

COURT AND SPARK

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On which Joni uses a richer musical palette, with intriguing jazz fusion and soft rock colours, to make her biggest-selling record. Is this, in fact, her true masterpiece?



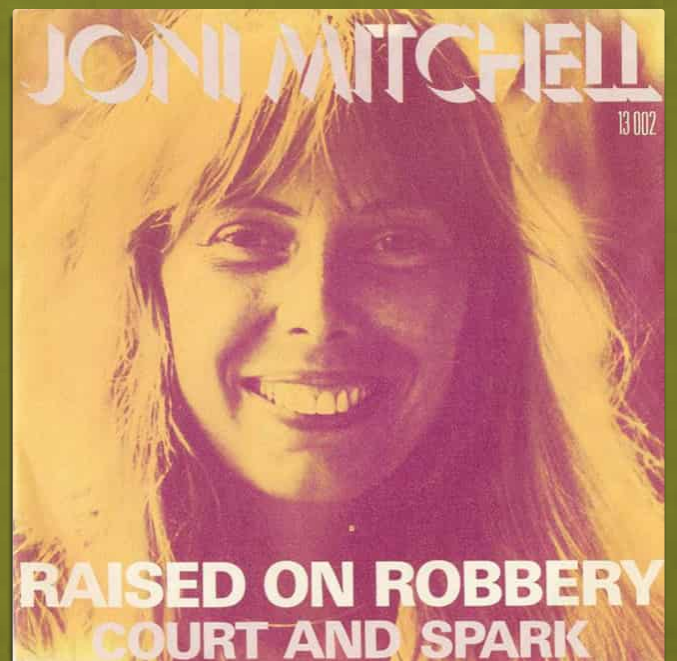
Fusion: Mitchell on-stage with Tom Scott of the L.A. Express, New Victoria Theatre, London, April 21, 1974.

JONI MITCHELL'S SIXTH album – and her biggest seller – marked her transition from folk singer-songwriter to multi-genre artist, from the pretty trills of *Ladies Of The Canyon* and the pared-down aesthetic of *Blue* to exploring tones of jazz fusion and soft rock.



She started this process in the winter of 1971 by retreating to a house in British Columbia, exiling herself from the frumpier and distraction of the LA scene to write and reinvent herself. Returning to LA refreshed, the result was *For The Roses*, recorded with an ➔

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array of musicians including woodwind player and Quincy Jones' protégé Tom Scott.

When it came to the follow-up Mitchell wanted to play with a full band, so teamed up with Scott and his jazz ensemble L.A. Express, which featured the cream of the city's session players – guitarist Larry Carlton, Crusaders' pianist Joe Sample and drummer John Guerin. While *For The Roses* was marked by introspection and withdrawal, *Court And Spark* sees Mitchell going back into the fray. "I couldn't let go of LA, city of the fallen angels," she sings on the title track, her declarative piano chords providing a charged counterpoint to Guerin's feathery drumming and Carlton's subtle guitar. That mixture of bravado and sensitivity permeates this album, as she negotiated issues both personal (dating again) and professional (the commercial music industry she abhors).

Despite her jitters, synching up with Scott and his L.A. Express led to a smooth, assured sound and took her dexterous songwriting to a new level. Help Me with its driving pop-soul groove and slick harmonies, captures the complex ritual of flirtation, seduction and insecurity in an affair with "a sweet-talking ladies' man". Released as the album's second single, it was Mitchell's first and only Top 10 US hit, reaching Number 7 on the Billboard chart in March 1974. It has now become a staple of classic yacht rock.

As well as tackling her own feelings of love and desire, Mitchell applied a clear gaze to those around her. After the desolation of her break-up with James Taylor, Asylum founder David Geffen took Mitchell on a trip to Paris to cheer her up. The Band's guitarist Robbie

Robertson and his wife Dominique came too, and this resulted in a number of songs, notably Free Man In Paris. Immersing herself in journalistic method, Joni fused fragments of conversation into a lyric about how unfettered and alive Geffen felt being away from work and the starmaking machinery – "There was no one calling me up for favours/And no one's future to decide." It takes nerve writing with such scrutiny about your boss and, unsurprisingly, Geffen pleaded with her not to put the song on her album; she included it anyway.

THE TRACK PEOPLE'S Parties has a similar observational style, a vivid picture of an LA celebrity bash, where a Dutch model freaks out over Jack Nicholson and jams a lampshade on her head. "Me and my frightened silence," Mitchell sings, "Thinking I don't understand." She is the misfit outsider, a girl from small town Saskatchewan looking at the beautiful people, an idea extended in the plunging piano and fluttering strings of The Same Situation, where she struggles to catch the attention of famous suitor Warren Beatty, and the anxious dance of social approval in Car On A Hill, waiting and watching for a lover who never arrives. There is delicious anticipation set up in vocal call-and-response, only for it to come to a halt in the juddering, stuttering keyboards that conclude the song.

The sumptuously slow and reflective Down To You continues Mitchell's theme of elusive love. "Pleasure moves on too early and trouble leaves too slow," she sings with bluesy precision. Scott's woodwind and the glistening strings create a kind of easy listening chamber pop, an influence Mitchell maybe picked up from The Carpenters, who were recording their *Now & Then* album in the studio next door and carving out their adult contemporary niche. But resisting the temptation to go further into that AOR direction, Mitchell pulls back with the restless soul-searching of Just Like This Train. Her fluid melody contrasts with the staccato rhythm and gently whining guitar.

So far, so seamless – but Raised On Robbery, the song she conceived with Robbie Robertson on that Paris trip, and recorded here with him on guitar as a bar-room rock-out, is less successful. Mitchell's tale of a good time gal sex worker trying to distract the man at the bar sounds a bit forced. It was released as the LP's first single in December 1973 and stalled at Number 65 on Billboard. Similarly quirky is her swing version of the Annie Ross song Twisted, featuring Cheech & Chong.

You had to be there at the time, one suspects.

There is the sense throughout *Court And Spark* of Mitchell finding her way to a new musical place, experimenting with sonic ideas. Trouble Child, for instance, was inspired by Marvin Gaye's downbeat soul and the boomy bass of Stevie Wonder. Here, with Chuck Findley's sultry trumpet and the wash of electric piano, she creates a cool feel of jazz melancholy. The song is intuitive and filmic, presaging the ambient sophistication of her next album, *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, and her full realisation as a questing artist. ●

TRACKS



Side 1

- Court And Spark
- Help Me
- Free Man In Paris
- People's Parties
- The Same Situation



Side 2

- Car On A Hill
- Down To You
- Just Like This Train
- Raised On Robbery
- Trouble Child
- Twisted

Free man: (left) label boss David Geffen at the Inn On The Park, London, July '72; (opposite) Joni supporting CSNY at Wembley, September 14, 1974.

