

BACK TRACK

JONI MITCHELL THE BOHO DANCE

Folk goddess grows new, experimental wings and upsets faithful the world over...

TRACK DETAILS

Picture courtesy of Dagmar Krajnc



Musician/Producer

Joni Mitchell

Engineer **Henry Lewy**

Assistant Engineer

Ellis Sorkin

Guitars **Jeff Baxter,**

Larry Carlton, Robben Ford

Vocals **Graham Nash,**

David Crosby, James Taylor

Bass **Max Bennet,**

Wilton Felder

Keyboards **Joe Sample**

Drums **John Guerin**

Recorded **Spring-**

Summer, 1975

Studios **A&M Studios,**

Hollywood

Released **November, 1975**

At the end of 1974 Joni Mitchell was staring down at the world from what would be the commercial zenith of her career. She'd nabbed several Grammy noms for her *Court and Spark* record, saw her face adorn the cover of *Time* magazine, and toured to international recognition. But in an act of minor artistic rebellion, Mitchell took her hard-won pop currency and recorded *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, an album that the rock gods at *Rolling Stone* called "pseudo-avant-gardism".

While it's fairly accurate to credit Mitchell in the role of the producer for this and most of her releases, her long-time engineer Henry Lewy was a significant accomplice in the development of her sound. In late 1975, Lewy re-recruited young staff engineer Ellis Sorkin to assist with the *Summer Lawns* sessions at A&M's Hollywood studios, since he had already performed tape op and mixing duties on the acclaimed *Court and Spark*.

"We did a lot of her vocals in Studio C – the majority I would say," says Sorkin. "We also did some tracking in that room with an API console that was there. We were on 24-track by then, probably using an

the discreet console preamps of either an API or HAECO-CSG board, on to a UREI 1176 limiter, with echo plates or EMTs for reverb.

"Henry wasn't that experimental. He used what he saw other people using that worked and that he liked. She sang with a Shure SM7 because she wanted to do some vocals in the control room."

While commonly used for recording drums and bass the SM7 has long been deployed as a vocal mic as well. With its large diaphragm, the SM7 has a flat, wide-range frequency response allowing for greater levels of sound pressure. And even though large-diaphragm microphones can have a limited high-frequency response, the SM7 has seen much use with trumpets and trombones.

One track to see extensive comping and track combining was *The Boho Dance*, and Lewy and Sorkin were very careful about mapping their way to a finished vocal.

"With *The Boho Dance* in particular, we must have taken a month to do the vocals because of the 100 different parts it had on it. That was quite a feat in those days. She would lay down all the different tracks until she found ones that she really dug. And then we would bring them back up through the console and combine them through the busses onto one track. We'd have a plot for where one line went or whatever words we were switching between. It was just a matter of

getting the routine right and balancing the levels between each track, especially if it was a word here and a word there. It was fairly labour-intensive."

But for all the detailed work Sorkin, now 50, still remembers Mitchell and the sessions fondly.

"It was always a gas to hang out with her and it was always a great time working with the guest stars that came in like Graham Nash and David Crosby. And she's just brilliant. She truly is a genius. You can sit there and talk to her and you just get lost. It was a great time." **MTM**

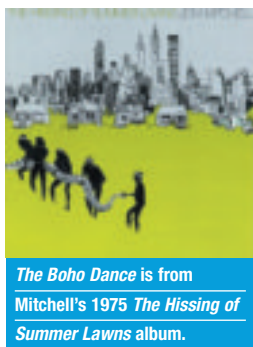
MCI JH-24 or a JH-16. But they were all modified. Our shop totally modified everything we had."

Studio C was the smallest room at A&M (used primarily for multi-channel mixing and as a pre-mastering studio), consisting of a control room and a 14x21ft recording space. And although A&M had a top shelf reputation for its gear and engineering staff, Lewy recorded Mitchell in a very straightforward fashion. The real intricacies lay in Mitchell's desire to absolutely nail down her material. Recording vocals took considerable chunks of time within the project, and according to Sorkin she was one of the artists to pioneer the technique of comping vocals (combining a variety of performances into one) as a means towards achieving a perfect take.

"We spent many, many hours doing that. She was one of the first people to get into that technique. She's such a perfectionist, she wanted the very best from all the different things that she did."

The signal chain for the majority of the *Summer Lawns* session would have been a Shure SM7 through

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The Boho Dance is from Mitchell's 1975 *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* album.

Key Facts

■ Despite the critical drubbing it received, *Hissing* reached #4 on the American Billboard chart.

■ A&M studio remained in operation until 1999, and the doors were finally closed once the Universal Music Group assumed its ownership.

■ Ellis Sorkin's other engineering credits include Joan Baez's *Diamonds and Rust* album and Carly Simon's *Playing Possum*.