brief spot supporting The Incredible String Band at the Speakeasy in early September 1967. "I'd persuaded them to put on the ISB, so I said to Joni, 'Why don't you come along and sing a few songs as an opening act?'" says Boyd. "She was delighted. Nobody had the faintest idea who she was. My memory is that she was wearing one of those straight mini-dresses with no waist that came quite high up on the thigh, and singing these extraordinary songs with that angelic voice. The whole Speakeasy was just open-mouthed."

"She was amazing," says Heron. "It was early stuff, very arty and very impressive guitar-playing."

Mitchell played a couple more shows during her British visit, at the Digbeth Civic Hall in Birmingham and The White Swan in Leicester, as well as a support slot for The Piccadilly Line at the Marquee. By the end of September, she was back in the States, fulfilling a five-day booking at the Gaslight in Miami, when David Crosby dropped anchor. After being fired by The Byrds, Crosby sailed his 59-foot schooner, Mayan, around the Gulf Of Mexico. "I went into a coffee house on Coconut Grove, and she was singing," he says. "I was incredibly smitten. It was so impressive. The writing was so good, the voice so pristine and stunning, the playing excellent."

The semi-official live album, *At The Second Fret*, gives a good impression of the show Crosby heard in October 1967. (Incorrectly billed as a recording of her show at the Philadelphia folk club on November 16, 1966, it was actually taped around a year later: Mitchell talks about her recent London trip, which dates the performance to autumn 1967.) The repartee is a little cutesy and contrived, but her musical authority is already assured – as well it might be, with a setlist that includes "Little Green", "Marcie", "Both Sides, Now", "I Don't Know Where

> *"The writing was so good, the voice so pristine and stunning"*
> DAVID CROSBY

I Stand", "The Circle Game", "Michael From Mountains" and "Eastern Rain".

DESPITE the minor inroads Mitchell had already made in the industry, Crosby "had never heard of her. Nope. Nu-huh. But of course, I fell for her. Naturally. I fell for her at the same time as I was totally impressed with her as a musician, those two things were mixed together. She was beautiful and fascinating, and we got together very quickly."

The first verse of "Cactus Tree", one of the standout songs on *Song To A Seagull*, details the beginning of Mitchell's intense romance with the "*man who's been out sailing*", who "*takes her to his schooner... He has called her from the harbour/He has kissed her with his freedom/He has heard her off to starboard/In the breaking and the breathing*".

"I told her she was wonderful, that she was doing the right thing and going in the right direction," says Crosby. "She taught me as much if not more than I taught her. I'd sing her a song I'd written, then she would sing me three back that she had just written last night, all of which were better than the one I'd just sung her. It was a little daunting and not really fair at all, but educational as hell. She did it right in front of me. Then I brought her back to California. She wanted to succeed, and that's where it was going to happen."

While Crosby historically takes much of the credit for "discovering" Mitchell, he was simply continuing the work of her existing champions,

albeit on a more elevated scale. "David had a much taller platform, in terms of advancing her career," says Tom Rush. "He did her a lot of good."

"David was producer, lover, friend, consort, cheering crowd," says Judy Collins. "He was very important. He gave her a lot of confidence, and just adored her work, as everyone did."

Crosby's flamboyant patronage was priceless, but equally significant was the influence of a young employee at the William Morris Agency, whom Mitchell had recently met thanks to the unceasing efforts of Buffy Sainte-Marie. "My agent, Joel Dean, for some reason couldn't get Joni," says Sainte-Marie. "But there was another guy in the office, Elliot Roberts, and he went down and saw her in the Village – and the rest is history."

At his client's urging, Roberts went to see Mitchell supporting Ian & Sylvia at New York's Café Au Go Go on October 26, 1967. He offered to become her manager; after a short probationary period, Mitchell consented. Roberts' colleague at William Morris, David Geffen, signed on as her agent. When Mitchell moved from New York to California shortly afterwards, Roberts and Geffen followed, forming Lookout Management. Mitchell, meanwhile, bought a "sweet little wooden cottage" just off Laurel Canyon Boulevard, in the heart of the district that housed a growing community of sensitive acoustic songwriters. Her new home cost $36,000 and backed into a hill peppered with manmade caves.

As 1967 turned into 1968, Mitchell refrained from playing any official shows in LA, but she was performing constantly nonetheless. "What I did was simple," says Crosby. "All I did was take her around everybody I knew, get them very stoned – because I had really stunningly good pot – and then said, 'Hey Joni, why don't you sing them a song?' She would sing to them and their brains would run out of their noses into a puddle on the floor. They would walk out of the room talking about her. Within a short period of time there was a big buzz around Los Angeles about Joni Mitchell."

Meanwhile, tipped off by Tom Rush, Elliot Roberts had already made contact with Reprise Records boss Mo Ostin. "Elliott was her manager," says Crosby. "He got the Reprise deal, but partly because I was producing the album – at least that's what he told me. He said that got him the leverage for the deal, which was all good. God knows, as soon as anybody heard her, there was no need for anybody else to help her along at all."

SONG To A Seagull was recorded at Sunset Sound's Studio One in February 1968. Crosby produced, with considerable restraint. Aside from the overlapping vocals of "Pirates Of Penance" and "Night In The City", and the background banshee wail in "Nathan La Franeer", the music is left unadorned. The only musician aside from Mitchell to feature is Stephen Stills, who adds bass to "Night In The City".

> *"I kept people from trying to turn it into a band record"*
>
> DAVID CROSBY

"I did not do that great a job on the first album," says Crosby, who had a notion for Mitchell to sing into the studio's grand piano, setting up extra microphones to capture her voice repeating off the strings. This caused excessive ambient noise and high levels of tape hiss, and the resulting post-production fix left the album sounding flat and airless.

"David Crosby produced it very simply, but he put her voice and guitar right next to a piano with the lid open, so it would make the strings vibrate," says Joe Boyd. "That's the kind of thing that only he could hear when he was very stoned!"

"I wish I'd gotten a better engineer, but I settled for the one they had there [*Art Cryst*], who was not that good," says Crosby. "I could have recorded it better, but the main thing was to catch the essence of what I saw and heard in her. The thing I did right was to keep people off the record. I kept people from trying to turn it into a band record, which she was not prepared to do, and which would have screwed it up and made it ordinary. Instead, what you got was a full dose of her – completely unusual, and pretty much untouched.

"The sessions went fairly quickly. She had been playing for a long time as a folk singer already, and she had really good arrangements. She knew what to do, and I knew better than to go more than a few takes on each song. I got Stephen to play on ["*Night In The City*"] because it swung so hard it needed it."

Although the process was relatively straightforward, the sessions were often fraught. Crosby had recently met his next girlfriend, Christine Hinton, while Mitchell would soon be stepping out with Graham Nash. "It was very difficult because she and I were breaking up," says Crosby. "It was emotionally tough. I loved her and thought she was fantastic. At the same time, she's an incredibly difficult woman. I can't really go there! I'm very lucky I managed to pull that record out of her."

Mitchell made a conscious call not to cut songs already recorded by other artists. Her debut does not include "The Circle Game", "Both Sides, Now", "Tin Angel", "Chelsea Morning" or "Urge For Going", their omission a quite remarkable act of confidence for a young artist making her first record. "The decisions about what did or didn't go on were all hers," says Crosby. "I loved all the songs she picked. I had no problem with any of it."

Like Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, each side is subtitled. Side one is "I Came To The City"; side ➤

Performing at The Bitter End in New York City, October 23, 1968

PETER RANDOLPH/GETTY IMAGES

Dark star: a change of outfit for the *Vogue* photo shoot, November 1968

JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES

two, "Out Of The City And Down To The Seaside". The chapter headings accentuate the sense of a personal story unfolding, a suite of sorts.

The city songs begin with the beautiful "I Had A King", a tenement tale of longing and leaving. The long, folkish "Marcie" is a New York saga, influenced by Cohen's "Suzanne", though the stimulus of Joan Baez is equally apparent. It concerns a friend she had made in London, whom she later discovered had been a neighbour in Chelsea. When she sings "*to the sea...*", her voice resonates like a cello. The 'sea' songs are full of pirates, mermaids, galleons, schooners and birds – and romantic intrigue. The verses of the album's greatest song, "Cactus Tree", measure Mitchell's need for freedom against the affections and charms of an array of admirers. The first is Crosby; the second is Michael from "Michael From Mountains"; one of the others is almost certainly

> *"The octave jumps... Nobody writes songs like that today"*
>
> JOE BOYD

Joe Boyd, wheeling and dealing on Mitchell's behalf: "*There's the one who writes her letters/With his facts and figures scrawl...*"

Boyd prefers to rave about the song's "octave jumps" and the LP's "melodic amplitude: the distance between the highest and lowest notes. Most melodies now are so constrained, so narrow. Nobody writes songs like that today. It was a symptom of the optimism and freedom of the '60s, and Joni's early records are the epitome of that."

"Night In The City", with Stills' thick bass and Mitchell's sprightly piano and pirouetting vocals, possesses a bouncy immediacy, but the overall mood is reflective. It wasn't folk music, but nobody yet quite knew what it was. In the homespun spirit of the times, the cover image was self-composed. Its vibrant, colourful blossoming seemed to capture much of the naïve, folksy optimism swirling around Laurel Canyon in early 1968.

Released in March 1968, the reviews were strong. "A very personal tale told with an integrity," reckoned the *Los Angeles Times*; *Billboard* called her "an important folk and folk-rock writer... Her rich, textured delivery is reminiscent of Joan

Baez, but Joni Mitchell's poetic imagery places her in a class of her own." Robert Shelton, in *The New York Times*, noted her "evanescent imagery" and the "haunting song-off-the-moors quality" of her voice. Said *Rolling Stone*, "Her lyrics are striking. Her tunes are unusual. Her voice is clear and natural."

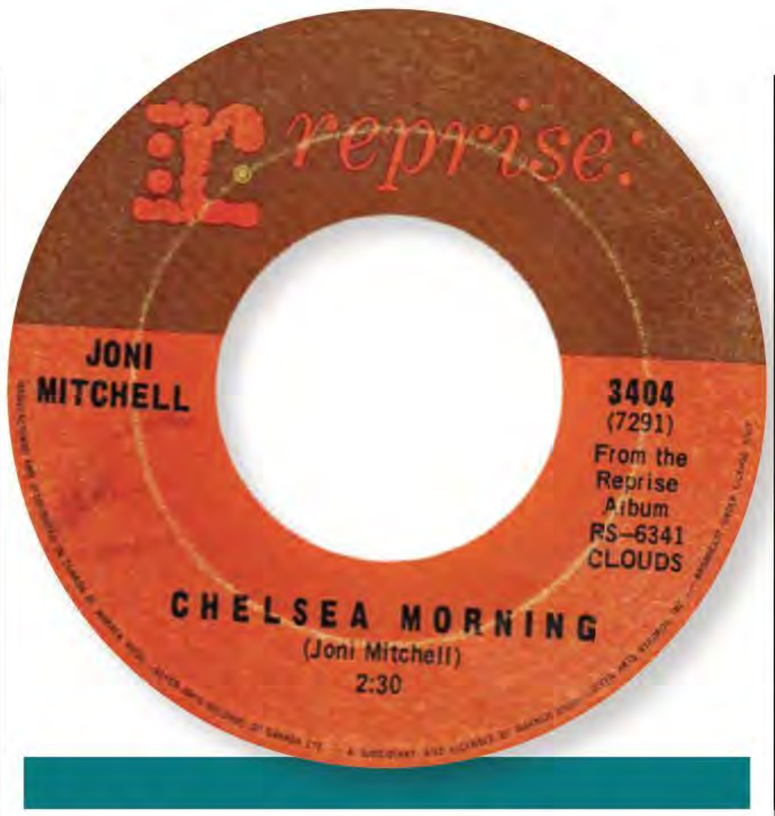
"It made a big impact critically right away," says Crosby. "It appealed to everybody, it was so pretty and straightforward, so fresh. That all fit in with that time and place. It was an immediate success, though not as big a success as Joni wanted it to be!" Peer reviews were also enthusiastic. "I must have been one of the first to buy it," says Ashley Hutchings. "Every song was terrific." "It was very exciting, everyone loved it," says Judy Collins.

IN the slipstream of *Song To A Seagull*, Mitchell returned to familiar territory, playing extended runs on the club circuit in Ottawa, Montreal and her old stamping ground, The Riverboat in Toronto. Roberts and Geffen, however, had plans. In early summer, she was officially launched on both coasts. Starting on June 4, she finally broke cover in LA, playing 12 nights at Doug Weston's Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood.

Her ascent was almost instantaneous. "The first time Joni played there, it was wonderful for her," says Ron Stone, who worked with Mitchell at Lookout Management. "I would say the second time [*in January 1969*] she was doing them a tremendous favour." Within a year, Mitchell had graduated to the far more prestigious Greek Theatre. Immediately after the Troubadour shows, she played an equally lengthy run at the Bitter End in the Village. There were appearances on *The Dick Cavett Show* and *The Today Show*. "She began to get her footing on the scaffolding of the star machine," says Judy Collins. "She was very good at it."

She returned to London in September 1968 for two shows at the Revolution Club, and to appear alongside Fairport Convention, Al Stewart and Jackson C Frank at the Festival Of Contemporary Song at the Royal Festival Hall. Hyped as "her first London appearance", she was billed as "a special guest star from America". "We didn't, on that occasion, hear any new songs," chuckles Simon Nicol. "She no longer needed Fairport to oil the wheels of her business."

While in London, she cut a segment for Radio 1's *Top Gear* and for *The Monday Show* on BBC TV, both broadcast later in the year.



> *"She began to get her footing on the scaffolding of the star machine"*
>
> JUDY COLLINS

By the time of her appearance at New York's Carnegie Hall on February 1, 1969, Mitchell was a star. In December 1968, almost 18 months after she had first heard it sung down a phone line, Judy Collins' flighty version of "Both Sides, Now" peaked at No 8 in the US charts. "At first, she was blown away and thrilled by its success," says Collins. "As the years went by, I think she became resentful that someone else had a hit with her song. The fact that it isn't appreciated by the writer is always discouraging..."

When Mitchell's second album, *Clouds*, came out in May 1969, it included her own reading of "Both Sides, Now". Though it had become a standard, with recordings by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Leonard Nimoy, she now felt sufficiently secure to put her own imprint on it. *Clouds*, which also included versions of the much-recorded "Tin Angel" and "Chelsea Morning", reached No 31 on the Billboard chart. Alongside *Song To A Seagull*, it created a template that directly inspired hundreds of artists, from Judee Sill to Laura Marling; Kate Bush to Prince. Even though she has spent much of the rest of her career doing her utmost to subvert it, for many young artists with acoustic guitars, Mitchell's earliest work remains the Platonic ideal of what a singer-songwriter can achieve. Yet equally as compelling as the manifold treasures displayed on *Song To A Seagull* is the sense of what was being held in reserve; an intuition of riches yet to come.

"While I feel good about the first record, it's not the full bloom," says Crosby. "The full exploration of tunings was yet to come. The dulcimer hadn't happened yet. The complete falling in love with jazz hadn't happened yet. The real growth into the serious introspective lyric that wound up at *Blue* hadn't happened yet. None of that had come to full fruition yet. But it was coming – and I could see it coming. She's a very problematical girl, but she's the best living singer-songwriter we have. The amazing thing is, I think I realised that the first time I heard her." ◐


At the Central Park Music Festival in New York City, 1969


With Graham Nash at the Big Sur Folk Festival, September 14-15, 1969

ROBERT ALTMAN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; SHERRY RAYNBARNETT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

SONG TO A SEAGULL

RELEASED MARCH 1968

A fêted songwriter takes the spotlight, for a quietly revolutionary debut.

BY JIM WIRTH

DAVID Crosby knew what he had found within minutes of stumbling into a Joni Mitchell show at the Gaslight Café in autumn 1967. The disaffected Byrd had come to Florida in search of a new start, but found a different kind of break from the norm. "I went looking for a sailboat to live on – I wanted to do something else, find another way to be. I was pretty disillusioned," he recalled years later. "I walked into a coffeehouse in Coconut Grove, and she was standing there singing those songs, and I just was gobsmacked. I fell for her. Immediately. It's a little like falling into a cement mixer. She's kind of a turbulent girl."

Mitchell was, at that stage, a 23-year-old whose songs were living a life of their own. Country singer George Hamilton IV had made a hit of "Urge For Going", Buffy Sainte-Marie had recorded "The Circle Game" and "Song To A Seagull", with a trickle of versions of her other early works soon to become a torrent.

She was also a divorcée, an art-school drop-out, and the mother of a child she gave up for adoption, three turbulent years having given her enough source material to last a lifetime. Her debut record, recorded with on-off partner Crosby's help at the back end of 1967, and released in March 1968, documented only a few fragments of a story still in flux: a few months in New York (Side One, subtitled *"I came to the city"*) and a few more on the West Coast (Side Two: *"Out of the city and down to the seaside"*).

Song To A Seagull (or 'Son To A Seagu' as it appeared on original copies, Mitchell's felt-tip frenzy sleeve art being badly mangled at the printers) is a quietly audacious debut. The least user-friendly of all of her early records (her best-known songs of the time were largely omitted), its spartan production job was true to Mitchell and Crosby's determination to get these songs down in their purest form, without psychedelic curlicues or mom-and-pop-friendly string sections.

"If I'd recorded a year ago, I would have used lots of orchestration," she told *Rolling Stone* in May 1968, alluding to how the success of her songs had enabled her to call the shots. "No-one would have let me put out an acoustic album. They would have said it's like having a whole paintbox and using only brown."

"We did get the actual songs down without a bunch of other crud on it, and that made me happy," Crosby remembered. "That's the thing I'm proudest of."

Crosby's production job was not uncontroversial, though; his quest to capture Mitchell's voice in all its wild seagull swoops picked up plenty of extraneous hiss, requiring slightly brutal surgery in the final mix. The finished product sounds like it was recorded behind glass, but given Mitchell's tendency to view both her songs' subjects and herself here as slightly baffling museum exhibits, that is oddly fitting.

"She's brilliant and tough and opinionated and slightly crazy and incredibly talented," Crosby said ➤

The spartan production was true to Mitchell and Crosby's determination to get these songs down in their purest form

as he looked back on their time together, his opinion of Mitchell's gifts having only intensified over time. "She's the best singer-songwriter that we've had in the past 100 years. She's as good a poet as Bob [*Dylan*], and a way better musician."

However, while Dylan talked in riddles, Mitchell's brilliance here hinged on close – often uncomfortably close – observation. *Song To A Seagull* begins, uncompromisingly enough, with the forbidding "I Had A King", a matter-of-fact account of her divorce from sometime singing partner Chuck Mitchell. When she left their Detroit apartment to head for New York in early 1967, he reportedly changed the locks, a detail that informs the song's chorus: *"I can't go back there any more, you know my keys won't fit the door"*. However, while there is a note of distress in Mitchell's voice, and in the upside down guitar chords she picks out, there is a quiet determination, too. She does not give in to despair, merely boxes the emotions up, labels them and quietly moves on.

Marrying Mitchell in his native Michigan on June 19, 1965 was one of a series of early stumbles (he *"carried me off to his country for marriage too soon"*, as she put it in "I Had A King"), the former Roberta Joan Anderson having dropped out of the Alberta College Of Art after just one year, 1963-'64, to pursue a career as a folk singer – a shocking decision for her relatively strait-laced parents.

She had spent her childhood tracking her Royal Canadian Air Force flight lieutenant father's moves from base to base before settling, aged 11, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where her father opened a grocery business. Her unconventional gift for language had first been recognised by her seventh-grade English teacher, Mr Kratzman; Mitchell credits him for having "taught me to love words" on the sleeve of *Song To A Seagull*.

Equally taken with music, she learned ukulele and then guitar, unconventional tunings helping to compensate for weakness in her fingers – a legacy from a childhood bout of polio – and went on to play in folk clubs in Calgary, and later Toronto, after dropping out of college.

However, her musical career took a significant detour when she fell pregnant by boyfriend Brad MacMath, giving birth to a daughter, Kelly Dale Anderson, in Toronto in spring 1965. While she wanted to keep the child – apparently marrying Chuck Mitchell with a view to creating a stable family unit – her daughter was fostered and then put up for adoption (a story that remained a secret, despite being explicitly addressed on *Blue*'s "Little Green" in 1971, until an old college room-mate sold it to a scandal sheet in 1993).

Aiming to make the best of a bad marriage, the newlyweds paired up on stage for a while, but it never worked out, with Mitchell well aware that she – and her songs – deserved better. In "I Had A King" she suggests that Chuck was a good deal less groovy than he seemed. *"He lives in another time/Ladies in gingham still blush while he sings them of wars and wine/But I in my leather and lace/I can never become that kind."*

The quest for a world that could handle her as she was underpins *Song To A Seagull*, "Michael From Mountains" the next potential partner to catch Mitchell's eye and ultimately come up short.

"He was a child-man; he was always showing you his treasures like a boy," she told the *Toronto Daily Star* about the song's real-life inspiration. Teasing and trepidatious, the song does its best to trap the elusive Michael, not to possess him, but to inspect him closer (*"Know that I will know you,"* Mitchell maintains doggedly in the chorus), and while he gets away at the end (*"You want to know all, but his mountains have called so you never do"*), amid the excitement of New York, there are so many more exciting specimens to be had.

Underpinned by a spring-heeled bassline from Stephen Stills (who was recording next door with Buffalo Springfield), and Mitchell's jaunty bar-room piano, "Night In The City" captures some of that country-mouse sense of the metropolis's infinite possibilities. A delirious yodel celebrating a life that can never come fast enough (*"Must you get ready so slow?"* she asks herself), it is an unalloyed joy.

The main protagonist in "Marcie" is anything but, allowing her best years to go to waste as she awaits a letter of intent from an absentee suitor (*"Dust her tables with his shirt and wave another day goodbye"*, Mitchell sings). "Is Marcie Joni?" asked *Melody Maker* in September 1968. "I suppose so, really," said Mitchell. "Marcie is a real girl, she lives in London. I used her name, because I wanted a two-syllable name. But I'm the girl in all these songs."

It ends with Marcie vanishing from the scene: *"Someone heard she bought a one-way ticket and went out west again"*, Mitchell sings with a shrug, and within minutes she is heading the same way.

A record that seeks neither to be liked, or pursued, but simply to document intensely lived experience

The *"I came to the city"* side ends with her trip to the airport in the company of the protagonist in "Nathan La Franeer" – in her own words: "a New York cab driver who really exists, who drove me to the airport one day". Over an abstract acoustic doodle occasionally interrupted with an electrified whine, Mitchell depicts a man whose emotional circuits have been burned out by overexposure to humanity (as Mitchell sings, he *"hated everyone who paid to ride and share his common space"*). Mitchell feared the same might happen to her. "New York has left a big impression on me: good and bad," she told *Broadside* in February 1968. "It's made me very paranoid, which is a thing I never was. I've always been sort of naïve and completely trusting."

However, if the laid-back West Coast promised a radically different way to be, it was one Mitchell found equally problematic. Side two begins with her rubbing shoulders with California's new smug bohemian aristocracy in "Sisotowbell Lane" (Sisotowbell a Mitchell acronym for 'somehow, in spite of troubles, ours will be ever-lasting love'). The sun-blasted Renaissance Fayre atmosphere may be prelapsarian bliss on the surface (*"Sweet well water and pickling jars"*), but the repeated *"we"* highlights the worrying conformity beneath the surface. She spots the fakery too; the Marie Antoinette country folk, and the pop singers desperate to pass themselves off as artists; *"A poet can sing"*, she sings, with absent-minded malice. The irascible Crosby, in such company, seems like a romantic hero. "The Dawntreader" – which Mitchell described at the time as her "one really true love song" – captures the renegade Byrd on the deck of his yacht. *"He stakes all his silver on a promise to be free"*, Mitchell sings, idly pondering their future together *"and a dream of a baby"*. Their romantic relationship was already dissolving by the time it was recorded, though.

A fever delirium Gilbert & Sullivan, one-woman operetta "The Pirate Of Penance" paves the way to *Song To A Seagull*'s frosty title track, an anguished minor-chord tiptoe along the cliff edge where Mitchell clocks the follies of life on both coasts, and ultimately throws her lot in with the birds.

Finally, "Cactus Tree" – the most musically simple and yet lyrically radical of all of these early songs. A gentle but purposeful stroll through a series of romantic adventures where Mitchell leaves a sequence of would-be suitors hanging on while *"she"* – observing herself from her usual seagull distance – focuses on the challenge of *"being free"*. Crosby and 'Michael' get a verse each, others just a few words (*"There's a drummer and a dreamer, and you know*

there may be more", Mitchell sings, simultaneously pitying her cast-offs and marvelling at her own "*full and hollow*" coldness). "She's not unattainable; I attained her pretty good," Crosby joked, but the giant cultural leap here is the no-regrets separation of sex and commitment. Twice shy, conventional monogamy seems horrifying ("*She fears that one will ask her for eternity*"), and the "Cactus Tree" Mitchell is quietly amazed that any lover would want more of her than she is prepared to give. "*She will love them when she sees them*", she adds in a luminous final verse. "*They will lose her if they follow*".

"I have yet to meet a woman who doesn't feel that Joni speaks for her," wrote *Crawdaddy*'s Paul Williams in mid-1968, but as much as *Song To A Seagull* shows seismic social changes, Mitchell is speaking only for herself. Not a big seller, it is a record that seeks neither to be liked, or pursued, or even understood, but simply to document intensely lived experience.

"I had to wait a long time for people to let me have my own opinions, and it was hard," Mitchell told Toronto's *Globe And Mail* in May 1968. "But now I can tell everybody." Soon enough, the world would listen.

TRACKMARKS SONG TO A SEAGULL

1 I Had A King ★★★★
2 Michael From Mountains ★★★★
3 Night In The City ★★★★★
4 Marcie ★★★
5 Nathan La Franeer ★★★★
6 Sisotowbell Lane ★★★
7 The Dawntreader ★★★★
8 The Pirate Of Penance ★★★
9 Song To A Seagull ★★★★
10 Cactus Tree ★★★★★

Label: Reprise
Recorded at: Sunset Sound, Hollywood, California
Produced by: David Crosby
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, piano, guitar, banshee), Stephen Stills (bass), Lee Keefer (banshee)
Highest chart position: UK –; US –

JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES

CLOUDS

RELEASED 01 MAY 1969

"*Ageing children, I am one...*" Songs of innocence and experience, intertwined.

BY WYNDHAM WALLACE

BY the time Joni Mitchell released *Clouds*, in May 1969, the track whose chorus gave the album its name – "Both Sides, Now" – had already been recorded by more than a dozen other artists, with further renditions on the horizon. Its ubiquity was understandable: not only is it a remarkable song but, as Mitchell revealed on March 12, 1967, in an interview for Gene Shay's *Folklore Program*, "I've been driving everybody crazy by playing it twice and three times a night." She'd only written it "a few days earlier", she added, but within months Judy Collins had cut a version for her *Wildflowers* album, which, released as a single a year later, took the song into the American Top 10. Frank Sinatra adopted it too, and *Camelot* star Robert Goulet, while Claudine Longet and Marie Laforêt delivered French interpretations. Even Leonard Nimoy took an affectionate, if faltering, crack at it for 1968's *The Way I Feel*, and its allure has apparently never waned. Including Dexys' cover last year, Mitchell's website currently states that it's been recorded an astonishing 1,141 times. A standard before Mitchell even put it to tape herself, "Both Sides, Now" is, one might argue, indestructible.

The song, she told Gene Shay during that *Folklore Program* interview, was inspired by – and written before she even finished reading – Saul Bellow's *Henderson The Rain King*. "There's a line in it that I especially got hung up on," she confided, "that was about when he [*Henderson*] was flying to Africa and searching for something. He said that in an age when people could look up and down at clouds, they shouldn't be afraid to die. And so I got this idea: '*from both sides now*'." It's an idea that, broadly speaking, she applied to the album as a whole. Almost all of *Clouds*' 10 tracks are distinguished by Mitchell's ability to perceive things from more than one perspective, and this sense of equilibrium, conspicuous in both her serenity and lyrical poise, is vital to the album's enduring appeal.

It's unsurprising that critics have often alluded to Mitchell's offerings as songs of innocence and experience. Unlike William Blake, however, Mitchell seems unable to separate these two mindsets. Twenty-five when the album was released, she appears both naïve and world-weary; forced, on "I Don't Know Where I Stand", to acknowledge the complexities and doubts new love brings while celebrating its dopamine-fuelled rush. *"Picked up a pencil and wrote 'I love you' in my finest hand"*, she sings, *"Wanted to send it, but I don't know where I stand"*. Like the *"varnished weeds in window jars"* and *"roses dipped in sealing wax"* that she describes on the meditative, minor-key "Tin Angel", she's frozen in a state of youthful purity. Unlike them, though, she's susceptible to a wisdom that grows with age. In fact, she even spells this out towards the end of the album: *"Songs to ageing children come/Ageing children, I am one"*.

Clouds articulates the dizzying confusion that accompanies the onset of adulthood, when you're expected to shoulder responsibilities, but are still coming to terms with your identity. Mitchell had ➤

It's hard to pinpoint one single quality that makes it so impressive. Its content perfectly matches its delivery

been forced to grow up fast in the years since she'd left home in 1965, swapping cities – including Toronto, Detroit and New York – and partners until, in 1967, at the behest of her new lover, David Crosby, she reached Los Angeles, where the Toronto department store in which she'd once worked was swiftly forgotten. *Clouds* is consequently saturated – in both its themes and the moods conjured up by its artful, unanticipated chord changes – with a vigorous idealism and a grounding realism. She'd come a long way in a relatively short time from her hometown of Saskatoon.

Clouds, however, reveals little of this frantic activity. Partially this is because some of its songs were long established in her catalogue, if unrecorded by Mitchell: besides "Both Sides, Now"'s multiple incarnations, "Chelsea Morning" had already been covered by both Jennifer Warnes and Dave Van Ronk, and "I Don't Know Where I Stand" and "Chelsea Morning" were included on Fairport Convention's 1968 self-titled debut after Joe Boyd passed them demos. The latter, furthermore, referred back to 1967 and Mitchell's New York bedroom's *"yellow curtains"*, its *"crimson crystal beads"*, and the rainbow projected on the wall through stained glass salvaged years earlier from a home for unwed mothers. But, more importantly, Mitchell's composure lies at the album's very heart: these songs are intricately constructed, full of carefully considered observations and confessions, and accompanied almost exclusively by only a single acoustic guitar, with any occasional overdubs largely restricted to Mitchell's additional harmonies. Whatever upheavals she's encountered are downplayed. Sidestepping drama in favour of subtle revelations, *Clouds* is instead as self-assured as it is candid, as calmly cynical as it is sentimental.

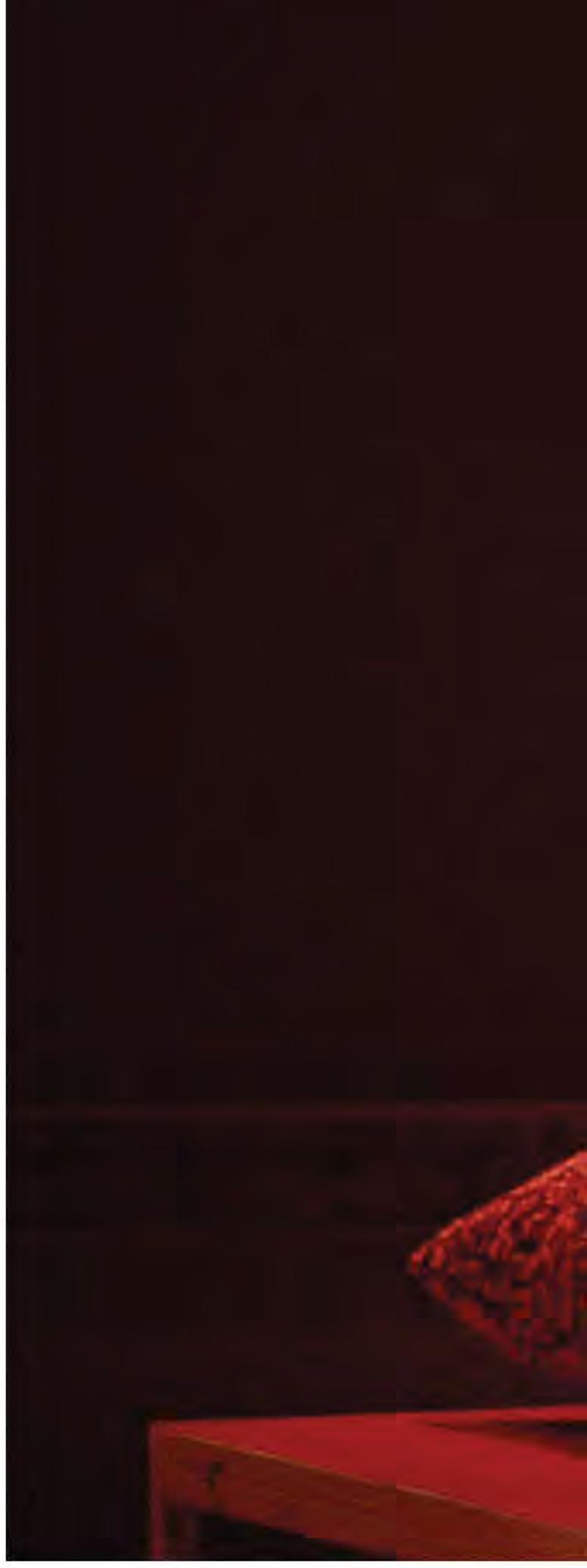
It had taken a while for Mitchell's approach to lift her above the scrum of folk singers whose recent omnipresence had initially handicapped her search for a deal. Even after manager Elliot Roberts had solved this problem with a Reprise Records contract, Mitchell had to battle prevailing attitudes in order to overcome the "girl singer" tag. In the summer of 1968, *Crawdaddy*'s Paul Williams – even though he was ostensibly praising *Song To A Seagull* – patronisingly asserted that, "Young women think and speak on a fairly simple level, but feel on a deeply complex one," before asking, "Have you ever noticed how much more important is the sound of a woman's voice than what she says with it?"

Mitchell, however, contradicted this, overcoming prejudices by pairing the fluidity of her voice with the ingenious expression of knotted emotions. "I was really a folk singer up until 1965," she told Barney Hoskyns, "but once I crossed the border, I began to write. My songs began to be, like, playlets or soliloquies. My voice even changed – I no longer was imitative of the folk style, really. I was just a girl with a guitar that made it look that way." Untrained as either a singer or guitarist, Mitchell assimilated influences from beyond the genre – her work's suitability for stylistically varied interpretations confirms this – and her lyrics, though full of colourful imagery like *"Crickets call, courting their ladies in star-dappled green"* ("I Don't Know Where I Stand"), transcended and sometimes even subverted contemporary hippie tendencies.

"Tin Angel", the album's opening track – also covered, alongside "Urge For Going" (a future B-side to "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio"), by Tom Rush for the previous year's *The Circle Game* (itself a Mitchell composition that would later surface on *Ladies Of The Canyon*) – swiftly establishes this technique. Beginning with a gently plucked guitar line and rippling chords, Mitchell goes on, elegiacally, to list *"reflections of love's memories"*: *"Tarnished beads on tapestries"*, *"Valentines and maple leaves/ Tucked into a paperback"*. But her joy in finding *"someone to love today"* is carefully undermined: *"Dark with darker moods is he/Not a golden prince who's come/ Through columbines and wizardry/To talk of castles in the sun"*. Similarly, "Both Sides, Now"'s memorable sketches of the skies above her – *"Rows and flows of angel hair/ And ice-cream castles in the air"* – are soon transformed into something more negative: *"But now they only block the sun/ They rain and snow on everyone"*.

On "I Don't Know Where I Stand", too, she appears to mock her romantic inclinations, contrasting the naïve pleasures of a *"sunny day, braiding wild flowers and leaves in my hair"* with a more sceptical acceptance of reality: *"Feeling too foolish and strange to say the words that I had planned/I guess it's too early"*. Indeed, while *Clouds* overflows with references to pleasures traditionally – condescendingly – thought of as feminine, they're part of a more sophisticated picture that relishes earthy, sensual desires and is tolerant of betrayals. This wasn't entirely new for Mitchell, as *Song To A Seagull* attests, but throughout *Clouds*, she extends this privilege even further, treating her listener as a confidante, inviting empathy while discreetly draping a poetic veil over the minutiae.

Two songs in particular address a love affair with a man whose identity was later confirmed by Judy Collins in her 2011 autobiography, *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes*. "Joni wrote 'That Song About The Midway' about Leonard (Cohen)," she revealed, "or so she says. Sounds right: the festival, the guy, the jewel in the ear." Mitchell had met Cohen at the 1967 Newport Folk Festival, and he not only made a significant impression, but also provoked one of her most notable similes: *"You stood out like a ruby in a black man's ear"*. The relationship was short-lived, possibly because, as Mitchell hints, Cohen proved to be less than faithful: *"You were betting on some lover/You were shaking up the dice/And I thought I saw you cheating once or twice"*. "The Gallery", too, appears inspired by Cohen's infidelity, a suggestion given further credence by both the Cohen-esque language employed by her protagonist – *"Lady, please love me now, I am dead"* – and her introduction to the song during a 1970 BBC In Concert performance: "Artists are connoisseurs of beauty, and I always like to say that this is a song about a man who spent a lot of time riding around 'connoisseuring' all those



CRITICS' VERDICT

"A superb second album from one of America's best singer-songwriters... All she has written is of a highly personal nature dealing with tangible situations and reflecting her reactions to them... Joni Mitchell is a great talent and this album more than confirms it."
CHRIS WELCH, MELODY MAKER, SEPTEMBER 27, 1969

Mitchell pairs the fluidity of her voice with the ingenious expression of knotted emotions

"Both Sides, Now": live on *The Mama Cass Television Program*, June 26, 1969

beauties." As she told Cameron Crowe in 1979, "I have a tendency to confront my relationships much more often than people would care." What's most striking about both songs, however, is how graceful her voice remains, even when, in "The Gallery", she sweetly but mischievously divulges how *"I see that now it's Josephine/ Who cannot be without you"*. Tenderness, in fact, permeates *Clouds*, whether she's exploring her newfound lower register on the contemplative but quietly optimistic "Tin Angel", or hitting her highest notes at the end of "Roses Blue", in which she slowly, expertly, unfurls a tale of a woman who's allowed her obsession with the occult to destroy friendships. It's there, as well, on "Songs To Aging Children Come", in which she trills and coos like a songbird, and in her playing, too, the strings of her guitars often seemingly caressed rather than strummed.

On "Chelsea Morning", she even spurns its lower notes, emphasising the lyrics' carefree, hopeful sentiment, while, on "The Fiddle And The Drum", she puts her instrument down altogether, forcing us to focus entirely on its forlorn melody and a bold, reasoned message of peace. *"Johnny, my dear friend"*, she asks, *"What time is this/ To trade the handshake for the fist?"* before she extends similar queries to America as a whole. To some, its sacrifice of the transparently personal for the bluntly political made it less effective than the songs that surrounded it. Geoffrey Cannon, writing in *The Guardian* in June 1969, declared that "'The Fiddle And The Drum' is her only failure, because its metaphors don't have her living in them." But such criticism was to overlook the affection expressed for its protagonist – and, by extension, the US – in lines like *"We can remember/All the good things you are"*. It also neglected to acknowledge that its sentiment, sadly, might remain pertinent even today.

In the end, it's hard to pinpoint one single quality that makes *Clouds* so impressive. Its content perfectly matches its delivery, the delight of language employed with such precision ideally suited to music even more lively. It earned Mitchell a 1970 Grammy for Best Folk Performance, but that was a backhanded compliment: *Clouds*' reach extended far beyond any specialist category. It confirmed Mitchell not only as a writer of unusually versatile songs open to endless reinvention – her website documents a total of 1,378 recordings of *Clouds*' tracks by other artists – but as a performer of exquisite sensitivity able to shed light on our passions and doubts. Like the sun that dappled her apartment walls on that famed Chelsea morning, its music *"poured in like butterscotch/And stuck to all my senses"*.

TRACKMARKS CLOUDS

1 Tin Angel ★★★★
2 Chelsea Morning ★★★★★
3 I Don't Know Where I Stand ★★★★
4 That Song About The Midway ★★★★
5 Roses Blue ★★★★
6 The Gallery ★★★★
7 I Think I Understand ★★★
8 Songs To Aging Children Come ★★★★
9 The Fiddle And The Drum ★★★★
10 Both Sides, Now ★★★★★

Label: Reprise
Recorded at: A&M Studios, Hollywood, CA
Produced by: Joni Mitchell (except "Tin Angel": produced by Paul Rothchild)
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, keyboards), Stephen Stills (bass, guitar)
Highest chart position: UK –; US 31

ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/ABC VIA GETTY IMAGES

LADIES OF THE CANYON

RELEASED MARCH 1970

Cosmic consciousness, pop songs of ecological doom, and a private life examined in public. Fame beckons...

BY GRAEME THOMSON

JONI Mitchell's third album overflows with remarkable images – *"The thirty-third floor in the air"*; *"With your father's gun alone"*; *"The face of the conquered moon"* – but one looms over all the others. It is the line in "Woodstock" that describes jet bombers *"turning into butterflies above our nation"*. Rarely has both the terror and the idealism of the late 1960s been so powerfully wrought, the competing forces of the times so perfectly evoked. The image spoke to a nation and a generation, but it also holds a metaphorical significance for the 26-year-old woman who wrote and sang it. *Ladies Of The Canyon* is the sound of Mitchell cracking out of her chrysalis and starting to soar.

With *Clouds*, Mitchell had forged a productive niche. She was by now a rising star, firm friends with James Taylor, Carole King and the rest of that golden set forever associated with boom time in laid-back Laurel Canyon. She could easily have followed many of her contemporaries in pursuing that distinctive sound and sensibility for the foreseeable future. Instead, she was gripped by a restless urge to change and move forward. She talked about wanting her records to become more complex, more sophisticated, for them to draw from a wider palette of colours. Implicit in this was a clear desire to let the music, rather than just her voice and her words, carry a greater weight of meaning. She was not content to allow her work to be merely pretty or simply clever. It had to have guts, too.

Ladies Of The Canyon is, mostly, the record on which Mitchell delivers on all of those ambitions, although in some ways it remains a transitional album. While more decorated than *Clouds*, it is still relatively sparse – half the tracks feature just Mitchell's voice with her own solo instrumental accompaniment. Strings, additional vocals and horns are subtly deployed, but as a rough rule of thumb, it's whenever she chooses the piano as her primary conduit of expression that things start to get really interesting. The way her voice colludes with the instrument brings out astonishing new tonal shades, while her increased proficiency offers not just an increased range of textures, but a new way into her music. On songs such as "Willy", her love-struck hymn to Graham Nash, the music follows the whims of the heart. It ebbs and flows, with its own internal logic, unbound by any formal structure, her accompaniment subtly changing with each new line.

On "For Free", the rippling piano captures the wistfulness of a song which contrasts the experiences of a successful professional musician who *"plays for fortunes"*, and the *"one-man band by the quick lunch stand"*, busking on the street corner purely for the love of it. It's a gentle song of disquiet, dispatched from the cusp of fame, half-observed, half-experienced, posing the question: what happens to the soul when your passion becomes a commercial transaction? Mitchell had plenty of reasons to ponder such matters following the release of *Ladies Of The Canyon*, as it dominated FM radio throughout the remainder of 1970, and quickly went gold. Her ➤

Ladies Of The Canyon is the sound of Joni Mitchell cracking out of her chrysalis and starting to soar

response was to take a prolonged break to consider her options. The melody is rich and beautiful, the contours teased out by a cello buried low in the mix, and the free-spirited horn that appears on the coda, an auteur touch echoing the sound of the street musician in the song, and an early signpost towards her coming infatuation with jazz.

A much more profound sense of materialistic disgust hangs over "The Arrangement", which feels like a direct forerunner of *Blue* in its mood of elegant desolation. It's a tale of emptiness and unfulfilled promise, the catalogue of consumerist trinkets no match for some interminable void: *"A credit card/ Swimming pool in the backyard... racing cars, whiskey bars/No-one really cares who you are"*. Her voice swoops from soprano to husky whisper, repeating a central refrain – *"You could have been more than a name on the door"* – which enforces the sense of an impending existential reckoning.

It is one of two tracks on *Ladies Of The Canyon* that point directly towards the future. The other is "Rainy Night House", which shares its pervasive sense of unease. It's an intricately detailed memory of a night spent in the family home of a man born into wealth, who desires to renounce his privileges in the quest for some greater meaning. Indicative of Mitchell's newfound ability to achieve a lot with just a little extra production flair, it's a brilliantly arranged piece: a lowering cello weaves its way through the piano, while the vocal flourish that follows the line about *"the upstairs choir"* – as well as the hair-raising keening sound that brings the song to a close – are masterly touches.

Here, the confessional side of her writing, soon to fully bloom on *Blue*, starts to become a public drama. Already critics and listeners were beginning to speculate about the personalities involved. At the time, Mitchell was going out with Graham Nash, a relationship that would prove mutually productive. In "Conversation", Mitchell is the other woman in a three-ringed romantic circus involving a musician (perhaps it is Nash; perhaps not). She recalls their idyllic stolen moments – *"I bring him apples and cheeses, he brings me songs to play"* – while casting barbs at her rival who *"speaks in sorry sentences... and only brings him out to show her friends"*. The song bounces along on a lively, open-hearted rhythm-guitar figure and her stunning vibrato, creating an outer brightness that belies an inner darkness. The faux-naïf *"doo-doo-do"*s, fluttering saxophone and flute that appear at the end are applied with a kind of exuberant innocence. There is a joy in hearing Mitchell beginning to explore how these particular colours should be painted into her music.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"I still don't know what gives Joni that haunting quality. The words of the songs are reproduced in Joni's script on the sleeve, and those on side one are rather trivial. Yet the songs seem to take on more significance when she sings them."
ERIC WINTER, NME, AUGUST 15, 1970

"Willy" is definitely for and about Nash (his middle name is William), *"my child... my father"*. Another undulating piano piece, perfectly formed, it's a lovely song of romantic rapture and regret. *"I feel like I'm just being born"*, she sings, and she sounds it. By the summer's end, the relationship would be over, although much affection remained on both sides, and Nash would continue to infiltrate her songwriting.

There are times when *Ladies Of The Canyon* goes so deep it becomes almost daunting to follow. The mysterious "Blue Boy" is a sad, strange and highly stylised tale of the impossibility of love, while "The Priest" is dense with a heavy symbolism. Mitchell picks out a John Fahey-like acoustic blues figure in a minor key, and there are echoes too of the early work of another former lover, Leonard Cohen, in the song's druggy undertow and its thick waves of imagery.

After all that introspection, Mitchell tilts her head back to gaze at the wider world. "Big Yellow Taxi" might take its title from the means of transportation preferred by a departing lover, but its concerns are weighted more towards the universal than the personal. Written following a dispiriting visit to Hawaii in November 1969, its message of ecological doom is simple – *"They paved paradise, put up a parking lot"* – and the medium irresistibly direct. Driven by the same fantastic rhythm-guitar sound as "Conversation", as big and wide as a Cadillac, "Big Yellow Taxi" lends *Ladies Of The Canyon* a welcome shot of levity. Running to barely two minutes, it's offhand in the best possible sense. With its silly octave leap and self-conscious laugh, zinging harmonies and pop melody, it gave Mitchell her first hit single as a performer, reaching No 11 in the UK and No 67 in the US.

"Woodstock", on the other hand, expands Mitchell's earthly concerns to the level of collective cosmic consciousness. Inspired by the vast gathering of humanity that descended on Max Yasgur's farm in mid-August 1969 for a festival she neither performed at nor attended, but instead watched on television from her hotel room, Mitchell unleashed a series of lines and images as unforgettable as those in Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall". With its references to the *"garden"* of Eden, to *"a child of God"*, and a mass of people *"half a million strong"* embarking on a pilgrimage, "Woodstock" offers the possibility of a reclaimed paradise where *"we are stardust, we are golden"*. Perhaps only someone who wasn't stuck in that very earthbound mass of muddy humanity could have brought such gravitas and generosity to the concept underpinning the song. Mitchell's great achievement here is to make it sound awe-inspiring rather than ridiculous.

The stinging blues-rock version of "Woodstock", recorded by CSNY for *Déjà Vu* and released as a single at the same time as *Ladies Of The Canyon* came out, was pitched directly as a rousing generational anthem. Mitchell turns her own composition into something less celebratory, more elegiac. Picked out with thick, sticky notes on the electric piano, it dispenses with the optimism of CSNY's cover in favour of a slow-burning hymn, setting a glimpse of bliss against the churning nature of the times. Mitchell's voice is stripped of any coffee-shop folk sweetness, preferring instead an uninhibited soulfulness, most affecting during the scatting at the song's conclusion.

While Mitchell spends most of her time on *Ladies Of The Canyon* casting a line into deep, dark waters, a handful of tracks are content to paddle in more familiar streams. Revisiting the upstanding folk of her previous work, "Morning Morgantown" is almost indecently pretty, a storybook portrait of idealised small-town life. All bright smiles, *"coloured rings"* and *"tea and lemonade"*, it's not quite the sole occasion on which the album veers towards tweeness. Already recorded by Buffy Sainte-Marie and Tom Rush, "The Circle Game" traces the cycle of life, as a young boy becomes a man. Time is a carousel of *"painted ponies"*, and the world promises *"dragonflies"*, *"cartwheels"* and *"falling stars"*. "The Circle Game" provides the album with a satisfyingly upbeat singalong ending, but its well-ordered craft and sweetness have more in common with what has come before than what lies ahead.

Likewise, the rather prim title track finds Mitchell at her most austere and her voice at its most bell-like, as though in conscious imitation of Joan Baez. Introducing us to the titular ladies of Laurel Canyon – Trina, Annie and Estrella – she celebrates a wellspring of female creativity that manifests itself in a variety of forms. Whether making clothes, baking brownies, singing songs or rearing cats and children, they are all *"pouring sunshine down the canyon"*. It's a well-meaning portrait of sisterhood and arty Los Angeles life that – if it didn't already – would soon sound like a parody.

Here, the confessional side of her writing, soon to fully bloom on *Blue*, starts to become a public drama

Joni in 1970: still sounding sunny and uncomplicated, but not for long

Such moments of prettiness risk appearing rather tame next to the riches on offer elsewhere on one of Mitchell's landmark albums, but the contrast between the light and the shade ultimately makes for a beautifully rounded record. And in any case, these sugary songs provide us with a kind of farewell. She would rarely, if ever, sound so relatively uncomplicated, so sunny, again.

TRACKMARKS LADIES OF THE CANYON

1 Morning Morgantown ★★★
2 For Free ★★★★★
3 Conversation ★★★★
4 Ladies Of The Canyon ★★★
5 Willy ★★★★
6 The Arrangement ★★★★
7 Rainy Night House ★★★★
8 The Priest ★★★
9 Blue Boy ★★★
10 Big Yellow Taxi ★★★★
11 Woodstock ★★★★★
12 The Circle Game ★★★★

Label: Reprise
Recorded at: A&M, LA
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (guitar, piano, vocals), Teresa Adams (cello), Paul Horn (clarinet, flute), Jim Horn (baritone sax), Milt Holland (percussion), The Lookout Mountain United Downstairs Choir (vocals on "The Circle Game"), Don Bagley (cello arrangement)
Highest chart position: UK 8; US 27

ROY JONES/GETTY IMAGES

"I want my music to get more sophisticated"

1970: Joni Mitchell arrives in London to play the Royal Festival Hall, with a clutch of new songs and ambitious plans for where her music might go next. Then, nine months later, she comes back to explain herself to *Melody Maker*'s MICHAEL WATTS. "If I have any personal philosophy," she reveals, "it is that I like the truth."

