

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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LIVES AND COMPILATIONS

RELEASED 1971-2014

"Go Tell The Drummer Man"! Joni Mitchell:
in concert, and in the archives.

BY PETER WATTS

As you'd expect with Joni Mitchell, the narrative of her compilations is idiosyncratic and meticulous, occasionally frustrating but ultimately very rewarding. They tell of an artist who demands – and gets – total control over her image and history, using the past to make statements about the present, as well as taking deep and personal explorations into her art and life. You get the sense she sweats blood putting these things together, with no thought of short cuts or quick cash-ins. This approach has culminated in *Archives Volume 1* – a release that for many years she shied away from but which she eventually embraced with glorious results.

It began in 1996, when Mitchell could no longer refuse label demand for a greatest hits album. She responded in ornery, witty fashion, insisting on two individual but complementary albums – *Hits* (★★★★) and *Misses* (★★★). Their successes and faults are pretty much what you'd expect – *Hits* is full of brilliance but remains a little too familiar, while the sardonic *Misses* is packed with overlooked gems, but lacks some pep. *Hits* is largely chronological – albeit with "Both Sides, Now" plonked right at the end to ensure things don't taper off too abruptly. That makes it easy to follow the changes in Mitchell's early style, but is also heavily focused on the first third of her career, with only two songs that were recorded after 1974. Hence *Misses*, which can celebrate her later career. This feels like the one Mitchell really cared about, and though it has tracks going back to *Ladies Of The Canyon*, eight of the 14 songs were cut between 1985 and 1994, allowing songs like "The Beat Of Black Wings" and "Sex Kills" to get attention.

Ten years later and having prematurely announced

her retirement, Mitchell again explored her back catalogue with three releases that demonstrated the careful thought she was now giving to her legacy. 2004's *The Beginning Of Survival* (★★★) focuses on her later career, overlapping slightly with *Misses* but with a tighter focus. These were 16 songs that Mitchell felt offered some aspect of social commentary – often political or ecological and including fine later songs like "The Three Great Stimulants". It's brilliantly put together, with recurring themes and concepts demonstrating the way Mitchell has come back to scratch the same itches. With all songs drawn from her post-1985 work, there's a consistency of tone as well as message that makes the album sound like a coherent, fully realised song cycle rather than a compilation of odds and ends. It was followed within months by *Dreamland* (★★★★★), a more straightforward compilation, with songs drawn from across her career and any specific theme a little more nebulous. There's considerable overlap with *Hits*, but more imagination and variety – the use of the 2002 versions of "For The Roses" and "Both Sides, Now" for instance, gives the album a better sense of a career as a life's journey. It's the best available single CD "best of".

The third in the trilogy came with 2005's *Songs Of A Prairie Girl* (★★★★★), which Mitchell described as her "contribution to Saskatchewan's Centennial celebrations" and which featured songs largely about her Canadian youth. It's a marvellous collection, as Mitchell selects songs that look back on her past but also evoke the atmosphere and climate of Canada. It's held together by the drifting 16-minute soundscape of "Paprika Plains", and the theme allows Mitchell to bring together songs as disparate as "River", "Don ➤



Juan's Restless Daughter", "Urge For Going" and "Raised On Robbery". As with *The Beginning Of Survival, Songs Of A Prairie Girl* uses the back catalogue to provide deeper insight into Mitchell's career. And as both albums were compiled by Mitchell herself, this is insight that has an official stamp. This splurge of activity ended with one more release in 2005, **Songs Chosen By Her Friends And Fellow Musicians** (★★★), with favourite Mitchell songs selected by the likes of Bob Dylan, Prince, KD Lang and Herbie Hancock. It's plenty of fun, but offers little new. It's also worth noting 1971's **The World Of Joni Mitchell** (★★★★), an Antipodean LP of early classics with a lovely cover.

