



Ranking the genius singer-songwriter's albums, from wistful acoustic folk to complex jazz pop and beyond

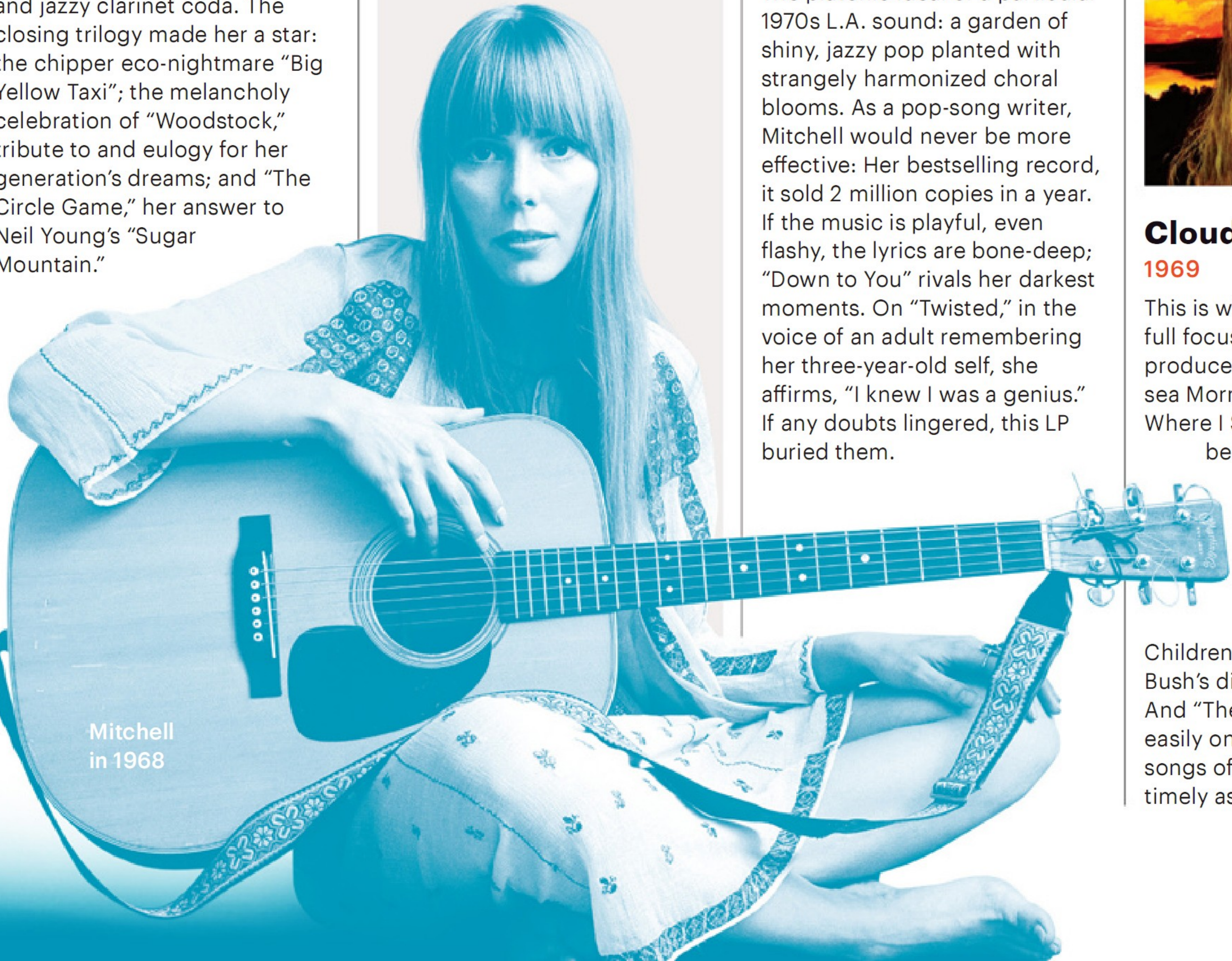
BY WILL HERMES

Must-Haves



Ladies of the Canyon 1970

The exact moment when Mitchell shifts from mere folk prodigy to something deeper happens when “Morning Morgantown” pivots into “For Free,” with its blue piano chords and jazzy clarinet coda. The closing trilogy made her a star: the chipper eco-nightmare “Big Yellow Taxi”; the melancholy celebration of “Woodstock,” tribute to and eulogy for her generation’s dreams; and “The Circle Game,” her answer to Neil Young’s “Sugar Mountain.”



