

TAMING THE TIGER

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An artist out of time – again – Mitchell returned to an '80s sound and some familiar gender politics. But hidden within was a great revelation: the reunion with the daughter she gave up for adoption in 1965 and whom a reporter had traced several years before.

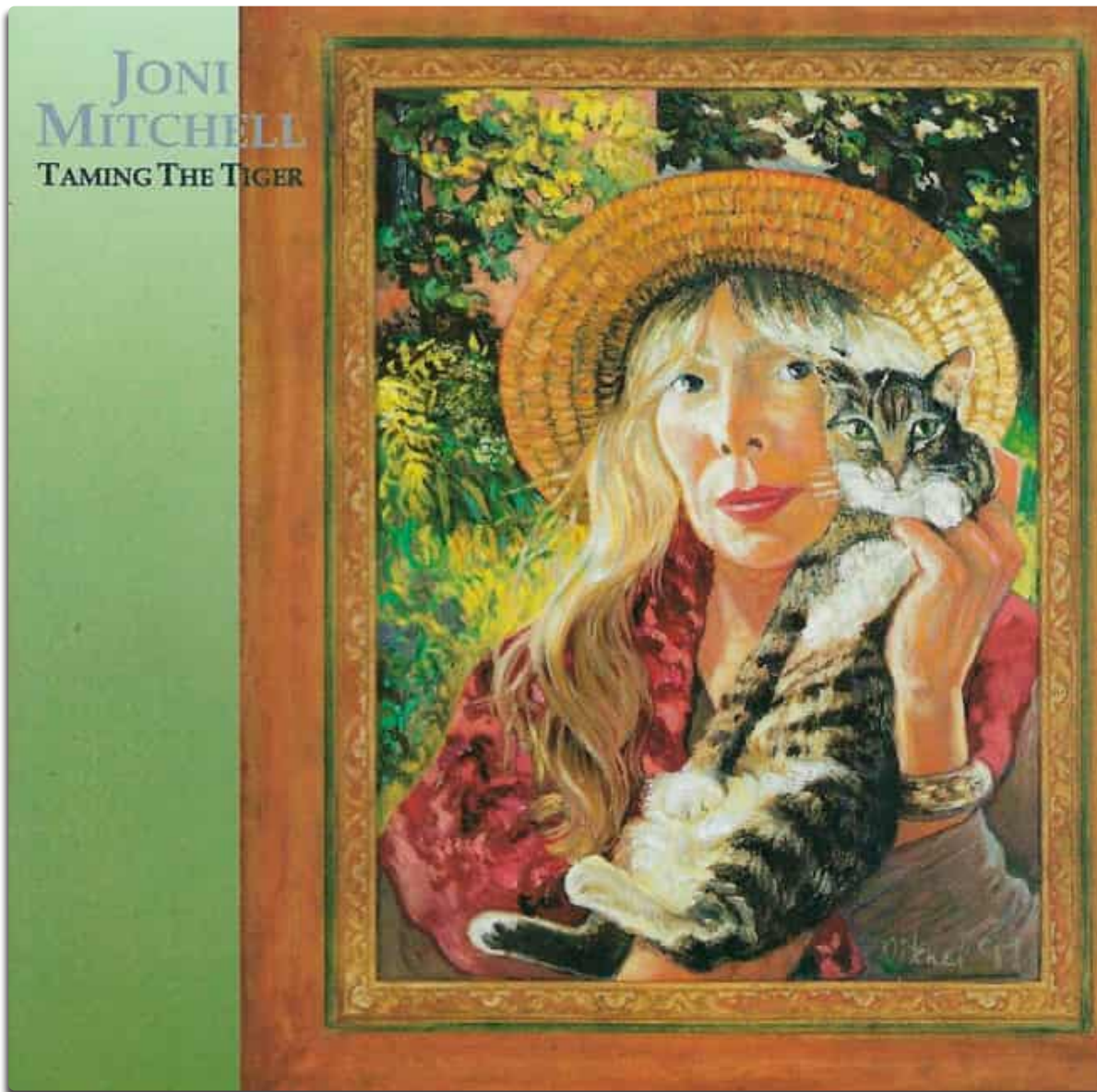


Certain stripe: (from left) Cher, k.d. lang, Madonna and Joni at the Vanity Fair post-Oscars party, LA, June 15, 1998.

ON *TAMING THE TIGER*'S title track, Joni sings, "I'm a runaway from the record biz... and the whiny white kids." Not half. In 1998, few records sounded so pointedly uncoupled from the zeitgeist. Trying to get a handle on the amorphous, if elegant, jazz stylings of Mitchell's 16th studio LP can be tricky, not least because she was in thrall to the Roland VG-8 guitar-synth, a gizmo her

biographer David Yaffe memorably described as sounding like "a guitar with a head cold". A new millennium beckoned, but much of *TTT* has a decidedly '80s sound. It's a wilful beast, unconcerned with fashion, commerciality or conventions of form.

Emboldened by two Grammy Awards for 1995's *Turbulent Indigo* – and awarded Sweden's prestigious Polar Music Prize gong in 1996 – Joni's stock was high



TRACKS



Harlem In Havana
 Man From Mars
 Love Puts On
 A New Face
 Lead Balloon
 No Apologies
 Taming The Tiger
 The Crazy Cries
 Of Love
 Stay In Touch
 Face Lift
 My Best To You
 Tiger Bones

and she was again doing just as she pleased. The VG-8's woozy sound sets her crystalline vocals into stark relief, and Wayne Shorter's classy tenor sax stylings also fly free. But this is not Wynton Marsalis ornamenting Sting – it's odder than that; more free-range.

Untethered by drums, *Stay In Touch* has been read as a cautious reflection on a seismic personal event, namely Mitchell's 1997 reunion with her daughter and only child, Kilauren, whom she'd given up for adoption in 1965, feeling unable to provide for her. "So we must be loyal and wary/ Not to give away too much/ Until we build a firm foundation", sings Mitchell against a buoyant wash of sound. But like *The Crazy Cries Of Love*, *Stay In Touch* was also part-inspired by Joni's then-boyfriend, Don Freed, hence it also works as a cautionary tale for new couples.

The stand-out track is *Man From Mars*, as later covered by Chaka Khan. The song's groove is immense despite its cushioned subtlety, and the subtext of Mitchell's lyrics seems to be 'and women are from Venus.' *Lead Balloon*, too – a real curio with surprisingly heavy Joni guitars buried disappointingly deep – also explores gender politics: "An angry man is just an angry man/But an angry woman [is a] bitch".

Taming The Tiger is more bold experiment than failed venture, certainly, but it does end somewhat toothlessly. Mitchell came to *My Best To You*, a sentimental

1942 song by Isham Jones, via country singers the Sons Of The Pioneers. Her cover of it seems a tad incongruous here, while *Tiger Bones* is filler, the instrumental skeleton of the title track. Mitchell had made her point but would return with 2000's *Both Sides Now*, a lavishly orchestrated set of jazz standards which also included reworkings of two of her best-known songs. Maybe even mavericks have to pay the rent... ●



"Emboldened by two Grammys, Joni's stock was high and again she was doing just as she pleased."