

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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BLUE

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A masterpiece made out of restless travel and doomed love affairs. "Looking for something, what can it be?"
BY ROB HUGHES

COMMERCIAL success didn't sit easy with Joni Mitchell. *Clouds* had gone gold and brought with it a level of popular appeal that took away some of her everyday liberties. Having finished *Ladies Of The Canyon* in February 1970, she vowed to take a year off, ostensibly to recharge her jaded batteries, but also to escape what she felt was an increasing sense of claustrophobia. "I was being isolated, starting to feel like a bird in a gilded cage," she explained to *Rolling Stone's* Larry LeBlanc. "A certain amount of success cuts you off in a lot of ways. You can't move freely. I like to live, be on the streets, to be in a crowd..."

In many ways, it signalled the start of Mitchell's conflicted relationship between art and celebrity. Now that the "black limousine" and "velvet curtain calls" of "For Free" had narrowed into the reality of her own life, she needed to regain her peripheral vision, restore a degree of clarity. Mitchell came to despise showbusiness, declaring fame "a series of misunderstandings surrounding a name". Not for nothing did David Geffen once tell her: "You're the only star I ever met that wanted to be ordinary."

There were major upheavals in Mitchell's private life, too. Her intense love affair with Graham Nash, which had coincided with an accelerated spurt of productivity from both parties, was nearing its end, resulting in a series of petty squabbles. Against this backdrop, Mitchell decided to head for Europe, where she travelled around Greece, Spain and France. Her main seat of exile was the island of Crete, where she took up

residence in a cave amid a hippie community in the fishing village of Matala. It was from there that she sent Nash a telegram home. He was busy laying a new floor in Mitchell's kitchen when it landed. It read: 'If you hold sand too tightly in your hand, it will run through your fingers. Love, Joan.' "I knew at that point it was truly over between us," Nash recalled, disconsolately, in his memoir *Wild Tales*.

Mitchell was introduced to the Appalachian dulcimer on Crete and adjusted to the unhurried rhythm of local life. The experience brought her into contact with a number of characters, who in turn helped reignite her creativity. One such figure was Cary Raditz, a wild-haired American chef who was blessed, in Mitchell's words, with "fierce-looking blue eyes" and "the mark of Cain on his brow". The pair began a relationship, sealed by a song she'd written in honour of his birthday: "Carey".

As more musical ideas started to flow, Mitchell noticed the formation of certain recurring themes – love, loss, escape, a quest for some kind of indefinable spiritual truth. And for all the delicious scenery, food and ready company, she was homesick. Shifting from one continental base to another only amplified the feeling. While in Paris, she poured her longing for her adopted West Coast into another fresh tune, "California".

She returned to her native Canada in late July, playing Toronto's Mariposa Folk Festival alongside James Taylor. Mitchell and Taylor had met a year earlier, at the Newport Folk Festival, but now they became

BLUE
JONI MITCHELL



A landmark against
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romantically involved. A month or so later, she visited him on the set of his Hollywood road movie, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, where they wrote together and, as Taylor told *Uncut* in 2015, “had some of the most outrageous good times”. By October, they were sharing a stage at London’s Paris Theatre, recorded for BBC Radio One’s *In Concert* series, with Mitchell unveiling a handful of new compositions.

She returned to London at the end of November to perform at the Royal Festival Hall, where the new songs were met with unanimous approval by reviewers, among them the *NME* and *Melody Maker*. The latter’s readership was similarly smitten with Mitchell, voting her 1970’s Top Female Performer in its year-end poll (ahead of Aretha Franklin, Grace Slick, Sandy Denny and the recently departed Janis Joplin), despite her paucity of live shows.

Back home by early ’71, Mitchell and Taylor were viewed by the American music press as Hollywood’s golden couple; two young, photogenic singer-songwriters whose liaison embodied the free-spirited ambience of Laurel Canyon. Both set about preparing their respective solo albums, with Mitchell singing backing vocals on what became *Mud Slide Slim And The Blue Horizon* – most notably on his cover of Carole King’s “You’ve Got A Friend” – and Taylor repaying the compliment by adding guitar to “California”, “All I Want” and “A Case Of You”. They also accepted an invitation from King to appear on a reworked version of “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” for *Tapestry*, then being cut in the same A&M studio that Mitchell had booked.