Another decade passed before Mitchell returned to confront her history. **Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting To Be Danced** (★★★★) is a 4CD compilation that again takes an overarching theme – in this case songs about or inspired by love. That concept is loose enough to include or exclude – there's no "Big Yellow Taxi", "Chelsea Morning" or "Woodstock" – pretty much anything Mitchell wants as she carefully sequences songs that fold into each other, musically and thematically. It's an intriguing selection, but as with any comp of this size, there is a point where you wonder whether it would make more sense just to listen to the original albums.

It's clear that Mitchell worked hard to make this set feel like an event in its own right. She described the process of patching together songs as gathering "scenes... like a documentary maker" and "by juxtaposition, edit them into a whole new work". Her delightful sleeve notes go into detail about her thinking and about the history of each song. She also explains how the album arose from two failed projects. One was a soundtrack for the love-themed ballet, which Mitchell tried to compile from her catalogue but struggled to contain on one disc, as she had 2007's war-themed **The Fiddle And The Drum** (★★★), a solid compilation in its own right. The second was a label-requested 2CD set of unreleased songs and outtakes. Mitchell described this as "peppered with discarded and damaged work. They hired a burglar to enter my storage space, rummaged around and came back with the dregs. 'Why are you doing this?' I asked the bosses. 'That's the way it's done,' was the reply. 'Not to me,' I said and I squelched it." By 2020, she had come to terms with the fact her "dregs" had artistic merit, resulting in the masterful **Archives Volume 1** (see review p131).

The *Archives* release was notable for its live recordings, some of which had circulated as much-loved recordings with a semi-official status and with *Archives* were finally granted a degree of legitimacy by Mitchell. Until *Archives*, she had officially released only two solo live albums and one collaboration, but these unofficial but legal live albums – some of which appeared in

CRITICS' VERDICT

"For a start, there is no doubt whatsoever that the versions of Ms Mitchell's songs which are accompanied solely by her own playing, be it on guitar, dulcimer, or piano, are better than the recorded versions, if it's spirit and intimacy you're looking for." **STEVE CLARKE ON MILES OF AISLES, NME, DECEMBER 7, 1974**

"Misses is a grievous disappointment... it makes for grim listening. It confirms every prejudice ever voiced against her – pretension, self-obsession, over-experimentation, indulgence, the very things that made her songs so good back when she was good." **DAVID BENNUN ON MISSES, MELODY MAKER, OCTOBER 19, 1996**

"The obstinate contrariness of *Love Has Many Faces* is entirely characteristic and only to be admired. It's the enduring reluctance of a great artist to accept other people's frames, other people's narratives." **STEPHEN TROUSSÉON ON LOVE HAS MANY FACES: A QUARTET, A BALLET, WAITING TO BE DANCED, UNCUT, JANUARY 2015**

part on *Archives* – are often magnificent. Widely available as standalone releases on Amazon, iTunes and Spotify, they include a double album from Philly folk club The Second Fret, a fine set from Cambridge, Mass, in 1968, Mitchell's performance at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival, a couple of shows on the 1983 world tour and a great 1995 show at the Wells Fargo Theater. Official or not, they have been welcomed by fans who otherwise find slim pickings from Mitchell's live portfolio.

That's because it all comes down to what you want from a live album. Do you want an artefact of an artist as they hit the zone, capturing that moment when their talent is transformed by an adoring audience and sheer adrenaline into something other-worldly? Or do you want, if not the opposite, something close to it – a record that brings you closer to a superstar, gets underneath the makeup and gives a glimpse of the human heart that drives it all?

