



"I just kind of go with the flow": Joni Mitchell outside A&M Studios, Los Angeles, 1974.

Love in a cold climate

Mitchell's rarities series reaches her prolific years at David Geffen's Asylum label, beginning in a stone cabin in British Columbia. By David Fricke.

Joni Mitchell



Archives – Volume 3:
The Asylum Years
(1972-1975)

RHINO. CD/DL/LP

ON AUGUST 26, 1973, Joni Mitchell dropped by S.I.R., a rehearsal facility in Los Angeles, where her friend and fellow Canadian Neil Young was recording his legendary Irish wake, *Tonight's The Night*. Taking a break from that racket, Young and the Santa Monica Flyers backed Mitchell on one of her new songs, *Raised On Robbery*, a frisky boogie about love and larceny. She was “like a kid in a candy store,” Nils Lofgren, one of the Flyers, told MOJO in 2021 of that jubilantly unruly take, first issued in Young’s *Archives II* and now the sole previously issued track in Mitchell’s latest box of rarities. “She kept saying, ‘I’ve never played electric guitar with a band before.’”

In fact, as this 5-CD bounty reveals, the day before that S.I.R. lark, Mitchell had a rousing bash at the song – ultimately cut with more pop decorum on 1974’s *Court And Spark* – in San Francisco, robustly strumming jangly electric guitar (or a rudely amplified acoustic) with ex-paramour Graham Nash and the rhythm section from his solo album, *Wild Tales*. And the

year before, working on demos for 1972’s *For The Roses*, Mitchell taped a version of that LP’s playful seduction *You Turn Me On, I’m A Radio* with Young and his *Harvest* band the Stray Gators, jumping back and forth in dreamy come-hither and jolting, bluesy lust. “Just looking for the clarity of things,” Mitchell claims in the liner notes of her three different passes at the song here – live and studio – before she found its final, breezy poise.

It’s a mantra she might well have chanted every day on her way to – and through – the imperial peak covered in this instalment of Mitchell’s *Archives*. *For The Roses* (sparingly detailed folk rock), *Court And Spark* (lush pop with jazz contours) and 1975’s *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* (emotional turbulence in fusion dynamics) remain her only Top 10 albums in America. But Mitchell was in no rush to get there, preferring a voluntary exile from the road and record business clockwork – to a stone cabin on the Pacific coast of British Columbia – after the profoundly confessional triumph of 1971’s *Blue*.

“It made me quite prolific,” she tells Cameron Crowe in the booklet, part of their ongoing conversation in this series. “I was now alone and collaborating with nature” – a bond she cites in the opening lines of *For The Roses* (“I heard it in the wind last night/It sounded like applause”), featured in a first-step reading from December 1971 with the



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junkie’s nightmare *Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire*. “Sometimes I sat on a rock and tuned my guitar” – an outdoor exercise that produced the heartbroken physics in *Electricity*.

Compared to the eternities now taken between albums by many artists, *For The Roses* was a race to closure, written in the wake of Mitchell’s devastating break-up with James Taylor and out by November, 1972. Yet she spends all of discs one and two in this set seeking the album’s delicate negotiation of agony and tender assurance, often set in the fleeting pleasures and inevitable disappointment of the tourbus and after-show flings. Half of *For The Roses* is in the setlist, solo and acoustic, at Carnegie Hall in February 1972, next to the wistful idealism in *Blue*’s *For Free* and the already nostalgic *Woodstock*.

Taylor actually shows up at an April ’72 studio date, playing guitar (with no small irony) in a test run of *Electricity*. And it’s fascinating to hear Mitchell’s instinctive certainty at work as she lays down a wordless guide vocal in *Cold Blue Steel*, mapping the tone and feel for Tom Scott’s eventual soprano sax solo.

Scott, in turn, was a pivot to *Court And Spark* when he invited Mitchell to see his group the L.A. Express in 1973, during their weekly residency

at a jazz room called the Baked Potato. She hired the Express en masse for the record and subsequent touring (also falling hard for drummer John Guerin). But where the first two *Archives* sets charted Mitchell’s formative passage as a singer and writer, from public domain ingénue to a “premier explorer [of] the tension between love and freedom” (Lorraine Alterman, the *New York Times*, 1974), *Volume 3* is an exhilarating helter-skelter of paths tested (the ruckus with Young) and inspirations refined, like Mitchell’s overheated vocal rapture at the end of a solo demo of *Help Me*, wisely dropped for the Top 10 single.

The most remarkable find is a Piano Suite from the same ’73 session that has Mitchell binding three songs for *Court And Spark* – *Down To You*, the title tune and *Car On The Hill* – in a solitary medley of wounds and warning that could have been a brilliant, contrary highlight of the album, a literal affirmation of the war on loneliness inside its mainstream charms.

The emphasis on experiment and process means there are fewer newly-excavated compositions – Like *Veils Said Lorraine*, a *For The Roses* orphan; the modal guitar reveries *Sunshine Raga* and *Bonderia*, the former with tabla and free-form trilling – but no less in the way of surprises. Mitchell had the swinging nugget *Twisted*, a 1960 smash for Lambert, Hendricks & Ross and the finale of *Court And Spark*, on deck for . . . *Roses*, going a cappella over drummer Russ Kunkel’s brush-stick sizzle. A March ’74 concert with the L.A. Express opens with *Blue*’s *This Flight Tonight* taking off in Nazareth-fusion gear. And even in a relatively quick sprint through the genesis of *Hissing* . . . , there is *The Jungle Line au naturel* (no Moog or Burundi percussion) and a long, look forward to *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* in solo and pop-wise stabs at that 1977 double-LP’s samba-school incantation *Dreamland*.

“I don’t recall ever thinking, ‘What’s next?’” Mitchell says, summing up the era for Crowe. “It’s just not how my brain works. I just kind of go with the flow. Everything takes care of itself.” Mitchell sang it this way on *Court And Spark*: “You can crawl, you can fly too . . . It all comes down to you.” She is always looking for the higher road here – and getting there, step by step.



BACK STORY: THE ROAD TO JERICHO

• Live curiosities on *Volume 3* include Mitchell’s all-star choir on *The Circle Game* at Carnegie Hall ’72 (you can hear her calling for Neil Young and Asylum Records boss David Geffen); a London unveiling that spring of Mitchell’s meditation on Beethoven, *Judgement Of The Moon And Stars*; and a solo, embryonic *Jericho*, again in London during an April ’74 show taped for BBC Television. “This one needs another lyrical verse,” she tells the crowd, “so I have to repeat the first one at the end.” That August, Mitchell recorded a finished *Jericho* live with the L.A. Express for *Miles Of Aisles*, then in definitive studio form three years later for *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*.

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