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From Hejira To Herbie Hancock

## Hejira

Keeping Joni's Legacy Live

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• Noel Langley • Greg Abate
• Darius Brubeck Takes Five

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Photo: Lou Jasmine

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# Both Sides Now – Joni Mitchell & Jazz

**While Joni Mitchell's 1976 album *Hejira* – featuring Jaco Pastorius, Larry Carlton and Victor Feldman – may have been her startling encounter with jazz, it was hardly her first. As this celebrated recording reaches its 50th anniversary this month, acclaimed writer Bill Milkowski explains why Mitchell turned to jazz musicians including Herbie Hancock to realise her wildly imaginative vision, one that frequently broke the bounds of convention and opened up bold new possibilities.**

Throughout her illustrious career, iconic singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell (Grammy Award winner, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, Kennedy Center honoree) has touched multitudes with her vulnerable, emotionally honest and genre-defying compositions. Her tunes such as 'Woodstock', 'River', 'Both Sides Now', 'The Circle Game', 'Help Me', 'Free Man in Paris', 'A Case of You' and 'Big Yellow Taxi' helped change the course of popular music: a female singer-songwriter who reimagined the rules of a largely male stronghold.

While Joni's early recordings such as 1968's *Song to a Seagull*, 1969's *Clouds* (containing the song 'Chelsea Morning', which a young Bill and Hillary Clinton named their daughter after), 1970's *Ladies of the Canyon* and 1971's deeply reflective and transformative masterpiece *Blue* were clearly delineated in the acoustic folk rock category, she began crossing over into jazzier territory with a pair of 1974 releases – *Miles of Aisles* (featuring Tom Scott's fusion band The L.A. Express), *Court and Spark* (featuring The Crusaders' Wilton Felder on bass and Joe Sample on electric keyboards, along with guitarist Larry Carlton and reedman Scott) and 1975's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

> **"Joni is as cutting edge as anybody"**
> **– Herbie Hancock**

In her own liner notes to 2025's box set, *Joni's Jazz*, Mitchell alludes to an early infatuation with jazz while growing up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: "When I was a teenager in the 1950s I loved to dance. One summer some of the boys in our dance crowd went to New York City and came back talking Kerouac, Coltrane and Charlie Parker. One of them, Brian Anderson, hired me to do a mural of a jazz trio on his bedroom wall. He paid me in jazz records. When I moved to Detroit in the 60s, I began to write songs. I played at a club called The Chess Mate, which was folk music until midnight and jazz after hours. Those jazz musicians were Motown players. I couldn't read or write music, so I hired them to transcribe my music for copyright purposes. They liked my melodies and began to incorporate them into their sets. Because of this, I gained a small Black audience in the Motor City."

The Canadian-born, 83-year-old Mitchell (recently officially sworn in as a U.S. citizen after 62 years of living in America) has always exhibited an affinity for jazz in her loose, behind-the-beat and over-the-barline phrasing as a singer, reflecting her admiration for Billie Holiday and Lambert-Hendricks & Ross. But on 1976's *Hejira*, she strides confidently into the jazz camp, holding her own with the likes of electric bass phenomenon Jaco Pastorius and revered saxophone elder Wayne Shorter as well as vibraphonist Victor Feldman and guitarist Carlton.

The first of a trilogy of so-called jazz outings (which some critics dismissed as "controversial" and some fans regarded as a polarising pivot from her core folk and pop-rock leanings), *Hejira* was followed in quick succession by 1977's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and 1979's *Mingus*, both of which also featured Pastorius and Shorter along with legendary pianist Herbie Hancock and veteran percussionist (and Joni paramour) Don Alias. And if her adventurous, world music excursions on music on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* weren't disorienting (and potentially alienating) enough, Mitchell courted a degree of backlash from the album's cover, a Norman Seef photo depicting her as an alter-ego she concocted named Art Nouveau, a male Black pimp character in blackface and Afro wig. As early as 1974, Mitchell had referenced an apparently imaginary "male muse named Art" that resided within her. The following year, she experimented with blackface for the first time during Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue tour. Then in 1976, she attended a Halloween party in blackface as a persona she named Art Nouveau. (In April 2024, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* was given a new album cover on music streaming services using an outtake from the photo sessions for her 1985 album, *Dog Eat Dog*).

