

JONI MITCHELL

WOMAN OF HEART AND MIND

When you've released a generation-defining masterpiece, as **JONI MITCHELL** did with *Blue*, what exactly do you do for an encore? In Mitchell's case, embark upon an extraordinary run of albums – *FOR THE ROSES*, *COURT AND SPARK* and *THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS* – which pulled her far away from her folk roots and expanded her confessional writing into something tougher and more expansive. Graeme Thomson talks to friends and collaborators to discover fresh insights into these canonical records and the powerful and complex creative processes of their creator. “They're all classics in my book,” says Neil Young

Photo by JOEL BERNSTEIN

PLUS!
JONI AT
NEWPORT:
THE FULL
STORY
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Joni Mitchell at Halfmoon Bay, British Columbia, September 1972, in a photo taken just after the one she chose for the cover of *For The Roses*



At home in LA, circa 1970



With James Taylor, 1971

“It’s one pinch-me moment after another”

Patrick Milligan, co-producer of Rhino’s reissue series, outlines the aims of the project, Mitchell’s close involvement – and the treasures to come

“THE typical approach for reissues is to look at original records and say, ‘OK, there’s stuff we can add for expanded versions, remastered with additional material.’ But even before I knew Joni, I felt somehow she doesn’t want to alter her records and add things. The cliché

is putting a moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. I thought, ‘What if we do something that included that material but wasn’t adding it to the records?’ I pitched the idea to her manager, Elliot Roberts, and he liked it. So, we’ve been doing this project by doing a box of the original albums followed by a box of the archive material that goes with that era. “Elliot got Joni on board, but unfortunately, he passed [in June 2019] before we got too far into the project. So, we started meeting with Joni directly. The first set



in 2020 [Volume 1: The Early Years] started with the 1963 tape recorded in Saskatoon at a radio station by a friend of hers, Barry Bowman. His kids found the tape in a box in the garage. He had it transferred and got in touch with Joni and – bless his heart, this meant the world to her – he didn’t want anything for it, he just thought she should have it. She flew him to LA with the tape, and she loved it. It really opened her eyes to her early years, which she’d always discounted a bit. She said, ‘I really want this to be my next record,’ and so we did *Early Joni – 1963* as a breakout on vinyl and she



Recording her debut album in 1967



did a new sketch for the cover.

“I think that put her in a mood to be a bit more open-minded on some of the other stuff. In the past she’s not been that open to looking into the vault and putting this stuff out. She told me when we were talking about this, ‘Well, I don’t know what you’re going to use, ‘cos I didn’t

leave anything behind.’ As I’ve gotten to be a little closer to her, I’ve been able to say, ‘Well, with all due respect, that’s not exactly true!’

“Basically, I’ve gone through this stuff and presented it to her, and she has said yea or nay. On volume two [The Reprise Years: 1968–1971] she did go through and say, ‘Well, I don’t think we need that version of this song and I don’t want that song.’ She took off three things. She is very much scrutinising this stuff and making the decisions. I mostly make CDs for her and take them to her. We don’t really listen to stuff together, but I’ll sit and talk to her about what the CD is and go over it with her. It’s fascinating for me as a fan. It’s one pinch-me moment after another.

“At this point, the next rarities box is five CDs. Without giving away too much, we have studio and live stuff. It should be out in spring 2023. I’m currently making some tweaks, and Joni has the sets to listen to. It depends on what she approves. The interesting arc about these boxes is hearing her develop as a performer and songwriter, but also how she is making records and how that is changing. That really informs the contents of the sets. It’s pretty cool, because this is Joni’s current way of making records. It’s not what she used to do, but she’s out there and she’s still a presence. I can’t speak for her, but I think she feels that way too. She really loves the response that these have gotten, it’s meaning a lot to her. She felt for years that she was underappreciated, so it’s a wonderful thing.”

if you gave her gems and pearls, she could put them together and make something wonderful out of what she received.”

The cumulative effect on the music she made during this period was enormous. “It’s a tremendous amount of ground that she covers in these years,” says Milligan. “It’s Beatles-like. Part of that is that she starts working more with outside musicians. It’s her collaborating more and definitely getting into a bit more of a jazzy side, and that develops as the albums go on.”

This creative quantum leap had a profound commercial dividend. These four years yielded Mitchell’s only Top 10 American hit single, a multi-million-selling album, arena tours and the kind of fame which eventually sent her diving into the weeds. If *Blue* articulated the longings of her peers, what followed made her a rock star for everyone. What is remarkable is that she achieved mainstream supremacy while becoming more, rather than less, adventurous. It was a heady time. A perfect storm. “We had the best of everything,” says Ellis Sorkin. “The best studio, the best equipment, the best musicians, the best artist. You couldn’t really go wrong.”

