

# LADIES OF THE CANYON

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*High up in the hills, Joni raises her game with tales of famous lovers and meditations on fame, femininity and a cynical music industry. Plus a tune about a brightly coloured cab...*

**A**FTER SOME YEARS grafting on the folk scenes of Toronto, Detroit and Greenwich Village, and then hustling in Hollywood, the rising singer-songwriter from Saskatchewan had got herself back to the garden. By the time Joni Mitchell first arrived in Los Angeles, Laurel Canyon was already taking shape as every hipster's preferred refuge from the cut-and-thrust of city life. Mitchell initially hated LA, and soon she and manager Elliot Roberts accepted an invitation from taste-making KMET radio DJ B. Mitchell Reed to stay at his place in the Canyon.

As Joni's star rose amid much intrigue within the Byrdsian folk-rock set, she and Roberts moved across to David Crosby's pad, where the Croz hosted reefer-wafted gatherings to show off his protégée (and, briefly, lover) via impromptu performances. They stayed on while the hilltop perch at 8217 Lookout Mountain Ave, which Mitchell had purchased on down-payment using her advance from Reprise, was being done up.

It was there, in July 1968, that she introduced her new friend Graham Nash, disillusioned after a gruelling East Coast tour with The Hollies, to Crosby and Buffalo Springfield's Stephen Stills. The three sang together – eureka! CSN! It was also where Joni, in her words, “played Florence Nightingale” to the ailing Nash, until the pair became an item; thereafter they cohabited at the residence, until Nash was given his marching orders in early 1970 – right around the time that *Ladies Of The Canyon* was unveiled.

This, then, was the psychogeography behind an album which, with or without its title (or eponymous track), will always be regarded as a document of the late-'60s counter-cultural migration to the Hollywood Hills, that blissful, rarefied (some might say elitist) milieu in which it was conceived and written.



Its coordinates on the narrative arc of Mitchell's creative development are equally important: on the heels of two albums of largely unmoderated acoustic folk (and a Grammy for the half-million-selling *Clouds*), *Ladies Of The Canyon* was the point at which she began to spread her wings lyrically and instrumentally, paving the way for the following year's career-defining *Blue*.

More than half of the record (seven of the 12 tunes) is based around Mitchell's rippling piano, a style no less sophisticated than her famous deployment of unusual guitar tunings. There's an unmistakable sense here of artistic liberation from the stultifying confines and dictates of the folk idiom – not entirely incomparable with Dylan going electric, though her shift is obviously not into amplified rock'n'roll, or even the more refined

**Now everything is easy: Graham Nash and Joni Mitchell at Big Sur Folk Festival, September 14-15, 1969.**

sonics of West Coast folk-rock, but the soul-baring, compositionally intricate, technically expansive ways of the singer-songwriters she was now moving among.

Again, she recorded at A&M studios, but this time Mitchell fully self-produced, helming artful overdubs: blasts of stacked non-verbal harmonies, inescapably reminiscent of CSN (largely because it was they who executed them), and, on third track Conversation, some brush-stroke percussion from jazz sticksman Milt Holland. Elsewhere, there are near-imperceptible splashes of cello (Teresa Adams), clarinet and flute (Paul Horn), and baritone sax (Jim Horn)

The connection with Nash, Crosby et al was further underlined when her anthem, Woodstock – about the festival which she'd been unable to perform at due to a scheduling clash, but she'd been enthusiastically informed about by her beau, who obviously had – appeared in rocked-up form on CSNY's *Déjà Vu*, around the same time of *LOTC*'s release. Her own recording is muted by comparison, Mitchell letting her mezzo-soprano fly high against moody Wurlitzer electric piano, forlorn with reverse FOMO at having missed a party among the “stardust” and “the golden”.

Also on *Déjà Vu*, of course, Nash immortalised their romantic cohabitational idyll in *Our House*, but what's perhaps surprising about *Ladies Of The Canyon* is how little of it is explicitly about that relationship, or indeed the Canyon and their aspirational hippy clique – apart from its title song.

There, Mitchell writes of three amigas, including the feminist cartoonist Trina Robbins, responsible for the female-staffed underground comic, *It Ain't Me, Babe*, and, in the mid-'80s, DC's *The Legend Of Wonder Woman*. The other two were aspiring songstress Estrella Berosini, and Annie Burden, wife of scene sleeve designer Gary, who'd routinely “sit you down to eat” while you visited on artwork business.

