

THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

JONI MITCHELL

UPDATED
DELUXE
EDITION

EVERY ALBUM
REVIEWED

CLASSIC
ENCOUNTERS,
REDISCOVERED

A Case Of You
JONI MITCHELL
THE FULL STORY

ARCHIVES
VOL 1:
THE VERDICT

HER **30**
GREATEST
SONGS

THE 2020
COMEBACK

FROM THE MAKERS OF **UNCUT**

contents

6 “She wanted to be a big deal” **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** Half a century on, the story of a singer-songwriter’s remarkable rise

18 **SONG TO A SEAGULL** **ALBUM FEATURE** A fêted 23-year-old songwriter steps into the spotlight, with a maverick ex-Byrd producing

22 **CLOUDS** **ALBUM FEATURE** The world-weary ingénue embraces her own contradictions with soon-to-be-standard songs

26 **LADIES OF THE CANYON** **ALBUM FEATURE** Fame beckons as we hear Mitchell “cracking out of her chrysalis and beginning to soar”

30 “I want my music to get more sophisticated” **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** Joni visits the UK, leaving her public and our correspondent awestruck

34 **BLUE** **ALBUM FEATURE** Romantic upheaval and restless travel fuel a timeless classic

38 **FOR THE ROSES** **ALBUM FEATURE** A retreat to Canada produces a more impressionistic fifth album

42 **COURT AND SPARK** **ALBUM FEATURE**

Backed by the LA Express, a bigger, bolder Mitchell sound is born, with hints of jazzier experiments to come

46 “They say I’ve changed... Yes, I have!” **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** Back in London, Joni isn’t talking, but she still reveals some secrets

52 **THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWN** **ALBUM FEATURE** Subtle sounds and suburban musings: an underrated (at the time) gem

56 **HEJIRA** **ALBUM FEATURE** Fearless women and open roads inspire an expansive, experimental journey

60 **DON JUAN’S RECKLESS DAUGHTER** **ALBUM FEATURE** Inching further into jazz with a bold double album

64 **MINGUS** **ALBUM FEATURE** A dying mentor inspires a meeting of minds like no other

68 **WILD THINGS RUN FAST** **ALBUM FEATURE** The Police, Lionel Richie and a new beau help usher Joni into a brash new decade



72 **DOG EAT DOG** **ALBUM FEATURE** Thomas Dolby’s synthscape soundtrack Ms Mitchell’s raging broadsides against the Reagan era

76 “You’re going to get me into my apocalyptic vision...” **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** The newlywed holds forth on censorship, Live Aid and her synth-heavy new LP

98 **TAMING THE TIGER** **ALBUM FEATURE** A new guitar sound, a rediscovered daughter and... a last hurrah?

102 **BOTH SIDES NOW** **ALBUM FEATURE** The legend finds a new voice, via vintage covers and a couple of her own old favourites

106 **TRAVELOGUE** **ALBUM FEATURE** Mitchell delves further into her back catalogue, in playfully revisionist mood

110 **SHINE** **ALBUM FEATURE** A ballet soundtrack is a surprise final encore to a peerless singer-songwriting career

114 **Joni Mitchell’s 30 Greatest Songs** **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** Friends, fans and bandmates take their pick

126 “I’m a fighter, that’s what I do” **CLASSIC INTERVIEW** Joni gathers her strength since her aneurysm in 2015

138 **LIVES AND COMPILATIONS** **ALBUM FEATURE** Bootlegs, outtakes, concert recordings and more

142 **MISCELLANY** **ALBUM FEATURE** Singles, DVDs, paintings, guest appearances... and those guitar tunings in full

146 **STOP ME** **ALBUM FEATURE** LA Express guitarist Robben Ford tells of his journey with Joni



Joni at 75: a birthday celebration at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, LA, November 7, 2018



86 **CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM** **ALBUM FEATURE** Celebrity guests add stardust to a glossy late-'80s outing

90 **NIGHT RIDE HOME** **ALBUM FEATURE** A new decade heralds a return to intimate, introspective concerns

94 **TURBULENT INDIGO** **ALBUM FEATURE** As a Van Gogh homage adorns the cover, a tortured artist vents her spleen between the grooves within