JONI Mitchell released *Blue* in June 1971. Following its ground-shifting impact on both audience and

artist, not least her sense of exposure at having such deeply personal songs picked over in public, she left Los Angeles and moved north to a little stone house in the wilds near Vancouver in British Columbia. There she read, wrote, questioned. Confused and deflated by success, she sought answers from philosophy, music, self-help books, and solace in the simplicity of the elements.

In Canada, the songs on *For The Roses* began to bloom. When she set off on tour in February 1972, Mitchell already had her next album written, and performed most of the material as she played dates around the States and in Europe. Her fractious romantic relationship with James Taylor had ended the previous year. Now she began an unfulfilling affair with her touring partner, Jackson Browne, whom she later deemed a “leering narcissist”.

Such personal upheavals were grist to the mill. “She said once to me, ‘Whenever I’m in a relationship and it breaks up, that’s when I do my best album,’” confirms her former keyboard player Roger Kellaway. On *Court And Spark*, her tryst with Browne was churned over on “Car On A Hill” and “Trouble Child”. Before that, on *For*



With Elliot Roberts and Jackson Browne, 1972

is really getting back into the swing of things.”

The latest spate of legacy work on Mitchell’s back catalogue focuses on three studio albums – *For The Roses*, *Court And Spark*, *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* – and the double live album, *Miles Of Aisles*. “They are all classics in my book,” says her old friend and compatriot, Neil Young. “I listened to every album as it came out. The musicians she played with were always above my abilities. She had grown from folk to jazz and in between, creating a unique kind of sound that I loved to listen to over and over.”

Presented with the problem of following the generation-defining *Blue*, Mitchell embarked on an extraordinary run of records which pulled her far away from her folk roots and expanded her confessional writing into something tougher and more expansive. Working with LA Express, a five-piece group of skilled and versatile fusion players, Mitchell infused her music with rich musical textures, complex string and horn arrangements, and an overt jazz influence.

“She still wrote by herself, but now opened up the recording process to a bunch of virtuosos,” says Ellis Sorkin, who engineered *Court And Spark* and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. Harnessing the power of the collective, Mitchell expanded her ambitions, shaping and manipulating sound and texture, relishing the push and pull between control and release. “She valued spontaneity, until she got her hands on the music after the fact,” says LA Express guitarist Larry Carlton. “With her great musicality she got to shape the final product off of our spontaneity. That’s where her brilliance shines through. I always like to make sure that she gets all the credit! She was such a great musical editor, and



“SHE GREW FROM FOLK TO JAZZ AND IN BETWEEN”

NEIL YOUNG



It is June 2022, and Joni Mitchell is in a playback studio in Los Angeles, listening to her most successful album, *Court And Spark*, being radically reborn. “I love the sound of my voice,” she tells Ken Caillat, the engineer overseeing new Dolby Atmos mixes of four albums Mitchell released between 1972 and 1976, rendering them as an immersive sound experience. “I can’t believe how good my voice sounds!” Aged 78, and still recovering from the effects of the aneurysm she suffered in 2015, she is sufficiently moved to start dancing. “She was thrilled,” Caillat tells *Uncut*. “And we were thrilled that she was thrilled.”

A month later, on July 24, Mitchell stunned the music world by performing in public for the first time in 20 years at the Newport folk festival. Appearing alongside Brandi Carlile, Marcus Mumford, Wynonna Judd and sundry other friends, she played guitar and sang a slew of her classic compositions as well as covers of “Love Potion No 9” and “Summertime”.

These two wildly cheering events were closely connected, believes Patrick Milligan, director of A&R at Rhino Records, who has been working closely with Mitchell overseeing the ongoing reissue programme. “Joni has been going through therapy to get beyond her aneurysm, and in the three years I’ve known her, the improvement has been incredible,” he explains. “She told me, ‘Working on these projects has helped me.’ I think we’re going to be hearing more from her all the time. She



Being interviewed in Amsterdam, 1972

The Roses, Taylor's heroin addiction is referenced explicitly in "Banquet", a cool-eyed measuring of whatever gets us all through the night – "Some turn to Jesus, some turn to heroin" – and only slightly more obliquely in the sinister groove of "Cold Steel And Sweet Fire". "Red water in the bathroom sink/Fever and the scum brown bowl... Bashing in veins for peace".

Back to business in California, Mitchell left Reprise and signed to Asylum, David Geffen's new record label. Geffen was a friend but he was also ambitious, for himself and for his new signing. Mitchell responded to his overtures by writing "You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio", which gently mocked the concept of a hit single while proving extremely effective at delivering one. It reached No 25, her first Top 40 success. "When she went to Asylum, she was obviously getting pressure to come up with hit singles," says Milligan. "It's interesting hearing how much focus those songs got [in the studio]."