And though *Hejira* may have initially been considered by many as a departure from earlier works such as *Song to a Seagull* and *Blue*, it nevertheless contained such timeless

Photo: AP Photo/Jim Cooper



Joni and Herbie

Mitchell classics as 'Coyote', 'Amelia', 'Furry Sings the Blues' and 'Black Crow'. A key element of this darkly beautiful album is the organic interaction between Mitchell's soaring vocals and Pastorius's singing bass lines. On tunes such as the title track and particularly on the poignant 'Refuge of the Roads', they blend like intimate partners on the dance floor lost in a muse.

*Hejira* presents Pastorius not as supreme chopsmeister and audacious scene-stealer, a role he relished in concert with Weather Report since joining the fusion supergroup, co-led by former Cannonball Adderley sextet keyboardist Joe Zawinul and former Jazz Messengers and Miles Davis Quintet saxophonist Shorter, on 1 April, 1976. Instead, Jaco plays sensitive accompanist and melodic foil to Mitchell's unique poetry set to music on those *Hejira* sessions held near the end of May through September, 1976; shortly after the 11 March release of Weather Report's *Black Market* (on which Pastorius played on two memorable tracks, his own super-funky 'Barbary Coast' and the remarkably lyrical 'A Remark You Made', Zawinul's paean to his former employer Cannonball Adderley, who had passed away the year before, on 8 August, 1975).

> ***"The bass players I worked with before just kind of played through it like four beats to the bar... just polka-dotting along. So you had to wait for somebody like Jaco to come along who had one foot in rock & roll and one foot in jazz."***
> ***– Joni Mitchell on Jaco Pastorius***

The *New York Times* music critic Stephen Holden described Mitchell's new sound heard on *Hejira* as "stark, electric folk-jazz that's centered on the proto-erotic interplay between her own agitated rhythm guitar and Jaco Pastorius' sweetly responsive bass." Holden further elaborated: "There was a real collaboration with Pastorius in which his bass and her voice became a man-woman duet, an extremely intimate, deep dialogue between two musicians."

Jaco's playing throughout *Hejira* is marked by thoughtful restraint and tender lyricism. The stunning title track features a whole choir of overdubbed basses and also marks Jaco's signature use of false harmonics, an unprecedented quality that he had introduced into the vocabulary of bass players on his self-titled debut on Epic Records, released in April, 1976 (a full year before his harmonics playing on 'Birdland' from Weather Report's landmark 1977 release, *Heavy Weather*). Jaco's use of ringing harmonics (first showcased on 'Portrait of Tracy' from his debut album) is particularly effective on 'Coyote', the grooving, rhythmically-charged opener to *Hejira*, as well as on 'Black Crow'. He also achieves an uncanny singing quality with his fretless bass on the brooding 'Refuge of the Roads', which stands as one of his most poignant, deeply resonating and affecting statements on the instrument.

In a 1978 interview, Jaco spoke to BBC radio journalist Clive Williamson about his initial collaboration with Joni Mitchell: "I didn't even know anything about Joni Mitchell. I hadn't even heard her music. In fact, I hadn't heard any of Weather Report's music before I joined the group. You know, I'm a father. My daughter's almost eight, and from when she was born I've had no time to listen to music, so I don't know that much about what's going on. I knew Miles Davis's music and Coltrane's music and James Brown and The Beatles. Frank Sinatra's music too. But once my kids were born, I was working around the clock and didn't have time to casually listen to music. So I didn't know Joni's music. But it was really fun coming in from nowhere and adding my thing to it."

Mitchell had recruited the Weather Report bassist to complement her deeply expressive, shape-shifting voice while also supplying innumerable surprises along the way in terms of off-the-cuff accents, phrasing and punctuations. In many ways, Jaco was Joni's dream bassist. As she explained to Bob Bobbing for *Portrait of Jaco: The Early Years*: "The bass players I worked with before just kind of played through it like four beats to the bar... just polka-dotting along. They couldn't see the shapes of the music or where the pressure points were. They couldn't grasp it. So you had to wait for somebody like Jaco to come along who had one foot in rock & roll and one foot in jazz. And when Jaco came in on the sessions for *Hejira*, he was doing what I wanted, which was a more classical counterpoint to my melodies, and leaving space, then going into another figure and then leaving another hole and sort of slurping around and sliding along. Plus, he had some interrelationship to the lyric and there was humour in the right places. So there was a personality there that deserved to be in the foreground. And we were conceptually kindred. And to my amazement, not only was he doing some of the things I was asking people to do but he was playing Stravinsky figures in the upper register and fitting them in in all the right places. And his choice of notes and his approach was very similar to what I was trying to get at. So it was as if I dreamed him, because I didn't have to give him any instruction. I could just kind of cut him loose and stand back and celebrate his choices."

