How do you choose the greatest Joni Mitchell song – or even, abandoning the wild goose chase of objectivity, your personal favourite Joni Mitchell song?

It’s a daunting challenge, and one that not all of the illustrious contributors to this month’s cover story would accept. When we asked David Crosby to pick a song, he gave us another one of his delightful pro-Joni and anti-Dylan rants, and scrupulously avoided specifics. “There’s so many songs of hers that are so brilliantly written,” he countered. “You can’t say which one is the best. There are 30 or 40 best ones.”

In the end, and with the help of Roger McGuinn, Matthew E White, Graham Nash, Linda Perhacs, Mike Heron and quite a few more, we settled on 30 songs. To rank them in any kind of order, though, struck us as an excruciating and ultimately pointless procedure; to be honest, we bottled it. On page 30, then, you’ll find 30 insightful pieces on 30 exceptional Joni songs, arranged in the order they were released, beginning with Radiohead’s Philip Selway on “Both Sides, Now” and ending with the 2002 orchestral version of “Amelia”, nominated by Robert Plant.

I ended up contributing a few over-wrought words about “Song For Sharon” to the piece, and in this issue I also wrote about PJ Harvey’s tantalising “Recording In Process” project, and Sam Lee’s new album, The Fade In Time, another one of those records I seem to be fixated on at the moment that makes deep, scholarly and emotional connections with old traditions, without being hamstrung by them.

Serendipitous, too, that one of my favourite new albums that’s turned up in the last few days is by The Weather Station, ostensibly a Canadian singer-songwriter called Tamara Lindeman. Like great swathes of the new Laura Marling album reviewed on page 74, The Weather Station’s Loyalty doesn’t really sound much like a record that could’ve been made in LA 40 years ago, but it does have a certain grace and profundity, a husky nuance or two that hits a few familiar emotional triggers… “I see something of myself in everyone,” as “Hejira” goes, “just at this moment of the world.”

Speak soon,

John Mulvey, Editor
Follow me on Twitter: www.twitter.com/JohnRMulvey
BACK TO THE GARDEN
Your guide to this month’s free CD

1. SUFJAN STEVENS
No Shade In The Shadow Of The Cross
An understated start this month, as Stevens dials back the maximalist excess of his recent work. The result, as this track illustrates so beautifully, is the sort of tender pop-folk that initially drew Stevens so many comparisons with Elliott Smith. Our exclusive interview with the great man starts on p18.

2. MATTHEW E WHITE
Rock’n’Roll Is Cold
Hot on the heels of the wonderful Natalie Prass album, the Spacebomb gang are back, this time with the team leader on the mic. A droll and very catchy exploration of genre politics, “Rock’n’Roll Is Cold” sounds a bit like late VU, produced by Allen Toussaint and with JJ Cale subbing for Lou Reed – can’t be bad!

3. RYLEY WALKER
Primrose Green
From our Album Of The Month, “Primrose Green” is a ravishing example of the old magic that Ryley Walker is conjuring up right now. A wilder talent than most of his folk-guitar contemporaries, Walker is shooting for the sort of jazzy highs that were once associated with Tim Buckley. Ambitious, perhaps, but on this form not unreasonable.

4. COURTNEY BARNETT
Pedestrian At Best
How best to follow up a rapturously acclaimed debut? By being as knowing and snarky as possible, if you’re Australia’s Courtney Barnett, who also has the good sense to keep up the high standard of her grunge-pop. Key – critically untrue – line: “Put me on a pedestal and I’ll only disappoint you!”

5. STEVE GUNN
& THE BLACK TWIG PICKERS
Trailways Ramble
A few short months after his Way Out Weather solo high, the unstoppable Gunn returns, with the Virginian Black Twig Pickers in tow. Droning fiddles and mouth harps add a raga-ish intensity, and banjos sub for sitars. Gunn, meanwhile, sounds transported, serene in the midst of this barn-raising, old-time freakout from new album Seasonal Hire.

6. HOUNDSTOOTH
Borderlands
Mostly untroubled by hype thus far in their career, Portland’s Houndstooth are discreet ones to watch in 2015. This beguiling track comes from their second album, No News From Home, and is reminiscent of another bunch of unassuming classicists, Yo La Tengo; just check Katie Bernstein’s unfussily intimate vocal, so redolent of Georgia Hubley.