She recorded *For The Roses* at A&M in Hollywood. Self-produced, with the assistance of Henry Lewy, it was released in November 1972 and documents both where Mitchell had been and where she was heading. The somewhat bombastic fanfare of reeds and woodwinds midway through "Judgement Of



"AT ASYLUM SHE WAS PRESSURED FOR HITS"

PATRICK MILLIGAN



Ambitious: David Geffen, 1972

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



The Moon & Stars (Ludwig's Tune)"; the big drum roll crashing into "Blonde In The Bleachers" at the precise moment she starts lamenting the vagaries of the "rock and roll man", followed by a burst of spacey electric guitar courtesy of Stephen Stills; the interlocking grooves on "Cold Steel And Sweet Fire"; the breezy tuned-in pop of "You Turn Me On"; the jazzily repetitive licks and percussive roll of "Woman Of Heart And Mind" – these were sure signs that Mitchell was beginning to think more deeply about the process of record-making.

Bruised by *Blue*, the album featured a fistful of songs about the industry and its venal ways. As well as "Bleachers" (half self-portrait, half groupie's lament) and "You Turn Me On", "Judgement Of The Moon & Stars (Ludwig's Tune)" reflects Mitchell's artistic resolve through the prism of Beethoven's struggles. Determining to let her work be judged by posterity, Mitchell reaffirms her gifts and vocation in the face of critical barbs: "They're going to aim the hoses on you, show 'em you won't expire".

The beautiful title track was inspired by the rustling of the wind in the arbutus trees outside her house, reminding her of the seductive danger of a round of applause. The song outlines the compromises and demands of the media circus, the dance between art and commerce, privacy and openness. The title phrase likens the acclaimed artist to a thoroughbred horse, trained "to run for the roses". Chasing prizes and adulation in its prime, it is discarded once it has outlived its usefulness. Mitchell was already seeing parallels with her own career. It was going to get a whole lot worse – or better, depending on your perspective.

MITCHELL played very few shows in 1973. She refocused on her music and occasionally lived the life of high Hollywood, dining with Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty while attempting to fend off their advances.

The latter is likely the subject of "The Same Situation", one of the most beautiful songs on *Court And Spark*, a portrait of a woman's insecurities in the face of a Lothario who's "had lots of lovely women/Now you turn your gaze to me/Weighing the beauty and the imperfection/To see if I'm worthy".

Musically, she was exploring more deeply an interest which had been percolating for years. "She and I both were very taken with jazz," says David Crosby, who had been instrumental in bringing Mitchell to LA in 1967, later producing her first album; they'd been lovers and remained friends. "I think some of it was my influence, but by no means all. She influenced me with her guitar tunings, and if I influenced her on jazz then the more the better, because she went whole hog in that direction. The more complex and intricate her charts got, all to the good."

She was further encouraged by other musician friends. A prodigy who had been working across the Los Angeles music scene since his teens, horn player Tom Scott had been a key presence on *For The Roses*. "What can you say about Tom?" says Larry Carlton. "We're the same age, and when I broke into the studios actively in 1970, he was already an established horn player in town doing sessions and movie calls. He's one of those unique upper-echelon musicians who only come along once in a while."

In 1973 Scott formed the LA Express with Carlton on guitar, Max Bennett on bass, Joe Sample on keyboards and recent Byrd John Guerin on drums. The smoky shuffle of "Sneakin' In The Back" on the group's



Fine diners: Warren Beatty...



...and Jack Nicholson

eponymous debut album has been widely sampled, most notably by Massive Attack ("Blue Lines") and Madonna ("Justify My Love"). It was a band of virtuosi. Sample and Carlton were also members of versatile jazz ensemble The Crusaders. Bennett had worked with everyone from Stan Kenton and Ella Fitzgerald to Frank Zappa. Guerin, who was Mitchell's romantic partner between 1974 and 1976, had recorded with Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee but fully embraced the new age of jazz-rock fusion. In his presence, Mitchell's interest deepened, falling hard in particular for Miles Davis and Duke Ellington's alto sax man, Johnny Hodges.

Through her connection with Scott – and urged by *For The Roses* drummer Russ Kunkel to find "a jazz drummer" to match her songs – Mitchell went to see LA Express play at The Baked Potato, a club in Studio City. Shortly afterwards, she called them into the studio. "She went crazy for the band and so she asked if we would like to play on a couple of songs on her upcoming album," the late Max

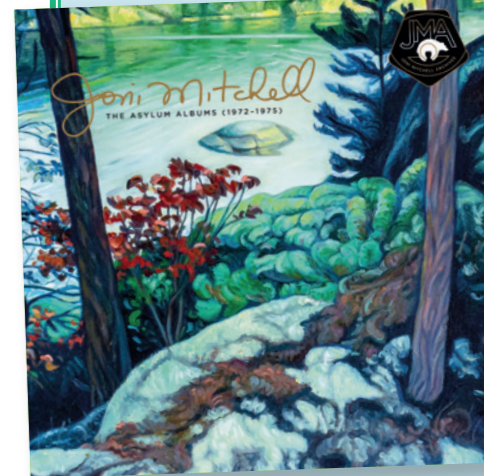
Bennett told *Uncut* in 2015, recalling that the first track they tried at A&M was "Help Me".

