

Michael Waddacor's

# ★ Strange Brew™

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## Living in turbulent indigo

A celebration of Joni Mitchell, eloquent queen of song



Seventies siren of bittersweet song ...

Joni Mitchell photographed in the 1970s by Norman Seeff© (copyrighted)

Almost 40 years ago, a young and beautiful Canadian folk musician with the bittersweet voice of a seductive siren was "discovered" wowing appreciative fans in New York City folk-music venues. Within weeks, she was whisked westwards to Los Angeles, signed to Elektra Records and writing and recording some of the best music made on American West Coast between 1968 and 1976.

**Michael Waddacor** pays tribute to Joni Mitchell, arguably the most gifted, explorative and influential female singer-songwriter to have emerged since the birth of rock 'n' roll.

Since her early gigging days at New York City venues such as the Café Au Go Go 40 years ago, the deeply inspired music and original vision of Joni Mitchell continue to endure, casting a lustrous rainbow across a mostly drab musical landscape that features too few compelling female singer-songwriters.

The gifted and acutely sensitive Canadian singer-songwriter, poet and painter created an impressive oeuvre of original recordings between 1968 and 1998. Her intelligent and finely crafted works – most notably her seven-year purple patch between 1970 and 1976 – have touched and influenced scores of other musicians, not to forget her millions of fans around the globe. Some of her musician fans and advocates have combined their own distinctive interpretative talents to produce a curious, but largely dismissible 12-song compact-disc album, *A Tribute to Joni Mitchell* (Nonesuch Records, ATCD 10233). [See review in *Strange Brew* edition eight].

Now approaching her sixty-fourth birthday and supposedly enjoying "retirement" from the largely soulless music industry, which she recently described as "a cesspool", Joni Mitchell has been mostly relevant, daring, innovative, excellent and touching in her primary works released between 1968 and

1998. These works comprise 16 studio albums, two live albums and the two sibling compilation albums, *Hits* and *Misses*. Since 1998, she has focused her interests on producing four compilation albums – one of which, *Travelogue* (2002), entailed rerecording 22 of her classic songs with an orchestra – and on recording 10 covers of cabaret-era songs for her 12-song *Both Sides Now*. Industry rumour is that she may release a new album of original works (*Shine*) before the end of 2007.

Looking back at the burgeoning North American and British folk and folk-rock scene of the 1960s and 1970s that developed so powerfully in the aftermath of Bob Dylan's first few albums, not many of the folk-era protagonists have survived with great – and lasting – significance besides Dylan, Mitchell and her compatriot, Neil Young. The likes of Nick Drake, Sandy Denny, Tim Buckley, Phil Ochs and Tim Hardin, for example, died prematurely, with the latter three American troubadours all completing their better works during their earlier careers.

Others went on to produce a few good or promising albums, but never showed real signs of becoming living legends. Here, the likes of Joan Baez, Judy Collins, John Martyn, Leonard Cohen, James Taylor, Gordon Lightfoot and Tom Rush spring to mind. Similarly, folk-based bands as diverse as Crosby, Still and Nash, Fairport Convention, Pentangle, Incredible String Band, Lindisfarne and Steeleye Span came and went.

Mitchell's earlier folk-inspired works – from 1968's *Song to a Seagull* (aka *Joni Mitchell*) to 1972's *For the Roses* – created the solid foundations she needed for an enduring career. Even when the folk and folk-rock boom was at its height between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, Mitchell stood head-and-shoulders above her peers because of the compelling combination of her touching voice (that would become more smoke-burnished with age) with its unusual phrasings and enunciations, her confessional lyrics rich in imagery and symbolism, and her mostly gorgeous melodies and arrangements.

It was, however, her earlier flirtations with jazz and elements of freeform rock that would set her apart from her folk and folk-rock contemporaries and catapult her into the upper echelons of the more serious pop and rock music of the 1970s. With the arrival in 1974 of her landmark *Court and Spark* album, she declared assertively that she would not be constrained by musical fashions and preoccupations with limited styles, chord patterns and traditional rock and folk arrangements.

Mitchell's initial flirtations with jazz rapidly evolved into a serious and enduring love affair, which was exemplified by her serious collaboration during 1978 with the legendary jazz bassist, Charles Mingus, towards the end of his life. When she released the dazzlingly different *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* in 1975, Mitchell heralded what would become the "world music" fad of the 1980s and earlier 1990s. She explored elements of African, Latin American and

other exotic musical forms, within a rock framework, long before the likes of Peter Gabriel, Sting, Paul Simon, David Byrne and Robert Plant.

### **Interminable adventurousness**

We celebrate Joni Mitchell for her eclectic musical tastes, kaleidoscopic soundscapes and her interminable adventurousness as an unusual and almost inimitable creative artist. She exudes a natural flair for all musical rudiments – melody, rhythm, tone, tempo and arrangement. She has an exquisitely beautiful and malleable soprano voice with an excellent range, despite being a passionate smoker since the age of nine. Just as a compelling, Mitchell has a poignant and fertile imagination as an idiosyncratic poet and shrewd social commentator, as well as an admirable command of the guitar and piano.

At the height of her career, for most of the period between 1971 and 1994, Mitchell seemed determined to keep her wits whetted and her vision original and fresh. For some music fans, it is possible that she has at times been too eclectic, ambitious and complex in her approach to writing and singing songs, but few can deny that rarely was she devoid of original ideas and a bold determination to remain invigorated and untarnished by the march of time and the fickleness of musical styles and genres. Even when album sales floundered and critics bemoaned her art, Mitchell retained her dignity, intelligence, sensitivity and explorative spirit.

Many of the 1960s' folk artists preoccupied with revolutionary slogans and counterculture ponderings faded into obscurity with the advent of the increased disillusionment and cynicism of the 1970s. Mitchell kept herself poised and perceptive, and was able to adapt, shift and evolve, thereby keeping the sound of her music and the poignancy of her lyrics vital, relevant and evocative. Her fluidity and adaptability sustained her appeal and, curiously, allowed her to maintain the envious balance of being a cult artist with strong enough record sales to enjoy an enviably free and comfortable lifestyle.

This ability makes her rare among artists – and here one can draw parallels with the music and legacies of Bob Dylan and Neil Young. In hindsight, and by default, Mitchell, Dylan and Young became the troika that led the post-Woodstock 1969 folk-rock musical and cultural revolution – a feat they have sustained, judging by their best works of the 1990s and the Noughties. At the risk of sounding like another dreary rock 'n' roll reactionary bemoaning the state of today's MTV-dominated muzak machine, the contemporary rock and singer-songwriter scene lacks truly outstanding artists.

Besides rare talents like Britain's Tom McRae, there are too few singer-songwriters propelled by an original vision and the psychological and artistic unfetteredness to nurture a musical style that arouses one's senses, heart and mind, if not one's soul.

## Blossoming of a prairie girl

An only child, Joni Mitchell was born Roberta Joan Anderson in Fort McLeod, Alberta in western Canada not far from the American border on November 7 1943 (with both her sun and ascendant in Scorpio). The time of her birth was bleak, with many Canadians having to endure the dreadful transition from the Great Depression to the Second World War.

Her father, William (Bill) Anderson, of Norwegian descent, was a wartime Royal Canadian Air Force pilot (flight lieutenant) turned grocery-store clerk and then manager. Her mother, Myrtle (née McKee), was a schoolteacher of Scottish and Irish ancestry. When she was about two-years-old, her parents moved cross-state to North Battleford in Saskatchewan. Here, she started piano lessons at the age of seven. She took these lessons for about 18 months, but lost interest because she wanted to write her own music rather than struggle learning to play classical masters.