7. 23 SKIDOO
Calypso
The quasi-industrial reputation of 23 Skidoo always did them a disservice. “Calypso”, from their first album in 15 years, shows how Alex Turnbull’s group remain one of the most durable and underrated British post-punk bands, here looping a steel drum sample over expansive, Eno-ish terrain.

8. HANNAH COHEN
Just Take The Rest
Enchantingly dissolve warbles galore, from a New York singer who often recalls a coherent Liz Fraser or, perhaps more pertinently, long-lost Sunday, Harriet Wheeler. Produced by the well-connected Thomas ‘Dovery’ Bartlett, associate of The National, Antony Hegarty, Sharon Van Etten, Rufus Wainwright, Sam Amidon et al.

9. MOON DUO
Slow Down Low
A choogling, dronerock take on the old “Roadrunner” formula, enticingly, courtesy of Ripley Johnson, Sanae Yamada and, new for this third album, a third member of the Moon Duo, drummer John Jeffrey. Johnson launches one of his trademark guitar solos, all woozy wandering, at 2:53. Very groovy handclaps, too.

10. WILL BUTLER
Sing To Me
As the Arcade Fire’s latest stadium-packing duties draw to a close, Will Butler has found time to record – at Electric Lady, no less – a debut solo album. Policy is a ramshackle and mostly exuberant return to Butler’s indie roots. “Sing To Me”, though, is something different again – a stark and insidious prayer of sorts, over sombre piano chords and the subtlest of string arrangements.

11. MARC ALMOND
Minotaur
When Uncut interviewed Almond last year about The Tyburn Tree, a song cycle about ‘Dark London’, he promised his next album would be “very posh, lustrous pop”. Here’s the proof: a luxurious synth ballad – produced and co-written by Lana Del Rey collaborator Chris Braide – that features Almond at his most elegantly dramatic.

12. LIGHTNING BOLT
The Metal East
Change of pace, anyone? Not the easiest track to sequence, perhaps, but it’s great to have the bracing Lightning Bolt, scourgé of a thousand All Tomorrow’s Parties, in the month’s mix. A heads-down, ecstatically technical noise-rock duo from Providence, if you haven’t encountered these notable forces of nature before, with a skree from their first album in three years.

13. SAM LEE
Blackbird
Sam Lee’s second album has been on heavy office rotation this year, with its radical, inventive – and in this case, rather jazzy – new takes on ancient British folk songs. Like many of Lee’s finds, “Blackbird” is Romany in origin, learned from one May Bradley of Shropshire.

14. JOHNNY DOWD
Cadillac Hearse
Dowd might have won Americana Album Of The Month garlands in this issue, but the old trickster remains endearingly tough to categorise. “Cadillac Hearse” involves gothic storytelling, Suicide-like drum machines and a big dirty guitar riff, not unlike that of the “Peter Gunn” theme.

15. CAT’S EYES
Requiem For The Duke Of Burgundy
To end this month, a flourish. “Requiem” is the highlight of Rachel Zeffira and Faris ‘Horrors’ Badwan’s score to the new Peter Strickland movie, summoning up strong memories of Michael Nyman’s “Memorial”. Very grand; maybe we should do this sort of thing more often?
“We’re captive on the carousel of time
We can’t return, we can only look
Behind from where we came.”

THE 30 GREATEST SONGS OF JONI MITCHELL

From “Both Sides, Now” to *Travelogue*, incorporating Laurel Canyon folk reveries, singer-songwriter milestones, jazz adventures and so much more, *Uncut* chronologically assesses the finest work of a singer-songwriter supreme. Thirty astonishing songs, chosen by ROBERT PLANT, PINK FLOYD, RADIOHEAD, GRAHAM NASH, REM, LAURA MARLING, ROGER McGUINN, ELBOW and many more collaborators, contemporaries and starry-eyed acolytes. “She’s probably,” says a still-devoted DAVID CROSBY, “the best writer of us all…”

*Portraits*: Jack Robinson
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 confessional songs 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. Towards the end of last year, 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 with us a remarkable piece of fresh information regarding her current activities.

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.
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. I really believe that in a hundred 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.

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, all the production, 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 at the time and I wanted to be like Radiohead. Later, when I left Texas and 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 he gave me was Ladies Of The Canyon and I took that back and listened to it while walking around Brooklyn, and on the subway, and just fell deeply, deeply in love with her. I 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.