The sweetly soulful "Help Me" was at the vanguard of Mitchell's new jazz-flecked approach, while lyrically it finds her trying – not without reservations – to embrace a similarly freeform kind of love, both loose and tight: "We love our lovin'", she sings. "But not like we love our freedom". She played the musicians a cassette of the song featuring her guitar and vocal, and they developed their parts. They had a take within hours. "That was the very first thing we did," said Bennett. "I remember it so well. We came in, she played a bit of it and Joe Sample and I looked at each other like, 'Is this gonna work?'" It was so different to what we were used to."

It took a while for each party to feel comfortable. Mitchell was accustomed to painting most of the musical colours herself, while the band had to find a sweet spot between virtuosity and service. "There was no rehearsal," says Larry Carlton. "There were no charts when we got

to the studio. We just listened to Joni's demo tapes and wrote out our own charts for the rhythm section and went out and started running the tunes. She had comments as we were getting our parts together, but not a lot. We really went out as a unit and started figuring out how to make the song. What comes to mind right now is the relationship, both musically and personally, that John Guerin and Max Bennett had. They did hundreds of sessions together and they were also best friends. There was just a connection between the two of them when they started putting their parts together for a song, and it made it lock really quick. They both had personalities in their playing."

"She respected the band and we respected her completely and everybody got along just great,"



BUYER'S GUIDE THE ASYLUM YEARS, 1972-1975

FOR THE ROSES (ASYLUM, 1972)

A transitional record, perhaps, but a fine one. The intricate piano ballads ("Banquet", "See You Sometime", "Lesson In Survival") throw back to *Blue*, but elsewhere Mitchell reaches for new horizons. "You Turn Me On I'm A Radio", with its breezy harmonica, lush vocal harmonies, easygoing acoustic groove and quick fade, illustrates how readily she could craft a pop hit to order. **8/10**

COURT AND SPARK (ASYLUM, 1974)

Featuring big hit "Help Me" and her winking tribute to David Geffen, "Free Man In Paris", her first collaboration with LA Express is lush, rhythmic and panoramic; the songs uniformly fantastic, the arrangements ravishing. The intensity of old remains, but now both words and music are imbued with dazzling range and colour. **9/10**

MILES OF AISLES (ASYLUM, 1974)

Double live set offering sometimes radical band reworkings of classics ("Woodstock" is positively funkadelic) alongside poised solo performances and two new songs: "Jericho", later recorded for *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, and "Love And Money". The ambience is muted and the tracks lean heavily towards early albums, but it's a terrific souvenir of a landmark tour. **8/10**

THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS (ASYLUM, 1975)

Prince's favourite album, a slyly seductive blend of jazz, AOR, torch song and technological experimentation. Lyrically, Mitchell digs mercilessly beneath the manicured values and pieties of her friends, her audience, her world. A gateway to further avant-garde adventures, but a bold, beautiful and brilliant record in its own right. **9/10**



Onstage with the LA Express at the New Victoria Theatre, London, April 20, 1974: (l-r) Tom Scott, Victor Feldman and Robben Ford

Bennett recalled. “We were all jazz musicians, not locked into any certain thing. She was totally impressed with that. She’ll skip beats and stuff, just on purpose to make the song the way she wants, and that never bothered us.”

All the musicians relished her unique musical qualities. “As a jazz-influenced player – I’m not a be-bopper but I love harmony and have since I got into jazz aged 14 – to me it was just like playing with a very sophisticated keyboard player,” says Carlton. “You use your ears because you love the harmony and you recognise where the harmony is going. It really wasn’t any big challenge; it was just unique.”

Roger Kellaway, who toured with Mitchell in 1974, plays a piano chord down the line. “This is a G major triad with a C in the bass,” he says. “That is one of the main harmonic staples of her music, and that comes right out of Stravinsky. I don’t know if she knew that, but I did! It was another notch of appreciation for me. I think she is probably the greatest songwriter of... I was going to say the 20th century, but I don’t mean to take Jerome Kern and Gershwin out of the mix. I don’t even know how to put a category on it, because she is outside of pop and rock. She has unique music. More than unique.”

Digging into the multi-tracks of these albums, Patrick Milligan has been struck by the extent to which Mitchell was “becoming not just more adventurous as a songwriter, but also as a record maker”. On *Court And Spark*, the layered complexities of “Down To You” exemplify this shift. “Something that fascinates me is just to hear the development of her making records,” says Milligan. “She is always in charge and she’s experimenting with things. You’ll hear her do a vocal of what she wants as a horn part or something like that. It’s fascinating to hear her as a producer in the studio. I don’t think she gets a lot of credit for that.”



“SHE IS OUTSIDE POP AND ROCK... UNIQUE”
ROGER KELLAWAY



Roger Kellaway and Robben Ford



ONE of the recordings under consideration for volume three of the archive series, due next year, is a piece known as “The Piano Suite”. “It was done right before *Court And Spark*,” says Ken Caillat. “It’s like a 20-minute piano piece with all the songs from the album, but just instrumental. She had all these licks which became string parts or horn parts, she had them all in her head. It’s just amazing. She is so articulate.”