Mitchell adds that before meeting Jaco, she had remained frustrated with what other bass players had presented her. "I began to have very strong opinions about what the bass should do, and they were in conflict with what the bass was doing," she told Bobbing. "I didn't understand why the high end could have so much freedom and yet the low end was so locked in. I would make suggestions to bass players about leaving more holes, like in classical music, and go sailing up into the high end and be more expressive. And I would sing the parts to the bass players and ask them to play like that, but they would refuse. At that particular time there weren't a lot of women in music instructing players, and sometimes bass players would frankly get annoyed. I forget who it was now but I was working with a bass player and giving him some instruction and he finally said to me, 'Look, Joni, there's this weird bass player in Florida who plays with Phyllis Diller and Bob Hope (at the Bachelors III nightclub, where Jaco played in the house big band led by Peter Graves). You'd probably like



Jaco Pastorius circa 1975 – Photo by Don Hunstein



**Clockwise from top left: Joni and Wayne Shorter, on stage with Jaco on the *Shadows and Light* tour, and in the dressing room with Jaco and Herbie Hancock, and smiling with Charles Mingus (photo by Sue Mingus)**

him.' In other words, he thought that what I was telling him was crazy, and he thought Jaco's playing was crazy. So he figured we'd probably get along just fine."

In the documentary *Woman Of Heart And Mind*, Mitchell described it this way: "Nearly every bass player that I tried did the same thing; they would put up a dark picket fence through my music. And I thought, 'Why does it have to go ploddy-ploddy-ploddy?' Finally one guy said to me, 'Joni, you better play with jazz musicians.'"

And so she did on the trilogy of jazz-soaked recordings through the 1970s – *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and the Charles Mingus collaboration, *Mingus*. Jaco and Joni's overdubbing guitars and basses was used to great effect on all three of those landmark recordings. For example, on Mitchell's tune 'Jericho' from *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, Jaco cleverly overdubbed combinations of bass harmonics to create beautifully stacked chord clusters. In a 1987 *Musician* interview, she described her working rapport with Pastorius: "He was formidable! You can hear it in the mixes back then. He was very dominating. But I put up with it; I even got a kick out of it. Because I was so thrilled about the way he played. It was exactly what I was waiting for. Everybody'd heard my lament about the trouble I was having. I was trying to find a certain sound on the bottom end, going against the vogue at the time. It's very difficult to buck a vogue. Bass players were playing with dead strings; you couldn't get them to change to get a round, full-bodied, boomier tone. And the other thing was, I had started to think, 'Why couldn't the bass leave the bottom sometimes and go up and play in the midrange and then return?' Why did it have to always play the root? So when Jaco came in, John Guerin said to me, 'God, you must love this guy. He almost never plays the root!'"

Keyboard legend Herbie Hancock made his first of many forays into Mitchell's music on 1979's *Mingus*. As he recalled in the liner notes to *Joni's Jazz*: "When I was first called by Jaco Pastorius to participate on an album that Joni was doing called *Mingus* – celebrating Charlie Mingus, who at the time was dying from Lou Gehrig's disease – he said, 'We're doing this record, and the only piece that's missing is you.' And I said, 'Joni Mitchell is doing a record of Charlie Mingus? Wow. Who else is on the record?' And he said, 'Wayne Shorter.' And I said, 'I'll be right there.' That's where I first met Joni."

Hancock was initially confused about his role in Mitchell's music on that first session for *Mingus*. As he recalled, "I was thinking I might have to back off certain things I might have done if it was just Jaco and Wayne, who were already doing cutting edge stuff in jazz. But Joni actually said, 'No, no. You go ahead and paint pictures, do whatever you want to do with the music.' Then when she started to sing along with us, she fit in so easily, I was shocked. That was when I really started to pay attention to Joni. I thought she might have the quote-unquote limitations of rock 'n' roll and folk. But she wasn't like that. Joni is as cutting edge as anybody."

