

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**

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# NIGHT RIDE HOME

RELEASED 19 FEBRUARY 1991

The home straight. In which Mitchell revisits old sounds, with new mature experiences.

BY BUD SCOPPA

**T**HE collective shrug that greeted *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* confirmed to Mitchell that her “wildly popular” years were in the past, never to be relived. The realisation that people weren’t after all ready to like her again, as she’d hoped, served to unburden the 46-year-old artist, who was turning her gaze inward once again when she entered her home studio in late 1989 to begin work on her 14th studio LP, with husband, co-producer and bass player Larry Klein once again by her side.

She cut the bulk of *Night Ride Home*, her fourth and final LP for Geffen, as well as her fourth co-produced by Klein, against the backdrop of a world morphing in profound ways. The Berlin Wall was coming down and the Soviet Union was unravelling, while at home in the States, Reagan had served out his second term, and his former vice president George Bush was in the Oval Office. In August 1990, the Bush administration and its European and Middle Eastern allies launched an offensive against Saddam Hussein in retaliation for Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait.

Two months earlier, Mitchell had completed what would be viewed by some as a prophetic statement, adapting WB Yeats’ apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming”, retaining its central image of a “rough beast...moving its slow thighs/Across the desert sands” and retitling it “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”. “If this is a holy war, God is pissed at us, and damn right,” she asserted on the album’s release, seemingly pleased that critics had picked up on the relevance of the Yeats appropriation, unintended though it was;

she’d clearly created the piece for aesthetic rather than political reasons.

By that point, aside from a July 1990 trip to Germany to perform on Roger Waters’ all-star concert *The Wall – Live In Berlin*, Mitchell’s interest in the big picture had waned, as she returned to her métier, matters of the heart, on a largely luminous album of ruminations and reveries, ranging from evocations of conjugal bliss to archaeological digs into her memory bank.

Unlike the glossy *Chalk Mark*, Mitchell eschewed the use of big-name guests on *Night Ride Home*, choosing instead to keep things decidedly intimate. Nine of the 10 tracks feature little more than her silken acoustic guitar phrasings and multitracked backing chorales – functioning as a sort of Greek chorus – Klein’s sinewy, undulating five-string basslines and just one or two other instruments, primarily Alex Acuna’s percussion and/or Vinnie Colaiuta’s drumkit. While the spare arrangements and crisply executed performances are of a piece with Mitchell’s inward-peering songs, the album’s understated virtuosity is undercut here and there by the compressed, artificially hermetic sonic sheen that marred so many ’80s albums, undercutting the sense of inspired musicians bouncing off each other in a spatial environment.

Fortunately, Mitchell’s vocals are “dried out”, in her words, in Mike Shipley and Dan Marnien’s mix, retaining their up-close immediacy as she nimbly vacillates between gravitas and playfulness, thickening the consonants and gliding through the vowels. The damage cigarettes had inflicted on her ➤

# JONI MITCHELL

## *Night Ride Home*



With *Night Ride Home*,  
she'd caught a  
tantalising new wave  
while searching for  
meaning in the past

vocal cords actually works to her advantage, adding a brassy burnish to her explorations of the widening gulf between innocence and experience.

“Night Ride Home” opens the album like a breath of tropical air, with sampled chirping crickets keeping time, as Mitchell ecstatically recounts a scene from a Hawaiian vacation with Klein, driving back to their rental house after watching a Fourth of July fireworks display on the beach. “Everything looked so magical, even the white line on the highway,” she told the *Los Angeles Times*’ Robert Hilburn. “It was as if someone had sprinkled fairy dust all around.” The song, delivered by her lived-in, womanly alto and embellished by Bill Dillon’s pedal steel, subtly establishes the theme of *Night Ride Home*, a lustrous example of emotion experienced under a Van Gogh-vivid starry night, recollected in tranquility.

But then, after distancing herself from her ’80s albums, Mitchell constructs another elaborate set piece with “Passion Play (When All The Slaves Are Free)”. Happily, her retelling of the Easter story in modern dress dances away from pretension, the track’s feathery presentation ornamented by an overdubbed falsetto chorale warbling “Who you gonna get”, while she fancifully costumes the assembled multitudes “in Exxon blue”. Mitchell flashes back to her childhood in Saskatoon for “Cherokee Louise”, about a sexually abused friend hiding under the city’s Broadway Bridge, comforting herself by leafing through the pages of a comic book and a movie magazine. The arrangement, in lilting 3/4 time, brings an implied hopefulness to the sombre tale, while Wayne Shorter’s soprano sax accentuates the underlying sense of existential isolation. When introducing the song in live performance, Mitchell noted that it was based on a childhood friend named Mary who was a Cree – but “Cree Mary” clearly doesn’t roll of the tongue as musically as does Mitchell’s renaming of the song’s subject.