**V**ERY OBVIOUSLY, Mitchell chose to champion the dynamic ladies on the scene, not its predominantly male movers and shakers. In the media around this time, she was beginning to speak out against the misogynistic boys' club mentality, which ruled the counter-culture, and had often deemed her in reviews as, she noted, “too feminine”.

The title track was her first effort at fighting back, evening up, redressing the balance. Its portrayal of boho comfort and craft is wonderfully warm, and enviable, but might risk becoming smug or plain annoying if not so wisely contained to those three and a half minutes.

Instead, Mitchell forges a variety in mood, cast list and geography which has enabled this record's appeal to last beyond that fleeting idyll. The opening *Morning Morgantown* is equally cosy, but reputedly refers to a lazy morning spent in Morgantown, West Virginia, though its stress-free ritual of “We'll find a table in the shade/And sip our tea and lemonade/And watch the morning on parade” might be lived out anywhere – up in the LA Hills, or even the UK once or twice a year.



**Side 1**  
Morning  
Morgantown  
For Free  
Conversation  
Ladies Of The  
Canyon  
Willy  
The  
Arrangement



**Side 2**  
Rainy Night  
House  
The Priest  
Blue Boy  
Big Yellow Taxi  
Woodstock  
The Circle Game



**Joy and sorrow:  
Joni and Graham  
Nash backstage,  
Queens College,  
New York, March  
30, 1969.**

The domicile in *Rainy Night House*, meanwhile, is believed to be the childhood home, in Westmount, Quebec, of Leonard Cohen: their ill-fated tryst after meeting at 1967's Newport Folk Festival is portrayed almost as one of mutual suspicion, each trying to figure out “who in the world I/you might be” against melancholy autumnal ivory-tinkling.

Darker still, *For Free* finds Mitchell laying bare her unhappiness with record-career superficiality, and the isolation that comes with pop celebrity – an on-the-money depiction which has seen it covered by Crosby, and more recently Lana Del Rey (the bitter finale of 2021's *Chemtrails Over The Country Club*). Introducing the song on-stage in July 1969, she aptly described it as “funky Gene Autry C&W”, and its swinging groove somehow makes the contrast between “the one-man-band/By the quick lunch stand/...playing real good for free” on a New York City street corner, and herself, moneyed and cloistered, feel somehow less devout and overwrought, more honest.

Listening to *Ladies Of The Canyon* today, its sequencing feels somewhat bizarre, as arguably its three biggest time-honoured bangers tumble out at the end. At Side 2 track four – the part of an album some US producers used to refer to as “the boneyard”, where crap songs go to die – comes *Big Yellow Taxi*, breezing in with one of the greatest lines in all of '70s pop: “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot”. Its bouncing strum and “ooo-ba-ba-ba” delivered 2:16 minutes of profound yet joyful hyper-melody whose impact hasn't waned one iota in over half a century.

With Woodstock's tootling atmosphere sandwiched in between, *The Circle Game* closes out with another deep and meaningful meditation. It's a coming-of-age tale written as a more positive answer song to *Sugar Mountain*, in which Neil Young lamented turning 19 (oh, boy!) and feeling that his youthful sense of boundless optimism was now gone and irretrievable.

Maybe this folky nugget was deprioritised in the track list, as it had already been much covered, first in 1967 by Canadian folk duo Ian & Sylvia and in the interim by Tom Rush and Buffy Sainte-Marie. Its sage musing on the passing of time, however, and ultimate conclusion – “There'll be new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty/Before the last revolving year is through” – showed a conclusive maturity in Joni's writing, further highlighted by the refinement of the harmonies from CSN, drolly masked as the *Lookout Mountain United Downstairs Choir*.

If *Ladies Of The Canyon* really had been all about a time and a place, its meaning would've quickly faded for those of us who weren't privileged enough actually to have been there. Rather, the aspiration of that special moment resulted in songs of great felicity, yes, but also ones of deep wisdom, un-flinching analysis, social awareness and romantic depth, whose keening rhymes will live on, one imagines, for many decades to come.

On its release, Mitchell withdrew to Greece to continue writing, a retreat which would yield the extraordinary exorcisms contained within *Blue*... ●