Hancock would go on to participate in Joni's glorious, Grammy-winning *Both Sides Now*, an orchestral triumph arranged and conducted by Vince Mendoza that showcases the mature singer delivering deeper tones in a voice clearly weathered by a lifetime of cigarette smoking yet resonating with a kind of haunting authority against the lush strings accompaniment. Herbie is featured soloist on two standards, the Tin Pan Alley song 'Sometimes I'm Happy' and the Rodgers & Hart nugget 'I Wish I Were in Love Again', from the 1937 Broadway musical *Babes in Arms*. He would later appear on Mitchell's 2002 2CD set, *Travelogue*, an orchestral reappraisal of her work covering the entirety of her career, from her 1968 debut, *Song To a Seagull*, to 1994's *Turbulent Indigo*. Then in 2007 – the same year that Mitchell also released her final studio recording, *Shine* (released on the Starbucks music imprint Hear Music) – he released *River: The Joni Letters*, his tribute to Mitchell with guest vocalists including Leonard Cohen, Tina Turner, Norah Jones, Corinne Bailey Rae, Luciana Souza and Mitchell herself on 'Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms)' from *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*.

Shorter was her most frequent jazz collaborator, appearing on 10 Mitchell albums, beginning with *Hejira* and continuing with 1977's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, 1979's *Mingus*, 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast*, 1985's *Dog Eat Dog*, 1988's *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*, 1991's *Night Ride Home*, 1994's *Turbulent Indigo*, 1998's *Taming the Tiger*, 2000's *Both Sides Now* and 2002's *Travelogue*. In a statement on her website following Shorter's passing on 2 March 2023 at the age of 89, Mitchell wrote: "Wayne was more than a musician. He was like a little Zen master. He was mystical. He was the only musician that I could direct metaphorically or theatrically. I would say to him, 'Come in here and get out here. Then come in really sad, and by the time you get to here... get really young.' And he would

> ***She is a multi-expressive person, and that is very rare and unique. She had a sense of feeling that I was joining her as a painter... And she said, 'You're playing like you have a paint brush, you know*** – Wayne Shorter

play that! Or, I'd tell him, 'Okay, Wayne, you're the bird.' So he'd go out in the studio, put his horn in his mouth, and the first lick that came out of him was so like a bird. It was amazing! It was magnificent. He was just kind of unconscious when he played it, but it was so bird-like and so unusual. He was a beautiful musician. He will be sorely missed."

In the liner notes to *Joni's Jazz*, which Mitchell dedicated to Shorter, he added this insight about their working relationship: "She is a multi-expressive person, and that is very rare and unique. She had a sense of feeling that I was joining her as a painter. She likes to paint, and I majored in fine arts before music. And she said, 'You're playing like you have a paint brush, you know.' It was like that kind of something that doesn't even have anything to do with music. We'd do a take and she would say, 'Do you have any more of that?' And then we'd do another take and she'd say, 'You got any more in you?' which is like, 'Do you have any more of those colours?' without using the word 'colours'. But that's what it was. I would give her the entrances and exits and all that stuff and she would choose from different takes to edit in, as if using a paint brush again. Because, of course, every take was different. She said she wished she could use all of them, but she would highlight the ones that would become the record with what she thought was a large, big, fat rainbow of a palette that she could use."

While Pastorius' contribution on *Hejira*, as well as *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus* is resounding, he and Mitchell would further explore their musical chemistry on her *Shadows and Light* tour of 1979 in an all-star band that included guitarist Pat Metheny, keyboardist Lyle Mays, tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker and drummer Don Alias. On that live recording, released in 1980 on the Asylum label, they covered several tunes from *Hejira*, including 'Coyote', 'Amelia', 'Black Crow', 'Furry Sings the Blues' and the title track as well as 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat', 'The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines' and 'God Must Be a Boogie Man' from *Mingus*. Their performance at the Santa Barbara County Bowl on 9 September 1979 was filmed and later released as a cable television broadcast, premiering on the Showtime network on 2 December, 1980, just a few months after the accompanying live double album hit record stores. For this television presentation, Mitchell directed the film herself, intercutting the live performance with classic movie clips (such as *Rebel Without a Cause*) and original footage of her skating on an icy pond. *Shadows and Light* first appeared in home video formats later in the decade, with official VHS and LaserDisc editions arriving around 1989 via Warner Home Video. It was finally released on DVD in 2003 via Shout! Factory.

