

THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWNS

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Mitchell's seventh LP may not have presented the world with the Joni they wanted. But the puzzle it invited you to solve struck a chord with critics and fans this side of the Atlantic.



THE WORST ALBUM OF 1975: that, said Joni Mitchell, was what Rolling Stone called *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. They didn't, actually, they called it the worst album title of the year. But their less than positive review of her seventh studio album – “a great collection of pop poems with a distracting soundtrack [with] no tunes to speak of” – cut deep. Joni was still talking about it in 1979, the year she released *Mingus*, in an interview with Carmeron Crowe. “They were ready to nail me,” she said. The reason? “I had stopped being confessional, and they didn't like that.”

Getty

Shadows and light: Joni in concert, 1975.

She was right. People loved the intimate, vulnerable lady-of-the-canyon Joni, with her acoustic guitar and dulcimer and ceaseless search for love. Her last three studio albums had been Top 10 in the Billboard charts and her 1974 double live album *Miles Of Aisles* made Number 2. The year closed with Joni on the cover of Time magazine, which likened her to a “rural neophyte waiting in a subway, a free spirit drinking Greek wine in the moonlight, an organic Earth Mother dispensing fresh bread and herbal tea”. Only now she wasn't.

On *Hissing* there's no Richard with his coffee percolator, no staring in a man's bathroom mirror to ➤➤

TRACKS



Side 1

In France They
Kiss On Main
Street

The Jungle Line
Edith And The
Kingpin

Don't Interrupt
The Sorrow

Shades Of
Scarlett
Conquering



Side 2

The Hissing of
Summer Lawns

The Boho Dance

Harry's House/
Centerpiece

Sweet Bird

Shadows
And Light



'Allo 'allo: Joni rocks the Parisien look, October 1975; on-stage with Richie Havens, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan at the benefit concert for Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter, Madison Square Garden, December 8, '75.

see if she's worthy. There are men all over these 10 new songs, but this time no sense of personal attachment. Here, they seem more like male archetypes than former or future partners. There's a detachment in how she observes and describes them.

She said she was shocked at how much her new record "frightened" people. Maybe it just surprised them, being her most experimental to date. But there were signs on the *Court And Spark* tour that something was going on. Where she'd previously toured solo with acoustic instruments, for the first time she had a backing band, the jazz-fusion L.A. Express, that had electric guitar. Some of her old songs were given soulful or jazzy arrangements, while her jokey impersonation of the barmaid in *The Last Time I Saw Richard* was simply bizarre. If fans were begging for another *Blue*, this seemed to confirm it wasn't going to happen.

Joni had couple of Dylan "Judas" moments on that tour. Someone in the crowd shouted to turn the

volume down; another said he wanted to hear her without the band. Her reply was, "Nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint a Starry Night again, man.'" There was a big difference between an artist who painted a picture and one who performed, and you could sense which side she was taking. All of this fed into her mysterious, shape-shifting new record, self-produced and featuring her jazz-fusion band.

Inside the gatefold cover, Joni Mitchell, in a black bikini, is floating on her back in a swimming pool at her new home, a 16-room hacienda in the LA suburb of Bel Air. She is not in Laurel Canyon anymore, physically, metaphorically or musically. In the credits she writes, "This record is a total work conceived graphically, musically, lyrically and accidentally as a whole. The whole unfolded like a mystery. It is not my intention to unravel that mystery for anyone." Among the clues is her cover art: a New York City skyline of skeletal skyscrapers, hemmed at the bottom by a row of subur-



ban houses. Beneath that, a green space in which five black native men carry a giant snake onto the back cover, where there's a church on a hill and Joni's new home.

THE OPENING TRACK/FIRST part of the musical puzzle is *In France They Kiss On Main Street* – the next chapter of *Court And Spark's* *Free Man In Paris*, perhaps. But where the former was a paradise of freedom for her record company boss, this has the innocence of '50s French movies. The closing track *Shadows And Lights* might be inspired by the 1951 French film *Ombre Et Lumiere*, in which a pianist has a mental breakdown on-stage.

The men in the songs don't come off well. Most have got money, which equals power – the coke dealer in *Edith And The Kingpin*; the married businessman looking for "blondes with credit card eyes" in *Harry's House/Centerpiece*; and in the title track – one of the highlights – a married woman, trapped in her deluxe

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suburban home, hears "her master's voice" in the never-ending sound of sprinklers watering their impossibly perfect lawns.

Shades Of Scarlett Conquering has the movie *Gone With The Wind* as its inspiration; *Boho Dance* – the most personal-sounding song – has Tom Wolfe's book about art and commerce as its muse. As to the most unexpected track, it's *Jungle Line*, its lyrics inspired by the French artist Rousseau, the melody sung over the French field recording *Burundi Black*. David Crosby and James Taylor's guest appearances might also be part of the puzzle. And throughout there's a sun-on-water shimmer to the whole thing.

In the UK *Hissing* was loved. Michael Watts of *Melody Maker* found the puzzle of her album "a delightful torture". Alan Lewis in *Sounds* praised her musical depiction of "the thin line between hope and despair down which we all walk in the '70s". And it was *Best Album of the Year* in both *Sounds* and *NME*. ●