“She knew what she wanted, always,” says Sorkin. “The basics went down fairly easily, especially on *Court And Spark*. Everybody would play live. The band would be there and she’d usually be in the control room with us. Once in a blue moon she did a bit of a guide vocal. It was quite orderly, compared to *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, which felt like it evolved as it went.”

Carlton recalls the sessions with LA Express lasting “at least five nights”. Later, the likes of Graham Nash, David Crosby, Wayne Perkins, Robbie Robertson, José Feliciano and Dennis Budimir came in to sing and play overdubs. “It was like a big family,” says Sorkin. “She

was friends with all those guys. It was a good time. Hanging out with her and Crosby and Nash in the control room, thinking, ‘I’m living history here!’”

Tom Scott, whose horn arrangements and overdubs are elemental to *Court And Spark*, was “very involved from the get-go, almost like a silent co-producer to some degree,” says Sorkin. “Joni always knew exactly what she wanted with everything, but Tom was very instrumental in creating the musical end of things. There were a lot of brilliant players, but he was primary.”

The results were revelatory, breathing colour into each corner of Mitchell’s songs, negotiating everything from the elegantly understated title track to the supple swing of

“Just Like A Train”, the upscale blowout of “Raised On Robbery” to the closing cover of Annie Ross’s funny-peculiar jazz romp, “Twisted”.

“We had great success with *Court And Spark*,” says Carlton. “I do remember loving the way it came out. That rhythm section really somehow gelled for Joni’s tunes, and of course, Tom Scott’s horn arrangements after the fact were impeccable. So: proud of that!”

The album was released on January 17, 1974. From the start, Mitchell envisaged LA Express joining her on tour, the most intense she’d undertaken. She played around 75 dates in 1974, spanning January to April and July to September. “She wanted us all to go with her, but myself and Joe Sample were still quite busy with The Crusaders and had commitments,” says Carlton. “We couldn’t upset that and make it look we were joining another band to tour. It wasn’t a difficult decision. It would have been fun, but the other options were things that were happening at the time.”

Replacements were quickly recruited. Young blues guitarist Robben Ford had earned his stripes playing with Jimmy Witherspoon and had appeared on the first LA Express record, while Roger Kellaway joined up on Fender Rhodes. “In 1974, my trio drummer was John Guerin,” says Kellaway. “He called me one day and told me Tom Scott was putting together a band for a Joni Mitchell tour. We started rehearsing, and 11 days later I had memorised the entire show. It’s the only show I’ve ever done in my life that I’ve completely memorised.”

Rehearsals took place at Studio Instrument Rentals in Los Angeles, where the entire band set up on sound stages. “Right from the beginning it was absolutely magical,” says Kellaway. “I didn’t know her music that well at the time, but I became much more interested. There’s a kind of circular, unending quality to Joni’s music. It’s what I call ‘water music’. It’s almost like there’s no ending, it just goes round and round, into the next song and the next song. Now, some of her songs, like ‘Both Sides Now’, come out where other people can easily access them, but many of her songs aren’t that way. They are simply water music. They go on and connect to one another.”

“We rehearsed for two weeks in Los Angeles and went on the road for the most part of nine months all over the US,” Robben Ford told *Uncut*. “First impressions? A goddess. An absolute goddess. She was beautiful, she was cheerful, she and John Guerin had pretty recently connected, and they were obviously in love and just having a ball together. It couldn’t have been a more cheerful scene; everyone was very happy in everything that they were doing. Joni was just loving having these musicians around.”

THE early shows took place during winter. On March 14, there was so much snow in Mitchell’s home town of Saskatoon that the truck carrying all the equipment couldn’t make it to the gig. “We actually played the concert on instruments from the local music store,” says Kellaway. “We got to go to her house and where she grew up and to see a lot of her paintings. She was easy to get to know. That ease carried



Dark horse: George Harrison on *The Dick Cavett Show*, 1971

through the rehearsals and the concerts. I don’t remember a single problem. I can even remember the soundchecks being fun, and they can be horrible. Joni was absolutely charming. No diva stuff. She was one of the guys, she just happened to be Joni Mitchell.”

After and between shows, Mitchell and Guerin tended to keep to themselves, but there were moments of group bonding. “We would finish a concert and we all decided we liked to bowl, so her manager would go to a bowling alley and keep it open so we could bowl,” Max Bennett recalled. “We had some sport, because being on the road is not as glamorous as people think.”

Each night LA Express played an opening set before joining Mitchell for the main show, which blended band and solo performances. They leaned into her songs, stretching them out. “I loved playing her music,” says Kellaway. “The structure of each piece was fixed, but in the moments where you had your solos you could improvise. In fact, that was expected. Joni is untrained. She had the strength to pick the LA Express, filled with every single member who is fully trained. That takes an extraordinary amount of courage. It could have been a train wreck, but it all worked very smoothly.”