Joni Mitchell has live albums that do both, but it's the latter that really fascinate, partly because she often sounds as if she's not entirely of this earth in the first place; above it all, not so much aloof as keeping a wise distance. The best of the non-official releases is **Live At The Second Fret 1966** (★★★★★), originally recorded for radio and for years circulated as a bootleg before it was released in 2014. Some appears on *Archives*, but it's worth listening to the album in its entirety. It comes from a Philadelphia folk club in November 1966, when Mitchell was still modelling herself on Joan Baez, but was also a seasoned performer, with enough life under her belt to give her something to write about. Songs are introduced with endearingly nervous, rambling anecdotes about Monopoly in London, and there are giggling asides and an atmosphere of tremulous vulnerability. But when she picks up a guitar it's like a different person has appeared, one whose voice has that familiar authority and crystal beauty. The setlist also demonstrates how much talent she had from the start, featuring songs she would not record until *Blue* as well as majestic versions of "Little Green", "Marcie", "Both Sides, Now", "I Don't Know Where I Stand", "The Circle Game" and "Michael From Mountains". There are also several songs you couldn't get anywhere until *Archives*, including "Eastern Rain", "Winter Lady", "Ballerina Valerie" and the gorgeous "Go Tell The Drummer Man".

Mitchell's writing demonstrates profound understanding of the human experience, but her official live performances are stiff and unrevealing by comparison. **Miles Of Aisles** (★★★★) was released in 1974 in the wake of *Court And Spark*, and featured Mitchell playing with LA Express in August 1974. That allowed her to reinterpret her old folk songs, updating them with jazz inflections, something that can be quite startling on "Woodstock", which loses so much of its sobriety.

Miles Of Aisles reached No 2 and went gold, giving her two big hits in 11 months. It even spawned a successful single, with the live version of "Big Yellow Taxi" reaching No 24 four years after the studio take stuck at No 67 in 1970. Part of its success derived from the fact it contained only one song from *Court And Spark* – "People's Parties" – with Mitchell concentrating on new versions of songs like "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire", "The Last Time I Saw Richard" and "Cactus Tree". The set is familiar but there are several curveballs and it concludes with a couple of songs that hadn't been released: "Jericho" and "Love Or Money". Add the high quality of the recording and you can see why it sold.

While *Miles Of Aisles* was mostly about Mitchell's voice, with the jazz stylings relatively understated, **Shadows And Light** (★★★) was something else again. This time the show was as much about band as singer. It was recorded in September 1979 at the Santa Barbara Bowl and released in 1980, by which time Mitchell had spent half a decade refining her jazz-soul investigations. She'd also recruited a superior band of musicians, with Pat Metheny on guitar, Jaco Pastorius on bass, Lyle Mays on keys, Michael Brecker on sax and Don Alias on percussion. Their proficiency is such that both Metheny and Alias are handed solo spots on *Shadows And Light*, and on several occasions the playing overshadows Mitchell – something that takes some doing. On "Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" and "Dreamland" the musicianship is extraordinary, and even Mitchell's stunning version of "Amelia" is ultimately hijacked by Metheny's extended coda. When singer and band are in sync, on "Coyote", "Shadows And Light" or the glorious "Furry Sings The Blues", the results are dreamlike – there's all the abstract flow of a typical Mitchell album, but the listener feels as if they are part of something bigger, more expansive. A loose theme of a life loved without regret is implied by the intro, which uses dialogue from *Rebel Without A Cause*, and the boisterous doo-wop cover of "Why Do Fools Fall In Love?" that appears towards the end.

Finally, **Amchitka: The 1970 Concert That Launched Greenpeace** (★★★) was released in 2010. The double-CD includes songs by fellow participants Phil Ochs and James Taylor, with Mitchell taking up most of CD 2, at first alone and later accompanied by Taylor. The concert was a fundraiser, held so Greenpeace could sail a boat to the island of Amchitka to protest a US nuclear bomb test. Mitchell's gleeful contribution undercuts any political sobriety with a jaunty "Bony Maronie", a terrific "Cactus Tree" and a satisfyingly chunky "Carey" that segues into "Mr Tambourine Man". It's the closest Mitchell's later live canon gets to the spirit exhibited back in 1966 at a pokey folksy club in Philly, but at least we now know there is much more to come. ●



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Guitar heroine:
Mitchell on her
1974 North
American tour