TONY RUSSELL/REDFERNS

At the Isle Of Wight Festival, August 29, 1970

Archive » 1970

CANADIAN folk singer Joni Mitchell this week denied rumours that she would be retiring after her Royal Festival Hall concert on January 17. But Joni, who can scarcely be described as a folk singer any more and has no current connections with Canada either, will be a good deal more withdrawn in the future.

She flew to London from Los Angeles last week and, at a Warner Reprise reception, she told *Melody Maker*: "It's true I've postponed all bookings indefinitely, but that's just to catch my breath. I really need to get some new material together, and I also want to learn to play more instruments, and find time to do some painting."

So Joni, far from taking things easy, is going to have her time cut out in the next few months. She made it quite apparent that she is going through a transitional stage in her career, expressing herself through a wider range of media, but at the same time delving deeper into her own distinctive musical bag.

"I've got a hardcore of fans who follow me around from one concert to another, and it's for them I feel I ought to produce some new songs. I come from Saskatoon, Canada originally, and I'll probably move back there, but at this point in my life I would rather live in Los Angeles as it's right in the middle of change, and therefore far more stimulating. There are a lot of artists in LA at the moment, and the exchange between artists is tremendous."

Joni took a trip back to her previous two visits to England. The first she remembers specifically as her first taste of English folk clubs, and the second for her appearance at the Festival Of Contemporary Song in September 1968, with Al Stewart, Jackson C Frank and The Johnstons. It was this concert that really established her as a major artist in Britain, and she is still more than enthusiastic about that concert. "I'd sure like to meet The Johnstons again while I'm here," she added.

But songs such as "Chelsea Morning", "Marcie" and "Both Sides, Now", which acted as her springboard, have now made way for slightly more complex numbers, perhaps brought about by the change of environment.

"I want my music to get more involved and more sophisticated. Right now I'm learning how to play a lot of new instruments. In the last month I've managed to write three new songs, including a couple of Christmas songs. I've also written a song for a film score that hasn't been used, and 'Woodstock', which is the next Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young single."

Joni emphasised that she will not be playing any folk clubs while in Britain. She will make only one concert appearance, and will be tele-recording a guest spot on Tom Jones' show [*This Is Tom Jones*]. "I shall then take a couple of weeks' holiday in Britain before returning. I want to get out into the country and, in particular, to Scotland."

Country and city life both play prominent but entirely different roles in Joni Mitchell's life. And it is the latter that is currently influencing her writing. "I've a feeling that America may suddenly get very strange. In Los Angeles the air is very bad, and it's not good to breathe city air all the time. But it's not just this environment that influences me. Any kind of music that moves me in any way has some effect on my writing."

Joni is more than enthusiastic about her next album, which is almost completed. A couple of tunes she has written, she picks out for special attention: "They Paved Paradise And Put Up A Parking Lot" [*sic*] and "He Played Real Good For Free", the latter being about a sidewalk musician.

JONI MITCHELL must love England to the same extent that England loves Joni Mitchell. This fact was implicit throughout the whole of her two-hour concert at the Royal Festival Hall on Saturday. The walls were still shaking 10 minutes after Joni had taken her second encore. Such was the greed and expectation that hardly a person had left the hall which she finally returned to for a farewell acknowledgement, and the audience rose en masse.

With great warmth and presence, the Canadian songstress appeared for the first set in a long red dress, her voice soaring and plummeting over that aggressive and characteristically open-tuned guitar. After three numbers, Joni moved to the piano and captured the audience completely by the nature of "He Played Real Good For Free", a recent composition, which reflects her environmental change. She closed a well-balanced first-half repertoire with the famous "Both Sides, Now".

Next Joni appeared in blue and embarked on a much longer set which included "The Gallery", "Marcie" and "Michael From Mountains", and with each song she drew the audience further into her. An outstanding Richard Farina-style rock number, "They Paved Paradise And Put Up A Parking Lot" [*"Big Yellow Taxi"*], and the next Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young single, "Woodstock", prefaced the finale which was an event in itself – Dino Valente's great song about brotherhood. ***JEREMY GILBERT***

SCENE in a television studio: girl in a long pink shift, which catches at her ankles when she walks, picks hesitantly at a few bars on the piano, reluctantly gives up, and asks for a glass of something hot, maybe tea.

Her manager, looking like a thinner, less ebullient version of Dave Crosby, brings her a drink, and she tells the audience sitting out there in the darkness of the television theatre that she must have picked up a cold in London, she always gets colds when she is in England; does everybody get colds when they go to America? Gives a nervous little giggle.

She resumes the song, unfolds it carefully like a love letter written on finest paper, pouring out its lines with a peculiar little sob in her voice, as if she cannot bear to let the words slip away. And they are deep, genuine words, about the lover who, "*when he is gone, the bed's too big and the pan's too wide*", which says it all so simply yet so fully.

Still in the same low key, she moves into the lyrics of "Woodstock" and the line about the "*bombers in the sky turning into butterflies above the nation*", which is tremendous imagery, and then "Willy": "*He is my child, he is my father/I would be his lady all my life*". No other contemporary songwriter could compose lyrics the equal of these in tenderness and innocence, a sweet combination. She plucks at a couple of tunes on a dulcimer, which she has only been playing since February, and then picks up her guitar to sing "Big Yellow Taxi", which gets great applause, of course, as does a song from *Clouds*. She falters a bit on it, and cannot quite reach the pitch at times, but it is the final number and she has made it through all right. Short pause while she stands timidly in the centre of the stage, looking vulnerable and dreamy, then fade-out.

Cut to the dressing room, and a typical dressing room scene, with a few friends, one or two press, a lot of record company representatives, and the usual well-known visitor. In appearance, she seems rather severe in an attractive sort of way with her fine blonde hair scraped back from her tanned face, which has large bones around the cheeks and forehead, and a wide, generous mouth. It's a pleasant, open face that sits on top of a body whose seeming fragility inspires a feeling of instinctive protectiveness.

With Tom Jones on his eponymous ITV show, aired January 1970

DONALDSON COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

"I would be his lady": with then-boyfriend Graham Nash at the Big Sur Folk Festival at the Esalen Institute, September 1969

Joni Mitchell is not her real name. At Fort McCloud in Alberta, Canada, she is known as Roberta Joan Anderson, but in 1965 she got married to one Chuck Mitchell, a marriage dissolved about 12 months later. Her first album, *Song To A Seagull*, reflects the sadness of this marital split, and, indeed, the motions that have inspired many of her songs are always tangible, beating like veins near the surface of her work.

"Willy", for instance, refers to her association with Graham Nash, now ended, while the impetus for writing "For Free" came from a clarinettist she saw playing on a London street – "*Nobody stopped to hear him, though he played so sweet and high*", one line goes wistfully.

"There is a certain amount of my life in all my songs," she told me softly. "They are honest and personal, and based on truth, but I exercise a writer's licence to change details. Honesty is important to me. If I have any personal philosophy it is that I like the truth. I like to be straight with people and them with me. But it is not easy to do this all the time, especially in this business where there is so much falsity."

Her first album was not released until late 1968, but she had been singing for five years then in clubs and bars, while her name was attracting public attention through other artists' interpretations of her songs: Judy Collins' version of "Both Sides, Now" is probably the best example.

More recently, too, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young cut their interpretation of her lovely, floating song "Woodstock", whipping it up in the process into something fierce and pounding, far removed from the original in tone and execution. "I liked their performance, too, in its way," she said. "They were seeing Woodstock from the point of view of the performers, while my version is concerned with the spirit of the festival. I never did actually get to Woodstock itself, you see, because the traffic jams to the site were nine miles long, so I sat in my New York hotel room and saw it on television."

If anyone has helped her, though, in popularising her work it has been the cowboy rock'n'roll singer Tom Rush, who, she said, had got her to leave Michigan, where she was doing the round of folk clubs, and securing her a gig at the Gaslight in New York. This was not a total success, but Rush put out a version of her "Urge For Going" after it had been

> *"I never did get to Woodstock: the traffic jams were nine miles long"*
>
> JONI MITCHELL

turned down by Judy Collins, and this became a favourite on the club circuits, opening doors for her in consequence. "Yes, he was the first to help. Until he played that and 'The Circle Game', nobody really wanted to know; they would time me when I went on as an opening act, so you can see that I have had to work my way up. It has all been very gradual. Tom helped me as well in that period, because I was unsure about my writing, and didn't think it was very good. But there have been a lot of people who have been good to me."

Count among these David Crosby, who produced her first album. He has given her lots of hints on recording techniques, she says, and has captured in the studio her stage presence: "he helped to keep the music simple and basic".

"No-one paid much attention to folk music three years ago," she remarked quietly, "and the record companies wanted to change my music, so I had to wait until I was in a position so that I could play as I wanted." The Judy Collins album *Wild Flowers*, which included some Mitchell compositions, allowed her to bargain, and the subsequent albums have been made completely under her direction, even down to the sleeves.

All of the album covers she has painted herself, from the rather plain but expressively poignant self-portrait on *Clouds* to the stark simplicity of the sketch on *Ladies Of The Canyon*. But it is the songs within the covers that are important, and they are tender and sensitive and as spare in construction as the line-drawings on the sleeves.

Her great quality is her spirit of humanity: the compassion for the solitary clarinettist on the street corner, the unalloyed romanticism of "Willy", or the comradely feelings for the half million gathered at Woodstock.

At the same time as being deeply emotional, though, they manage to avoid the clingings of nostalgia; her work shows no signs of being mushy. Rather, it is built of sturdy bones, and in "Big Yellow Taxi", for instance, shows humour, as she herself does ("Clean linen and funk is my idea of a good life,'" she told me with a laugh.).

For those who saw her on the Isle Of Wight or who will be able to see the TV programme on BBC2, it was a brief glimpse of an artist who bids fair to have the same impact in the '70s on the popular musical consciousness that Dylan and Baez had in the '60s. For those who miss her, you don't know what you got till it's gone.

MICHAEL WATTS

ROBERT ALTMAN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

BLUE

RELEASED 22 JUNE 1971

A masterpiece made out of restless travel and doomed love affairs. "*Looking for something, what can it be?*"

BY ROB HUGHES

COMMERCIAL success didn't sit easy with Joni Mitchell. *Clouds* had gone gold and brought with it a level of popular appeal that took away some of her everyday liberties. Having finished *Ladies Of The Canyon* in February 1970, she vowed to take a year off, ostensibly to recharge her jaded batteries, but also to escape what she felt was an increasing sense of claustrophobia. "I was being isolated, starting to feel like a bird in a gilded cage," she explained to *Rolling Stone*'s Larry LeBlanc. "A certain amount of success cuts you off in a lot of ways. You can't move freely. I like to live, be on the streets, to be in a crowd..."

In many ways, it signalled the start of Mitchell's conflicted relationship between art and celebrity. Now that the *"black limousine"* and *"velvet curtain calls"* of "For Free" had narrowed into the reality of her own life, she needed to regain her peripheral vision, restore a degree of clarity. Mitchell came to despise showbusiness, declaring fame "a series of misunderstandings surrounding a name". Not for nothing did David Geffen once tell her: "You're the only star I ever met that wanted to be ordinary."

There were major upheavals in Mitchell's private life, too. Her intense love affair with Graham Nash, which had coincided with an accelerated spurt of productivity from both parties, was nearing its end, resulting in a series of petty squabbles. Against this backdrop, Mitchell decided to head for Europe, where she travelled around Greece, Spain and France. Her main seat of exile was the island of Crete, where she took up residence in a cave amid a hippie community in the fishing village of Matala. It was from there that she sent Nash a telegram home. He was busy laying a new floor in Mitchell's kitchen when it landed. It read: 'If you hold sand too tightly in your hand, it will run through your fingers. Love, Joan.' "I knew at that point it was truly over between us," Nash recalled, disconsolately, in his memoir *Wild Tales*.

Mitchell was introduced to the Appalachian dulcimer on Crete and adjusted to the unhurried rhythm of local life. The experience brought her into contact with a number of characters, who in turn helped reignite her creativity. One such figure was Cary Raditz, a wild-haired American chef who was blessed, in Mitchell's words, with "fierce-looking blue eyes" and "the mark of Cain on his brow". The pair began a relationship, sealed by a song she'd written in honour of his birthday: "Carey".

As more musical ideas started to flow, Mitchell noticed the formation of certain recurring themes – love, loss, escape, a quest for some kind of indefinable spiritual truth. And for all the delicious scenery, food and ready company, she was homesick. Shifting from one continental base to another only amplified the feeling. While in Paris, she poured her longing for her adopted West Coast into another fresh tune, "California".

She returned to her native Canada in late July, playing Toronto's Mariposa Folk Festival alongside James Taylor. Mitchell and Taylor had met a year earlier, at the Newport Folk Festival, but now they became ➤

A landmark against which the work of all confessional singer-songwriters would be measured

romantically involved. A month or so later, she visited him on the set of his Hollywood road movie, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, where they wrote together and, as Taylor told *Uncut* in 2015, "had some of the most outrageous good times". By October, they were sharing a stage at London's Paris Theatre, recorded for BBC Radio One's *In Concert* series, with Mitchell unveiling a handful of new compositions.

She returned to London at the end of November to perform at the Royal Festival Hall, where the new songs were met with unanimous approval by reviewers, among them the *NME* and *Melody Maker*. The latter's readership was similarly smitten with Mitchell, voting her 1970's Top Female Performer in its year-end poll (ahead of Aretha Franklin, Grace Slick, Sandy Denny and the recently departed Janis Joplin), despite her paucity of live shows.

Back home by early '71, Mitchell and Taylor were viewed by the American music press as Hollywood's golden couple; two young, photogenic singer-songwriters whose liaison embodied the free-spirited ambience of Laurel Canyon. Both set about preparing their respective solo albums, with Mitchell singing backing vocals on what became *Mud Slide Slim And The Blue Horizon* – most notably on his cover of Carole King's "You've Got A Friend" – and Taylor repaying the compliment by adding guitar to "California", "All I Want" and "A Case Of You". They also accepted an invitation from King to appear on a reworked version of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" for *Tapestry*, then being cut in the same A&M studio that Mitchell had booked.

The relationship quickly turned sour, however. Apparently devastated by Taylor's decision to call it off, Mitchell funnelled her pain into the other songs she was recording for the appositely named *Blue*. The album duly became a document of a life in flux, a diary of physical and emotional displacement set against a backdrop of restless travel and doomed love affairs.

Shorn of the affectations of *Clouds* or the airy folk-pop of *Ladies Of The Canyon*, *Blue* was almost uncomfortably direct. Mitchell again refused to coat the songs in fussy arrangements, preferring to place her voice front and centre over spare guitar, dulcimer and piano, her vulnerability plain for all to hear. She later told *Rolling Stone* that "at that period of my life, I had no personal defences. I felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes. I felt like I had absolutely no secrets from the world, and I couldn't pretend in my life to be strong. Or to be happy. But the advantage of it in the music was that there were no defences there either."

She was to use a more curious, semi-grotesque analogy in 2014's *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words*, telling interviewer Malka Marom that she'd dreamed she was watching "a big fat women's tuba band. Women with big horns and rolled-down nylon in house dresses, playing tuba and big horn music, and I was a plastic bag with all my organs exposed, sobbing on an auditorium chair at that time. That's how I felt. Like my guts were on the outside. I wrote *Blue* in that condition."

The implication here is that *Blue* is an unwavering litany of distress and despair, an inventory of misfortune with no light relief. But it's actually a counterweight of ecstasy and agony, of the best and worst of times. Nash is supposedly the subject of the piano-led "My Old Man", Mitchell riding the climatic extremes of romantic love in a breathy soprano. *"He's my sunshine in the morning/He's my fireworks at the end of the day/He's the warmest chord I ever heard"*, she sings at her sunniest, her voice adopting the shifting cadences of jazz. It's in direct contrast to the clouds that descend in his absence: *"But when he's gone/Me and them lonesome blues collide/The bed's too big/The frying pan's too wide"*.

The exquisite "A Case Of You", also rumoured to be about Nash, finds her trying to absorb the lessons of a failed love affair that refuses to let her move on. As if to measure the depth of its impact, Mitchell addresses her quandary in religious terms: *"Oh, you're in my blood like holy wine/You taste so bitter and so sweet"*. The sensitivity of her lyrics is echoed in the deft accompaniment of Taylor's acoustic guitar and in the poignant tones of Mitchell's dulcimer, the latter providing much of *Blue*'s graceful fragility. As testament to its enduring pull, "A Case Of You" became one of her most-covered tunes, siring versions from as far afield as KD Lang, Nancy Wilson, James Blake, The Decemberists' Colin Meloy and Prince (as, naturally, "A Case Of U").

Of the trio of songs considered to be inspired by Taylor, "All I Want" alludes to the jealousies and insecurities that appear to have undermined their relationship from an early stage. All Mitchell wants, she sings, her fluted voice rising and dipping over silvery dulcimer, *"is to bring out the best in me and in you too"*. But it feels like honest delusion rather than realistic hope. Her opening lines give a truer indication of her emotional condition: *"I am on a lonely road and I am travelling/Travelling, travelling, travelling/Looking for something, what can it be/Oh I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you some"*.

As she explained to Cameron Crowe some years later: "In the state that I was at in my inquiry about life and direction and relationships, I perceived a lot of hate in my heart... I perceived my inability to love at that point. And it horrified me some."

The title track follows a similar line of confession. A sombre lullaby that finds Mitchell alone at the piano, the song appears to directly address Taylor's heroin addiction – *"Ink on a pin/Underneath the skin/An empty space to fill in"* – while attempting to strike a note of optimism. Yet the prospect of self-destruction is too enticing to ignore out of hand: *"Everybody's saying that hell's the hippest way to go/Well I don't think so/But I'm gonna take a look around it though"*. Arguably the most affecting moment on the entire album occurs halfway through "Blue", when Mitchell sings *"lots of laughs"* with such forlorn resignation that it's almost impossible not to well up.

Stephen Stills is on board for the more sprightly "Carey", bringing a quasi-calypso rhythm to a tune that details

CRITICS' VERDICT

"The album is rich in... poetic imagery, a lyrical strength unequalled certainly among her female contemporaries. This may well be the best album of the year, but then, where Joni is concerned, comparisons have little point. She is in a class of her own."
NICK LOGAN, NME, JULY 10, 1971

"We elect our heroes because they tell us truths about life, but their very success divorces them from our field of experience... None of it is Joni's fault, of course. Her songs continue to reflect her own reality, but where once the truths she distilled were universal, the songs here tend to be inward-looking."
AL, MELODY MAKER, JULY 10, 1971

Blue is sad, funny, poetic, revelatory and often achingly candid...

Joni talking to Carole King in the control room of A&M Records' studio in LA during the recording of *Tapestry*, January 1971

Mitchell's sojourn in Matala. Despite revolving around her activities with Raditz – another devilishly *"mean old Daddy"* to whom she's helplessly drawn – it's essentially a conflicted piece of travelogue that contrasts the simple hedonism of Cretan nightlife with homesickness for California. Mitchell can't seem to decide what she wants more – the wine, laughter and scratchy rock'n'roll of the Mermaid Café or the comforts of the Canyon. *"Oh, you know it sure is hard to leave here, Carey/ But it's really not my home"*, she declares, double-tracking herself on harmonies, with Russ Kunkel adding tactful percussion. *"My fingernails are filthy, I got beach tar on my feet/And I miss my clean white linen and my fancy French cologne"*. Raditz also features in the equally fidgety "California", in which Mitchell's loneliness and dislocation are all too apparent.

Perhaps most telling of all is "The Last Time I Saw Richard". A conversational piece with a gorgeously understated piano melody, it's a tale of romantic disillusion and the passage of time, its titular character most likely a reference to Mitchell's ex-husband, Chuck. She hears that *"Richard got married to a figure skater/And he bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator/And he drinks at home now most nights with the TV on"*. This surrender to suburban torpor seems to flood Mitchell's character with dread, as if the domesticity she craves will, in actuality, snuff out her creative free-spiritedness.

For all its thwarted romance and soul-stripping, it's this question that sits at the heart of *Blue*. Mitchell is ultimately trying to reconcile her life with her art, compressing an elusive search for personal contentment into a grand artistic statement. *Blue* is sad, funny, poetic, revelatory and often achingly candid. And such an intense experience that it feels much longer than its relatively slight 35 minutes.

Issued in the summer of 1971, *Blue* did brisk business both at home and abroad, cracking the Billboard Top 20 and peaking in the UK Top 3. It quickly became a landmark against which the work of all confessional singer-songwriters would be measured. Graham Nash says he still has a hard time listening to it. Mitchell herself has called it a turning point in her career.

It was also the album that finally established the 27-year-old as an American superstar. A situation that would once again test her ambivalence towards her own fame.

TRACKMARKS BLUE

1 All I Want ★★★★
2 My Old Man ★★★★★
3 Little Green ★★★★
4 Carey ★★★★★
5 Blue ★★★★★
6 California ★★★★
7 This Flight Tonight ★★★★
8 River ★★★★★
9 A Case Of You ★★★★★
10 The Last Time I Saw Richard ★★★★★

Label: Reprise
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Recorded at: A&M Studios, Hollywood, California

Personnel: Joni Mitchell (Appalachian dulcimer, acoustic guitar, piano, vocals), James Taylor (guitar on "All I Want", "California" and "A Case Of You"), Stephen Stills (bass and guitar on "Carey"), 'Sneaky' Pete Kleinow (pedal-steel guitar on "California" and "This Flight Tonight"), Russ Kunkel (drums on "A Case Of You", "California" and "Carey")
Highest chart position: UK 3; US 15

JIMMCCRARY/REDFERNS

FOR THE ROSES

RELEASED NOVEMBER 1972

The reluctant star makes her escape, to "melancholy exile" in British Columbia. A pause for new thoughts.

BY SHARON O'CONNELL

BY Joni Mitchell's own admission, the brutal self-exposure of *Blue* took its toll. In 1985, she declared it to be "probably the purest emotional record that I will ever make in my life". That superlative holds still, but what sounds like a simple artistic judgment bears the faint suggestion of a shudder, with a note-to-self attached – never again.

In the latter half of 1971, Mitchell realised that her mental health was being compromised by a combination of factors: her deep, autobiographical questing, the fallout from her breakups with James Taylor and Jackson Browne, the voracious demands of what she felt was an exploitative industry and the public adulation that *Blue* delivered – to the point where she was cancelling as many shows as she was playing. Even applause she found difficult. As she told Timothy White in *Rock Lives*: "My animal sense was to run offstage. Many a night I would be out onstage, and the intimacy of the songs against the raucousness of this huge beast that is an audience felt very weird. I was not David to that Goliath." So, at the age of 28, she sold her Laurel Canyon home and retreated to a small stone house – just one room with a loft, "like a monastery" – that she was building on a 40-acre property on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. It was there, in a period of unsettlement, that she wrote most of her fifth album, and her first for Asylum, *For The Roses*.

"The idea of people at my knees was just horrifying to me," Mitchell explained of her need to escape, in the 2003 documentary *A Woman Of Heart And Mind*. "Fame made me really nervous and uncomfortable. So I isolated myself and I made my attempt to get back to the garden. I lived with kerosene, stayed without electricity for about a year. I was going down and with that came a tremendous sense of knowing nothing. Western psychology might call it a nervous breakdown; in certain cultures, they call it a shamanic conversion. I read nearly every psychology book I could get my hands on and threw them all against the wall, basically. But depression can be the sand that makes the pearl."

The "pearl" that was *For The Roses* – with Henry Lewy again on board as production guide and engineer – is widely acknowledged as a transitional record. Written largely on piano, it falls between the emotional transparency of *Blue* and 1974's *Court And Spark*, but that's not to say it doesn't have a character all of its own. And Mitchell hardly ditched the soul-baring altogether. In fact, "Lesson In Survival", "Let The Wind Carry Me" and "Woman Of Heart And Mind" are among the most poignant and revealing songs in her entire catalogue. But it does show her shifting away from relentlessly personal exposés towards impressionistic vignettes and, inspired by Dylan, starting to hang her melodies on narrative platforms. The self-described "scientist of love" was not only done with microscopic examination of her own psyche almost to the exclusion of all else, she was also experimenting with songwriting structure and – later, in the studio – the airy, instrumental abstractions ("The rustle of the arbutus trees at night finding its way into the music") that ➤

The title track takes a long, hard look at fame, the price an artist pays for it

The "scientist of love", Amsterdam, 1972

would become a defining characteristic.

According to Mitchell, her time in British Columbia was "a very solitary period. It was melancholy exile – there was a sense of failure to it." That sounds like a harsh self-judgement, but she'd set her own bar high. She agonised about whether or not her audiences would love her as deeply if they knew what she was really like – in other words, not some supernatural Earth Woman – but was testing their commitment by telling them, in song.

And even as Mitchell retreated, she wondered how she would get back in the saddle. Any lingering misconceptions about the singer's nature should have been cleared up by her explanation of the title "For The Roses", which refers to a horse race in the Kentucky Derby. Introducing the song in concert in 1972, she said: "That comes from the expression 'to run for the roses'. You know what that's all about: you take this horse and he comes charging into the finish line and they throw a wreath of flowers around his neck and then one day they take him out and shoot him." How she might return to LA and showbusiness after hiding out for a year was less obvious.

Beethoven helped, it seems. One of the many books Mitchell read during her "maladjusted period", alongside Jung, Freud and numerous theology and self-help titles, was JWN Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, written in 1927.

> She has the ability to open up her chest cavity and peer inside, without showing a shred of self-pity

It detailed his struggles, self-doubts and worries about how his work was being received, his deafness and the significance of these troubles on a more profound level. His story struck a deep chord with Mitchell, so much so that she wrote "Judgement Of The Moon And Stars (Ludwig's Tune)", the album's lustrous, cathartic closer, which extols the importance of speaking truth to oneself, whatever the cost. "I spoke to [*Beethoven*] and to myself at the same time," she told *The Star* in 2013. "I said, 'You've got to keep going in spite of your deafness, in spite of everything.'"

If Beethoven helped, then so did time spent in forest solitude. As Mitchell said, "I guess it strengthened my nervous system a little, so I finally came back." When she did, it was as a houseguest of her friend and former agent, Asylum Records co-founder David Geffen. He asked her, straight up, to write a hit for her new album. Mitchell did just that with the breezy and sun-bright, almost onomatopoeically Californian "You

GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

Turn Me On, I'm A Radio", which peaked at No 25 on the Billboard Hot 100 and delivered her first Canadian Top 10 hit. It was originally recorded with old associates David Crosby, Graham Nash and Neil Young, but only Nash's harmonica part made the final cut because, as Mitchell put it, while acknowledging that it had been great fun to record, "there were too many chefs". Her swooping yodel is in full, zephyr-borne flow, her playful lyrics aimed fair and square at radio DJs. With history's perspective, the song now reads like a dig at the commodification of creativity that produced it, but to Mitchell's mind, "It was just my peculiar, warped sense of humour."

"You Turn Me On..." is certainly the wild card in *For The Roses*' deck. It's in stark contrast to the opening track, "Banquet", which starts with a forcefully pitching, Carole King-like piano passage and then opens up via Mitchell's effortless vocal aerobatics onto a vista of seagulls, lobster pots, sunshine and sails. Her lyrics, though, use the metaphor of a harbourside meal to make a point about social inequality, among other things: *"Who let the greedy in, who left the needy out?"* she asks. *"Some get the gravy and some get the gristle/Some get the marrowbone and some get nothing – though there's plenty to spare"*. There's also what might be a personal swipe at James Taylor, as well as a general comment on the drug's popularity in LA music circles at the time: *"... some turn to heroin"*. That point is punched home hard in the next song, "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire". Simple, rhythmic guitar work, Mitchell's skating vocal and breezy woodwind are a seductive combination, but they can't camouflage lyrics that detail a very particular lifestyle, with its dodging of beat police, padlocked pawnshops and deals done on fire escapes – all in service of *"the black soot of Lady Release"*.

Two other tracks underline Mitchell's sharpening of her torytelling skills. The first is "Barangrill", which introduces characters of vivid imagining in deceptively simple phrases (*"Three waitresses all wearing black diamond earrings, talking about Zombies and Singapore Slings"*) and reflects both freedom's thrill and a destination's long-distant lure in life on the road. The other is jazz-folk fusion "Blonde In The Bleachers", in which multi-tracking of players' parts (including Stephen Stills on guitar) suggests a much bigger band. It's a rueful and bittersweet ode to rock'n'roll relationships, which must battle vanity, sexual competitiveness, hunger for the so-called chase and more. Against a sudden, Carpenters-like boom, Mitchell declares, *"You can't hold the hand of a rock'n'roll man very long"* – thus inviting speculation for decades to follow.

Far more intimately autobiographical are "Let The Wind Carry Me", "Lessons In Survival" and "Woman Of Heart And Mind". Alongside stiff competition from *Blue*, the last of those songs has become emblematic of Mitchell's ability to open up her chest cavity and peer inside, without once flinching or showing a shred of self-pity. In it, she describes her various roles in her current relationship (foil, nurturer, cheerleader, scold...) and laments her partner's shallowness and lack of commitment. She also states exactly what she needs – *"affection and respect, a little passion"* – but, despite the song's f-bomb, it's disappointment that sets the tone, not defiance.

Earlier, amid the soft grey piano tones of "Lesson In Survival", Mitchell airs her relationship anxiety in lines of casually eloquent scansion that seem to hover in mid-air, until the bluntness of a phrase like *"there's this reef around me"* suddenly grounds them. That song segues straight into its existential mate, "Let The Wind Carry Me", where Mitchell introduces her family and the life that helped shape her – *"Papa's faith is in people, Mama she believes in cleaning"* – in an era when the generation gap was starting to yawn, while detailing how her urge to be free always wins out over her desire to settle down and raise a family.

The album's title track – a delicate guitar composition more in line with *Ladies Of The Canyon* – occupies a kind of middle ground in terms of content, since it's neither an emotional portrait of shocking transparency nor an impressionistic narrative. Rather, it takes a long, hard look at fame, the price an artist pays for it, and the music industry's ruthless pragmatism. Mitchell's tone shifts from scathing and almost accusatory to regretful, acknowledging her part in the circus. *"I guess I seem ungrateful with my teeth sunk in the hand that brings me things I really can't give up just yet"*, she admits, later adding, *"Just when you're getting a taste for worship, they start bringing out the hammers and the boards and the nails"*. As Mitchell told *The LA Times* in 1996: "To me, this was an unfair, crooked business and it has nothing to do with real talent. That [*song*] was my first farewell to showbusiness."

Needless to say, showbusiness forgave Mitchell this poetic slight – if in fact it had even really noticed it was its target – and welcomed her back with open arms. Not only did *For The Roses* feature an upbeat, drivetime-friendly bona fide hit, it was also a less uncomfortable listen all round. But Mitchell's restless talent was already preparing to move on. She said later of her experience of group creativity when recording "I'm A Radio..." that it was "like when you do a movie with a cast of thousands. Somehow, I prefer movies with unknowns."

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Her new album isn't likely to surprise those versed in her ways. More convoluted melody lines, thoughtful, well-written and often genuinely inspired lyrics, and skilfully uncluttered lyrics. Her extreme gentleness enables her to perform sharply observant pieces of social satire without ever becoming vicious or condescending."
CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY, NME, DECEMBER 16, 1972

"Not for her is self-pity, and her task is made easier by an almost total command of poetic device... *For The Roses* is mostly about loss. In many of these songs she caresses her precious yesterdays like the cover of a well-thumbed, leather-bound book."
RICHARD WILLIAMS, MELODY MAKER, DECEMBER 9, 1972

TRACKMARKS FOR THE ROSES

1 Banquet ★★★★
2 Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire ★★★★
3 Barangrill ★★★★
4 Lesson In Survival ★★★★
5 Let The Wind Carry Me ★★★★★
6 For The Roses ★★★★
7 See You Sometime ★★★
8 Electricity ★★★
9 You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio ★★★
10 Blonde In The Bleachers ★★★★
11 Woman Of Heart And Mind ★★★★★
12 Judgement Of The Moon And Stars (Ludwig's Tune) ★★★★★

Label: Asylum
Recorded at: A&M Studios, Los Angeles
Produced by: Henry Lewy
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (guitar, vocals, piano), Wilton Felder (bass), Russ Kunkel (drums), Stephen Stills and James Burton (electric guitar), Bobbye Hall (percussion), Graham Nash (harmonica), Bobby Notkoff, (strings) Tommy Scott (woodwind and reeds)
Highest chart position: UK – ; US 11

COURT AND SPARK

RELEASED 01 JANUARY 1974

All aboard the LA Express! Back in the "*city of the fallen angels*", the quintessential singer-songwriter becomes a team player.

BY JON DALE

THE year 1973 was relatively quiet for Joni Mitchell, at least as far as the public eye was concerned. She only performed a few times, once at a benefit concert, then a few shows with Neil Young; indeed, much of 1973 would be spent in the studio, finding the right musicians and the right métier for the songs that would make up her next album, 1974's *Court And Spark*.

For anyone who has listened through Joni's first wave of albums in their entirety, the leap from the folk stylings of 1972's *For The Roses*, with its tentative nods to the pop charts, to the panoramic *Court And Spark*, is nothing short of startling: it's the career equivalent of a deep, long exhale, as though Mitchell has finally, after five albums, found musicians who fully grasp what she is capable of doing. She still kept contact with her old crew – David Crosby and Graham Nash both turn up on backing vocals – and as with *For The Roses*, she brings in outliers for exotic touches, such as José Feliciano's guitar on "Free Man In Paris", and The Band's Robbie Robertson on "Raised On Robbery". What you take away most from listening to *Court And Spark*, though, is a massive jolt of confidence to Mitchell's writing – she was doing things, now, that simply no-one else was doing.

Perhaps the most important break for Mitchell, with the development of *Court And Spark*, was her embrace of jazz musicians: in this instance, Tom Scott and LA Express. The change came about, at least partly, because of struggles in the demoing process. She'd called on seasoned session musician Russ Kunkel to play drums, a logical choice given his appearance not only on *Blue* and *For The Roses*, but also on albums by members of her peer group (he had played for James Taylor, Carole King and Jackson Browne). But Kunkel struggled with the ornamentation that Mitchell was building into her new, increasingly complex songs, eventually compelling her to try someone else: "I think you should get yourself a jazz drummer."

Mitchell's subsequent trawl of LA jazz clubs, accompanied by her right-hand production man Henry Lewy, landed her at legendary watering hole The Baked Potato, on Cahuenga Boulevard West in Studio City. There, she saw LA Express, and while she had prior form with Scott – he'd played woodwinds and reeds on *For The Roses* – this time Mitchell picked up the entire group, inviting them at first to guest on a few songs on her forthcoming album, though that would soon develop into LA Express playing on the entire album. At that point, the group were playing at their peak, with an unbeatable lineup, Scott joined by Max Bennett (bass), Larry Carlton (guitarist), Joe Sample (keyboards) and, perhaps most significantly for Mitchell, John Guerin on drums. Carlton and Sample were also members of jazz-fusion gang The Crusaders.

The encounter wasn't seamless, at first – there were real struggles for the new outfit, Mitchell noting that the group "didn't really know how heavy to play, and I was used to being the whole orchestra. Many nights I would be very discouraged." The breakthrough came, seemingly unexpectedly, one evening where "we suddenly overcame the obstacles". One can imagine ➤

Making stronger connections with jazz musicians opened up what Mitchell was able to do with songform

Recording *Court And Spark* at A&M Studios, La Brea Avenue, LA, 1973

STEPHANIE RAYNBARNETT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

the struggle – Mitchell trying to pull back on her tendency towards taking up all the space owing to her past as a solo performer; LA Express feeling out territory with a songwriter who was at first glimpse a folk musician, but whose songs admitted to a richness and complexity well beyond the genre's ken. Building a surprising, unique musical lexicon to themselves, the meeting of solo artist and group also had greater personal significance to Mitchell, as she and Guerin would fall for each other, staying together for several years.

Certainly, LA Express brings a newly supple texture to *Court And Spark*. Much is made of the intimacy of Mitchell's songwriting, but few of her albums open with quite such beckoning closeness, while reeling out a tableau of the tensions of the romantic tryst, as "Court And Spark" itself. Beginning with Mitchell seated at the piano, it feels as though she's finding the melody as she sings, tasting its possibilities, before the group quietly move into view behind the break after the song's first verse, a weeping pedal steel winding the song into its next verse. Each moment builds the song's emotional tenor, and the investments in the lyrics, the to-and-fro of Mitchell and her tentative lover, her inability to fully shake the mobility so cherished by the committed artist, their place in the geographies of the soul (with LA branded as the *"city of the fallen angels"*), maps out one of *Court And Spark*'s key concerns – love versus freedom.

"Help Me", one of the album's singles and a Top 10 hit for Mitchell – her only such achievement – still surprises in the way it walks through various moments from the inside of a relationship, multi-faceted in its understanding of love's domain. By the end of the song, Mitchell's acknowledging the tempestuous nature of the romantic contract – *"Both of us flirting around/ Flirting and flirting/Hurting too"* – and hymning, elegiacally, the inevitable fall into love: *"Are you going to let me go there by myself/That's such a lonely thing to do"*. In contrast, "Free Man In Paris" is one of Mitchell's more playful, observational songs: written about David Geffen, whose label she was signed to and whose house she shared for some time, it paints a wistful picture of an industry mover reminiscing over wasted time on the Champs Elysees, before sighing about their return to workaday reality, *"stoking the starmaker machinery behind the popular song"*.

Court And Spark turns after this moment – if "Help Me" and "Free Man In Paris" share a sense of play, "People's Parties" unflinchingly documents the cold interactions of the social, dissecting the forms of self-presentation and self-preservation that were evident in her milieu, from the *"passport smiles"* through the schmoozers and chancers *"standing in the centre, giving to get something"*. The song's pivot, though, is the mirroring of the *"photo beauty"* with her observation *"laughing and crying, you know it's the same release"*, and the song's protagonist, sighing at the end of the song, *"I wish I had more sense of humour"*. From here, the song segues into "The Same Situation" – both songs share a bittersweet tang, but if the former is about the external world, the latter internalises the fear and anxiety of

> *Court And Spark* stands as the beginning of Mitchell's most experimental phase...

the scenario, the song's Lothario *"weighing the beauty and imperfection"* of his target, while the woman is left unpacking the complexity of the moment: the parry-and-thrust of the relationship; the use and misuse of love as word and deed; the need to balance art and heart.

"The Same Situation" is sometimes read as Mitchell's song about her romance with Warren Beatty. But the power in Mitchell's writing at this point was its ability to address the intimate concern with a far broader sweep of the pen; even when she's interrogating her past mistakes, these songs gesture outwards. The desire to link her songs to her past loves also undercuts the poetry of Mitchell's writing, and ignores the way this articulates a strongly female experience of struggle and pain through a form of women's writing. Further, this writing refuses to kowtow to western culture's need to read everything through the perspective of the male. And when Mitchell does seem to be addressing deeply personal concerns – "Car On A Hill", the next song on *Court And Spark*, is believed to be about her painful break-up with Jackson Browne, who she was seeing in 1972, and who left her for model Phyllis Major – she writes in a way that understands everyone's insecurities, but doesn't excuse or gloss over the many privileges of masculinity.

For "Down To You", Mitchell pares back the fulsome arrangements of the rest of the album. After the cumulative intensity of "People's Parties", "The Same Situation" and "Car On A Hill", her singing and playing on "Down To You" is disarmingly becalmed at first. Admitting another angle on *Court And Spark*'s multi-faceted address of the interpersonal, Mitchell writes through the flux of romance, the middle stanza taking the protagonist out to a pick-up joint, where *"closing lights strip off the shadows on this strange new flesh you've found"*. Throughout the song there's an echo of the endless existential threat of love, the 'constant stranger' at the heart of the encounter. Scott's arrangements take, at times, an almost baroque turn, and the instrumentation follows Mitchell's pausing and rushing piano playing, winding around each other in uncertain intimacy.

"Just Like This Train" brings the group back to the fore – it's a joy to hear the wind and weep of Larry Carlton's electric guitar, gliding notes between the gentle flood of Mitchell's acoustic, while the rhythm section lock into a deceptively simple throb. Bennett's bass often pauses on the one note, drawing out a low drone, before moving through thickets of pulsing notes. Mitchell courts bitchiness here: there's a great moment where she sings, tongue somewhere near cheek, *"dreaming of the pleasure I'm going to have watching your hairline recede, my vain darling"*. In an interview, she would exclaim, "That was intentionally mean... That was the meanest I ever got." But the cold ardour of "Just Like This Train" – with lovers observed passing *"like railroad cars"* – is soon lost with the joyous swing of "Raised On Robbery", a mischievous boogie that's a welcome crack in *Court And Spark*'s armour.

It's also a deceptive moment. The following "Trouble Child" is one of the hardest, flintiest songs in Mitchell's career. For Sheila Weller, author of *Girls Like Us*, it's a song that takes on, with unforgiving eye, her experience of entering therapy after her break-up with Browne. It's certainly a compelling reading of the song, with Mitchell singing of figures that *"open and close you, then they talk like they know you – they don't know you"*. The song's dark drift also reinforces one of the recent developments in Mitchell's music – an increasing capacity to 'drape' her melody over the music, as though dressing the instrumentation in a thick fabric of melody. But Mitchell would claim elsewhere that she got plenty out of her time in therapy – "I wanted to talk to someone about confusion which we all have," she said, before concluding, "I think analysis did me a lot of good." And as if to make a point about the complex experience of the analysand, Mitchell finished the album with a cover of Annie Ross and Wardell Gray's "Twisted", a satirical spin on psychoanalysis, replete with guest appearance from stoner comedy duo Cheech & Chong; never let it be said that Mitchell doesn't have a sense of humour.

Wrapped in a beautiful painting from Mitchell, *Court And Spark* was rapturously received, and would end up being her biggest selling album, going platinum, and earning her three Grammy nominations. The subsequent tour for the album, which saw Mitchell rejuvenated and playing with a fierce funk in her feet thanks to LA Express, was documented on the *Miles Of Aisles* double set (reviewed on page 140). In Europe, she would share the stage with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; really, 1974 was a year spent mostly on the road. But her music was already changing shape, no doubt thanks to the ongoing influence of her backing group, but most likely as part of her ongoing quest to find the most supple and invigorating ways to frame her songs. While it was her biggest success, *Court And Spark* also stands as the beginning of Mitchell's most experimental phase – by making stronger connections with jazz musicians, who opened up what she was able to do with songform, she was being enabled to make the massive strides forward on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"In terms of colours and moods... the arrangements here seem more sensitive than she's ever had before. Everything is just right, from the Junior Walker-style tenor intro on 'Car On A Hill' to the raunchy back-up of 'Raised On Robbery'."
MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, JANUARY 26, 1974

"While others have resorted to pitying self-parody or just lame songs, Ms Mitchell has gone from strength to strength... Here the songs are more honest and several indicate a coming to terms with herself, with the beauty and the imperfections as she says in 'The Same Situation'."
STEVE CLARKE, NME, FEBRUARY 2, 1974

TRACKMARKS COURT AND SPARK

1 Court And Spark ★★★★★
2 Help Me ★★★★★
3 Free Man In Paris ★★★★
4 People's Parties ★★★★
5 The Same Situation ★★★★
6 Car On A Hill ★★★★
7 Down To You ★★★★★
8 Just Like This Train ★★★★
9 Raised On Robbery ★★★
10 Trouble Child ★★★★★
11 Twisted ★★★

Label: Asylum
Recorded: A&M, LA
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, piano, clavinet on "Down To You"), John Guerin (drums, percussion), Max Bennett (bass), Joe Sample (electric piano, clavinet on "Raised On Robbery"), Tom Scott (woodwinds, reeds), Larry Carlton (electric guitar), Milt Holland (chimes on "Court And Spark"), Wilton Felder (bass on "People's Parties" and "Free Man In Paris"), Jim Hughart (bass on "Trouble Child"), Chuck Findley (trumpet on "Trouble Child" and "Twisted"), José Feliciano (electric guitar on "Free Man In Paris"), Wayne Perkins (electric guitar on "Car On A Hill"), Robbie Robertson (electric guitar on "Raised On Robbery"), Dennis Budimir (electric guitar on "Trouble Child"), David Crosby (backing vocals on "Free Man In Paris" and "Down To You"), Graham Nash (backing vocals on "Free Man In Paris"), Susan Webb (backing vocals on "Down To You"), Cheech Marin (background voice on "Twisted"), Tommy Chong (background voice on "Twisted")
Highest chart position: UK 14; US 2

“They say I’ve changed... Yes, I have!”

By 1974 Joni Mitchell has given up interviews, but as a run of shows at London’s New Victoria Theatre proves, she has ways of appearing more accessible than ever. MICHAEL WATTS and STEVE CLARK take notes, and follow the trail to the after-show, where Rod Stewart pays homage and Joni’s manager offers encouragement... “She’s nice. Go over and say hello!”

GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

Live at the Honolulu International Center, Hawaii, February 16, 1974

ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS

ENTERTAINMENT, as the critic Ned Rorem has pointed out, confirms rather than challenges. One might comment that there are entertainers and there are blue-blood artists, but that the two don't often coincide in popular music. When they do, you've good reason to believe you're in the presence of something special and rarefied: genius as opposed to talent.

As far as I know, nobody has ever asked for their money back at a Joni Mitchell concert, and that's a fair enough endorsement of good entertainment for you. At the same time you'd be a pretty boneheaded mutt not to feel challenged by her presence and the splendid mystery of her music.

There's nothing equivocal about shivers bristling on the spine as she hovers into view upon the stage and that effortless, crystal voice begins to play upon the sensibilities. Joni Mitchell is disturbing in a very real way, because after watching and listening to her for a while you start thinking she's not just a woman, she's WOMAN, embodying all male desires and expectations.

Small wonder then that a legion of very well known men have been sufficiently drawn by the siren's call to jump in headfirst after her. So this is the meaning of worship? Like the White Goddess of mythology she beckons – elusive, virginal and not a little awe-inspiring. It must be a trifle terrifying to know you appear that perfect. Crap, she'd probably reply, because after all she's human and with a well-developed sense of humour, too.

Idolatry is fun, but it gets a little wearing after the initial enslavement. Her biggest problem in recent years, one might argue, has been to convince us that she's not Lady Madonna, children at her feet, and not, for that matter, a latterday Joan Baez for the pure of heart...

Still, the mystique persists, and it's not just confined to male fantasies and communicants. Without her ever having made much outright comment on it, ardent feminists inevitably tend to see her as the patron saint of Lib, finding all the justification they need in the barely oblique autobiography of her albums. Therein lie exposed all her innermost thoughts and feelings, her psychic and sexual wrestlings with the male species that she's at pains never to divulge in any journalistic context. A true paradox.

For her part she retires to some private world, there to view the outside happenings with a deep and discerning detachment. She laughs a lot – girlishly, even – but I should think, from the few occasions I've seen her away from the public platform, she's careful to keep her guard up. For a woman so obviously sensitised by her experiences it must be necessary; flippant posturing and brassy panache are not weapons in her armoury. Ms Midler and Ms Streisand find no echoes.

Dory Previn can turn it into tragi-comedy, play Woody Allen from the safety of the psychoanalyst's couch, but Joni always makes us feel her soul is on the line. It's all rather confusing for a mere mortal male: the protective instinct met head on by her sensual authoritativeness.

But quite evidently, something has changed of late, for her concert appearances, such as Saturday's at London's New Victoria Theatre, are now much less solemnly artistic than in the past. She no longer even resembles the old coffee-house folk singer, with long blonde hair brushing shoulders and eyebrows; it's curled and finessed, and her cheeks glow with makeup.

Her manager, Elliot Roberts, laughs as you remark upon this. "Well," he says, "she's a woman!" Undeniably, but the effect is somehow less ethereal. And then there's a band around her for the first time, Tom Scott's LA Express, filling the emptiness and silence between the grand piano, the acoustic guitar and Appalachian harp.

Joni actually rocking out with some funky chicken, Joni closing the show with Annie Ross's little exercise in lingual humour, "Twisted". Joni cracking wry jokes. Joni elaborating long stories to her audience as preludes to her songs, and even – for her pains – coming in for the affectionate rebuke of "speed freak" from some guy out there in the crowd.

Joni, finally, somewhat more in evidence as the entertainer, as well as the artist, and suddenly the sharp realisation for this listener of the gap in time and emotion between a song's composition and its public performance, and in particular the extent of her professional skill in pulling out that original emotion. Yes, she was as great as ever, but her performance was doubly interesting for the way the new situation threw light on her artistic functioning.

In "The Same Situation" she muffed the second stanza, stopped and laughed broadly, then explained via the piano how she was confusing the particular passage with a new melody she was working on. Eventually she went back to the song and performed it with such conviction and sincerity that it might have been the freshest thing she'd written.

She preceded "People's Parties" with a wickedly intelligent and humorous rap about the incident from which it sprang, complete with a dissertation on the significance of Nixon's facial expressions. And then she illuminated a song about her mistrust of materialism, together with critics and the music industry, with a completely evocative tale about ascetic existence in British Columbia and the humanistic qualities of the arbutus tree that grows there!

These virtual self-parables and the evident disregard for the private mask made her more accessible than she's ever seemed. Contrast this attitude with the incommunicado stance of Dylan, the male artist whose stature she most closely approaches, and one can't help but feel her performances gain from it.

On the other hand, perhaps, by featuring a band, she never built up and sustained the deepest intimacy of atmosphere that she's often achieved before with just an acoustic and a piano. But it was time for her to devise a new mode of presentation, and in the LA Express she couldn't have found finer instruments.

If anything, they helped to concentrate attention on the arranging side of her talents. For instance, that usually delicate song "Woodstock" was here translated into a piece of funk, with snapping snare work from John Guerin and the deep, churning Fender of Max Bennett. It didn't quite suit the lyrics, but what *were* you to do with a four-year-old hippie anthem? ➤

The LA Express perform a similar kind of function for Joni as the Section did for James Taylor: they're both an independent unit and a backup band. But the Section don't have quite the same degree of intensity and virtuosity. As the LA Express went through a short warm-up set for Joni, it gradually began to dawn upon us that they weren't just B-movie filler material for the great extravaganza. Not that the presence of Robben Ford, the guitarist last seen here with Jimmy Witherspoon, would suggest that. Though the context didn't allow for much in the way of real soloing, his gifts were always apparent in deft touches and complements, and his enthusiasm – his body jiggling around and long hair flapping – was infectious.

Roger Kellaway on electric piano had one roaring solo on "Raised On Robbery", and Tom Scott played a variety of parts on saxes, flute and clarinet – a lovely, wistful sign-off on "For Free" – but the essence of their role was its selflessness, just as their inclinations were obviously towards jazz. And for Joni's music they were perfect, gilding the lily at exactly the right junctures and taking the edge off the occasional austerity of her live performance.

Now, too, Joni seems able to laugh at herself more – at the public image of her. In "For Free" she could slip in a sly reference to not just one or two, but "*16 gentlemen*" lovers, an indication of her self-confidence and maturity. Again, the gentle humour of her public self, the optimism of her onstage presence, contrasted with the disquiet and virtual despair of her records. Ultimately, you're forced to admit, she remains a cool and beautiful enigma, all the more so with a new style of performance that stresses her easiness of manner.

