

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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DOG EAT DOG

RELEASED OCTOBER 1985

A timely brew of politics and Fairlight synths...
"Don't you have anything about sex and parties?"

BY JASON ANDERSON

JONI Mitchell looked at the television and didn't like what she saw. Given the woes in the world beyond her Malibu home as the '80s wore on, that's hardly a surprise. Filled with division and discontent, America was not the place she recognised. The country was ruled over by a former Hollywood B-movie actor and governor of California who was deeply distrusted by the artistic community from which he'd originally emerged. The cynical alliance between Reagan's Republicans and Christian evangelists like Jerry Falwell had yielded the Moral Majority and a new conservative movement that wanted to remake the country as if the '60s never happened.

Meanwhile, the president's commie-hating bent manifested in a resurgence of Cold War paranoia and the CIA's not-so-secret campaign to subvert left-wing governments in Latin America, prompting anti-nuke and anti-Contra protests involving many of Mitchell's fellow celebs. Even though deforestation in the Amazon and famine in Ethiopia had begun to unite the music world in common causes, Mitchell questioned the west's complicity in these crises and unwillingness to recognise its own destructive ways. She also criticised the "self-congratulatory" aspect she saw in the very public brand of activism that culminated in Live Aid. (Not that she was entirely averse to such gestures – in February of 1985, she took part in Northern Lights, a Canadian answer to USA For Africa that paired her with fellow Canucks such as Neil Young, Bryan Adams and Anne Murray.)

Mitchell's self-described "political awakening" inevitably manifested itself in the songs she wrote over the course of 1984 and '85. In "Tax Free", she assailed the hypocrisy of TV preachers and the vanishing line between church and state. ("How can he speak for the Prince Of Peace when he's hawk-right militant?" she wondered.) In "The Three Great Stimulants", she lamented "these troubled times" and the proverbial opiates that keep the masses disengaged "while madmen sit up building bombs and making laws and bars". She skewered the false gods of consumerism and celebrity in "Fiction" and "Shiny Toys" and the needlessness and commercialisation of suffering itself in "Ethiopia". ("On and on the human need/On and on the human greed profanes" was one of its less mellifluous couplets.) The song that eventually provided the title for Mitchell's 12th album, "Dog Eat Dog" laid it all out in apocalyptic terms: "In every culture in decline/The watchful ones among the slaves/Know all that is genuine will be/Scorned and conned and cast away".

This degree of topicality was not entirely new in her work – after all, she'd written one of pop's first bona-fide environmental anthems after looking out of a hotel window in Hawaii and seeing how they'd paved paradise to put up a parking lot. Yet the shift in her perspective from inward to outward was dramatic. In interviews after *Dog Eat Dog's* release in October 1985, she expressed her belief that this development was only natural. For one thing, the usual personal dramas had given way to a period of relative



With the tensions in the studio and the rage in the songs, she may have been better off making a punk record

domestic contentment with new husband Larry Klein.

What's more, she felt a grave sense of urgency due to the worrying political climate and new challenges to free speech. One such threat was the PMRC, whose campaign to alert parents to the dangers lurking in the lyrics of Madonna and Prince led to widely publicised Senate hearings in the fall of 1985. As Mitchell told the *NME*, "If I don't start speaking out, taking a chance and addressing things that are important to me in this way, we might not have this outlet very long."

In many respects, *Dog Eat Dog* was just another example of music's wider politicisation of pop in the Reagan era, with Mitchell responding to the same conditions that compelled Sting to write "Russians", Jackson Browne to defend Nicaragua and Neil Young to found Farm Aid. Hell, even the Ramones did "Bonzo Goes To Bitburg". Few major artists, though, were willing to venture so far from cosy platitudes and to confront listeners by putting these problems at their own doorstep.

Traditionally one of the first listeners for Mitchell's latest songs ever since Buffy Sainte-Marie had dragged him out to see her play a club in Greenwich Village in October of 1967, her manager Elliot Roberts also may have been the first to note this new batch's unabashedly political nature. "I don't know about these songs, Joan," he told her after a preview. "Don't you have anything about sex and parties?"

As pig-headed as it may look on the page, the comment was clearly meant (and taken) with affection even if Mitchell's professional relationship with Roberts ended before the album was finished. (She'd then sign on with Peter Asher, the former Peter & Gordon singer who already handled her friends James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt.) Roberts' quip was also gentler than many of the other reactions that greeted the transformation of an artist who so many thought they knew so well. Indeed, as *Dog Eat Dog* emerged from a difficult and expensive creative process – a "nightmare", by her own estimation – Mitchell's anger was often met in kind.

