

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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COURT AND SPARK

RELEASED 01 JANUARY 1974

All aboard the LA Express! Back in the "city of the fallen angels", the quintessential singer-songwriter becomes a team player.

BY JON DALE

THE year 1973 was relatively quiet for Joni Mitchell, at least as far as the public eye was concerned. She only performed a few times, once at a benefit concert, then a few shows with Neil Young; indeed, much of 1973 would be spent in the studio, finding the right musicians and the right métier for the songs that would make up her next album, 1974's *Court And Spark*.

For anyone who has listened through Joni's first wave of albums in their entirety, the leap from the folk stylings of 1972's *For The Roses*, with its tentative nods to the pop charts, to the panoramic *Court And Spark*, is nothing short of startling: it's the career equivalent of a deep, long exhale, as though Mitchell has finally, after five albums, found musicians who fully grasp what she is capable of doing. She still kept contact with her old crew – David Crosby and Graham Nash both turn up on backing vocals – and as with *For The Roses*, she brings in outliers for exotic touches, such as José Feliciano's guitar on "Free Man In Paris", and The Band's Robbie Robertson on "Raised On Robbery". What you take away most from listening to *Court And Spark*, though, is a massive jolt of confidence to Mitchell's writing – she was doing things, now, that simply no-one else was doing.

Perhaps the most important break for Mitchell, with the development of *Court And Spark*, was her embrace of jazz musicians: in this instance, Tom Scott and LA Express. The change came about, at least partly, because of struggles in the demoing process. She'd called on seasoned session musician Russ Kunkel to

play drums, a logical choice given his appearance not only on *Blue* and *For The Roses*, but also on albums by members of her peer group (he had played for James Taylor, Carole King and Jackson Browne). But Kunkel struggled with the ornamentation that Mitchell was building into her new, increasingly complex songs, eventually compelling her to try someone else: "I think you should get yourself a jazz drummer."

Mitchell's subsequent trawl of LA jazz clubs, accompanied by her right-hand production man Henry Lewy, landed her at legendary watering hole The Baked Potato, on Cahuenga Boulevard West in Studio City. There, she saw LA Express, and while she had prior form with Scott – he'd played woodwinds and reeds on *For The Roses* – this time Mitchell picked up the entire group, inviting them at first to guest on a few songs on her forthcoming album, though that would soon develop into LA Express playing on the entire album. At that point, the group were playing at their peak, with an unbeatable lineup, Scott joined by Max Bennett (bass), Larry Carlton (guitarist), Joe Sample (keyboards) and, perhaps most significantly for Mitchell, John Guerin on drums. Carlton and Sample were also members of jazz-fusion gang The Crusaders.

The encounter wasn't seamless, at first – there were real struggles for the new outfit, Mitchell noting that the group "didn't really know how heavy to play, and I was used to being the whole orchestra. Many nights I would be very discouraged." The breakthrough came, seemingly unexpectedly, one evening where "we suddenly overcame the obstacles". One can imagine ➤

Count and Spark



Joni Mitchell

Making stronger connections with jazz musicians opened up what Mitchell was able to do with songform

Recording Court
And Spark at A&M
Studios, La Brea
Avenue, LA, 1973



the struggle – Mitchell trying to pull back on her tendency towards taking up all the space owing to her past as a solo performer; LA Express feeling out territory with a songwriter who was at first glimpse a folk musician, but whose songs admitted to a richness and complexity well beyond the genre's ken. Building a surprising, unique musical lexicon to themselves, the meeting of solo artist and group also had greater personal significance to Mitchell, as she and Guerin would fall for each other, staying together for several years.

Certainly, LA Express brings a newly supple texture to *Court And Spark*. Much is made of the intimacy of Mitchell's songwriting, but few of her albums open with quite such beckoning closeness, while reeling out a tableau of the tensions of the romantic tryst, as "Court And Spark" itself. Beginning with Mitchell seated at the piano, it feels as though she's finding the melody as she sings, tasting its possibilities, before the group quietly move into view behind the break after the song's first verse, a weeping pedal steel winding the song into its next verse. Each moment builds the song's emotional tenor, and the investments in the lyrics, the to-and-fro of Mitchell and her tentative lover, her inability to fully shake the mobility so

cherished by the committed artist, their place in the geographies of the soul (with LA branded as the "*city of the fallen angels*"), maps out one of *Court And Spark*'s key concerns – love versus freedom.