The relationship quickly turned sour, however. Apparently devastated by Taylor’s decision to call it off, Mitchell funnelled her pain into the other songs she was recording for the appositely named *Blue*. The album duly became a document of a life in flux, a diary of physical and emotional displacement set against a backdrop of restless travel and doomed love affairs.

Shorn of the affectations of *Clouds* or the airy folk-pop of *Ladies Of The Canyon*, *Blue* was almost uncomfortably direct. Mitchell again refused to coat the songs in fussy arrangements, preferring to place her voice front and centre over spare guitar, dulcimer and piano, her vulnerability plain for all to hear. She later told *Rolling Stone* that “at that period of my life, I had no personal defences. I felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes. I felt like I had absolutely no secrets from the world, and I couldn’t pretend in my life to be strong. Or to be happy. But the advantage of it in the music was that there were no defences there either.”

She was to use a more curious, semi-grotesque analogy in 2014’s *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words*, telling interviewer Malka

CRITICS’ VERDICT

“The album is rich in...poetic imagery, a lyrical strength unequalled certainly among her female contemporaries. This may well be the best album of the year, but then, where Joni is concerned, comparisons have little point. She is in a class of her own.”
NICK LOGAN, *NME*, JULY 10, 1971

“We elect our heroes because they tell us truths about life, but their very success divorces them from our field of experience... None of it is Joni’s fault, of course. Her songs continue to reflect her own reality, but where once the truths she distilled were universal, the songs here tend to be inward-looking.”
AL, *MELODY MAKER*, JULY 10, 1971

Marom that she’d dreamed she was watching “a big fat women’s tuba band. Women with big horns and rolled-down nylon in house dresses, playing tuba and big horn music, and I was a plastic bag with all my organs exposed, sobbing on an auditorium chair at that time. That’s how I felt. Like my guts were on the outside. I wrote *Blue* in that condition.”

The implication here is that *Blue* is an unwavering litany of distress and despair, an inventory of misfortune with no light relief. But it’s actually a counterweight of ecstasy and agony, of the best and worst of times. Nash is supposedly the subject of the piano-led “My Old Man”, Mitchell riding the climatic extremes of romantic love in a breathy soprano. “*He’s my sunshine in the morning/He’s my fireworks at the end of the day/He’s the warmest chord I ever heard*”, she sings at her sunniest, her voice adopting the shifting cadences of jazz. It’s in direct contrast to the clouds that descend in his absence: “*But when he’s gone/Me and them lonesome blues collide/The bed’s too big/The frying pan’s too wide*”.

The exquisite “A Case Of You”, also rumoured to be about Nash, finds her trying to absorb the lessons of a failed love affair that refuses to let her move on. As if to measure the depth of its impact, Mitchell addresses her quandary in religious terms: “*Oh, you’re in my blood like holy wine/You taste so bitter and so sweet*”. The sensitivity of her lyrics is echoed in the deft accompaniment of Taylor’s acoustic guitar and in the poignant tones of Mitchell’s dulcimer, the latter providing much of *Blue*’s graceful fragility. As testament to its enduring pull, “A Case Of You” became one of her most-covered tunes, siring versions from as far afield as KD Lang, Nancy Wilson, James Blake, The Decemberists’ Colin Meloy and Prince (as, naturally, “A Case Of U”).

Of the trio of songs considered to be inspired by Taylor, “All I Want” alludes to the jealousies and insecurities that appear to have undermined their relationship from an early stage. All Mitchell wants, she sings, her fluted voice rising and dipping over silvery dulcimer, “*is to bring out the best in me and in you too*”. But it feels like honest delusion rather than realistic hope. Her opening lines give a truer indication of her emotional condition: “*I am on a*

Joni talking to Carole King in the control room of A&M Records’ studio in LA during the recording of *Tapestry*, January 1971



lonely road and I am travelling/Travelling, travelling, travelling/Looking for something, what can it be/Oh I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you some”.