I covered the *Shadows and Light* concert as a freelance music critic for *The Milwaukee Journal* when the tour arrived at the Alpine Valley Music Theatre in East Troy on 17 August 1979. Here's my review, under the heading 'Folksy, Jazzy, Glorious':

"No, Joni Mitchell did not turn into Billie Holiday overnight. She has not suddenly forsaken her folk roots and Woodstock anthems to become strictly a singer of straight-ahead jazz. Instead, the gifted poet-painter-musician from Alberta, Canada, has merely added another mode of expression to her eclectic career. Although some old folk fans have been scared off by Ms. Mitchell's latest album, where she explores the rudiments of bebop under the direction of the late jazz composer Charles Mingus, they were not disappointed with her superb show Thursday night at the Alpine Valley Music Theatre.

After warming up a crowd of 7,100 with some of her own hits – 'Big Yellow Taxi', 'Free Man in Paris', 'Coyote', 'Furry Sings the Blues' – Ms. Mitchell slid into a few of the more daring, more dissonant Mingus compositions. They allowed for more creative liberties, highlighting her dynamic range and her unique talent for phrasing lyrics.

And there was the added attraction of a dream band consisting of guitarist Pat Metheny, bassist Jaco Pastorius, percussionist Don Alias, pianist Lyle Mays and saxophonist Michael Brecker. These masterful jazz-oriented musicians enhanced the performance with subtle colours and textures behind the haunting, almost aloof Mitchell style. Each also received a solo spot, which gave the whole concert a broader flavour. Pastorius performed a virtual concerto on his electric bass, using a tape system for a multiple-layered effect. His amazing dexterity and unheard-of harmonic technique was almost overshadowed by his playful theatrics as he slapped, whipped, dropped and finally jumped on his instrument. It was a great contrast to the serene style and sweet, singing guitar work of Metheny. Percussionist Alias offered a bit of the Afro-Latin flavour with a solo spot that preceded 'Dreamland'. Ms. Mitchell put down her guitar and became a sultry torch singer on the old Mingus classic, 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat'.

Perhaps her greatest talent lies in painting such vivid, emotional images with words. She can neither read nor write music, and she usually approaches her tunes in a pictorial fashion. Her stories and images are so revealing and honest that they deeply touch her most avid fans.

As a nostalgic finish to a fine show, the 35-year-old singer performed a touching version of the 'Woodstock' theme song, a tale of idealistic young people "getting back to the garden." The concert showed Ms. Mitchell as an able improviser, capable guitarist and sensitive lyric writer who continues to evolve and defy categories. Her music deserves the full hyphenate: folk-rock-country-jazz-classics."

That she survived a brain aneurysm in 2015 and went on to make a celebrated return to live performance at the Newport Folk Festival in July 2022, as documented on the 2023 Rhino Records release, *Joni Mitchell at Newport*, is a miracle. But then Joni Mitchell's entire career, from her humble Saskatchewan folk roots to her multiple Grammy triumphs and groundbreaking, genre-stretching albums such as *Hejira*, has been miraculous.




**Joni's jazz odyssey (from top): *Mingus*, *Shadows and Light*, *Hejira* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter***

# Hejira Highs

With their pitch-perfect readings of Joni Mitchell's music, **Hejira** have been dazzling audiences across the UK. As the album the band is named after turns 50, **Peter Jones** meets bandleader Pete Oxley and singer Hattie Whitehead to uncover the alchemy of their sound

Anyone who has heard them will probably agree that the most impressive bearer of the Joni Mitchell torch these days is a band known as Hejira. *Jazzwise* readers, of course, were on to them early – we featured them in 'Taking Off' in our February 2024 issue. For those who missed it, a swift recap: guitarist Pete Oxley has run The Spin jazz club in Oxford for 25 years. As a great admirer of Joni Mitchell, particularly the period covered by her 1980 live album *Shadows and Light*, it crossed his mind in 2022 to organise a special night of her music at the club.