"Once known for airy laments on love gone wrong, Mitchell is now tackling big business, the religious right and African famine," *Newsweek* complained in a tone that suggested she'd far overstepped her bounds. The same tone was palpable in a *New York Times* review that complained how "the most probing confessional singer-songwriters of the 1970s" had resorted to "blunt topical commentary" full of lyrics that didn't flow. Dismissing her stabs at social criticism as "the sort of bloodless liberal homilies you'd expect from Rush", *Rolling Stone* concluded that "while Joni's venom is an encouraging sign, its clumsy expression is unnerving". Along with her lyrical content, Mitchell drew flak for the musical direction, too, especially her embrace of the Fairlight CMI and a

CRITICS' VERDICT

"Dog Eat Dog takes a scalpel to the dark underbelly of Reagan's America, detailing a descent into hell: a place of ignorance and bankrupt values, the blind leading the lame."

SEANO'HAGAN, NME, NOVEMBER 23, 1985

"She's ditched the recent jazz preoccupation for more classic Mitchell, meandering and full of warm inflections with a contemporary instrumentation."

HELEN FITZGERALD, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 23, 1985

synthesiser-heavy sound whose fundamentally rigid nature seemed to preclude the folk- and jazz-influenced freedoms she'd previously enjoyed. The sight of Thomas Dolby's name among the co-producers was another sign that, despite the songwriting's newly polemical bent, Mitchell was another star of the '60s and '70s forced to contend with the challenges in the pop marketplace of the '80s.

To be fair, she had some good ideas about how to face those challenges. But within a few months of *Dog Eat Dog*'s appearance it was clear that audiences had much the same response as the album's harshest critics. Its poor sales and chart performance having snuffed out any plans for touring; Mitchell didn't even make a concert appearance until an unscheduled spot on the bill for Amnesty International's Conspiracy Of Hope benefit show at the Meadowlands in New Jersey on June 16. Stuck in front of an ungrateful audience that was much more eager to see U2 and The Police instead, she was understandably indignant to find herself getting pelted with water bottles, cups and other objects. "I'm not that bad, you dig?" she told the crowd. "Quit pitching shit up here!"

It would've no doubt felt great to say the same thing to everyone else who'd treated *Dog Eat Dog* so unkindly. The songs deserved better, as did their creator. Indeed, when they're heard outside the tumultuous context of their original moment, the best of them are testaments to Mitchell's tenacity, audacity and wisdom in the face of very trying circumstances both in the world at large and the more intimate confines of the recording studio.

Before he departed the fold, Roberts had pushed her to enlist an outside producer, the first time she'd done so since her debut album. Her long collaboration with engineer Henry Lewy was also winding down. Things had started off amiably enough with Dolby – in his memoir *The Sound Of Speed* he retells Mitchell's hilarious anecdote about a failed sexual advance by a very wasted Miles Davis and fondly reminisces the "huge quantities of takeout food from LA's best restaurants" that would appear in the studio.

Yet it soon became clear there were too many cooks in this kitchen. The tenseness of the situation was further compounded

by what Dolby perceived to be the incompatibility between Mitchell's spontaneous working methods and the programming complexities of the new technology she loved. Mitchell resented what she saw as resistance from all her collaborators, including Klein. "I had to fight for every note that I put on that record," she'd later say in an interview with Malka Marom for *In Her Own Words*.

What with all the tensions in the studio and the rage in the songs themselves, she may have been better off trying to make a punk record. (Maybe it wasn't such an unlikely fantasy, seeing as she and John Lydon got along famously when they met in Jamaica in 1977.) In any case, the album is more coherent and more interesting than circumstances should have allowed, even if it's sometimes marred by many now-disparaged hallmarks of '80s rock production.

That description definitely applies to the compressed clip-clop of the drum programming and the slick, semi-funky guitar licks on "Good Friends", *Dog Eat Dog*'s opening track and first single. Mitchell's choice of the always game Michael McDonald as a duet partner may also seem ill-advised at first, but the warmth of their performances counteract the frigidity of the production aesthetic. The similarly uptempo "Fiction" suffers more from the stiffness of the rhythm programming and the team's tendency to oversaturate the mixes with superfluous details, like the roboticised voices of Dolby, Klein and others on the chorus here and throughout "Tax Free" and "Shiny Toys".