During her earlier childhood, Mitchell was plagued with several maladies, among them a burst appendix, German measles, red measles, chickenpox and scarlet fever. At the age of nine, she contracted polio and had to spend months convalescing with the loving support of her mother. Also at the age of nine, she started smoking and began developing her interests in the arts and freedom of expression. After convalescing and regaining her ability to walk, Mitchell joined a local church choir and, by default, her singing career begun. When she was 10 or 11-years-old, Mitchell and her parents moved to Saskatoon, Canada's city of bridges, which she still regards as her hometown.

She spent most of her childhood in Saskatoon in the southern-central part of Saskatchewan on the Canadian Plains. She attended school in this small city, but was not considered an assiduous student, although she had an important influence in the form of an Australian teacher, Arthur Kratzman, who taught her seventh-grade English at Queen Elizabeth School. Kratzman inspired her to find her poetic voice and "paint with words". This explains why the cover of her first album carries the line: "This album is dedicated to Mr Kratzman, who taught me to love words".

In her teens, she listened to American radio broadcasts of rock 'n' roll and bought herself a baritone ukulele for C\$36 because she could not afford a guitar. She played her ukulele at social gatherings and became a frequent visitor at the Louis Riel coffeehouse in Saskatoon. She later studied the guitar with the help of a Pete Seeger instruction record. In later interviews, Mitchell cited many musical influences, including classical music, cabaret-era jazz singers, rock 'n' roll and folk music. She has expressed heartfelt admiration for Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf and Laura Nyro, as well as Bob Dylan and

Charlie Parker. The first record she remembers buying was a 78-rpm recording of Sergei Rachmaninov's *The Story of Three Loves*.

During her teens, she also started ballroom and rock 'n' roll dancing classes and won a few local contests. She also began extramural art studies and, at the age of 13, was inspired to change the spelling of her name to Joni because she admired the look of the signatures of one of her painting teachers, Henry Bonli. She also devoted time to professional modelling for travelling clothing salesmen who passed through Saskatoon.

## Paying her dues

Joni Mitchell dropped out of high school without passing her final examinations. She enrolled at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary with the intention of becoming a commercial artist or dress designer. During her year-long art school sojourn (mid-1963 to mid-1964), Mitchell began exploring her musical interests seriously and, with the encouragement of friends, began singing in folk-oriented coffee bars in Calgary. During this embryonic phase, she performed mostly traditional folk songs at a Calgary coffeehouse, The Depression.

After performing at the Mariposa Folk Festival at Ontario in 1964, she did not return home. Instead, she travelled eastwards and settled in the Canadian capital of Toronto in the deep south of Ontario, where she began writing her own songs in earnest and singing in coffee bars. Her earlier days in Toronto, however, were tough. She did not have the money to join the musicians' union and therefore was prohibited from playing at most music venues. To raise funds, she worked in Toronto departmental shops during the latter half of 1964.

Life did not get any easier. She discovered she was pregnant by her former boyfriend from art college and, on February 19 1965, she gave birth to a daughter (Kelly Dale Anderson – later renamed Kilauren Gibb), which was a secret she harboured for almost 30 years. A few weeks after the birth of her daughter, she married in Rochester, Michigan, an American folk singer, Chuck Mitchell, who agreed to look after her and her baby. Within weeks of their marriage, however, Mitchell placed her daughter for adoption. The singer met Chuck Mitchell when he, at the age of 29, was performing at the Penny Farthing club on Yorkville Avenue in Toronto.

In June 1965, Joni and Chuck Mitchell moved south to Detroit, Michigan in the United States (USA) where their marriage ended about 18 months later. Joni Mitchell continued to live in Detroit for a short while and gradually established a cult following, which gave her the necessary credentials to risk the more competitive New York folk circuit. One of her musician friends from her Detroit days was Tom Rush, best remembered for albums like *Take a Little Walk with Me* (1966) and *The Circle Game* (1968).

One of her earlier feats was making her mark at the Newport Folk Festival on Rhode Island in the northern-hemisphere summer of 1966, where she wowed fans of Tim Hardin, Odetta, Judy Collins and Tom Paxton with a few of her early songs such as *Michael from Mountains*, *Chelsea Morning* and *The Circle Game*. She received a standing ovation and, from here, there was no doubting that the then 22-year-old singer-songwriter faced a promising music career.

It was not long before New York and the wider American north-east regarded her as an emerging celebrity in 1967, but her real early fame came through other folk artists recording her songs. Judy Collins recorded *Both Sides, Now* and *Michael from the Mountains* in 1967 and, over in Britain, Fairport Convention recorded *Eastern Rain*. In addition, fellow Canadian, Tom Rush, recorded *The Circle Game* and *Urge for Going*. In December 1968, Collins' rendition of *Both Sides, Now* became a Top 10 hit.



Mitchell's no-frills debut album of 1968, *Song to a Seagull*, remains immensely listenable after almost 40 years

### Discovered and signed

Not long after settling in the trendy Chelsea district of Manhattan in New York City, Mitchell became a key support act in a few of the city's popular folk-music venues. In the latter half of 1967, for example, she was earning US\$15 a night as the opening act for Richie Havens at the Café Au Go Go in Greenwich Village. One night, while playing at the Café Au Go Go, folksinger Buffy Sainte-Marie took one of the managers from her talent management agency to hear Mitchell perform. The manager turned out to be Elliot Roberts, who was impressed enough with the young Canadian's singing and songs, he agreed to become her manager. Before 1968, Mitchell did not believe her career as a performing musician would

last long. She worked every night and saved every dollar she could, believing she would have to return to the world of women's wear or commercial art.

Elliot Roberts played a key role in opening doors for Mitchell in New York City. That same year, while performing at The Gaslight South, a club in Florida, she met David Crosby of The Byrds. Impressed by her budding talents, Crosby persuaded her to travel to Los Angeles and develop her career further, which she did with manager Roberts in tow. After rejecting an offer from Vanguard Records, the record company that had signed Joan Baez, Mitchell signed a recording deal with Reprise Records through Mo Ostin in December 1967. Mitchell decided to make Los Angeles (LA) her new home and, for the first part of her LA days, she lived at David Crosby's Hollywood home, where the two were involved romantically for a while.

Her first album, *Song to a Seagull* (aka *Joni Mitchell*), was released in March 1968. This sparse album revealed a fresh, fragile yet astonishing young folksinger. David Crosby, who at the time had recently quit The Byrds before forming Crosby, Stills and Nash in LA, produced it sympathetically and unobtrusively, trying not to tamper with Mitchell's naturally good singing voice and unusual style. Crosby's friend, Stephen Stills, played bass on the album. The album sold 70,000 units within its first few months of release and sent a serious message to the music establishment that a new talent would be competing with the likes of Joan Baez, Judy Collins and Buffy Sainte-Marie.

Mitchell became a regular member of their greater LA rock-and-folk social scene through her relationship with Crosby and spent much of 1968 touring clubs and other smaller venues to promote *Song to a Seagull*. She also played at London's Royal Festival Hall in September and at the Miami Pop Festival in December 1968 – the month that Judy Collins' version of *Both Sides, Now* peaked in the Top 10 charts in the USA and other countries.

### Maturing skills

Joni Mitchell followed up the success of her debut album with the release of *Clouds* (Reprise) in October 1969, two months after the famous Woodstock music festival near the small town of Bethel in upstate New York. Featuring *Both Sides, Now* and *Chelsea Morning*, *Clouds* revealed her maturing compositional skills and more assured and distinctive singing style. The album reached number 31 in the *Billboard* album charts.

