

CLOUDS

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Musically daring, with songs employing alternative tunings and unusual chord voicings, Joni's second LP cemented her compositional genius with the exquisite Both Sides Now.



Stardust: Mitchell performs on the **This Is Tom Jones** TV show, aired on January 29, 1970.



TRACKS



Side 1

Tin Angel

Chelsea Morning

I Don't Know
Where I StandThat Song About
The Midway

Roses Blue



Side 2

The Gallery

I Think I
UnderstandSongs To Aging
Children ComeThe Fiddle And
The Drum

Both Sides Now

ON ONE LEVEL *Clouds* seems fairly unexceptional, another instance of the age-old tryst between singer and acoustic guitar. But in truth it's phenomenal, early evidence of the eloquence and idiosyncrasy which distinguished Joni's songwriting and musicianship. Dissatisfied with David Crosby's foggy production on *Song To A Seagull*, Reprise initially drafted Paul A. Rothchild (*Love*, *The Doors*) to oversee *Clouds*. But when Rothchild gaffertaped Joni's feet to the floor after she'd moved them while singing *Tin Angel* it went way beyond mansplaining. Pioneering a template for female voyagers of independent mind (hello, Kate Bush), Mitchell self-produced the remaining tracks, working with engineer Henry Lewy while Rothchild holidayed. "A producer is a babysitter," she later said.

At 25, Joni brought questioning, unguarded emotional intelligence to *Clouds*. A visionary reflection on the vicissitudes of friendships, and part-inspired by cloud-gazing from an airplane, *Both Sides Now* seems precociously wise – though by the time it appeared on *Clouds* it had already been a hit for Judy Collins. The insight of someone far older than her actual years continued on *The Gallery*, wherein our former Alberta College Of Art student sings from the perspective of a painter's ageing muse: "I gave you all my pretty years/ Then we began to weather/ And I was left to winter here/ While you went west for pleasure."

Clouds is emphatically not someone strumming D. Nine of its 10 songs use ingenious alternative tunings to find inspiring new chord-voicings, most strikingly so on *Songs To Aging Children Come*, wherein the low E string of Mitchell's guitar is tuned down to a droning B, and her haunting, chromatic vocal melody fights its own war against cliché. The only other musician credited on *Clouds* is Stephen Stills, but his guitar and bass contributions are minimal. There's only one captain here.

Some critics characterise the bright, breezy *Chelsea Morning* as unsubstantial juvenilia, but *Roses Blue* and *The Fiddle And The Drum* have real gravitas, and move beyond *Chelsea Morning*'s pretty, poetic imagery. The former, built on a tricky, stop-start finger-picking pattern, describes Rose, a seemingly disturbed woman lost to "mysterious devotions... tarot cards and potions", while the latter, sung a cappella despite some challenging movements of interval, is partly a denouncement of US involvement in the Vietnam War.

Blue tends to steal *Clouds*' thunder, but *Clouds* was Mitchell's first great folk LP, a spare, searching album about self-discovery and personal authenticity. The self-portrait she painted for the record's cover says 'this is me' – and there was still plenty of *Both Sides Now* in Mitchell when she re-made the song for her 2000 LP of the same name. Her voice was deeper, certainly, something lost and plenty gained. The new version was cloud-like: gauzy, in-flux, quietly majestic. ●

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