HEJIRA

RELEASED NOVEMBER 1976

"Now I'm returning to myself..." In an unlicensed white Mercedes, Mitchell seeks the refuge of the roads. *BY LAURA SNAPES*

THE women of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* were always trapped in somebody else's frame. Joni Mitchell only used the first person once on her seventh album; instead, she sang of women as seen through men's eyes, assessed according to their suitability for motherhood, sex and deference. Similarly, Mitchell found herself made into an adjunct when she briefly joined the Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975, opening for male artists who were her equal. She approached the tour as a research trip, "an amazing experience, studying mysticism and ego malformation like you wouldn't believe", as she told journalist Timothy White. "Everybody took all of their vices to the Nth degree and came out of it born again, or into AA."

Where these acts were tilting towards the mainstream, by the mid-'70s Mitchell was keenly following Marvin Gaye in "moving away from the hit department, to the art department", keen to forge her own rhythms away from rock. In the wake of her split from drummer John Guerin, she was ready to give life the slip for a while.

After the end of the *Hissing* tour, Mitchell was sojourning at Neil Young's beach house. She knew

she wanted to travel, but didn't know where, or who with. By chance, two friends invited her to drive cross-country. Her answer: "I've been waiting for you; I'm gone," she recounted to *Rolling Stone's* Cameron Crowe. They travelled together for a while before Mitchell went off alone. It was one of three road trips she took between 1975 and 1976, which led her from Los Angeles to Maine, then California via Florida and the Gulf Of Mexico. On the road, Mitchell stayed in lighthouses along the Gulf Coast, and wore wigs to disguise herself in New Orleans. "Meanwhile, nobody knew where I was," she told White. "I'd do those disappearing acts. I'd pass through some seedy town with a pinball arcade, fall in with people who worked on the machines, people staying alive shoplifting, whatever. They don't know who you are: 'Why you driving that white Mercedes? Oh, you're driving it across country for somebody else.' You know, make up some name and hang out. Great experiences, almost like the prince and the pauper."

Mitchell had no licence for her flashy car, so she drove behind truckers, who would signal when the police were approaching. She was living out of bounds, but hadn't, as the folk song goes, "*fallen by* ➤

JONI MITCHELL HEJIRA



Mitchell isolates
herself from
familiarity in order
to confront her
true nature

the wayside". By the mid-'70s, *Walden* and *On The Road* were archetypal male quests, but there were still few cultural precedents for women travelling alone. Eighteenth-century "girl stunt reporter" Nellie Bly circled the world in 72 days to prove that she could. Simone De Beauvoir's *America Day By Day* (1947) was more journalistic, intended to convey the reality of America's culture and mores to the French. Released in 1976, the same year as Mitchell's travels, Tom Robbins' absurdist novel *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues* followed the giant-thumbed Sissy Hankshaw as she encountered various countercultural avatars. But although just as geographically far-reaching, Mitchell's trip was defiantly insular – the kind of story that hadn't yet been written.

Living between her car and anonymous motels, Mitchell wrote songs on her acoustic guitar since pianos were seldom available. She thought of naming the collection of material "Travelling", but that implied a fixed destination. Instead, she chose a reference to the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, which she later summed up as "leaving the dream, no blame".

"Hejira" was an obscure word, but it said exactly what I wanted," she told Crowe. "Running away, honourably." She continued, referencing her split with Guerin. "It dealt with the leaving of a relationship, but without the sense of failure that accompanied the breakup of my previous relationships. I felt that it was not necessarily anybody's fault. It was a new attitude."