The album hits a bizarre stretch four tracks in, beginning with the startlingly antagonistic “The Windfall (Everything For Nothing)”, as she eviscerates a Guatemalan live-in servant who’d returned her generosity by taking her to court. The vindictive lyric comes off like a diary entry from a pampered, Republican-voting Bel Air matron in need of a Valium and a frozen margarita, the impact deepened by its appearance just after the deeply compassionate “Cherokee Louise”. Despite its mean-spiritedness, “The Windfall” is beguiling, thanks in large part to the balmy guitar-bass interplay, over which a multi-tracked chorus of falsetto Jonis impersonates a murder of crows cawing what sounds like “Do whatcha-whatcha want”. A spider web “spit spun between the trees” and the “Jaguar in the drive” provide cinematic detail to one of Mitchell’s most nakedly candid oddities.

## CRITICS’ VERDICT

“A return to her roots – or in Joni’s case, her cheroots... After all her jazz, avant-garde, jazz-fusion and vocalese tease, she’s just a folkie again, albeit a sophisticated one.”

FRED DELLAR, NME, MARCH 9, 1991

It’s followed by the curiously sing-song recitation, percussive bombast and siren sound effects of “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”, derailing the accrued momentum. Why she chose to include this ambitious but wrongheaded exercise so late in the album’s gestation is puzzling indeed. As it happened, Neil Young, Mitchell’s artistic peer, Geffen labelmate and the yang to her yin, had pulled off a far more compelling oracular feat with 1989’s “Rockin’ In The Free World”, skewering Bush’s America, with its “kinder, gentler/ Machine gun hand”, dropping Yeats and Mitchell’s rough beast in its tracks. In terms of outside material, Mitchell fares far better with Dylan than with Yeats. She added a diaphanous rendition of “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” to the 2003 re-release, part of the Complete Geffen Series, dropping in the words “reindeer navigators” to cement her sense of ownership and pay him back for his contribution to “Big Yellow Taxi”.

The exquisite centrepiece “Come In From The Cold” offers rhyme schemes as precise as Mitchell’s brush strokes and inspired parenthetical commentary provided by her overdubbed harmonies repeating “Come in, come in” with a hint of Caribbean patois. Stretching out over seven-and-a-half minutes but feeling like four, the loping midtempo song, which finds a boy and girl dancing the required foot apart in high school and rubbing their legs together under a restaurant table as adults, is deliriously romantic, suggestively erotic and undercut with poignancy. The entire album – indeed, this stage of her life as a whole – is encapsulated in the fifth of its seven verses: “Are you just checking out your mojo?/Or am I just fighting off growing old?”

The passage of time is again directly addressed in “Nothing Can Be Done”, as Mitchell reflects, “Oh, I am not old/I am told/But I am not young/Oh, and nothing to be done”. She’s joined on backing vocals by David Baerwald, whose solo LP *Bedtime Stories* (released in May 1999) was produced by Klein and featured her backing vocals on one track. With its chemtrails of synths, thunderclap drums and taut vocal interplay, “Nothing Can Be Done” is the album’s most widescreen track, evoking the quintessential mid-’80s LA vibe of Baerwald’s lone LP as half of David & David, 1986’s *Boomtown*.

Mitchell lightens the album’s

increasingly introspective feel in her sequencing (she claims to have gone through nearly a hundred variations before coming up with a satisfactory tracklist) with a pair of carefree reveries. “The Only Joy In Town” fondly recounts a recent visit to Rome’s Spanish Steps, on which a self-proclaimed flower child with flowers in his ’fro is imploring female passersby to check him out. The way she remembered it, Joni uttered what would become the song’s refrain to her travelling companion on the spot: “The Botticelli black boy with the fuchsias in his hair is breathing in women like oxygen on the Spanish stairs”. “Ray’s Dad’s Cadillac” plumbs a deeper memory, as she recalls herself as a teenager riding shotgun with the son of her maths teacher, listening to rock’n’roll on the radio while she wonders why she’s unable to “keep the numbers in their place”. These songs may be minor Joni, but they sparkle like fireflies.