Musically, it would be a rather daunting task: *Shadows and Light* features some of the most extraordinary jazz musicians of the modern era. Having studied Pat Metheny for many years, Oxley felt reasonably comfortable taking on the electric guitar role himself. The rest of the band were Chris Eldred on keys (for Lyle Mays), Ollie Weston on reeds (for Michael Brecker), Dave Jones on fretless bass (Jaco Pastorius) and Rick Finlay on drums (Don Alias). Later he added percussionist Marc Cecil to the line-up. The all-important vocal/acoustic guitar slot was taken by Hattie Whitehead.

The one-off gig at The Spin sold out, and Oxley quickly added a second night, which also sold out. Since then the project has snowballed, with 150 gigs throughout the UK, culminating in 2026 in a nine-date American tour. Live recordings taken from those performances have now been released as Hejira's second album.

Joni Mitchell's left hand was weakened by polio as a child, restricting her dexterity on the guitar, a problem she solved by using different tunings, many of which were her own invention. This resulted in an entirely personal sound, chord inversions that other guitarists would never find, leading to melodies that were equally unique.

A consummate musician as well as singer, Hattie Whitehead had few qualms about tackling the odd guitar tunings. "I already played in several different open tunings anyway, so it wasn't a new thing to me when we started this project." She initially discovered them on a website, as well as listening to the *Shadows and Light* album and comparing the information. "I've also adapted slightly so I'm not using a different tuning for every single song." As for the emotions and messages in the music, Hattie recognises what a well-rounded person Joni Mitchell is, a woman "that's so aware of herself, and so aware of the world, and so in touch with emotion."

Pete Oxley is also in awe of Mitchell's songwriting. "When I heard Joni, it was like a whole other level of singer-songwriter. The melodies were so beautiful and the way she sang, her pitch, her sound, and all these beautiful melodies, such unusual melodies, and with her open tunings, and these made-up chords of hers. So when I came to wanting to do this music, and I started transcribing songs, I listened to 'Hejira' – the song 'Hejira'. I was completely amazed, it's a three-chord song, with two interludes between each verse. And because the melody is so beautiful, and the voicings are so unlike a standard three-chord song, it never struck me that that's what it was. Not only the melodies and the voices, but also the lyrics. I really got stuck into the lyrics and found the poetry of those songs in particular completely striking, and poetry in its own right."

Hattie maintains that Hejira are not a tribute band. "Originality is in the way that you perform the song – you make that performance your own. The more we play this repertoire, the more meanings pop out in the lyrics that I can apply to my own existence, and that's the original thing we're doing. We're enjoying it as ourselves doing it rather than pretending to be someone else playing the songs, which is what I imagine a tribute band's thing to be."

As well as a guitarist of rare sophistication, Pete Oxley is a canny business operator, with the organisational skills and technical know-how to capitalise on his band's potential. "A big thing that's happened for us is the use of YouTube. That's been really, really helpful. I made these videos, put them up online. They'd only just gone up, and one of them got quite a lot of attention – the actual song, 'Hejira'. So quite quickly it went up to 50,000 views, which I'd never had in any of my original music. And some useful people started seeing it – promoters were seeing it. You know, the word got out a little bit." It certainly did. At the time of writing, that video had reached 228,000 views.

Commercially, Hejira has the advantage of appealing to audiences way beyond jazz: folk fans, obviously, given Joni Mitchell's musical history, but also rock – perhaps veering into yacht rock – hooking in the sort of people who like Americana in the vein of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Doobie Brothers or Steely Dan. This genre fluidity has opened the door to the sort of festivals and venues that might baulk at the idea of promoting pure jazz.

"We've been selling out at places like the Stables at Wavendon, which holds about 400, St George's in Bristol, we had more than 500 there. Great venue. Jazz Café, we've now sold it out three times. That's 500. So, you know, the audiences

are developing. We've spread the word by playing as many venues around the country and playing as often as we can. Right up to Scotland, Ireland as well – we've been to Ireland a couple of times."

Such was the intensity of touring during the first year, with 50 gigs all over the UK, that Hattie, who has her own career as a singer-songwriter, told Pete she was finding it all a bit much. "She said, I really need to limit it to about 35, more or less. But the rest of the band were saying, actually, we'd like to do more than 50 a year! So the only solution was to try and find other singers. And we've been incredibly fortunate in finding two other great singers who also can play guitar, who also love Joni's music, and also bring their own thing to the band. So, they're not emulating Hattie, just like Hattie doesn't emulate Joni."