"Help Me", one of the album's singles and a Top 10 hit for Mitchell – her only such achievement – still surprises in the way it walks through various moments from the inside of a relationship, multi-faceted in its understanding of love's domain. By the end of the song, Mitchell's acknowledging the tempestuous nature of the romantic contract – "*Both of us flirting around/ Flirting and flirting/Hurting too*" – and hymning, elegiacally, the inevitable fall into love: "*Are you going to let me go there by*

myself/That's such a lonely thing to do".

In contrast, "Free Man In Paris" is one of Mitchell's more playful, observational songs: written about David Geffen, whose label she was signed to and whose house she shared for some time, it paints a wistful picture of an industry mover reminiscing over wasted time on the Champs Elysees, before sighing about their return to workaday reality, "*stoking the starmaker machinery behind the popular song*".

Court And Spark turns after this moment – if "Help Me" and "Free Man In Paris" share a sense of play, "People's Parties" unflinchingly documents the cold interactions of the social, dissecting the forms of self-presentation and self-preservation that were evident in her milieu, from the "*passport smiles*" through the schmoozers and chancers "*standing in the centre, giving to get something*". The song's pivot, though, is the mirroring of the "*photo beauty*" with her observation "*laughing and crying, you know it's the same release*", and the song's protagonist, sighing at the end of the song, "*I wish I had more sense of humour*". From here, the song segues into "The Same Situation" – both songs share a bittersweet tang, but if the former is about the external world, the latter internalises the fear and anxiety of

Court And Spark
stands as the
beginning of Mitchell's
most experimental
phase...



the scenario, the song's Lothario "weighing the beauty and imperfection" of his target, while the woman is left unpacking the complexity of the moment: the parry-and-thrust of the relationship; the use and misuse of love as word and deed; the need to balance art and heart.

"The Same Situation" is sometimes read as Mitchell's song about her romance with Warren Beatty. But the power in Mitchell's writing at this point was its ability to address the intimate concern with a far broader sweep of the pen; even when she's interrogating her past mistakes, these songs gesture outwards. The desire to link her songs to her past loves also undercuts the poetry of Mitchell's writing, and ignores the way this articulates a strongly female experience of struggle and pain through a form of women's writing. Further, this writing refuses to kowtow to western culture's need to read everything through the perspective of the male. And when Mitchell does seem to be addressing deeply personal concerns – "Car On A Hill", the next song on *Court And Spark*, is believed to be about her painful break-up with Jackson Browne, who she was seeing in 1972, and who left her for model Phyllis Major – she writes in a way that understands everyone's insecurities,

but doesn't excuse or gloss over the many privileges of masculinity.

For "Down To You", Mitchell pares back the fulsome arrangements of the rest of the album. After the cumulative intensity of "People's Parties", "The Same Situation" and "Car On A Hill", her singing and playing on "Down To You" is disarmingly becalmed at first. Admitting another angle on *Court And Spark*'s multi-faceted address of the interpersonal, Mitchell writes through the flux of romance, the middle stanza taking the protagonist out to a pick-up joint, where "closing lights strip off the shadows on this strange new flesh you've found". Throughout the song there's an echo of the endless existential threat of love, the 'constant stranger' at the heart of the encounter. Scott's arrangements take, at times, an almost baroque turn, and the instrumentation follows Mitchell's pausing and rushing piano playing, winding around each other in uncertain intimacy.

"Just Like This Train" brings the group back to the fore – it's a joy to hear the wind and weep of Larry Carlton's electric guitar, gliding notes between the gentle flood of Mitchell's acoustic, while the rhythm section lock into a deceptively simple throb. Bennett's bass often pauses on the one note, drawing out a low drone, before moving through thickets of pulsing notes. Mitchell courts bitchiness here: there's a great moment where she sings, tongue somewhere near cheek, "dreaming of the pleasure I'm going to have watching your hairline recede, my vain darling". In an interview, she would exclaim, "That was intentionally mean... That was the meanest I ever got." But the cold ardour of "Just Like This Train" – with lovers observed passing "like railroad cars" – is soon lost with the joyous swing of "Raised On Robbery", a mischievous boogie that's a welcome crack in *Court And Spark*'s armour.