She began touring her own headlined club and concert-hall circuit from coast to coast, accumulating a greater following in the USA during 1969. Mitchell was supposed to have performed at Woodstock in August 1969, but, when manager Roberts saw the Woodstock traffic jams in upstate New York on television, he advised her not to go. He feared she would miss a vital appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show* in New York City immediately after the

Woodstock long weekend. The following month, Mitchell performed at the equinox festival at Big Sur in California. The event was filmed and later released as *Celebration at Big Sur*.

Tired from countless performances, she took off most of 1970 and spent time travelling in Europe and sailing with Graham Nash and David Crosby on the latter's yacht. Around this time, the young, attractive singer created ripples because of her numerous, infamous romantic affairs, including one with the former Hollies member, Graham Nash. Her song, *Willy*, was written for him. Nash, in turn, wrote *Our House* for Mitchell (featured on Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's *Déjà Vu* album of 1970). She and Nash lived together in a small house in Laurel Canyon, LA, which did have "two cats in the yard".



Mitchell's endearing second album, *Clouds* (1969), assured us she was not a fleeting talent with fine songs like *Both Sides, Now* and *Chelsea Morning*

### Golden living

In March 1970, the singer received her first Grammy Award for Best Folk Performance of 1969 for her *Clouds* album. Reprise Records released her third album, *Ladies of the Canyon*, in May 1970 and it became her first gold album with sales of more than 500,000 units. The album peaked at number 27 in the *Billboard* album charts.

*Ladies of the Canyon* displayed her first major attempts to diversify and explore new musical idioms, while also revealing her becoming more confessional in her deeply personalised songs. Although it was not as consistently good as its predecessor was, the album included her first big hit, *Big Yellow Taxi*, as well as *Woodstock*, her arousing anthem immortalising the flower people's dreams. Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, however, had a far bigger hit with their version of this song, as did Matthews' Southern Comfort across the Atlantic in

Britain. In *Big Yellow Taxi* – later covered by Counting Crows and Amy Grant – Mitchell had a sardonic stab at ecological abuses before green-themed songs were really in vogue. *Ladies of the Canyon* also features *The Circle Game*, *Willy* and *Morning Morgantown*.

In August 1970, Mitchell was persuaded to get back to concert work and appear at the Isle of Wight Festival in Britain. Sadly, a crazed spectator stormed the stage, upset Mitchell's performance and the incident ended with a tearful singer admonishing an unappreciative crowd for not respecting performers. On the upside, 1970 was a positive year for Mitchell. She travelled extensively and indulged in a newfound freedom. It was also a fruitful period for writing, with some of her new songs becoming the core of her next album, *Blue*. The songs, *Carey* and *California*, for example, were written on the island of Crete.

### Confessional poet

In April 1971, Mitchell was heard singing background vocals on Carole King's watershed album, *Tapestry*. Later that year, she would also be heard as a guest singer on James Taylor's *Mud Slide Slim* album.

With her fourth and fifth albums, *Blue* (Reprise) released in July 1971 and *For the Roses* (Asylum) released in October 1972, Mitchell regarded herself in retrospect as a "confessional poet" baring, in slightly camouflaged lyrics only, her private relationships and personal sentiments. She was beginning to formulate a freer, more-complex narrative style.

Undoubtedly, *Blue* is the album that established Mitchell's singer-songwriter credentials more than any other of her earlier works. The album entered the *Billboard* Top 20 album charts in September 1971 and, for many fans, it remains her quintessential album. Revolving largely around a stark suite of songs to a former lover (or more), this album displayed her increasing confidence, originality and depth as a songwriter.

Haunting, searching and often intense, *Blue* conjures some frightening images of a young, sensitive woman cast into a harsh, male-dominated environment. [A retrospective album review is featured in *Strange Brew* edition eight].

By the time of *Blue*, Mitchell had, it seemed, become the reluctant star, giving fewer concerts and refusing interviews. At one time, manager Roberts calculated that she had cancelled more concerts than ones performed. In subsequent interviews, she said touring inhibited her need to write and remain creative. She also appears to have had an awkward love-hate relationship with the media throughout her career, particularly with *Rolling Stone* magazine during the 1970s.

Yet, when Mitchell grants an interview, she appears to be an enthusiastic conversationalist and insightful commentator on her music, the industry and her

times. She is smart, articulate and provocative – and always worth reading in print.

### **Introspection in British Columbia**

Mitchell always seems to have had a reclusive side. In a 1988 interview with Phil Sutcliffe for the May 1988 edition of Britain's *Q* rock magazine, the singer said of her earlier Laurel Canyon days that she was "too much of a loner" living on "the fringes of everything". This is part of the double-sided nature of Mitchell, who also seems to be able to flow with the crowd and enjoy city life and parties as an extrovert, and then retreat to her rural cabin to introspect, paint and write, often alone.

Some time in 1971, the singer sold her Laurel Canyon home and returned to Canada, where she bought a seaside property in British Columbia to escape the hurly-burly LA scene and enjoy quietude and privacy again. She returned to the USA periodically to play a few concerts and promote *Blue*. During her first weeks at her new Canadian seaside retreat, she wrote most of the material for her next album.



Largely overshadowed by its predecessor and successor, *For the Roses* (1972) nevertheless remains an essential Mitchell album

Mitchell left Reprise Records and, on signing with Asylum Records in LA, recorded *For the Roses* in 1972 with the help of some of LA's leading musicians. These artists included Graham Nash, Stephen Stills, James Burton (of Elvis Presley Band fame), Russ Kunkel (Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt bands), Tom Scott (LA Express) and Wilton Felder (The Crusaders). Musically, she ventured closer to freeform expression and, lyrically, she continued questioning herself and romantic relationships.

In a wrier, more cynical vein, *For the Roses* revealed at the time the anguish of the modern, thinking woman thrust into the struggle between the roles of the devoted romantic lover and the emancipated woman. Rich with poignant moments

and sensitive insights, the album never degenerates towards self-pity or self-indulgence.

The single from the album, *You Turn Me On I'm a Radio*, became her first major hit song, having peaked at 25 in the *Billboard* singles chart of March 1973.

Throughout this year, Mitchell was insistent that she would find musicians who would be sympathetic to playing her "weird chords" [see article in *Strange Brew* 08] and distinctive rhythms. This quest inspired her to forge a stronger musical relationship with Tom Scott, a fine Los Angeles jazz woodwind player who had contributed to the recording of *For the Roses*. Towards the end of 1973, Asylum Records released another Mitchell single, *Raised on Robbery*.

### **Another masterpiece**

By the time of her majestic *Court and Spark* (Asylum), released in the USA in January 1974, Mitchell was recording with Tom Scott's LA Express and having a romantic affair with the band's drummer, John Guerin. To date, this masterfully cohesive album captured the culmination of her best ideas and featured finely pared lyrics.

Written during a lonely sojourn at her rural retreat in British Columbia, this album often has been regarded as the major turning point in her recording career and, for many fans, it marks her artistic zenith. Mitchell found an accessible and sanguine pop sound that was also idiosyncratic and fresh. [A retrospective album review is featured in *Strange Brew* 08]. The album climbed to number two in the *Billboard* album charts and its second single, *Help Me*, became her only Top 10 single.