“We were responsible for changing a lot of different things,” said Bennett. “She kept the format and the basics, harmonically speaking, but a lot of things were added to make it really better. ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ was really fun to play. It went through metamorphoses, we just kept adding little things on the road.”

In April, the tour came to London, for three concerts at the New Victoria Theatre. These were Mitchell’s first shows in the UK since 1972. That time, touring *For The Roses*, she performed alone with guitar, dulcimer and piano, demonstrably still the folk artist who had made *Blue* the summer before. This time she was backed by a furiously funky band. The shift left some people off balance. *Melody Maker* reviewer Steve Clarke, for one, wasn’t convinced that LA Express added much to the party, preferring the solo performances.

Others felt Mitchell was becoming a little too grand. The audience at the New Victoria Theatre was told she would leave the stage immediately if any photographs were taken. The same diklat was laid down at the afterparty, where Rod Stewart was in attendance. George Harrison come to one of the shows and afterwards invited the band back to his home. Mitchell declined. However, the rest of LA Express rolled up. “We stayed overnight in his castle in Henley-on-Thames,” says Kellaway. “That was an extraordinary experience. In one end was a 24-track studio, in which he had 17 guitars. I counted them!” They recorded two songs that night, “Hari’s On Tour (Express)” and “Simply Shady”, which ended up as the opening two tracks on Harrison’s next LP, *Dark Horse*.

BY the summer, Mitchell couldn’t avoid the fact that she had become a rock star. *Court And Spark* reached No 2 in the *Billboard* chart and sold two million copies in 1974 alone. When she returned to the road in early July, it was with a Top 10 hit under her belt, the swooning “Help Me” having peaked at No 7 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in June. “Free Man In Paris” climbed to No 22 by the end of the summer. The tour grew in length and pulling power as her popularity grew. Five nights at the 5,200 capacity Universal Amphitheatre sealed her rise from connoisseur’s choice to marquee name. “She was adored by everyone,” says Ken Caillat, who was recording the tour for a live record. “People yelled out, ‘I love you, Joni!’, and she would giggle.”

A certain swagger duly entered the shows. “Elliot Roberts was her manager,” says Kellaway. “He kept

JONI MITCHELL

encouraging me to be more rock'n'roll. Not just in bodily actions, but I ended up wearing over-the-knee boots and flashy coloured shirts. I remember doing a concert to 10,000 people and looking out and thinking, "These people are mine!"

A live album was planned to capitalise on her popularity. Caillat worked at Wally Heider's studio and taped several concerts on the West Coast on a mobile recording truck. "It feels like we did five or six shows, up and down California," he says, while Kellaway recalls: "We'd recorded that album nine times on tour, and Joni didn't like any of them!"

Even when Kellaway decided to jump ship, the mood didn't sour. "Tom Scott and I kind of agreed that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life doing this, and so I left the band," he says. "It was amicable. There was no bad feeling." Mitchell gave him a signed tour poster inscribed: 'Roll Over Beethoven and tell Kellaway the Blues!' Larry Nash was the pianist for the rest of the tour, which ended on September 14 with a show at Wembley Stadium, where Mitchell and the band supported Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young on a bill which included The Band and Jesse Colin Young.

The tour is captured on *Miles Of Aisles*, a double live album released at the end of 1974. Aside from two songs recorded in Berkeley, and one from Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, both from shows in early March, the album was recorded in July during the run at the Universal Amphitheatre. It offers a partial snapshot of the full concert experience. For a start, only one *Court And Spark* song, "People's Parties", was included, although Mitchell performed most of the record on the tour. "She was touring *Court And Spark* so obviously she was playing more songs from that album in concert, but she didn't want to repeat too many of the songs on a subsequent album," says Patrick Milligan. "It's a pretty edited-down version of the complete show and presented not to be too repetitive of *Court And Spark*." Volume three in the rarities series will include many more live recordings from the 1974 tour.

"The running order of the concert was much different from the album running order," says Caillat. "One day she might start the show with one song, the next day with another. I was also disappointed that they left so much talking out. She was always putting her guitar into these strange tunings, and to cover the tunings she would tell stories. We had the back of the truck open on these warm summer nights to hear her music playing and



"SHE WASN'T LOOKING FOR THE ORDINARY" ROBBENFORD



her telling these stories. It was a thrill. On the album, all the stories were gone. Back in '74 they had time issues with vinyl; they had to cut it down to maintain a decent volume on the record."

These grumbles aside, the authentic live sound was largely unaltered in post-production. Caillat thinks a couple of lead vocals were redone; Sorkin – who helped mix the record – isn't sure. "We did some minimal touch-up overdubs," he says. "I remember on 'The Circle Game', they brought in everybody from the studio hallway, including myself, to sing background. I'm not a singer, but they wanted people who didn't sound like real singers. I had a musician friend who came in and it's permanently etched in his life!"