It's also a deceptive moment. The following "Trouble Child" is one of the hardest, flintiest songs in Mitchell's career. For Sheila Weller, author of *Girls Like Us*, it's a song that takes on, with unforgiving eye, her experience of entering therapy after her

the albums

CRITICS' VERDICT

"In terms of colours and moods... the arrangements here seem more sensitive than she's ever had before. Everything is just right, from the Junior Walker-style tenor intro on 'Car On A Hill' to the raunchy back-up of 'Raised On Robbery'." **MICHAEL WATTS, MELODY MAKER, JANUARY 26, 1974**

"While others have resorted to pitying self-parody or just lame songs, Ms Mitchell has gone from strength to strength... Here the songs are more honest and several indicate a coming to terms with herself, with the beauty and the imperfections as she says in 'The Same Situation'." **STEVE CLARKE, NME, FEBRUARY 2, 1974**

break-up with Browne. It's certainly a compelling reading of the song, with Mitchell singing of figures that "open and close you, then they talk like they know you – they don't know you". The song's dark drift also reinforces one of the recent developments in Mitchell's music – an increasing capacity to 'drape' her melody over the music, as though dressing the instrumentation in a thick fabric of melody. But Mitchell would claim elsewhere that she got plenty out of her time in therapy – "I wanted to talk to someone about confusion which we all have," she said, before concluding, "I think analysis did me a lot of good." And as if to make a point about the complex experience of the analysand, Mitchell finished the album with a cover of Annie Ross and Wardell Gray's "Twisted", a satirical spin on psychoanalysis, replete with guest appearance from stoner comedy duo Cheech & Chong; never let it be said that Mitchell doesn't have a sense of humour.

Wrapped in a beautiful painting from Mitchell, *Court And Spark* was rapturously received, and would end up being her biggest selling album, going platinum, and earning her three Grammy nominations. The subsequent tour for the album, which saw Mitchell rejuvenated and playing with a fierce funk in her feet thanks to LA Express, was documented on the *Miles Of Aisles* double set (reviewed on page 140). In Europe, she would share the stage with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; really, 1974 was a year spent mostly on the road. But her music was already changing shape, no doubt thanks to the ongoing influence of her backing group, but most likely as part of her ongoing quest to find the most supple and invigorating ways to frame her songs. While it was her biggest success, *Court And Spark* also stands as the beginning of Mitchell's most experimental phase – by making stronger connections with jazz musicians, who opened up what she was able to do with songform, she was being enabled to make the massive strides forward on *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*. ❶

TRACKMARKS COURT AND SPARK

- 1 **Court And Spark** ★★★★★
- 2 **Help Me** ★★★★★
- 3 **Free Man In Paris** ★★★★★
- 4 **People's Parties** ★★★★★
- 5 **The Same Situation** ★★★★★
- 6 **Car On A Hill** ★★★★★
- 7 **Down To You** ★★★★★
- 8 **Just Like This Train** ★★★★★
- 9 **Raised On Robbery** ★★★★★
- 10 **Trouble Child** ★★★★★

11 **Twisted** ★★★★★
Label: Asylum
Recorded: A&M, LA
Produced by: Joni Mitchell
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, piano, clavinet on "Down To You"), John Guerin (drums, percussion), Max Bennett (bass), Joe Sample (electric piano, clavinet on "Raised On Robbery"), Tom Scott (woodwinds, reeds), Larry Carlton (electric guitar), Milt Holland

(chimes on "Court And Spark"), Wilton Felder (bass on "People's Parties" and "Free Man In Paris"), Jim Hughart (bass on "Trouble Child"), Chuck Findley (trumpet on "Trouble Child" and "Twisted"), José Feliciano (electric guitar on "Free Man In Paris"), Wayne Perkins (electric guitar on "Car On A Hill"), Robbie Robertson (electric guitar on "Raised On Robbery"), Dennis

Budimir (electric guitar on "Trouble Child"), David Crosby (backing vocals on "Free Man In Paris" and "Down To You"), Graham Nash (backing vocals on "Free Man In Paris"), Susan Webb (backing vocals on "Down To You"), Cheech Marin (background voice on "Twisted"), Tommy Chong (background voice on "Twisted")
Highest chart position: UK 14; US 2