For Saturday's performance did, indeed, confirm and challenge one's feelings about her, and at the risk of being accused of critical overkill, I'd say she's just about the most fascinating and involving artist of the times. She's found a uniquely personal way of transcending the rock idiom while retaining the rock audience. What's more she's undisputedly an artist of the future, who's yet to

hit anything like a peak. She's got everything she needs, she's an artist... she don't look back.
MICHAEL WATTS

NME 27|04|1974

THE LADY sits at the head of the table, boyfriend on her right. Her face isn't attractive in the normal sense of the word, but it's not the kind you forget in a hurry – gaunt without being wasted and highlighted by prominent cheekbones. It's also a kind of haunted face. She's a rich girl and not afraid to admit it. One of the "nouveaux riches" she'd called herself earlier — though that was slightly tongue-in-cheek. She's got a sense of humour, too, see.

The humour of her public self contrasted with the disquiet of her records

Every now and then, a well-wisher nudges in and says hello to her. Rod Stewart, bright green suit, matching tartan waistcoat, and ruffled front shirt, goes and has a bit of a natter. Has his picture taken.

She doesn't stay very long and, after a while, she walks – bodyguarded – out of the restaurant where her party's being held and into a black limo. She'd sang about that car earlier (or, to be precise, a car like it) in a song called "For Free" which comes from her third LP, *Ladies Of The Canyon*. Changed the words a little, though. In the original, she sang about having just three gentlemen escorting her to the halls. This evening she'd sang "*about 16*". And as she sang the lines "*And I play if you have the money or if you're a friend to me*" a note of cynicism crept into her voice. Was she being hypocritical? Or was this another example of Joni Mitchell's fearsome honesty?

She's a star all right, but she comes over as the Reluctant Star, as with most other human situations she can see through that one. For instance, Joni Mitchell barely does any interviews. "She's nice. Go over and say hello. She'd like to meet you but she doesn't do interviews... These things are so awkward." Co-manager Elliot Roberts, in London with her, takes care of business.

She doesn't like having her photo taken either. Some fella at her concert – one of three at London's New Victoria Theatre – broadcast the fact that Miss Mitchell would leave the stage if any pictures were taken. And at the party afterwards a similar statement was issued by the English boss of Elektra-Asylum, her record company.

Is this elusiveness yet another example of keeping the press away from the star so as to increase the enigma? Or is it that Joni doesn't really consider herself too much of a star – or, more likely, doesn't put that much importance on her star status? From her lyrics it's obvious that she's quite aware of her stardom, but she seems to regard it as inhibiting. But in the same breath she enjoys the freedom that it brings, ie, the cash. In "For The Roses", she sings, "*I guess I seem ungrateful with my teeth sunk in the hand that brings me things I really can't give up just yet*".

ON SATURDAY she didn't look too much like a star, either on stage or off. For the first half of her set she wore flared jeans and a blouse belted around her middle and changed into a plain powder-blue evening gown for the second half. But the music... that's what Joni Mitchell is all about. Forget all this star crap. I think she tries to.

Tom Scott's LA Express opened the show with around half an hour or so of jazz-cum-funk doodlings. Scott has now been playing horns with Joni for her last two albums, *For The Roses* and *Court And Spark* – although it wasn't until the latter that his music played any real role in her music. All the musicians in his band are very accomplished, but often the music they produced degenerated into mere muzak. And somehow they overdid it at times.

Joni herself appeared on stage without any "Hello-I'm-glad-to-be-back-in-England" (no bullshit, you see) and, strumming an acoustic guitar, went into that Nazareth (!!) song "This Flight Tonight". She didn't sound too good and her voice seemed kind of flat and the band trod very gently, feeling their way. Obviously she was very nervous. Her onstage gait is not one you would expect from


In Amsterdam with co-manager Elliot Roberts, '72

GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

"Twisted" sisters: with Annie Ross, supporting Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young at London's Wembley Stadium, September '74

a performer who's made six albums: she stands as though she's hardly ever been on stage before. (On a couple of occasions she sang without either a guitar or a piano to keep her hands busy.)

Scott tacked on a sax solo at the end of "This Flight Tonight" and that was that. Not a bad start, but in no way was it shattering – although the sheer power of her voice came through a couple of times.

No introduction of any sort as she went into "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio". Her vocals had now improved no end and she sounded just as good as on the record, although the band were still very loose and seemed under-rehearsed. She finished the song by improvising vocally in harmony with the guitarist.

Scott added backup vocal on "Free Man In Paris", the first song of the set from *Court And Spark*. He's not a very good singer – although trying to sing the part of a Joni Mitchell backup vocal where she does it herself on the record ain't too easy.

Her confidence grew and her voice was now more mellow than before, and she hardly ever broke into that piercing falsetto she used around the time of *Ladies Of The Canyon*. Still without a word, she moved to the piano for another *Court And Spark* song, "The Same Situation", with its very fine melody. Again it's a very honest song and although a lady of experience, Joni doesn't sound world-weary like so many of today's so-called rock poets. She fights a situation realistically: "*Send me someone who's strong and somewhat sincere*".

It was during this song that the ice finally broke and Joni established some kind of conversation with the audience. She was barely into the piece when she suddenly started playing something different. "Hey, you guys," she giggled to the nonplussed band. "I've been working on this other thing. I know it wasn't what we were doing but I'd like to throw it in." She explained they'd just had a two-week layoff, so things might be a little loose.

They started the song again and it was the best so far. During "Just Like This Train" – another *Court And Spark* song – her vocals were almost extinguished by Scott's sax break. The band kept with her for "Rainy Night House", and although they didn't ruin it, the sparser recorded version is far better. They did, however, virtually destroy "Woodstock", adding a totally uncomplementary broken rhythm and some soul chords.

And that was the first set.

Now I reckon that Joni Mitchell's the best at what she does. There's not another singer-songwriter, male or female, fit to handle the same guitar. She's as good as that kind of thing gets and to see one or two of her songs ruined brought me down a little. She did, however, get a whole lot better in the second set.

"Cactus Tree", from her first totally romantic album, came first, plain and simple and beautiful. "Big Yellow Taxi" followed and some words got changed, and instead of "*big yellow taxi*" she sang about a "*big yellow tractor*" taking down her house.

Then came her first real rap of the night. She rambled on about being at a party where all the food was white and all the furnishings were transparent. And all the people had Nixonian expressions (predictably that got a lot of applause). And then she sang "People's Parties" – again from *Court And Spark*. Her phrasing was perfect and she seemed to have butterflies in her voice, holding down notes long and low until they disappeared.

She picked up a dulcimer and, sitting legs astride, did three songs from *Blue*: "All I Want" and "A Case Of You" and "Blue", with its immortal "*crown and anchor me*" line. Beautiful, breathless, sensual phrasing. Another long preamble and she sang "For The Roses". Then it's that uncomfortable song about heroin, "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire". The eeriness of the song is enhanced by Scott's excellent sax solo from offstage.

Look, all these song titles are getting boring, but let me tell you, she did some more songs from *Court And Spark* ending with "Raised On Robbery", a band-accompanied version of "Both Sides, Now" (in which she added "*Yes, I have*" after the line "*They say I've changed*"), an encore of "Last Time I Saw Richard" – where she mimicked a New York barmaid putting on a harsh accent for the lines "*Drink up now, it's gettin' on time to close*" – and Annie Ross's "Twisted".

Now that's a lot of songs to sing in one evening. During the second half she dispelled all my earlier misgivings, although those were really about the band. But even they had improved by the end. ◐

STEVE CLARK

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS

RELEASED NOVEMBER 1975

The confessor turns anthropologist. A bold mission into the depths of American suburbia.

BY DAVID CAVANAGH

WHEN a Brazilian photo-journalist named Wolf Jesco Von Puttkamer took an assignment in the mid-'70s to document the lives of the Kreen-Akrore, a reclusive tribe of Amazonian hunters later known as the Panará, there were serious doubts about whether they'd survive the decade. The government had built a highway through their territory in '73, redoubling their fear of strangers, and the small amount of contact they'd had with the outside world in the past had decimated them with disease. Von Puttkamer found only 130 left alive.

In one of the photos he took, a tiny girl camouflaged in stripes of genipap pulp peers out from a gap in the jungle. In another, the chief of the tribe grimaces as a doctor injects him with penicillin. In another, seven hunters wearing yellow headbands carry an enormous, trussed-up python back to their village from a riverbank. Published in the February 1975 issue of *National Geographic*, the images were seen by millions of readers, among them Joni Mitchell. While officials in Brasília had been turning the Kreen-Akrore's paradise into a parking lot, Mitchell's live album *Miles Of Aisles*, with the serene momentum of an adult-oriented superstar going through an invincible phase, had cruised to No 2 on Billboard, outsold only by Linda Ronstadt's *Heart Like A Wheel*. At the beginning of March, Mitchell was chauffeured to the Shrine Auditorium in downtown LA to collect a Grammy for a song on *Court And Spark* – a pleasant accolade to place alongside its platinum disc. But the python and the boys in the headbands must have stirred something, because she got out her ink, drew the photo from *National Geographic* and incorporated it into the cover art of her next LP. In doing so, she set in motion a chain of events that shattered the calm, darkened the skies and left her seething about the criticism she never saw coming.

The Hissing Of Summer Lawns is many things. It's an exclusive peek behind the curtain of palm trees that protects the super-wealthy and the super-bored. It's a set of 10 musical pieces that are at times melancholy, graceful, fine-woven and inscrutable. It's a dossier of sophisticated observations on women's material victories and defeats as they rely on, resent or revolve around their men. Above all, it's an LP that documents the lives of an endangered species that knows little of worlds beyond its own: the indigenous tribespeople of American suburbia. On the embossed sleeve, Mitchell transposed the giant snake to a fettucine-green landscape that might have been a modern-day urban park. The skyscrapers of a metropolis towered in the distance. Lined up in front of them, occupying the space between the businessmen and the bushmen, a row of bungalows stood like tanks before an army, guarding the city's perimeter. Mitchell's motif of the summer lawn was both impressionistic and sociocultural. The incongruous elements of the cover art combined in a visual pun. The hissing sound was made by sprinklers, but a serpent can thrive in a suburban dream-home, coiling itself around a marriage.

Joining some of the dots was "The Jungle Line", the album's second song, in which Mitchell traced direct ➤

The hissing sound was made by sprinklers, but a serpent can thrive in a suburban dream-home

connections from Africa to the jazz clubs of NY, imagining their crammed noisy cellars as canvases painted by Henri Rousseau. A primitivist best known for his tropical jungle scenes, Rousseau might well have designed a club décor of *"ferns and orchid vines"* (as well as putting a *"jungle flower"* behind the waitress's ear), but the snake that Mitchell notices in the jazz band's dressing-room is only a figurative cousin to the real ones in Rousseau's *The Snake Charmer*. It's a *"poppy snake"* – in other words, the heroin that comes into the city via the trafficking routes that lead back to another humid, vine-thick jungle. To get deeper into the heart of darkness, Mitchell hitches the venue's wild clientele (*"cannibals of shuck and jive"*) not to a backdrop of jazz horns, but to pummelling Burundi drums and the electronic growl of a Moog . A totally new event on a Joni Mitchell record, "The Jungle Line" was conceptually provocative and years ahead of its time. The primitive met the avant-garde in the ritual of after-hours safari, and everyone from Paul Simon to Adam Ant was galvanised by the rhythms.

But as the LP cover reminds us, to travel from jungle to city, the primitive must first pass through the suburbs. In isolation and affluence, the suburbanites scatter themselves like plush velvet cushions behind their gadgetry and emotional shields, while Mitchell, with penetrating eye and paintbrush, sees something slithering in their neatly mown gardens. How self-negating are the concessions, she seems to conclude, that yield and are yielded by these unhappy families. Her "third-person lyrical portraits of damaged and unsympathetic characters", as Elvis Costello once called them, now begin to make their presence felt. They change the tone of the album completely, and with them disappear any realistic prospect of another singer-songwriter confessional. What exactly appears in its place – an air of cold detachment? A sleight-of-hand elegance? An artistry so rarefied that some people don't react to it while others can't stop overdosing on it? – has been the subject of debate for four decades.

For example: Edith, picked up last night by a crime boss, awakes in his bed with a song going through her mind. The title eludes her, but her thoughts quickly turn to the man by her side. She won the contest to be his prize for the evening, beating off the competition of older girls, and the criminal empire he runs is not hers to question. She locks eyes with him across the pillow. As the song ends, Mitchell seems to suggest they're as amoral and desperate as each other: a perfect gangland match. *"You know they dare not look away"*, she sings, holding one of the album's longest notes for as long as the two of them can stare without blinking. And that, sure enough, is one way of hearing "Edith And The Kingpin".

But another way is to listen to the musicians – all of them, or as many as you can – who, far from being emotionally detached, bring sweetness and warmth flooding into the song from all corners. This way of hearing involves smiling with eyes closed as the trumpet on the left is joined by a flute on the right, and once they've held their notes for nine seconds, an electric piano (*"fresh lipstick glistening"*) plays a rippling trill so exquisite that a nearby electric guitar appears to sigh with bliss. Another example: "Don't Interrupt The Sorrow", which follows, has often been described as a stream-of-consciousness jazz poem, making it sound like a text of abstruse intellectualism that only someone with a triple First in Classics and Oriental Languages would enjoy. Don't believe a word of it. Cajoled along by Wilton Felder's inventively rubbery bassline, "Don't Interrupt The Sorrow" is a cavalcade of musical delights. Guitarist Larry Carlton's feather-light glides up and down his fretboard provide so many gorgeous moments that Mitchell stops singing and lets him form them into a solo.

Minutes later, when we meet the high-maintenance Southern belle Scarlett ("Shades Of Scarlett Conquering"), we can count, by all means, the cost of what she loses with her impossible demands while she adheres to the doctrine she absorbed from *Gone With The Wind* – but we mustn't forget to swoon to Dale Oehler's heavenly string arrangement or luxuriate in the dreamy pattern of piano notes that Mitchell reiterates with her left hand. The *Rolling Stone* reviewer in 1975 who claimed that the album had "no tunes to speak of" evidently missed the wood for the trees; most of the songs are inundated with instrumental parts of aching loveliness, be it Chuck Findley's Bacharach-ian trumpet on the title track or his flugelhorn's haunting three-note refrain on "The Boho Dance", and their cumulative importance is as absolute as any vocal or lyric. However, as Mitchell would learn, finding not a single tune on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* wasn't the most scathing accusation the critics in America would level.

There are two more songs about suburban marriages in the album's second half, and at the end of each one the wife makes a pragmatic decision of sorts. In the title track, an unnamed woman lives as a virtual prisoner on her husband's hillside ranch (*"She patrols that fence of his to a Latin drum"*), but chooses to stay because there's just enough value in their expensive home to compensate for the poverty of her dreary days. As per Mitchell's album concept, the soothing hiss that the woman can hear from her balcony has worked its mesmeric effect. When it doesn't, the result comes as a shock. A high-ranking executive on a business trip to New York ("Harry's House/ Centerpiece") has an erotic daydream about his wife when she was younger (*"Shining hair and shining skin/Shining as she reeled him in"*), before snapping out of his reverie – and we aren't prepared for it – to reveal in the last few lines that she asked him for a divorce that morning. How old is the woman? Her age isn't specified. Old enough to be bored out of her mind with her husband, that's all we need to know. Old enough to be conscious of the moisturising lotions and the march of time. *"All those vain promises on beauty jars"*, Mitchell sings in "Sweet Bird", the next song, just in case a middle-aged divorcee might fancy she's escaping into a rainbow. *"Calendars of our lives, circled with compromise"*.

Mitchell, unmarried herself, lived behind wrought-iron gates in her 1920s Bel Air mansion with her boyfriend and drummer, John Guerin. When the gatefold sleeve of *Hissing...* was opened, there she was, floating on her back in the secluded Eden of her swimming pool, while 30 lines of album notes, starting somewhere above her right knee, made it clear she was elated with the product inside. "This record is a total work conceived graphically, musically, lyrically and accidentally – as a whole. The performances were guided by the given compositional structures and the audibly inspired beauty of every player. The whole unfolded like a mystery." A mystery to be lapped up by hundreds of thousands of armchair sleuths who hung on her every word. But something went wrong.

The verdict was not measured out in superlatives this time. Critics dipped their adjectives in scorn ("narcissistic", "pretentious", "sometimes so smug that it is downright irritating") and her manager had to hide the reviews from her. With its jazz overtones and clear shift away from autobiographical writing, the LP left many fans disappointed. Internet book reviewers condemn a much-hyped novel by saying they "couldn't relate to any of the characters". The problem with the album was that some people couldn't relate to the fact that there were characters at all.

In the 40 years since its release, it's been placed in a much more favourable light. Mitchell was touched when Prince listed it as one of his favourite albums in the '80s. Björk, Morrissey and George Michael all sang its praises. Elvis Costello hailed it as "the masterpiece of that time" when he wrote about Mitchell for *Vanity Fair* in 2004. It's now celebrated for the very qualities that '70s listeners found hard to tolerate: the icy stillness, the spatial composure, the delicate balance of colours, the manicured refinement, the considered reportage.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Joni has produced an album which has successfully put the finger on western society as she sees it... Here she has dealt with that theme in a way which is unprecedented in rock music. And in a way which avoids either cheap sloganeering or trite banalities."
STEVE CLARKE, NME, NOVEMBER 29, 1975

With penetrating eye and paintbrush, Joni sees something slithering in the neatly mown gardens

Mid-'70s Joni: sleight-of-hand elegance? Cold detachment?

When Mitchell, still furious at the reviews, agreed to a rare interview in '76, it was with *Architectural Digest* – a magazine that knew a thing or two about refinement and colour balance – whose reporter and photographer came to inspect her Bel Air property that summer. They judged it to be glamorous, but free from contrivance. Showing them the royal-blue dining room and her Eskimo art, Joni explained: "Decorated rooms sometimes sacrifice feelings and emotions for the sake of chic. The look is sometimes too polished. I couldn't live in a house like that." Too polished. Sacrificing emotions. It was a good job that nobody mentioned lawn sprinklers.

TRACKMARKS THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS

1 In France They Kiss On Main Street ★★★★
2 The Jungle Line ★★★★
3 Edith And The Kingpin ★★★★★
4 Don't Interrupt The Sorrow ★★★★
5 Shades Of Scarlett Conquering ★★★★★
6 The Hissing Of Summer Lawns ★★★★
7 The Boho Dance ★★★★
8 Harry's House/ Centerpiece ★★★★
9 Sweet Bird ★★★
10 Shadows And Light ★★★

Label: Asylum
Recorded at: Burbank Studios, Los Angeles
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (acoustic guitar, piano, keyboards, Moog, ARP String Ensemble, vocals), Larry Carlton (electric guitar), Robben Ford (electric guitar), Jeff 'Skunk' Baxter (electric guitar on "In France They Kiss On Main Street"), Max Bennett (bass), Wilton Felder (bass), Joe Sample (keyboards), Victor Feldman (electric piano, vibes, congas), John Guerin (drums and Moog), Chuck Findley (trumpet, flugelhorn), Bud Shank (sax and flutes), James Taylor (acoustic guitar on "The Hissing Of Summer Lawns" and bk vocals on "In France They Kiss On Main Street"), Graham Nash and David Crosby (bk vocals on "In France They Kiss On Main Street"), and a recording of the drummers of Burundi
Highest chart position: UK 14; US 4

MIKE SLAUGHTER/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

HEJIRA

RELEASED NOVEMBER 1976

"*Now I'm returning to myself...*" In an unlicensed white Mercedes, Mitchell seeks the refuge of the roads. BY LAURA SNAPES

THE women of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* were always trapped in somebody else's frame. Joni Mitchell only used the first person once on her seventh album; instead, she sang of women as seen through men's eyes, assessed according to their suitability for motherhood, sex and deference. Similarly, Mitchell found herself made into an adjunct when she briefly joined the Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975, opening for male artists who were her equal. She approached the tour as a research trip, "an amazing experience, studying mysticism and ego malformation like you wouldn't believe", as she told journalist Timothy White. "Everybody took all of their vices to the Nth degree and came out of it born again, or into AA."

Where these acts were tilting towards the mainstream, by the mid-'70s Mitchell was keenly following Marvin Gaye in "moving away from the hit department, to the art department", keen to forge her own rhythms away from rock. In the wake of her split from drummer John Guerin, she was ready to give life the slip for a while.

After the end of the *Hissing* tour, Mitchell was sojourning at Neil Young's beach house. She knew she wanted to travel, but didn't know where, or who with. By chance, two friends invited her to drive cross-country. Her answer: "'I've been waiting for you; I'm gone,'" she recounted to *Rolling Stone*'s Cameron Crowe. They travelled together for a while before Mitchell went off alone. It was one of three road trips she took between 1975 and 1976, which led her from Los Angeles to Maine, then California via Florida and the Gulf Of Mexico. On the road, Mitchell stayed in lighthouses along the Gulf Coast, and wore wigs to disguise herself in New Orleans. "Meanwhile, nobody knew where I was," she told White. "I'd do those disappearing acts. I'd pass through some seedy town with a pinball arcade, fall in with people who worked on the machines, people staying alive shoplifting, whatever. They don't know who you are: 'Why you driving that white Mercedes? Oh, you're driving it across country for somebody else.' You know, make up some name and hang out. Great experiences, almost like the prince and the pauper."

Mitchell had no licence for her flashy car, so she drove behind truckers, who would signal when the police were approaching. She was living out of bounds, but hadn't, as the folk song goes, *"fallen by* ➤

Mitchell isolates herself from familiarity in order to confront her true nature

the wayside". By the mid-'70s, *Walden* and *On The Road* were archetypal male quests, but there were still few cultural precedents for women travelling alone. Eighteenth-century "girl stunt reporter" Nellie Bly circled the world in 72 days to prove that she could. Simone De Beauvoir's *America Day By Day* (1947) was more journalistic, intended to convey the reality of America's culture and mores to the French. Released in 1976, the same year as Mitchell's travels, Tom Robbins' absurdist novel *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues* followed the giant-thumbed Sissy Hankshaw as she encountered various countercultural avatars. But although just as geographically far-reaching, Mitchell's trip was defiantly insular – the kind of story that hadn't yet been written.

Living between her car and anonymous motels, Mitchell wrote songs on her acoustic guitar since pianos were seldom available. She thought of naming the collection of material "Travelling", but that implied a fixed destination. Instead, she chose a reference to the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, which she later summed up as "leaving the dream, no blame".

"'Hejira' was an obscure word, but it said exactly what I wanted," she told Crowe. "Running away, honourably." She continued, referencing her split with Guerin. "It dealt with the leaving of a relationship, but without the sense of failure that accompanied the breakup of my previous relationships. I felt that it was not necessarily anybody's fault. It was a new attitude."

A new attitude required a new musical approach, furthering Mitchell's quicksilver mid-'70s evolution. "For a long time, I've been playing in straight rhythms," she had told friend Malka Marom in 1973. "But now, in order to sophisticate my music to my own taste, I push it into odd places that feel a little unusual to me, so that I feel I'm stretching out." After 1974's richly melodic *Court And Spark*, the jazzy abstractions of *Hissing* were perceived as an ornery career-killer. On *Hejira*, Mitchell pared percussion back to the faintest patter, ditched choruses, and created nine fairly similar tone poems from her guitar (mostly electric on the recordings) and Jaco Pastorius's fretless bass (only lounge-jazz pastiche "Blue Motel Room" veers from the form). Their rippling instruments evoke the uncanny surface of the pools in Hockney's California paintings, and the scant reliance on hooks encourages a sense of forward motion. (*The New York Times*' reviewer called it a "Los Angeles version of Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn'.") This minimal backing lets Mitchell's voice loose, as she sings in a meditative, instinctual fashion. "The poet took over the singer," she said in 1998. "It's more like jazz melody, it's conversational improvisation."

This intimate, personal voice is key to *Hejira*, where Mitchell isolates herself from familiarity in order to confront her true nature. *"In our possessive coupling/ So much could not be expressed/So now I'm returning to myself/These things that you and I suppressed"*, she sings on the title track, as if taking her first deep breath in a long while. *Hejira* contains Mitchell's starkest and most sensitive examinations of the apparent incompatibility of love and work, belonging and freedom. *Hejira* lets Mitchell's duelling ideologies and impulses coexist at the same scale within each song, avoiding extremes of crisis or revelation, an idea reflected in the artwork. Mitchell used a Camera Lucida to edit together 14 different photos of varying perspectives – including an imposing Norman Seeff portrait – and then hired an airbrusher to blend in the edges. "If I had done the cover as a collage, it would've looked much more primitive," she told *Rock Photo*. "This way it's so polished, as if it's exactly one photograph."

If art and love are in conflict, Mitchell's lucid relationship with that bind is unparalleled. "I suppose a lot of people could have written a lot of my other songs," she told *The Ottawa Citizen* in 1996, "but I feel the songs on *Hejira* could only have come from me." Marrying *Hissing*'s observational approach to the personal nature of Mitchell's earlier records, *Hejira* contains some of her most expansive and idiosyncratic writing, each song filled with unanswered questions about the definition and contradictions of fulfilment. Sometimes, that satisfaction is immediate. To be a solo travelling woman requires a heightened sensitivity to the environment, and Mitchell vibrates at the frequency of her gorgeous, sensory landscapes. There are towering pinewood trees and vivid blue skies streaked with vapour trails that look like *"the hexagram of the heavens"*, or the strings of her guitar. Snow *"gathers like bolts of lace waltzing on a ballroom girl"* in the spacious "Hejira", where Mitchell sighs with gratitude at her synchronicity with her surroundings: *"There's comfort in melancholy/When there's no need to explain/It's just as natural as the weather/ In this moody sky today"*. Her world is so vivid, it almost feels surreal at time.

As she acclimatises to the road, she clocks on to the behaviour of the characters she encounters. The dewy "Coyote" details a tryst with a philandering rancher (who may be Sam Shepard in disguise) – Mitchell knows that he has *"a woman at home and another down the hall"*, but she enjoys their brief affair, and revels in his palpable consternation about whether to run away the next morning. *"Coyote's in the coffee shop/ He's staring a hole in his scrambled eggs/He picks up my scent on his fingers/While he's watching the waitresses's legs"*, she sings, high on intimate power. *"You're not a hit-and-run driver, no no"*, she reassures him, having played him at his own game. Sex is purely pleasure on *Hejira*, Mitchell writing without shame or qualification as she steps outside of society's expectations. *"All I really want right now/Is to find another lover"*, she confesses at one point, and she succeeds. She may have reservations about the *"foolish and childish"* protagonist of "A Strange Boy", but rationality barely matters out here. *"We got high on travel/And we got drunk on alcohol/And on love, the strongest poison and medicine of all"*, she rhapsodises, sounding barely tethered to the earth. *"See how that feeling comes and goes/Like the pull of moon on tides/ Now I am surf rising/Now parched ribs of sand at his side"*.

Supposedly alone in the world and enjoying "the sweet loneliness of solitary travel", as she would describe it, Mitchell forces herself to reckon with the part of her that still craves contact, and comfort. *"I'm porous with travel fever/But you know I'm so glad to be on my own/Still somehow the slightest touch of a stranger/ Can set up trembling in my bones"*, she sings on "Hejira". The alternating keys of "Amelia", a tribute to the lost pilot Amelia Earhart, underscore *Hejira*'s most poignant and uneasy interrogation of a woman's ineffable need to wander, and the sacrifices that entails. *"Maybe I've never really loved/I guess that is the truth/I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitude/And looking down on everything/I crashed into his arms"*, she rues.

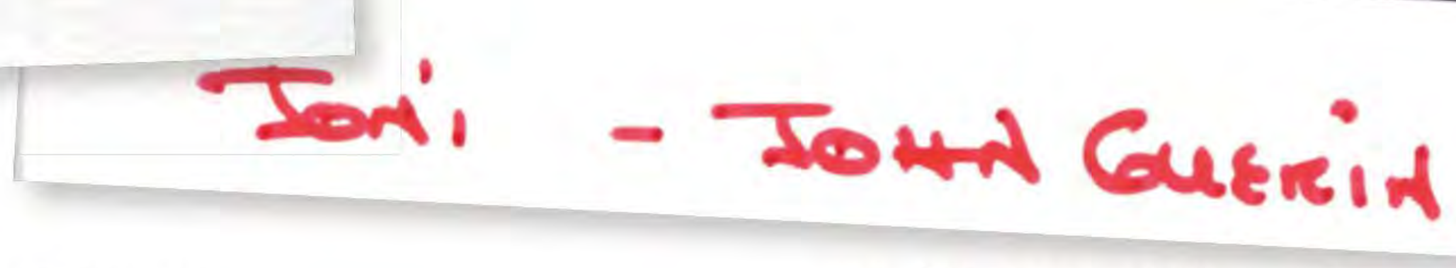
CRITICS' VERDICT

"There has always been a dark side to her work, but she has never sounded more isolated, more enclosed within herself, than in these songs of perpetual melancholy journeys 'across the burning desert' and 'thru the snow and the pinewood trees... porous with travel fever'."
MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 27, 1976

"*Hejira* is, one presumes, Ms Mitchell's soul-to-soul statement circa 1976... But be warned: this is no worthy successor to... *Summer Lawns* and this time around the old she's-an-artist-she-don't-look-back shtick can't be regurgitated because most of the sentiments here have been presented before."
NICK KENT, NME, NOVEMBER 27, 1976

Hejira contains some of Mitchell's most expansive and idiosyncratic writing

Soft focus: in LA, 1976, and (right) with drummer and erstwhile lover John Guerin



No matter how far she gets from home, she can't escape her mind. *"Oh radiant happiness/It was all so light and easy/'Til I started analysing/And I brought on my old ways/A thunderhead of judgement was gathering in my gaze"*, Mitchell sings on the melty, hiccuping "Refuge Of The Roads". *Hejira* offers no resolution between love and independence, both of which lead to a measure of isolation that Mitchell elucidates beautifully. Being tethered to someone means always being seen in reflection: *"White flags of winter chimneys/Waving truce against the moon/In the mirrors of a modern bank/From the window of a hotel room"*, she sings on "Hejira". But a similarly desolate image in "Refuge" suggests that being alone means barely being seen at all. In a service station, she sees *"a photograph of the Earth/Taken coming back from the moon/And you couldn't see a city/On that marbled bowling ball/Or a forest of a highway/Or me here least of all"*.

In *The Rolling Stone Book Of Women In Rock*, Lisa Kennedy writes that Mitchell's work up until *Court And Spark* was influenced by the prairie, and that what came after drew from the city. It's true of *Hissing*, *Mingus* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, but *Hejira* is a psychological bridge connecting the two territories and all that they represent. The closest she comes to defining that irreconcilable pull between a woman's duty and desire is on energetic highlight "Song For Sharon". (It's the only song here written on cocaine, which may explain the pace.) *"And the power of reason/And the flowers of deep feeling/Seem to serve me/Only to deceive me"*, she ruminates. It's no wonder, as she sings on "Refuge...", that her journey *"made most people nervous/They just didn't want to know/What I was seeing in the refuge of the roads"*.

To this day in popular culture, most women on the road are doomed figures, fated to die or disappear. In 2013, the cultural critic Vanessa Veselka wrote an essay for *The American Reader* titled "The Lack Of Female Road Narratives And Why It Matters". "We recognise that, in our world, a woman on the road is marked," she writes. "She has been cut from the social fabric, excised at such an elemental level that when she steps onto the road, she steps into an abyss. And whatever leads up to that choice inspires in us a primal fear. A man on the road is solitary. A woman on the road is alone."

Hejira remains one of the few counterexamples to this deficit – a restless rejection of what satisfaction and success is meant to look like for women as lovers and artists, and a fearless confrontation of the consequences that stem from rejecting the norm. It's perhaps the great feminist record: "Leaving the dream, no blame," indeed.

TRACKMARKS HEJIRA

1 Coyote ★★★★★
2 Amelia ★★★★★
3 Furry Sings The Blues ★★
4 A Strange Boy ★★★★
5 Hejira ★★★★★
6 Song For Sharon ★★★★★
7 Black Crow ★★★★
8 Blue Motel Room ★★★
9 Refuge Of The Roads ★★★★

Label: Asylum
Recorded at: A&M Studios, Hollywood
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitars), Larry Carlton (guitars), Jaco Pastorius (bass), Max Bennett (bass), Chuck Domanico (double bass), John Guerin (drums), Bobbye Hall (perc), Victor Feldman (vibraphone), Neil Young (harmonica), Abe Most (clarinet), Chuck Findley and Tom Scott (horns)
Highest chart position: UK 11; US 13

GINNY WINN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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 ➤

A double album where her music can take full flight, with all the risk and trepidation 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 Lawns*."
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 & Marlena". 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 ★★★★
2 Talk To Me ★★★★
3 Jericho ★★★★
4 Paprika Plains ★★★★
5 Otis & Marlena ★★★★
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 Studios, Hollywood; orchestra recorded at Columbia Studio C, New York, Basing Street Studio, London
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
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, 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"), Airto 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")
Highest chart position: UK 20; US 25

RON GALELLA/WIREIMAGE

MINGUS

RELEASED 13 JUNE 1979

The stricken jazz legend offers an induction into the most "sacred and unattainable music". A challenging collaboration.

BY NICK HASTED

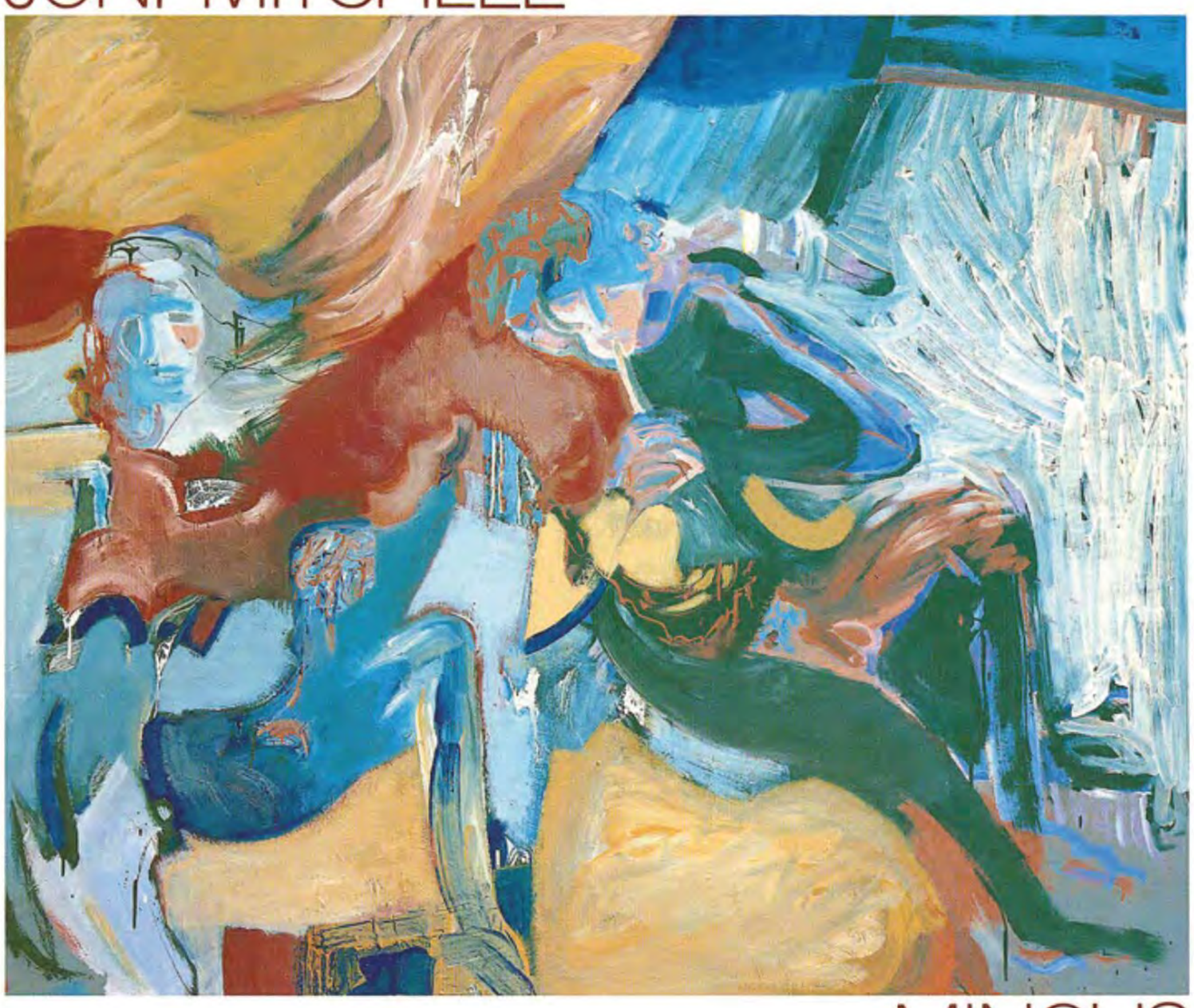
CHARLES Mingus was dying when he saw Joni Mitchell in blackface. The great jazz bassist and composer had railed against racism in his autobiography, *Beneath The Underdog*. But Mitchell's minstrelsy on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* got his attention. The album's sidelong orchestration of her piano improv, "Paprika Plains", offended him more with its out-of-tune piano, but its content, too, convinced him that Mitchell had "a lot of balls". Mingus had suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease since 1976, a rare, degenerative condition which now left the big, combative man paralysed, and unable to play or compose conventionally. He needed a collaborator to make the music that still filled his head. This white woman from the rock world might just fit the bill.

Mingus couldn't have known how ready Mitchell was for such a request in 1978. The free-flowing structures and fleeting abrasions of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* had flirted with jazz, *Hejira* had been an intimate musical affair with Weather Report bassist Jaco Pastorius, and *Don Juan...* had bust down all the boundaries around her work. But even the increasingly hostile US rock press hadn't grasped how totally she had left folkie Joni behind. By the mid-'70s, she had simply stopped listening to pop, preferring Stravinsky and the electric Miles Davis of *In A Silent Way* and *Nefertiti* (her two all-time favourite albums). Yet Mitchell thought of jazz as "sacred and unattainable" music. Mingus's invitation to fully enter the jazz realm almost didn't reach her, as what she called the "normal channels" around her screened his messages at first. After *Don Juan*, *Mingus* must have seemed the last straw to some in her exasperated circle.

When Mitchell phoned him, he had a grandly ambitious proposition ready, to adapt TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* for four simultaneous layers of sound: an orchestra, guitar and bass playing an entirely different sort of music, a formal reading of the poems, and finally, Mitchell singing her earthier distillation of Eliot's words. She gamely bought Eliot's poems to read, but found condensing them an impossible "sacrilege". Undeterred, in April 1978, Mingus rang again, to say he'd written six songs – provisionally and beguilingly titled 'Joni I-VI' – awaiting her lyrics and voice.

Mitchell was "flattered", her then-manager Elliot Roberts recalled in the documentary *Woman Of Heart And Mind*. Mitchell remembered him warning: "Management begged me not to do it. 'You'll just plummet into obscurity.'" She defiantly viewed herself, she told *Rolling Stone*, as a "musical student", gifted the opportunity to learn from a priceless teacher. Like some bashful wallflower, she'd hung around jazz's pool for three years. Now, she wrote in *Mingus*' liner notes, "Charlie came by and pushed me in."

Mingus also filled a familiar role in Mitchell's music: the male muse. The erotic aspect may have been minimal this time, but it was still love at first sight. When she met him in his Manhattan skyscraper apartment, his back was turned, and he massively filled a wheelchair she came to view as throne-like. His face was revealed as "glowing, full of the devil... beautiful, open", she said in *Woman Of Heart And Mind*; to *Rolling Stone*, she recalled his "sweet ➤



> Mitchell put a lot into *Mingus*, but it became her worst-selling record of the decade

Jazzing trio: Joni Mitchell, Mimi Fariña and Herbie Hancock backstage at the Berkeley Jazz Festival, California, May 1979

ED PERLSTEIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

giddiness". Not all Mingus's peers would have recognised this gentle, once terrifying giant. The "fearsomely challenging" man she described in *Downbeat* was closer. But the photos of Mitchell with Mingus and his highly supportive wife, Sue, show a fond, fun relationship. He called her "hillbilly".

The cassette Mingus handed her on that first meeting contained six sung melodies, as physical notation was now beyond him. The plan was for Mitchell to finish these pieces, and complete an LP with two more from his vast songbook. "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat", his 1959 tribute to the late saxophonist Lester Young, was his most famous, lovely tune, and an obvious pick. They spent a pleasant afternoon listening to his other old records. On the East Coast trips that followed, Mitchell would visit his home, where they'd discuss the music's themes and lyrical direction, then retire to work in her apartment at the Regency Hotel.

In every way, she was a long way from Laurel Canyon, and the hippie community she'd once symbolised. Though effectively hired by Mingus, the collaboration was never easy or passive, as Mitchell found herself fully inducted into the jazz world for the first time. A problem in working with a musician 20 years her senior became clear: when Mingus suggested personnel for the recording, she'd never heard of them. Two of the six planned new songs also proved "too idiomatic", she confessed to *Downbeat*. Though Mingus had been a jazz radical in the '50s, he'd been contemptuous of the next decade's free jazz, and even his most jolting and near-chaotic moments held to verities learned from former employers such as his idol, Duke Ellington. This was black American music with New Orleans roots, which had to swing. Mitchell felt there was nothing she could add to such sounds in 1978. The album's first session, at New York's Electric Lady studios, with Mingus in attendance and a band including his great sax peer Gerry Mulligan, proved her point. "It was closer to what Charlie wanted," she told *Downbeat*, comparing the session to the album she actually made. It swung more, maybe she even sang better. But it could have been 1960. And what Charlie wanted wasn't enough. "I was after something personal – something mutual – something indescribable," Mitchell wrote.

She kept switching lineups, 'til she got what she wanted: Pastorius back at her right hand on bass, with his Weather Report bandmates and Miles sidemen Wayne Shorter (soprano sax) and Herbie Hancock (electric piano), and Peter Erskine on drums. She felt fully part of this "band of my dreams", she said in *Woman Of Heart And Mind*. They made music "so braided together that you couldn't take it apart".

By this time, Mingus was unable to say if he approved, or if he'd even heard of Pastorius. Sue Mingus had taken her husband to a faith healer in Mexico, and

Mitchell was now a long way from Laurel Canyon, and the hippie community she'd once symbolised

when Mitchell headed south to visit for 10 days, he could hardly speak. His illness was closing in. Still, Mitchell soaked up his company. Mingus also pointed out key passages in his autobiography, while Sue handed Mitchell home tapes of him talking, filling in more of who he was. What had begun as an active collaboration was becoming a last expression of Mingus' personality, left to Mitchell to finish. "Time never ticked so loudly" as it did in the second half of 1978, she wrote in *Mingus*'s liner notes. She just wanted to complete these songs while Charles Mingus was alive to hear them. Only one, "God Must Be A Boogie Man", was unfinished on his eventual death on January 5, 1979.

Only half of his new melodies made it into the studio (as well as the two Mitchell found "too idiomatic", a "really beautiful" tune floundered on its theme of Mingus's relationship with God, which she couldn't handle). This had become Joni's idea of jazz. A collaboration which had begun with the bassist's maximalist vision of orchestras and epic poems was finally refined to six "audio paintings", as Mitchell described them in her notes, two written by her alone.

the albums

"God Must Be A Boogie Man" was one of these solo pieces, and became the album's opening tune. Mitchell drew on the first four pages of *Beneath The Underdog* for its lyrics, which describe Mingus as a soul split in three, alternately watchful, gently loving, and defensively lashing out: *"Blind faith to care/Blind rage to kill"*. The music, meanwhile, made *Hejira* sound like *Sgt Pepper*. The intertwining of Pastorius's electric bass and her acoustic guitar was abstracted into a still more intimate duet here. Metallic shards of her instrument, no longer sounding fit for folk, met bass-swipes and bullet-crack beats, making up the sparest of sonic palettes. If this music was painterly, to set beside her four evocative, impressionist portraits of Mingus in the LP's lavish gatefold sleeve, then it had "a lot of white canvas", she suggested to *Downbeat*. Throughout the album, sketched lines and empty space sufficed. This was jazz simmered down to the bone, and beyond.

In a rare emotional confession, Mingus had told Mitchell that the tune she turned into "A Chair In The Sky" was about his trepidation and regrets at impending death. Describing her initial view of him, in his wheelchair in his skyscraper apartment, she imagines him wondering what his "daydreams of Birdland" amount to now, and wryly wishing for more cash and women next time. Hancock and Shorter add decorative ripples, while Joni the singer flexes her Annie Ross fantasies, with some bright, brief scatting, and arcing croons.

Of the two other Mingus/Mitchell originals, "Sweet Sucker Dance" investigates the vulnerability of Mingus in love, adding a measure of Mitchell's own affection: *"You're such a sweet love/You're a proud man/You're a treasure"*. She'd always loved to dance, but rarely found partners among LA's rhythmically stiff singer-songwriters. Mingus is fondly imagined moving with her here. "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" is a shaggy dog story about good luck, with a sinuous Shorter solo, and Pastorius-arranged brass stabs. Compared to the earlier music, they sound like an orchestra. "The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey", meanwhile, is a Joni-only tune with no direct Mingus connection, portraying a bad man on the prowl, in Californian canyons haunted by wolf-pack howls.

Tape of a still healthy Mingus talking atmospherically fill some of the album's airy gaps. Styled "raps" in the tracklisting, he debates his birthdate, has a seconds-long doo-wop duet with Mitchell ("I's A Muggin'"), and jokingly imagines death as a cutting contest with his hero Ellington, to see who dies oldest (Duke was 71, Mingus 56). But it's his gorgeously melancholy farewell to Lester Young, "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat", which of course becomes his own elegy. Mingus had passed on reams of personal knowledge about his late friend, but after three months of trying, Mitchell's lyric still wouldn't come. Making the album was liberating, but also frequently confirmed her limitations, and she knew she was no biographer. She could only respond to her own experience. And, shortly after her return from Mexico, the New York night gave her what she needed, as she wandered out of the subway with the album's conga player, Don Alias. They saw two young black kids doing what in retrospect sounds a lot like body-popping, to jukebox jazz coming through the door of the Pork Pie Hat, a jazz club covered in photos of Lester Young. This unlikely apparition let her end the jazz she made with Mingus with a verse set in the present, which looked to the future. And he would have been pleased that it really swung.

Even rock journalists theoretically sympathetic to the album didn't get it, on its June 1979 release. "*Mingus*, unfortunately, doesn't enhance his legend," judged *MM*'s Michael Watts, "and it diminishes hers." A rare bright spot came in US jazz bible *Downbeat*, which declared: "This is a wonderful record... Even in those moments when the deed fails, the thought carries the day." It's an album that can sound as if it's not all there, with whatever last threads of melody Mingus provided sounding ephemeral next to the climactic tune from his '50s pomp. Joni's love for the Mingus she met, and determination to honour him with original work, creates music that sometimes seems about to disappear.

Mitchell had put a lot into *Mingus*, and really hoped it would be accepted. Instead, neither rock nor jazz radio played it, and it became her worst-selling record of the decade. In *The Times* years later, she declared herself "stricken from the history of rock'n'roll in America" by its release. She had gone way out on a limb. Now the hostile '80s were coming, and Mitchell would have to work her way back.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Far from emerging as an increasingly coherent comprehensible piece of work, *Mingus* threatens to become oddly disorientatingly indecipherable... I sincerely hope that Joni Mitchell no longer cherishes any ambitions or pretensions... to become a jazz singer."
ANGUS MACKINNON, NME, JUNE 23, 1979

"Few records can have been made with as much underlying affection, nor received with so much goodwill; but music cannot only be judged by its intentions. *Mingus*, unfortunately, doesn't enhance his legend, and it diminishes hers."
MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, JUNE 16, 1979

TRACKMARKS MINGUS

1 Happy Birthday 1975 (Rap) ★★★
2 God Must Be A Boogie Man ★★★
3 Funeral (Rap) ★★★
4 A Chair In The Sky ★★★
5 The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey ★★★
6 I's A Muggin' (Rap) ★★
7 Sweet Sucker Dance ★★★
8 Coin In The Pocket (Rap) ★★
9 The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines ★★★
10 Lucky (Rap) ★★
11 Goodbye Pork Pie Hat ★★★★

Label: Asylum
Recorded at: A&M Studios, Hollywood and Electric Lady Studios, New York
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar), Jaco Pastorius (bass, horn arrangement on "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines"), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Herbie Hancock (electric piano), Peter Erskine (drums), Don Alias (congas), Emil Richards (percussion), wolves
Highest chart position: UK 24; US 17

WILD THINGS RUN FAST

RELEASED 21 NOVEMBER 1982

"Hot dog darlin'!" New love, simpler songs and Lionel Richie... Joni Mitchell enters the '80s. BY GRAEME THOMSON

IN 1980, Joni Mitchell poured considerable resources of time and energy into writing the script, curating the music and taking the lead role in a 15-minute segment of a film anthology called *Love*. Her contribution was one of nine stories written by a series of notable women, including Edna O'Brien, Antonia Fraser and Liv Ullmann. Directed by Swedish auteur Mai Zetterling, Mitchell cast herself as a black male pimp named Art Nouveau, dressed in the same garb in which she appeared on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. The music she chose to accompany her performance was by Miles Davis, but Mitchell also contributed the film's title track, on which she set the famous biblical passage on love, from Corinthians 13, to music. The film, destined from birth to be an arthouse curio, endured a tortuous post-production history and was never officially released, but the themes continued to resonate with Mitchell. Love was much on her mind. So was transformation.

The transition from one decade into another is a necessarily arbitrary measure of shifting tastes and trends, but Joni Mitchell's '80s would have a very different trajectory from her '70s. She ended a decade in which she had few peers with the spare, elegantly unanchored *Mingus*, her jazz instincts as overt as they had ever been. She followed it with a traditional means of slate-clearing. The double live album, *Shadows And Light*, recorded in 1979 and released the following year, roamed over her catalogue and marked the culmination of her interaction with Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius. Listening to its sometimes over-generous spotlighting of her fellow players, in hindsight *Shadows And Light* sounds something like a farewell. It would be her last record with Asylum. Although she owed the company one more album, she left them shortly before the release of *Wild Things Run Fast* to sign with her old friend David Geffen at the newly formed Geffen Records, ending a 10-year association. The world tour that followed her new album in 1983 would be her last. Mitchell was seeking fresh sources of inspiration. She gained encouragement on a six-week writing holiday in the Caribbean in the summer of 1981, where she fell hard for The Police's "De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da", a staple during her frequent visits to the local disco. "My feet loved that record," she said, neatly encapsulating a subtle but pronounced shift away from the cerebral towards the physical.

Perhaps the most significant development was the arrival on the scene of Larry Klein, a 25-year-old American bassist who had played with Wayne Shorter, Freddie Hubbard and Joe Henderson. Shortly into the sessions, he and Mitchell became lovers, their bond cemented over chatty games of pinball on the machine at A&M Studios. His influence on the album steadily grew. "When Joni and I became involved romantically, she wanted my opinions as that project was being finished," Klein told *Jazz Times* in 2007. "We ended up working somewhat as a team." They became husband and wife shortly after the album's release, on November 21, 1982, and he went on to co-produce her next four albums.

