

# BOTH SIDES OF BLUE...

MOJO's musician friends celebrate Joni's aqua-tinted sensation, track-by-track...



## Side One

### ALL I WANT

**Robin Pecknold (Fleet Foxes):** I was 15, 16 and had started writing songs, and at some point my dad said I should listen to *Blue* and *Blood On The Tracks* – because those are, like, the bibles of songwriting. So I had a fall and a winter driving around rainy Seattle in my 1980s Toyota Camry listening only to those records.

I started learning all the songs on *Blue* and playing them at coffee shops, and for *All I Want*, because I wanted to do it right, I had to buy a dulcimer. The song is all about how little you need to be infinite, and the dulcimer is definitely a part of that. Dylan is like, I only need 6 strings. Joni's like, I only need 4 – total flex!

*All I Want* is like the overture to *Blue*, setting up the mission statement that this is going to be about relationships, and we even get the first appearance of the word “blue”, with that amazing melody, moving from the G to the F for “...so I hurt you too”. It's a master level move.

There's stuff on *Blue* that I think about almost every day. Even [from *River*] “I'm gonna make a lot of money and quit this crazy scene” – I aspire to that sometimes! Some people have the Bible, I have *Blue*.

### MY OLD MAN

**Natalie Mering (aka Weyes Blood):** My Old Man is a beautiful song, and not the kind of love song Joni Mitchell wrote very often. Maybe *Night Ride Home* [from

1991], when she was married to Larry Klein, is similar. The lyrics feel quite old-school but I think she's playing it that way because she had to. I'm sure she did cook this guy's meals and darn his socks – feminism hadn't caught up with music people yet. That said, I think the line “We don't need a piece of paper from the city hall...” was a radical statement at the time: Yeah, we're living together but we're not getting married. We don't need to do that.

Musically, I think it's one of the first big tip-offs of what's to come from Joni – the start of that piano style you hear more of on *For The Roses*. She uses these chromatic half-steps – which gives it an angular modern sound, like blues and gospel meets jazz and even a Charles Ives atonal thing.

Joni is hard to cover well, because if you try to do the songs simply, and kind of flatten out the idiosyncrasies, it doesn't sound so good. Because it's her individual timing and strangeness that gives it the transcending feel.

The songs on *Blue* are like one-time things. Like if she'd recorded them the next day they'd have sounded completely different.

### LITTLE GREEN

**Nadia Reid:** I think on first listen it's possible to mistake *Little Green* for being about a lost love. It's so poetic and mysterious. If the story about the daughter

she gave up hadn't surfaced in the '90s we may never have figured it out.

But knowing what we know, I can't think of a more tender, or braver song. It's heartbreaking, yet I never feel too saddened by Joni's songs. She takes grief and pain and turns it into something useful, something that lasts for ever. So if anything, I get this intense comfort. I hear this deep wisdom. Joni knows something that I want to know.

### CAREY

**Laura Marling:** Though I believe the idea that songs need narrative context is a trend, not a necessity, I was delighted to find out many years after first hearing *Blue* that Carey was a real person: this eccentric American Mitchell met in Crete, and found sufficiently beguiling to memorialise in song.

The language places it firmly in its era. The “finest silver” she promises to put on, the “clean white linen” and “fancy French cologne” she says she misses, they're signifiers of a certain type of glamour that feels of another time. And, of course, “you're a mean old daddy, but I like you” is a beautiful piece of time-stamped language. I'm unsure of the provenance of the use of “daddy” in this context, and if I were the author's analyst I might suggest we delve deeper into that word,

but as another stroke on the canvas, it serves a purpose perfectly, rapidly giving dimension to their relationship.

Mitchell is full of detail, which is precisely what allows the listener, standing back and taking in the scene as a whole, to feel the mood so intensely. She is a true artist.



### BLUE

**Rufus Wainwright:** When I was asked to sing at the concert that celebrated Joni's 75th birthday [in Los Angeles, November 7, 2018] *Blue* hadn't been taken yet, and the general consensus seemed to be that people were a little bit afraid of it. Even for Joni, it's unusual and challenging and unique, so indicative of her style and essence and so vertical, vocally. I kind of thought of it as an aria. So for a month or so I was also pretty terrified of it too.



