

THE SPECIALS

AND 40 YEARS OF 2-TONE!



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"My gift was
born of tragedy"

**THE AGONY
& ECSTASY OF**

JONI MITCHELL

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This CRAZY Scene

Woman of heart and mind: Joni Mitchell in 1972, striking out on a "solitary path".

Love and life, boyfriends and managers flit through the candid diary pages of JONI MITCHELL's first imperial phase. By DAVID CAVANAGH.

HERE WERE places: a park in Paris, a Grecian isle, the Mermaid Café. There were the names she gave her lovers: mean old daddy, my old man, the red red rogue. And there was 'me', the name she called herself. Mitchell's *Blue* captured her at her existential utmost, in agony and in ecstasy, weak at the knees and cut to the quick, dancing like a dervish and sinking like a ship. Like a backpacker with the human heart as her map, she roamed and explored until there was nowhere to go but home. The calendar passed from spring to December.

Mitchell had taken herself off to Europe in 1970, visiting France, Spain, the Balearic island of Formentera and the Cretan village of Matala, where she bedded down with a hippy commune in a network of caves. Her European adventure had none of the inflexibility of a concert tour ("Maybe I'll go to Amsterdam or maybe I'll go to Rome," she deliberates in *Carey* when the cave-dwelling starts to pall), but her creative brain, unable to switch off, was inspired by her experiences at every port of call. Telegramming Graham Nash thousands of miles away to end their two-year relationship, she fell, by November, under the spell of the charismatic, damaged, heroin-addicted James Taylor. These were her private moments, but she opened them up for public scrutiny, immortalising her affairs in ravishing poetry with unflinching exactitude. Nash, for one, found *Blue* stunning but hard to take. Mitchell wondered if she'd written the first truly honest album about men and women trapped in cycles of love and loss.

The songs on *Blue* crossed the invisible line separating the metaphorical from the literal. It was as if Mitchell had listed her home phone number in the album credits. Nobody died in it (unlike in Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* and Neil

Young's *After The Gold Rush*) and nor, on the other side of the coin, did Mitchell seek solace in family values – and implied happy endings – like Carole King on *Tapestry*. Of all the eminent singer-songwriter albums of 1970-71, *Blue* would acquire the highest reputation because of its honesty, its lack of a self-advancing agenda and its open-veined catharsis. The songs were vulnerable, mischievous, tearful, horny, bereft, heartsick and more. She sang them as if they were just occurring to her, spilling out her daydreams in fresh diary ink. Thanks to *Blue*, the break-up album – a concept familiar to Frank Sinatra fans for almost two decades – now had a new benchmark to meet, and a high one at that, for any albums that might care to follow, from Bob Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* to Peter Hammill's *Over*, from P.J. Harvey's *Rid Of Me* to Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago*.

Thrown over by Taylor in 1971 and feeling bullied by the music industry to move to the next stage of superstardom, Mitchell filled her 1972 album *For The Roses* not with commercial leitmotifs but with images of gluttony, neurosis and isolation. Had fame done her harm? Had Taylor? Her life seemed far less peripatetic than on the previous year's album, and even lonelier somehow. Finding her feet once again in the land of the abstract, she identified strongly with Beethoven's "solitary path" – so much of *For The Roses* was about remaining artistically pure – while on the title track, which she approached as a resignation letter of sorts, she quietly took an axe to her post-*Blue* popularity: "And now you're seen on giant screens/And at parties for the press/And for people who have slices of you/From the company/They toss around your latest golden egg." She still wrote about her break-ups (See You Sometime) and she delved deep into her vocabulary to try to understand Taylor's heroin dependency (Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire), but other faces and places had a fuzzy emotional blankness (Barangrill) where *Blue* had teemed with giggly and sorrowful life. Several of Mitchell's beautifully manicured verses were about people searching for meaning in their everyday existences. It's fair to assume her own head was in a similar quandary. What mattered to her now was nature's good stuff ("a clean sky and a drinking stream"), but how poignant to think that her talent had ensured those were the only things in the world she could trust.

THE MUSICAL textures on *Blue* had been all about Mitchell's piano, guitar and Appalachian dulcimer. But some songs on *For The Roses* had woodwind parts, strings and electric bass. Her compositions were growing in complexity; little of *For The Roses* could be described as "folk". As a singer, she left the competition for dead with her dazzlingly airborne lead vocals and her breathtaking cluster



harmonies. Crucially, two prominent musicians on the album – Tom Scott and Wilton Felder – were jazz players. Both of them were retained, and were joined by others from the same genre, on Mitchell's 1974 album *Court And Spark*.

Court And Spark began more or less in the same dominion as *For The Roses*, with Joni alone and perturbed at her piano, but major differences between the two records soon revealed themselves. For one, she was now fronting a full band. Thirteen musicians contributed to *Court And Spark* in all, among them five electric guitarists including Robbie Robertson, Larry Carlton (who would play on four more Mitchell albums) and Wayne Perkins (who would soon audition for The Rolling Stones). As voices and instruments conjoined in a heavenly blend, the songs' arrangements proved every bit as

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Alamy
beguiling as the songs themselves. Mitchell's rhapsodic swoons on Help Me, which on *Blue* might have been accompanied by a dulcimer and nothing else, were given empathy and ballast by a top LA jazz-rock rhythm section and the electric piano of Joe Sample from The Crusaders. Free Man In Paris had the intricate musical charts of virtuosic fusion, yet glided from line to line with no apparent effort, even when the sentiment was caustic and the lyric a tongue-twister. Raised On Robbery was high-sophisti-

JONI ON JONI: #6

The Same Situation

(*Court And Spark*, 1973)

"I don't want to name names or kiss and tell, but basically it is a portrait of a Hollywood bachelor and the parade of women through his life... how he toys with yet another one. So many women have been in this position... being vulnerable at a time when you need affection or are searching for love, and you fall into the company of a Don Juan."

cation radio rock, so slick that it swung. Car On A Hill was Steely Dan's *Aja* three years before Walter Becker and Donald Fagen got around to writing it.

Mitchell sounded happier than ever on *Court And Spark* – though of course it had its darker corners too. Perhaps the music was so divine that a halo of contentment on her crown was inevitable. She watched the album climb to Number 2 on the Billboard charts and earn her four Grammy Award nominations (one of which she won). Her rapport with the jazz-trained studio cats on

Court And Spark – three of whom played in Tom Scott & The LA Express, her backing group on the ensuing tour – can be heard throughout *Miles Of Aisles*, a double live album in which she reinterpreted songs from as far back as 1968 (Cactus Tree) and left her international fanbase with two new ones (Jericho and Love Or Money) to tide them over until the next masterpiece. *Miles Of Aisles*, like *Court And Spark*, soared to Number 2 on the US charts.

Mitchell, the consummate artist of the mid-'70s, performed to ovations in more than 50 North American cities and finished off at Wembley Stadium on a sunny Saturday in September. Having threatened retirement on the title song of *For The Roses* just two years earlier, there now seemed no end to what she could achieve.