Klein provided Mitchell with the spark she felt she needed to complete her new songs satisfactorily. Prior to that, she had been struggling to find the right mix of musicians, and had already recorded some tracks several times before she alighted on Klein and ➤

Mitchell's most direct, structured – and upbeat – set of songs for many years

Blonde ambition: Mitchell on the UK leg of her world tour, 1983

Joni didn't follow up on her idea to use The Police as her backing band, but their influence is apparent

drummer Vinnie Colaiuta as her rhythm section. The cumulative result of these changes was a sleeker, smoother, more obviously contemporary sound. Although Mitchell did not follow through on an initial idea to use The Police as her backing band – they were, perhaps mercifully, busy mixing in Montreal – their influence is apparent in the widely spaced sonic design. "Their rhythmic hybrids, and the positioning of the drums, and the sound of the drums, was one of the main calls out to me to make a more rhythmic LP," she told *Musician* magazine. Guitars are often used as syncopated punctuation, while Klein's taut fretless bass dominates several songs. Reggae was another influence, as well as the post-punk directness of Talking Heads and the freeze-dried sophistication of Steely Dan. Lionel Richie appears on two tracks. What jazz inflections there are come with a cocktail cherry on the top; the soul is chilled, and the rock brittle and trebly, with a crisp sheen.

What emerged was her most direct, structured – and upbeat – set of songs for many years. It is not, perhaps, a sound that has aged terribly well, at least in contrast to the more elegant productions of her earlier records. At times, *Wild Things...* seems to herald the sound of coming yuppiedom with all the depth and lasting sustenance of a frothy cappuccino, but it has considerably more heart than that suggests. As the music veers between uptempo affirmations and more meditative contemplations, so the lyrics combine expressions of profound love – often via some of the most simple, unguarded writing of her career – and more wistful acknowledgements of passing time. In her late thirties, Joni appears preoccupied with the interplay between past and present, keenly aware that everything – friendships, love affairs, cherished neighbourhoods, old values – is in flux. The opening "Chinese Café/Unchained Melody" provides the LP with its tag-line manifesto – *"Nothing lasts for long"* – a thought at once liberating and sad. It's a lush, languorous, sweetly melodic scene-setter, laying down a marker in terms of mood and message. *"Middle class and we're middle-aged, wild in the old days"*, she sings. *"Your kids are coming up straight/My child is a stranger, I bore her but I couldn't raise her"*. The song is entwined with signifiers from those *"old days"*, punctuated by snatches of "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" and "Unchained Melody", as well as a pointed nod to "Big Yellow Taxi": *"Putting up sleek concrete/Tearing the old landmarks down now/Paving over brave little parks/Ripping off Indian land again"*. As they do throughout, universal themes underscore the deeply personal. The song's retrieval of "Unchained Melody" begins as '60s nostalgia and ends as an expression of naked commitment: *"I need your love, I need your love..."*

Many times on *Wild Things...*, Mitchell aspires to nothing more complicated than to sing her newfound happiness to the world. Indeed, there are moments where love seems to have deprived her of her better judgement, as on a purely anodyne cover of the 1957 Elvis Presley hit "(You're So Square) Baby, I Don't Care". "Solid Love" is better, and far lighter on its feet than its title suggests. It's a perky filigree, a hint of a pop-reggae rhythm in its choppy guitar, the warm breeze of her Caribbean holiday filling its sails. She sounds quite astoundingly happy: *"We got a chance – hot dog darlin'! – no more fly-by-night romance"*. Where once love came like a disease, now it arrives as a blessing. *"You're my hope, you're my happiness"*, she sings. It's an almost artless expression of joy at two souls who have caught a break in a Hollywood *"where hearts are going under"*. "Underneath The Streetlight" is a slighter yet even sparkier declaration – *"I love ya!"* – of devotion.

Yet without wishing to deny Mitchell all the good things in life, the album is better when she's surfing the ambivalences, ambiguities and insecurities. "Man To Man" is featherlight synthetic soul music, a slightly ominous musing on her romantic wanderlust – *"A lot of good guys gone through my door"* – and her fear at committing to a new love: *"When I saw you standing there I was scared/I thought, oh I hope he can care"*. "You Dream Flat Tires" is an overly busy little rocker, dominated by Michael Landau's shrieking guitar, Klein's syncopated bass groove, and Mitchell's metaphor of love as a fast car, which her paramour seems to wish to take off the road for a while. As she spits out lines berating his romantic cowardice, Lionel Richie is tasked with making the case for the male respondent: *"Woman she bounce back easy/But a man could break both his legs"*. "Be Cool", on the other hand, is a finger-snapping, wryly amusing note-to-self to keep emotions in check and worries out of sight, no matter what the provocation. *"Don't get jealous/Don't get over-zealous/Keep your cool/Don't whine/Kiss off that flaky Valentine/You're nobody's fool"*. This is the sharp end of new love, albeit often hidden beneath a cloak of breezy positivity. It flashes its blade more than a few times on the album. The title track is a brief, rather inelegant hunk of art-house rock, with squalls of electric guitar from Steve Lukather and frequent time shifts. A slightly hysterical tale of two new lovers hurtling along on the squealing tyres of their passions, both aware that they're made of combustible material, it ends on a note of vulnerability: *"What makes you run, wild thing?"*

The muffled warning cries in these songs are rendered explicit on "Ladies' Man", a slice of slick blue-eyed soul, on which Mitchell pulls no punches in expressing her reservations about her new beau. The music complements the uneasy mood. "Ladies' Man" has a queasy early-'80s Hollywood edge, reminiscent of Steely Dan in its bleached bad vibes. *"Couldn't you just love me like you love cocaine"*, sings Mitchell, her heightened emotions leaving her suddenly exposed in the face of an unreliable lover playing *"cocaine head games"*. It's neither the first nor the last time drugs seep in. There are ambiguous *"fast tracks in the powder white"* on the title track, and on "Moon At The Window", the *"rattle rattle rattle, in the spoon and the glass"*.

The latter happens to be the album's one unequivocal moment of Class A writing. It finds Mitchell returning to a jazzier sensibility, a meandering meditation of burbling bass, whispering brushes and Wayne Shorter's conversational soprano sax lines, beautifully evoking what Klein later described as a "musical argument between a man and a woman". It's a perfect setting for a late-night drama in which Mitchell appears as a woman cast into darkness by the end of a relationship and life's other sundry iniquities, haunted by *"ghosts of the future/Phantoms of the past"*. Her light has been stolen, and all that remains is the moon, casting illumination while also throwing a mocking light on the scene. She sings with her lightest, loosest inflections, buoyed by some wonderfully tight harmonies.

Wild Things... ends with the title song from that ill-fated film from 1980. A soothing jazz meditation, dominated by Shorter's lyrical horn and Joni's calm, clear vocal, "Love" is a fairly faithful interpretation of the oft-quoted passage from Corinthians 13: *"As a child I spoke as a child/I thought and I understood as a child/But when I became a woman/I put away childish things"*. And so Mitchell's 11th album circles back to the opening themes of "Chinese Café", acknowledging the never-ending need to change, and the mastery of one human emotion above all others. Love and transformation, right to the end.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"There is the persistent suggestion that she's slumming in the cheapest throes of dime novel romance, and it's ludicrous that the progenitor of the scorched skyline of the *Hejira* set should want to settle for something so facile."
RICHARD COOK, NME, NOVEMBER 27, 1982

"There are no immediately noteworthy classics here, though several tracks pack something of a likeable punch on first hearing... She is making music with the realistic and graceful perception of someone who realises that this is 1982."
CAROL CLERK, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 27, 1982

TRACKMARKS WILD THINGS RUN FAST

1 Chinese Café/Unchained Melody ★★★★
2 Wild Things Run Fast ★★
3 Ladies' Man ★★★
4 Moon At The Window ★★★★
5 Solid Love ★★★
6 Be Cool ★★★
7 (You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care ★★
8 You Dream Flat Tires ★★★
9 Man To Man ★★★
10 Underneath The Streetlight ★★★
11 Love ★★★

Label: Geffen
Recorded at: A&M Studios and Devonshire Studios, Los Angeles
Produced by: Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, piano, electric piano), Larry Klein (bass), Michael Landau (electric guitar), Steve Lukather (electric guitar), John Guerin (drums, backing vocals), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums), Larry Williams (Prophet synthesiser, tenor saxophone), Russell Ferrante (Oberheim synthesiser), Wayne Shorter (soprano saxophone), Larry Carlton (guitar), Victor Feldman (percussion), Kim Hutchcroft (baritone saxophone), Lionel Richie (vocals), Charles Valentino, Howard Kinney, James Taylor, Kenny Rankin, Robert De La Garza, Skip Cottrell (backing vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 32; US 25

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

DOG EAT DOG

RELEASED OCTOBER 1985

A timely brew of politics and Fairlight synths... "Don't you have anything about sex and parties?"

BY JASON ANDERSON

JONI Mitchell looked at the television and didn't like what she saw. Given the woes in the world beyond her Malibu home as the '80s wore on, that's hardly a surprise. Filled with division and discontent, America was not the place she recognised. The country was ruled over by a former Hollywood B-movie actor and governor of California who was deeply distrusted by the artistic community from which he'd originally emerged. The cynical alliance between Reagan's Republicans and Christian evangelists like Jerry Falwell had yielded the Moral Majority and a new conservative movement that wanted to remake the country as if the '60s never happened.

Meanwhile, the president's commie-hating bent manifested in a resurgence of Cold War paranoia and the CIA's not-so-secret campaign to subvert left-wing governments in Latin America, prompting anti-nuke and anti-Contra protests involving many of Mitchell's fellow celebs. Even though deforestation in the Amazon and famine in Ethiopia had begun to unite the music world in common causes, Mitchell questioned the west's complicity in these crises and unwillingness to recognise its own destructive ways. She also criticised the "self-congratulatory" aspect she saw in the very public brand of activism that culminated in Live Aid. (Not that she was entirely averse to such gestures – in February of 1985, she took part in Northern Lights, a Canadian answer to USA For Africa that paired her with fellow Canucks such as Neil Young, Bryan Adams and Anne Murray.)

Mitchell's self-described "political awakening" inevitably manifested itself in the songs she wrote over the course of 1984 and '85. In "Tax Free", she assailed the hypocrisy of TV preachers and the vanishing line between church and state. (*"How can he speak for the Prince Of Peace when he's hawk-right militant?"* she wondered.) In "The Three Great Stimulants", she lamented *"these troubled times"* and the proverbial opiates that keep the masses disengaged *"while madmen sit up building bombs and making laws and bars"*. She skewered the false gods of consumerism and celebrity in "Fiction" and "Shiny Toys" and the needlessness and commercialisation of suffering itself in "Ethiopia". (*"On and on the human need/On and on the human greed profanes"* was one of its less mellifluous couplets.) The song that eventually provided the title for Mitchell's 12th album, "Dog Eat Dog" laid it all out in apocalyptic terms: *"In every culture in decline/The watchful ones among the slaves/Know all that is genuine will be/Scorned and conned and cast away"*.

This degree of topicality was not entirely new in her work – after all, she'd written one of pop's first bona-fide environmental anthems after looking out of a hotel window in Hawaii and seeing how they'd paved paradise to put up a parking lot. Yet the shift in her perspective from inward to outward was dramatic. In interviews after *Dog Eat Dog*'s release in October 1985, she expressed her belief that this development was only natural. For one thing, the usual personal dramas had given way to a period of relative ➤

With the tensions in the studio and the rage in the songs, she may have been better off making a punk record

domestic contentment with new husband Larry Klein.

What's more, she felt a grave sense of urgency due to the worrying political climate and new challenges to free speech. One such threat was the PMRC, whose campaign to alert parents to the dangers lurking in the lyrics of Madonna and Prince led to widely publicised Senate hearings in the fall of 1985. As Mitchell told the *NME*, "If I don't start speaking out, taking a chance and addressing things that are important to me in this way, we might not have this outlet very long."

In many respects, *Dog Eat Dog* was just another example of music's wider politicisation of pop in the Reagan era, with Mitchell responding to the same conditions that compelled Sting to write "Russians", Jackson Browne to defend Nicaragua and Neil Young to found Farm Aid. Hell, even the Ramones did "Bonzo Goes To Bitburg". Few major artists, though, were willing to venture so far from cosy platitudes and to confront listeners by putting these problems at their own doorstep.

Traditionally one of the first listeners for Mitchell's latest songs ever since Buffy Sainte-Marie had dragged him out to see her play a club in Greenwich Village in October of 1967, her manager Elliot Roberts also may have been the first to note this new batch's unabashedly political nature. "I don't know about these songs, Joan," he told her after a preview. "Don't you have anything about sex and parties?"

As pig-headed as it may look on the page, the comment was clearly meant (and taken) with affection even if Mitchell's professional relationship with Roberts ended before the album was finished. (She'd then sign on with Peter Asher, the former Peter & Gordon singer who already handled her friends James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt.) Roberts' quip was also gentler than many of the other reactions that greeted the transformation of an artist who so many thought they knew so well. Indeed, as *Dog Eat Dog* emerged from a difficult and expensive creative process – a "nightmare", by her own estimation – Mitchell's anger was often met in kind.

"Once known for airy laments on love gone wrong, Mitchell is now tackling big business, the religious right and African famine," *Newsweek* complained in a tone that suggested she'd far overstepped her bounds. The same tone was palpable in a *New York Times* review that complained how "the most probing confessional singer-songwriters of the 1970s" had resorted to "blunt topical commentary" full of lyrics that didn't flow. Dismissing her stabs at social criticism as "the sort of bloodless liberal homilies you'd expect from Rush", *Rolling Stone* concluded that "while Joni's venom is an encouraging sign, its clumsy expression is unnerving". Along with her lyrical content, Mitchell drew flak for the musical direction, too, especially her embrace of the Fairlight CMI and a synthesiser-heavy sound whose fundamentally rigid nature seemed to preclude the folk- and jazz-influenced freedoms she'd previously enjoyed. The sight of Thomas Dolby's name among the co-producers was another sign that, despite the songwriting's newly polemical bent, Mitchell was another star of the '60s and '70s forced to contend with the challenges in the pop marketplace of the '80s.

To be fair, she had some good ideas about how to face those challenges. But within a few months of *Dog Eat Dog*'s appearance it was clear that audiences had much the same response as the album's harshest critics. Its poor sales and chart performance having snuffed out any plans for touring; Mitchell didn't even make a concert appearance until an unscheduled spot on the bill for Amnesty International's Conspiracy Of Hope benefit show at the Meadowlands in New Jersey on June 16. Stuck in front of an ungrateful audience that was much more eager to see U2 and The Police instead, she was understandably indignant to find herself getting pelted with water bottles, cups and other objects. "I'm not that bad, you dig?" she told the crowd. "Quit pitching shit up here!"

It would've no doubt felt great to say the same thing to everyone else who'd treated *Dog Eat Dog* so unkindly. The songs deserved better, as did their creator. Indeed, when they're heard outside the tumultuous context of their original moment, the best of them are testaments to Mitchell's tenacity, audacity and wisdom in the face of very trying circumstances both in the world at large and the more intimate confines of the recording studio.

Before he departed the fold, Roberts had pushed her to enlist an outside producer, the first time she'd done so since her debut album. Her long collaboration with engineer Henry Lewy was also winding down. Things had started off amiably enough with Dolby – in his memoir *The Sound Of Speed* he retells Mitchell's hilarious anecdote about a failed sexual advance by a very wasted Miles Davis and fondly reminisces the "huge quantities of takeout food from LA's best restaurants" that would appear in the studio.

Yet it soon became clear there were too many cooks in this kitchen. The tenseness of the situation was further compounded by what Dolby perceived to be the incompatibility between Mitchell's spontaneous working methods and the programming complexities of the new technology she loved. Mitchell resented what she saw as resistance from all her collaborators, including Klein. "I had to fight for every note that I put on that record," she'd later say in an interview with Malka Marom for *In Her Own Words*.

What with all the tensions in the studio and the rage in the songs themselves, she may have been better off trying to make a punk record. (Maybe it wasn't such an unlikely fantasy, seeing as she and John Lydon got along famously when they met in Jamaica in 1977.) In any case, the album is more coherent and more interesting than circumstances should have allowed, even if it's sometimes marred by many now-disparaged hallmarks of '80s rock production.

That description definitely applies to the compressed clip-clop of the drum programming and the slick, semi-funky guitar licks on "Good Friends", *Dog Eat Dog*'s opening track and first single. Mitchell's choice of the always game Michael McDonald as a duet partner may also seem ill-advised at first, but the warmth of their performances counteract the frigidity of the production aesthetic. The similarly uptempo "Fiction" suffers more from the stiffness of the rhythm programming and the team's tendency to oversaturate the mixes with superfluous details, like the roboticised voices of Dolby, Klein and others on the chorus here and throughout "Tax Free" and "Shiny Toys".

Despite his own occasional vocal cameos, Dolby's presence is actually more discernible in "The Three Great Stimulants", which benefits greatly from his signature sensitivity to the proverbial silences around the notes. (Indeed, the song has the same sonic spaciousness as Prefab Sprout's *Steve McQueen*, a Dolby collaboration that received a much kinder reception when it arrived a few months before *Dog Eat Dog*.) A similar quality of lightness takes the edge off some of the rancour in "Tax Free" before it develops into a beefier rocker with a backing chorus of rock-star friends like Don Henley and James Taylor. Actor Rod Steiger provides the Jimmy Swaggart-style preacher-man ranting – Mitchell had originally enticed Jack Nicholson to perform the bit, but a security guard denied him access to the film studio where they were recording it.

"Smokin' (Try Another)" is a more experimental curio that essentially consists of Mitchell singing alongside her own sampled vocals, a bass lick by Klein and a loop of a noisy cigarette machine that fascinated Mitchell at the studio where she recorded *Wild Things Run Fast*.

Really, it's not until "Dog Eat Dog" that the unmusicality of Mitchell's most polemical lyrics becomes obvious. She fares better with the shorter, wittier phrases

CRITICS' VERDICT

"*Dog Eat Dog* takes a scalpel to the dark underbelly of Reagan's America, detailing a descent into hell: a place of ignorance and bankrupt values, the blind leading the lame."
SEAN O'HAGAN, NME, NOVEMBER 23, 1985

"She's ditched the recent jazz preoccupation for more classic Mitchell, meandering and full of warm inflections with a contemporary instrumentation."
HELEN FITZGERALD, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 23, 1985

Dog Eat Dog was just another example of music's wider politicisation of pop in the Reagan era

Smokin' Joni: at a celebrity art exhibition in New York, June 1984

in "Shiny Toys", an infectious piece of cod-calypso synthpop that became the album's second single and garnered her first-ever extended dance remix (house music pioneer François Kevorkian did the honours). Shifting from that song's jokes about parties and Porsches – her old manager must not have heard that one – to the hectoring and handwringing of "Ethiopia" was bound to be something that rankled the album's first wave of critics, and it's still a tough turn to navigate. Equally problematic is the frustratingly rigid and static arrangement – a freer-flowing, *Hejira*-like approach may have been more forgiving to lines like *"Between the brown skies and sprinkling lawns/I hear the whine of chainsaws hacking rainforests down"*.

It's a shame that saxophonist Wayne Shorter doesn't show up until *Dog Eat Dog*'s final two tracks, since his contributions greatly enhance the grace and elegance of "Impossible Dreamer", on which Mitchell wryly acknowledges just how little change she's likely to affect with her pleas, and "Lucky Girl", a charming vignette about the domestic bliss she found with Klein. *"I never loved a man I trusted as far as I could throw my shoe 'til I loved you"*, she sings, mixing the sweet and the caustic with her customary flair.

For such a cantankerous work to end with such a gentle gesture may leave the impression that she ran out of fight before the battle was really through. But Mitchell always understood how grateful listeners are to get a little solace after being left out in a storm.

TRACKMARKS DOG EAT DOG

1 Good Friends ★★★
2 Fiction ★★★
3 The Three Great Stimulants ★★★
4 Tax Free ★★★
5 Smokin' (Empty, Try Another) ★★★
6 Dog Eat Dog ★★
7 Shiny Toys ★★★★
8 Ethiopia ★★★
9 Impossible Dreamer ★★★★
10 Lucky Girl ★★★★

Label: Geffen
Recorded at: Galaxy Studios, Los Angeles
Produced by: Joni Mitchell, Larry Klein, Thomas Dolby, Mike Shipley
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, background vocals and vocal samples, piano, Fairlight CMI and assorted keyboards), Larry Klein (basses, keyboards, Fairlight CMI and synthesiser programming, spoken vocals), Thomas Dolby (keyboards, Fairlight CMI and synthesiser programming, spoken vocals), Michael Landau (guitars), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums, samples), Michael Fisher (percussion samples), Steve Lukather (guitar), Larry Williams (flute, tenor saxophone), Kazu Matsui (shakahachi), Wayne Shorter (soprano and tenor saxophone), Jerry Hey (trumpet, flugelhorn), Gary Grant (trumpet, flugelhorn), Alex Acuna (bata drum), Don Henley (background vocals), James Taylor, Amy Holland (bk vocals), Michael McDonald (vocals, bk vocals), Joe Smith (spoken vocals), Rod Steiger (spoken vocals), Bob 'Zyg' Winard (spoken vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 57; US 63

RON GALELLA, LTD/WIREIMAGE

"You're going to get me into my apocalyptic vision..."

From star-packed LA galleries to intimate London hotel rooms, Joni Mitchell is back on the scene and giving interviews again. ALAN JACKSON and ADAM SWEETING bear witness to a rare intellectual intensity as she talks about Reagan and the environment, MTV and Weimar cabaret, marriage and feminism. And, of course, jazz. Also starring Jack Nicholson: "Life's been fucking great..."

PICTORIAL PRESS LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

SCENE ONE: ***'Joni Mitchell, New Paintings And Songs', an evening benefit for the Museum Of Contemporary Art at the James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles. Subtitled: "All the people at this party/They've got a lot of style/They've got stamps of many countries/They've got passport smiles/Some are friendly/Some are cutting/Some are watching it from the wings/Giving to get something..." – "People's Parties" (Joni Mitchell)***

A low building in a parade of liquor stores, restaurants and other sub-glamorous service industry ephemera. Outside, faces watch figures emerging from cabs and limousines. Inside, faces are watching faces... Mitchell's husband Larry Klein, handsome eyes shining, is talking with a beaming Pat Metheny, who suddenly throws his head back and laughs delightedly. A posse of the curious, gathered close by in the as-yet-uncrowded room, pauses mid-conversation, anxious to share in the joke. A tall young man with a video camera balanced on his shoulder moves in towards the room's dominant canvas, a vast and semi-figurative work titled *Dog Eat Dog*, like Mitchell's new LP. He is recording the event for Japanese TV...

Shelley Duvall is looking earnestly at a work called *The Marriage Of Church And State*, which features a soiled crucifix hammered onto an American flag. Within the Stars And Stripes there stands a small army of toy-shop tin generals tacked on by hand. A woman squeezes past, wine glass aloft. "My God, that's Barbi Benton. She looks no older," says a whisper in her wake... A flurry of excitement in the entrance hall and Mitchell herself is here. The presence is palpable, long before her trademark black beret can be glimpsed amid the clamour, because waves of people radiate from her wherever she moves.

Closest to her are the friends with whom she exchanges kisses and conversation mindful of the audience. Next there are the friends of those friends listening in. And by them, a broader band of spectators watch the listeners listening. Further back linger the shy, the single, the resolutely un-starstruck. Fame, it seems, acts like a pebble dropped into a pond.

"Life's been pretty good to you, hasn't it?" a beautiful, dark-haired girl with wide-open eyes is asking Jack Nicholson as he lounges in a doorway, granting audiences to a procession of young callers. "Yeah," replies Jack, giving that slow, wicked smile and tilting his shades forward a little. "Life's been fucking great..."

Wayne Shorter's saxophone trails behind the general conversation and rises to the ceiling like cigarette smoke in the smaller of the gallery's two main rooms. It is *Dog Eat Dog* being played on continuous loop through loudspeakers. Mitchell is now circulating among her guests. Having been introduced to Sheena Easton, she is craning forward in conversation. "You're from a small town too, aren't you?" those passing can hear her ask.

Outside in the warm, dark-blue night, departing guests are being presented with copies of the new album. One group pauses on the sidewalk discussing the paintings inside. "I expected them to be more figurative somehow, like her record covers," says one man. Asked about this, her first ever collected exhibition of art work, Mitchell will say later: "At their most trivial you could think of them [*her paintings*] as party decorations for the release of the new album. At their most trivial, they are at least that good."

SCENE TWO: ***Afternoon tea at the offices of Peter Asher Management, North Doheny Drive, Los Angeles. Joni Mitchell turns aside from the birthday celebrations of her manager's secretary, wipes crumbs from her fingers, and dissects her art, her music and her increasingly troubled view of America and the wider world.***

> *"The western world has all the symptoms of downfall"*
>
> JONI MITCHELL

SHERRY RAYNBARNETT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES, PRESS/ABRAMSON/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Subtitled: "Fiction of obedience/Fiction of rebellion/Fiction of the goody-goody and the hellion/Fiction of destroyers/Fiction of preservers/Fiction of peacemakers and shit disturbers..." "Fiction", from the album Dog Eat Dog, Joni Mitchell, 1985

The flaxen-haired figure sitting behind a large glass desk in a small side office looks tired. Joni Mitchell at 41 is an intriguing mixture of sage and schoolgirl. Clothes are elegant, expensively understated, heavy silk sleeves carelessly rolled up, emerald suede shoes slipped on and off unconsciously while considering a response. The look is anything but Hollywood, just minutes down the boulevard, and the effect as unselfconscious as can be. But her beauty and candour are as disarming as her music.

This is the woman, born in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who began singing while at art school in Calgary; who married and divorced the folk singer Chuck Mitchell in the mid '60s, whose songs "The Circle Game" and "Both Sides, Now" were recorded by other artists (Tom Rush and Judy Collins respectively) before she released her first solo album; whose song "Woodstock", from her third album, *Ladies Of The Canyon*, became the anthem for a generation; who released the ultimate bedsitter-land soundtrack with 1971's *Blue*, expanded its folk-pop concerns in the following year's *For The Roses*, then sold self-pity down the Swanee in the search for jazz.

This is the artist whose 1974 release *Court And Spark* stands today as a milestone of romantic introspection, leading into a double *Miles Of Aisles*, reworking her existing songbook in a jazz-aware framework that would itself lead to 1976's historic *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. An impressionistic collection of jazz-pop vignettes, it contrasted the sterile life of her suburban sisters with the threatening but fertile jungle world lying beyond the well-manicured lawns and airy interiors of Beverly Hills and Bel Air...

This in turn would be developed into the pared-down, minimal jazz accompaniments of *Hejira*, an album which paired Mitchell's guitar with the brooding electric bass work of Weather Report player Jaco Pastorius on songs about flight, fame, fear and escape. These achievements alone would assure Joni Mitchell of her place in some cobwebbed hall of all-time fame. But add a career which continued to flourish (artistically if not commercially) through a still more fully blooded romance with jazz on studio double-album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and the collaboration with the then-dying composer and bassist Charles Mingus on 1979's *Mingus*, and it becomes more difficult to fathom Joni Mitchell's place in the scheme of things.

Has she released an electro album using synthesised voices ➤

Lady in blue: backstage at the Farm Aid concert, September 22, 1985

to disguise the vocal shortcomings of being middle-aged? Has she published a racy autobiography detailing her love life with California's mellowest but most macho men? Has she even turned a well-timed back on liberalism and come out in support of nuking, nationalism and New Cold War Diplomacy? None of these things? What? She's even turned in a more-than-halfway-decent new album that brings her razor-edged lyricism into the '80s world of Fairlights and pre-Holocaust paranoia? This is not what becomes a legend most, these days at least. Joni Mitchell has some answering to do...

The legend is laughing. "You know, I'm just one of those Spock babies. We do everything a little late..." In this case the joke could be on any one of the many Joni Mitchell fans who rely on their heroine to articulate those unique yet universal stirrings of the heart – the circumstantial minutiae of the love affair. Her own emotional turmoil has fuelled both her art and the animosity of critics. She has been called the High Priestess Of Confessional Songwriting in some columns. *Rolling Stone*, in one article featuring a family tree of her liaisons, called her "Old Lady Of The Year".

Every silver lining has its cloud. "It took a long time for me to remarry," says Mitchell, referring to 1983's ceremony with bassist Klein, 28. "It took me a long time to find the stability of a partner again. But what am I going to do now? Torture myself? Sit there and reminisce about the past? It would be bad for me, bad for my marriage. So with that taken care of, you begin to look around you. It's a natural sociological phenomenon, you know?" She is explaining the logic behind the new-found politicism of her music. *Dog Eat Dog* has the odd strand of romanticism in its lyrical fabric, but also contains attacks on consumerism, right-wing evangelism, media hype, international aid policy and good old-fashioned greed. It's a list of targets that might be considered hip if addressed less articulately by someone half her age.

AS IT is, Joni Mitchell has made one of the most political albums to come out of America this year. The title track refers to a nation of "*snakebite evangelists and marketeers... a culture in decline*". "*Land of snap decisions/Land of short attention spans/Nothing is savoured long enough/To really understand...*"

"Although I see it in America because I'm here, it's more of a global point of view," she says, gesturing with a cigarette. "We are so interrelated with the news being the way it is... world incidents broadcast into your living room... the western world has all the symptoms of downfall if you study it and compare it with all the other civilisations which have gone under. There are the youth cult obsessions, a greater openness regarding homosexuality, the decadent theatre reflecting the repressed savageness of a culture. Look at German theatre before Hitler. It's very similar to MTV with all its black studs, that one pocket that rock went through a couple of years ago that was dominantly savage, apocalyptic... the enactment of surviving a holocaust... savage scavengers. Even though there's a certain theatricalness, there's also a truth to it." This awareness, coupled with the stability of marriage, led her away from what others would call her confessional muse.

"I never thought of myself so much as a confessional songwriter," she says, "but in order that my work should have vitality I felt I should write in my own blood. The closer it was to my direct experience, the less it was going to be hearsay, the more poignancy it should have. My job as I see it is to be a witness. I am a witness to my times. The world had become so mysterious from the vantage point of the '70s. The disillusionment, the killing of the president, the stain of the Vietnamese war. It was a natural thing for people to look into themselves.

"That period was one of soul searching. The dream, everything that America stood for, was broken, and the people break a little with the dream. Where do you have left to go but in? It was, she concedes, a very particular moment in time, experienced by those coming of age in the '60s. We really broke from our elders. There was a clear cut. A line was drawn. This generation kind of resembles my parents' generation, like a throwback, which often happens. Their aim is to get a job and hold it because they came up in a depression although not one as severe as that of the '30s. But they came up under the same pressures. We came up in the greatest pocket of affluence post-Second World War, though. The country was rich, the economy was in good shape, and we were raised on certain philosophies. Like, spare the rod. Yes, do spoil the child. So we never really reached adulthood in a certain way. We were a kind of freaky generation; very self-centred as a rule, in a good way and a bad way..."

Liberated from the need to introspect, Mitchell found inspiration in full measure by looking around at the confused kingdom her baby boomer peers had inherited. To her, one of the most disturbing phenomena was the eerie interplay between religion and politics which began as a reaction to the soft-pedal Carter years and which has found full expression during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Her song "Tax Free", from the new album, analyses the implications, employing actor Rod Steiger's melodramatic oracular talents to simulate one of the hawkish TV preachers.

"*Lord, there's danger in this land/You get witch-hunts and wars/When church and state hold hands*", she sings, as Steiger counters, "*I think we should turn the United States Marines loose on that little island south of Florida and stop that problem... I am preachin' love... I am...*"

"Tax Free" starts from the premise that the new right-wing religious are playing the same stadiums as the rock bands they so despise, and can outdraw even Springsteen. It then shows how the "*immaculately tax free*" preachers combine with the president to inculcate the idea that any opposition to church or state is Communist-induced, and that perhaps the right of free speech should be taken away from its instigators.

"So now it starts to get really scary," says Mitchell, leaning forward and jabbing the air with her cigarette. "You think, we're only a hairline and a few laws from incredible censorship. They're already trying to censor rock'n'roll. One of the reasons this album is so outspoken in the context of my work is that I think it's a case of use it or lose it. If I don't start speaking out, taking a chance and addressing things that are important to me in this way, we might not have this outlet very long."

HAVING taken part in the recent Farm Aid benefit and joined in the recording of "Tears Are Not Enough", the Canadian equivalent to "Do They Know It's Christmas", did she detect a reactive movement back to more Woodstock-style values among the young? "Woodstock was Woodstock... it had its own identity. There'll never be another Woodstock," she says. "Every time there's been one of those large

"Terrible doings are being done in the name of commerce": at Farm Aid, September '85

gatherings of people, any one of them, they've been entirely different. Collectively, each of those crowds had its own personality. To me, Woodstock was a very high event. It was the height of the hippie movement. Afterwards it began to recede. Live Aid didn't have the same things up against it as Woodstock did. It was much more commercialised. They were flashing up the band's latest album after every song. I don't think people were weeping in the wings. I don't think there was the same poignancy surrounding the event."

Dog Eat Dog contains the song "Ethiopia", her own comment on the political inertia and short-sightedness that contributes to the famine and threatens its repetition elsewhere. It will also provide royalties for charitable causes, but is far removed lyrically from the self-involved smugness of, for example, "We Are The World". It fuses the ecological concerns of past songs like "Big Yellow Taxi" and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* with the bleak, minimal sound of *Hejira* and provides a despairing, angry whole. Mitchell admits that, yes, she worried that she might be accused of picking up on a chic subject and that, yes, there was opposition in some quarters to its inclusion on the album.

"It's too good a song to even think about what people might think of it on the downside. I'm used

> *"My work should have vitality, so I felt I should write in my own blood"*
>
> JONI MITCHELL

to people thinking of my work on the downside. I've had plenty of it". Mitchell's husky voice has a hard edge to it now. "The song was too good to kill. I thought, it's not a pretty subject. It will be too sad for some people. They won't like it, won't want to look at it. But what would you do if you'd written that song? Abort it? Wouldn't you put it on record?"

"After I'd done the Canadian Band Aid, I felt that all the songs that had been written, while they were good for generating the spirit to gather money and to focus people on a cause – in that they were perfect – they were more about us, we the performers and we the contributors of money, than they were about the people of Africa themselves. So once I had that idea I did the portrait more of the Ethiopians themselves in the context of our own world hunger.

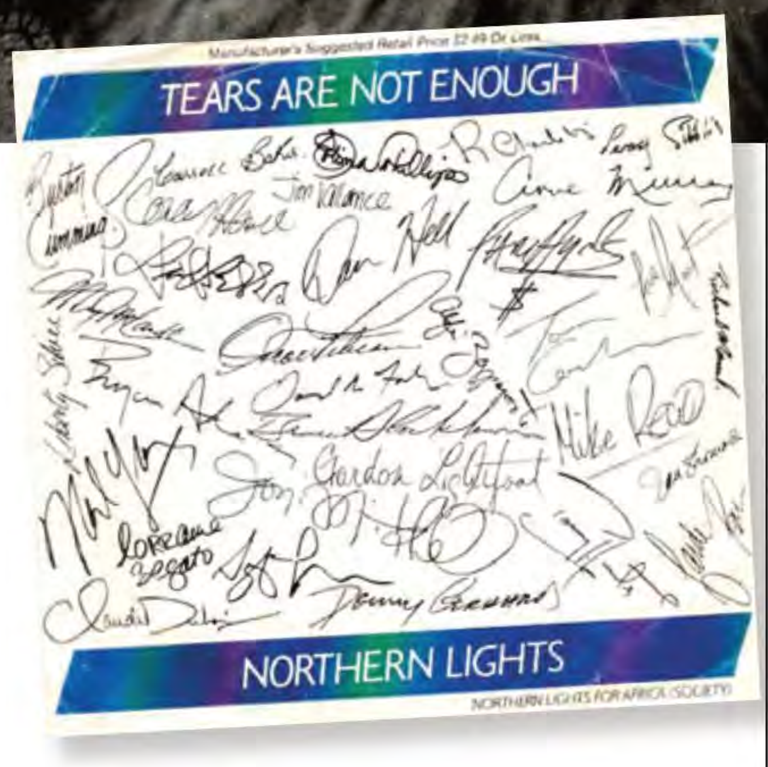
"To me it's not like they're over there and they have a drought, they mismanaged their soil, it's now sick and their government doesn't really care about them. That could happen anywhere in the world at any time, closer to home. We can cause the same problems with our pesticides going into the ground... You're going to get me into my apocalyptic vision now... Terrible doings are being done in the name of commerce. The rainforests are coming down around the globe. We're going to have deserts springing up all over the place. It's not just going to be in Ethiopia."

The song's impression is made all the more powerful by the simplicity of its musical form in contrast to the computer-age pop she has adapted elsewhere. The sound is expensive – it is Mitchell's most costly album to date – and uniquely for her post-folkie work, production credits are given to outside agents. Nile Rodgers and Thomas Dolby both volunteered, but she was wary of turning her music over to someone so completely.

"I found it difficult, because I've always been kind of a benign dictator on my dates," she says ➤

EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS

Mitchell with Neil Young and Elliot Roberts entering the studio to record the supergroup Northern Lights' charity single at Manta Sound, Toronto, February 10, 1985; (inset) the single sleeve for "Tears Are Not Enough"



of the production-by-committee (Mitchell and Klein, engineer Mike Shipley and, on some of the tracks, Dolby as well) that resulted. "There's never been a producer. There never was a credit given, and I leaned heavily on artistic contributions from my players. A producer is kind of the guy who has the last word. Often he's a formula man. He's trying to make something commercial, and that can be a watering down. I don't think of producers generally speaking – and there are exceptions – as people who play long shots."

Mitchell says that she and her husband had been attracted by the best of recent music using Fairlights and drum machines, and wanted to assimilate that sound into her own work. But Shipley was invited onto the sessions to handle the more complex functions of the equipment that they had not yet learned to perform, and then the need for a fourth person – Dolby – to speed up programming was recognised. There have been rumours that it was not an altogether harmonious relationship.

"I was reluctant when Thomas was suggested because he had asked to produce the record," she admits. "Would he consider coming in as a programmer and a player...? So we met with him and said, 'Now we know you're used to being a frontliner and this is kind of a foot-soldier position...' and he said, 'I would love to do it. I am sick of people always looking to me for the answer.' And when he said that I thought of the play *A Chorus Line*. I thought, 'I know his intentions are the best and that at this moment he believes he can do that, but he's still a lead player and can he go back into the chorus line? He's going to have to subordinate his ideas.'

"So on that level we did have some problems because he'd get excited with some idea and I couldn't get him off the keyboards. Then I'd feel bad. I'd think, 'Oh God, I understand. He's on a creative roll. But he can't, because if he does that he'll decorate me right off my own project. He may be able to do it faster. He may even be able to do it better, but the fact is it won't really be my music.'"

It would be hard not to see the irony in the fact that Mitchell has just released her most rock-aware album in more than a decade, at a time when the American mega-sales are going to artists testing their toes in jazz.

Complete immersion in the form led to her being pilloried by many critics on her home continent, and being largely ignored by record buyers.

Is she bitter?

"I felt bitter at the time. I had bitter moments; I had to fight it. But I did not become an embittered person, so I won some of the battles. I took a lot of hard knocks. Mean knocks, not smart knocks. People weren't thinking... they were just afraid of it. It was just different at the time... and now this is a good time for it. I'm glad it came about this way because it gives me optimism. I like to make that kind of music and I like the idea of it having a broad public communication. There is a tendency on some projects for something to be considered jazz because jazz is new chic. But it's not good jazz. It's beginner's. But the players that Sting is working with, for instance – those are real virtuosi."

"I like the idea that good musicians can have a broad public communication. And you've got to start somewhere. Even if I'm thinking, God, you think this is hip but you haven't even digested the history of jazz enough to know that, like, this giant existed and he did that... It may be very beginnerish, but it's still where to begin to educate the public. Maybe if they can like that, then they can like something else too and gradually acquire a taste for this magnificent pocket of music which has always been designated as something for kind of '50s cellars in Europe."

As for herself there are no plans to explore the area further now that the rest of the industry is catching up. "All people have to do is go back and play the old records," she says. "I already did that."

DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

Old wounds are still discernible though. *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, widely considered to be her landmark album of the '70s, was voted "Worst Album of The Year" by the staff of *Rolling Stone* on its release in 1976. She got a telegram from Paul and Linda McCartney that year saying, 'We really liked it.' It was the only good review that it got, and then it was almost a sympathy telegram.

"It was destroyed on so many levels and that really hurt. There's no way just on a level of craftsmanship that you could say it was the worst record made that year. If they'd just said they hated it, you could take it, because it would be a personal opinion. But to say it's the worst. Stay as you are and bore us, or change and betray us. That's your choice." Mitchell smiles and shrugs, pausing to light another cigarette.

Asked to consider her position in relation to the women's movement, she draws herself up behind the desk with shoulders hunched and hands clasped, like a pupil concentrating in class. On one level she has done more than any other female songwriter to express the sexual and emotional landscape of the past two decades. On another, she has always seemed apart from other women, either isolated in her art or distanced from them by her romantic relationships. She admits she has never seen herself as a feminist, finding the structures of the movement too limiting and divisive.

"I had a good relationship with my father," she says carefully. "He taught me a lot of things that, had he had a son, he would have taught a boy. How to make bows and arrows and so on. I enjoy men's company, and I grew up enjoying it. My best friendships generally speaking that I've made in my life were with men. It's not that I don't like women. I've made good friendships with women too, but I'm so driven as women go that I can relate more to driven men. A lot of women would like to paint, for example, but they have 101 things that keep them from doing it. I can have friendships with these women, but sometimes I remind them of their inability to get going, which leaves a hole or a potential hole in the relationship. Feminism was too divisive. It was us against them... but it did something to open things up. I hate the word but I like the idea of a person, that a man and a woman can sit and for one moment all of these sexual considerations are bypassed and you have an open dialogue from person to person. I have basically tried to live my life as a person in that way."

Suddenly she lightens, remembering an article she has read recently about one of the new right-wing women's organisations. It is hard for her to keep from laughing while relating the story. "I forget the name of the particular group, but it was Christian women linked to getting the devil's language out of rock'n'roll," she says. "They like being housewives. They're anti-feminist, and they were in training to go out and visit the media, because some of them had appeared on television and had felt awkward. So the training programme consisted of a woman standing up and saying, [*Mitchell adopts a prissy Miss Manners delivery*] 'Now remember, girls, on TV your knees are your best friends. Keep them together...', and then, 'Take out your pocket mirrors, girls. I want you to notice that if, when you're speaking, you raise your eyebrows up and down, your voice takes on a more melodious quality.'"

Mitchell is laughing with delight now as she winds up the anecdote: "The last thing the article said was that the women prayed, they sang songs, and then they looked at an aborted foetus, and I thought, God, this is a new movement? It's just as sick and limited as the old one. It's the pendulum sprung back too far against a reaction which was itself already too extreme. When is the pendulum going to get to the middle?"

She talks a little about the art show, her recent move into abstract painting – "I've just broken into a movement that happened in the '50s. I'm still an art student" – and other plans for coming to Europe with her band next year. Outside the room her husband lounges in a chair chatting with office staff. He grins when he sees her. With the heart soothed, Joni Mitchell has found fresh sources to energise her music.

ALAN JACKSON

THEY'VE all been coming out of the woodwork this past year, the artists who'd never deign to speak to anyone – ole Neil, Dylan a bit, and now the reclusive Joni Mitchell. The recent *Dog Eat Dog* is her 14th album, and it's a mighty long way from her 1968 debut *Song To A Seagull*.

I didn't even have to go to California, because Joni flew into Europe just before Christmas to face the press. Still, not doing interviews for years does have its advantages. It means you actually have something to say for yourself. About how *Dog Eat Dog* isn't a collection of songs written on the move, for instance.

"When I did *Hejira*, that writing year was spent driving around in the States. I drove across country with a couple of friends of mine to Maine, then to New York, and from New York I drove back home across country by myself, so that year was spent writing against a moving landscape, as was *Blue*. *Blue* was mostly written in Europe, in Greece and France. It has a lot of longing for going back to America.

> *"A lot of people think Reagan's a nice guy. He's an actor, y'know"*
>
> JONI MITCHELL

"*Dog Eat Dog* is a very domestic American album in a certain way, it has a global overview but mainly it was written... married, settled, staying home a lot, watching a lotta television, which puts you in contact with millions of other people watching television. You are the recipient of communications that are going out that a lot of people are picking up."

Dog Eat Dog finds Mitchell handling some big and disturbing topics alongside her more familiar personal cryptograms. The sound is weighted towards some sort of rock mainstream, unlike *Mingus* or *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, so in that respect it follows on logically from her last recording, 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*. Mitchell's musician husband Larry Klein appears as co-producer, writer and musician, while Thomas Dolby also figures prominently among guests with famous names like Don Henley, James Taylor, saxman Wayne Shorter and even actor Rod Steiger, enlisted to enact the role of an ultra-right-wing evangelist on "Tax Free".

The growth of the TV preachers and the Moral Majority with all its hideous hawkishness has alarmed Mitchell more than somewhat. A child of the flower power years, she still cherishes the American ideal of plurality of thought and deed. She's Canadian herself, of course.

"The ideals of the '60s and '70s have a true and clear enemy in this new idea, absolutely focused," she said grimly, exhaling a jet of Camel smoke. She admits to being a chain smoker, and evidently can't kick the habit.

"I guess people, finding that there was an emptiness in their lives, and a lack of community in a certain way, turned to the churches and the more flamboyant of these speakers. Looking for wholesomeness, looking for something that perhaps had been lost in America with the family unit disintegrating and so on, they turned to this idea of the paternal figure at the head of the family, the wife in the kitchen and the children coming up, and temperance. This idea seemed to flower and expand. A lotta people stopped drinking, became born-again Christians."

And the perfect father was, of course, Ronald Reagan, who has been at pains to court the evangelists of the new right as publicly as possible.

"A lot of people think Reagan's a nice guy," said Mitchell, wryly. "Neil Young thinks he's a nice guy." She paused before adding: "He's an actor, y'know." She rocked back in her seat, laughing.

In retrospect, 1985 might be remembered as the year when rock finally faced a few facts about itself. It was no longer radical or unruly, but had become institutionalised and safe. But it still wielded enormous media clout and earning power, factors with huge potential if suitably harnessed.

Joni Mitchell decided rock ought to speak up against the preachers and zealots trying to emasculate it further and subject it to self-righteous censorship of the most obnoxious kind. Hence "Tax Free": "*Tonight I'm going dancing with the drag queens and the punks/Big Beat deliver me from this sanctimonious skunk.*"

On the other hand, the Live Aid and Sun City operations left her with some reservations, though she took part in a Canadian Band Aid project. She was asked to appear on the Sun City disc, but then discovered that the original lyric went like this: "*Linda Ronstadt, how could you do that?/Rod Stewart, tell me that you didn't do it/Julio Iglesias, you oughta be ashamed to show your face/Queen and the O'Jays, what you got to say?*"

Linda Ronstadt is an old friend of Mitchell's, part of the whole LA/Asylum/Geffen crowd, and Joni was damned if she was going to have her pilloried on disc. She declined to take part, and insists Ronstadt's visit to Sun City was undertaken in all innocence on the basis of "art should cross any border". Perhaps Linda's ➤

watched the Sun City video by now, which ought to have rocked her ivory tower.

Meanwhile, Joni's song "Ethiopia" is designed to put that godforsaken hellhole into some kind of global context. She reckons that the world's in a critical ecological state, with the oceans turning toxic, ineradicable nuclear pollution everywhere and the rainforests coming down in tons. But how much impact does she expect a song like this to have? Live Aid and Sun City seem to have set some wheels in motion, but who does her song really influence? "Well, there's the appearance of wheels in motion and then there's the actual motion. For instance, Bangladesh [*The Concert For*] appeared to set wheels in motion, right..." And the money disappeared. "No it didn't disappear, it went into escrow. It was just released in 1984. It was held all that time – by who, for what, who got the interest I don't know, but the fact was wheels appeared to go into motion but the direct influence on the cause was all an illusion. The same with the No Nukes festival. There was a big to-do and a movie and a this and a that, but the funds have a mysterious way of being snatched by government and being disarmed along the way by, if not the government of the country from which they emanate, then the country to which they go. There's a hundred and one ways to stop the ball in motion."

So you think this will happen to Sun City?

"Well, I don't know. All I know is we just find out these things after the fact. I don't know how much good it does. It certainly seems to elevate people's spirits and they can feel like they're doing something anyway. That in itself is something."

Sceptical or what? Tell it to Bob Geldof and watch his blood boil. Mitchell isn't optimistic about the state of the world. Nuclear disarmament, for instance.

"Even if the miracles happened and both sides said, 'Yes, yes, we've been fools all along and we must lay down our arms', what do they do with all the crap that they've got? All of that stuff is toxic. Where are you gonna put it? And supposing they get the bright idea they'll ship it into outer space and blow it up out there. With the forces being what they are out there it's the same ideas as the oceans – 'Oh, we'll dump it in the ocean, the ocean is so big.' Well, nothing is so big. Even the universe isn't so big that one of those little bangs isn't gonna create some kind of chain reaction out there."

Not much to look forward to, then, though it seems Joni may just be going through a particular phase of doomwatching. She once had a reputation as a kind of professional bleeding heart whose albums were chunks of her personal diary set to music, thinly veiled accounts of her liaison with various rock'n'roll personalities. As her music grew more complex and idiosyncratic, her lyrics developed a broader reach and sought out less obvious targets.

But, she cautions, "I may go back to bleeding all over the public at any moment" [*laughs*]. "The thing that's peculiar is what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to do it in a pop context and apparently that's unusual. It they were short stories they wouldn't be unusual at all, and unless it's a case of Hemingway where they go picking through all of his short stories to link it up to his own life, most of the time they blessedly take a short story at face value as a short story."

So it won't surprise you to learn that Mitchell is considering devoting herself, for 1986, to having a bash at some short stories. She says she's been devouring volumes of other people's lately, by writers including Raymond Carver and the great John Cheever.

"My work is a combination of fiction, autobiography, a lot of the names are the actual names of friends and acquaintances, some are fictionalised and some aren't. How do you figure the whole puzzle out? How much of it is fact or autobiography and how much of it is theatre or fiction? And what difference does it make as long as it's a good piece? I'm trying to write short stories or small movies, I guess, in the pop song idiom. Because I have this musical ability I've decided to use that form to communicate. It creates all kinds of difficulties because it's so much more of a public life than that of a short story writer. They tend to confuse the artist with the art more in this idiom than any other."

And if writing fiction doesn't work out, she can still go back to her painting, an increasingly important part of her life in any case. She refers to this juggling of creative media as "crop rotation". "David Geffen said to me once that I was the only star he ever met that didn't want to be one," she observed. "The reluctant star, y'know." But it seems to suit her just fine. ◐

ADAM SWEETING

My old man: with husband Larry Klein at Wembley Arena, April 23, 1983

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

"I'm trying to write short stories in the pop song idiom"

JONI MITCHELL

CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM

RELEASED 23 MARCH 1988

The guestlist expands to include Tom Petty, Peter Gabriel, Willie Nelson and Billy Idol. But is Joni, once again, on the retreat?

BY SAM SODOMSKY

"I SEE *something of myself in everyone*", Joni Mitchell sang on the title track of 1976's *Hejira*. Like many of her lyrics, this one can be scoured for meaning. Its most obvious interpretation is that it addresses the fuel of her songwriting – crafting stories where she inhabits a variety of characters and moods without sacrificing her core identity. But the lyric could also be a comment on her massive influence during the '70s, as her conversational tone, jazz inflections and odd guitar tunings turned from idiosyncrasies into omnipresent signifiers of the singer-songwriter genre. Following her relentlessly innovative run, however, the lyric took on a different meaning during the following decade. Fans started seeing less of Joni Mitchell in her own music, with a series of synthier, poppier records that deviated drastically from what they perceived as her characteristic sound. Like Neil Young – also newly signed to Geffen Records that decade – Mitchell started focusing on work that reflected a disinterest in catering to expectations, dismissing concepts of consistency or coherency.