As she explained to Cameron Crowe some years later: “In the state that I was at in my inquiry about life and direction and relationships, I perceived a lot of hate in my heart... I perceived my inability to love at that point. And it horrified me some.”

The title track follows a similar line of confession. A sombre lullaby that finds Mitchell alone at the piano, the song appears to directly address Taylor’s heroin addiction – “*Ink on a pin/Underneath the skin/An empty space to fill in*” – while attempting to strike a note of optimism. Yet the prospect of self-destruction is too enticing to ignore out of hand: “*Everybody’s saying that hell’s the hippest way to go/Well I don’t think so/But I’m gonna take a look around it though*”. Arguably the most affecting moment on the entire album occurs halfway through “Blue”, when Mitchell sings “*lots of laughs*” with such forlorn resignation that it’s almost impossible not to well up.

Stephen Stills is on board for the more sprightly “Carey”, bringing a quasi-calypto rhythm to a tune that details

Blue is sad, funny, poetic, revelatory and often achingly candid...



Mitchell's sojourn in Matala. Despite revolving around her activities with Raditz – another devilishly “mean old Daddy” to whom she’s helplessly drawn – it’s essentially a conflicted piece of travelogue that contrasts the simple hedonism of Cretan nightlife with homesickness for California. Mitchell can’t seem to decide what she wants more – the wine, laughter and scratchy rock’n’roll of the Mermaid Café or the comforts of the Canyon. “Oh, you know it sure is hard to leave here, Carey/ But it’s really not my home”, she declares, double-tracking herself on harmonies, with Russ Kunkel adding tactful percussion. “My fingernails are filthy, I got beach tar on my feet/And I miss my clean white linen and my fancy French cologne”. Raditz also features in the equally fidgety “California”, in which Mitchell’s loneliness and dislocation are all too apparent.

Perhaps most telling of all is “The Last Time I Saw Richard”. A conversational piece with a gorgeously understated piano melody, it’s a tale of romantic disillusion and the passage of time, its titular character most likely a reference to Mitchell’s ex-husband, Chuck. She hears that “Richard got married to a figure

skater/And he bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator/And he drinks at home now most nights with the TV on”.

This surrender to suburban torpor seems to flood Mitchell’s character with dread, as if the domesticity she craves will, in actuality, snuff out her creative free-spiritedness.

For all its thwarted romance and soul-stripping, it’s this question that sits at the heart of *Blue*. Mitchell is ultimately trying to reconcile her life with her art, compressing an elusive search for personal contentment into a grand artistic statement. *Blue* is sad, funny, poetic, revelatory and often achingly candid. And such an intense experience that it

feels much longer than its relatively slight 35 minutes.

Issued in the summer of 1971, *Blue* did brisk business both at home and abroad, cracking the Billboard Top 20 and peaking in the UK Top 3. It quickly became a landmark against which the work of all confessional singer-songwriters would be measured. Graham Nash says he still has a hard time listening to it. Mitchell herself has called it a turning point in her career.

It was also the album that finally established the 27-year-old as an American superstar. A situation that would once again test her ambivalence towards her own fame. ●

TRACKMARKS BLUE

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 All I Want ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| 2 My Old Man ★★★★★ | 10 The Last Time I Saw Richard ★★★★★ |
| 3 Little Green ★★★★★ | |
| 4 Carey ★★★★★ | |
| 5 Blue ★★★★★ | Label: Reprise |
| 6 California ★★★★★ | Produced by: Joni Mitchell |
| 7 This Flight Tonight ★★★★★ | Recorded at: A&M Studios, Hollywood, California |
| 8 River ★★★★★ | |
| 9 A Case Of You | |

Personnel: Joni Mitchell (Appalachian dulcimer, acoustic guitar, piano, vocals), James Taylor (guitar on “All I Want”, “California” and “A Case Of You”), Stephen Stills (bass and guitar on “Carey”), ‘Sneaky’ Pete Kleinow (pedal-steel

guitar on “California” and “This Flight Tonight”), Russ Kunkel (drums on “A Case Of You”, “California” and “Carey”)
Highest chart position: UK 3; US 15