The original version of "Big Yellow Taxi", from *Ladies Of The Canyon*, had given Mitchell her only British hit single in 1970. In the States, however, it was the live version from *Miles Of Aisles* which became a hit. Its chart success propelled the album to No 2 in February 1975, four months after its release.

By then, Mitchell was thinking about the next record. Having demoed many of the songs acoustically, she retained the core of LA Express when she returned to A&M to record the follow-up to *Court And Spark*. Tom Scott wasn't around this time, and John Guerin played a more prominent role in the arrangements, even co-writing the title track. Henry Lewy and Sorkin were again manning the boards, though Lewy's input was waning.

"Henry was getting a bit elderly by the time *Hissing...* came along," says Sorkin. "He was starting to have a lot of problems with arthritis and I ended up doing quite a lot more than technically being the assistant. Joni and I would spend some time alone before Henry got there. It was always just mind-bending how this woman was so intelligent about everything. She was talking about stuff that was going way above my head. She was crazy-brilliant."

To begin with, the backing tracks were recorded the same way as *Court And Spark*. "The rhythm section live in the studio, no edits, no picking of different parts," says Larry Carlton. "That's the way we laid the tracks down."

It was clear, however, that Mitchell was consciously reacting against the popularity of her previous studio record. "*Court And Spark* was the most commercial success she had," says Sorkin. "I think even to her it was a little bit of a surprise how big it became. I picked up on it when we were starting *Hissing...* I know it was a reason why it was a complete departure in some ways. That was the beginning of her departure into jazz, Mingus and all those following records that were much less [commercially] successful."

"My first experience working with her in the studio was on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*," Robben Ford recalled. "She would ask you to do things that weren't necessarily your instincts. The opening song on the record is 'In France They Kiss On Main Street' and I'm doing all the riffing. I was very young and inexperienced but I figured: I'm plugging into an amp in the studio, put mics on it and I put on headphones and play the guitar. She said 'Uh Robben? Let's just plug the electric guitar into a fuzz tone, into the console.' This to me was the most foreign request I could've imagined. But we plug it in, everybody was sitting around the console and I'm sitting in the



Sunshine smile: backstage before opening for CSN&Y, Roosevelt Raceway, Westbury, New York, September 8, 1974

middle, and it turned out very cool, different and unique. She wasn't looking for the ordinary, she wasn't looking for what she'd heard before. She was always reaching and it was always very gently, there was never any attitude. Her demeanour was just fantastic, never stressed, never rushed."

It was as though the more mainstream Mitchell was becoming in terms of her audience appeal, the more sonically ambitious and experimental she was determined to be. The mesmeric "Don't Interrupt The Sorrow" built layer upon layer over an unspooling rhythm, like a piece of futuristic classical music. "It doesn't really have a dynamic range," says Ford, who played dobro on the track. "It doesn't go higher, it doesn't go lower, she has this groove that just keeps on going. Rather than things getting louder she just adds. There's this very interesting journey. It's a great, unusual piece of music and I'm very proud to have been on it."

The icy "Shadows And Light" comprised nothing but a stack of complex vocal harmonies and thick slabs of ARP and Moog synthesiser. "The Jungle Line", inspired by her musings on post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau, used a field recording of the Royal Drummers of Burundi (nobody seems quite sure of the original source) as the basis for the track. Mitchell looped the drums and overlaid vocals, synthesiser and guitar to form the song.

Listening back to multi-tracks of "The Jungle Line", Milligan says "you can physically hear her making that record. It was just amazing that she had the idea, to hear those drums and build a track around it. People do that all the time now, but certainly not then. It's arguably one of the earliest uses of sampling."

PLOT TWIST!

DURING Ken Caillat's recent meeting with Mitchell, the master storyteller revealed she's been working on her Hollywood ending. "I met Joni the other day and I still was pretty awestruck," says Caillat. "She is 78, she walks with a cane, but she has a great mind and she still tells so many stories. She told us that she'd bought a funeral plot in the cemetery. She said it was very expensive but very gorgeous, under a tree, with a grassy knoll. She said it cost so much money that she asked the people [at the cemetery] if they'd mind if she had a picnic there on occasion. So, she took some of her good friends and they picnicked on her future grave site. That's pretty clever, right? Before you spend eternity there, you can have a little afternoon delight on the lawn."

"She was an innovator," says Sorkin. "She gets credit for the tunings, but she maybe doesn't get as much credit for the other stuff, the overdubs and production."