In 1988, Joni Mitchell capped off her strange and polarising decade with *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*. It's a breezy, meditative album that mostly eschews the experiments and political bent of its predecessor, 1985's Thomas Dolby-assisted *Dog Eat Dog*. "It's not so hard-hitting, not so emphatic," Mitchell said of the record at the time of its release, tying the music to her happy marriage with collaborator Larry Klein: "I guess I'm on the brink of maturity, too." *Chalk Mark* is a reflective record – "a series of characters commenting on different times," as she explains it. The variety of perspectives allows Mitchell to touch on some of her most fruitful subject matter: the pursuit of love, the mistreatment of the environment, the perils of the media. But she was not merely summarising past successes. *Chalk Mark* is a subtly ambitious record, effective in both refining her vision and widening her scope.

"Like a filmmaker," Mitchell has said, "I cast people in my songs." In a sense, *Chalk Mark* is her most high-profile, blockbuster release. The LP boasts a stellar cast, with appearances from Peter Gabriel, Billy Idol, Tom Petty, Don Henley, Willie Nelson, Wayne Shorter, The Cars' Benjamin Orr, and Wendy and Lisa, recently departed from Prince's Revolution. Mitchell had long considered the idea to bring in guests to voice the characters in her songs, but *Chalk Mark* was the LP on which she chose to fully enact it. The process began as a simple matter of proximity – collaborating with artists in nearby studios. "Then it became fun," Mitchell explains, "and I just started calling people when I would think of them." Even with its impressive roster – spanning genres from jazz to classic country to new wave and beyond – *Chalk Mark* is no straightforward 'duets' album. As one would expect from an artist who defined herself by always taking the path less travelled, Mitchell turned her most collaborative, marketable record in years into one of her most understated and intimate.

The album kicks off with "My Secret Place", an atmospheric ballad that pairs Mitchell's voice with ➤

A breezy, meditative album that mostly eschews the political bent and experiments of its predecessor

Peter Gabriel's. A singer who spent the '80s much like Mitchell spent the '70s, experimenting with various media and reinventing himself with each album, Gabriel's influence is clear throughout the album. Like Gabriel's 1986 breakthrough *So*, *Chalk Mark* finds its heartbeat in Manu Katché's percussion, guiding the songs with propulsive intensity. But whereas Katché's rhythms on *So* were built to reach the cheap seats at football stadiums, *Chalk Mark* keeps its pop ambition below the surface, favouring subtler sounds. In "My Secret Place", Katché establishes a slow, sensuous backdrop, as Gabriel and Mitchell's voices tie together to the point of becoming sonically inseparable. They finish each other's sentences and sing in unison, an aural equivalent of a couple who've accidentally started to dress the same. *"I don't talk much to anyone"*, Mitchell sings, *"but you're a special case"*.

Other tracks take a similar approach, with Mitchell bringing in personalities that reflect her own, absorbing their influence and playing off them. "Snakes And Ladders" features Don Henley and, as the album's first single, gives Mitchell the spotlight, with Henley offering quiet counterpoints in the background. The country standard "Cool Water" is a perfect showcase for Willie Nelson; it's an album highlight that further illustrates Mitchell's range. Her otherworldly arrangement does little to modernise the song's old-school Americana charm but, as always, Mitchell sings folk melodies with the same nuance and attention she applies to Charles Mingus compositions. Her voice surges with passion, supplementing the lilting folk song with urgency. Nelson, meanwhile, dips into his lowest register, offering a sense of stern disillusionment to Mitchell's desperation.

The album's most upbeat number is "Dancing Clown", a dizzying rock song that updates the old-school spirit of 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast* with *Dog Eat Dog*'s swirling soundscapes. The song features Billy Idol grunting his way through the role of a bully to Tom Petty's snivelling gentleman, with Mitchell shining through as the object of their affections. Unlike some of the album's more natural pairings, this one is appealing mostly for its novelty. Petty and Idol's respective vocal styles add little to Mitchell's narrative, and neither of them has the charisma to go toe-to-toe with her. In the song's charmingly homemade video, Idol and Petty are absent; it's just Mitchell in her kitchen, dancing with her cat, banging on pans, and air-guitaring with a broom. This visual representation for the joy of solitude makes an even stronger point than the song's ill-fated love story. It's fun and cathartic, where the song feels awkward and overcrowded.

The sprawling "Lakota" makes more successful use of an unlikely guest. Iron Eyes Cody opens the track with an a cappella chant before a bed of synths converts it into a fiery singalong. According to Mitchell, when she showed Iron Eyes an early version of the song, he instantly agreed to collaborate, telling her, "You've got the haunting." The activist and actor – best known for portraying the Native American with a tear in his eye in an iconic Public Service Announcement – is a ghostly presence in the song, with a tough but tender voice that reappears mostly to add emphasis to certain lines. The arrangement is one of the album's finest moments, with a tempo that stutters and stretches beneath Mitchell's layers of harmonies – her voice emerging in all its phrasings and colours, from a scratchy whisper to a searing falsetto. By the time the song reaches its riveting double-tempo finale, Mitchell has exorcised her myriad personalities, delivering the song's most potent metaphor: *"I am Lakota"*, she sings, *"fighting among ourselves"*.

Joni's internal conflict is inherent through the rest of the album. In "Number One", she sings about the competitive nature of pop culture, where your reputation – and thereby your future – is often beyond your control. For an artist whose finest work often went misinterpreted and underappreciated ("Fame is a glamorous misunderstanding," she once said), her words hit doubly hard. The percussion comes not from Manu Katché, but from Mitchell's own programming of a tape flipping within a reel. The looped sound serves as the song's heartbeat, and it also symbolises the day-to-day monotony of Mitchell's recording career. It calls back to the late nights she described in 1976's "Coyote", *"getting home with my reel-to-reel"* just as the sun ascends. By the late '80s, Mitchell had become even more of a dedicated craftswoman, making records that might not have been her most successful, but covered new ground with every move.

With the psychedelic "The Reoccurring Dream", Mitchell made a song unlike any she had written. Sampling a variety of television advertisements on the album's most disorienting track, "The Reoccurring Dream" sounds like the logical endpoint to the decade's experimentation: an epilogue to the dystopian pop of *Dog Eat Dog* and a counterpoint to some of *Chalk Mark*'s more subdued work. *"Dreamer, dream on"*, Mitchell sings, with a tone of amusement and sarcasm, as disembodied voices promise love and happiness to anyone who'll listen. It's at once the album's most confrontational moment and its clearest statement of purpose: beneath these songs, with their ambient production and friendly collaborations, lies an uneasy songwriter with a growing disillusionment towards the world around her. Beneath *Chalk Mark*'s beatific exterior, it is one of her most incisive and self-reflexive works.

Even with its star-studded cast and complex lyrics, *Chalk Mark*'s biggest revelation is its simplest, and it arrives at the very end of the record. "A Bird That Whistles (Corrina, Corrina)" is based on a traditional folk song, but more notably, it's based on traditional Joni Mitchell songs. After settling into a deeper register for most of the decade, her voice soars back into her *Blue*-era falsetto, telling a simple story about love lost. She's backed by little more than her own acoustic guitar, but there's also some jazzy fretless bass – echoes of Jaco Pastorius' work on *Hejira* – that swerves between her words like affirmation from an old friend. The song foreshadows her cosy return to form with 1991's *Night Ride Home* and 1994's Grammy-winning comeback *Turbulent Indigo*, and ends the record on a gorgeous, all-too-brief note. Here, Joni sounds at peace with herself, or rather, with all of her selves. "I don't fit in anywhere and I don't dare indulge in hope for this record," Mitchell told *Spin* at the time of *Chalk Mark*'s release. Her words reflect the hardness of an artist whose work had long confounded critical and commercial audiences, often growing in acclaim only with the passing of time. "Obviously, these things are frustrating to me," Mitchell continued, "but I've come to accept that I must write what I feel when I feel it and can't make my life unravel in a particular way."

Chalk Mark was seen as something of an improvement following *Dog Eat Dog*, but as Mitchell expected, its reception was unremarkable – a continuation of her stagnant commercial and critical appeal prior to her '90s comeback. It further proved that Mitchell's best work arrived at its own pace, and that the rules that apply to the rest of the industry never quite worked for her.

While taking her even further from the limelight than her purposefully esoteric '70s experiments, Joni's '80s work did so

CRITICS' VERDICT

"This... is the maturer, more cosmopolitan woman, not the scrawny hippie who sang those jewels about drinking a case of you and so on. This one wouldn't leave her sleeping bag in your bathroom, but she might own a Filofax with the phone numbers of Peter Gabriel, Silly Billy Idol, Willie Nelson and Tom Petty."
CHRIS ROBERTS, MELODY MAKER, MARCH 26, 1988

"With a tasteless assortment of famous friends virtually destroying some of the tracks... Joni is ignoring her fans' instincts with her eager participation in this super groupiness. Too many cooks are making the broth bland."
MICHELE KIRSCH, NME, MARCH 26, 1988

She would never make an album as glossy and high-profile again

Eye of the beholder: Mitchell in 1988

while making more concessions than ever to commercial radio. From *Wild Things*' catchy love songs to *Dog Eat Dog*'s ambitious art-pop and *Chalk Mark*'s bevy of guests, Mitchell could have been mistaken for an artist with newfound commercial drive. In fact, *Chalk Mark* sounds more like Mitchell following trends (casting the album with some of the most popular male recording artists of the time was certainly no coincidence), after an entire career spent establishing trends and swiftly swerving away. If *Chalk Mark* has aged more than some of her other albums, it's because of how of-its-time it must have seemed upon release – the sound of pop radio filtered through Mitchell's lens. Shortly before the record came out, a *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* reporter even managed to eke out some optimism from Mitchell about the album's potential appeal: "I think people are ready to like me again," she said.

While Mitchell's writing always sought self-knowledge by looking outward (remember: she saw something of herself in everyone, and not the other way around), she also longed for acceptance on her own terms. *"Will you take me as I am?"* she asked repeatedly in "California", a centrepiece on *Blue*, whose emotional tension arrived from knowing she would never receive an affirmative answer. It's a thought that occurs to her again on *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*. *"Will they shower you in flowers?"* she asks in "Number One". *"Or will they shun ya/ When your race is run?"* Adept as ever at translating her deepest anxieties into poetry, Mitchell was also growing closer to learning the answer to that question.

In the years to come, as Mitchell's legacy became cemented with a new generation of singer-songwriters who saw her as a patron saint of individuality, she would record several well-received records. She would never make one as glossy and high-profile as *Chalk Mark*, but she would use its best moments – the hushed intimacy of "My Secret Place", the dignified throwback of "A Bird That Whistles" – as templates for her work to come. In retrospect, *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* is the almost-happy ending to a tempestuous part of Mitchell's career, and the runway from which the rest of her story took off.

TRACKMARKS CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM

1 My Secret Place ★★★★
2 Number One ★★★★
3 Lakota ★★★★
4 The Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms) ★★★
5 Dancin' Clown ★★
6 Cool Water ★★★★
7 The Beat Of Black Wings ★★★
8 Snakes And Ladders ★★★
9 The Reoccurring Dream ★★★★
10 A Bird That Whistles ★★★★

Label: Geffen
Produced by: Joni Mitchell, Larry Klein
Recorded at: Ashcombe House, Bath, The Wool Hall, Beckington, UK; Artisan, The Village, Ocean Way, A&M, Sound Castle, Galaxy (all LA); Ground Control, Santa Monica, CA
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, keyboards, drum prog), Manu Katché (drums, percussion), Steve Lindsey (organ), Larry Klein (bass, keyboards, congas prog, bk vocals), Michael Landau, Steve Stevens (guitar), Wayne Shorter (sax), Thomas Dolby (marimba), Willie Nelson, Iron Eyes Cody, Julie Last, Peter Gabriel, Tom Petty, Don Henley, Wendy Melvoin, Billy Idol, Benjamin Orr, Lisa Coleman (vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 26; US 45

CALLE HESSLEFORS/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

NIGHT RIDE HOME

RELEASED 19 FEBRUARY 1991

The home straight. In which Mitchell revisits old sounds, with new mature experiences.

BY BUD SCOPPA

THE collective shrug that greeted *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* confirmed to Mitchell that her "wildly popular" years were in the past, never to be relived. The realisation that people weren't after all ready to like her again, as she'd hoped, served to unburden the 46-year-old artist, who was turning her gaze inward once again when she entered her home studio in late 1989 to begin work on her 14th studio LP, with husband, co-producer and bass player Larry Klein once again by her side.

She cut the bulk of *Night Ride Home*, her fourth and final LP for Geffen, as well as her fourth co-produced by Klein, against the backdrop of a world morphing in profound ways. The Berlin Wall was coming down and the Soviet Union was unravelling, while at home in the States, Reagan had served out his second term, and his former vice president George Bush was in the Oval Office. In August 1990, the Bush administration and its European and Middle Eastern allies launched an offensive against Saddam Hussein in retaliation for Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait.

Two months earlier, Mitchell had completed what would be viewed by some as a prophetic statement, adapting WB Yeats' apocalyptic poem "The Second Coming", retaining its central image of a "*rough beast...moving its slow thighs/Across the desert sands*" and retitling it "Slouching Towards Bethlehem". "If this is a holy war, God is pissed at us, and damn right," she asserted on the album's release, seemingly pleased that critics had picked up on the relevance of the Yeats appropriation, unintended though it was; she'd clearly created the piece for aesthetic rather than political reasons.

By that point, aside from a July 1990 trip to Germany to perform on Roger Waters' all-star concert *The Wall – Live In Berlin*, Mitchell's interest in the big picture had waned, as she returned to her métier, matters of the heart, on a largely luminous album of ruminations and reveries, ranging from evocations of conjugal bliss to archaeological digs into her memory bank.

Unlike the glossy *Chalk Mark*, Mitchell eschewed the use of big-name guests on *Night Ride Home*, choosing instead to keep things decidedly intimate. Nine of the 10 tracks feature little more than her silken acoustic guitar phrasings and multitracked backing chorales – functioning as a sort of Greek chorus – Klein's sinewy, undulating five-string basslines and just one or two other instruments, primarily Alex Acuna's percussion and/or Vinnie Colaiuta's drumkit. While the spare arrangements and crisply executed performances are of a piece with Mitchell's inward-peering songs, the album's understated virtuosity is undercut here and there by the compressed, artificially hermetic sonic sheen that marred so many '80s albums, undercutting the sense of inspired musicians bouncing off each other in a spatial environment.

Fortunately, Mitchell's vocals are "dried out", in her words, in Mike Shipley and Dan Marnien's mix, retaining their up-close immediacy as she nimbly vacillates between gravitas and playfulness, thickening the consonants and gliding through the vowels. The damage cigarettes had inflicted on her ➤

With *Night Ride Home*, she'd caught a tantalising new wave while searching for meaning in the past

vocal cords actually works to her advantage, adding a brassy burnish to her explorations of the widening gulf between innocence and experience.

"Night Ride Home" opens the album like a breath of tropical air, with sampled chirping crickets keeping time, as Mitchell ecstatically recounts a scene from a Hawaiian vacation with Klein, driving back to their rental house after watching a Fourth of July fireworks display on the beach. "Everything looked so magical, even the white line on the highway," she told the *Los Angeles Times*' Robert Hilburn. "It was as if someone had sprinkled fairy dust all around." The song, delivered by her lived-in, womanly alto and embellished by Bill Dillon's pedal steel, subtly establishes the theme of *Night Ride Home*, a lustrous example of emotion experienced under a Van Gogh-vivid starry night, recollected in tranquility.

But then, after distancing herself from her '80s albums, Mitchell constructs another elaborate set piece with "Passion Play (When All The Slaves Are Free)". Happily, her retelling of the Easter story in modern dress dances away from pretension, the track's feathery presentation ornamented by an overdubbed falsetto chorale warbling "*Who you gonna get*", while she fancifully costumes the assembled multitudes "*in Exxon blue*". Mitchell flashes back to her childhood in Saskatoon for "Cherokee Louise", about a sexually abused friend hiding under the city's Broadway Bridge, comforting herself by leafing through the pages of a comic book and a movie magazine. The arrangement, in lilting 3/4 time, brings an implied hopefulness to the sombre tale, while Wayne Shorter's soprano sax accentuates the underlying sense of existential isolation. When introducing the song in live performance, Mitchell noted that it was based on a childhood friend named Mary who was a Cree – but "Cree Mary" clearly doesn't roll of the tongue as musically as does Mitchell's renaming of the song's subject.

The album hits a bizarre stretch four tracks in, beginning with the startlingly antagonistic "The Windfall (Everything For Nothing)", as she eviscerates a Guatemalan live-in servant who'd returned her generosity by taking her to court. The vindictive lyric comes off like a diary entry from a pampered, Republican-voting Bel Air matron in need of a Valium and a frozen margarita, the impact deepened by its appearance just after the deeply compassionate "Cherokee Louise". Despite its mean-spiritedness, "The Windfall" is beguiling, thanks in large part to the balmy guitar-bass interplay, over which a multi-tracked chorus of falsetto Jonis impersonates a murder of crows cawing what sounds like "*Do whatcha-whatcha want*". A spider web "*spit spun between the trees*" and the "*Jaguar in the drive*" provide cinematic detail to one of Mitchell's most nakedly candid oddities.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"A return to her roots – or in Joni's case, her cheroots... After all her jazz, avant-garde, jazz-fusion and vocalese tease, she's just a folkie again, albeit a sophisticated one."
FRED DELLAR, NME, MARCH 9, 1991

It's followed by the curiously sing-song recitation, percussive bombast and siren sound effects of "Slouching Towards Bethlehem", derailing the accrued momentum. Why she chose to include this ambitious but wrongheaded exercise so late in the album's gestation is puzzling indeed. As it happened, Neil Young, Mitchell's artistic peer, Geffen labelmate and the yang to her yin, had pulled off a far more compelling oracular feat with 1989's "Rockin' In The Free World", skewering Bush's America, with its "*kinder, gentler/ Machine gun hand*", dropping Yeats and Mitchell's rough beast in its tracks. In terms of outside material, Mitchell fares far better with Dylan than with Yeats. She added a diaphanous rendition of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" to the 2003 re-release, part of the Complete Geffen Series, dropping in the words "*reindeer navigators*" to cement her sense of ownership and pay him back for his contribution to "Big Yellow Taxi".

The exquisite centrepiece "Come In From The Cold" offers rhyme schemes as precise as Mitchell's brush strokes and inspired parenthetical commentary provided by her overdubbed harmonies repeating "*Come in, come in*" with a hint of Caribbean patois. Stretching out over seven-and-a-half minutes but feeling like four, the loping midtempo song, which finds a boy and girl dancing the required foot apart in high school and rubbing their legs together under a restaurant table as adults, is deliriously romantic, suggestively erotic and undercut with poignancy. The entire album – indeed, this stage of her life as a whole – is encapsulated in the fifth of its seven verses: "*Are you just checking out your mojo?/Or am I just fighting off growing old?*"

The passage of time is again directly addressed in "Nothing Can Be Done", as Mitchell reflects, "*Oh, I am not old/I am told/But I am not young/Oh, and nothing to be done*". She's joined on backing vocals by David Baerwald, whose solo LP *Bedtime Stories* (released in May 1999) was produced by Klein and featured her backing vocals on one track. With its chemtrails of synths, thunderclap drums and taut vocal interplay, "Nothing Can Be Done" is the album's most widescreen track, evoking the quintessential mid-'80s LA vibe of Baerwald's lone LP as half of David & David, 1986's *Boomtown*.

Mitchell lightens the album's increasingly introspective feel in her sequencing (she claims to have gone through nearly a hundred variations before coming up with a satisfactory tracklist) with a pair of carefree reveries. "The Only Joy In Town" fondly recounts a recent visit to Rome's Spanish Steps, on which a self-proclaimed flower child with flowers in his 'fro is imploring female passersby to check him out. The way she remembered it, Joni uttered what would become the song's refrain to her travelling companion on the spot: "*The Botticelli black boy with the fuchsias in his hair is breathing in women like oxygen on the Spanish stairs*". "Ray's Dad's Cadillac" plumbs a deeper memory, as she recalls herself as a teenager riding shotgun with the son of her maths teacher, listening to rock'n'roll on the radio while she wonders why she's unable to "*keep the numbers in their place*". These songs may be minor Joni, but they sparkle like fireflies.

The instrumental track and vocal melody of "Two Grey Rooms" date back to the sessions for 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*. Mitchell rediscovered the unfinished piece while she was working on *Night Ride Home* and added lyrics, which she sang over the original instrumental. What listeners assumed was a melancholy character sketch of a middle-aged woman was in fact inspired by a magazine interview with filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who recalled a childhood friend pining for a male lover from his youth after coming upon him 30 years later. "It's the strangest story of obsession I ever heard of – all romance has an element of obsession," she said of the source material. "I feel it as much as anything autobiographical." In another interview she boasted, "That's a song that shows my songs aren't all self-portraits." The track, retaining the deft touch of engineer Henry Lewy in its rarefied instrumental delicacy, topped by Mitchell's lovely piano work and Jeremy Lubbock's languorous orchestration, closes the album with breathtaking eloquence.

Encountering *Night Ride Home* on its release, critics seemed relieved to be dealing with an album of relatively conventional songs performed on standard instruments. Dave Marsh began his review with the comparative assessment, "This one works". *Entertainment Weekly*'s Linda Sanders found the LP to be "vintage Joni Mitchell – crazy, elusive, gorgeous". Writing for *The Guardian*, Adam Sweeting hailed it as "one of the three or four best albums she's ever made", while *Time*'s Jay Cocks waxed poetic, offering, "If music is, as Mitchell defines it, 'a diagram of emotion', then *Night Ride Home* is a sort of filling-station road map of the heart. The 10 songs... represent alternate routes to the kind of altered state some people call romance, and others irresolution."

Mitchell was positively chatty during the battery of interviews to which she'd willingly submitted on both sides of the Atlantic, the album's February 1991 release

The album's placid surfaces mirrored her contentment, so "only a sunny chord would do"

In from the cold: Mitchell at London's Rotunda Gallery, 1990

conveniently coinciding with a travelling exhibition of her paintings in the UK and Europe. It was apparent that she was enjoying the opportunity to display her sharp wit, charm and feistiness as she explained and in some cases defended the artistic choices she'd made on *Night Ride Home*. "It's not shallow," she asserted to *Time*'s Jay Cocks. "But it's not making you look at hard facts as much as *Dog Eat Dog*."

She had a ready explanation for the album's juxtaposition of weighty lyrics and buoyant melodic treatments: "I want things that match my emotional inner life," she said. "I like dissonance running through things, because our lives are full of ongoing dissonances." She claimed she wasn't motivated by her fans' desire to see her return to her acoustic roots after two albums dominated by electronics. On the contrary, she pointed out, the album's placid surfaces mirrored her contentment, so much so that "only a positive sunny chord would do. I kind of stroked myself and wrote accordingly and found out other people needed the stroke of those warmer chords, too." She gave the *Boston Globe* a playful but revealing take, noting that "It's not that it's a 'smile' button in any way, because there are moments of minor, where it's tragic re-evaluation and yadda-yadda."

She gave her final word on her '80s output in her notes for *The Complete Geffen Recordings*, acknowledging that the previous three albums "were viewed as being out of sync with the '80s. But I was out of sync with the '80s. Thank God! To be in sync with the times, in my opinion, was to be degenerating both morally and artistically." Mitchell had challenged her listeners and herself throughout that decade; with *Night Ride Home* she'd caught a tantalising new wave while searching for meaning in the past, one that she would ride through the '90s and beyond.

TRACKMARKS NIGHT RIDE HOME

1 Night Ride Home ★★★★
2 Passion Play (When All The Slaves Are Free) ★★★★
3 Cherokee Louise ★★★★
4 The Windfall (Everything For Nothing) ★★★★
5 Slouching Towards Bethlehem ★★
6 Come In From The Cold ★★★★★
7 Nothing Can Be Done ★★★★
8 The Only Joy In Town ★★★
9 Ray's Dad's Cadillac ★★★
10 Two Grey Rooms ★★★★★
11 It's All Over Now, Baby Blue (2003 bonus track) ★★★★

Label: Geffen

Produced by: Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein
Recorded at: The Kiva (home studio), A&M Studios and One on One, LA, in 1989–90
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (guitars, vocals, keyboards, Omnichord and oboe on "The Only Joy In Town"), Larry Klein (basses, percussion, keyboards), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums), Alex Acuna (percussion), Bill Dillon (pedal steel, guitar), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Karen Peris, David Baerwald, Brenda Russell (backing vocals), Michael Landau (guitar on "Two Grey Rooms"), Jeremy Lubbock (string arrangement on "Two Grey Rooms")
Highest chart position: UK 25; US 41

MIKE FLOYD/ANL/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

TURBULENT INDIGO

RELEASED 25 OCTOBER 1994

Can Joni Mitchell really be the Siren Of Sorrow? And why is she so disillusioned with the world and the music business this time? BY DAVID CAVANAGH

ON the last day of February 1996, Joni Mitchell was presented with two Grammy awards – her first since 1974 – for her 15th studio album, *Turbulent Indigo*. Taking the stage arm in arm with Larry Klein, Mitchell looked stunned and thrilled. To win the Grammy for Best Pop Album was no little achievement for a 52-year-old in a youth-driven industry (though not everyone thought so; the glare on the face of Mariah Carey, a runner-up, was priceless). Mitchell, who hadn't slept for two days prior to the ceremony, delivered her acceptance speech in a fit of giggles. "We had cats for help," she jabbered. "We went out to a pet shop and got a couple of cute little cats to frolic around, to take the tension off the engineer. Ha!"

She returned to her seat to be embraced by her boyfriend, a Canadian songwriter named Don Freed. Klein retook his seat next to his girlfriend. If it was awkward for them to be socialising as a foursome, imagine how *Turbulent Indigo*'s engineer must have felt when he arrived at Mitchell's Bel Air studio one day in 1993 to be told that Joni and Klein were divorcing after 11 years of marriage – and intended to co-produce the album regardless. "That was a trip," Mitchell later recalled. "We were so uncooperative, it was awful." The divorce was her first major relationship break-up since the days when she used to write famous songs about the break-ups of her major relationships.

While praise for *Turbulent Indigo* wasn't universal, it was widely acclaimed as her most significant release since the '70s. The compliments were appreciated by the ever-sensitive Mitchell, especially in the light of the voter apathy that had greeted *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* and *Night Ride Home*. By 1993-4, clear lines of inspiration could be traced back to Mitchell's golden age from singer-songwriters such as Tori Amos, Aimee Mann, Jane Siberry, Sarah McLachlan and Kristin Hersh – and even, if you wanted to stretch a point about emotional candour, PJ Harvey. All those artists had fans who were in their teens. There seemed no reason why those fans couldn't also be fans of Joni Mitchell. Cindy Lee Berryhill, another singer-songwriter, summed up Mitchell's allure in a 1996 magazine piece: "Cool words, great guitar player, excellent blonde hair." And more seriously: "As far as I'm concerned, she's way more real in her pissed-offedness than some green-M&M-eating, posing-for-the-press, copycat nu-punker." It was that "pissed-offedness" – a sense of injustice bordering on outrage – that informed the subject matter of *Turbulent Indigo*.

"A troubled look at the world around her," a presenter on CBS called it, and he wasn't kidding. With its songs about AIDS, spousal abuse, the "*ulcerated ozone*" and the degrading exploitation of young women by sadistic nuns in an Irish convent, it didn't take long for the LP to get a reputation for hard-hitting social commentary. Turbulent indigo, as a colour and as a premise, could be seen as an ominous advance on *Night Ride Home*'s "*Exxon blue*", and could be applied to everything from a bruise on a face to a gathering storm in a Van Gogh sky. "*Let me speak*," Mitchell sang towards the album's end, "*let me spit out my bitterness*".

There was a sense of injustice bordering on outrage that informed the subject matter of *Turbulent Indigo*

The track that drew most attention was "Sex Kills", a headline-grabbing title for a song about the direful plagues that threaten an anxious citizen of LA from every angle. Mitchell cruises the streets to a sinister soundtrack like De Niro in *Taxi Driver*, sickened by all she sees, her antenna tuned to a kind of pan-societal road rage. *"Indian chiefs with their old beliefs know the balance is undone/Crazy ions/You can feel it out in traffic/Everyone hates everyone"*. The song was awash in modern synthetic textures and had a reasonably catchy chorus under the circumstances, and it might have been a strong pre-album single if someone had been braver. In the end, with Madonna's *Bedtime Stories* and Lisa Germano's *Geek The Girl* scheduled to come out the same day as *Turbulent Indigo* – dear God, how the landscape had changed since *Ladies Of The Canyon* – Mitchell's label, Reprise, tasked with obtaining the support of American radio and MTV for a middle-aged, non-touring artist with the dreaded imprint of jazz on her latter-day work, plumped for a more conservative choice, "How Do You Stop".

A soul ballad written by the duo of Dan Hartman and Charlie Midnight, "How Do You Stop" had first appeared on a 1986 album by James Brown. There's generally little overlap between the canons of Mitchell and the Godfather Of Soul, but a key verse halfway through the song may explain its appeal to her: "*You've had success/Lots of fancy friends/You've tasted the good life/You thought it would never end/One day you're too young, then you're in your prime/Then you're looking back at the hands of time*". For Mitchell, a writer who had worried about the ticking of the clock since her early thirties, if not her mid-twenties, the idea of chronicling a lifetime in those lines would have been irresistible. Her version, featuring the British R'n'B sensation Seal on backing vocals, took on added poignancy when its co-writer Hartman, a former disco star who belted out high-energy hits ("Instant Replay", "Relight My Fire") around the time that Mitchell was collaborating with Charles Mingus, died of an AIDS-related brain tumour while *Turbulent Indigo* was in production. In the song's video, Mitchell and Seal danced discreetly around each other like a couple in an advert waiting for an Old English Sheepdog to enter the room. But while Seal stormed America with "Kiss From A Rose" in the months ahead, "How Do You Stop" sold so poorly it didn't even register a chart position.

On an album full of people trudging their way through their daily ordeals, the indignities to which women are subjected are particularly grim. Cloaked in apparitional *Twin Peaks* synths, "The Magdalene Laundries" is written in the voice of a long-dead Irish woman forced to work in Dickensian conditions in a convent-run institution, for no other reason than because the Catholic Church deems her to be a fallen woman. The inmates of the real-life Magdalene Laundries in the 19th and 20th centuries were unmarried mothers, prostitutes, girls suspected of being sexually curious and – in Mitchell's lyric – teenagers made pregnant by their own fathers. She learned of their horror stories just as the rest of the world did, when newspaper articles in 1993 revealed the discovery of 130 women's bodies in a mass grave in Dublin. The testimonies of survivors would later inspire two documentaries and a feature film, *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002).

From eerie visions of sepia laundries, Mitchell, now seated at a piano, jerks us into a present-day nightmare. Her piano chords, in and around which floats the melancholy soprano saxophone of Wayne Shorter, seem too elegant for the scenario they paint – a man assaulting his partner, then telling his friends that she deserved it. The three words in the title ("Not To Blame") end each verse, giving the man his habitual get-out clause. Mitchell was irritated when the media concluded that the man was Jackson Browne, her onetime boyfriend, who, in 1992, had been accused of beating up his partner, Daryl Hannah. "It's not about anyone specific," Joni scolded them. "It's about the phenomenon of the battered woman at this time." She could hardly blame the journalists for their assumption: the lyrics of "Not To Blame" gave several clues to his identity. Again, she changed the subject – or refused to let it be changed. "Ugliness is on the increase," she told an interviewer, "especially towards women." In the years following *Turbulent Indigo*'s release, Browne denounced Mitchell as "very embittered" and condemned the song as "beneath her". A decade after their feud appeared to die down, Sheila Weller's 2008 book *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell And Carly Simon – And The Journey Of A Generation* controversially claimed that Mitchell had attempted suicide in 1972 during her relationship with Browne.

Although Mitchell insisted in her mid-'90s meetings with the press that she was "not an uncheerful person", the mere fact that she felt obliged to say it underlines just how stark and hopeless *Turbulent Indigo*'s prognosis for humanity is. Her voice may have a smoky intimacy that beckons us towards her (and when the vocal melody is an agile one, for example in "Last Chance Lost", she sounds like an uncanny cross between Rickie Lee Jones and Harriet Wheeler of The Sundays); but the characters in the songs are mostly pessimistic, photophobic and prone to desolate monologues. "The Sire Of Sorrow (Job's Sad Song)" is a seven-minute journey into the agonised mind of Job, the Bible's ultimate sufferer, complete with taunts from a chorus of antagonists. Mitchell, who has denied that it is autobiographical, sequences it as the album's closing track, not as an anthem or a psalm but as an irrevocable, endlessly tragic totem for all the people in *Turbulent Indigo* who have been forsaken by a man or a God.

Who, then, has forsaken Joni? In her cover concept, she identifies with the most tormented and neglected figure in western art. While he was alive, Vincent Van Gogh, whose *Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear* she impudently recreates on the front of *Turbulent Indigo*, would have been shunned as a dangerous lunatic by the hypocrites who now revere him as a genius, she scathingly contends in the album's title track. ("*The madman hangs in fancy homes they wouldn't let him near/He'd piss in their fireplace!*") Artistic injustice is the subtlest of the injustices that Mitchell confronts on

CRITICS' VERDICT

"This is not a bad album. There's just no point in listening to Joni Mitchell being anything less than brilliant... Here she's just drunk and boring someone in some dark café."
EMMA FORREST, NME, NOVEMBER 5, 1994

Turbulent times: Mitchell performs at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles, January 1995

In her cover concept, she identifies with the most tormented and neglected figure in art

Turbulent Indigo, but it's an injustice that cuts her to the quick all the same. In a 2005 interview, *Reader's Digest* would ask her if criticism of her post-1980 LPs had upset her. "It upset me all the way," she confirmed. "I watched as the industry standards got lower and lower. The sediment rose to the top, and crap was being elevated. More formulated, less sincere. It's all very typical of a culture in decline."

To put *Turbulent Indigo* in its correct context, it was a unilateral attempt by Mitchell to arrest a cultural decline while reminding the philistines in the music business that Mitchell, far from being an icon of the Woodstock generation who had faded from popularity, was an enduring genius whose records continued to be works of art. (When she was first introduced to Don Freed in 1993, he asked her how she was. "Undervalued," she replied. She began her *Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear* not long afterwards.) Moreover, even when she received an award for "distinguished creative achievement" from *Billboard* magazine at the end of 1995, she was noticeably prickly about it, referring in her speech to "a sea of misunderstandings and rejections and dismissals" that had submerged her albums between 1985 and 1991, and describing herself as feeling as though she was "emerging from the McCarthy era". Well! What an apocalyptic way she had of looking at her record sales. Not only undervalued but blacklisted, too. No wonder she empathised with Job.

Only a couple of months later, in February 1996, she was all smiles when she collected the third and fourth Grammys of her career (Best Pop Album and Best Album Package). The euphoria, however, lasted less than 24 hours. When she bought a newspaper the next day, it had an interesting article about singer-songwriters. There was a Then list, and a Now list. She was in the Then list. Could that have been the final straw? Was that the moment when the sea of misunderstandings, rejections and dismissals broke Joni's banks? The nocturnal artist knew she had better ways to spend her time. She painted four canvases for every song she wrote. "I paint all night," she said in the *Reader's Digest* interview. "The night is quiet and everything shuts down, so night is a creative time for me."

She could produce 40 paintings in the next three years and no music critic or radio programmer would shrug their shoulders and talk about Alanis Morissette. The songs she wrote for her next album, she decided, would be her last.

TRACKMARKS TURBULENT INDIGO

1 Sunny Sunday ★★★
2 Sex Kills ★★★★
3 How Do You Stop ★★★
4 Turbulent Indigo ★★★★
5 Last Chance Lost ★★★★
6 The Magdalene Laundries ★★★★
7 Not To Blame ★★★
8 Borderline ★★★
9 Yvette In English ★★★
10 The Sire Of Sorrow (Job's Sad Song) ★★★★

Label: Reprise
Produced by: Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein
Recorded at: The Kiva, Los Angeles
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (guitar, keyboards, percussion, vocals), Larry Klein (bass, keyboards), Wayne Shorter (soprano saxophone), Michael Landau (electric guitar), Steuart Smith (electric guitar), Greg Leisz (pedal steel guitar), Bill Dillon (guitarorgan), Carlos Vega (drums), Jim Keltner (drums), Seal (vocals on "How Do You Stop"), Charles Valentino and Kris Kello (backing vocals on "Yvette In English")
Highest chart position: UK 53; US 47

DONNA SANTISI/REDFERNS

TAMING THE TIGER

RELEASED 29 SEPTEMBER 1998

Lost cats, rediscovered daughters and the love of a new synth guitar. The end – perhaps... *BY* JOHN LEWIS

GUITARISTS have long been fascinated by Joni Mitchell's unorthodox guitar tunings. Old folkies might use one or two alternate tunings – the DADGAD, the dropped D – but Mitchell has built up a veritable encyclopaedia of nearly 60 over her 50-year career. Guitar magazines, internet forums and the jazz courses at music colleges are filled with debates about which arcane tuning she has used for which song, with countless tablatures and mathematical charts doing the rounds.

It must be demanding enough for those who have to keep up with her in the studio. But, for the guitar techs at live dates who had to keep her supplied with differently tuned instruments for each song – the DGDGBD, the GCGCEG, the BF#BEAE and so on – it must have been a nightmare. It was one of the reasons why she gave up touring in 1983. "The guitar is intended to be played in standard tuning; the neck is calibrated and everything," she told *Guitar* magazine in 1996. "Twiddling it around isn't good for the neck; it unsettles the intonation. I have very good pitch, so if I'm never quite in tune, that's frustrating."

It's why, when she played the 1995 New Orleans Jazz Festival – her first live date in more than a decade – Mitchell used a digital instrument: the Roland VG8. The actual instrument looks like a normal guitar and is physically set to standard tuning (EADGBE) but, with a flick of a switch on the effects box, the strings can be assigned to any number of tunings from song to song, or even mid-song. It made the laborious task of touring infinitely easier for Mitchell and her band, and it was used throughout her 1998 US dates.

For better and worse, nearly every track on *Taming The Tiger* seems to have been inspired by the possibilities offered by this "virtual guitar". And it's not just in tunings – the same technology can be used to trigger sounds that you'd usually associate with other instruments. For instance, the opening track, "Harlem In Havana" starts with the digital burblings of what sounds like a heavily mutated steel drum, or a marimba. All of these voicings, however, are actually synth sounds being triggered by Mitchell's new digital toy, the VG8. "It's like a marimba," says Mitchell, "but it's not like any marimba part you've ever heard because it's fingerpicked. Meanwhile, the bass string is almost atonal and sounds like a didgeridoo..." She describes the Roland guitar on the sleeve credits as her "guitar orchestra".

"Harlem In Havana" was apparently inspired by a very young Joni witnessing Leon Claxton's Afro-Cuban circus when it visited her home town of Saskatoon in the '50s. Her parents had forbidden her from visiting, and the lyrics relish the circus's forbidden status ("*Hootchie-cootchie! Auntie Ruthie would've cried if she knew we were on the inside!*"). Despite recalling an event that happened in the 1950s, the sonic language being used couldn't be more forward looking. "*Step right in! Silver spangles, see 'em dangle in the farm boy's eyes*", she hollers, the "*silver spangles*" mirrored by the futuristic metallic sounds made by the synth guitar. It's a curious collision of styles – Brian Blade eases ➤

JONI MITCHELL

TAMING THE TIGER

Nearly every track seems to be inspired by the possibilities of the Roland VG8 "virtual guitar"

through a swinging shuffle rhythm, Wayne Shorter sprays his soprano sax in the gaps, while Mitchell lays punky thrash guitars over her digital chimes. Absolutely nothing released in 1998 sounded anything like this.

Even more remarkable is the album's swaggering standout track, "Lead Balloon", probably Mitchell's finest flirtation with heavy rock. Here Mitchell's chiming digital guitar duels with a low-end heavy metal solo from veteran session man Michael Landau, who often sounds like he's been patched in from a different song. It leads to some delightful, Stravinsky-like clashing harmonies that are exploited by Wayne Shorter's sly soprano sax solo. The joyous discordancy seems to suit the lyrics, which start with the female narrator shouting "*Kiss my ass!*" before pouring a drink over a man. "*An angry man is an angry man, but an angry woman... bitch!*"

Another highlight here is "Man From Mars", one of Mitchell's finest ballads, and one that has already become something of a jazz standard, inspiring covers by the likes of David Sanborn, Jacqui Dankworth and Chaka Khan. The song was originally written for the 1996 film *Grace Of My Heart*, which was loosely based on the life of Carole King and which featured other fine Brill Building pastiches, including Bacharach and Costello's "God Give Me Strength". The film version, sung by Kristen Vigard and lip-synched by actress Illeana Douglas, keeps us in the '60s, with spartan backing on piano, pedal steel and banjo. Mitchell's own version takes us into digital territory, with soft, metallic synthetic voicings that recall the gentle futurism of Peter Gabriel's "Don't Give Up". But it's the contours of the melody that make this song so memorable, with Mitchell floating and improvising over the chords, like a Coleman Hawkins tenor sax solo. Even the daftest lyrics ("*I can't get through the day/Without at least one big boo-hoo*") can tug at the heartstrings, so it's rather sobering to discover that the song was actually inspired, not by some grand romantic split, but by Joni Mitchell's cat Nietzsche, who disappeared for two weeks.

"Love Puts On A New Face" is a drumless ballad that recalls the Pastorius/Mitchell duels on 1976's *Hejira*, and has a similar airborne quality to many of those tracks, with Greg Leisz's pedal steel strongly reminiscent of Larry Carlton's liquid lead guitar lines on tracks like "Amelia" or "A Strange Boy". It's one of the six songs that features the loyal Shorter on soprano, who floats in and around the gaps in the melody. "He crawls over notes and has a relationship with them," says Mitchell. "He is always welcome to scribble all over my songs."

The same interplay between Greg Leisz's spacey pedal steel and Mitchell's heavily chorused guitar comes on "No Apologies", this time with Brian Blade providing delicate percussion duties. It starts with a reference to the horrific true story of two US soldiers kidnapping and raping a 12-year-old Japanese girl while stationed in Okinawa in September 1995. The line "*He said the soldiers erred in judgement/They should have hired a hooker*" is based on the shocking statement by US Navy Admiral Richard C Macke, commander of the US Pacific Command. Mitchell, however, uses this as a springboard for an unfocused piece of socio-political hectoring, her scattershot anger quickly dissipated across an endless range of problems that span the world. "*Lawyers and loan sharks are laying America to waste*", she says. "*As drug lords buy up the banks/And warlords radiate the oceans/Ecosystems fail*". As the *Village Voice* critic Steven Anderson pointed out, "When Mitchell intends to be angry, she ends up sounding merely perturbed."

Of course, we're all familiar with the paradox of choice: how technology, in pursuit of endless variety, can often stifle us and paralyse us into repetition. And, weirdly, the limitless novelty afforded by the Roland VG8 seems to have had this effect on Mitchell. It's as if she has run through the countless guitar effects at her disposal and settled on just one of them – a heavily chorused, slightly flanged voicing that recalls the opening chords of Prince's "Purple Rain". It's used on more than half of *Taming The Tiger*'s tracks. Even more problematically, six of the 11 tracks on the album are in exactly the same key – C major – something that might have been pointed out to Mitchell if she'd had a producer offering constructive criticism.

It leads to a real sense of sameyness, especially as we go into the last half of the album, where most of the tracks are virtually solo, drumless exercises, with Mitchell providing very similar accompaniment for herself on synth guitar, keyboards and bass. What rescues these songs, however, are the unusually personal lyrics. The title track seems to allude to the Grammy award ceremony that Mitchell attended in February 1996, when her album *Turbulent Indigo* was a surprise winner of the big prize, Best Pop Vocal Album. It starts with her leaving the auditorium to have a cigarette, in a parking lot surrounded by rented cars. "*I'm a runaway from the record biz*", she muses, over layers of synth guitar and washes of synthesised noise, "*From the hoods in the hood and the whiny white kids/Boring!*" It's not usually interesting to hear artists complain about the music industry, and often rather undignified for musicians of a certain age to complain about the next generation, but the image of Joni Mitchell being judged alongside music titans like Alanis Morissette, Babyface and Hootie And The Blowfish is an amusing one. "*As the radio blared so bland/Every disc a poker chip, every song just a one-night stand/Formula music, girly guile/Genuine junk food for juveniles*". (The song's backing is effectively reprised as an instrumental on the 'hidden' final track, "Tiger Bones".)

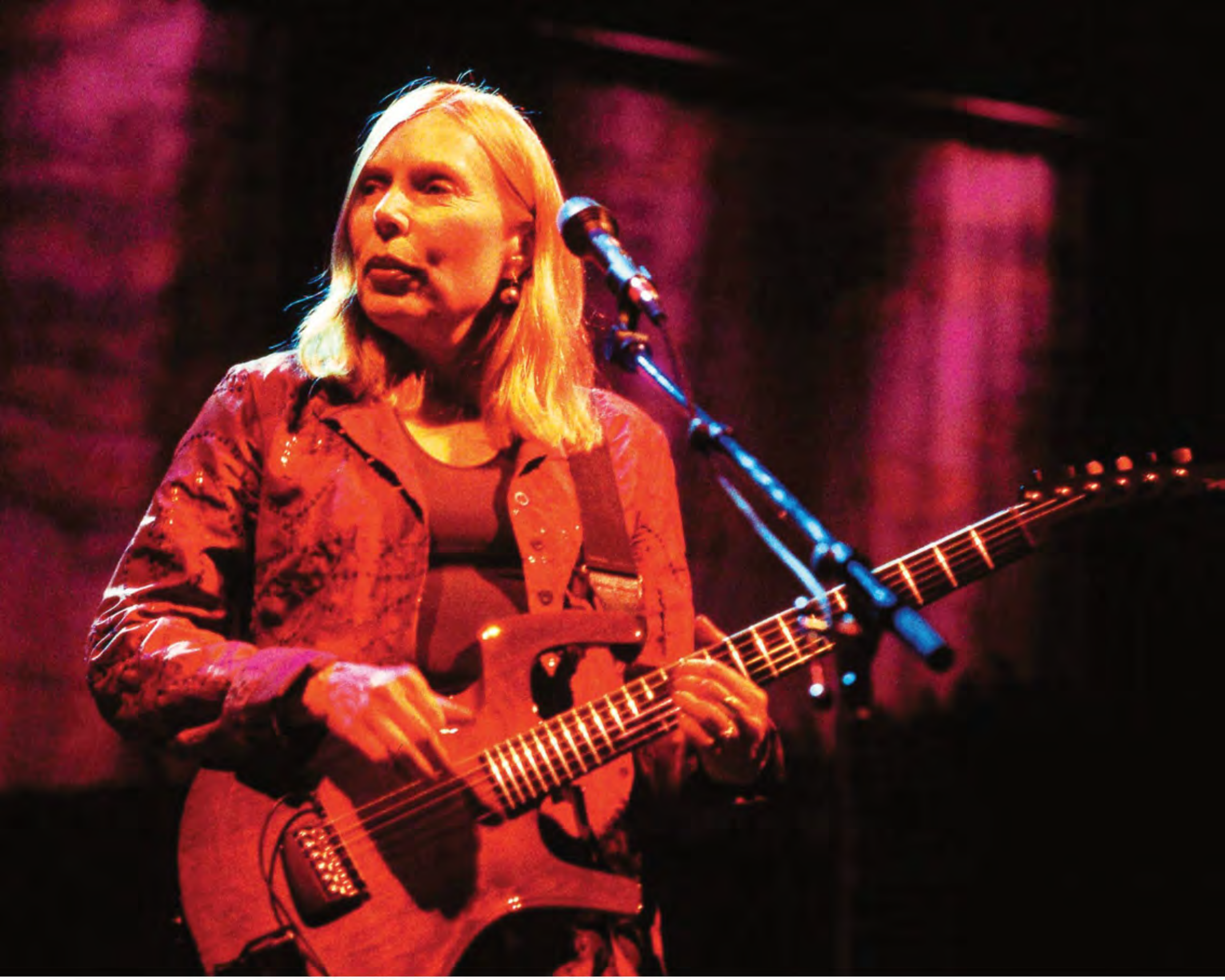
"The Crazy Cries Of Love" is a rare co-write, with lyrics by her then boyfriend Don Freed. One of the few songs on the album with a full band – featuring Larry Klein, Brian Blade and Greg Leisz rattling through a fast 6/8 swing rhythm – it's a playful and tender song of idealised love that recalls one of Mitchell's own lyrics: "*They were laughing, they were dancing in the rain/They knew their love was a strong one*". Freed also appears as an incidental character on two further tracks. Mitchell describes "Face Lift" as "another morbid little Christmas song" and it is reputedly

CRITICS' VERDICT

"The melodic invention and intelligent lyricism full of allusion and metaphor is as dazzling as ever... And those elusively beguiling, textured Mitchell melodies still seem to use chords no-one else has yet discovered."
NIGEL WILLIAMSON, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 1998

Lady in red, LA, 1998

She lays punky thrash guitar over digital chimes. Nothing released in 1998 sounded like this



based on her returning to Saskatoon for Christmas and feuding with her mother, who was apparently annoyed at Freed's presence ("*She made me pay/For gleaming with Donald down her street*"). It's a revealing little miniature that suggests that even a fiftysomething megastar can get told off by her mother ("*She said, 'Did you come home to disgrace us?' I said, Why is this joy not allowed? For God's sake, I'm middle-aged, Mama!*'"). It's one of the most confessional songs that Mitchell has ever written.

"Stay In Touch" was also inspired by Mitchell's burgeoning love affair with Freed. However, Mitchell has agreed that the references to the tentative start of a relationship ("*Our roles aren't clear/So we mustn't rush*") seemed to chime perfectly with the much publicised story of the reunion with her daughter Kilauren Gibb. Mitchell had given birth to her in 1965 as a 21-year-old art student, after a brief relationship with an artist called Brad MacMath, and travelled to Toronto to put her up for adoption. Gibb, who was adopted by an upper-class Toronto family and went on to model internationally, was reunited with Mitchell in March 1997, in a fanfare of publicity. The words "*Part of this is permanent/Part of this is passing/So we must be loyal and wary/Not to give away too much/Until we build a firm foundation*" would prove to be instructive in Mitchell's problematic relationship with her daughter. Musically, it's a minimal setting, and instead of Wayne Shorter it's Mark Isham who provides a Miles Davis-inspired *obbligato* on a Harmon-muted trumpet.