A new attitude required a new musical approach, furthering Mitchell's quicksilver mid-'70s evolution. "For a long time, I've been playing in straight rhythms," she had told friend Malka Marom in 1973. "But now, in order to sophisticate my music to my own taste, I push it into odd places that feel a little unusual to me, so that I feel I'm stretching out." After 1974's richly melodic *Court And Spark*, the jazzy abstractions of *Hissing* were perceived as an ornery career-killer. On *Hejira*, Mitchell pared percussion back to the faintest patter, ditched choruses, and created nine fairly similar tone poems from her guitar (mostly electric on the recordings) and Jaco Pastorius's fretless bass (only lounge-jazz pastiche "Blue Motel Room" veers from the form). Their rippling instruments evoke the uncanny surface of the pools in Hockney's California paintings, and the scant reliance on hooks encourages a sense of forward motion. (*The New York Times*' reviewer called it a "Los Angeles version of Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn'.") This minimal backing lets Mitchell's voice loose, as she sings in a meditative, instinctual fashion. "The

CRITICS' VERDICT

"There has always been a dark side to her work, but she has never sounded more isolated, more enclosed within herself, than in these songs of perpetual melancholy journeys 'across the burning desert' and 'thru the snow and the pinewood trees...porous with travel fever'."

MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 27, 1976

"Hejira is, one presumes, Ms Mitchell's soul-to-soul statement circa 1976... But be warned: this is no worthy successor to... Summer Lawns and this time around the old she's-an-artist-she-don't-look-back shtick can't be regurgitated because most of the sentiments here have been presented before."

NICK KENT, NME, NOVEMBER 27, 1976

poet took over the singer," she said in 1998. "It's more like jazz melody, it's conversational improvisation."

This intimate, personal voice is key to *Hejira*, where Mitchell isolates herself from familiarity in order to confront her true nature. "*In our possessive coupling/ So much could not be expressed/ So now I'm returning to myself/ These things that you and I suppressed*", she sings on the title track, as if taking her first deep breath in a long while. *Hejira* contains Mitchell's starkest and most sensitive examinations of the apparent incompatibility of love and work, belonging and freedom. *Hejira* lets Mitchell's duelling ideologies and impulses coexist at the same scale within each song, avoiding extremes of crisis or revelation, an idea reflected in the artwork. Mitchell used a Camera Lucida to edit together 14 different photos of varying perspectives – including an imposing Norman Seeff portrait – and then hired an airbrusher to blend in the edges. "If I had done the cover as a collage, it would've looked much more primitive," she told *Rock Photo*. "This way it's so polished, as if it's exactly one photograph."

If art and love are in conflict, Mitchell's lucid relationship with that bind is unparalleled. "I suppose a lot of people could have written a lot of my other songs," she told *The Ottawa Citizen* in 1996, "but I feel the songs on *Hejira* could only have come from me." Marrying *Hissing*'s observational approach to the personal nature of Mitchell's earlier records, *Hejira* contains some of her most expansive and idiosyncratic writing, each song filled with unanswered questions about the definition and contradictions of fulfilment. Sometimes, that satisfaction is immediate. To be a solo travelling woman requires a heightened sensitivity to the environment, and Mitchell vibrates at the frequency of her gorgeous, sensory landscapes. There are towering pinewood trees and vivid blue skies streaked with vapour trails that look like "*the hexagram of the heavens*", or the strings of her guitar. Snow "*gathers like bolts of lace waltzing on a ballroom girl*" in the spacious "Hejira", where Mitchell sighs with

gratitude at her synchronicity with her surroundings: "*There's comfort in melancholy/ When there's no need to explain/ It's just as natural as the weather/ In this moody sky today*". Her world is so vivid, it almost feels surreal at time.

As she acclimatises to the road, she clocks on to the behaviour of the characters she encounters. The dewy "Coyote" details a tryst with a philandering rancher (who may be Sam Shepard in disguise) – Mitchell knows that he has "*a woman at home and another down the hall*", but she enjoys their brief affair, and revels in his palpable consternation about whether to run away the next morning. "*Coyote's in the coffee shop/ He's staring a hole in his scrambled eggs/ He picks up my scent on his fingers/ While he's watching the waitresses's legs*", she sings, high on intimate power. "*You're not a hit-and-run driver, no no*", she reassures him, having played him at his own game. Sex is purely pleasure on *Hejira*, Mitchell writing without shame or qualification as she steps outside of society's expectations. "*All I really want right now/ Is to find another lover*", she confesses at one point, and she succeeds. She may have reservations about the "*foolish and childish*" protagonist of "A Strange Boy", but rationality barely matters out here. "*We got high on travel/ And we got drunk on alcohol/ And on love, the strongest poison and medicine of all*", she rhapsodises, sounding barely tethered to the earth. "*See how that feeling comes and goes/ Like the pull of moon on tides/ Now I am surfri/sing/ Now parched ribs of sand at his side*".