The instrumental track and vocal melody of “Two Grey Rooms” date back to the sessions for 1982’s *Wild Things Run Fast*. Mitchell rediscovered the unfinished piece while she was working on *Night Ride Home* and added lyrics, which she sang over the original instrumental. What listeners assumed was a melancholy character sketch of a middle-aged woman was in fact inspired by a magazine interview with filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who recalled a childhood friend pining for a male lover from his youth after coming upon him 30 years later. “It’s the strangest story of obsession I ever heard of – all romance has an element of obsession,” she said of the source material. “I feel it as much as anything autobiographical.” In another interview she boasted, “That’s a song that shows my songs aren’t all self-portraits.” The track, retaining the deft touch of engineer Henry Lewy in its rarefied instrumental delicacy, topped by Mitchell’s lovely piano work and Jeremy Lubbock’s languorous orchestration, closes the album with breathtaking eloquence.

Encountering *Night Ride Home* on its release, critics seemed relieved to be dealing with an album of relatively conventional songs performed on standard instruments. Dave Marsh began his review with the comparative assessment, “This one works”. *Entertainment Weekly*’s Linda Sanders found the LP to be “vintage Joni Mitchell – crazy, elusive, gorgeous”. Writing for *The Guardian*, Adam Sweeting hailed it as “one of the three or four best albums she’s ever made”, while *Time*’s Jay Cocks waxed poetic, offering, “If music is, as Mitchell defines it, ‘a diagram of emotion’, then *Night Ride Home* is a sort of filling-station road map of the heart. The 10 songs... represent alternate routes to the kind of altered state some people call romance, and others irresolution.”

Mitchell was positively chatty during the battery of interviews to which she’d willingly submitted on both sides of the Atlantic, the album’s February 1991 release

The album’s placid surfaces mirrored her contentment, so “only a sunny chord would do”

In from the cold:  
Mitchell at  
London's Rotunda  
Gallery, 1990



conveniently coinciding with a travelling exhibition of her paintings in the UK and Europe. It was apparent that she was enjoying the opportunity to display her sharp wit, charm and feistiness as she explained and in some cases defended the artistic choices she'd made on *Night Ride Home*. "It's not shallow," she asserted to *Time's* Jay Cocks. "But it's not making you look at hard facts as much as *Dog Eat Dog*."

She had a ready explanation for the album's juxtaposition of weighty lyrics and buoyant melodic treatments: "I want things that match my emotional inner life," she said. "I like dissonance running through things, because our lives are full of ongoing dissonances." She claimed she wasn't motivated by her fans' desire to see her return to her acoustic roots after two albums dominated by electronics. On the contrary, she pointed out, the album's placid surfaces mirrored her contentment, so much so that "only a positive sunny chord would do. I kind of stroked myself and wrote accordingly and found out other people needed the stroke of those warmer

chords, too." She gave the *Boston Globe* a playful but revealing take, noting that "It's not that it's a 'smile' button in any way, because there are moments of minor, where it's tragic re-evaluation and yadda-yadda."

She gave her final word on her '80s output in her notes for *The Complete Geffen Recordings*, acknowledging that the previous three albums "were viewed as being out of sync with the '80s. But I

was out of sync with the '80s. Thank God! To be in sync with the times, in my opinion, was to be degenerating both morally and artistically." Mitchell had challenged her listeners and herself throughout that decade; with *Night Ride Home* she'd caught a tantalising new wave while searching for meaning in the past, one that she would ride through the '90s and beyond. ●

## TRACKMARKS NIGHT RIDE HOME

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 <b>Night Ride Home</b><br>★★★★                           | 7 <b>Nothing Can Be Done</b><br>★★★★                              |
| 2 <b>Passion Play (When All The Slaves Are Free)</b> ★★★★★ | 8 <b>The Only Joy In Town</b><br>★★★                              |
| 3 <b>Cherokee Louise</b><br>★★★★                           | 9 <b>Ray's Dad's Cadillac</b><br>★★★                              |
| 4 <b>The Windfall (Everything For Nothing)</b> ★★★★★       | 10 <b>Two Grey Rooms</b><br>★★★★★                                 |
| 5 <b>Slouching Towards Bethlehem</b> ★★                    | 11 <b>It's All Over Now, Baby Blue</b> (2003 bonus track)<br>★★★★ |
| 6 <b>Come In From The Cold</b> ★★★★★                       |   |

Label: Geffen

**Produced by:** Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein  
**Recorded at:** The Kiva (home studio), A&M Studios and One on One, LA, in 1989-90  
**Personnel:** Joni Mitchell (guitars, vocals, keyboards, Omnichord and oboe on "The Only Joy In Town"), Larry Klein (basses, percussion, keyboards), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums), Alex

Acuna (percussion), Bill Dillon (pedal steel, guitar), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Karen Peris, David Baerwald, Brenda Russell (backing vocals), Michael Landau (guitar on "Two Grey Rooms"), Jeremy Lubbock (string arrangement on "Two Grey Rooms")  
**Highest chart position:** UK 25; US 41