The overdubs on *Hissing...* were by far the more complex and time-consuming part of the process. Much of the work was done in Studio C, the smaller room at A&M, where Carole King made *Tapestry*. "There were so many vocals!" says Sorkin. "Shadows And Light" and "The Jungle Line" had maybe 100 vocals on them. Just as she experimented and developed her tunings, layering vocals to that extent was new. We spent endless amounts of time on them. I mean, weeks and weeks. She was so specific and exacting in what she wanted, more so than anyone I'd ever worked with, apart from maybe Karen Carpenter, who had a similar level of perfectionism but didn't take as much time getting there as Joni did. There was more editing on that stuff than on anything I'd ever seen. Joni had a vision and took as long as she needed to get there. She was appreciative and pleasant to be with, but there was some frustration at times about just how long things were taking. If the sessions were called for 7pm she generally wouldn't show up until 10 or 11pm. That was the only frustration. It felt endless." ➔



DAVID WARNER/REDFERNS; PAUL POPPER/POPPERFOTO

JOEL BERNSTEIN



With CSNY at Wembley, September 14, 1974

JONI MITCHELL

WHEN *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* was finally released in November 1975 it was received with some caution by contemporary critics. It was a bold and uncompromising follow-up to *Court And Spark*. Both languid and terse, smooth yet sour, with a flickering strangeness at its edges, it was widely perceived as Mitchell shunning the mainstream in favour of a wilder path. Then again, nothing was quite that simple. The beautiful but barbed “Boho Dance”, with its lilting flute and flugelhorn, took issue with rote notions of authenticity and the idea that her newfound success somehow betrayed some purer impulse. “Some steps outside the boho dance,” she shrugged. “Have a fascination for me”.

“People were a bit weirded by *Hissing...*,” says Sorkin. “It was only in later years it became appreciated as much as it now is.”

“Her stuff is very complex and deep and intricate, and it goes over the heads of people who listen to shallow pop music,” David Crosby told *Uncut*. “Pop music is about as deep as a bird bath. It appeals to stupid people. Joni doesn’t. Joni appeals to bright people and there are less of those.”

In the same month that the album was released, Mitchell hitched her wagon to the second leg of Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue. She had loved *Blood On The Tracks* and wanted to pay homage to what she saw as Dylan’s creative rejuvenation, but the reality was rough: drug-fuelled, ego-driven, somewhat like being kidnapped by the circus. Mitchell had flu, and the blues, and felt out of her element much of the time. She refused to take part in Dylan’s movie project, *Renaldo And Clara*.

It proved the precursor to a turbulent time. The *Hissing...* tour began in January 1976, again with LA Express in tow, but the harmony of 1974 gradually evaporated, partly because Mitchell and John Guerin were splitting messily. “I don’t think we ever had any conflict whatsoever, until the end, and that was a conflict with her,” Bennett recalled. “She was going with John Guerin, and they broke up during the ’76 tour.”

Stressed and ill, on February 22, Mitchell bolted from



“LONGLIVE JONI!”

...and so says Neil Young

“**J**ONI’S music and her time at Asylum Records are a major contribution to our world of music. Since we first met and I played my song ‘Sugar Mountain’ for her, she has been my good friend. She wrote ‘The Circle Game’ and continued our young conversation! Joni’s music is so deep and transporting. She comes right from the source. There is no mistaking it.

“Since those early days, her music on Reprise and then Asylum was definitive. For *The Roses*, *Court And Spark*, *Miles Of Aisles* and *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns...* they are all classics in my book. I listened to every album as it came out. The musicians she played with were always above my abilities. She had grown from folk to jazz and in between, creating a unique kind of sound that I loved to listen to over and over.

“We both come from the Canadian prairies, where the wheatfields grow for miles and miles between grain elevators that dot the highway. I feel that kinship with Joni and I know you hear and love this period of her music as much as I did when I first encountered these songs back in the day. Long live Joni and her wonderful sound! Thanks, Joni!”

Taken from *Joni Mitchell – The Asylum Albums (1972–1975)*

the stage at Cole Field House in Maryland before completing the first song. She didn’t return, leaving a crowd of 18,000 dangling. She played a handful more dates but cancelled most of her American concerts and an entire European leg. She wouldn’t tour again until 1979.

Although members of the band continued to contribute to her records, the curtailed tour effectively marked the end of the LA Express connection, and to an extraordinary chapter in her career. The next one would begin later in 1976, with an album she named *Hejira*, a word of Arabic origin which translates as ‘exodus’ or ‘escape from a dangerous situation’. For the Prophet Muhammad it signified a flight from Medina to Mecca. For Mitchell it denoted an extended road trip and the discovery of mercurial bassist Jaco Pastorius, her next muse.

Glancing in her rearview mirror in March 1976, she could see just how far she had travelled from the artist who recorded *Blue* in 1971. The common denominator, then as now, was an eternally questing spirit. “I visited her at the studio once, she was doing a synthesised keyboard overdub to one of the songs,” Robben Ford recalls. “She’s sitting in a chair that’s high up off the ground and she’s there playing this keyboard, and her legs are swinging in the air! Like a little girl with crayons, she just had that freedom, a childish kind of freedom, and at the same time a brilliant mind. Not afraid to go anywhere with her music.”



Mercurial muse: Jaco Pastorius

MORE JONI! - TURN THE PAGE FOR MITCHELL LIVE AT NEWPORT

During the 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue tour with Joan Baez and Bob Dylan