The deps are Immy Churchill and Jana Varga, who hails from Slovenia (readers may wish to check out Varga's gorgeous rendition of Joni Mitchell's 'Love' on YouTube). In case of anyone else's unavailability, Pete Oxley has also found deps for each musician in the band. "I'm the only one that is sort of undeppable," he adds, "because I'm in charge."

The 2026 American tour was a feat of quite extraordinary luck, as well as judgement. First, an email arrived out of the blue from a promoter in Syracuse, New York, saying that he'd seen the band's videos, and wanted them to come and play at the festival he'd been running for 40 years. Learning that American work visas would cost $7,000 and take at least six months to be processed, Pete realised that extra gigs were urgently needed. Then he remembered someone else who had contacted him 18 months earlier from a theatre in Pennsylvania, who now offered them dates which fitted in.

Another email arrived, this one from someone who had enjoyed the Hejira show at The Stables, mentioning that he didn't go to gigs very much because his work was organising gigs for bands in America. Oxley couldn't believe his luck. "We met up the next day, and he became our agent in America, and filled in the rest of the dates." And the luck didn't end there. Another American got in touch – again after seeing the band's YouTube videos. He turned out to be an experienced tour manager, who ended up not only supplying all the equipment and instruments they needed, but driving them between gigs, culminating at the Iridium in New York.

Lucky? Certainly. But of course, the harder Pete Oxley works, the luckier he seems to get. "I'm surprised there hasn't been another band doing this," he muses, "so we've got a little niche. And within that niche, there's still quite a lot of gold to mine."

**Hejira play Jazz Cafe, London (16 Nov), Brighton Dome Corn Exchange, Brighton (28 Nov), The Voodoo Rooms, Edinburgh (10 March 2027), and Saint Luke's, Glasgow (11 March 2027)**

***"[Joni Mitchell is, a woman] that's so aware of herself, and so aware of the world, and so in touch with emotion"***
***– Hattie Whitehead***



Pete Oxley (left) and Hattie Whitehead (right)





## Hejira
### The Year of Hejira
Spin Jazz Productions (2LP, CD, DL)
★★★★ EDITOR'S CHOICE

Hattie Whitehead, Jana Varga, Immy Churchill (v, g), Pete Oxley (g), Ollie Weston (reeds), Chris Eldred, Nick Gilmore (ky), Dave Jones (b), Rick Finlay (d) and Marc Cecil, Adam Osmianski (perc). Rec. date not stated.

Soft and dreamlike for most of its running time, this second album from Hejira builds on the artistic success of their 2024 debut *Live at the Cockpit*. Although they use Joni Mitchell's songs for their repertoire, they avoid simply reproducing the original recordings, which are deepened and extended in Pete Oxley's subtle arrangements. The band is also notable for its restraint. A seven-piece ensemble with three chord instruments might fall into the trap of bombast, duplication of effort or over-complexity, but the arrangements give the songs room to breathe. The many gigs the band has put in over recent years are evident in the relaxed and assured way they play as a unit.

Since the overall effect is so integrated, it's invidious to pick out individual performances, but it must be said that Ollie Weston's work on bass clarinet is outstanding. The singers also deserve praise, not only for their individual channelling of Mitchell's voice, but for the fact that you have to listen quite hard to tell which of them is which.

A couple of highlights among the songs: 'Woodstock', a dark and spooky take on one of Mitchell's best-known tunes; and Oxley's own composition, the instrumental samba 'The Surging Waves' – solidly in the style of the Mitchell albums that form the core of the band's repertoire. *The Year of Hejira* (released to coincide with its namesake's 50th anniversary) is beautifully presented too, with extensive sleeve notes. **Peter Jones**

## Liam Noble
### Go See Jasmin: All the Big Questions
Bandcamp (CD, DL) ★★★½

Liam Noble (ky), Tara Cunningham (g), Tom Herbert (b) and Will Glaser (d). Rec. 6 November 2025



Any recording with a cut called 'Good Pudding' gets my vote. But *Go See Jasmin...* may get the goat of those who only know Noble through 'straight ahead' projects like *Tapestry Unravelled* with Christine Tobin, exploring Carole King's work, or *Brubeck*, dedicated to one of his heroes. In contrast *Go See Jasmin...* see-saws around with a punkish surrealism, replete with a talking dog. However, anarchy's always been a theme for Noble, not least in this year's *Distant Plains* when Penny Rimbaud of Crass harnessed Noble and Alcyona Mick for a deconstruction, or just plain destruction, of Holst's 'The Planets'.