In February 1974, Mitchell commenced a two-month, first-phase North American tour with the LA Express before flying to London to film a concert at the New Victoria Theatre for BBC Television. On returning to the USA, she and the band commenced a second-phase tour as the opening act for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's summer stadium tour. In mid-August 1974, Mitchell recorded additional concert performances for her first live album, the double-disc *Miles of Aisles*.

Asylum Records released the album in January 1975. Mitchell also toured as a casual member of *The Rolling Thunder Revue* cast featuring Bob Dylan, Roger McGuinn, Joan Baez and other folk-rock luminaries. That same year, Mitchell decided to resettle in the greater LA area and bought a Spanish-style hacienda in Bel Air, which she shared with her then partner, drummer John Guerin.

### **Birth of a new coolness**

In 1975, she returned to the recording studio with Robben Ford, Crosby, Stills and Nash and members of the LA Express to record and produce her seventh studio album. Asylum Records released *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* in November 1975. Some fans at the time regarded the album as a disconcerting

deviation from expected Mitchell standards and styles. It seemed to be too avant-garde and, in places, also complex, indulgent and cerebral. The album also received notably mixed reviews from the international music media. Sales, however, were strident and the album climbed to number four in the *Billboard* album charts.

Again, Joni Mitchell made a gallant break from many of her previous stylistic trends and, in the process, commenced her "jazz period". She also wrote and recorded some of her most elaborate, esoteric and enthralling songs to date, musically and lyrically. The lyrics reveal the singer sloughing her introspective cocoon and confessional tendencies, and moving towards isolated and sometimes piercing social commentaries. Although becoming more oblique in her poetic expressions, Mitchell continued to exploit the plight of the modern thinking woman torn between her heart and mind in a comfortable, yet smothering suburban landscape.

Written in LA suburbia (the "summer lawns" being one of the key references), the album crisply captures mundane moments of middle-class suburban women. The singer, at the time, regarded the album as "... a kind of little novel about the dilemma of a housewife trapped in suburbia, staring at the furniture she sat in; the description of alienated marriages. Whatever the mirror was that I held up, it was more of a confrontation than a lot of people could take. A year or two later ... they began to appreciate it."

### Disquieting effect

In her *Rolling Stone* interview with Cameron Crowe published in July 1979, she revealed:

"*The Hissing of Summer Lawns* is a suburban album. About the time this album came out, I thought: 'I'm not going to be your sin eater any longer'. So I began to write social description as opposed to personal confession. I met with a tremendous amount of resentment.

"People thought suddenly that I was secure in my success, that I was being a snob and was attacking them. The basic theme of the album, which everybody thought was so abstract, was just any summer day in any neighbourhood when people turn their sprinklers all up and down the block. It's just that hiss of suburbia."

The "hissing of summer lawns", we know, was not only a mundane observation, but also a reference to something more sinister and disquieting, as the artist's hand-drawn front-cover artwork suggested.

Symbolically, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* features her most intriguing artwork. Superimposed on a flat-green expanse of lawn in front of a cityscape that blends what seems to be familiar New York and Los Angeles high-rise buildings, is a group of six Amazonian Indian-looking tribesmen bearing a large, python-like snake and walking uphill towards one of

those quaint, clapperboard churches one finds in small American towns. [A retrospective album review is featured in *Strange Brew* 08].



The much-maligned *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* was voted "worst album" of 1975 by *Rolling Stone*, but it could be her pinnacle work

### Refuge of the road

Backed again by the LA Express, Mitchell toured North America to promote *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, with the main tour dates commencing in January 1976. A few months later, she and drummer Guerin ended their relationship and the tour halted, too. Not longing after returning to the West Coast, where she spent some time in Neil Young's beach house, she was whisked away by two friends who said they were travelling eastwards to fetch the one friend's daughter from her grandmother's home in Maine. From Maine, Mitchell drove back alone to California, an odyssey that created most of the songs that would become her next album.

Mitchell kept her rapidly maturing artistry on a high with the release in November 1976 of another excellent and refreshingly original album, this time a more pared, subtle and personal outing, *Hejira* (Asylum). This album – one of the finest of her 40-year career – marked her return to confessional writing, this time exploring flight and travel (actual and metaphorical), as well as time and love. Characterised by sparse, haunting arrangements, *Hejira* had finely pared lyrics and melodies, and revealed the singer still riding on the crest of a massive creative wave.

The songs – among them *Amelia*, *Song for Sharon* and *Refuge of the Road* penned on guitar during her long, solo car journey across the USA – are poignant evocations of travel and flight bound in poetically rich images. Mitchell was inspired to use this title because *hejira/hejira* – derived from Arabic – refers to the prophet Mohamed's seventh-century flight from Mecca to the safe haven of Medina. She recruited

three session musicians only – guitarist Larry Carlton, bassist Jaco Pastorius and drummer Bobbye Hall – to keep the sound pared and honest. *Hejira* reached number 13 on the *Billboard* charts and was certified gold (for sales of 500,000 units) three weeks after its release. [A retrospective album review is featured in *Strange Brew* 08].

Three days after the release of *Hejira*, Mitchell performed on stage on Thanksgiving Day (November 25 1976) at San Francisco's Winterland concert hall as a guest artist in *The Last Waltz*, The Band's farewell concert, along with Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Eric Clapton and other popular musicians. She performed three of her songs with The Band: *Coyote*, *Shadows and Light* and *Furry Sings the Blues*. She also joined The Band and its stellar cast of guest musicians to sing the final song, *I Shall Be Released*. *The Last Waltz* album, along with the Martin Scorsese-directed film of the same name, was released to critical acclaim in April 1978.

### Greater eccentricity

In mid-1977, Mitchell was back in the recording studios to begin work on what would become her first and only double long-playing studio record, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, her penultimate album for Asylum Records. The recording sessions involved extensive support from bassist Jaco Pastorius, drummer John Guerin and saxophonist Wayne Shorter, as well as guest vocals from Chaka Khan, Glenn Frey of The Eagles and J D Souther of the Souther-Hillman-Fury Band.

The album also featured percussionists Alejandro Acuna, Airto, Don Alias and Manolo Badrena. The album was released in December 1977 and, despite receiving mixed reviews, climbed to 25 in the *Billboard* album charts and was certified gold within three months of its release.



The variable standards of the more indulgent and experimental *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* double album (1977) irked many passionate fans

Compared with her recent albums, *Don Juan* was a far more experimental, eccentric, jazzier and, at times, more indulgent and abstract affair, with the final collection of 10 songs being a mixed bag. At times, as on *Jericho* and *Off Night Back Street*, she approached brilliance; on other occasions, however, as on the tortuous piano noodlings of *Paprika Plains*, her longest track, she fell short of her usual high standards.

Considerably less commercial and cohesive than her recent albums, *Don Juan* saw Mitchell moving further away from mainstream rock, folk and pop and proving that greater experimentalism and freedom of musical expression was the way she wanted to go – even if she risked losing much of her mainstream following.

Instead, for those who cared to listen intently, she crafted some superlative aural tapestries, highlighted by an intelligent fusion of jazz and Latin American percussion, even if most critics believed her overall standard fell short of a five-star rating.

In addition, many of the lyrics were chanted rather than sung. On the downside, *Don Juan* begged for some judicious editing – and songs like a side-long *Paprika Plains* may have been too wayward.

### Challenge of a lifetime

In 1978, Mitchell was approached by then ageing jazz maestro bassist and composer, Charles Mingus (1922-1979), who appreciated her new musical directions, as reflected in *Paprika Plains*. Based in New York City and wheelchair-bound because of his crippling disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), Mingus wanted Mitchell to work with him on an ambitious musical interpretation of poet T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* (first published together in book form in 1943).