Joni Mitchell



Blue 1971

The apex of Mitchell’s confessional writing, *Blue* is a deceptively folksy set flush with intoxicating melodies, dazzling (if often invisible) syncopation, and lyrics of breathtaking intimacy. “Songs are like tattoos,” she sings on the title track. Indeed, each here is indelible — none more than the exquisitely sad holiday hymn “River,” and “A Case of You,” written with her ex Leonard Cohen in mind and played with her ex James Taylor on guitar. “My stuff is not male fantasy at all,” she once noted. “It’s instructed to make men a little more informed.”



Court and Spark 1974

The platonic ideal of a particular 1970s L.A. sound: a garden of shiny, jazzy pop planted with strangely harmonized choral blooms. As a pop-song writer, Mitchell would never be more effective: Her bestselling record, it sold 2 million copies in a year. If the music is playful, even flashy, the lyrics are bone-deep; “Down to You” rivals her darkest moments. On “Twisted,” in the voice of an adult remembering her three-year-old self, she affirms, “I knew I was a genius.” If any doubts lingered, this LP buried them.



The Hissing of Summer Lawns 1975

This avant-pop shift from *Court and Spark* was her next masterpiece, though few recognized it at the time. Shifting her perspective from interior to exterior, Mitchell turned tables on the male gaze and stared down America’s heart of darkness. Arrangements are intricate, layered and harmonically packed, yet the music eddies as naturally as a stream. With its radical mix of samples, synths and Burundi drumming, “The Jungle Line” would echo through Eighties pop (see Bow Wow Wow’s “I Want Candy”). Superfan Prince is said to have once called it “the last album I loved all the way through.”

Further Listening



Clouds 1969

This is where Mitchell came into full focus as artist, arranger, producer and songwriter. “Chelsea Morning” and “I Don’t Know Where I Stand” had already been covered by Fairport Convention, and Judy Collins hit the Top 10 with “Both Sides Now,” but Mitchell took ownership here. “Songs to Aging Children Come” anticipated Kate Bush’s dizzying harmonies. And “The Fiddle and the Drum,” easily one of the finest anti-war songs of all time, remains as timely as ever.



For the Roses 1972

Another transitional record — this is Mitchell broadening her palette. Jazzy wind instruments are woven into the fabric of the songs, not just tacked on for codas; multitracked vocal choruses grow more intricate; James Burton adds swampy electric guitar. As the Sixties receded, the songs glint with jadedness. Few fame interrogations cut as deep as the title track, or with as cool an eye as “Blonde in the Bleachers.”



Miles of Aisles 1974

Released in the wake of *Court and Spark*’s jackpot, Mitchell’s first proper live LP documents her maiden voyage with a road band: slick SoCal jazzbos the L.A. Express. It’s best when they lay back, which thankfully is often, and she inhabits material she’s lived in for years — notably, heart-wrenching takes of “Blue” and “Last Time I Saw Richard,” the latter with Mitchell doubling as a salty closing-time barmaid.



Hejira 1976

Her sense of melody gets more diaphanous as she leans more fully into jazz. Jaco Pastorius arrives with his fretless bass; his voicelike lines define “Coyote,” an unsparing observation of male mating behavior with lyrics as jaw-droppingly vivid as ever: “He picks up my scent on his fingers/While he’s watching the waitresses’ legs.”



Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter 1977

The jazz moves deepen. The 16-minute “Paprika Plains” features Pastorius and Weather Report bandmate Wayne Shorter. The cover image of Mitchell in blackface offended many. But it packaged a complicated indictment of cultural hypocrisy and racism: See the impressionistic “Dreamland,” featuring vocals by Chaka Khan.

Going Deeper



Song to a Seagull (aka Joni Mitchell) 1968

This is folk music of its era, yet outside it. The voice is ornate, moony and lovely, pulling against unusual chord changes. Produced by David Crosby with a light touch (if an unfortunate murkiness), it’s still mainly her and her guitar. The gorgeous melodies echo English folk, and it resonated across the pond: “I Had a King” would be one of multiple Joni inspirations for Led Zeppelin’s “Going to California.”