5 WOODSTOCK
Ladies Of The Canyon, 1970
HENRY DILTZ, PHOTOGRAPHER: I first met Joni at Mama Cass’ 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 lines. Joni just came right out front and said, “I’m gonna do it my way.” She was so doggone good that they were following more traditional lines, but they were following more traditional lines.

It gives you so much with so little.

“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 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.

**8 BLUE**

**JONI MITCHELL**

**YASHTI 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.

**9 CALIFORNIA**

**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”. I 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?
“Joni managed through personal experiences to embody the pulse of the times”

LEE RANALDO
A CASE OF YOU
Jimmy Webb: I saw Joni the first time at The Troubadour in 1967. She looked like an angel and out of her mouth came cinema verité: 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 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’d 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 so much to it. 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.

Jimmy Webb is touring the UK in April. Visit www.jimmywebb.com/shows

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 and I 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.

FOR THE ROSES
For The Roses, 1972
Jean Grand-Maitre (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.
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 which 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
taken 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
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 onstage 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 onstage. 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.

1976

**DON’T INTERRUPT THE SORROW**

*I.Don’t Interrupt The Sorrow*, 1975

ROBBEN FORD, GUITARIST, LA EXPRESS: In 1974, I got a phone call from Tom Scott inviting me to tour with Joni and the LA Express. We went on the road for the most part of nine months all over the US. But my first experience working with her in the studio was on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. I was 22 and still very inexperienced in the studio. I remember, she would ask you to do things that weren’t necessarily your instincts. For instance, on “In France They Kiss On Main Street”, she said, “I’d like you to plug the electric guitar into a fuzz tone, into the console.” To me, that was the most foreign request I could have imagined. But it turned out different and unique. She was always looking for something different, and she was always very gentle about the way she suggested things, there was never any attitude, it was always “Why don’t we just try it?” 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, and she was sitting in a chair that was quite high up off the ground and underneath her legs were swinging in the air! She was like a little girl with crayons, she just had that freedom. I love “Don’t Interrupt The Sorrow”, though. It’s got this very slinky feel and this groove that just keeps on going. I play Dobro guitar on it, and Larry Carlton is playing this very flowy electric guitar that comes in and out. It’s a great, unusual piece of music. I’m very proud to have been on it.

1975

**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 we were on the road for the most part of nine months all over the US. But my first experience working with her in the studio was on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*. I was 22 and still very inexperienced in the studio. I remember, she would ask you to do things that weren’t necessarily your instincts. For instance, on “In France They Kiss On Main Street”, she said, “I’d like you to plug the electric guitar into a fuzz tone, into the console.” To me, that was the most foreign request I could have imagined. But it turned out different and unique. She was always looking for something different, and she was always very gentle about the way she suggested things, there was never any attitude, it was always “Why don’t we just try it?” 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, and she was sitting in a chair that was quite high up off the ground and underneath her legs were swinging in the air! She was like a little girl with crayons, she just had that freedom. I love “Don’t Interrupt The Sorrow”, though. It’s got this very slinky feel and this groove that just keeps on going. I play Dobro guitar on it, and Larry Carlton is playing this very flowy electric guitar that comes in and out. It’s a great, unusual piece of music. I’m very proud to have been on it.

1975

**THE JUNGLE LINE**

*The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, 1975

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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 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, EDITOR: 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, perhaps more than any other record I own, 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 (not, you’ll note, Jaco Pastorius here) 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…”
really a technician of music. She plays by ear, 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 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.

**1991**

**27 COME IN FROM THE COLD**

*Night Ride Home, 1991*

**MICHAEL BONNER, ASSOCIATE EDITOR:** “The ’80s were very hard on me,” Mitchell confessed to Texas radio station KGSR-FM in 1996. “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 TROUSSE, 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 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 center to my life now/No grace in my heart”) in the entire Mitchell songbook.
admiried. 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.

“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 for her to lose that magic of the guitar playing. She always sang other people’s songs. The 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.

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 ‘Guinevere’.

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

We hope you enjoyed our 30 greatest Joni songs. But did we miss anything out? What are your favourite Joni songs? Why not send your Mitchell missives to uncut_feedback@timeinc.com