The two not only became good friends bound by mutual admiration and affection, but close musical collaborators.

Mingus wanted her to help him to compose songs, particularly the lyrics. Mitchell, by her own admission, struggled, but was determined to take the project full-circle. The Mingus collaboration became a project of a lifetime, but ended up taking a new direction once Mitchell realised the fuller extent of Mingus' musical vision and ambitions.

The collaboration eventually emerged as Mitchell's eleventh album, *Mingus* (Asylum), released in June 1979. It was appropriately titled as a tribute to a great musician who died in January 1979. This album – perhaps too sketchy and uncertain in places – features four distinguished melodies written by Mingus with lyrics by the singer-songwriter.



The album reached number 17 in the *Billboard* album charts, but became her first album to fall short of reaching sales of 500,000 units.

During their friendship, Mitchell painted several outstanding portraits of Charles Mingus, some of which were reproduced for the *Mingus* cover. Mitchell is renowned for producing much of the artwork for most of her albums, including earlier works such as *Clouds*, *Court and Spark*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Wild Things Run Fast*. [See article in *Strange Brew* 08].

Shortly after the *Mingus* sessions, Joni Mitchell granted *Rolling Stone* magazine's Cameron Crowe a rare interview, her first in at least three years. When she does conduct an interview, Mitchell usually is in control and handles it with admirable articulation, sincerity, candour and depth. During her Crowe interview, she confessed:

"My goals have been to constantly remain in music. I see myself as a musical student. That's why this project (the *Mingus* album) with Charles Mingus was such a great opportunity. Here was a chance to learn, from a legitimately great artist, about a brand-new idiom that I had only been flirting with before."

Prior to the release of *Mingus*, Mitchell participated in an all-day benefit concert in May 1978 in front of the Capitol in Washington, DC, to protest against the irresponsible use of nuclear energy.

Later that month, 43 of Mitchell's paintings completed between 1968 and 1978 were reproduced in a coffee-table book produced by Debbie Cheshier. The book featured reproductions of paintings and drawings by five other musicians. On June 15 1979, the singer headlined the Playboy Jazz Festival at LA's Hollywood Bowl.



Mitchell's second live album, *Shadows and Light* (1980), is good, but *Miles of Aisles* (1974) is the better of her two double live albums

Later in the northern-hemisphere summer of 1979, Mitchell embarked on a six-week US tour to promote the *Mingus* album, starting at Oklahoma City on August 3. After the 1979 tour, she started work on selecting and editing material recorded during the tour for the production of a double live album and a film, both of which would be called *Shadows and Light*. Asylum Records eventually released *Shadows and Light* in September 1980 as her last work for the label.

Recorded mostly at the Santa Barbara County Bowl in California in September 1979, the album essentially is a celebration of her return to national touring and her newly found "integral relationship". The *Shadows and Light* band featured guitarist Pat Metheny, bassist Jaco Pastorius, keyboardist Lyle Mays, saxophonist Michael Brecker, drummer Don Alias and the vocal group, The Persuasions. The album climbed to number 38 in the *Billboard* album charts and spawned a single, *Why Do Fools Fall in Love*, her duet with The Persuasions.

Of this remarkable band's cohesion, Mitchell said: "I finally realised what I was looking for – an integral relationship with the band. We all seemed to be one organism in the music. If you look at it, you'll see how entwined we are, and I thought that was a beautiful accomplishment."

### Less prolific

The 1980s would see Mitchell's talents and influences wane, in many respects, after her 1970s purple patch. It appeared that Mitchell was no longer concerned about being part of any musical vanguard, and her work would become not only less prolific, but, in some respects, less evocative and emotive.

Towards the end of 1980, Mitchell began work on her participation in a feature film, *Love*, that would comprise nine women's short stories and cameo appearances. After writing her segment of the script and selecting her soundtrack (mostly Miles Davis material), she travelled to Toronto to film her segment of *Love*. Mitchell's almost 15-minute segment featured her performing as black male pimp and Miles Davis fan called Art Nouveau, dressed in the clothes she wore for the *Don Juan* cover shoot the previous year.

The singer also wrote and sang the theme song, *Love*, her adaptation of verse from the *Book of Corinthians*. The film, however, has not been shown on the mainstream cinema circuit and appears not to have been released in any video format for home viewing.

In February 1981, the then Canadian prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, inducted Mitchell into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in a ceremony at Toronto. The singer then left for a six-week holiday in the Caribbean to paint, write new songs and meet friends. She also met the Jamaican film director,

Perry Henzell, who had directed the Jimmy Cliff film, *The Harder They Come*. In the Caribbean, she developed an interest in reggae music, as well as some of the polyrhythmic rock of the day, including the music of The Police, Steely Dan and Talking Heads. She set her heart on recording some polyrhythmic music once returning to the USA.

On her return, Mitchell spent about 18 months in New York City and Los Angeles writing and recording new material, some of which she recorded with four different sets of musicians as part of her drive to find a new sound. After some deliberation, she opted for the dominant rhythm section of bassist Larry Klein and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta.

Other guest artists included Toto guitarist Steve Lukather, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, drummer John Guerin and guitarist Larry Carlton. These sessions would produce the 11 final songs chosen for her next album. The sessions also led to her next serious romantic relationship and, in time, her marriage to Larry Klein.

### Return to simplicity

Fans had to wait particularly long for Mitchell's thirteenth album, *Wild Things Run Fast*, her first album for Geffen Records, which was released in November 1982. This was partly because of certain superstitions she had (one assumes she is at least mildly triskaidekaphobic), which prompted her to record with extra-meticulous care.

Fortunately, for a fastidious Joni Mitchell, the final product was neither over-elaborate nor overprocessed. Perhaps 13 is lucky for some, because *Wild Things Run Fast* reached a high of 25 in the *Billboard* album charts. From here on, Mitchell would become far less prolific as a recording artist, releasing, on average, one album every 30 months or so.

Regarded as a career summary of sorts, this more accessible and poppier album marked her return to simpler, pristine rock roots. In this slick and almost seamless production, she fused pop, rock, folk and jazz elements tastefully and with sufficiently depth, intelligence and finely honed directorial skills, which assured us at the time that she was intent of keeping her music vital, near flawless and adventurous.

Described in 1982 by a Geffen Records publicist as "a poised, resonant self-portrait of the artist on the threshold of middle age", *Wild Things Run Fast* is a mature and shrewd fusion of wry humour, spirited optimism and resignation.

Mitchell regarded this album as a departure from the album cycle that commenced with *Court and Spark* and ended with *Mingus*. At least temporarily satisfied with her recent jazz-dominated exploitations, she had rediscovered the simplicity, excitement and animation of rock.

Not long after releasing the album, Mitchell reflected: "In the late '70s, I became increasingly disenchanted with the backbeat and locked-in quality of pop. Finally, on *Mingus* I tried to eliminate the bottom end altogether. But I've been exploring the jazz cellars for some time now and I've since come to feel that the best traditional jazz has already been made. It's almost like a living antique. And there's not much fusion music since so few jazz musicians have an affinity for rock grooves.

"I have found that Steely Dan was doing a better job of uniting sophisticated chord changes with rock rhythms than anyone in the jazz arena, and I was also inspired by the hybrid rhythms of The Police, in which they brought the snare drum way up front (in the final mixed sound)."