Last of all – before the hidden final track – is a rare cover version, an old waltz entitled "My Best To You". Written by Gene Willadsen and Isham Jones, it was originally recorded in 1942 by the slightly corny big band crooner Jimmy Cash, and has since been interpreted by dozens of artists, including Lulu Belle & Scotty, Slim Whitman, Eddy Howard, David Frizzell and the Hanson Family Singers. Mitchell, a fan of old westerns, says she first heard the 1949 version being sung by The Sons Of The Pioneers, the country & western troubadours who appeared in dozens of oaters in the '30s and '40s. Greg Leisz's pedal-steel guitar is in keeping with cowboy spirit, but Mitchell's backing – all arpeggiated synths, burbling bells and wobbly fretless bass – is defiantly futuristic. If this was going to be her final album – as many thought at the time – Mitchell was going to end it while looking both into the past and the future. ◐

TRACKMARKS TAMING THE TIGER

1 Harlem In Havana ★★★★
2 Man From Mars ★★★★★
3 Love Puts On A New Face ★★★
4 Lead Balloon ★★★★★
5 No Apologies ★★★
6 Taming The Tiger ★★
7 The Crazy Cries Of Love ★★
8 Stay in Touch ★★
9 Face Lift ★★
10 My Best to You ★★
11 Tiger Bones ★★

Label: Reprise
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Recorded at: Joni Mitchell's home studio, Bel Air, LA
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (voice, guitars, guitar orchestra, bass, keyboards), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Greg Leisz (pedal steel), Brian Blade (drums), Larry Klein (bass), Michael Landau (low lead guitar on "Lead Balloon"), Mark Isham (trumpet on "Stay In Touch"), Femi Jiya (backing vocals on "Harlem In Havana")
Highest chart position: UK 57; US 75

ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS

BOTH SIDES NOW

RELEASED 8 FEBRUARY 2000

An orchestral concept album about love, built mostly out of other people's standards. Sung, says Larry Klein, "as if she'd written them in her own blood". BY NIGEL WILLIAMSON

IN the 2002 film *Love Actually*, Emma Thompson's character is seen listening to a song from *Blue* and telling her husband, played by Alan Rickman, that Joni Mitchell taught her "how to feel". Later, Thompson unwraps a Christmas present from Rickman, rips off the wrapping paper and finds a copy of Mitchell's 2000 album *Both Sides Now*. When Rickman tells her the gift is intended "to continue your emotional education", she realises that he is having an affair and escapes upstairs to the marital bedroom. There, she breaks down to the strains of the title track; Mitchell's heavily reworked, autumnal version of her classic song which she had first recorded, so spring-like, on *Clouds* more than three decades earlier.

As a dramatic metaphor, the two songs brilliantly encapsulate the trajectory of the relationship in which Thompson's character is trapped. But the use of Mitchell's music in the film also holds up a mirror to her own journey from *Blue* to the Mitchell we encounter on *Both Sides Now*. At the time of its release, *Both Sides Now* felt like a valediction. Why else would one of the world's greatest songwriters put out an album of orchestral covers if she hadn't run out of things to say? The inclusion of world-weary versions of two of her own greatest songs seemed to confirm the sense of a creative life that had come full circle.

Not that Mitchell was admitting that she had reached a full stop. She told the *Los Angeles Times* she felt her "point of view is too realistic and reality is too bleak" to inflict another collection of her own songs upon a troubled world. "Even I wouldn't want to hear an album of that stuff right now," she reasoned.

Yet she wasn't finished with articulating the pleasure and pain of love. She was simply going to do so with songs that came from a different perspective than that of a 57-year-old woman facing an uncertain future who, as she told *The Times*, was now "an old babe... of an age when husbands run away with younger models".

Like others before and after, she hit upon the idea of reinvigorating her own muse by turning to the songs of a pre-rock'n'roll era; the music of Billie Holiday, Glenn Miller, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald and Broadway showtunes. These were the songs her parents had listened to when she was growing up and her father, Bill – who must have played many of them as the trumpeter in a Saskatchewan dance orchestra – offered to help choose the tracks.

Mitchell had her own ideas, however. Not for her a random selection haphazardly plucked from the Great American Songbook, as Linda Ronstadt had done on a trio of 1980s albums with Nelson Riddle, and Carly Simon had also done on the albums *Torch* and *My Romance*. She might have run out of new songs, but she still had artistic ambition, and Mitchell's covers album was to be graced with a concept – the songs would trace the arc of a love affair from beginning to end, constituting, as Larry Klein her co-producer, musical director and by-now ex-husband grandiloquently put it, "a programmatic suite documenting a relationship from initial flirtation through optimistic consummation, metamorphosing into ➤

She hit upon the idea of reinvigorating her own muse by turning to the songs of a pre-rock'n'roll era

disillusionment, ironic despair, and finally resolving in the philosophical overview of acceptance and the probability of the cycle repeating itself."

Klein's role in the project added another layer of emotional poignancy to the concept: he and Mitchell had spent 12 years together prior to their separation in 1993, by far the most enduring relationship of her much-documented romantic life. Still a key artistic collaborator, Klein described a rigorous process of song selection. "Being a writer herself, we were very careful to select songs that Joni could really feel were her own, that she sang with the same intensity as if she had written them," he explained. "If a song didn't hold up to her standards as a songwriter, she just didn't feel that she could immerse herself in it."

Warming to his theme, Klein cited Nietzsche in claiming that his ex-wife sang the compositions "as if she had written them in her own blood". That Mitchell approved the Nietzsche quotation for inclusion in the liner notes suggested she didn't disagree with this high-minded judgement of her interpretative abilities.

But then Mitchell had never regarded false modesty about her art as a virtue. Two years earlier, following the release of *Taming The Tiger*, she had given an interview to *The Observer* in which she'd likened her work to Mozart, Blake and Picasso, opined that her lyrics "have a lot of symbolic depth, like the Bible" and declared that her music was so original that it "needs its own genre name". It would have come as little surprise in this vaunting self-assessment if she had also announced herself to be a singer who should be listed with Callas, Holiday and Piaf among the great female voices of the century. She didn't; but *Both Sides Now* was certainly in part conceived as an opportunity to force the world to consider her artistry as a vocalist, the one aspect of her genius that she felt had received insufficient recognition over her recording career.

The first hint of the project came in the summer of 1998, before *Taming The Tiger* had reached the stores. At the Day In The Garden festival held on the original Woodstock site, she performed "Comes Love", composed by Sam H Stept, with lyrics by Lew Brown and Charles Tobias, for the 1939 Broadway musical *Yokel Boy*.

By the time she joined Bob Dylan on a joint tour that autumn, she was confidently closing her set with "Comes Love". It was a bold statement of her desire to be taken seriously as a singer, for the song was famous for the versions recorded by Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald in the '50s, yet she pulled it off with an undeniable panache. "The song made the most of her natural voice, its bright cutting vowels and its new depths, a gift of age. It took her into a completely new context," remarked Ben Ratliff, reviewing her concert appearance at Madison Square Garden for the *The New York Times*.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"The arrangements are original and intelligent, and her voice has become a fabulously expressive instrument, particularly on Nat King Cole's 'Answer Me My Love', which thrills with the audacity of her phrasing."
NIGEL WILLIAMSON, UNCUT, APRIL 2000

When Dylan followed her on stage, he reportedly told her, "I'm going to sound like a hillbilly now." Did Mitchell's performance plant a seed that would lead to his own adventures into the Great American Songbook many years later? Only Dylan knows, but the favourable reception encouraged Mitchell in her ambition to make an entire album that showcased her talents as a singer rather than a songwriter.

As she selected the songs with Klein and began to arrange them into a narrative sequence, she realised that she could not have sung such songs with any degree of authentic sophistication in the "pure" voice of her younger, ingénue self, but that the vocal deterioration caused by age, experience and years of smoking had also brought with it a greater emotional depth and realism. In turn, this realisation led to the idea of incorporating some of her own songs into the narrative, on the basis that she could now bring an expression and nuance to them which she had only been able to hint at in the original versions.

It was a move fraught with danger, for artists re-recording their old hits is usually a fruitless exercise in disappointment. Yet there was one successful example that gave Mitchell encouragement. While she was planning the album that was to become *Both Sides Now*, Kris Kristofferson released *The Austin Sessions*, a set of wonderfully weather-beaten versions of his most famous material, including "Me And Bobby McGee", "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" and "Help Me Make It Through The Night" that sounded even better in his 63-year-old voice than when he'd first recorded them 30 years earlier. "I didn't really understand 'em when I wrote 'em," he said. "Now I'm beginning to get what they're about."

Mitchell endorsed the sentiment and decided to include "A Case Of You" to mark the halfway point in her song cycle, as love is beginning to turn bittersweet, and "Both Sides Now" (with the comma dropped from its original 1969 title) as its almost Zen-like philosophical conclusion.

Having selected the songs, in the summer of 1999, Mitchell, Klein and the American arranger and conductor Vince Mendoza flew to London to record the album at George Martin's Air Studios in Hampstead with a 90-piece orchestra, many of its members drawn from the London Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra was augmented by Herbie Hancock on piano, the jazz drummer Peter Erskine and bassist Chuck Berghofer, all of whom were already in London, while Wayne Shorter's sax and Mark Isham's trumpet would be over-dubbed on returning to Los Angeles.

The album opens with a swooning, velvety arrangement of "You're My Thrill", first recorded by Al Bowlly in 1934 but later made famous by Billie Holiday and sung by Mitchell with an audacious, jazzy phrasing packed with an intoxicated, erotic charge. "At Last" was first heard in the 1941 film *Sun Valley Serenade*, played by Glenn Miller's orchestra, although the song is probably more famous as the title track of Etta James' 1960 debut album. There's barely a hint of James' R'n'B syncopations here, though, as Mitchell channels the opulent big band swing of the original.

"Comes Love" is another vocal tour de force for her dusky contralto, with some cool jazz soloing from Shorter and Isham, before the arc of romance begins its descent with two songs associated with Nat King Cole in "You've Changed" and the anguished "Answer Me, My Love", a No 1 hit for Cole in 1954, both sung by Mitchell with smoky subtleties of tone and phrasing.

"A Case Of You", given a transformatively melancholic arrangement by Mendoza, offers the opportunity to measure just how much Mitchell's voice has altered. She can no longer hit the high notes and, as her biographer Brian Hinton noted, "The way she sings, which was once a whoop, is now a dying fall." Yet the loss is more than offset by the richer, deeper patina with which her voice has become coated. "Don't Go To Strangers" is lush and opulent, but you can hear her imploring soul aching. "Sometimes I'm Happy", a show tune from 1927 later covered by Holiday and Cole, is given a more jaunty arrangement, as Joni invests the words *"when I hate you it's because I love you"* with an emotional ambiguity that shows she knows her way around a lyric even when it's not her own.

The arrangement given Sinatra's "Don't Worry 'Bout Me" is smoochy, almost treacly, but Joni's vocal eschews oversize crooning and captures the song's resignation to perfection, while her unorthodox diction on "Stormy Weather" transforms an over-familiar standard by distilling its melodic essence into something more hauntingly stark than the famous versions by Lena Horne and Judy Garland.

The mood lifts on Rodgers and Hart's witty "I Wish I Was In Love Again" before she ends with the magnificent reinvention of her own title track, the brooding orchestration reflecting her meditative reinterpretation of the lyric. To anyone who grew up on the original 1969 recording of "Both Sides, Now", to play the two versions back-to-back is akin to seeing your life flash by in the blink of a song.

Although the album was only a modest commercial success, it was a critical triumph, winning two Grammy awards for

Both Sides Now was an opportunity to force the world to consider her artistry as a vocalist

At the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, February 2001

best pop vocal and best instrumental arrangement. Even those with little love for Mitchell as a songwriter were forced to acknowledge the potency of her "new" mature voice. Robert Christgau of *The Village Voice*, a longtime Mitchell detractor, begrudgingly admitted that she had proved herself "a major interpretive singer", while *NME* offered the backhanded compliment that "she sings like a singer, rather than warbling like a harpy, for the first time in her career". ●

TRACKMARKS BOTH SIDES NOW

1 You're My Thrill ★★★★
2 At Last ★★★
3 Comes Love ★★★★
4 You've Changed ★★★★
5 Answer Me, My Love ★★★
6 A Case Of You ★★★★
7 Don't Go To Strangers ★★★
8 Sometimes I'm Happy ★★★
9 Don't Worry 'Bout Me ★★★
10 Stormy Weather ★★★
11 I Wish I Were In Love Again ★★★
12 Both Sides Now ★★★★★

Label: Reprise
Produced by: Joni Mitchell, Larry Klein
Recorded: Air Studios, London
Personnel includes: Joni Mitchell (vocals), Mark Isham (trumpet), Wayne Shorter (sax), Herbie Hancock (piano), Peter Erskine (drums), Chuck Berghofer (double bass), orchestra conducted by Vince Mendoza
Highest chart position: UK 50; US 66

FRANK MICELOTTA/IMAGEDIRECT

TRAVELOGUE

RELEASED 19 NOVEMBER 2002

"We can only look behind from where we came". Joni Mitchell reinvents her own canon.

BY JOHN LEWIS

"THAT'S the big difference between the performing arts and being a painter," muses Joni Mitchell, on a between-song introduction on her 1974 live album *Miles Of Aisles*. "Nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint *Starry Night* again, man!' He painted it, that's it..."

She might be an accomplished painter, but Mitchell has never treated her musical compositions as completed paintings. Instead she sees them as living entities, subject to expansion and development. Live recordings show how she has always radically reassessed her works – arranging songs for different instruments, altering her guitar tunings, shifting tempos, keys and time signatures. By the time Mitchell stopped touring in 1983, she must have got sick of having to rework her own musical masterpieces, but it would seem that her 1998 US tour must have whetted her appetite to have one last tilt at her legacy.

The result is *Travelogue*, where Mitchell chooses 22 songs spanning 30 years – most of them relatively little-known album tracks – and orchestrates each of them grandly, slowing them down and delivering each in a hushed, poetic diction. It is usually seen as a companion piece to *Both Sides Now*, her 2000 album of jazz standards. Both were recorded at north London's Air Studios with a 70-piece orchestra arranged by Vince Mendoza, and both share some of the same personnel (including Wayne Shorter, a fixture of her albums since the late '70s, here using his soprano sax to pour liquid gold onto nearly every track). Both albums, it appears, were designed to fulfil her Warners contract – when the Warners imprint Reprise turned down *Travelogue*, Mitchell took it to Nonesuch, a more creative, artist-friendly wing of the Time Warner empire.

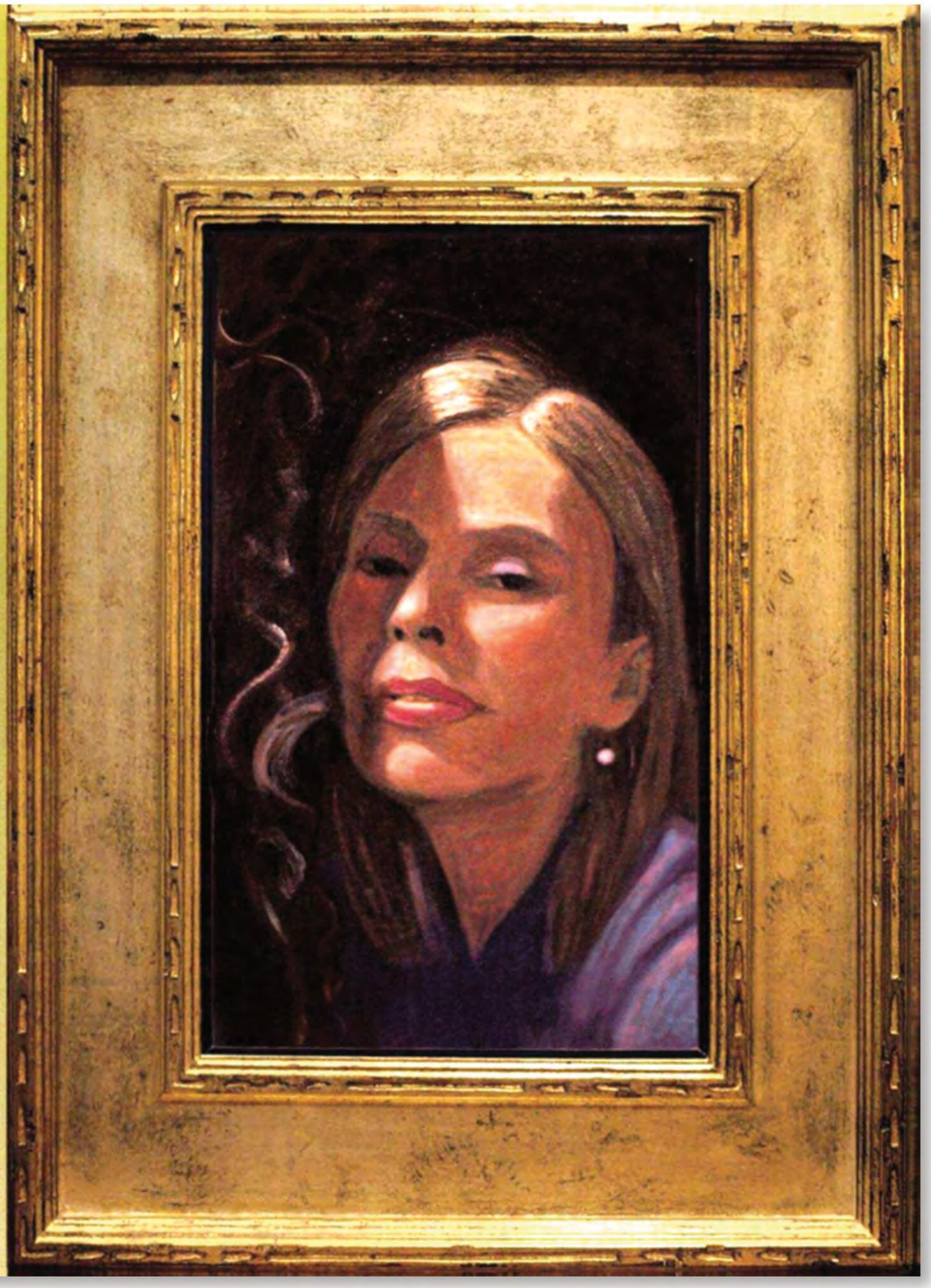
Ironically, the album of jazz standards sounds more like a classical album, while *Travelogue* is much closer to the exploratory spirit of jazz, tearing into its source material and radically rebuilding each song from the foundations up. The guitars that are usually an intrinsic part of Mitchell's songs have been completely excised, replaced by strings and woodwind that coo and growl, soothe and disrupt, solicit and rebuff.

The title of the album comes from a stray lyric ("*Your life becomes a travelogue of picture postcard charms*") from "Amelia", one of three tracks from 1976's *Hejira* that have been recast for orchestra. Addressed to the doomed pilot Amelia Earhart ("*A ghost of aviation, she was swallowed by the sky or by the sea/Like me she had a dream to fly*"), the original sounded almost airborne: all woozy pedal steel and heavenly vibraphone, flying, like Icarus, dangerously close to the sun. The *Travelogue* arrangement, though, takes us down to earth, as if Earhart had landed safely and was sharing incredible life stories with Mitchell.

"Amelia" is a perfect example of Mitchell's approach throughout *Travelogue*. Poetic imagery that might have got lost on the original song – the "*six white vapour trails*" of the six jet planes representing "*the strings of my guitar*" – are enunciated, sometimes arrhythmically, delivered like a declamatory poet, emphasised by gaps in the orchestration. And the ➤

Joni Mitchell

Travelogue



> Mitchell has always radically reassessed her works live, altering tunings, shifting tempos and keys

Homecoming queen: at the Art Gallery of Ontario to receive an award for helping to bring international attention to Canadian music, November 2002

TS/KEYSTONEUSA/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

orchestrations build upon ideas that were often only hinted at in the originals. It's something that seems to work particularly well on the tracks from *Hejira*, an album filled with spacious, modal, drumless explorations. The title track, "Hejira", works well as a slow-burning orchestral suite, with drummer Brian Blade providing a subtle propulsion. "Refuge Of The Roads" sees Joni's heavily chorused guitar recast on a harp and Kenny Wheeler's flugelhorn playing counterpoint to Mitchell's voice, while an Aaron Copland-ish string arrangement attempts to mirror the woozy fretless bass explorations of Jaco Pastorius.

With other classic albums, the orchestral treatment doesn't work quite as well. The two tracks from 1972's more minimal *For The Roses* – the title track and "Judgement Of The Moon And Stars" – have been so radically upholstered with bombastic Bernard Herrmann-style orchestrations that they have become virtually unrecognisable.

Travelogue was not a success. Not only was it the only Joni Mitchell album to not chart in the US, the UK, or even Canada, but the critical responses were generally negative. "The album sounds wrongly monumental," said *Rolling Stone*. "It does not swing or get loose... it translates Joni Mitchell as a scrupulously constructed puzzle." *The New York Times* was even more withering. "I personally have little use for the kind of bloated symphonic jazz heard here," wrote John Rockwell, dismissing its "soggy orchestral ditherings" and comparing Mitchell's voice unfavourably to the Manhattan drag queen John Kelly's infamous Joni impressions. Many other reviewers also criticised what they saw as a radically altered voice, a product of Mitchell's 50-year addiction to tobacco, which she has famously described as "a focusing drug". "A husky shadow of former featherlight glory," said Betty Clarke in *The Guardian*. "If the health warning isn't enough to put you off cigarettes, the nicotine-ravaged vocals of the once angelic, now gasping Joni Mitchell should."

The truth is that Mitchell's voice had been losing its upper register since the early '70s. By the time of her 1974 tour, many of the songs had already dropped by several semitones. The lowering in pitch is nowhere near as marked as with, say, Leonard Cohen – whose voice dropped by more than an octave in his final decades. Nor has it altered Joni's approach to her back catalogue as radically as Kate Bush, whose first few albums were so heavily based around that distinctive "falsetto" register that she refused to perform anything recorded earlier than 1985 on her 2015 comeback gigs.

Travelogue works best when drawing upon the jazz sensibilities of its personnel

Oddly, the very oldest song on *Travelogue*, "The Dawntreader", written in 1966, is taken in exactly the same key (D major) as it was on 1968's *Song To A Seagull*. The same is true of all three tracks from 1976's *Hejira*. There are only a few instances on *Travelogue* where the drop in pitch radically alters the whole mood of the song. When Mitchell originally recorded "Woodstock" with a Wurlitzer electric piano, on 1970's *Ladies Of The Canyon*, the crystalline purity of her voice seemed to feed into the song's sense of bright-eyed, hippie-era optimism. By 1974, live recordings show that she had already lowered the song from E flat minor down to B minor – as if the countercultural dream had already faded – while the *Travelogue* version takes us down to A minor, a whole flattened fifth lower than the original. It leads to a complete re-evaluation of the lyric: this hopeful paean to a reborn nation is now a lament to a lost age. The image of "*the bombers riding shotgun in the sky... turning into butterflies above our nation*" is less of a promise, more of a bad acid trip.

Likewise the original version of "The Last Time I Saw Richard", from 1971's *Blue*, was in G major; the live version recorded on 1974's *Miles Of Aisles* took it down to E major, while *Travelogue*'s version pitches us all the way down to B major – that's a massive downward leap of a whole sixth. On the original, when the self-pitying drunken ex tells us that he is "*hiding behind bottles in dark cafés/Only a dark cocoon before I get my gorgeous wings and fly away*", the Bukowski-bleak realism is undermined by Mitchell's light and playful delivery, all yodelling chirrups and warbles. Here the heaviness of the orchestral backing and the texture of Mitchell's voice – less a soprano piccolo, more a cello-like contralto – actually seems to suit the darkness of the song.

There are other tracks where songs are improved by recontextualisation. The aforementioned "Dawntreader" gets an upgrade – with an elegant, modernist arrangement that highlights the poignancy of the lyric far more than the original. "Otis And Marlena", a quizzical miniature on 1977's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, is turned into a suitably jerky baroque arrangement which rather suits the lyric, as it compares the elderly couples in Florida enjoying their mundane holidays, oblivious to the horrors of the world ("*while Muslims stick up Washington*").

Travelogue often works best when drawing upon the jazz sensibilities of its personnel. On 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast* album, "You Dream Flat Tires" is marred by some inappropriate cock-rock guitar and a guest vocal from Lionel Richie. Here it's slowed down and given a much more appropriate (and timeless) big-band swing treatment, complete with Nelson Riddle woodwind, muted horn blasts and a prowling Hammond organ from Billy Preston. "Be Cool", another track from *Wild Things Run Fast*, gets a similar big band setting, this time with a nod to Gil Evans, and with a tremendous piano freakout from Herbie Hancock. And "God Must Be A Boogie Man", originally a spartan, drumless duel between Joni and Jaco on 1979's *Mingus*, is here filled out for a full big band, with the strings filling in complex extended chords that were only hinted at in the original. Brian Blade's drums flutter, Shorter's improvisations are filled with sly references to the Charles Mingus canon, while Chuck Berghofer's double bass dances around the low end, imagining what Mingus himself might have brought to the track.

One thing common to all of these versions is that they are much, much slower than the originals. Mitchell sometimes lags behind the beat, like Sinatra, and often lingers on phrases that take her fancy, like a poet. Indeed the two actual settings of other people's poetic writing here – "Love" (from 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*, based on the popular King James Bible passage from the first book of Corinthians) and "Slouching Toward Bethlehem" (based on WB Yeats' "The Second Coming") – are perfectly suited to this environment. On the former, the *Sketches Of Spain*-style string backing draws attention to Joni's extraordinary melody, one that improvises over the chord changes as adventurously as Miles Davis might have done (it's fitting that Miles alumni Shorter is, of course, playing counterpoint on soprano). On 1991's *Night Ride Home*, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" paired the dystopian Yeats lyric ("*Things fall apart/The centre cannot hold*") with a rather bland, folksy backing. Here it's given a suitably dramatic soundtrack treatment, all thundering timpani, growling strings and ominous woodwind

As would befit an album that revisits old material, there is a strong element of nostalgia, and Mitchell seems to have deliberately chosen some lyrics that directly address the subject of ageing. "Just Like This Train" (from 1974's *Court And Spark*) sees the loose-limbed funk of The LA Express replaced by a slow, brooding, Carla Bley-inspired arrangement that turns the lyric into something that's less embittered and more resigned ("*I used to count lovers like railroad cars... Lately I don't count on nothing, I just let things slide*").

"Chinese Café/Unchained Melody", another track from 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*, starts with a remembrance of adolescence ("*We're middle class, we're middle-aged/We were wild in the old days, birth of rock'n'roll days*"), but here moves from the wistful into the darkly heartbreaking. The line about giving up her child for adoption ("*My child's a stranger/I bore her but I could not raise her*") takes on a new poignancy (she had not long been reunited with her daughter Kilauren Gibb, in a blaze of publicity), while the recurring musical quotation from the old Righteous Brothers single here serves like a Wagnerian leitmotif. Likewise "Cherokee Louise", from 1991's *Night Ride Home*, moves from uptempo melancholy of a teenage friendship ("*Ever since we turned 13 it's like a minefield*") and focuses instead on the mention of sexual abuse ("*She runs home to her foster dad/He opens up a zipper and yanks her to her knees*"). The strings and woodwind sound less like a pop orchestration and more like the underscore on a particularly harrowing documentary.

The most moving evocation of time, however, comes in the closing track, "The Circle Game". It was a light campfire ballad on 1970's *Ladies Of The Canyon*, and a singalong favourite at live concerts, but here it mutates into a deliciously orchestrated epic, elevated by Wayne Shorter's dancing soprano sax. Again, the 59-year-old Mitchell can linger on poignant lines ("*We're captive on the carousel of time*"; "*Cartwheels turn to car wheels through the town*"; "*We can only look behind from where we came*", and so on) that the 26-year-old seemed to matter-of-factly sing with gusto.

The album would have made a suitable headstone for a remarkable career, and as was becoming a habit, Mitchell's interviews in 2002 certainly suggested that it would be her last. "I'm quitting because the business made itself so repugnant to me," she said, describing the record industry as "a corrupt cesspool". But once again, there would be further twists to come.

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Ambitious and richly textured... Although there's no explicit valedictory aspect to this project, there's a melancholy sense of a whole era passing away in these reflective performances."
IAN MACDONALD, UNCUT, JANUARY 2003

TRACKMARKS TRAVELOGUE

1 Otis And Marlena ★★★
2 Amelia ★★★★
3 You Dream Flat Tires ★★★★
4 Love ★★★
5 Woodstock ★★★
6 Slouching Towards Bethlehem ★★★
7 Judgement Of The Moon And Stars (Ludwig's Tune) ★★
8 The Sire Of Sorrow (Job's Sad Song) ★★
9 For The Roses ★★
10 Trouble Child ★★★
11 God Must Be A Boogie Man ★★★★
12 Be Cool ★★★
13 Just Like This Train ★★★
14 Sex Kills ★★
15 Refuge Of The Roads ★★★
16 Hejira ★★★
17 Chinese Café ★★★
18 Cherokee Louise ★★★
19 The Dawntreader ★★★★
20 The Last Time I Saw Richard ★★★
21 Borderline ★★
22 The Circle Game ★★★★

Label: Nonesuch Records
Produced by: Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein
Recorded at: Air Studios, London; Ocean Way, Hollywood; Market Street, Venice, CA
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals), Larry Klein (bass guitar, musical direction), Vince Mendoza (conductor, orchestral arranger), Wayne Shorter (soprano saxophone), Herbie Hancock (piano), Billy Preston (Hammond B3 organ), Chuck Berghofer (double bass), Brian Blade (drums), Paulinho da Costa (percussion), Plas Johnson (tenor saxophone), Kenny Wheeler (flugelhorn), Gavyn Wright (orchestra leader), the Metro Voices Choir
Highest chart position: UK –; US –

SHINE

RELEASED 25 SEPTEMBER 2007

The last act. Bad dreams delivered with grace and beauty – and a valedictory ride in the Big Yellow Taxi. BY JASON ANDERSON

ARRIVING nine years after her last album of new material with *Taming The Tiger*, and five years after her second classics-gone-orchestral collection *Travelogue*, the appearance of *Shine* was a surprise to everyone – and possibly to Joni Mitchell most of all. It wasn't her style to go back on her word, having made it perfectly clear in 2002 that *Travelogue* would be her final recorded work. What's more, she had plenty of other ways she wanted to spend her seventh decade.

One was painting, a passion that had long outranked music anyway – as she said to an interviewer in 2000, "I have always thought of myself as a painter derailed by circumstance." Such was her productivity, she was able to present 60 new works in *Green Flag Song*, a collection that opened at Los Angeles' Lev Moross Gallery in November 2006 and was her first major exhibition since 2000.

Her second priority was the family she rediscovered when she met Kilauren Gibb, the daughter she'd given up for adoption when she was an art student in 1965. Like so many of Mitchell's relationships, this too would have its tensions and problems, but she revelled in her unexpected new role as a grandmother to Gibb's kids. Otherwise, Mitchell – content not to be tethered to any man since her divorce from Larry Klein in 1994 – divided her time between her homes in California and Vancouver, where she liked watching old movies on TV and, of course, smoking.

That should've been the end of Mitchell and the music business, especially since she'd fulfilled the last of her Warners contract with *Both Sides Now* and *Travelogue*. But in late 2006 she admitted to an *Ottawa Citizen* reporter that she was working on a new album, though she swore that no record company would ever make any more money off one of her releases. ("The record labels are criminally insane," she told *The Citizen*, "ugly, screwed up, crooked, uncreative, selfish.")

There was also word of a new dance work by the Alberta Ballet that would be set to nine Mitchell songs, including two new originals, an update of "Big Yellow Taxi" and an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's "If". Co-created by Mitchell and choreographer Jean Grand-Maître, *The Fiddle And The Drum* prominently featured her artwork and set and video design when it premiered in Calgary in February 2007.

Then in July came news that her new music would be made available by the same people who brought you the Venti Chai Tea Latte. Three years before, Starbucks had approached Mitchell about curating a compilation of favourite songs for the Artist's Choice series on the coffee chain's Hear Music imprint. Her subsequent immersion in other people's music – with songs by Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis and The New Radicals all making the cut for the collection that appeared in 2005 – got her gears going again. She'd also enjoyed delving into her own back catalogue for the mid-decade trio of compilations for those horrible record labels she used to contend ➤

The appearance of *Shine* was a surprise to everyone – and perhaps to Joni Mitchell most of all

with: *Dreamland* and *Songs Of A Prairie Girl* for Rhino/Warner and *The Beginning Of Survival* for Geffen.

As for new material, she claimed that one haiku was all she'd written in the previous 10 years. Then one evening in Vancouver, after watching seals swimming and a blue heron soaring over a perfect Pacific Ocean vista, she went to her piano and composed "One Night Last Summer", the beatific instrumental that became the opener for the album no-one expected. "There was such a sense of well-being and gratitude," she'd later say of the moment that the dam broke.

Despite the persistence of health issues (including her battle with the mysterious condition known as Morgellons disease), she somehow found the energy to prepare a dance production, an art exhibition and a new album all at once. "I'm doing the work of four 20-year-olds," the 63-year-old bragged to *The New York Times* in February 2007, back when she wasn't sure if the album would be called *Shine* or 'Strange Birds Of Appetite'. "I've never worked so hard in my life." She was particularly pleased to combine her music and artwork in a piece that demonstrated her love of dance, "something that's never really been publicly expressed". She'd long resented the opinion that her songs were no good for dancing.

There was also a fourth project. Produced for the Canadian network Bravo and partially financed by Mitchell, the television version of the ballet may have been her most satisfying achievement of all, since it "transcended stylistic problems that I've had to deal with". She didn't even mind not making her money back. (Sadly, the Alberta Ballet's plans for another ballet with Mitchell in 2014 were cancelled when she was unable to whittle her shortlist of 42 songs down to a number that could be feasibly performed in *The Fiddle And The Drum*'s more love themed follow-up.)

Yet for all the pride and excitement Mitchell exuded as these works entered the world, the content itself expressed a much darker perspective. Consisting of photographic images that Mitchell snapped of her malfunctioning TV and then digitally modified, artistically embellished and arranged into triptychs, *Green Flag Song* offered an unremittingly grim vision of America's post-9/11 war on terror along with many other haunting sights of suffering, degradation and destruction. She described the theme of the show as "war, revolution and torture" – sales for mugs and T-shirts in the gallery gift shop were presumably slow.

War was also the central fixation in *The Fiddle And The Drum*, which combined the dancers' sometimes militaristic movements with many of the same images and some of her angriest and most caustic songs of the previous two decades, including *Turbulent Indigo*'s "Sex Kills" and *Dog Eat Dog*'s "The Three Great Stimulants".

CRITICS' VERDICT

"There's an elegiac beauty to these tracks, Mitchell seeming ready to leave behind this angry, overcrowded world. But they fail to dramatise the predicament, and that's always been her strength as a writer."
STEPHEN TROUSSÉ, UNCUT, OCTOBER 2007

The lyrical content of the eight original new songs on *Shine* was often no rosier. After opening the album with the lilting, Debussy-like "One Week Last Summer", Mitchell gets straight down to business with "This Place", a lamentation for the devastation of the environment around her once-pristine West Coast retreats. "*Money makes the trees come down*", she sang in the lower-register warble familiar from the revised classics on *Travelogue* and *Both Sides Now*. "*It makes mountains into molehills, big money kicks the wide wide world around*".

Over the plaintive piano figure of "If I Had A Heart", she further decries the state of the world and the religiosity used to justify injustices and atrocities: "*Holy war, genocide, suicide, hate and cruelty*", she sings in the opening verse. "*How can this be holy? If I had a heart I'd cry*". She later complains how all this pain and horror "*makes you feel so feeble now*", though as much as her voice has changed owing to her tobacco habit and various laryngeal complaints, she doesn't sound it.

The machismo, ignorance and war-mongering ways of President Bush and his hawkish acolytes come under fire in "Strong And Wrong". Mitchell can't help but wonder how, even after thousands of years of civilisation, we humans are "*still worshipping our own ego*" and using "*shock and awe*" as its ultimate ethos. The number of things worthy of her ire increase once again on *Shine*'s title track, on which she targets everything from the "*evaporating seas*" and "*Frankenstein technologies*" to the Catholic Church and "*asshole*" drivers who run red lights while talking on their cellphones.

But as was not the case for so many of the songs Mitchell wrote after her political awakening with *Dog Eat Dog*, such outpourings of rage and rancour do not dispel the grace and beauty of their successors on *Shine*. Evidently continuing to compose on piano after her breakthrough with "One Week Last Summer", Mitchell's playing is emotive and enthralling throughout. With a thoughtful arrangement that supports her piano with horns, synthesisers, samples of strings and Greg Leisz's pedal steel, "Bad Dreams" sounds so exquisite that no amount of spite in the lyrics can detract from the song's sheer loveliness.

Just as well judged are the contributions by Larry Klein on bass and guitar, Bob Sheppard on soprano and alto sax, and drummer Brian Blade. The latter's subtle rhythmic underpinning for "If I Had A Heart" and the title track (which also includes some picking by James Taylor) confirms Blade's status as Mitchell's most sensitive and skilful musical collaborator in the final decade of her recording career.

The more she's able to depart from the dyspeptic perspective of *Shine*'s most political material, the better the songs get, too. Her love of those old movies on TV surfaces strongly on two standouts. Inspired by John Huston's 1964 film version of Tennessee Williams' play about a defrocked priest's misadventures on a bus trip in Mexico, "Night Of The Iguana" boasts the album's most startling and adventurous musical setting, Mitchell situating a wry sketch of Richard Burton's lead preacher character amid a murky, menacing swell of synths, a gloriously distorted guitar sound and a mild mariachi rhythm. Mitchell said she didn't remember the name of the movie for "Hana", but it's probably *White Banners*, a 1938 melodrama about a poor Irish woman who arrives in a Midwestern town and ingratiates herself with a family there while concealing the true reason for her arrival: the desire to see the son she was forced to give up for adoption years before. Though it's a plotline with obvious personal resonance for Mitchell, the song is airy and playful rather than pained, with Sheppard's sax and her vocal line darting in and around programmed beats.

Another work that resonated just as strongly for her was "If–", a poem that Rudyard Kipling originally wrote in 1895 as a tribute to Leander Starr Jameson, widely regarded as the epitome of civilised manhood and fortitude in colonial-era Britain. Though she loved many of the lines, she found some too macho, as you might expect of a poem written from a soldier's perspective. Introducing a "female principle" to Kipling's poetry, she changed the last part of "*If we can fill the journey/Of a minute/With 60 seconds' worth of distance run/Then you'll be a man, my son*" to "*With 60 seconds' worth of wonder and delight/Then the Earth is yours and everything that's in it*". Such amendments also enhance the flow of her playing and singing, resulting in a supple, jazzy treatment that's as entrancing as the most mellifluous sequences of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*.

The delightful rendition of "Big Yellow Taxi" is another respite from *Shine*'s heavy weather. Her pioneering eco-anthem became part of *The Fiddle And*

Evidently continuing to compose on piano, Mitchell's playing is emotive and enthralling throughout

Grand dame: at the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame Gala, Toronto, January 2007

The Drum when Grande-Maître told Mitchell that their ballet needed an encore. She chose to revisit "Big Yellow Taxi" and emphasise its element of humour. Starting with a doo-wop pattern that she liked, she lightens it further with a "very French-circus-sounding" arrangement complete with the wheezes of an accordion sample. Investing it with a joyful vocal performance, she was understandably pleased about how well it worked for the ballet ("It dances perfect without drums," she says). Even so, she believed the song's warning would fall on ears that were just as deaf as they'd been in 1970. "It's taken people a long time to see that we have to cut back on our electricity," she later wrote of the song, "but we won't."

Thankfully, the yellow-shirted dancers don't seem too concerned about humankind's imminent doom as they cavort for one last time in *The Fiddle And The Drum*. It's a telling moment when a serious-faced female dancer wearing a businessman's overcoat and toting a briefcase speed-walks back and forth through the company. Though she momentarily cows them, they don't allow her to spoil their fun. The dark and dour concerns on Joni's mind evidently lose the same battle with *Shine*'s counterforces of lightness, resulting in a more luminescent and pleasurable sort of swansong than anyone had a right to expect. ◐

TRACKMARKS SHINE

1. One Week Last Summer ★★★★
2. This Place ★★★
3. If I Had A Heart ★★★★
4. Hana ★★★★
5. Bad Dreams ★★★
6. Big Yellow Taxi (2007) ★★★★★
7. Night Of The Iguana ★★★★
8. Strong And Wrong ★★
9. Shine ★★★★★
10. If ★★★★★

Label: Hear Music
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Recorded at: Castle Oaks Productions, Calabasas, California
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, piano, guitar, various instrumentation), Bob Sheppard (alto and soprano sax), Greg Leisz (pedal steel), Brian Blade (drums), Larry Klein (bass, guitar), Paulinho Da Costa (percussion), James Taylor (guitar)
Highest chart position: UK 36; US 14

CANADIAN PRESS/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

"She's the best writer of us all..."

JONI MITCHELL'S 30 GREATEST SONGS

An all-star panel – including ROBERT PLANT, NICK MASON, LAURA MARLING, GRAHAM NASH, RADIOHEAD, FATHER JOHN MISTY, REM and many more – tackle the daunting task of identifying Joni Mitchell's greatest songs. On the way, her many friends and collaborators share secret memories of a singer-songwriter for the ages. "I'm a huge believer in Bob Dylan," argues DAVID CROSBY, "but Joni's a better musician. I don't think there's any question about it. She's certainly 10 times the singer Bob ever was, and as good a poet in her own way."

JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Contact sheet from a photo shoot for *Vogue* magazine, 1968

UNCUT 04|2015

"I DON'T THINK THERE'S a singer-songwriter in the world that hasn't been affected by Joni," David Crosby tells *Uncut*. "You want to be that good, we all did. We all do." As Crosby attests, in a career spanning almost half a century of music, Joni Mitchell has proved enduringly influential. During her artistic prime, she ploughed indefatigably through a wide variety of styles – from stark confessionals to jazz – in an astonishingly short period of time; her sophisticated work transcending the conventional songcraft of her many like-minded peers. Lately, there have been encouraging signs of activity. In 2014, she curated her own retrospective boxset, *Love Has Many Faces*, while in January 2015 she was unveiled as the face of a new Saint Laurent ad campaign.

On this occasion, we have chosen to look back at some of her greatest songs with help from a panel of her collaborators, friends and famous fans. Along the way, we hear tales involving picnics with Eric Clapton, hand-knitted sweaters, a birthday cake in the shape of a guitar, car journeys across Canada, late-night visits to bowling alleys and one eye-watering early morning encounter with the Flying Squad. One former paramour, we learn, admits he still sends her flowers every year for her birthday. But critically, one of her more recent collaborators shares with us a remarkable piece of fresh information regarding her current activities. "I think there's always a chance of new music," they reveal. "She was writing a few months ago..."

DOUG GRIFFIN/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES; NIALL REDDY; PIETER M VAN HATTEM

In Toronto, 1968

1969

1 | BOTH SIDES, NOW
CLOUDS, 1969

PHILIP SELWAY, RADIOHEAD: I think if you've got an interest in songwriting, Joni's one of the best reference points and guides in that respect. You can't go far wrong, can you? My favourite, because it happened twice, is "Both Sides, Now". It was on *Clouds* originally, and then it was the closing track on [*2000's*] *Both Sides Now*.

The first was in her acoustic phase, you know, *Clouds* and *Ladies Of The Canyon* and *Blue*, and it's such a strong song performed with just vocal and acoustic guitar. If a song can stand up in that way, and still have that power behind it, when there are no tricks to hide behind there... It either stands up in its own right at that point, or it sounds insipid. To me, on that version on *Clouds*, it sounds amazing, it's the perfect culmination to that record.

And then Joni returned to the song again when she did *Both Sides Now* in 2000, where she revisited some of her older songs. To me, she's almost like Ella Fitzgerald on that record and I found it really interesting, having "A Case Of You" from *Blue*, and also "Both Sides, Now", just comparing the two tracks; the younger Joni Mitchell, and then the wisdom and the depth that comes through in the version on *Both Sides Now*. When you hear the later version, you genuinely believe that she's really had the life that backs up the sentiment in the song. Her voice has dropped in pitch, and for some people that would be a huge worry, but actually she's used that to her advantage. It's like the before and after of songs, and it feels in some way like the two versions are bookends in her work.

1970

2 | MORNING MORGANTOWN
LADIES OF THE CANYON, 1970

MIKE HERON, THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND: The first time I heard "Morning Morgantown" was up in Scotland on late-night radio. I was fascinated. We'd actually met her through Joe Boyd. Joe had been involved with Dylan's appearance at the Newport Folk Festival. He had a long connection with those people. When we recorded *The 5,000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion*, he sent a copy of the album to the Newport committee. They were putting on a festival of new names on the block. They had Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. They booked us for it, too. That was November 1967. So when we met her, she hadn't yet made her first album. We sat around, me and Robin [*Williamson*] and Joni, and we swapped songs. She sang a few of her songs, and we sang a few of ours. She said she really liked what we were doing. I was flattered! Robin and I were into open tunings, so we were taken as much by her guitar-playing as her beautiful voice. I followed her career since. *Hejira* was her standout album really. I was listening to some songs earlier, and her piano-playing is remarkable. I don't know if anyone else was doing that kind of piano-playing at the time. It's not really Carole King, but it's not too jazzy at that point. Listen to *Ladies Of The Canyon*. Songs like "Rainy Night House", for instance – I think she set the template for that kind of piano-playing.

3 | WILLY
LADIES OF THE CANYON, 1970

GRAHAM NASH: "Willy", to this day, breaks my heart when I hear it. But her artistry is such that she takes a personal situation and turns it into a world situation. The relationship she's talking about can apply to anyone who's listening. That's the art of writing a great song, taking a simple thing and making astounding music from it.

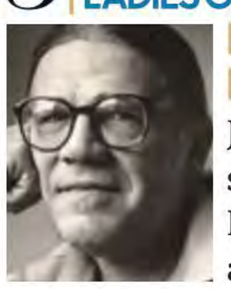
There are so many great songs for a start. I really believe that in 100 years from now, when people look back on the '60s, the great writers will be Bob Dylan, John and Paul, and Joni. I like "Amelia", I think it speaks directly to your heart, and there is not much in the way of production. She concentrates on the lyrics and the melodies of her music and she wants to find the shortest path from your brain to your heart. She consistently does that. If you listen to "For The Roses", for instance... my God! Listen to "A Case Of You": holy shit, it goes straight to your heart! I love "River" on *Blue*, too. She influenced me, as well. There's a couple of songs I've written in tunings that I learned from Joni, particularly "Lady Of The Island". I got tunings from Crosby, too, because he's a maniac that way. Hey, you know it's her birthday today? I've been sending her flowers on her birthday ever since the day we parted. Let's wish Joni a happy birthday today.

"Give us some respect": addressing a restive audience at the Isle Of Wight Festival, August 29, 1970

4 | RAINY NIGHT HOUSE
LADIES OF THE CANYON, 1970

JOHN GRANT: Choosing my favourite song is an easy one for me – on "Rainy Night House", I just felt completely understood. I feel like she is very special, to understate the issue greatly. The combination of the songwriting craft and the level of vocal ability mixed with virtuosity on the guitar, and the choices of sounds and backing vocals and everything, is overwhelming. I was working in a record shop in Denver, I think, when I was introduced to her. I didn't think it was for me and I didn't get into her until much later. I think the first record I heard of hers was *Blue*, in California. I had a boss at the record store and he told me I needed to get *Blue* and *Court And Spark*. I was trying to get my own band going and I wanted to be like Radiohead. Later, when I moved to New York, and was working on my first solo record, Tim Smith, the former singer of Midlake, gave me a bunch of Joni Mitchell albums. The first one was *Ladies Of The Canyon* and I listened to it while walking around Brooklyn, and on the subway, and just fell deeply, deeply in love with her.

5 | WOODSTOCK
LADIES OF THE CANYON, 1970



HENRY DILTZ, PHOTOGRAPHER: I first met Joni at Mama Cass's house, when she had a picnic for Eric Clapton. He'd come to town with Cream and didn't know anybody, so she invited him to meet some friends. One of them was David Crosby and he brought this new girl with him he'd found in Florida and flown to LA to record her first record. We were all sitting out under the trees and Joni sat there and played the whole album. Eric was spellbound. He was staring at her fingers, transfixed by her tunings. I would see Joni around at friends' houses for dinner, or the Troubadour. One day, we went round her house down the hill from me on Lookout Mountain Avenue. She was leaning out of the window, with her elbows on the sill, relaxed, talking to my partner, Gary Burden, which allowed me to shoot about 50 pictures of her over 10 minutes or so. But "Woodstock" is a special song to me, partly because I was Michael Lang's photographer at Woodstock. In all, I spent two-and-a-half weeks at Woodstock, photographing the building of the stage onwards, to the festival itself. Joni couldn't make it, of course, and was stuck in her hotel room. So she wrote the song; this idyllic metaphor for the concert rather than the reality.

> *"'Willy', to this day, breaks my heart when I hear it..."*
>
> GRAHAM NASH

6 | THE CIRCLE GAME
LADIES OF THE CANYON, 1970

LINDA PERHACS: So many folk singers were sticking with a pattern from the past, and men had more opportunity at that time to get contracts than women – we forget this. So when Joni Mitchell came aboard she broke all those rules. One thing that opened the door for me was that Joni was doing so well on Warners that Universal wanted somebody in that kind of position on their label. So do I owe her a thank you? We all owe her a thank you!

There was Joan Baez, Judy Collins and a few others, but they were following more traditional lines. Joni just came right out front and said, "I'm gonna do it my way." She was so doggone good that you couldn't argue with her. I love everything she does. I love the early albums, because those were the ones I was first familiar with and first struck by. Songs like "The Circle Game". People who create are out there to open new avenues, and Joni Mitchell is definitely one of the strongest we had last century. I never met her – I was in Topanga Canyon, and she was more in her community of people in Laurel Canyon, a lovely little haven, but very close to the city. Not everybody may agree, but I never feel a personality that strong doing something so well is a first-timer at it, there's a history as a soul. ➤

Recording with James Taylor for Carole King's *Tapestry*, 1971

1971

7 | CAREY
BLUE, 1971

MATTHEW E WHITE: "Carey" is like a journey. It's so personal, so intimate, so free, so independent – and very cleverly produced. There's this really unique way that '70s guys produce records, where there doesn't seem like a lot of production going on, there doesn't seem like there's a lot of decisions being made, and it's because they were so good at making records. But Joni is such an incredible singer – no-one can sing like that; you can try but you can't. "Carey" has such a cool tempo. It's kind of an 'up' song when so much of that record is a 'down'. I just feel like it captured a moment of her life that was so fresh, and so fun. It's funny, because *Blue* is so stereotypical – it's a famous album or whatever, but it's famous for a reason. When I was on tour last, all I listened to was *Blue* and Kendrick Lamar's record *Good Kid, Maad City*. I liked listening to them back to back. They represent complete opposites on the musical spectrum in a lot of ways, but they're both so beautiful and well made and well crafted. But "Carey", I probably play this one throughout my house and in my car more than anyone else. It's really groovy and minimal in a lot of cool ways. It gives you so much with so little.

8 | BLUE
BLUE, 1971

VASHTI BUNYAN: The first time I heard Joni play, I recall a borrowed cottage in the Lake District – winter 1968. The room with the TV in it had no heating. Wrapped in coat, jumpers and scarves, I watched a speckly black-and-white image of a young woman at a piano – playing a song that made me forget being cold. I was overcome with admiration for her being able to play and sing alone in front of an audience. I don't remember the song – I only know it was as heartbreakingly beautiful as she was and that I have carried that image with me always, like an old photograph. And so now I choose a piano-led song of hers from 1970 – which was probably when I next heard her. "Blue"... how well it conveys to me an era – and an LA canyon culture – one that I didn't ever know, but which I feel I can hear so clear through the words of this song. She moved on into jazzy styles I had less feeling for at the time, which only goes to underline the courage with which she left her – in her label's opinion – more commercial songs behind. She never gave up doing what she wanted to do. But when I hear her voice – from whichever decade – it is with an immediate recognition. Many may try to imitate her, but what is the point? It seems to me that to try to sound like someone else is no real compliment, but a waste of a musical talent that could be going its own way. Own way – that would be much more like her.

