

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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FOR THE ROSES

RELEASED NOVEMBER 1972

The reluctant star makes her escape, to “melancholy exile” in British Columbia. A pause for new thoughts.

BY SHARON O'CONNELL

BY Joni Mitchell's own admission, the brutal self-exposure of *Blue* took its toll. In 1985, she declared it to be “probably the purest emotional record that I will ever make in my life”. That superlative holds still, but what sounds like a simple artistic judgment bears the faint suggestion of a shudder, with a note-to-self attached – never again.

In the latter half of 1971, Mitchell realised that her mental health was being compromised by a combination of factors: her deep, autobiographical questing, the fallout from her breakups with James Taylor and Jackson Browne, the voracious demands of what she felt was an exploitative industry and the public adulation that *Blue* delivered – to the point where she was cancelling as many shows as she was playing. Even applause she found difficult. As she told Timothy White in *Rock Lives*: “My animal sense was to run offstage. Many a night I would be out onstage, and the intimacy of the songs against the raucousness of this huge beast that is an audience felt very weird. I was not David to that Goliath.” So, at the age of 28, she sold her Laurel Canyon home and retreated to a small stone house – just one room with a loft, “like a monastery” – that she was building on a 40-acre property on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. It was there, in a period of unsettlement, that she wrote most of her fifth album, and her first for Asylum, *For The Roses*.

“The idea of people at my knees was just horrifying to me,” Mitchell explained of her need to escape, in the 2003 documentary *A Woman Of Heart And Mind*.

“Fame made me really nervous and uncomfortable. So I isolated myself and I made my attempt to get back to the garden. I lived with kerosene, stayed without electricity for about a year. I was going down and with that came a tremendous sense of knowing nothing. Western psychology might call it a nervous breakdown; in certain cultures, they call it a shamanic conversion. I read nearly every psychology book I could get my hands on and threw them all against the wall, basically. But depression can be the sand that makes the pearl.”

The “pearl” that was *For The Roses* – with Henry Lewy again on board as production guide and engineer – is widely acknowledged as a transitional record. Written largely on piano, it falls between the emotional transparency of *Blue* and 1974's *Court And Spark*, but that's not to say it doesn't have a character all of its own. And Mitchell hardly ditched the soul-baring altogether. In fact, “Lesson In Survival”, “Let The Wind Carry Me” and “Woman Of Heart And Mind” are among the most poignant and revealing songs in her entire catalogue. But it does show her shifting away from relentlessly personal exposés towards impressionistic vignettes and, inspired by Dylan, starting to hang her melodies on narrative platforms. The self-described “scientist of love” was not only done with microscopic examination of her own psyche almost to the exclusion of all else, she was also experimenting with songwriting structure and – later, in the studio – the airy, instrumental abstractions (“The rustle of the arbutus trees at night finding its way into the music”) that ➤

JONI MITCHELL

For The Roses



The title track
takes a long, hard
look at fame, the
price an artist
pays for it

The "scientist of love",
Amsterdam, 1972



would become a defining characteristic.

According to Mitchell, her time in British Columbia was “a very solitary period. It was melancholy exile – there was a sense of failure to it.” That sounds like a harsh self-judgement, but she’d set her own bar high. She agonised about whether or not her audiences would love her as deeply if they knew what she was really like – in other words, not some supernatural Earth Woman – but was testing their commitment by telling them, in song.

And even as Mitchell retreated, she wondered how she would get back in the saddle. Any lingering misconceptions about the singer’s nature should have been cleared up by her explanation of the title “For The Roses”, which refers to a horse race in the Kentucky Derby. Introducing the song in concert in 1972, she said: “That comes from the expression ‘to run for the roses’. You know what that’s all about: you take this horse and he comes charging into the finish line and they throw a wreath of

flowers around his neck and then one day they take him out and shoot him.” How she might return to LA and showbusiness after hiding out for a year was less obvious.

Beethoven helped, it seems. One of the many books Mitchell read during her “maladjusted period”, alongside Jung, Freud and numerous theology and self-help titles, was JWN Sullivan’s *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, written in 1927.

It detailed his struggles, self-doubts and worries about how his work was being received, his deafness and the significance of these troubles on a more profound level. His story struck a deep chord with Mitchell, so much so that she wrote “Judgement Of The Moon And Stars (Ludwig’s Tune)”, the album’s lustrous, cathartic closer, which extols the importance of speaking truth to oneself, whatever the cost. “I spoke to [Beethoven] and to myself at the same time,” she told *The Star* in 2013. “I said, ‘You’ve got to keep going in spite of your deafness, in spite of everything.’”

If Beethoven helped, then so did time spent in forest solitude. As Mitchell said, “I guess it strengthened my nervous system a little, so I finally came back.” When she did, it was as a houseguest of her friend and former agent, Asylum Records co-founder David Geffen. He asked her, straight up, to write a hit for her new album. Mitchell did just that with the breezy and sun-bright, almost onomatopoeically Californian “You

She has the ability to
open up her chest
cavity and peer inside,
without showing a
shred of self-pity



Turn Me On, I'm A Radio", which peaked at No 25 on the Billboard Hot 100 and delivered her first Canadian Top 10 hit. It was originally recorded with old associates David Crosby, Graham Nash and Neil Young, but only Nash's harmonica part made the final cut because, as Mitchell put it, while acknowledging that it had been great fun to record, "there were too many chefs". Her swooping yodel is in full, zephyr-borne flow, her playful lyrics aimed fair and square at radio DJs. With history's perspective, the song now reads like a dig at the commodification of creativity that produced it, but to Mitchell's mind, "It was just my peculiar, warped sense of humour."