Noble finds himself in appropriate company for a slice of pataphysical devilment, notably in Cunningham's fearless guitar work. She's all trancey reverb, floating around the rhythm section's loops and Noble's bleeps on 'A Moment's Peace'. On 'The Dog and the Money' (yup that yappy pooch) she floats between Santo and Johnny and Mark Ribot while Noble's vox is somewhere between Zappa and Bernie Cribbins. Wide parameters? *Mais bien sur!*

It's all darker and more fun than first appears: 'Miss Savage' is all impossible adolescent yearning, with sad trancey keys and lost guitar with a little Halvorson stirred in. Forget Brubeck: all big questions answered here. Or are they? **Andy Robson**

## Lothar Ohlmeier / Rudi Fischerlehner / Isambard Khroustaliov
### Landscapes
Not Applicable (LP, DL) ★★★

Lothar Ohlmeier (bcl), Rudi Fischerlehner (d, perc) and Isambard Khroustaliov (elec). Rec. date not stated.



There is a surprising amount of warmth in this improvised music, the third album from the collaborative trio of Lothar Ohlmeier, Rudi Fischerlehner and Isambard Khroustaliov whose first release *Hypertide Over Kiribati* emerged in 2019. Their electro-acoustic sound world combines Fischerlehner's meticulously evolutionary drums with Ohlmeier's judiciously restrained bass clarinet within an electronic counterpoint from Khroustaliov (aka UK producer Sam Britton) that can range from scattershot punctuation to tidal washes of overwhelming sound. Typically, there's a languid sonic foreground over a busy distant hubbub, the three musicians finding different voicings within each piece's atmosphere. Bass (and sub-bass) sounds are tightly rationed, meaning the full resonance of the bass clarinet has full sway over clatteringly tinny percussion or strange electronic howlings. The titles of tracks like 'Beneath The Surface' and 'Falling Water' are a guide to listeners – the latter's apparent tsunami opening shrinking to a trickling leaking roof swept aside by a later typhoon. 'Nocturnal' has an oddly random collection of animal sounds – was that a sheep? It all feels carefully studio curated with the possible exception of 'Luminous' which rushes into a clarinet and drum duet and a whoosh of electronics that all feels like live performance but ends rather quickly. It all conjures up strangely intangible images: Jack Bruce once penned a song called 'Theme From An Imaginary Western' – this album could well be 'Soundtrack to Impossible Animations'. **Tony Benjamin**




## Samara Joy
### Live at the Blue Note LA
Verve 6128676 (CD/Digital/LP)
★★★★ EDITOR'S CHOICE

Samara Joy (v), Kendric McCallister (ts), David Mason (as), Jason Charos (t), Eli Feingold (tb), Cameron Campbell (p), Marty Jaffe (b) and Evan Sherman (d). Rec. 15–16 April 2026

Samara Joy's debut live release, the five-track EP *Live at the Blue Note L.A.*, captures her at her most dynamic, backed by a superb septet in perfect sync with her artistry. Joy first recorded her wondrous version of Monk's 'Round Midnight' on her 2022 album *Linger Awhile*, eschewing the customary lyrics of Bernie Hanighen for those supplied by Jon Hendricks which she first heard Carmen McRae sing on the TV show *Jazz Casual*. A song clearly beloved by Joy, it's fascinating to hear how her approach has changed since the studio album, with sudden tempo shifts and switches to her operatic voice adding real dramatic heft. Joy's interpretation of the minor-key, brooding Jerome Kern/Otto Harbach standard 'Yesterdays' possesses enormous depth and emotional weight, with singer and band beautifully conveying its mood of nostalgia and regret. From the theatrical, confessional quality of its opening verse to the exquisitely phrased lines of its harmonically shifting chorus, the version of Billy Strayhorn's remarkable teenage masterpiece 'Lush Life' takes the breath away. Joy and her septet also deliver a virtuosic, joyful reading of 'No More Blues', the Jobim and Moraes bossa classic with English lyrics by Jon Hendricks, a song she previously recorded on her outstanding 2024 release, *Portrait*. **Peter Quinn**