> *"Joni managed through personal experiences to embody the pulse of the times"*
>
> LEE RANALDO

9 | CALIFORNIA
BLUE, 1971

LEE RANALDO, SONIC YOUTH: Joni managed through her personal experiences to embody the pulse of the times in so many ways. "California" is one of those songs which I always come back to. She's not quite wearing the pearls and perms that would come with the *Court And Spark* era, but it's certainly got this slightly jet-set vibe – there's a verse set in Paris, one on the Greek Islands, and one in Spain. But deep within all this travelling is this unsettling sadness about the war and the fact that on those fronts nothing is really changing – she's travelling around the world, but the war is the thing that's on her mind, and going back to her adopted home in California. There's something about the lyrics to this one – it sends chills up me. It's not saying anything very directly, but it says so much in such economical means.

When Sonic Youth was working on *Daydream Nation*, I wrote "Hey Joni". It stemmed from an odd comment that Thurston [*Moore*] made – he mentioned "Hey Joe" while we were working on the song, and it gave me the inspiration to flip it around. Although the song wasn't really about her, I always thought by putting her name in the title I was professing my deep love for her music.

I don't think she was a touchstone for the group, tuning-wise, but definitely something about those rich modal tunings she was using left a big impression on me. Back then, it was really hard to sit down and figure out what her tunings were – now you can look on the internet. So what Joni was doing was very mysterious, it's hard to figure out. I wonder if there are any Sonic Youth tunings that actually overlap with Joni's?

10 | RIVER
BLUE, 1971

LINDA THOMPSON: This is a beautiful, dark song, with an amazing lyric and melody. I particularly love that minor-key "Jingle Bells" bit at the top and bottom of the song. That lyric, *"I wish I had a river I could skate away on..."* Who says that? People often use rivers in a lyric, and water in general, for washing them clean, drowning in and even walking on. But skating away on... It's a most evocative picture.

I remember exactly where I was when I heard that song and the record *Blue*. I was living at the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles, with my darling friend Joe Boyd. He was head of film music for Warner Brothers then. He came home once with a test pressing of *Blue*. I remember being aghast with admiration and envy.

I met Joni once. Around *Blue*, she was managed by Peter Asher, and I worked for Peter for a while. She was with James Taylor at the time, and he often came by the office. She came once with one of her paintings, and a sweater she had knitted, and asked me to give them to James. Next time he came by, I gave them to him and relayed Joni's message. I guess they were on the rocks, because he told me he didn't want them. I'm upset to this day that I didn't take both items home. They probably got thrown away!

11 | A CASE OF YOU
BLUE, 1971

JIMMY WEBB: I saw Joni the first time at the Troubadour in 1967. She looked like an angel and out of her mouth came *cinéma vérité*: real life, real pain, real suffering and sometimes joy and excitement. She found this voice to reveal things that were not previously thought of as fitting, proper or even interesting subjects for songs. That got me thinking about my own songwriting. I was privileged to be round her a lot and heard many songs before they were finished. I heard the whole of the *For The Roses* album when I was staying in London making my *Land's End* album and she ➤

spent time with me. I had the chance to look over her shoulder and witness her methodology. She would take out her big Martin guitar and start playing these wildly interesting chords. The form of the song was constantly changing, she'd take out her notebook and have multiple versions completely written out. There was a tremendous amount of preparation. I love "A Case Of You". It's a revelation. I wish I could have written the lyrics to that song. There's 10,000 ways to tell somebody you love them and that song is one of them. The metaphor is perfect and it has a lovely air and a beautiful melody. That's my kind of stuff. She's an interesting combination of world-weary and totally innocent. I loved her and love her still.

1972

12 | URGE FOR GOING
B-SIDE OF "YOU TURN ME ON, I'M A RADIO", 1972

MARK LANEGAN: "Urge For Going" has got that kind of wistful, sad thing that I'm always drawn to. It's so devastatingly great, and it's one of my favourite songs. It was one of those things I heard about through other people or read about. I remember seeing her in *Creem* magazine in the '70s, but I didn't actually get to see her in concert until, I think, the late '90s, so it took many, many years between when I first heard and became a fan and actually saw her perform. And it was a good one, too. She was on tour with Bob Dylan and Van Morrison. What I remember most about her set was how very charming she was on stage – and really funny. Yeah, man. That was some tour...

13 | COLD BLUE STEEL AND SWEET FIRE
FOR THE ROSES, 1972

JOE BOYD: We met at the Newport Folk Festival in '67. She and The Incredible String Band were both on the bill on the Sunday afternoon. There was an evening of just drinking and smoking dope and sitting under a tree in the balmy Rhode Island summer and listening to Joni and Mike [*Heron*] and Robin [*Williamson*] swap songs for about three hours. She didn't have a record deal, but George Hamilton IV had a hit with "Urge For Going". She wanted to sort out a European publishing deal, so she came to London to stay. I was sharing a flat with a guy who was kind of involved in the underground, and the morning after she arrived we were all woken up by the Flying Squad. Joni was pushed up against a wall, frisked and threatened by the British bobbies in plain clothes. Anyway, I introduced her to Essex Music, and while she was here, The Incredible String Band were playing at the Speakeasy. She came and did a short set at the beginning of their show, and blew everybody away. Then she went back to America, and the rest is history. I guess my favourite song is "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire". The lyrics look like they're about heroin. That was a period where there was an awful lot of drugs in Laurel Canyon. There's lines like, *"Hollow gray fire escape thief/Looking for sweet fire, shadow of lady release"*. But one of the most amazing lines, it's so brilliant, is *"Do you want to contact somebody first?/Leave someone a letter/You can come now, or you can come later"*. It's so bureaucratic, it's almost like signing you into the prison after you've been arrested, you know? She's playing guitar with James Burton on that track. There's this weird swing, it's a really complex rhythm track. And the use of the saxophone foreshadows things that she got into later on, doing much more musically complex material.

14 | FOR THE ROSES
FOR THE ROSES, 1972

JEAN GRAND-MAÎTRE (ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, ALBERTA BALLET): When we came together to talk about the ballet, *The Fiddle And The Drum*, it was during the Iraq invasion and she was really pissed off about it, and about Earth's ecological destruction. So a lot of the songs we selected were dark, but "For The Roses" is a much more poetic song. The orchestral version in the ballet is deeply melancholic. It's about the plight of the artist. When we invited her to create a ballet, we thought it was a long shot, but I didn't know that she loves dance. I think she enjoyed it because it made her do something new, and that's what she's always wanted. I call her the Stanley Kubrick of music, because she's made a masterpiece in every genre, just like he did. I was at her birthday party in LA last year, and she's got more energy than ever. Her mind never stops, it's a locomotive of thinking and feeling. She questions herself, and doubts herself, and criticises herself. I think there's always a chance of new music. She was writing a few months ago – but there was the event at the Hammer Museum in LA, so I think she put that on hold to finish the *Love Has Many Faces* boxset. The ideas are always there. As a Canadian, I can say she's one of the most important artists that our country has ever produced.

> *"She looked like an angel and out of her mouth came real life, real pain..."*
>
> JIMMY WEBB

1974

15 | HELP ME
COURT AND SPARK, 1974

MIKE MILLS, REM: As with most people, your favourite songs are the ones which were played while things were happening in your life, and this came around at an interesting period in my life. "Help Me" was a song that always seemed magical and beautiful, and it showed what you could do that was non-traditional and yet very melodic and effective. When I heard this it must have been '74, so I would have been 15 or 16 – I was just discovering heartache, so the song made a lot of sense to me! Some of *Court And Spark* was kinda baroque, and that's what I enjoyed, the songs could be non-traditional but melodic, catchy and hummable. I know more about her singles than I do about her deeper tracks, but this was one song which impressed me with how you could have a radio hit with something that was complicated – complicated arrangements, songs and unusual melodies, and yet they were able to be big hits on the radio. She, like REM I think, didn't care about having hits. She made the songs she wanted to make and if radio was going to move in her direction then I think she was fine with that, but I don't think she was out for hit singles.

16 | SAME SITUATION
COURT AND SPARK, 1974

LAURA MARLING: My dad gave me *Court And Spark* when I was 11 or 12, along with a few others. He really liked this song, apart from anything because the melodies were so strange. He bought me a guitar and I remember sitting down in a room with him trying to learn a few songs, one of which was "Same Situation". The record had such an important effect on me. It's sort of a concept album in that it has a thread that follows all the way through and all of the songs connect into one, which is pretty rad for that era. I don't know what it is about that song, it hit me the most. It's funny, I feel that Joni Mitchell resonates in a special way with women; not exclusively, of course, but that song is so perceptive in the way it articulates specific thoughts and feelings.

17 | FREE MAN IN PARIS
COURT AND SPARK, 1974

FATHER JOHN MISTY: I have a really distinct memory of being in high school, driving around late at night around Christmas, and the modern rock station played "River". That knocked me off my ass. Then, when I was about 20, I moved to Seattle and started listening to *Blue* incessantly. But "Free Man In Paris", I was with someone for three years who managed the band [*Fleet Foxes*]. We would listen to that song around the house and she would sing it. It was so specific, like it was tailor-made for this person that I loved at this point in my life. I was watching her life get overtaken by the work. So on some level, I relate to the song. You start out as a songwriter and then all of a sudden you feel like you're running a small business. You have employees and you've got the merchandise and people are asking you about budgets. So there's something about that song's portrayal of the black hole that a career in

STEVE GULLICK; ANNE-MARIE BRISCOMBE

Supporting Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young at Wembley Stadium, London, September 14, 1974

music can become. The irony is, you get into this thing for freedom and creative expression, live this lofty, spiritual existence, but before you know it, you're filling out Excel spreadsheets. But Joni is the real deal, and "Free Man In Paris" is a very special song.

18 | BIG YELLOW TAXI
MILES OF AISLES, 1974

MAX BENNETT, BASSIST, LA EXPRESS: The band had just started. We were working at the Baked Potato, the jazz club, and she came in. She went crazy for the band and asked if we would like to play on a couple of songs on her upcoming album. That was *Court And Spark*. Then we went on tour with her.

We recorded *Miles Of Aisles* at the Universal Amphitheatre. It was open air, and chilly at night, so we were on stage freezing every night for a week while they were recording us. The version of "Big Yellow Taxi" from *Miles Of Aisles* was fun to play live; we just kept adding little things to it while we were on the road. Things are never the same once you do the album and then you go on the road, you alter songs as you go along, and that tune became a lot of fun to play. Being in the studio with Joni was very different to being on stage. The studio is pretty much business; friendly business, though, because she respected the band. We were all professional jazz musicians and because she would skip beats or whatever she did to make a song unique, that never bothered us. She said once, the guys in CSNY couldn't get it because they were a different type of musician.

When we were on the road, we hung out a lot together. Because we all liked to bowl, her manager would go to a bowling alley in the city where we were playing and ask them to keep it open so we could go bowling after the concert. Of all the people I've gone on the road with – Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee – she was definitely the best.

1975

19 | THE JUNGLE LINE
THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS, 1975

AL STEWART: I went to see the first concert she ever gave in England, a little showcase put on by the record company. There were about 20 people there. Then, a little later, I played the Royal Festival Hall. Fairport Convention were the headliners and Joni was the special guest; that would have been 1968. About 10 years later, I played at a benefit concert for an American charity called Bread & Roses run by Mimi Fariña, Joan Baez's sister. Joni was on that bill too, so our paths keep crossing.

I think a lot of her style comes from those guitar tunings; because she had an illness in her youth, she had to adapt to play the guitar in her own style. Everyone around the folk scene played D-A-D-G-A-D, but not Joni. "The Jungle Line", though, is quite a departure. It's a very odd chord construction; very unorthodox. I don't even think there's any rhythm guitar on it. *"Rousseau walks on trumpet paths/Safaris to the heart of all that jazz..."* She is very literate. She uses words that pretty much no-one else would, but she uses them more in an emotional way than an intellectual way. So I'm always interested in what she does with the language, to conjure up a fresh take on something which otherwise would be quite run of the mill.

20 | DON'T INTERRUPT THE SORROW
THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS, 1975

ROBBEN FORD, GUITARIST, LA EXPRESS: The song that always comes to mind first, it's not obvious I don't think. But it is "Don't Interrupt The Sorrow", which I believe is the fourth tune on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. It doesn't really have a dynamic range – it doesn't go higher, it doesn't go lower, like other things might do. But Joni has this groove that just keeps on going, rather than things getting louder she just adds. That's how tunes are done in classical music. It's not about playing louder, you just add more instruments and it naturally gets louder. There's that quality to the recording that is done by layering it. It's also got this slinky feel to it! So it has this very interesting journey. I play Dobro guitar on it, something kinda funky, kinda bluesy, and Larry Carlton is playing this very fluid electric guitar that comes in and out. It has an incredible lyric too. It's just a great, unusual piece of music and I'm very proud to have been on it. It's my favourite Joni Mitchell song and I played on it!

1976

21 | COYOTE
HEJIRA, 1976

SIMON NICOL, FAIRPORT CONVENTION: I can never get tired of "Coyote". There's a particularly good live version, from the Greek Theatre in 1979. It has her stamp; that unusual degree of storytelling going on during that period, and she tells the story in quite a tongue-twisting way. The delivery is more energetic than reflective. It sounds like she's having a ball, especially when she's with Jaco and the others in the band from that period.

I met her a couple of times. She was stepping out with Joe Boyd when he first signed us. This was ➤

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES, PIPER FERGUSON, CLIVE LANE

1967 or '68, and she found herself in London to talk publishing with somebody and she was staying with Joe for a week or so. He invited us round to meet her one afternoon. I was 16 or 17 and she was this sophisticated super hippie, with this North American aura about her. I recall she had a very smart Martin D28 guitar. We sat in the room and she sang about half a dozen songs. That's where we got "Eastern Rain" and "Chelsea Morning" and the other songs of hers that are on our early albums. Then the next time I saw her was 1970 or '71. She'd parted company with Joe by then, but somehow we ended up in her house in Laurel Canyon in the afternoon, having tea. It wasn't going to be builders; it was Earl Grey drunk in little Chinese tea cups, the ones without handles. We sat on the deck in her lovely garden, overlooking the canyon. That was jolly.

22 | HEJIRA

HEJIRA, 1976

JONATHAN WILSON: I was a young jazz fanatic when I heard the *Mingus* album and the recordings she'd made with Jaco Pastorius. Yet when I listen back to "Hejira", the way she melts jazz into her thing seems so effortless. Her sensibilities and her ethereal qualities speak to me, the harmonic depth and chords that she achieved being self-taught is staggering. But on "Hejira", the way she cross-pollinates between styles is very affecting. I always think about when I was in my studio with David Crosby, and just the reverence with which David – or Graham [*Nash*], Jackson [*Browne*] or whoever – talk about her. David told me about when he first heard her, and how she blew his mind and he was so excited to bring her back to town to share this stupendous talent, and he's like a proud parent. You know, I ended up at her 70th birthday party. It was completely random. We were downstairs at this Hollywood club and upstairs had a VIP space. I thought I'd pop up and see what was going on. I sneaked my way up and Joni was sitting there. It was her birthday party. They had a beautiful cake in the shape of a Martin guitar. I spoke to her briefly and wished her a happy birthday.

23 | SONG FOR SHARON

HEJIRA, 1976

JOHN MULVEY, *UNCUT* EDITOR 2016–18: When I listen to *Hejira*, I don't often notice the music that much. The jazz humidity, Mitchell's remorseless journey away from folk and the expectations of her fans; these details seem at best incidental, at times irrelevant. What I hear are the words, great measured cascades of them, and the way Joni Mitchell delivers them as a stream of consciousness that never loses its meticulous poetic poise.

Hejira works best as a single piece, a bittersweet travelogue of sorts. But its pleasures are most satisfyingly exemplified by "Song For Sharon", where bassist Max Bennett and drummer John Guerin empathetically track Mitchell's voice and guitar for the best part of nine minutes. Such is the focus on the lyrics that the rhythm seems to be set by her ruminations, line by line.

"Song For Sharon" is about the conflicting attractions of rootless freedom and romance, about the divergent paths of Mitchell and a friend from childhood, about the consolations that music, at least occasionally, can offer. Ideas and stories rear up and evaporate – a trip to Staten Island to buy a mandolin is memorably hijacked by *"the long white dress of love on a storefront mannequin"* – but while nothing is resolved, I can think of few songs that present more effectively the contradictory impulses of a great artist. One moment, Mitchell is keen to embrace *"a wide wide world of noble causes/And lovely landscapes to discover"*. The next, she's frankly admitting, *"All I really want to do right now/Is find another lover"*.

And always, unerringly, she has the precise words for imprecise emotions. After a friend kills herself, and her friends call up, *"all emotions and abstractions"*, Mitchell nails the vagaries of the human condition with, I think, one of my favourite couplets in any song. *"It seems we all live so close to that line"*, she sings, as if the perfect words just materialised in her head, *"And so far from satisfaction..."*

> *"She plays by ear... she makes up colours to explain what she's feeling"*
>
> ROGER McGUINN

1977

24 | DREAMLAND

DON JUAN'S RECKLESS DAUGHTER, 1977

ROGER McGUINN: I covered "Dreamland" on my *Cardiff Rose* album. I was riding on the tour bus with Joni on the Rolling Thunder Revue. Sitting next to her, she had a little composition book and she was filling it up with new songs, and I was getting ready to record *Cardiff Rose*. I didn't have enough songs to complete it, so I turned to Joni and asked her if she had any spare. She said, "Well, McGuinn, I got this one song you might be able to use, but there's a line in it I'm not sure about." I said, "Yeah, what's that?" She said, *"I wrapped a flag around me like a Dorothy Lamour sarong"*... I said, "Well... I can work with that!" [*laughs*] So I changed it to *"Errol Flynn sarong"*. She must have had 25 or 30 songs in there, and then she lost the book! I don't know if she ever recovered it, somehow it slipped out of her possession. I guess she remembered some of them, but I recall she was quite devastated at losing it.

On my version, I was trying to emulate some of Joni's phrasing, on the vocals. And I remember she came to the studio, and she said, "Well, it sounds pretty good, but you need to work on the vocal", and I said "Well, no, no, that's the way I wanted it." I don't think she appreciated my version. It was so different from hers. Joni's not really a technician of music. She plays by ear, she makes up her own theory, and makes up colours and things to explain what she's feeling, what she's trying to express with her music. I remember being at Leonard Cohen's house for dinner with her, and she and Leonard were talking about this kind of language that they'd developed, about music in terms of colours, which was a very interesting conversation.

1982

25 | CHINESE CAFÉ / UNCHAINED MELODY

WILD THINGS RUN FAST, 1982

LARRY KLEIN, BASS: I was called to play on some sessions that ended up becoming *Wild Things Run Fast*. I was 25, and she was unlike any woman that I have ever been around or worked with. I was completely impressed with her. In the studio, she was very open and adventurous and curious and completely game for trying new ways of approaching music. We became an item and she wrote "Chinese Café"/"Unchained Melody" somewhat early on in our relationship. She was travelling across Canada by car, from Calgary to Saskatoon, a trip we did several times ourselves together, but this particular time she was travelling by herself. There is something in the simplicity of the song and its sentiment that is extraordinarily touching to me. It has this wistful quality to it, of someone looking out at the world changing. The hook of the chorus is, *"Nothing lasts for long"*. She's using that line in relation to human experience but also the ecology of the planet. Then she interlocks it with "Unchained Melody", and the way in which she undulates between her new poem and snatches of that old song is amazing to me. When we worked on that together, it had this incredible power to make me cry, or at least just make emotions well up inside of me. To this day, when I listen to the recording that we made of it, it has the same quality for me. There's just something so evocative about it and sad. But sad in a bittersweet way, you know, in the way that melancholy is kind of sweet.

26 | MY SECRET PLACE

CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM, 1988

NICK MASON: This came from the period when she was married to Larry Klein. I've always loved the sound of her voice, right from when we listened to her first album, and she's one of those artists where I have virtually all her albums and so it's very hard to find a single song or moment that encapsulates it all. I would never get tired of hearing a song like "Chelsea Morning" or "Big Yellow Taxi" for instance, but I love some of the work she's done on *Shine* just as much as any on her earlier albums. Part of what I love about her music is how she's changed, that's the interesting thing. I love the things that have remained constant – the quality of the singing, the interpretation of the songs – but the music itself has also become more sophisticated, especially

MINCHIN, HARRY BORDEN

At the time of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, October 17, 1975

after she began to work with Larry Klein. He brought a real jazz influence to her music that I loved. You can hear that change on the two versions of "Both Sides, Now" [*from Clouds and Both Sides Now*]. If I had to pick one of the songs from the albums he produced, it would be "My Secret Place" from *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* because she's doing duets with various guest artists and that one was with Peter Gabriel, so it's a two-for-one as I'm such a fan of Peter, too. Their voices just combined perfectly.

1991

27 | COME IN FROM THE COLD

NIGHT RIDE HOME, 1991

MICHAEL BONNER, EDITOR: "The '80s were very hard on me," Mitchell confessed to Texas radio station KGSR-FM in 1998. "Everybody that could, robbed me in the greedy '80s." Indeed, *Night Ride Home* – her first album in the '90s – marked a significant return for Mitchell. The songs privileged her old jazz guitar phrasings, discreetly accompanied by co-producer Larry Klein's sensitive bass-playing. A highlight among several graceful reminiscences that feature on the album, "Come In From The Cold" finds Mitchell chronicling a narrator's sadness – in relationships, youthful ambitions that never came to fruition, the failings of her generation, the ageing process. Its layers of nostalgic ruminations create a pervasive sense of loneliness and isolation: *"I am not some commission/Like a statue in a park/I am flesh and blood and vision/I am howling in the dark"*.

1996

28 | MAN FROM MARS

GRACE OF MY HEART OST, 1996/ TAMING THE TIGER, 1998

STEPHEN TROUSSÉ, UNCUT CONTRIBUTOR: When ex-husband Larry Klein approached Joni in 1995 to contribute a song (maybe something in the vein of "For The Roses"?) to the soundtrack he was curating for Allison Anders' Brill Building movie *à clef*, *Grace Of My Heart*, she turned him down flat. What was she – some kind of short-order hack? She reconsidered, so the story goes, when her favourite cat, Nietzsche, went missing for over a fortnight and the grief hurt her into writing a song that, purely coincidentally, was perfect for the film (where it was sung by Kristen Vigard). As alibis go, it's up there with *Blood On The Tracks* being about Chekhov. When she finally released "Man From Mars" herself on 1998's *Taming The Tiger*, the song was comfortably declawed and domesticated, arranged on a plump bed of new age synth and fretless bass. But check out the original piano version with Joni's demo vocal, accidentally released on first pressings of the soundtrack album and swiftly deleted to be replaced by the cast recording, but now easily findable on YouTube, for one of the rawest reckonings of loss (*"There is no centre to my life now/No grace in my heart"*) in the entire Mitchell songbook.

2000

29 | A CASE OF YOU

BOTH SIDES NOW, 2000

GUY GARVEY, ELBOW: This is the orchestral version of "A Case Of You" from *Both Sides Now*. The song itself is very nostalgic; she was talking about past love, and it's fairly melancholy. To hear her sing it as an old lady with a smoky old vocal and a big lush orchestra behind her, it's just really beautiful. The first time you hear it is unbeatable, especially if you don't know what you're listening to, which was the case when I heard it. My sister Becky has always made me compilations, especially when the band is going on tour. Becky said, "I want to be with you when you hear the first track on this compilation." She was working at Granada TV, and I went to meet her in the canteen. There was a chap from *Coronation Street* at the next table, I can't remember his name. I just remember thinking, 'I wish he'd shut up, I can't hear this.' I recognised the chords when the strings picked up and when her voice came in with its age and its richness and its experience and its longing and its heartbreak, there I am, sat blubbing next to whatever-his-name from *Coronation Street*. It's just really beautiful. You can hear her influence in "Starlings" or "The Bones In You". Her phrasing and her lines are organic, and it twists and it dives and it jumps around, and that's why it's so beautiful. It's as natural as birds in the sky. ➤

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW WHITTON

4 + Joni: Wembley Stadium, 1974

2002

30 | AMELIA
TRAVELOGUE, 2002

ROBERT PLANT: On *Travelogue*, there's a great version of "Amelia". I love that orchestral version. If I ever commissioned anybody to look at me for 40 years and then write a song about me, it would be that song, it's all encapsulated there. What happened on *Travelogue* is she revisited a lot of her old songs, but the emotive quality of the voice has changed – as has mine. The voice has to change or you give up, so you have to keep using it. There's a lot of muscle involved, but also a lot of it is in the mind, gaining confidence. With "Amelia", I love the drama and the thought in the orchestration; it's a beautiful contrast to the emotive quality of the lyrics and combines with her vocal performance. It's so beautiful. Joni had a huge effect on me. Not so much as an influence, but as a really big, strong member of the fraternity that I really admired. She was part of that group effecting social change, attempting to embrace and demonstrate an awareness of the circumstances of America through music. I think that was a magnificent time, and all power to those people that did that. I wouldn't say I aspired to it myself. I'm a Black Country boy.

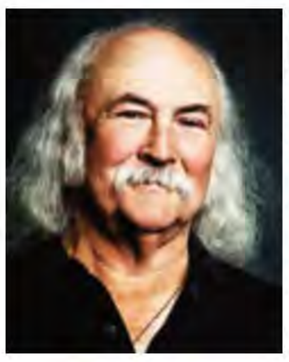
"I love the drama and the thought in the orchestration"

ROBERT PLANT

DAVID WARNER ELLIS/REDFERNS; GREGG DELMAN; ELEANOR STILLS

"She is probably the best writer of us all"

DAVID CROSBY salutes the genius of Joni



I DISCOVERED JONI in a club [*The Gaslight South, Coconut Grove*] in Florida in '67. I walked in and she was standing there singing. It was one of those early songs like 'Michael From Mountains' or 'Both Sides, Now'. I was stunned. She had the voice and the guitar-playing.

She'd already been singing for a while with her husband, Chuck Mitchell, and then by herself after she got smart and realised that she was good on her own. It was a hell of an experience to walk in and run into somebody who was writing songs at that level.

I produced her first album, and left it pretty simple. If I did her any kind of favour, other than introducing her to everybody, it was to keep that record pretty pristine. What folk singers did back then was a kind of indicated arrangement. We all learned how to be the whole band on one guitar, and her arrangements were superb. I was afraid that people would try to take her stuff and translate it into a band and lose the magic of how she played.

Joni had a lot of great qualities, but one of them has always been that she was a superb musician, not just a great singer, not just a great songwriter. I didn't like the big lush orchestrations of her stuff as much, because I really love when it's her playing the guitar and the dulcimer, and her giving her own swing to it.

I think if you look back on this past 50 years from, say, 50 years from now, I don't think anybody is close to Joni Mitchell or Bob Dylan in significance and songwriting. The two of them stand out. Now, I think Bob is a fantastic poet, and I'm a huge believer in Bob Dylan, I've made records out of his songs dozens of times, I think he's fantastic – but Joni's a better musician. I don't think there's any question about it. She's certainly a better singer, 10 times the singer Bob ever was, and as good a poet in her own way. But it's apples and oranges, they approached things completely differently. If you listen to her poetry it's hard to deny, man – I mean, Christ. I've been singing 'Amelia' lately, and damn, her poetry's good! There's so many songs of hers that are so brilliantly written. You can't say which one is the best. There are 30 or 40 best ones.

At the time when I first met her and brought her back to California, we were going together, and I don't know if it lasted a year, but it lasted a long time. It was good, but it was daunting. I would sing her a song and she'd sing me three back that were all better than the one I sang her. Something like that can either make you feel belittled or it can encourage you to do better. And what it did with me is it encouraged me to do better. It made me write songs like "Guinnevere".

She's probably the best writer of us all, and I still think that. I don't think there's any question. I don't think there's a singer-songwriter in the world that hasn't been affected by Joni. If you listen to her songs and you're a singer-songwriter, you can't help but be affected by her. You want to be that good, we all did. We all do.

INTERVIEWS BY MICHAEL BONNER, TOM PINNOCK AND PETER WATTS

“I’m a fighter, that’s what I do”

At 76, **JONI MITCHELL** is back. There are no new compositions (at least “not yet”), but there is new writing and drawing, and a warm new embrace of public life, with appearances at gigs, plays and tribute shows. As Joni curates and unveils a new archive project (reviewed below), which reveals for the first time the first stirrings of her genius, *Uncut* also hears from old friends and intimates about Mitchell’s gathering strength since her 2015 aneurysm, and the “soulful” musical soirees at her house. “As she often says, she’s a dancer and a rock’n’roller at heart, and it’s that Joni that people see on those nights,” Cameron Crowe tells **ROB HUGHES**

SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

Joni Mitchell at a piano, looking to her right at Sunset Sound in 1967 in Los Angeles, California.

JONI MITCHELL has lived in the same hilltop villa, overlooking the Bel-Air Country Club, since July 1974. Hidden from the street, with its own private drive, most of her creative life can be measured in its walls and spaces. Inside the six-bedroom house, built in 1930, there are musical instruments, mementos and small sculptures. A baby grand piano sits in the living room. Strikingly, the walls teem with her own canvasses – landscapes, still lifes, studies of Picasso, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Van Gogh. And, of course, the original self-portraits used on album sleeves like *Turbulent Indigo*, *Travelogue* and *Both Sides Now*.

"I've been there many times," David Crosby tells *Uncut*. "It's kind of like a museum in that she's got her paintings everywhere. And she's a brilliant painter. So you walk in the house and you're smitten. You have to struggle to remember to have a conversation, because your eyes are glued to this stuff: 'Oh my God, look at that one!'"

Traditionally, Mitchell has guarded her privacy here with steadfast conviction. Interviewed by the *Toronto Star* in 2013, the place was likened to a refuge in which she lived in relative seclusion. "Yes, you can call me a recluse," she said, "but I like living alone."

Seven years on, however, her outlook appears to be changing. The arrival of the mouth-watering *Archives – Vol 1: The Early Years (1963-1967)* [*see review p131*] is the latest sign of renewed activity in the Mitchell camp. Having started on the project in 2018, it's merely the first in a series of archival releases scheduled for the coming years.

Film director and screenwriter Cameron Crowe first visited Joni's house in 1979, when Mitchell granted him a rare interview during his time as journalist for *Rolling Stone*. The pair have stayed in touch ever since, to the point where Crowe is now part of her trusted inner circle. Early this year he spent a couple of Sundays on the patio, talking to Mitchell about *Archives*.... Their warm, digressive conversations act as liner notes for the five-CD boxset, which contains nearly six hours of unreleased gold – home demos, live recordings, radio sessions – from Mitchell's formative days.

"Generally we'd be outside in her garden, which she calls Tuscany, because it has that vibe," Crowe explains of their meetings. "She's one of the greatest conversationalists ever. You could just go down any path with her and find yourself in an hours-long conversation about anything, much less her own stuff. So I'm always going to jump at a chance like that. The stuff on *Archives* is a miracle for any real fan of hers, because she's not opened the vault on this early material before. And barely even discussed it. So the idea that she was going to focus on this period, inviting questions and thoughts and detailed work, was just fantastic. It was so much fun having permission to get into the deep tissue on some of these songs."

Mitchell has been directing operations from home, aided by longtime friend and associate Marcy Gensic, and chief archivist Joel Bernstein. And when not busy with this catalogue of rarities, she's been spending much of her time, pre-Covid, either dancing with celebrity pals at a Burbank roadhouse bar or hosting regular hootenannys. These informal gatherings have featured everyone from Elton John, Bonnie Raitt and Chaka Khan to Harry Styles, Sam Smith and Brandi Carlile. "We'd get together about once a month," says Carlile, who helped organise them. "There's so much joy and generosity involved. Joni sings too. She sounds *great*, clear and light-hearted."

> *"She decided that the cultural path of the moment was folk music"*
> CAMERON CROWE

Crowe is ideally placed to note the shift in Mitchell's life. "The atmosphere in the house is always warm and super creative," he says. "When I first went there, it felt like an inner sanctum. But over time it's only become more heartfelt. You're never far from an instrument and there's always a comfortable sofa to sit in. It's not ornate. It's wide open and it invites love."

SINCE suffering a brain aneurysm at home in March 2015, Mitchell has gradually returned to public view. Chaka Khan and Judy Collins were among the first to relay encouraging news of their good friend's improving health later that year, before Mitchell was spotted out and about at a Chick Corea gig in LA the following summer.

Her first significant foray came in February 2017, when Crowe and author Daniel Levitin escorted Mitchell to Clive Davis's annual pre-Grammy Gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. The A-list crowd (among them Jane Fonda, Stevie Wonder, Ringo Starr, Herbie Hancock and Michael Keaton) gave her a


Joni the "stunning blonde girl", mid-'60s

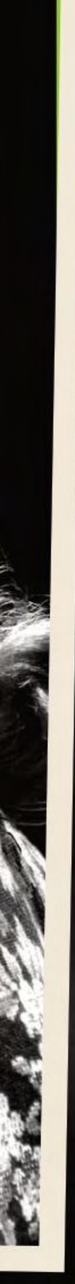
KING COLLECTION/PHOTOSHOT/GETTY IMAGES

When Joni Met Jimi "It's the greatest thing ever!"

DURING the conversations between Mitchell and Cameron Crowe that serve as liner notes for *Archives*, talk unexpectedly turns to partying with Jimi Hendrix after a show in Ottawa in early 1968. Mitchell was in residency at Le Hibou coffeehouse, while Hendrix and the Experience were across town at the Capitol Theatre. Hendrix's diary entry of March 19 reads: "Talked with Joni Mitchell on the phone... I think I'll record her tonight with my excellent tape recorder... Went down to the little club to see Joni. Fantastic girl with heaven words." Crowe takes up the story: "Hendrix was in the front row of this club, taping her on a reel-to-reel, apparently with stereo mics, and then the tape got stolen two nights later and the reel-to-reel machine, too. So somewhere in the world, if it's not destroyed, there's a bootleg of Joni Mitchell live, engineered and recorded by Jimi Hendrix! It's the greatest thing ever."


Hendrix, 1968

Four nights earlier, Mitchell met Graham Nash for the first time, at an after-show party when The Hollies played Ottawa. "Joni is moving through this club world and finding her way, attracting this little Pied Piper line of people who can't take their eyes or ears off her," adds Crowe. "It's just an amazing time and it's starting to explode during this boxset."



Joni with ukulele in 1963, the year she recorded a rediscovered audition tape

Recording *Song To A Seagull* at LA's Sunset Sound Recorders, 1967

standing ovation. Judy Collins went further, making a tribute speech and performing "Both Sides, Now", the song that carried her into the Billboard Top 10 in 1968, a year prior to its appearance on Mitchell's own *Clouds*.

"It was very emotional," says Collins. "Even though neither Joni or I had been on his Columbia label, Clive had a great feeling for her work and wanted to do something special by having me do that song for her. Joni and I sat around the same table and there were lots of people that we all knew. It was very much a homecoming event. Clive was beaming because he'd managed to pull this thing off."

The 23-year-old Joni Mitchell who performs "Both Sides, Now" on *Archives*, from a Philadelphia radio station in March 1967, is brimming with raw enthusiasm. "It's a very new song and I've been driving everybody crazy by playing it two or three times each night," she bubbles. So new, in fact, that she's still halfway through *Henderson The Rain King*, the Saul Bellow book that inspired it.

"This was a girl who was wandering around Greenwich Village, looking for somebody to notice her, looking for something to happen," recalls Collins. "Then sometime in the spring of 1967, at three o'clock in the morning, my friend Al Kooper called me and told me about this songwriter he'd just met in a bar. He put Joni Mitchell on the phone and she sang me 'Both Sides, Now'. And of course it changed both of our lives. It was a huge hit for me and a great favour to Joni too. We became friends. I'd go to her house, she'd play me all of her songs and I'd weep. I'm wild about her music, she was clearly an extraordinary talent."

> *"I was interested in how much she credits Leonard [Cohen]"*
>
> CAMERON CROWE

Kooper and Collins weren't the first ones to notice her. For *Archives*, Saskatoon DJ Barry Bowman, struck by the "stunning blonde girl" who was paying her way at art school by modelling and singing in local coffeehouses, has bequeathed his audition tape. Bowman's recordings for CFQC AM take place in 1963, when Mitchell is just 19. Consisting of old folk standards, they're the earliest-known examples of Mitchell on tape, accompanied solely by ukulele. "She had a beautiful honeyed lilt to her voice that sounded like it came from another time," observes Bowman in a short essay for the liner notes. "One day I recall saying she should have something to send to prospective bookers, agents or possible managers." Bowman only rediscovered the master tapes by chance, when his daughter brought over an old box of reel-to-reels, more than 50 years later.

"When it came to *Archives*, the Bowman tapes became the holy grail," contends Crowe, who became involved with the project a year ago. "It ➤

Archives – Vol 1

The Early Years 1963–1967

Almost six heavenly hours of unreleased demos, radio sessions and live recordings

There's a moment on *Archives Volume 1* where Joni Mitchell suddenly becomes Joni Mitchell. We're at the start of disc two. It's 1965 and she's living in Detroit with her husband, fellow folk singer Chuck Mitchell. As a birthday gift for her mother, she decides to record a tape and send it home to Saskatoon. The first thing we hear is "Urge For Going", a beautiful, lilting melody pinned to a painterly lyric about unforgiving winters on the Canadian prairies and the prospect of warmer climes.

Like its companion piece "Born To Take The Highway", it's the kind of vividly poetic, deceptively simple sketch that Mitchell shaded to perfection in the coming years. While we don't know whether or not her mother liked the tape – though in the liner notes Mitchell calls her mother "a terrible critic of my music" – these songs bear the early hallmarks of Joni's greatness.

Archives – Vol 1 is full of revelations. The first disc of this five-CD set starts with her earliest known recording to date, as teenage art student Mitchell singing "House Of The Rising Sun" for a Saskatoon radio station in 1963. The standards that follow – "John Hardy", "Fare Thee Well", "Nancy Whiskey" and so on – may feel overly formal in places, but are just as elegantly rendered. She's slowly finding her feet by the time we move forward a year, to the Half Beat in Toronto. The songs are still trad-arr, but Mitchell is already telling stories and experimenting with tunings.

Her own songs are emerging too, as is the narrative of her life. "Day After Day", here in its demo form for Elektra's Jac Holzman, is written while pregnant, on the train to the Mariposa Folk Festival. She's told her parents she's going there to become a musician, although the story is actually just a ruse to avoid telling them about her condition.

There are spots on Canadian TV's *Let's Sing Out* in '65 and '66, where she unveils the exquisite "Night In The City". The onset of Mitchell the songwriter is mirrored in the subtle shifts in vocal emphasis, her voice now occupying a lower register more frequently, as if feeling more at ease in its surroundings.

Mitchell's growth as an artist has accelerated by the time she pitches up at Philadelphia's 2nd Fret in November 1966. She cites Bob Dylan and David Blue in the preamble to the lively "What's The Story Mr Blue", one of her formative revenge ballads. "The Circle Game", inspired by (but thematically opposed to) Neil Young's wishful "Sugar Mountain", makes its appearance later in the same set. And just over six months later, on Philadelphia radio, we're treated to a luminous cover of "Sugar Mountain" itself.

These are the kinds of surprises that give *Archives Volume 1* its dazzle. However slight, the minute-and-a-half of improvisation that closes Michael's Birthday Tape, from May 1967, offers a tantalising peek into Mitchell's creative process. A month later, at home in New York City, she records a run of soon-to-be breakthrough songs: "I Had A King", "Chelsea Morning", "Michael From Mountains".

She takes these compositions to Canterbury House in Ann Arbor that October, the show spread across the rest of disc four and the whole of disc five. Mitchell's second set at the venue begins with another remarkable new tune, "Little Green", the moving hymn to the daughter she gave up for adoption. In this context, given her absurdly high quality quotient, it's perhaps forgivable that underrated gems like "Carnival In Kenora" never made it onto record. For most artists, this boxset would mark the plateau of an entire career. Mitchell was just getting going.

SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

Portrait of the artist: a 1968 shot by her chief archivist, Joel Bernstein

"An outpouring of love and affection": Mitchell and friends on stage at Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration, November 7, 2018

was the perfect place to start for Joni. From there it was filling in the various phases and collecting some of the private tapes, many of which came from Joel Bernstein, who she gave most of her stuff to in the '70s and '80s for safe-keeping. Joni told me that everybody felt the loss of Elliot Roberts, her old manager [*who died in June 2019*], in a big way. She said Elliot had always wanted her to consider doing this and she figured out a way. Previously, in *Love Has Many Faces* [*2014's career-spanning comp, divided into four thematic CDs*], she'd done her own kind of mix and match with her stuff and I thought that worked really well. She had such a clear vision of how she wanted to do that material. But I think *Archives* became a novel thing when she consulted Neil Young and he said, 'OK, why don't you try the straight-up, chronological path?' And they really got into it."

HOWEVER tentative these earliest recordings sometimes sound – whether it be covers of "House Of The Rising Sun", "Dark As A Dungeon" or "Deportee (Plane Crash At Los Gatos)" – Mitchell still exudes an inner confidence and steely sense of resolve. Especially on the live stage, where she engages the audience with stories between songs, buying time while she fiddles with a temperamental new tuning. She's also structuring her setlists deliberately, allowing themes to develop, each song speaking to the next.

"She's mixing and matching," says Crowe. "'Here's the beginning of a relationship, here's the end.' So she's already curating. But she's really working these rooms. If you listen to the club stuff, she's firing on all cylinders. She's also really good with the camera. She was a model, originally, and I talked about this with her a bunch. So when she does these TV shows back in the very early days, she kills it. And she's *still* that person. I remember the first time she went to Clive Davis's pre-Grammy party. Clive was announcing her and I saw the spotlight moving around the room, looking for her. As Joni saw it coming, she lifted her chin at this perfect angle to meet the spotlight. I was like, 'Damn!' She's always had that striking charisma without ever playing overtly into it."

Certainly, that same easy charisma is evident on *Archives*. Mitchell is still a work in progress as she winds her way from Saskatoon radio and Toronto club dates to small shows in the States, but she's never less than riveting company. Her rate of acceleration is remarkable too. "Joni didn't even have a career, but was apparently so striking that they were doing articles on her early on, as an influencer," says Crowe. "They're like, 'Let's write about this woman, because we can't take our eyes off her.' She never presented herself as a female ideal or anything like that, but she decided that the cultural path of the moment was folk music. So she chooses that when painting is still her first language. She's exploring folk music and learning in these different clubs and environments. It's great to see in the liner notes that she's not out partying, she's there to be a student and a workhorse."

> *"Our parting was painful, but we've remained friends"*
> GRAHAM NASH

"The things that stand out for me on *Archives* are the intros to the songs, because it's the exact same person I'm hanging out with up there at her house," observes Carlile. "She giggles and laughs a lot when she speaks. The other thing I noticed is that, when she's singing traditional folk music, she stays in the upper range of her voice, in a falsetto. But when she starts writing her own songs, she starts getting into her lower register. So you hear this kind of guttural woman emerge into the world."

The liner note discussions are illuminating. Crowe used the opportunity to pose questions about her early years that he'd never felt able to ask before. Mitchell recalls being flown 100 miles to hospital for treatment of polio, which she contracted aged nine. Looking down from the plane, the towns resemble a succession of "jewels on the black prairie".

Her mother, Myrtle, calls her a quitter when she ditches piano lessons. In 1965, after Mitchell has moved to Detroit, she makes a birthday tape for her and sends it home. One of its songs is the extraordinary "Urge For Going". Rather than fostering maternal approval, however, Joni reveals that Myrtle "never showed much pride in me, ever. It was only criticism... She was a heckler... She wanted me to be Doris Day or something like that."

The first song of her own, "Day After Day", is tied into her difficult relationship with Myrtle. It's written en route to 1964's Mariposa Folk Festival in Ontario, where Mitchell is planning to watch Buffy Sainte-Marie. "Joan is pregnant at the time, but doesn't want her mum to know," explains Crowe. "And she wants to keep working. So she basically tells us that she concocts a career and a mission to go to this folk festival with ➤

Star bright: Mitchell in the studio, listening to a playback

JOEL BERNSTEIN; SULFIATIMAGNUSON/GETTYIMAGES, VIVIENKILLILEA/GETTYIMAGES

the father of this child. And she's going to use that as a ruse, she says, to get out of her hometown. That points you to 'Day After Day' as the first *real* Joni song, because she writes it on the train."

Crowe revels in the unexpected details and shifts of conversation for *Archives*. A discussion about Mitchell's resentment at being labelled a folk singer leads to mention of Chuck Berry, her favourite songwriter early on. She then recounts meeting the rock'n'roller in a Florida hotel, when she and Graham Nash are in town for the Miami Pop Festival. Hotel management, not being the biggest admirers of travelling musicians, tell them they'll have to share a bathroom with Berry.

"It was a kind of funky hotel, but Joan and I weren't bothered," recalls Nash today. "We were in love and didn't care where we were. At one point, I'm in the bathroom and Chuck walks in. He goes, 'Y'know, there's only two things to do here in Miami – eat hamburgers and fuck.' Trust me, when you're stood peeing next to Chuck Berry, you remember that vividly." Later, Nash and Mitchell decide to roll him a joint. Knocking first, they enter the bathroom, only to find Berry and a girl about to have sex. "So we excused ourselves," notes Joni with casual coolness, "and went back into our room."

Another, more significant, encounter concerns Leonard Cohen, who became her lover for a while. He and Mitchell share a bill at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1967, where Joni is knocked sideways by his rendition of "Suzanne".

"That was the first person I admired," she tells Crowe. "He made me feel... my writing, I thought, was so immature. He was an adult. 'This is how adults write.'"

"Hearing 'Suzanne' kind of sent her into the deeper waters and all that would come later," reflects Crowe. "I was really interested in how much she credits Leonard in our interviews. It made me wish he'd talked about her more. I never read him on the record much on the subject of Joni."

TWO months ago, Mitchell invited David Crosby round for dinner. The pair were an item for a while back in the day, hooking up after Crosby had seen her at Miami's Gaslight Café in September 1967. Four weeks later, as heard live on *Archives*, Mitchell has already acknowledged him in song, as the free-spirited sailor of "Cactus Tree", "*bearing beads from California*".

"There were lots of other girl singers around, but they weren't anywhere even *close* to Joni," Crosby recalls. "She was spectacular. Back then when I first met her, the voice had maybe a whole other octave on the top and she was just learning what to do with it. But you could tell right away that she was special – the chords she picked, the way she juxtaposed the melody over them. And, of course, the words. I thought, 'Oh my God, here comes the next wave.' And I just wanted to be with her. But I had to get used to the fact that she was going to write songs *to* me and *about* me. She did that with 'Song To A Seagull' and 'Cactus Tree'. Then later on, when she wanted to get rid of me, she said goodbye in 'That Song About The Midway'."

Despite the hardships of the past few years, Mitchell remains the same person she ever was, according to Crosby. "You can never count her out, because this is a very tough woman," he states. "She took a big hit and she's fighting her way back.

The *Song To A Seagull* sessions: Crosby and Stephen Stills confer as John Sebastian plays the harmonica

SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

> *"There were a lot of girl singers around, but none came even close"*
>
> DAVID CROSBY

And she's the best singer-songwriter I ever encountered in my life. She's painting again, because I've seen her, and I want to hear the music that lives inside of her too."

In February 2018, she and Crosby attended David Geffen's 75th birthday bash in LA. The place was packed with Hollywood celebrities. "There were only five musicians there – Joni, Elton, Bruce, McCartney and me," says Crosby. "Everybody else was much bigger than me. I was so happy to see Joni there, she gave me a huge smile. We don't always get along, but I do love her, man."

Unsurprisingly, given his public falling out with his ex-CSNY partner, Crosby didn't make it to Neil Young's secret wedding to Daryl Hannah that August. Mitchell was invited though, as was Stephen Stills. Three months later, on November 6 and 7, she was centre of attention in her own right, when a whole bunch of big names played two shows at LA's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion for 'Joni 75: A Birthday Celebration'.

The starry lineup included Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Graham Nash, James Taylor, Rufus Wainwright and Brandi Carlile. Looking immaculate in platinum braid, black bolero hat and long red coat, Mitchell accepted a birthday cake from her guests and joined them on stage during an all-star rendition of "Big Yellow Taxi".

"The outpouring of love and affection was unprecedented," recalls Nash, who sat at the piano to perform "Our House", the CSNY song he'd written to bless their romantic union in the late '60s. "During the last chorus, when the audience sang along, I turned my head to the right to see her in the front row. And she was smiling and singing along too. That was an incredible moment for me, personally – to see Joni, at 75, singing the

song that I wrote for her 50 years ago.

"After the show, everybody wanted to come up and shake her hand and tell her what she meant to them," Nash continues. "I was at the table with Joan and James Taylor and she looked so happy. When the crush of people had lessened, I went up to her and asked, 'Have you got anything coming? Any new songs?' She looked at me with that Joni Mitchell thousand yard stare and said, 'No, not yet.' I really loved the fact she said not *yet*."

Nash has been over to visit his ex-lover three or four times in the last couple of years. "We talk about what happened to her and I, how our lives changed and where we moved on to," he says. "I don't think either of us have any regrets about it, we just realised that it was the right thing to do at that time. Our parting was painful and sad, particularly for me, but we've remained friends."

MITCHELL'S return to the wider cultural milieu has manifested itself in various ways. Sometimes she's been absent while others have honoured her, as when old ally Eric Andersen picked up a Lifetime Achievement gong on her behalf at Montreal's International Folk Awards last year. Or when Tourism Saskatoon held an all-day celebration to salute their greatest export in the form of a newly named riverfront – Joni Mitchell Promenade – in June 2018.

Altogether more spectacular is the footage of her in *Rolling Thunder Revue*, Martin Scorsese's documentary about Bob Dylan's famous travelling circus of 1975. Mitchell has written a luminous new song on the road, "Coyote", and plays it at Gordon Lightfoot's house, with Dylan and Roger McGuinn on acoustic guitars. It's a potent reminder of Mitchell at her dazzling peak, cutting through the chaos with nimble, clear-eyed acuity.

Not long after the film's Netflix debut in June 2019, Mitchell began popping up at more events. There was a Blondie gig at Santa Barbara Bowl, followed by the San Diego premiere of Crowe's stage-musical version of *Almost Famous*, which required the leads to sing her classic break-up ballad "River".

"At intermission I went to find her and she was just glowing at our play," Crowe recalls. "Afterwards she stayed at this party in the courtyard, outside the Old Globe Theatre, for three-and-a-half hours. And posed for *every* picture with every actor and all their friends. And it was not duty. It was just bringing her kind of love. She said, 'This is better than the movies!'"

A month later, Brandi Carlile and her band paid tribute to guest of honour Mitchell by performing *Blue* in its entirety at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA. "It was more than just scary," confesses Carlile. "I actually went to a hypnotist beforehand, so that I could get through it. I do a lot of teasing myself around Joan, joking around. I'd tell her I'm a country station, I'm a little bit corny, and Joni would just say, 'Don't be silly, it's just another party. We're going to have fun.' But what I couldn't get past was how difficult the songs were. *Blue* is seen as one of Joni's most truthful, but also simpler, albums. But there's not one fucking simple thing about it. The time signatures are complicated and the notes she chose to sing couldn't be more intimidating."