*Wild Things Run Fast* features a Lionel Richie vocal cameo on *Ladies Man*. Songs like *Solid Love* and *Underneath the Streetlight* capture the great rock 'n' roll essence, while *You're So Square* (one of Elvis Presley's earlier hits) and *Unchained Melody* (a major hit for The Righteous Brothers in 1965) assume completely fresh dimensions and reveal Mitchell's underexploited skills as an interpretative artist.

*Moon at the Window* is fluid jazz-pop, while *Chinese Café*, with its "nothing lasts for long" refrain, captures her sad-joyous realisation of standing alone on the threshold of middle age. The album reaches a moving finale with *Love*, a jazz-pop adaptation of verses from Chapter 13 from the first *Book of Corinthians* in *The Holy Bible*. Although the explicit religious symbolism and archaisms were eliminated, Mitchell preserved the intrinsic beauty of the original verse.



After a three-year hiatus, Mitchell returned to the limelight with her promising, but mixed offering of 1982, *Wild Things Run Fast*

On November 21 1982, Mitchell and Klein married in a ceremony performed at the Malibu home of her manager, Elliot Roberts.

#### **Final world tour**

In March 1983, Mitchell launched her longest and most ambitious international tour, starting in Osaka, Japan on March 4 with a backing band called Refuge. After Japan, she performed concerts in Australia, Ireland, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Denmark before returning to the USA with Refuge for a month's holiday.

In June 1983, Mitchell and Refuge commenced the two-month North American leg of their international tour, which included key dates at Red Rocks, Colorado, as well as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Boston, New Jersey and Toronto. Sadly, the tour was a financial disaster for Mitchell. She grossed a mere US\$35,000 after expenses for the tour and has since opted not to do any major tours.

She and husband Larry Klein devoted some of their time in 1984 to selecting and editing material of the 1983 tour, which Pioneer Artists released on laser disc later in 1984 as *Refuge of the Roads*. This tour documentary eventually was released in VHS videocassette format in 1989. This film is now available in digital videodisc (DVD) format.

After the film's release, Mitchell began writing news songs, while husband Klein started learning to play the Fairlight synthesizer. These efforts would lead to the 1985 recording sessions for her next album. Because Mitchell and Klein wanted to use the Fairlight, Geffen suggested the duo hire an expert on the instrument to work as an album technical advisor and co-producer, which led to Geffen recruiting the eccentric British musician Thomas Dolby. The musician had recently enjoyed a hit with his song, *She Blinded Me with Science* (1983).

In early 1985, Mitchell and her manager of almost 18 years, Elliot Roberts, agreed to part amicably and the singer appointed Peter Asher Management to take care of her business management. Between February and September 1985, Mitchell, Klein, Dolby and engineer Mike Shipley recorded and mixed the *Dog Eat Dog* songs. On September 22 1985, Mitchell performed at the *Farm Aid* benefit concert at Champaign, Illinois.

#### **The 1980s polemicist**

In October 1985, Geffen Records released *Dog Eat Dog*, which would prove to be Mitchell's most obvious social-commentary album with songs such as *Ethiopia*, *The Three Great Stimulants*, *Tax Free*, *Dog Eat Dog* and *Shiny Toys*. The album's guest artists included singers Don Henley, Michael McDonald and James Taylor, guitarists Mike Landau and Steve Lukather, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, saxophonist and flautist Larry Williams and keyboardist Thomas Dolby, as well as the Japanese musician Kazu Matsui on shakuhachi.

The veteran American actor, Rod Steiger, delivered the fanatical evangelist speech on *Tax Free*.



Although marred by too much of a disposable mid-1980s pop sound, *Dog Eat Dog* (1985) is probably her best work of the 1980s with haunting songs like *Ethiopia*

In general, the media response to the new Mitchell album was tepid and sometimes downright negative. Not everyone seemed impressed with her seemingly new-found vision and voice as a polemicist, but she did have some incisive observations to sketch – and some of us sat up and agreed.

The album did not fare too well in the charts, either, reaching 63 in the *Billboard* album charts. In hindsight, much of the lukewarm response to *Dog Eat Dog* was a little harsh. The album – while a few notches short of a masterpiece – features some of Mitchell's most evocative work of the 1980s and probably is her album of the decade.

In early 1986, English musician Peter Gabriel commissioned Larry Klein to play bass on two songs (*Mercy Street* and *Big Time*) for his new album recorded at Aschombe Studios new Bath in Somerset, *So*, released in May 1986. Mitchell accompanied her husband to the UK, where she recorded the touching duet with Peter Gabriel in the form of *My Secret Place*, which later appeared on her album, *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*.

After returning to the USA, Mitchell appeared at Amnesty International's *Conspiracy of Hope* benefit concert at New Jersey's Giants Stadium on June 15. The event, however, proved to be a major disappointment for Mitchell who was sandwiched between two major rock acts, Bryan Adams and U2, and had to endure a restless and unappreciative audience. Sadly, to add insult to injury, *Rolling Stone* magazine later that year voted her three-song *Conspiracy of Hope* set as the Worst Performance of 1986. She also performed at the *Get Tough* on

*Toxics* concert at the Long Beach Arena in greater Los Angeles in August 1986.

### Construction of The Kiva

In 1987, a month after the tragic death of her musical collaborator, Jaco Pastorius, Mitchell – along with Jackson Browne and Willie Nelson – participated in the *Free Leonard Peltier Benefit* concert at the Pacific Amphitheater at Costa Mesa, California, on October 28. The musicians raised US\$90,000 to finance a new trial for Peltier, a Native American serving a life sentence in an American penitentiary for his alleged involvement in the killing of two FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) officers on a reservation in the 1970s during a dispute with Native American activists. *Rolling Stone* magazine produced a twentieth-anniversary television documentary, which ABC Television broadcast on December 2 1987.

In early 1988, Mitchell and Klein began constructing her own recording studio, The Kiva, at her Bel Air home. The couple's first recording project in The Kiva was some of the final work for Mitchell's follow-up album to *Dog Eat Dog*, *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*. The album's material was recorded in eight other studios, including Peter Gabriel's studio near Bath in England. The 10 songs featured eight new Mitchell originals, some of which she co-wrote with Klein.

The original songs included *Lakota*, *Snakes and Ladders* and *Number One*, as well as *My Secret Place*. The album's guest artists included singers Iron Eyes Cody, Peter Gabriel, Don Henley, Billy Idol, Willie Nelson and Tom Petty, as well as guitarists Michael Landau and Steve Stevens, drummer Manu Katche, saxophonist Wayne Shorter and organist Steven Lindsey.



Mitchell's fifteenth album, the mixed *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm* (1988), is one of her least memorable works, but contains good songs like *Lakota*

Geffen Records released *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm* in March 1988. The media responded more favourably to this album, which peaked at 45 in the *Billboard* album charts. Compared with her more recent works, the album seemed prosaic, comfortable and relatively unadventurous, if not too safe and fey, but it contained a few fine songs, among them *Lakota* and *The Tea Leaf Prophecy*.

### Political activism

Mitchell and Klein undertook a short promotional tour of a few American, Canadian and British cities to stimulate interest in the new album before travelling to Japan and Australia in May 1988 to extend their promotional work. The Japanese leg of her promotional tour coincided with her solo art exhibition at Tokyo's Parco Gallery, which was the first time she sold paintings. In October 1988, Mitchell travelled with her husband to Italy to accept a songwriter's award from the San Remo Song Festival. Mitchell and Klein also performed a few songs at the festival, including *Hejira*, *Lakota* and *Night Ride Home*.

