

# TURBULENT INDIGO

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*An album of perfectly formed arrangements and pretty melodies – yet dig deep into the lyrics and the anger of Dog Eat Dog was still there. So what was Joni so bitter about?*



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**F**OR JONI MITCHELL to invoke the spirit of Vincent Van Gogh as a metaphor for creative toil and unrecognised genius was an artist's prerogative. But to paint a self-portrait in his style for an album cover seemed a little bit rich: Van Gogh was ignored his whole life, while Mitchell had been lauded for much of her career. 'Turbulent Ego' might have been a more apposite title. But Mitchell was clearly feeling aggrieved. "Let me speak/Let me

## TRACKS



Sunny Sunday  
Sex Kills  
How Do You Stop  
Turbulent Indigo  
Last Chance Lost  
The Magdalene  
Laundries  
Not To Blame  
Borderline  
Yvette In English  
The Sire Of  
Sorrow (Job's  
Sad Song)

**How do you stop:**  
(above) Mitchell  
on *The Tonight  
Show*, February 3,  
1995.

spit out my bitterness," began *Turbulent Indigo's* closing track *The Sire Of Sorrow* (Job's Sad Song).

What was the exact problem? One possible explanation was the way Mitchell's efforts to stay relevant in the '80s – sampling, digital production, socio-political commentaries, duets with younger artists – had been routinely lambasted by the media. And let's face it, no one needs again to hear Mitchell duet with Billy Idol over big, booming drums or sample a cigarette machine. But with *Turbulent Indigo*, she might have had good reason to feel martyred when critics took aim, for it's an album of considerable strengths, continuing its predecessor's return to form.

**L**IKE *NIGHT RIDE HOME*, her first album of the '90s, *Turbulent Indigo* was a marked departure from her '80s records, restoring the airy grace and subtle shades of her '70s work, amplifying the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of her songs with her voice still in radiant health (the smoking had yet to remove her higher register).

Album intro *Sunny Sunday* packaged it all up. The music matched the upbeat mood of its title, neatly contrasting with the sharp vignette of anger and frustration, as a woman fired a pistol at the streetlight outside her house: "She always misses/But the day she hits/That's the day she'll leave," Mitchell crooned. With bass, muted keys and sax (trusted collaborator Wayne Shorter returns) augmenting Mitchell's acoustic guitar, and lasting just two and a half minutes, *Sunny Sunday* is pure perfection.

Even when the following *Sex Kills* was busier and louder, dominated by Michael Landau's serpentine guitar, there was space and light for Mitchell to glide in between. But *Sex Kills* is where *Turbulent Indigo's* ➤

**“The severity of Mitchell’s lyrics appear to have blinded critics to the music, each of the songs couched in sultry, lithe melody.”**



detractors come down hard. In her youth, sex was a personal and cultural liberation, but now, “Sex sells everything/And sex kills.” Most fans wanted her to remain the metaphysical poet they adored, not address AIDs and consumerism.

But Mitchell was 51 years old, and had seen it all; from both sides now, in fact. Mitchell had cited her marriage to Larry Klein as a cause: “I’ve discovered that with your focus no longer on finding a mate,” she once said, “you get a heightened sense of community, and I’ve become a bit more political – not too political, though.” The couple had recently separated, but they remained friends: Klein produced *Turbulent Indigo* with Mitchell (and played bass and organ), and would work with her again, so no revengeful love songs this time either.

As for how political Mitchell was feeling, *Sex Kills* also had the corruption of doctors and lawyers in its sights, adding, “Little kids packin’ guns to school/The ulcerated ozone... And the gas leaks/And the oil spills.” Guns appeared again in *Last Chance Lost* (“They bicker on the rifle range/Blame takes aim”). *Magdalene* Laundries was inspired by the abuse scandal at the Irish Catholic homes for ‘fallen’ women. *Not To Blame* also dealt with violence and abuse: “They said you beat the girl you loved the most.”

It’s understood the abuser was Mitchell’s former lover Jackson Browne, who reputedly hit his then girlfriend, actor Daryl Hannah, which set off a war of words between Mitchell and Browne. A turbulent Mitchell was unwilling to hold back. *Borderline* railed against judgemental figures (“You snipe so steady/You snub so snide/So ripe and ready/To diminish and deride!”), conceivably with the media in mind.

The severity of Mitchell’s lyrics appear to have blinded critics to the music, as without exception each of these songs couched its heart of darkness in sultry, lithe melody. *Last Chance Lost* was further enriched by Mitchell’s sublime vocal, amplifying her deeper register while building a rich stack of harmonies.

Shorter’s sax was mostly the lead instrument, curling conversationally around her voice, or providing pithy punctuation marks; Landau, a busy presence on Mitchell’s ’80s albums, was only called on for two tracks, one being *Turbulent Indigo*’s lead single *How Do You Stop*, written by Dan ‘Relight My Fire’ Hartman with songwriter/producer Charlie Midnight. Mitchell’s lyric here was more of a wistful complaint: “One day you’re too young/Then you’re in your prime/Then you’re looking back at the hands of time.” It’s the album’s only misstep, a bid for radio play rather than *Authentic Joni*.

**A**UTHENTIC JONI RETURNS to close out *Turbulent Indigo*. The David Crosby co-write *Yvette In English*, a love song of sorts, is set in Paris with romance infused in every stanza, such as “Burgundy nocturne tips and spills/They trot along nicely in the spreading stain.” The *Sire of Sorrow* (*Job’s Sad Song*) is all gliding chords and a melody as light as air. Not content with comparing herself to Van Gogh, Mitchell was now referencing the biblical figure of Job, whose faith was tested by one catastrophe after another. Perhaps it was her faith in humanity rather than just the media that underpinned Mitchell’s bitterness. “Man is the sire of sorrow,” she sang. “I’ve lost all taste for life/I’m all complaints.”

*Turbulent Indigo* won the Grammy for Best Pop Album. Van Gogh should have been so lucky. ●

**Soft return:** (above) on *The Tonight Show*, December 12, 1995; (opposite) collecting her Grammy for Best Pop Album, LA, February 28, '96.