Carlile's friendship with her had deepened over the previous year, since appearing at 'Joni 75'. "Whenever I see her, Joni never looks anything less than a million fucking dollars," she says. "Her hair is gorgeous, her makeup is perfect and she's always wearing some funky, hip outfit. She's honest about how she feels from day to day. She never tries to entertain anyone, but she is very warm and generous with her time. You get the feeling that she's holding so much of herself to herself." ➤

Playing at Canterbury House in Ann Arbor, October 1967

One night after dinner at Mitchell's place, she continues, "Joni got to talking about her desire to have music in her house. She wasn't making any promises about touching an instrument, but they were there and sometimes she wished that people were playing them. So she suggested a jam, or a series of jam sessions."

With Carlile and Marcy Gensic at the helm, they set about finding players. Carlile brought along Andrew Hozier to the first one, arriving at the door with an orchid and a bottle of champagne. "I was so nervous," she says. "It felt like an elaborate prank. Joni has this radiance like a cat, where you get the feeling she could take you or leave you, but you almost wouldn't want it any other way. We were just kind of stunned to be there. So we wind up in the living room, where Hozier plays an old Irish folk tune and I start singing 'Helplessly Hoping' by Crosby, Stills & Nash. Apropos of nothing, Chaka Khan walks into the room, sits down and throws a harmony over it. I'm thinking, 'What the fuck!' And right behind her comes Herbie Hancock, who promptly sits down at the piano and starts playing. My brain is exploding at this point. I look over at Joni and she's just laughing, because she can see us squirm and look sufficiently shocked."

This impish sense of glee seems to be a guiding principle behind the jams. Crowe remembers Elton John being "blown away by how Joni takes such delight in everybody playing music". Crowe watched from the sofa on New Year's Eve as Mitchell played host to Eric Idle, Chaka Khan, veteran publicist Elliot Mintz and various girlfriends and helpers. "They're not huge gatherings, but they're very soulful ones," he observes. "She'll have longtime friends like Sharon Kemp, Leslie Morris, Herbie Hancock, Kathy Bates and Rosanna Arquette. And sometimes very old friends from Canada. It's an eclectic mix of people she tends to have a long history with. But sometimes someone like Harry Styles will slip in there. Everybody lets loose. As she often says, she's a dancer and a rock'n'roller at heart, and it's that Joni that people see on those nights. Pure joy. It's 'Raised On Robbery'-style Joni. For people wondering what she's been up to, she's living a very full and creative life."

> *"She's not arrogant enough to care about her legacy"*
>
> BRANDI CARLILE

DURING the process of compiling *Archives*, Mitchell also decided to revisit a handcrafted project from late 1971. Informally titled 'The Christmas Book', it's a compendium of drawings and watercolour paintings, interspersed with poetry and handwritten lyrics, that she gifted to a select group of close friends in the wake of *Blue*. "It's a beautiful thing," says Nash. "I actually have two original copies and one of them is signed to me."

Mitchell dug out hers, added several pieces that didn't make the original cut and reproduced the whole thing as faithfully as possible for public consumption. The resulting *Morning Glory On The Vine: Early Songs And Drawings* was published in October 2019, complete with a new, Joni-penned foreword. It's an exquisite piece of work. Moreover, it suggests that, for Mitchell, the disciplines of poetry, music and visual art are interchangeable, a fluid cycle of nourishment and inspiration.

It's tempting to draw the conclusion that *Archives* and *Morning Glory On The Vine* are evidence of Mitchell, at 76, starting to tend her own legacy. But it may not be that simple. Or even strategic. "I've spent a lot of time just going up to the house, having

AL BLIXT

Joni at 75: a birthday celebration live at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, LA, November 7, 2018

a glass of wine and a quiet night with Joni and listening to her talk about these projects," says Carlile. "And she's not arrogant enough to care about her legacy. This is just a way of putting something beautiful in the world. It's her interpretation of what she can do now, drawing attention to things she's done in her life that she's proud of. It's got very little to do with ego."

For Carlile, her visits to Mitchell's house are revealing on an unspoken level too. "It's a really rich space," she explains. "There's not just art on the walls, she's also painted beams and cabinets and doors. And there are orchids everywhere, almost on every surface. The only sign that you're in the home of the greatest living songwriter is that you see instruments in one room. There are no displays of grandiosity anywhere else that have to do with music or songwriting. It actually stands out like a sore thumb that there's a Grammy on show. But when you read it you see that it's been given to her for album artwork. And that's when it clicks. You realise that she's not intentionally making a statement, but she's holistically an artist, well beyond her legacy or what some of us might imply."

For Crowe, *Archives* isn't merely an archeological dig. It's an opportunity for Mitchell to reassess and confront her feelings about her younger self. "I think it's brought her a real sense of humour about that period," he offers. "And maybe it's unloaded some baggage that she might have had about those early songs. It brings her joy now, which I'm sure is invaluable. Joni listened very carefully to that stuff in her living room and warmed to the young artist she heard singing those folk songs. I think she'd been very hard on that initial phase, in no small part because the folk community had been tough on her. She was so beautiful that she had to work extra hard to prove herself to some of the hard-bitten folk types. I think they saw her more as this kind of ingénue. But what you hear is a sparkling young artist finding her way."

SPEAKING to *The Guardian* earlier this year, Mitchell's former beau James Taylor teased that she may be "coming back musically", fuelling rumours that she was writing and recording again. Neither Crowe nor Carlile, however, have seen any evidence so far. Rather, Mitchell's energies have been directed elsewhere. "She's been so into the *Archives* project and *Morning Glory*," says Carlile. "It's been very much a labour of love for her and the closest people in her life. None of this could have happened without Joni's approval, enthusiasm and love for it all. She's been in the wars, she's had a hell of a recovery and it's just been unbelievable. She's an astounding woman."

In light of all the tributes in recent years, Carlile believes that Mitchell is finally aware of the sheer depth of hero worship and admiration that the world has for her. "She's tickled and perplexed by it," Carlile offers. "She knows that she has very few contemporaries and that she might be the best there's ever been – and she detests false humility – but I think she's only just beginning to grasp how beloved and how important she is to our generation of followers. You see this twinkle that's like, 'Holy shit, that's right, I'm Joni Mitchell!' come across her face every now and then. She's an absolute light in the world."

"People appreciate her so much and I think she enjoys it," agrees Crowe. "Because you don't realise that, for a lot of her life, she's been pushing against obstacles and sometimes prejudice. I've seen her in situations where they say, 'And now, the greatest *female* singer-songwriter alive!' Why are we saying 'female', guys? That's something that she's had to deal with. And you don't see it, because the size of her genius obscures a lot of that. But if you look closely, not everybody was like Prince, writing her fan mail."

As for the future, Crowe is convinced there's a whole lot left. "She has a pretty strong therapy programme and she's been doing a lot of walking," he says. "And she dances too. She's somebody who's fought her way back, just like she fought her way back from polio as a child. It's like she said when we talked: 'I'm a fighter, that's what I do.' She did a wonderful line drawing for *Archives*, which I think shows that it's all coming back to her. Nothing in her genes seems to accept being vanquished, so we're just going to keep getting Joni for many years to come."

LIVES AND COMPILATIONS

RELEASED 1971–2014

"Go Tell The Drummer Man"! Joni Mitchell: in concert, and in the archives.

BY PETER WATTS

As you'd expect with Joni Mitchell, the narrative of her compilations is idiosyncratic and meticulous, occasionally frustrating but ultimately very rewarding. They tell of an artist who demands – and gets – total control over her image and history, using the past to make statements about the present, as well as taking deep and personal explorations into her art and life. You get the sense she sweats blood putting these things together, with no thought of short cuts or quick cash-ins. This approach has culminated in *Archives Volume 1* – a release that for many years she shied away from but which she eventually embraced with glorious results.

It began in 1996, when Mitchell could no longer refuse label demand for a greatest hits album. She responded in ornery, witty fashion, insisting on two individual but complementary albums – **Hits** (★★★★) and **Misses** (★★★). Their successes and faults are pretty much what you'd expect – *Hits* is full of brilliance but remains a little too familiar, while the sardonic *Misses* is packed with overlooked gems, but lacks some pep. *Hits* is largely chronological – albeit with "Both Sides, Now" plonked right at the end to ensure things don't taper off too abruptly. That makes it easy to follow the changes in Mitchell's early style, but is also heavily focused on the first third of her career, with only two songs that were recorded after 1974. Hence *Misses*, which can celebrate her later career. This feels like the one Mitchell really cared about, and though it has tracks going back to *Ladies Of The Canyon*, eight of the 14 songs were cut between 1985 and 1994, allowing songs like "The Beat Of Black Wings" and "Sex Kills" to get attention.

Ten years later and having prematurely announced her retirement, Mitchell again explored her back catalogue with three releases that demonstrated the careful thought she was now giving to her legacy. 2004's **The Beginning Of Survival** (★★★) focuses on her later career, overlapping slightly with *Misses* but with a tighter focus. These were 16 songs that Mitchell felt offered some aspect of social commentary – often political or ecological and including fine later songs like "The Three Great Stimulants". It's brilliantly put together, with recurring themes and concepts demonstrating the way Mitchell has come back to scratch the same itches. With all songs drawn from her post-1985 work, there's a consistency of tone as well as message that makes the album sound like a coherent, fully realised song cycle rather than a compilation of odds and ends. It was followed within months by **Dreamland** (★★★★★), a more straightforward compilation, with songs drawn from across her career and any specific theme a little more nebulous. There's considerable overlap with *Hits*, but more imagination and variety – the use of the 2002 versions of "For The Roses" and "Both Sides, Now" for instance, gives the album a better sense of a career as a life's journey. It's the best available single CD "best of".

The third in the trilogy came with 2005's **Songs Of A Prairie Girl** (★★★★★), which Mitchell described as her "contribution to Saskatchewan's Centennial celebrations" and which featured songs largely about her Canadian youth. It's a marvellous collection, as Mitchell selects songs that look back on her past but also evoke the atmosphere and climate of Canada. It's held together by the drifting 16-minute soundscape of "Paprika Plains", and the theme allows Mitchell to bring together songs as disparate as "River", "Don ➤

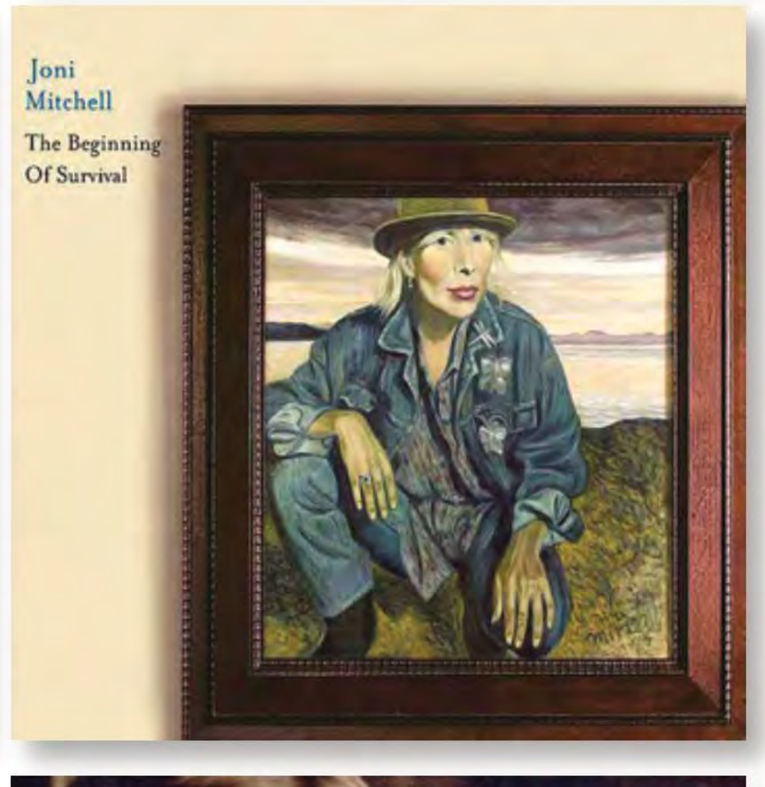

the World of
Joni Mitchell


JONI MITCHELL
THE L.A. EXPRESS
MILES OF AISLES


JONI MITCHELL
SHADOWS
AND LIGHT


joni mitchell hits


joni mitchell misses


Joni
Mitchell
The Beginning
Of Survival


Joni
Mitchell
Dreamland


JONI MITCHELL Songs Of A Prairie Girl


joni
mitchell
songs chosen by her friends
&
fellow musicians


amchitka
the 1970 concert that launched Greenpeace
joni mitchell
james taylor
phil ochs


JONI MITCHELL'S
THE FIDDLE AND THE DRUM
BALLET SOUNDTRACK


JONI MITCHELL
LOVE HAS MANY FACES


JONI
MITCHELL

Juan's Restless Daughter", "Urge For Going" and "Raised On Robbery". As with *The Beginning Of Survival, Songs Of A Prairie Girl* uses the back catalogue to provide deeper insight into Mitchell's career. And as both albums were compiled by Mitchell herself, this is insight that has an official stamp. This splurge of activity ended with one more release in 2005, **Songs Chosen By Her Friends And Fellow Musicians** (★★★), with favourite Mitchell songs selected by the likes of Bob Dylan, Prince, KD Lang and Herbie Hancock. It's plenty of fun, but offers little new. It's also worth noting 1971's **The World Of Joni Mitchell** (★★★★), an Antipodean LP of early classics with a lovely cover.

Another decade passed before Mitchell returned to confront her history. **Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting To Be Danced** (★★★★) is a 4CD compilation that again takes an overarching theme – in this case songs about or inspired by love. That concept is loose enough to include or exclude – there's no "Big Yellow Taxi", "Chelsea Morning" or "Woodstock" – pretty much anything Mitchell wants as she carefully sequences songs that fold into each other, musically and thematically. It's an intriguing selection, but as with any comp of this size, there is a point where you wonder whether it would make more sense just to listen to the original albums.

It's clear that Mitchell worked hard to make this set feel like an event in its own right. She described the process of patching together songs as gathering "scenes... like a documentary maker" and "by juxtaposition, edit them into a whole new work". Her delightful sleevenotes go into detail about her thinking and about the history of each song. She also explains how the album arose from two failed projects. One was a soundtrack for the love-themed ballet, which Mitchell tried to compile from her catalogue but struggled to contain on one disc, as she had 2007's war-themed **The Fiddle And The Drum** (★★★), a solid compilation in its own right. The second was a label-requested 2CD set of unreleased songs and outtakes. Mitchell described this as "peppered with discarded and damaged work. They hired a burglar to enter my storage space, rummaged around and came back with the dregs. 'Why are you doing this?' I asked the bosses. 'That's the way it's done,' was the reply. 'Not to me,' I said and I squelched it." By 2020, she had come to terms with the fact her "dregs" had artistic merit, resulting in the masterful **Archives Volume 1** *(see review p131)*.

The *Archives* release was notable for its live recordings, some of which had circulated as much-loved recordings with a semi-official status and with *Archives* were finally granted a degree of legitimacy by Mitchell. Until *Archives*, she had officially released only two solo live albums and one collaboration, but these unofficial but legal live albums – some of which appeared in part on *Archives* – are often magnificent. Widely available as standalone releases on Amazon, iTunes and Spotify, they include a double album from Philly folk club The Second Fret, a fine set from Cambridge, Mass, in 1968, Mitchell's performance at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival, a couple of shows on the 1983 world tour and a great 1995 show at the Wells Fargo Theater. Official or not, they have been welcomed by fans who otherwise find slim pickings from Mitchell's live portfolio.

That's because it all comes down to what you want from a live album. Do you want an artefact of an artist as they hit the zone, capturing that moment when their talent is transformed by an adoring audience and sheer adrenaline into something other-worldly? Or do you want, if not the opposite, something close to it – a record that brings you closer to a superstar, gets underneath the makeup and gives a glimpse of the human heart that drives it all?

Joni Mitchell has live albums that do both, but it's the latter that really fascinate, partly because she often sounds as if she's not entirely of this earth in the first place; above it all, not so much aloof as keeping a wise distance. The best of the non-official releases is **Live At The Second Fret 1966** (★★★★★), originally recorded for radio and for years circulated as a bootleg before it was released in 2014. Some appears on *Archives*, but it's worth listening to the album in its entirety. It comes from a Philadelphia folk club in November 1966, when Mitchell was still modelling herself on Joan Baez, but was also a seasoned performer, with enough life under her belt to give her something to write about. Songs are introduced with endearingly nervous, rambling anecdotes about Monopoly in London, and there are giggling asides and an atmosphere of tremulous vulnerability. But when she picks up a guitar it's like a different person has appeared, one whose voice has that familiar authority and crystal beauty. The setlist also demonstrates how much talent she had from the start, featuring songs she would not record until *Blue* as well as majestic versions of "Little Green", "Marcie", "Both Sides, Now", "I Don't Know Where I Stand", "The Circle Game" and "Michael From Mountains". There are also several songs you couldn't get anywhere until *Archives*, including "Eastern Rain", "Winter Lady", "Ballerina Valerie" and the gorgeous "Go Tell The Drummer Man".

Mitchell's writing demonstrates profound understanding of the human experience, but her official live performances are stiff and unrevealing by comparison. **Miles Of Aisles** (★★★★) was released in 1974 in the wake of *Court And Spark*, and featured Mitchell playing with LA Express in August 1974. That allowed her to reinterpret her old folk songs, updating them with jazz inflections, something that can be quite startling on "Woodstock", which loses so much of its sobriety.

Miles Of Aisles reached No 2 and went gold, giving her two big hits in 11 months. It even spawned a successful single, with the live version of "Big Yellow Taxi" reaching No 24 four years after the studio take stuck at No 67 in 1970. Part of its success derived from the fact it contained only one song from *Court And Spark* – "People's Parties" – with Mitchell concentrating on new versions of songs like "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire", "The Last Time I Saw Richard" and "Cactus Tree". The set is familiar but there are several curveballs and it concludes with a couple of songs that hadn't been released: "Jericho" and "Love Or Money". Add the high quality of the recording and you can see why it sold.

While *Miles Of Aisles* was mostly about Mitchell's voice, with the jazz stylings relatively understated, **Shadows And Light** (★★★) was something else again. This time the show was as much about band as singer. It was recorded in September 1979 at the Santa Barbara Bowl and released in 1980, by which time Mitchell had spent half a decade refining her jazz-soul investigations. She'd also recruited a superior band of musicians, with Pat Metheny on guitar, Jaco Pastorius on bass, Lyle Mays on keys, Michael Brecker on sax and Don Alias on percussion. Their proficiency is such that both Metheny and Alias are handed solo spots on *Shadows And Light*, and on several occasions the playing overshadows Mitchell – something that takes some doing. On "Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" and "Dreamland" the musicianship is extraordinary, and even Mitchell's stunning version of "Amelia" is ultimately hijacked by Metheny's extended coda. When singer and band are in sync, on "Coyote", "Shadows And Light" or the glorious "Furry Sings The Blues", the results are dreamlike – there's all the abstract flow of a typical Mitchell album, but the listener feels as if they are part of something bigger, more expansive. A loose theme of a life loved without regret is implied by the intro, which uses dialogue from *Rebel Without A Cause*, and the boisterous doo-wop cover of "Why Do Fools Fall In Love?" that appears towards the end.

Finally, **Amchitka: The 1970 Concert That Launched Greenpeace** (★★★) was released in 2010. The double-CD includes songs by fellow participants Phil Ochs and James Taylor, with Mitchell taking up most of CD 2, at first alone and later accompanied by Taylor. The concert was a fundraiser, held so Greenpeace could sail a boat to the island of Amchitka to protest a US nuclear bomb test. Mitchell's gleeful contribution undercuts any political sobriety with a jaunty "Bony Maronie", a terrific "Cactus Tree" and a satisfyingly chunky "Carey" that segues into "Mr Tambourine Man". It's the closest Mitchell's later live canon gets to the spirit exhibited back in 1966 at a pokey folky club in Philly, but at least we now know there is much more to come.

CRITICS' VERDICT

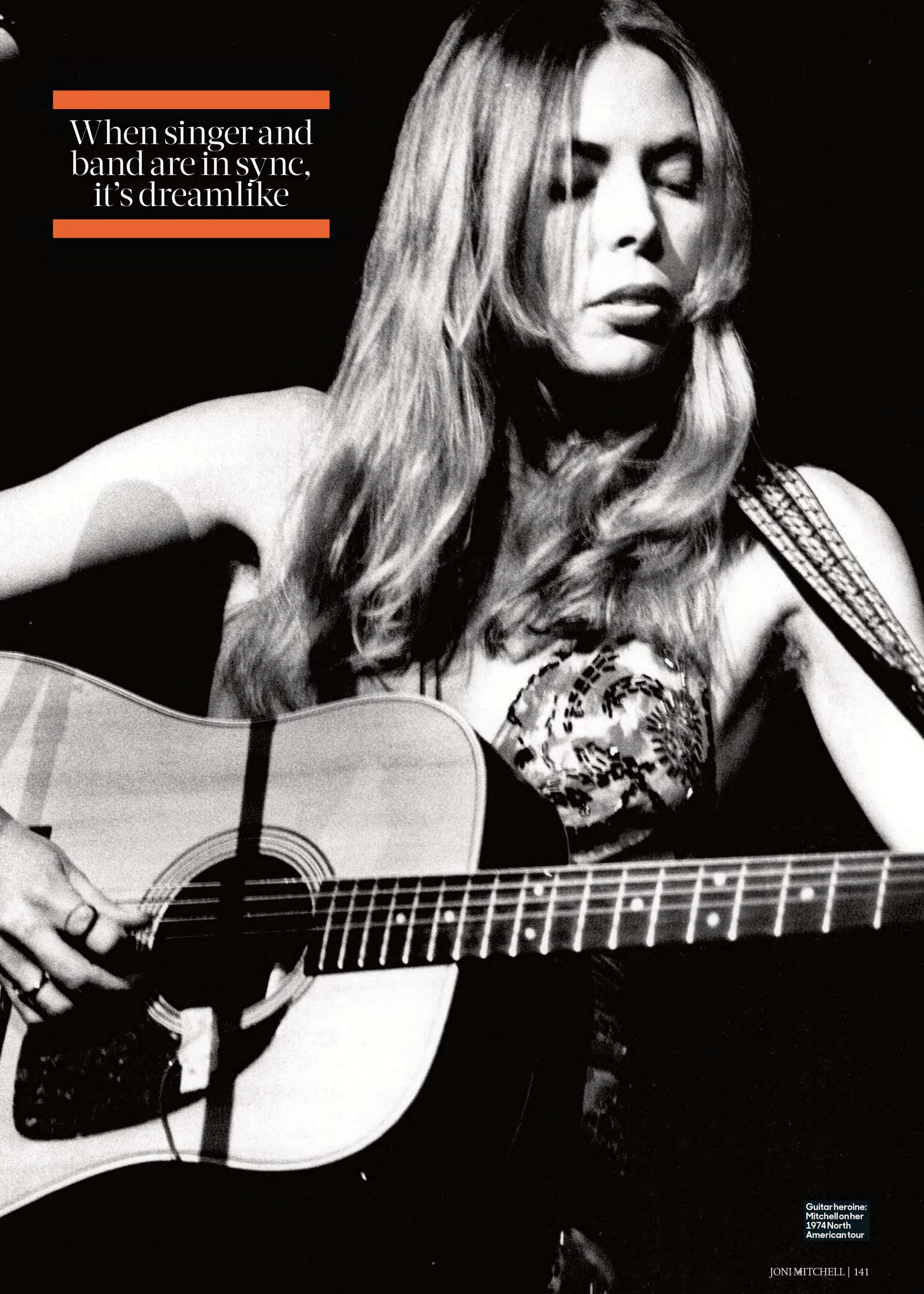
"For a start, there is no doubt whatsoever that the versions of Ms Mitchell's songs which are accompanied solely by her own playing, be it on guitar, dulcimer, or piano, are better than the recorded versions, if it's spirit and intimacy you're looking for."
STEVE CLARKE ON *MILES OF AISLES*, NME, DECEMBER 7, 1974

"*Misses* is a grievous disappointment... it makes for grim listening. It confirms every prejudice ever voiced against her – pretension, self-obsession, over-experimentation, indulgence, the very things that made her songs so good back when *she* was good."
DAVID BENNUN ON *MISSES*, MELODY MAKER, OCTOBER 19, 1996

"The obstinate contrariness of *Love Has Many Faces* is entirely characteristic and only to be admired. It's the enduring reluctance of a great artist to accept other people's frames, other people's narratives."
STEPHEN TROUSSÉ ON *LOVE HAS MANY FACES: A QUARTET, A BALLET, WAITING TO BE DANCED*, UNCUT, JANUARY 2015

BORIS SPREMO/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

When singer and band are in sync, it's dreamlike



Guitar heroine: Mitchell on her 1974 North American tour

MISCELLANY

Notebooks out, Joni-ologists: we cast an eye over singles, DVDs, collaborations, collectables, those odd tunings and her other great passion: painting. BY MARK BENTLEY

SINGLES DISCOGRAPHY

CALL it the curse of the singer-songwriter. Rather like Van Morrison and Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell is a writer of hit songs, rather than a purveyor of hit singles. Many of her best known songs ("Both Sides, Now", "Woodstock", "The Circle Game") were taken into the mainstream by other artists. So it is that her pop chart CV is surprisingly mediocre. Indeed, that 1996 compilation *Hits* may be optimistically named: over a 50-year career she's racked up one solitary US Top 10 ("Help Me") and nothing in the UK Top 20 since "Big Yellow Taxi" in 1970.

The following list of her singles reveals a series of rather contrarian choices. As a standalone single, "Both Sides, Now" languishes unissued; likewise there's no "The Last Time I Saw Richard". There are multiple singles where the B-side is more radio-friendly than the A-side. Still, what you get is a fascinating litany of great songs, unlikely mini-hits ("Come In From The Cold", "Good Friends") and the story of an ever-changing, ever-growing artist.

To reflect stronger commercial heft in her homeland, we've listed UK, US and Canadian chart placings where relevant.

NIGHT IN THE CITY/ I HAD A KING

REPRISE, JULY 1968

UK highest chart position: Did not chart **US:** - **Canada:** -

CHELSEA MORNING/ BOTH SIDES, NOW

REPRISE, AUGUST 1969

UK: - **US:** - **Can:** -

BIG YELLOW TAXI/ WOODSTOCK

REPRISE, JAN 1970

UK: 11 **US:** 67 **Can:** 14

CAREY/THIS FLIGHT TONIGHT

REPRISE, AUGUST 1971

UK: - **US** 93 **Can:** 27

CALIFORNIA/ A CASE OF YOU

REPRISE, NOVEMBER 1971

UK: Not issued

US: - **Can:** -

YOU TURN ME ON, I'M A RADIO/URGE FOR GOING

ASYLUM, NOVEMBER 1972

UK: - **US:** 25 **Can:** 10

COLD BLUE STEEL AND SWEET FIRE/ BLONDE IN THE BLEACHERS

ASYLUM, MARCH 1971

UK: Not issued **US:** - **Can:** -

RAISED ON ROBBERY/ COURT AND SPARK

ASYLUM, DECEMBER 1973

UK: Not issued

US: 65 **Can:** 51

HELP ME/ JUST LIKE THIS TRAIN

ASYLUM, MARCH 1974

UK: - **US:** 7 **Can:** 6

FREE MAN IN PARIS/ PEOPLES PARTIES

ASYLUM, JULY 1974

UK: - **US:** 22 **Can:** 16

BIG YELLOW TAXI (LIVE)/ RAINY NIGHT HOUSE

ASYLUM, JAN 1975

UK: - **US:** 24 **Can:** 54

IN FRANCE THEY KISS ON MAIN STREET/ BOHO DANCE

ASYLUM, FEB 1976

UK: - **US:** 66 **Can:** 19

COYOTE/ BLUE MOON HOTEL

ASYLUM, FEB 1977

UK: - **US:** -

Can: 79

OFF NIGHT BACKSTREET/ JERICHO

ASYLUM, FEB 1978

UK only issue: -

JERICHO/ DREAMLAND

ASYLUM, FEB 1978

US only: -

THE DRY CLEANER FROM DES MOINES/ GOD MUST BE A BOOGIE MAN

ASYLUM, JAN 1979

UK: - **US:** -

WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE? (LIVE)/BLACK CROW

ASYLUM, OCTOBER 1980

UK: - **US:** -

(YOU'RE SO SQUARE) BABY I DON'T CARE/ LOVE

ASYLUM, NOVEMBER 1982

UK: - **US:** 47

BE COOL/ UNDERNEATH THE STREETLIGHT

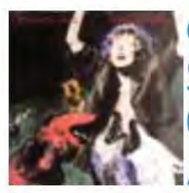
ASYLUM, FEB 1983

US: -

CHINESE CAFÉ/ LADIES MAN

ASYLUM, FEB 1983

UK: - **US:** -



GOOD FRIENDS/ SMOKIN' (EMPTY, TRY ANOTHER)

ASYLUM, NOVEMBER 1985 **US:** 85

SHINY TOYS/ THREE GREAT STIMULANTS

ASYLUM, APRIL 1986

UK: - **US:** - **Can:** -

MY SECRET PLACE/LAKOTA

ASYLUM, MAY 1988

UK: - **US:** -

Can: 44

COME IN FROM THE COLD/ RAY'S DAD'S CADILLAC

ASYLUM, JULY 1991

UK: - **US:** - **Can:** 27

HOW DO YOU STOP/ THE SIRE OF SORROW/ MOON AT THE WINDOW

REPRISE, NOVEMBER 1994

UK: - **US:** - **Can:** 56

Picture this: Joni with her painting *Malibu Fire*, featuring then-husband Larry Klein, Rotunda Gallery, London, 1990

SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Joni's guitar tunings

LIKE kindred spirits David Crosby and Neil Young, Joni has long used the trick of alternate guitar tunings when composing – that is, moving away from the standard guitar tuning of EADGBE. Many of her songs were written in non-standard tunings, and rather than finger complex chords she would often simply 'barre' chords with one finger, on one fret. If you have a guitar and an hour or two spare, it's well worth exploring her approach. While alternate tunings are a folkie's trick, in Joni's hands the effect is distinctly jazzy – and she often used the same tuning more than once, like so:

CGDFBbD – "Edith And The Kingpin", "Furry Sings The Blues", "Jericho", "Harry's House"

DADF#AD – "Free Man In Paris", "Big Yellow Taxi", "Both Sides Now"

DGBGBD – "Morning Morgantown", "The Circle Game", "Little Green"

Getting in tune: Joni poses for *Vogue* magazine, 1968

LADY OF THE CANVAS

A brief guide to the art of Joni Mitchell

"PAINTING is a completely different mental process," Joni told *The New York Times* in 2000. "It completely clears my mind until I get to the point where I have no thoughts. I get the same charge from juxtaposition of colours as I do from juxtaposition of chords."

You know her painting style intimately, and probably better than you know many 20th-century painters... Joni Mitchell's art graces many of her albums, from *Song To A Seagull* via *Clouds*, *Ladies Of The Canyon* to *Hissing...*, *Mingus* and *Turbulent Indigo*. The cover to CSN's *So Far*? That's a Joni original too, and you've probably already heard her famous quote – "I'm a painter first, and a musician second."

A second, lesser-heard soundbite is more illuminating: "I have always thought of myself as a painter derailed by circumstance," she said in 2000. Her formal art training at an art school in Calgary, Alberta, lasted only one year, and yet it is circumstance – her status as a world-famous musician – that allowed her access to the subjects that have come to define her style. Her impressive portfolio includes striking, confident portraits of her stellar contemporaries and collaborators, including Graham Nash, Bob Dylan and a stunning neoclassical oil study of Miles Davis, admired by the subject, who would apparently often drop in to chat. ("[*Miles*] would talk painting, but never music.") She's exhibited, too. Her 2000 show at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Canada, attracted more than 1,000 visitors a day, and earned her the respect of the notoriously closed-ranks art world. Canadian critic Robert Enright described her work at the time as "a worldly version of a naïve artist, indifferent to art trends and the positioning that has so much to do with contemporary art". We think that sounds like a compliment.

To get a sense of her range, and the wide variety of styles and media she has worked with, your best port of call is the brilliant official website, *jonimitchell.com*. As well as providing well-written commentary on many pieces, this showcases some of her artwork dating back to her post-war childhood. ➤

PETER BROOKER/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK; JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES

TURN HER ON: SHE'S ON VIDEO

...well, on DVD and Blu-ray at least. A visual history of Joni Mitchell

WHILE you can happily waste hours on YouTube, picking through grainy footage of our heroine, Joni Mitchell is not well represented by official video product. Her early years are particularly ill-served. There's only a handful of DVD releases out there, but the good news is they are widely available, and can be snapped up cheap. Here's our pick:

THE LAST WALTZ (1976)

Another excuse to buy/dig out the greatest rock movie ever, if only to put Joni in the context of the musicians around her. She features alongside Bob, Van, Neil and more at The Band's farewell gig at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom on Thanksgiving Day, 1976. Her three solo spots – "Coyote", "Shadows And Light" and "Furry Sings The Blues" (available in full glory on the recent 40th Anniversary edition) – are stunning.

SHADOWS AND LIGHT (1979)

Unquestionably the best live document of Joni at her questing, jazzist peak, this live DVD (issued in 2004 but still out there) is a must-buy. The highlights are many, framed by the telepathic interplay between Joni and the shit-hot musicians in her band (Jaco Pastorius and Pat Metheny in particular are incredible to watch). It does get pretentious, though: ice skating and artful old footage of James Dean make unwelcome appearances, and rather puncture the musical momentum.

REFUGE OF THE ROADS (1983)

A slight 60-minute document of Joni's early-'80s explorations, reissued on DVD in 2008. Very much of its time, you get live-in-the-studio footage, artfully lit and delivered without fuss, alongside interview excerpts. Some on-the-road Super-8-style material adds a sense of intimacy. The great, intense version of "For Free" is a highlight.

JONI MITCHELL: A LIFE STORY – WOMAN OF HEART AND MIND (2003)

This 120-minute exploration of her story from coffee-bar folkie and beyond is a touch hagiographical, but it's still more than worth your while as a go-to primer. Well paced, featuring tantalising snippets of vintage footage, including a 1970 BBC2 special, and talking heads David Crosby, James Taylor and Herbie Hancock, it paints a great picture of her development as an artist and musician. These are broad strokes, though – don't expect in-depth analysis of every album.

PAINTING WITH WORDS AND MUSIC (2004)

This 1998 concert collects 19 tracks for a brilliant come-one, come-all celebration of her career. Surrounded by her artwork, and in front of a small, select audience, Joni holds court and sparks in stellar fashion – although her vocals can be more scratchy than smooth and smoky. Larry Klein marshals a great band; "The Magdalene Laundries" and "Woodstock" are beautiful.

A CASE OF YOU!

A brief guide to Joni rarities and collectables.

BY MARK BENTLEY

THE one we all want, of course, is **Blue**. Like *Astral Weeks*, *Forever Changes* et al, Joni's fourth LP is a sanctified classic, acknowledged as a must-have for serious record collectors. Finding a copy isn't a problem. It's finding *the* copy. As the discognoscenti put it, finding a 'time machine' version is the holy grail item. One still-sealed version, never disturbed from its plastic shrinkwrap, sold for £300+ in 2018.

Down the scale a bit, a very fine first vinyl US 'Santa Maria' pressing, with textured sleeve, deep indigo inner and Blue Note-cool cover photo, will set you back $60+. Superb UK copies can make similar amounts, and the prized original Japanese version, with the distinctive vertical paper 'obi' strip intact, is priced around $100+. Not – by the standard of some original vinyl records these days – ridiculously expensive.

Why? Joni's stuff isn't as slavishly sought after as The Beatles, the Stones or Dylan. Her collector fan base is probably more like those of

MICHAEL MONTFORT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Joni (fourth from left) joins a stellar cast on stage for The Band's 1976 Winterland Ballroom show in San Francisco, as seen in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*

Steely Dan or her beloved jazz artists, where the music – and the quality of the audio – is far more important than some label error or sleeve misprint.

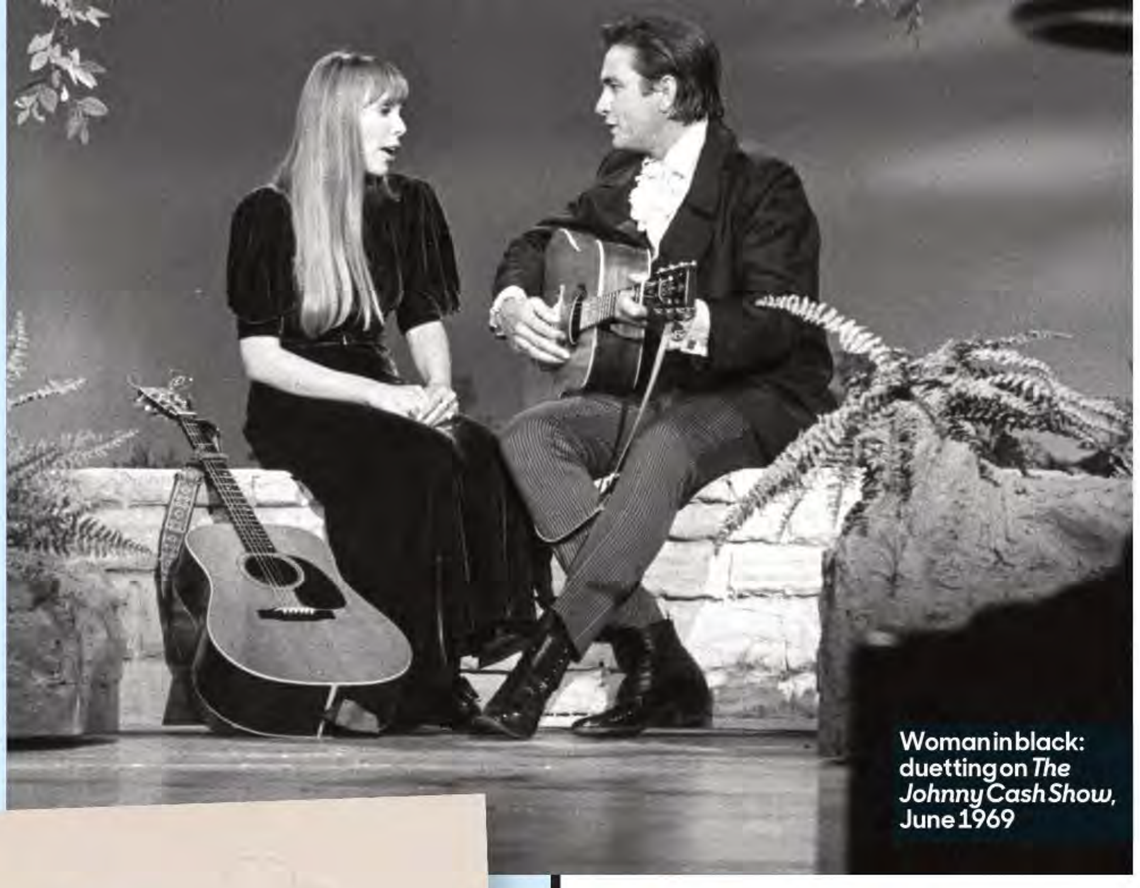
Joni's an audiophile favourite. Her music has always been expertly recorded and meticulously produced. And so it is that some specialist repressings of old albums are actually more sought after than the originals themselves. *Blue*, *Hissing...* and *Court And Spark* regularly turn up on "best-sounding albums of all time" forums. And these folk want the very finest-sounding products, to play on their very fine-sounding equipment.

It's the reason why the mail-order-only 1983 **Nimbus Supercut** audiophile pressing of *Hissing...* can make £150+ – which is probably 10 times the value of a 1975 original. It's the reason a sealed 180gm 2007 Rhino remaster of *Blue* is regularly listed for sale at $100+. And it's the logic behind the highest-priced Joni collectables out there: boxset **Clarity Test Pressings** of *Blue* and *Court And Spark*, from the mid-2000s. These sets comprised four single-sided discs, to be played at 45rpm, and on heavyweight 200gm vinyl. Only 40 of each were made, and they were never officially released. They can top $1,000. The formula is simple: rarity plus quality equals price.

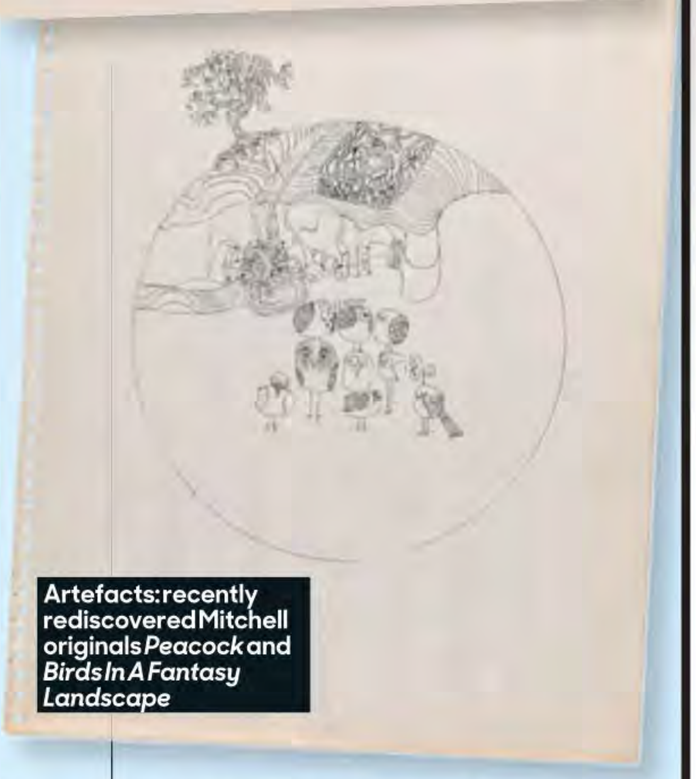
The fact that Joni's back catalogue has been well served by reissues and good-quality repressings has kept the price of originals affordable, particularly that stunning run of '70s stuff. Even from premium retailers you can pick up excellent-condition original UK copies of, say, **For The Roses** or **Ladies Of The Canyon** for £25 or so. A near-mint-condition **Hejira** will push £20, and there are "mint unplayed" originals of **Mingus** available widely for half that. Eighties stuff remains cheapish, and interestingly – with '90s vinyl very much *a thing* – her most valuable original LP pressing is probably 1991's **Night Ride Home**, on Geffen. You'll need at least £75 to catch that.

She's not known as a singles artist, so 7"s make good collectables, too. You can score the UK 45rpm of **"Chelsea Morning"** for £15, while debut single, 1968's **"Night In The City"**, on the steamboat Reprise label, is a lovely £20+ item. (Look out for the French versions, with stunning picture sleeves, which can make £40.)

As always, promo or authenticated autographed versions of all her output will go much, much higher. But if you're in the market for a serious Joni colltectable, have you thought about artwork? As Joni herself has said: "I'm a painter first, and a musician second..." Prints are widely available through a number of online galleries and sources, and official website *jonimitchell.com* regales fans with an exclusive storefront, a searchable archive, and even links to auction listings on third-party sites. Failing that, you could always put one of those beautiful LP covers in a frame...



Woman in black: duetting on *The Johnny Cash Show*, June 1969

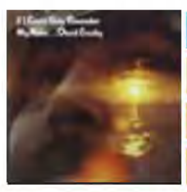


Artefacts: recently rediscovered Mitchell originals *Peacock* and *Birds In A Fantasy Landscape*

OTHER SIDES NOW

Joni the collaborator

FROM duetting with Johnny Cash on "Long Black Veil" on TV in 1969 to "Tears Are Not Enough" – the Canadian Allstars' contribution to the 1985 *We Are The World* benefit album – Joni has appeared on some diverse releases. We reckon these are the best Joni 'diaspora' – sundry recordings where she features strongly and that are certainly worth seeking out...



DAVID CROSBY: IF I COULD ONLY REMEMBER MY NAME (1971)

A gloriously airy, meditative, endlessly inventive record, featuring Young, Stills, Jerry Garcia, Jefferson Airplane and more. As a bonus, you get Joni's crystalline backing vocals on two key tracks: "Laughing" and "What Are Their Names".

JAMES TAYLOR: MUD SLIDE SLIM AND THE BLUE HORIZON (1971)

A commercial juggernaut, Taylor's third album was the apogee of the radio-friendly singer-songwriter movement. Alongside The Memphis Horns, you'll find Joni on "Long Ago And Far Away", "Love Has Brought Me Around" and the standard "You've Got A Friend". The Carole King connection goes further: Joni also appears on "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?", as heard on *Tapestry*.

JIMMY WEBB: LETTERS (1972), LAND'S END (1974)

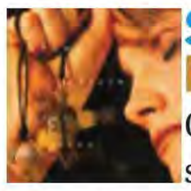
The songwriter's songwriter, Jimmy Webb recorded a clutch of precious solo albums, and Joni features on these two mid-'70s efforts, on "Simile" and "Feet In The Sunshine". Via her Asylum label connections, Joni also appears on a long-lost effort from the same period. Rod Taylor's self-titled album, released in 1973, stars Bonnie Bramlett, Ry Cooder, Jesse Ed Davis, Andrew Gold and Joni, on backing vocals on "Making A Way" and "Something Old".

ERIC ANDERSEN: BE TRUE TO YOU (1975)

Amid drop-in guest appearances on Graham Nash's *Wild Tales*, Jackson Browne's *For Everyman* and Joan Baez's *Gracias A La Vida*, Joni collaborated on two albums with this well-connected Greenwich Village songwriter, whose songs had been recorded by Dylan and Johnny Cash. She's featured on no less than five tracks here, of comfortable, introspective folk.

INDIO: BIG HARVEST (1989)

Indio is one Gordon Peterson, a native of Hamilton, Ontario, whose environmentally conscious 1989 album was fired by a Top 10 Canadian hit ("Hard Sun"). Joni appears on three tracks: "Big Harvest", "Hard Sun" and "My Eyes". After the album's release, Peterson quit the music business for good, and this became a serious collector's item.



SHAWN COLVIN: FAT CITY (1992)

Colvin's stunning second album of callus-hard Americana was co-produced by Larry Klein, and its cast list of musicians is incredible: Booker T Jones, Bruce Hornsby, Richard Thompson, Jim Keltner, David Lindley and the Hendrix of the banjo, Bela Fleck. Consistently strong throughout, it features Joni on the delicious "Object Of My Affection", playing percussion...

HERBIE HANCOCK: RIVER: THE JONI LETTERS (2007)

Friends and collaborators since *Mingus*, Joni and Herbie go way back. First, check out *Gershwin's World* (1998), the jazz maestro's take on the George and Ira songbook, where Joni contributes vocals to "Summertime" and "The Man I Love". Then drink deep on this sumptuous record, a love letter to Joni's compositional skills. Guest vocalists include Norah Jones, Tina Turner and Leonard Cohen. Joni takes vocal duties herself on "Tea Leaf Prophecy". ●

ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/ABC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Stop Me ...if you've heard this one before

1974: In the studio with Joni Mitchell! Guitarist ROBBEN FORD recalls that "she was like a little girl with crayons"

LA Express live with Joni Mitchell, London, April 1974: (l–r) Tom Scott, Victor Feldman and Robben Ford

I WAS living in LA, playing guitar with Jimmy Witherspoon, the blues singer. I'd been with 'Spoon for about two years and I decided to go off on my own. In June 1973, I'd played at an event called the Guitar Explosion at the Hollywood Bowl. Max Bennett, the bassist for the LA Express, who played on *Court And Spark*, saw me there, so did Roger Kellaway, who was the pianist on the first tour I did with Joni. They both recommended me to Tom Scott and John Guerin as a possible guitarist for the group. The day I was leaving Jimmy Witherspoon, I was waiting in the office of the management company we were both signed to – I'd been called in – and I got a call from Tom Scott, asking me if I wanted a job. I said no – I wanted to do my own thing – but Tom said, "Why don't I just bring the records by? Check 'em out, let's see what you think." So he brought over copies of *Court And Spark* and the first LA Express album, we listened to them and then Tom said, "We're at A&M tomorrow. Why don't you come over and just play with the band?" I was very headstrong about jazz at this point, and I wasn't really familiar with Joni's music or any of the musicians. All the same, the next day I went over to the studio. They asked me to go on tour with Joni and the LA Express and I wound up saying yes.

Joni was an absolute goddess, she was beautiful! She and John Guerin, the drummer, had pretty recently connected. They were obviously in love and having a ball together, so it couldn't have been a more cheerful scene. Everyone was very happy. They were all successful studio musicians, all very accomplished, and Joni loved having these guys around. In the past, she had a rolling group of very close associates working with her, guys like Stills or Crosby or whoever, but this was the first time she'd got a ready-made band around her.

When I first joined the group, *Court And Spark* was done, so initially I was brought in strictly to do the tour. We rehearsed for two weeks in Los Angeles, and then we went on the road for the most part of nine months all over the States. A live album came out of the tour, *Miles Of Aisles*.

My first experience working with Joni in the studio was on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* – and again the vibe was always very good and professional. She would ask you to do things that weren't necessarily your instincts. I remember when we were recording the opening song, "In France They Kiss On Main Street". Honestly? I was still new to recording, very young and inexperienced. I had my guitar plugged into an amp in the studio, with the microphones on it, I had headphones on and I started playing. Then Joni said, "Hey, Robben? I'd like to try something. Plug the electric guitar into a fuzz tone, into the console." To me, that was the most foreign request I could have imagined. I said, "What? You gotta be kidding me!" But anyway, we plugged it in. Literally everyone was sitting around the console, and I'm in the middle, riffing on my guitar and it sounded very cool; it turned out different and unique. But Joni wasn't looking for the ordinary. She was always reaching for something new and she was always very gentle about the way she suggested things. Her demeanour was never stressed, never rushed. There was never any attitude, it was always, "Why don't we just try it..?"

> *"She was always very gentle... There was never any attitude"*
>
> ROBBEN FORD

I remember visiting her later in the studio when she was recording *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. She was playing some synthesised keyboard overdubs on one of the songs. She was sitting in a chair that was quite high up off the ground, and as she was playing, underneath her legs were swinging in the air! She was like a little girl with crayons, she just had that freedom. At the same time, she has a brilliant mind – she is not afraid to go anywhere with her music.

I was 22 when I toured with Joni, and then I had my 23rd birthday on the road with George Harrison. It was really overwhelming for me because I'm from a very small town, and I was broke and a struggling musician in Los Angeles. Suddenly I was hurled into this very high situation, hanging around with these sophisticated grown-ups! I always thought they were very kind to me... I felt like they let me learn on their time and dime. And Joni was super, super cool.

WILL IRELAND/FUTURE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK; MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**

JONI MITCHELL

"*Everything comes and goes...*" As she curates her legacy with her *Archives* set, the full story of Joni Mitchell: lady of the canyon and singer-songwriter supreme

VIVIEN KILLILEA/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE MUSIC CENTER

Including...

"STUNNINGLY GOOD, RIGHT OFF THE BAT"

David Crosby is amazed by the arrival of a major new talent

"MY WORK SHOULD HAVE VITALITY – I FELT I SHOULD WRITE IN MY OWN BLOOD"

In mid-career, Joni reflects on her achievements

"SHE SUGGESTED A SERIES OF JAM SESSIONS. IT FELT LIKE AN ELABORATE PRANK!"

Herbie Hancock, Chaka Khan and Joni's return to music, 2020

ARCHIVE INTERVIEWS AND IN-DEPTH REVIEWS
OF EVERY JONI MITCHELL ALBUM FROM
SONG TO A SEAGULL TO *SHINE*

More from **UNCUT**...