

BLUE

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Spare, raw, beautiful, it's the masterpiece that's always there with its humanity and honesty when you need it. But what lay behind its musical "perfection"?

IF CONVERSATION EVER turns to perfect albums of the pop era, *Blue* will almost certainly come up. It is now routinely considered the quintessential singer-songwriter text. Other records may have been more voguish or more commercial in their day – Carole King's *Tapestry*, most obviously – but *Blue* has endured and grown in esteem in a way other singer-songwriter keynotes have not. It's perfect because it does no less than it sets out to do, and so much more, a byproduct of the careful selection of 10 candid, finely wrought and simply arranged vignettes that boost and support one another. Taken together, they form a raw, personal diary of the year of its creation, yet somehow transmit something universal and timeless.

Blue chronicles the vicissitudes of desire, whether that's desire for company or solitude, the longing for a familiar place or a new horizon. *Blue* admits we have – and most specifically its creator has – deep-seated urges that contradict themselves. The songs unpack those contradictions, covering the pain and pleasures of moving on or looking back either physically, mentally or emotionally. It documents the quarter-life crisis of a woman suddenly realising the extent of her fame.

She reaches out to three countries, up to five different men and a child. She addresses the warmth of her affection for a lover whom she has recently dumped, her attraction to a 'mean ole daddy' on a Greek isle (Carey), and her ambivalent love for handsome heroin-addict about town James Taylor, who may be the inspiration for the title song, a melancholic figure who understands that "hell's the hippest way to go". She also, unforgettably, mourns the loss of her only child to adoption in the heart-breaking Little Green (written in 1967). There's intriguing use of domestic detail: knitting, frying pans, coffee percolators.

Getty

TRACKS



Side 1

All I Want
My Old Man
Little Green
Carey
Blue



Side 2

California
This Flight Tonight
River
A Case Of You
The Last Time I
Saw Richard

Best folk singer:
Grammy-winning
Joni, March 1970.



Yet for all the specifics, *Blue* speaks for everyone who has ever felt homesick, lovesick or agonised over emotional misjudgments. *Blue*, you might say, takes place at a crossroads everyone can recognise.

It's concise and spare, mostly Joni alone with piano, guitar or mountain dulcimer, recorded with a notably dry sound that emphasises its intimacy. Such guest musicians as there are barely make an impact on the tracks, they gently push the groove along. Nobody but Joni solos. On earlier albums, Joni sounded jejune vocally and her influences peaked through, on *Blue* ➤



she masters the extended syllables and vocal runs that define her singing style, her signature technique of extending the last

note of every line. That trait is

clearly audible on *Blue* itself, its opening word unfurled over eight seconds. James Taylor later noted that Joni wasn't smoking at this point in her life (something she's been doing since the age of nine), which makes her voice especially clear. "She was at the height of her powers," he told *The Guardian*. "There were very few people in the sessions. *Blue's* brilliance lies in its minimalism."

Every song has its own feel, a distinct atmosphere, and brings something individual to the table. After production masters were made, two songs, *Hunter* and *Urge For Going*, were cannily dropped at the last minute. Both had stronger cousins already in the running order and their removal actually made *Blue* stronger. There is no weak track.

With 'love' songs of the calibre of *Carey*, *Case Of You*, *California*, *River* and *Little Green*, it's no wonder succeeding generations fell under this record's spell. Jimmy Webb has declared that Joni's candour "changed how people write songs". Bob Dylan kept people guessing, Leonard Cohen flirted with them, Carole King held out a hand. But had anyone ever used songwriting in such a nakedly therapeutic way as Joni does on *Blue*, asking so pointedly: "Will you take me as I am?"

"Had anyone ever before used song-writing in such a nakedly therapeutic way as Joni does on *Blue*?"

A case of him: (above) James Taylor joins Joni on backing vocals during the recording of Carole King's *Tapestry*, A&M studios, LA, January 1971; (opposite) Mitchell at the Isle Of Wight Festival, August 29, 1970.

IN 2013, JONI reflected to the *Tornoto Star*: "I'm not saying, Look at me, look at me. It's the exact opposite. I'm saying, Look at you, look at you. Are we not human? Do we not share these things. I was told that people were horrified by the intimacy of it. It was about human nature. It's all I had to work with. It's a soul trying to find itself and seeing its failings and having regrets. What's so horrible about that?"

But she realised pretty quickly that she may have inadvertently let people come too close. She reacted badly to facing a crowd who effectively demanded that she continually bare her soul on their behalf. "Some people would call it a nervous breakdown, but I just hit that pocket that everyone does on some point in their journey through their lives. That identity crisis, Who am I, really? You're lucky if it hits you early like it did with me." From *For The Roses* onward, she wrote songs that operated more at arm's length – and later at intellect's length – from her audience, as both words and music became more impressionistic and, if drawn from her personal experience, more obliquely conjured.

Hosannahs rang out when the album celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2021 – "It's still a miracle" said the *LA Times* – such that *Blue*, perhaps, feels in danger of being taken for granted, *Sgt. Pepper*-like in a "Yeah, yeah, we know all about that, what else have you got?" way. But, if heard when one needs it, *Blue's* beauty, directness and deep humanity impacts like almost no other record. Someone had to do it. It was the making of her. It will last forever. ●