Supposedly alone in the world and enjoying "the sweet loneliness of solitary travel", as she would describe it, Mitchell forces herself to reckon with the part of her that still craves contact, and comfort. "*I'm porous with travel fever/ But you know I'm so glad to be on my own/ Still somehow the slightest touch of a stranger/ Can set up trembling in my bones*", she sings on "Hejira". The alternating keys of "Amelia", a tribute to the lost pilot Amelia Earhart, underscore *Hejira*'s most poignant and uneasy interrogation of a woman's ineffable need to wander, and the sacrifices that entails. "*Maybe I've never really loved/ I guess that is the truth/ I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitude/ And looking down on everything/ I crashed into his arms*", she rues.

Hejira contains some of Mitchell's most expansive and idiosyncratic writing



Soft focus: in LA, 1976, and (right) with drummer and erstwhile lover John Guerin



Joni - John Guerin

No matter how far she gets from home, she can't escape her mind. "Oh radiant happiness/It was all so light and easy/'Til I started analysing/And I brought on my old ways/A thunderhead of judgement was gathering in my gaze", Mitchell sings on the melty, hiccuping "Refuge Of The Roads". *Hejira* offers no resolution between love and independence, both of which lead to a measure of isolation that Mitchell elucidates beautifully. Being tethered to someone means always being seen in reflection: "White flags of winter chimneys/Waving truce against the moon/In the mirrors of a modern bank/From the window of a hotel room", she sings on "Hejira". But a similarly desolate image in "Refuge" suggests that being alone means barely being seen at all. In a service station, she sees "a photograph of the Earth/Taken coming back from the moon/And you couldn't see a city/On that marbled bowling ball/Or a forest of a highway/Or me here least of all".

In *The Rolling Stone Book Of Women In Rock*, Lisa Kennedy writes that Mitchell's work up until *Court And Spark* was influenced by the prairie, and that what came after drew from the city. It's true of *Hissing*, *Mingus* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, but *Hejira* is a psychological bridge connecting the two territories and all that they

represent. The closest she comes to defining that irreconcilable pull between a woman's duty and desire is on energetic highlight "Song For Sharon". (It's the only song here written on cocaine, which may explain the pace.) "And the power of reason/And the flowers of deep feeling/Seem to serve me/Only to deceive me", she ruminates. It's no wonder, as she sings on "Refuge...", that her journey "made most people nervous/They just didn't want to know/What I was seeing in the refuge of the roads".

To this day in popular culture, most women on the road are doomed figures, fated to die or disappear. In 2013, the cultural critic Vanessa Veselka wrote an essay for *The American Reader* titled "The Lack Of Female Road Narratives

And Why It Matters". "We recognise that, in our world, a woman on the road is marked," she writes. "She has been cut from the social fabric, excised at such an elemental level that when she steps onto the road, she steps into an abyss. And whatever leads up to that choice inspires in us a primal fear. A man on the road is solitary. A woman on the road is alone."

Hejira remains one of the few counterexamples to this deficit – a restless rejection of what satisfaction and success is meant to look like for women as lovers and artists, and a fearless confrontation of the consequences that stem from rejecting the norm. It's perhaps the great feminist record: "Leaving the dream, no blame," indeed. 🎧

TRACKMARKS HEJIRA

- 1 Coyote ★★★★★
- 2 Amelia ★★★★★
- 3 Furry Sings The Blues ★★
- 4 A Strange Boy ★★★★★
- 5 Hejira ★★★★★
- 6 Song For Sharon ★★★★★

- 7 Black Crow ★★★★★
- 8 Blue Motel Room ★★★★★
- 9 Refuge Of The Roads ★★★★★

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(vocals, guitars), Larry
Carlton (guitars), Jaco
Pastorius (bass), Max
Bennett (bass), Chuck
Domanico (double

bass), John Guerin
(drums), Bobbye Hall
(perc), Victor Feldman
(vibraphone), Neil Young
(harmonica), Abe Most
(clarinet), Chuck Findley
and Tom Scott (horns)
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