In March 1989, Mitchell contributed her voice to the environmental conservation benefit song, *The Spirit of the Forest*, along with Kate Bush, Thomas Dolby, Bonnie Raitt, Chris Rea, Ringo Starr, XTC and other artists. On June 3, she performed in New York City with Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Andy Summers and Larry Klein as part of the wider promotional work of artists to highlight the United Nations' *Our Common Future* campaign.

Mitchell and Klein returned to the studio for much of the first half of 1990 to work on songs for her next album. She and Klein also travelled to Berlin where she participated in Roger Waters' concert, *The Wall*, to commemorate the razing of the Berlin Wall. After returning to California and finishing work for her next album, *Night Ride Home*, Mitchell and Klein travelled by car to tour parts of Canada, including her hometown of Fort McLeod. Back in California, they completed the new album and presented their final mixes to Geffen Records just before Christmas 1990.

### Return to intimacy

The release of *Night Ride Home* in March 1991 – the singer's final album for Geffen Records – marked Mitchell's return to a more intimate, acoustic-driven and less expansive sound with her voice and the use of acoustic guitar being more pronounced in the final mix. Her songwriting, in general, was also stronger and more assured. She later referred to the album as a collection of "middle-aged love songs". Geffen produced a 15,000 limited-edition version of the album packaged in string-tied paper that included four of Mitchell's double-exposure photographs.

The album peaked at 41 in the *Billboard* charts after six weeks, but fared better in Britain where it peaked at 25 on the album charts. Mitchell told a writer from the *Boston Globe* that *Night Ride Home* was a much sunnier and friendlier album because she had used

many positive-sounding major chords, most notably C major. In many respects, the media responded well to her new album, with some writers indicating that it marked her gallant return to the freer spirit and sounds of her best works of the 1970s. The album's guest musicians included percussionist Alex Acuna, drummers Vinnie Colaiuta and Jim Keltner, guitarists Bill Dillon and Michael Landau and saxophonist Wayne Shorter, as well as singer David Baerwald of the short-lived David & David fame.



*Night Ride Home* (1991) marked Mitchell's return to more familiar pleasing form with songs like *Cherokee Louise* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

In August 1991, Geffen Records released a promotional long-form video that could be hired free from American combo video-and-audio stores, *Joni Mitchell: The Original Returns*. In October, she released a collection of eight music videos under the title of *Come in from the Cold*. The video included *The Beat of Black Wings*, *Dancin' Clowns*, *Lakota*, *Night Ride Home* and *Two Grey Rooms*. In November 1991, *Rolling Stone* magazine voted the cover of her 1976 album, *Hejira*, one of the 100 best album covers.

The next year, in May 1992, Rhino Records released a three-disc anthology, *Troubadours of the Folk Era*, which included on the second disc Mitchell's original version of *Both Sides, Now*.

In mid-1992, the singer participated in the benefit concert at the LA Whiskey for singer-songwriter Victoria Williams, who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Towards the end of 1992, two of Mitchell's albums were remastered and released on gold disc, *Court and Spark* and *Wild Things Run Fast*.

### Best album of the 1990s

In 1993, Mitchell returned to her home studio, The Kiva, with Larry Klein to record her next album,

*Turbulent Indigo*. During the *Turbulent Indigo* sessions, Mitchell later confessed to Britain's *Mojo* magazine, she and husband Klein agreed to end their 11-year marriage. After completing recording, she headlined the *Troubadours of Folk* festival in June 1993 at the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Drake Stadium. The success of the show, including rave reviews from the music media, inspired music promoter Jim Rissmiller to schedule another six US shows, including ones at Columbia, Chicago and Denver, between August 28 and September 18 1993.

Reprise Records released Mitchell's fifteenth studio album, *Turbulent Indigo*, in 1994. The album, in general received lukewarm to good reviews, but, by now, it appeared that the singer-songwriter's glory days were passed. The album, however, features some of her best songs since the 1970s, including *Sex Kills*, the poignant ode to abused women, *The Magdalene Laundries*, and the somewhat tedious song she had co-written a year before with David Crosby, *Yvette in English*.

On a good day in the mid-1990s, she could turn to dark and desolate themes and transform her thoughts and visions into heart-stirring lyrics, melodies and arrangements. This – her best album of the 1990s – is revisited in *Strange Brew* 08.

It would be another four years before Mitchell would release another album of original songs, perhaps her most disappointing set, *The Taming of the Tiger* (Reprise, 1998), which has not yet seen a follow-up studio album of new original songs. Sadly, this is her dead-cat album, a largely light and bland affair that does little to arouse one's heart or mind.

### Citations and compilations

On December 9 1995, *Billboard* featured Mitchell's portrait on the front cover in honour of her receiving the 1995 *Billboard* Century Award. The music publication also featured an insightful essay written by respected American music writer, Timothy White. Peter Gabriel presented the award to her at a *Billboard* banquet on December 6.

White's excellent essay – along with other key journalistic works on the artist – are accessible through an indispensable fan website, the Joni Mitchell Discussion List (JMDL) at [jmdl.com](http://jmdl.com).

At the 38<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards on February 28 1996, Mitchell received the awards for Best Pop Album and Best Album Packaging for *Turbulent Indigo*. It seemed that after almost 30 years of being a comparatively high-profile recording artist, Joni Mitchell, at last, was beginning to receive formal recognition from the music establishment.

She flew to Stockholm, Sweden, to receive on May 6 1996 her Polar Music Prize, a Nobel-like prize for music, which included a US\$150,000 cash award. In the USA and Canada, she is also the recipient of the

National Academy of Songwriters' Lifetime Achievement Award and the Canadian Governor-General's Performing Arts Award, among other awards and citations.

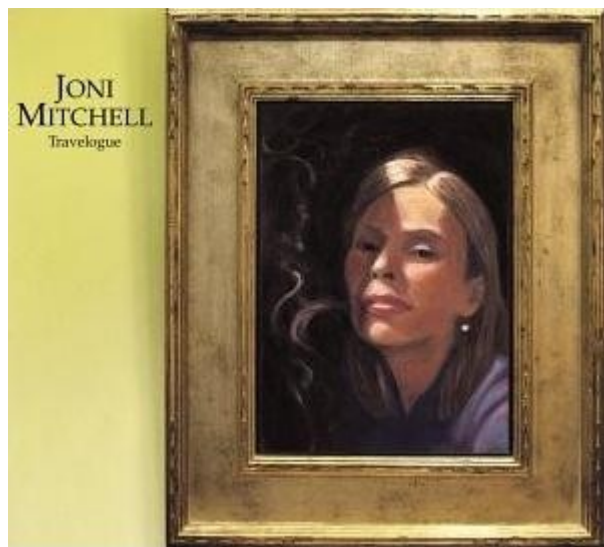
In mid-1996, Reprise Records released Mitchell's first formal compilation album, a two-volume set, appropriately titled *Hits* and *Misses*. In May 1997, Mitchell was inducted into the American Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at Cleveland, Ohio, along with The Bee Gees, Buffalo Springfield, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Parliament/Funkadelic and The Rascals, among others.

She did not attend the ceremony, but, later at an intimate concert in LA, she accepted the award (wrapped symbolically in a plastic rubbish bag) from her long-time friend and former lover, Graham Nash.

Mitchell's public life story has since become increasingly vague, while her recording output has been far less prolific. To fulfil contractual obligations, she recorded for Reprise Records the *Both Sides Now* album comprising mostly her covers of jazz songs, such as *You're My Thrill*, *Answer Me*, *My Love* and *Stormy Weather*, as well as new renditions of her own *A Case of You* and the title track.