Despite his own occasional vocal cameos, Dolby's presence is actually more discernible in "The Three Great Stimulants", which benefits greatly from his signature sensitivity to the proverbial silences around the notes. (Indeed, the song has the same sonic spaciousness as Prefab Sprout's *Steve McQueen*, a Dolby collaboration that received a much kinder reception when it arrived a few months before *Dog Eat Dog*.) A similar quality of lightness takes the edge off some of the rancour in "Tax Free" before it develops into a beefier rocker with a backing chorus of rock-star friends like Don Henley and James Taylor. Actor Rod Steiger provides the Jimmy Swaggart-style preacher-man ranting – Mitchell had originally enticed Jack Nicholson to perform the bit, but a security guard denied him access to the film studio where they were recording it.

"Smokin' (Try Another)" is a more experimental curio that essentially consists of Mitchell singing alongside her own sampled vocals, a bass lick by Klein and a loop of a noisy cigarette machine that fascinated Mitchell at the studio where she recorded *Wild Things Run Fast*.

Really, it's not until "Dog Eat Dog" that the unmusicality of Mitchell's most polemical lyrics becomes obvious. She fares better with the shorter, wittier phrases

Dog Eat Dog was just another example of music's wider politicisation of pop in the Reagan era

Smokin'
Joni: at a
celebrity art
exhibition in
New York,
June 1984



in “Shiny Toys”, an infectious piece of cod-calypto synthpop that became the album’s second single and garnered her first-ever extended dance remix (house music pioneer François Kevorkian did the honours). Shifting from that song’s jokes about parties and Porsches – her old manager must not have heard that one – to the hectoring and handwringing of “Ethiopia” was bound to be something that rankled the album’s first wave of critics, and it’s still a tough turn to navigate. Equally problematic is the frustratingly rigid and static arrangement – a freer-flowing, *Hejira*-like approach may have been more forgiving to lines like “*Between the brown skies and sprinkling lawns/I hear the whine of chainsaws hacking rainforests down*”.

It’s a shame that saxophonist Wayne Shorter doesn’t show up until *Dog Eat Dog*’s final two tracks, since his contributions greatly enhance the grace and elegance of “Impossible Dreamer”, on which Mitchell wryly acknowledges just how little change

she’s likely to affect with her pleas, and “Lucky Girl”, a charming vignette about the domestic bliss she found with Klein. “*I never loved a man I trusted as far as I could throw my shoe ’til I loved you*”, she sings, mixing the sweet and the caustic with her customary flair.

For such a cantankerous work to end with such a gentle gesture may leave the impression that she ran out of fight before the battle was really through. But Mitchell always understood how grateful listeners are to get a little solace after being left out in a storm. ●

TRACKMARKS DOGEAT DOG

- 1 Good Friends ★★★
- 2 Fiction ★★★
- 3 The Three Great Stimulants ★★★
- 4 Tax Free ★★★
- 5 Smokin’ (Empty, Try Another) ★★★
- 6 Dog Eat Dog ★★
- 7 Shiny Toys ★★★★★
- 8 Ethiopia ★★★
- 9 Impossible Dreamer ★★★★★
- 10 Lucky Girl ★★★★★

Label: Geffen
Recorded at: Galaxy Studios, Los Angeles
Produced by: Joni Mitchell, Larry Klein, Thomas Dolby, Mike Shipley
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, background vocals and vocal samples, piano, Fairlight CMI and assorted keyboards), Larry Klein (basses, keyboards, Fairlight CMI and synthesiser

programming, spoken vocals), Thomas Dolby (keyboards, Fairlight CMI and synthesiser programming, spoken vocals), Michael Landau (guitars), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums, samples), Michael Fisher (percussion samples), Steve Lukather (guitar), Larry Williams (flute, tenor saxophone), Kazu Matsui (shakuhachi), Wayne Shorter (soprano and tenor

saxophone), Jerry Hey (trumpet, flugelhorn), Gary Grant (trumpet, flugelhorn), Alex Acuna (bata drum), Don Henley (background vocals), James Taylor, Amy Holland (bk vocals), Michael McDonald (vocals, bk vocals), Joe Smith (spoken vocals), Rod Steiger (spoken vocals), Bob ‘Zyg’ Winard (spoken vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 57; US 63