"You Turn Me On..." is certainly the wild card in *For The Roses*' deck. It's in stark contrast to the opening track, "Banquet", which starts with a forcefully pitching, Carole King-like piano passage and then opens up via Mitchell's effortless vocal aerobatics onto a vista of seagulls, lobster

pots, sunshine and sails. Her lyrics, though, use the metaphor of a harbourside meal to make a point about social inequality, among other things: "Who let the greedy in, who left the needy out?" she asks. "Some get the gravy and some get the gristle/Some get the marrowbone and some get nothing – though there's plenty to spare". There's also what might be a personal swipe at James Taylor, as well as a general comment on the drug's popularity in LA music circles at the time: "...some turn to heroin". That point is punched home hard in the next song, "Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire". Simple, rhythmic guitar work, Mitchell's skating vocal and breezy woodwind are a seductive combination, but they can't camouflage lyrics that detail a very particular lifestyle, with its dodging of beat police, padlocked pawnshops and deals done on fire escapes – all in service of "the blacksoot of Lady Release".

Two other tracks underline Mitchell's sharpening of her torytelling skills. The first is "Barangrill", which introduces characters of vivid imagining in deceptively simple phrases ("Three waitresses all wearing black diamond earrings, talking about Zombies and Singapore Slings") and reflects both freedom's thrill and a destination's long-distant lure in life on the road. The other is jazz-folk fusion "Blonde In The Bleachers", in which multi-tracking of players' parts (including Stephen Stills on guitar) suggests a much bigger band. It's a rueful and bittersweet ode to rock'n'roll relationships, which must battle vanity, sexual competitiveness, hunger for the so-called chase and more. Against a sudden, Carpenters-like boom, Mitchell declares, "You can't hold the hand of a rock'n'roll man very long" – thus inviting speculation for decades to follow.

Far more intimately autobiographical are "Let The Wind Carry Me", "Lessons In Survival" and "Woman Of Heart And Mind". Alongside stiff competition from *Blue*, the last of those songs has become emblematic of Mitchell's ability to open up her chest cavity and peer inside, without once flinching or showing a shred of self-pity. In it, she describes her various roles in her current relationship (foil, nurturer, cheerleader, scold...) and laments her partner's shallowness and lack of commitment. She also states exactly what

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Her new album isn't likely to surprise those versed in her ways. More convoluted melody lines, thoughtful, well-written and often genuinely inspired lyrics, and skilfully uncluttered lyrics. Her extreme gentleness enables her to perform sharply observant pieces of social satire without ever becoming vicious or condescending."

CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY, NME, DECEMBER 16, 1972

"Not for her is self-pity, and her task is made easier by an almost total command of poetic device... For *The Roses* is mostly about loss. In many of these songs she caresses her precious yesterdays like the cover of a well-thumbed, leather-bound book."

RICHARD WILLIAMS, MELODY MAKER, DECEMBER 9, 1972

she needs – "affection and respect, a little passion" – but, despite the song's f-bomb, it's disappointment that sets the tone, not defiance.

Earlier, amid the soft grey piano tones of "Lesson In Survival", Mitchell airs her relationship anxiety in lines of casually eloquent scansion that seem to hover in mid-air, until the bluntness of a phrase like "there's this reef around me" suddenly grounds them. That song segues straight into its existential mate, "Let The Wind Carry Me", where Mitchell introduces her family and the life that helped shape her – "Papa's faith is in people, Mama she believes in cleaning" – in an era when the generation gap was starting to yawn, while detailing how her urge to be free always wins out over her desire to settle down and raise a family.

The album's title track – a delicate guitar composition more in line with *Ladies Of The Canyon* – occupies a kind of middle ground in terms of content, since it's neither an emotional portrait of shocking transparency nor an impressionistic narrative. Rather, it takes a long, hard look at fame, the price an artist pays for it, and the music industry's ruthless pragmatism. Mitchell's tone shifts from scathing and almost accusatory to regretful, acknowledging her part in the circus. "I guess I seem ungrateful with my teeth sunk in the hand that brings me things I really can't give up just yet", she admits, later adding, "Just when you're getting a taste for worship, they start bringing out the hammers and the boards and the nails". As Mitchell told *The LA Times* in 1996: "To me, this was an unfair, crooked business and it has nothing to do with real talent. That [song] was my first farewell to showbusiness."

Needless to say, showbusiness forgave Mitchell this poetic slight – if in fact it had even really noticed it was its target – and welcomed her back with open arms. Not only did *For The Roses* feature an upbeat, drivetime-friendly bona fide hit, it was also a less uncomfortable listen all round. But Mitchell's restless talent was already preparing to move on. She said later of her experience of group creativity when recording "I'm A Radio..." that it was "like when you do a movie with a cast of thousands. Somehow, I prefer movies with unknowns." 🎧

TRACKMARKS FOR THE ROSES

1 Banquet ★★★★★	8 Electricity ★★★	★★★★★	James Burton (electric guitar), Bobby Hall (percussion), Graham Nash (harmonica), Bobby Notkoff, (strings) Tommy Scott (woodwind and reeds)
2 Cold Blue Steel And Sweet Fire ★★★★★	9 You Turn Me On, I'm A Radio ★★★	Label: Asylum	Highest chart position: UK - ; US 11
3 Barangrill ★★★★★	10 Blonde In The Bleachers ★★★★★	Recorded at: A&M Studios, Los Angeles	
4 Lesson In Survival ★★★★★	11 Woman Of Heart And Mind ★★★★★	Produced by: Henry Lewy	
5 Let The Wind Carry Me ★★★★★	12 Judgement Of The Moon And Stars (Ludwig's Tune) ★★★	Personnel: Joni Mitchell (guitar, vocals, piano), Wilton Felder (bass), Russ Kunkel (drums), Stephen Stills and	