While not an indispensable Mitchell album, *Both Sides Now* is worth exploring, especially if you appreciate some of the cabaret-era songs from before the birth of rock 'n' roll.

The featured guest musicians included Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, trumpeter Mark Isham, bassist Chuck Berghofer and drummer Peter Erskine, as well as a 70-piece symphony orchestra. Former husband, Larry Klein, acted as a musical director and co-producer with the singer. Mitchell dedicated this album to her long-lost daughter, Kilauren (Gibb).



Her 22-song career overview, *Travelogue*, recorded with an orchestra, is worth investigating, but Mitchell fans have not yet tasted a definitive anthology of her amazing career. Is Rhino Records listening?

This project inspired a follow-up, 22-song double album, *Travelogue*, released by Nonesuch Records in 2002. Again, Mitchell co-produced the album with her former husband, while Vince Mendoza returned to score the orchestral arrangements. The album acts, in many ways, as a brief career retrospective and features reworkings of some of her classic songs, including *Amelia*, *Woodstock*, *For the Roses*, *Sex Kills*, *Refuge of the Roads*, *The Last Time I Saw Richard* and *The Circle Game*. The elaborately packaged album features photographic reproductions of several of her paintings.

In 2003, Geffen Records released a four-disc box set, *The Complete Geffen Recordings*, with remastered versions of *Wild Things Run Fast*, *Dog Eat Dog*, *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm* and *Night Ride Home*, as well as three outtake songs, including her rendition of Bob Dylan's *It's All Over Now*, *Baby Blue*.

Record companies released another three themed compilation albums: *The Beginning of Survival* (Geffen, 2004; 16 songs); *Dreamland* (Nonesuch/Rhino, 2004; 17 songs); and *Songs of a Prairie Girl* (Nonesuch/Rhino, 2005; 13 songs). The last album, curated and directed by Mitchell, was her contribution to the centennial celebrations held for her home state of Saskatchewan.

Mitchell – a frequent critic of the music industry and the state of much of modern music in recent years – has, it seems, retired from music and spends most of her time at home, either at Bel Air in Los Angeles or in her cabin retreat at Sechelt, British Columbia in her native Canada. She remains a passionate painter. Rumours persist through the Internet that she may release an album of new original songs (*Shine*) later in 2007.

Whether or not she releases another album of original songs, Joni Mitchell is a rare and precious talent whose legacy will continue to endure. One doubts if many singer-songwriters will rival her prolific oeuvre and, above all, the majesty of her singing, writing and performing.

Like one of her admired painters, Vincent van Gogh, she dared to explore a rich and diverse palette of musical colours and subject matters, sustain her spirit of originality, and remain true to her vision and talents, even in the face of ridicule and derision. ■

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### Strange Brew's top 10 Mitchell albums

- (01) *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975)
- (02) *Court and Spark* (1974)
- (03) *Hejira* (1976)
- (04) *Blue* (1971)
- (05) *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970)
- (06) *For the Roses* (1972)
- (07) *Clouds* (1969)
- (08) *Song to a Seagull* (1968)
- (09) *Turbulent Indigo* (1994)

- (10) *Dog Eat Dog* (1985) or maybe *Night Ride Home* (1991)

## Album discography

### Impressive track record

<i>Song to a Seagull</i> (1968)	★★
<i>Clouds</i> (1969)	★★
<i>Ladies of the Canyon</i> (1970)	★★
<i>Blue</i> (1971)	★★
<i>For the Roses</i> (1972)	★★
<i>Court and Spark</i> (1974)	★★
<i>Miles of Aisles</i> (1975) [L]	★
<i>The Hissing of Summer Lawns</i> (1975)	★★
<i>Hejira</i> (1976)	★★
<i>Don Juan's Reckless Daughter</i> (1977)	★
<i>Mingus</i> (1979)	★
<i>Shadows and Light</i> (1980) [L]	★
<i>Wild Things Run Fast</i> (1982)	★
<i>Dog Eat Dog</i> (1985)	★★
<i>Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm</i> (1988)	★
<i>Night Ride Home</i> (1991)	★★
<i>Turbulent Indigo</i> (1994)	★★
<i>Hits</i> (1996)	★★
<i>Misses</i> (1996)	★
<i>Taming the Tiger</i> (1998)	--
<i>Both Sides Now</i> (2000) [mostly covers]	★
<i>Travelogue</i> (2002) [re-recordings] [C]	★
<i>The Complete Geffen Recordings</i> (2003) [B]	★
<i>The Beginning of Survival</i> (2004) [C]	★
<i>Dreamland</i> (2004) [C]	★★
<i>Songs of a Prairie Girl</i> (2006) [C]	★

[B]	Box set
[C]	Compilation or anthology-type album
[L]	Live album
★★	Essential
★	Nice-to-have

### The Joni Mitchell anthology

#### *A Case of You*: The dream box set

Fans of Joni Mitchell – along with those of Neil Young, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd – are disappointed at the artist's extensive oeuvre not being subjected to a judiciously compiled box set over four, five or even six 80-minute compact discs (CDs).

Perhaps it is time that the Warner entertainment empire, through Rhino Records, takes some inspiration from Capitol Records, which produced a stunning five-CD box set of The Band (*A Musical History*) in 2005.

Devoted fans enjoy excellent box sets – and, here, inspiration can also be drawn from box sets compiled for The Byrds (*There Is a Season*, 2006), Crosby, Stills and Nash (CSN, 1991), Jethro Tull (*Twenty Years of Jethro Tull: The Definitive Collection*, 1988), Led Zeppelin (*Led Zeppelin*, 1990) and Roxy Music (*The Thrill of It All*, 1995).

Out of frustration, I compiled my own box set of 110 songs over six CDs, *A Case of You*.

## Singles discography

### Seven inches of pleasure

<i>Night in the City</i> (1968)
<i>Chelsea Morning</i> (1969)
<i>Big Yellow Taxi</i> (1970)
<i>Carey</i> (1971)
<i>You Turn Me on I'm a Radio</i> (1972)
<i>Free Man in Paris</i> (1974)
<i>Help Me</i> (1974)
<i>Raised on Robbery</i> (1974)
<i>Big Yellow Taxi</i> (live) (1975)
<i>In France They Kiss on Main Street</i> (1975)
<i>Coyote</i> (1976)
<i>Off Night Back Street</i> (1977)
<i>The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines</i> (1979)
<i>Why Do Fools Fall in Love?</i> (1980)
<i>Chinese Café/Unchained Melody</i> (1982)
<i>(You're so Square) Baby, I Don't Care</i> (1982)
<i>Good Friends</i> (1985)
<i>Shiny Toys</i> (1986) (UK only)
<i>My Secret Place</i> (1988)
<i>Snakes and Ladders</i> (1988)
<i>Come in from the Cold</i> (1991)
<i>How Do You Stop?</i> (1994)
<i>Big Yellow Taxi</i> (remix) (1996)

#### The live album

*Miles of Aisles* (1974)

#### The compilation album

*Hits* (1996)

#### The dead-cat album

*Taming the Tiger* (1998)

### More Joni Mitchell in edition 08

The *Strange Brew* celebration of Joni Mitchell continues in the eighth edition of Monday July 16 2007. This edition includes retrospective reviews of four of her great 1970s albums, *Blue*, *Court and Spark*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*. It also features short articles on her guitar playing, Jaco Pastorius and the *Turbulent Indigo* album, as well as review of *A Tribute to Joni Mitchell* (2007).

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