True blue: David Crosby, Joni Mitchell and Judy Collins at Big Sur, California, September 1969.

Thankfully, the day it really clicked was at rehearsal, and it happened that Chaka Khan was waiting to do her song after mine. She was my only audience member and I thought, “Well, I’m really going to have to take this up a notch – I mean, Chaka Khan is staring at me!” And magically, it really worked.

As someone who has struggled with addiction, the song touches a raw place. It’s sung from the perspective of someone witnessing this downfall, so I would put myself in the place of my father or mother watching me go through that. Joni communicates what’s tragic – chastising the user somewhat. But you know that she gets it. She’s in there with you. Like the tattoo in the song, for me it’s the album’s anchor.

## Side Two

### CALIFORNIA

**St. Vincent:** I have often felt I could understand Joni on a purely logistical level. I too, have sat on a bench in Paris, France, while on tour reading the news from back home. Wondering if the love you left there will love you when you get finally get home. Feeling at once at home on the road and at home nowhere. Nobody but Joni could pack so much heavy into a song that feels like spring birds flitting around Laurel Canyon.

### THIS FLIGHT TONIGHT

**Tamara Lindeman (The Weather Station):**

The first time I heard *Blue*, I didn’t get it. I think in part it was my youth. Joni on this record is so vulnerable that it’s kind of frightening. I didn’t want to be like that myself. But obviously, I came around to it!

I’ve been on a lot of planes and I really relate to the existential moment she’s having on this one. It’s a tangled statement. She seems to be constantly disagreeing with herself: I love you; I miss you; you hurt me. “Star bright, star bright, you’ve got the loving that I like, alright,” then immediately turning to regret and then to anxiety. I love the rock band part [from 1:56 to 2:05] when she puts the headphones on. It’s like she’s running away from herself, to get away from her head.

After *Blue*, Joni really grew and changed. I happen to think she got better at everything. But there’s a purity to *Blue*, an unfiltered quality that was kind of her gift to music. It’s not polished. It’s not a fantasy. It’s vulnerability and uncertainty and confusion, and it’s perfectly expressed in this song.

### RIVER

**Judy Collins:** I’ve been enchanted by Joni’s songs ever since I first heard

that clear, bell-like Canadian voice of hers. There was a charm and a luminescence, and her turn of phrase was spellbinding.

But on *Blue* – and *River* especially – she reached above and beyond my wildest expectations. During that time, she and I were involved with CSN in personal ways – she had been in a relationship with Graham Nash and I’d been having an affair with Stephen Stills. In 2019, what seemed like one million years later, I was recording my album, *Winter Stories*, with Norwegian singer Jonas Field and Chatham County Line, a bluegrass group from North Carolina. In our rehearsals, *River* made it to the top choices for the album. When I started to sing the song, I was in tears.

Joni is indelibly timeless in her lyrics, fresh and remarkably poetic even in the fiercest of her plots. Think of *Free Man In Paris* or *The Magdalene Laundries* off *Turbulent Indigo*. Forever poignant, forever precise. That’s our Joni. Our only.

### A CASE OF YOU

**David Crosby:** I love everything about *A Case Of You*. When she first sang it to me, it blew me away. But this happened to me every time I heard a song of hers, man. She was my old lady for a year, and I would write something I thought was really good and she would come back with three things she wrote the night before, and they’d all be better.

*A Case Of You* is so open and so her. She’s telling you the truth. And she utterly hooks you from that conversation at the start of the song: “If you want me I’ll be in the bar.” It’s a tough woman who’s got her dukes up about life.

That line: “I could drink a case of you and still be on my feet.” There’s a duality there that’s deliberate. On the one hand she’s saying she can’t get enough of him. But she’s also telling him, “You can’t bowl me over.” Because you know she’d been through some serious trials and tribulations. Polio. Chuck Mitchell. She’d paid her dues. She knew what pain was.

*Blue* is the best record by the best singer-songwriter of our times. *A Case Of You* is a face photographed under a bright light.

### THE LAST TIME I SAW RICHARD

**Elvis Costello:** A full stop at the end of a beautiful page. ●