Mingus 1979

Made with the iconic Charles Mingus near the end of his life, this was Mitchell doubling down on her jazz journey, writing lyrics to the Mingus signature “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” and

FURTHER READING

Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell By David Yaffe

Yaffe, a musician as well as a fine writer, got remarkable access to the reclusive artist for this bio, a deep dive into not just her life and loves (on which he dishes, respectfully) but also her songwriting, notably the later material. For Mitchell, it’s all inextricably intertwined.



some songs he wrote specifically for her. The gem is “The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines,” a gambling tale about dumb luck with some wild, chortling horn charts by Pastorius, whose bass line is so blindingly funky, it’s become a model of form.

of what would be a long-term relationship with bassist-producer Larry Klein. Playful, with her voice still in great shape, it draws inspiration from both the Bible (“Love”) and Elvis Presley (a giddy cover of “[You’re So Square] Baby, I Don’t Care”).



Shadows and Light 1980

A double live LP with an all-star band, featuring quicksilver jazz guitarist/ECM Records windfall Pat Metheny. The originals are post-*Court and Spark* but for a gossamer “Woodstock” and a jaunty “Free Man in Paris,” both reminders that “stoking the star-maker machinery behind the popular song” held less interest for Mitchell than ever. And the Persuasions help her become Frankie Lymon on a charming, pointed “Why Do Fools Fall in Love.”



Wild Things Run Fast 1982

Mitchell enters the Eighties gamely with a set of love-fixated songs that marks the beginning

Tracks

Forgotten gems, B sides, rarities

“ME AND MY UNCLE”

Canadian TV performance, 1965

A folk standard performed by the then-unmarried Mitchell on the Canadian folk-revival show *Let’s Sing Out*. The glee with which she sings of icing her partner is priceless.

“SUGAR MOUNTAIN”

Bootleg radio performance, 1967

Mitchell covers an early signature by Neil Young, which generated an answer song that became her own early signature: “The Circle Game.”

“CAREY”/“MR. TAMBOURINE MAN”

From *Amchitka*, 2009

Recorded in 1970 at a Vancouver Greenpeace benefit, with a Mitchell segue from the *Blue* lover’s ode into a footloose Dylan cover. When her then-boyfriend, James Taylor, joins in, he carries the vocal melody while Mitchell does some harmonic somersaults.

“HUNTER”

Studio outtake, 1970 [*The Seeding of Summer Lawns*]

Alternatively known as “The Good Samaritan,” this masterful rush of acoustic guitar and vocals, about teetering between fear and kindness, was ostensibly recorded for *Blue* and later appeared on the *Amchitka* concert album.

“URGE FOR GOING”

Non-LP single, 1972

Originally recorded by folkie Tom Rush on his Joni-heavy 1968 album, *The Circle Game*, Mitchell finally released her own version on the B side of “You Turn Me On, I’m a Radio,” a Top 40 hit from *For the Roses*. One of her best early songs, it was later compiled on the *Hits* album.

“IN FRANCE THEY KISS ON MAIN STREET”

Demo, 1975 [*The Seeding of Summer Lawns*]

This acoustic version of the *Hissing of Summer Lawns* gem suggests a completely thought-out arrangement, though it’s just a guitar and Mitchell’s multi-tracked vocals, tracing the horn arrangements to come.

“SPEECHLESS”

From *The Complete Geffen Recordings*, 2003

A wordless, scat-sung instrumental from 1989, imagined as a French song in the style of Edith Piaf. It would eventually become “Two Grey Rooms,” a highlight of 1991’s *Night Ride Home*.

“IT’S ALL OVER NOW, BABY BLUE”

From *The Complete Geffen Recordings*, 2003

A billowy French Impressionist take on a classic by her old pal Bobby, this 1991 outtake reimagines it with the boldness Dylan had been bringing to his back catalog live.

“ONE WEEK LAST SUMMER”

From *Shine*, 2007

This stately piece from Mitchell’s most recent, if not final, LP, won a Grammy for Best Pop Instrumental. A handsome coda for a monumental oeuvre.



With James Taylor, 1971



Check out Rolling Stone .com for a definitive Joni Mitchell playlist.

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