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review



Joni Mitchell: 50 years of Blue

The heartbreak behind her classic album
Plus, the songs rated, track by track

cover story

Joni Mitchell's Blue: 'Fifty years later people finally got it'

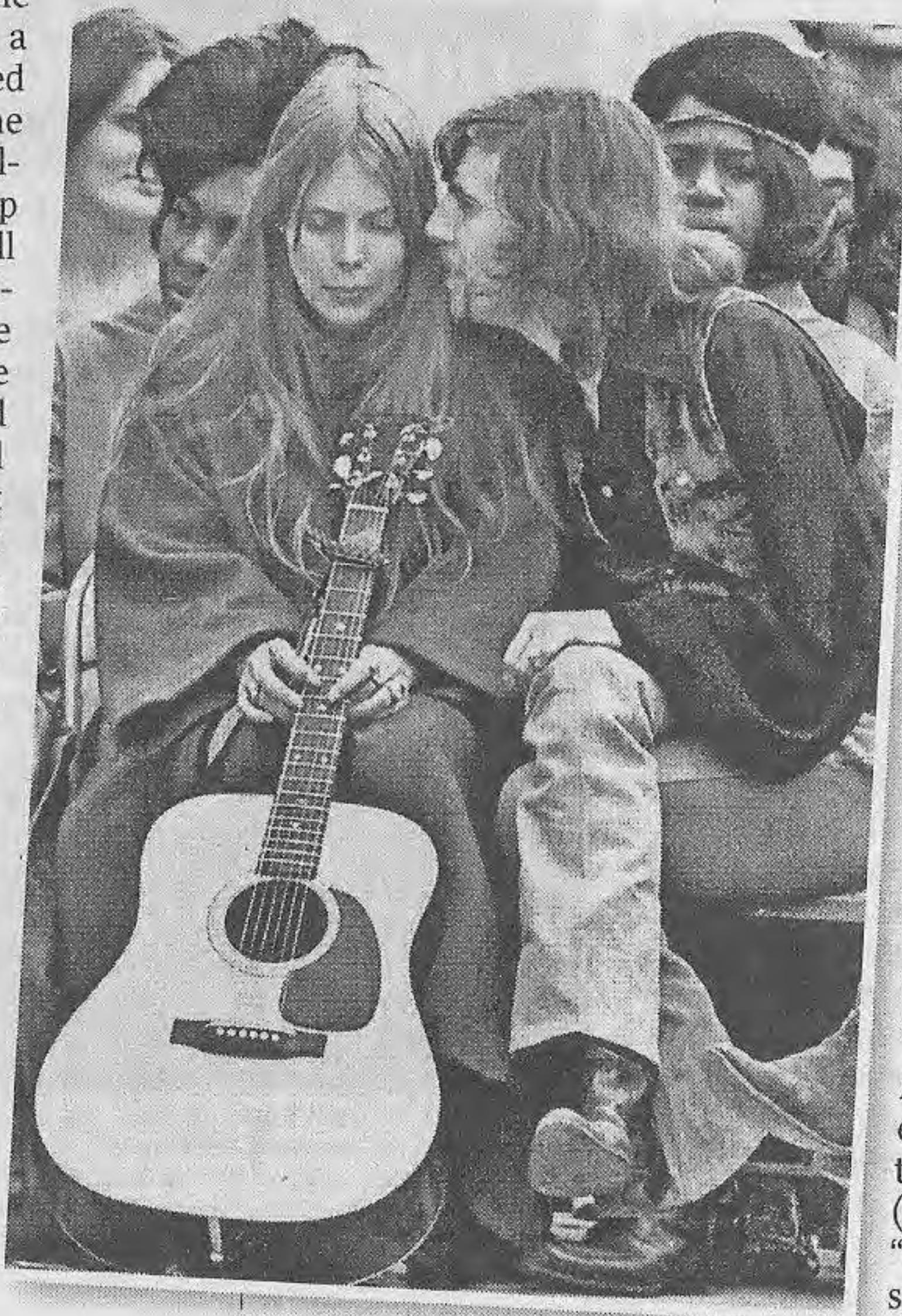
As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of her classic 1971 album, **Will Hodgkinson** describes the agony that inspired it

What makes a masterpiece? Fifty years on, *Blue* by Joni Mitchell still holds up as the beacon of the era of singer-songwriters, an expression of pure intimacy driven by little more than dulcimer, guitar, piano and Mitchell's high, keening voice. What really makes *Blue* so special is its creator's willingness to take the most painful, personal aspects of her life and spin them into artistic gold. Mitchell went deep, thereby setting the template for confessional songwriting ever since.

At the time, as she told her friend Cameron Crowe in a rare, recent interview, "the most feedback that I got [on *Blue*'s release] was that I had gone too far and was exposing too much of myself". Her male counterparts began wondering if they were going to have to follow suit. "They were afraid," Mitchell, 77, recalled. "Is this contagious? Do we all have to get this honest now?"

In August 1970 Mitchell performed at the Isle of Wight Festival. Having turned up with Neil Young and their manager Elliot Roberts in a Rolls-Royce, she was in the middle of her performance when a man called Yogi Joe invaded the stage and lectured the crowd on the commercialisation of rock, firing them up in the process. Mitchell implored her raucous audience: "You're acting like tourists, man! Give us some respect." They quietened down as she sang a handful of songs that would make it onto *Blue* the next year, but the hippies had a point. Was this really what songwriting was about, to become famous, make a load of cash and, as she would dream about on *River*, quit this crazy scene?

While *Blue* expressed disillusionment with the trappings of success, it also came in the wake of Mitchell's break-up with Graham Nash. A year previously they had been the golden couple of the Laurel Canyon scene. He wrote *Our House* about their groovy life together.



SINGERS IN THE PARK
Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash at the Big Sur Folk Festival in 1969

She responded with *Blue*'s *My Old Man*, a far more troubled love song on which she admits to having the blues when he's gone, but also not feeling ready to commit. "I believed in that relationship and suddenly it was over," Mitchell said. "I also lost most of my Los Angeles friends. When I left him, they took his side."

Mitchell escaped to Greece, and in early 1970 she was in the fishing village of Matala in Crete when she heard an explosion. She turned round to witness a man being blown out of the doors of a restaurant after the stove he had been lighting exploded. So began her brief affair with Cary Raditz, immortalised on *Blue*'s *Carey* in the line: "You're a mean old daddy but I like you." Raditz was a true hippy, living in a cave on the coast and refusing to be impressed by the presence of a celebrity in his midst.

Mitchell wrote about their primitive life together on *Carey*, including her confession that she did actually quite like clean white linen, fancy French cologne and other aspects of bourgeois life. "Cary watched all his friends go kind of gaga over me," Mitchell told Crowe. "He resented me for that. He was always trying to put me in my place in front of his friends."

One way or another, these experiences fleshed out *Blue*. Mitchell really was sitting in a park in Paris reading about the Vietnam War in a newspaper and concluding that peace was just a dream some of them had, when she began to tire of Europe's old, cold ways and longed for the freshness and optimism of LA, as recounted on *California*. On *The Last Time I Saw Richard* she paints a scene of being in a bar at closing time with a folk singer friend called Patrick Sky, who warned Mitchell that hopeless romantics like her end up as cynical drunks. It was rare for singer-songwriters of the time to write so directly from life without hiding behind metaphor.

Back in her native Canada for a Toronto festival, in July 1970 Mitchell hooked up with James Taylor, for whom she wrote *All I Want*, a beautifully simple expression of not needing anything when you're with the right (or, in this case, wrong) person. "I want to wreck my stockings in some jukebox dive," she con-



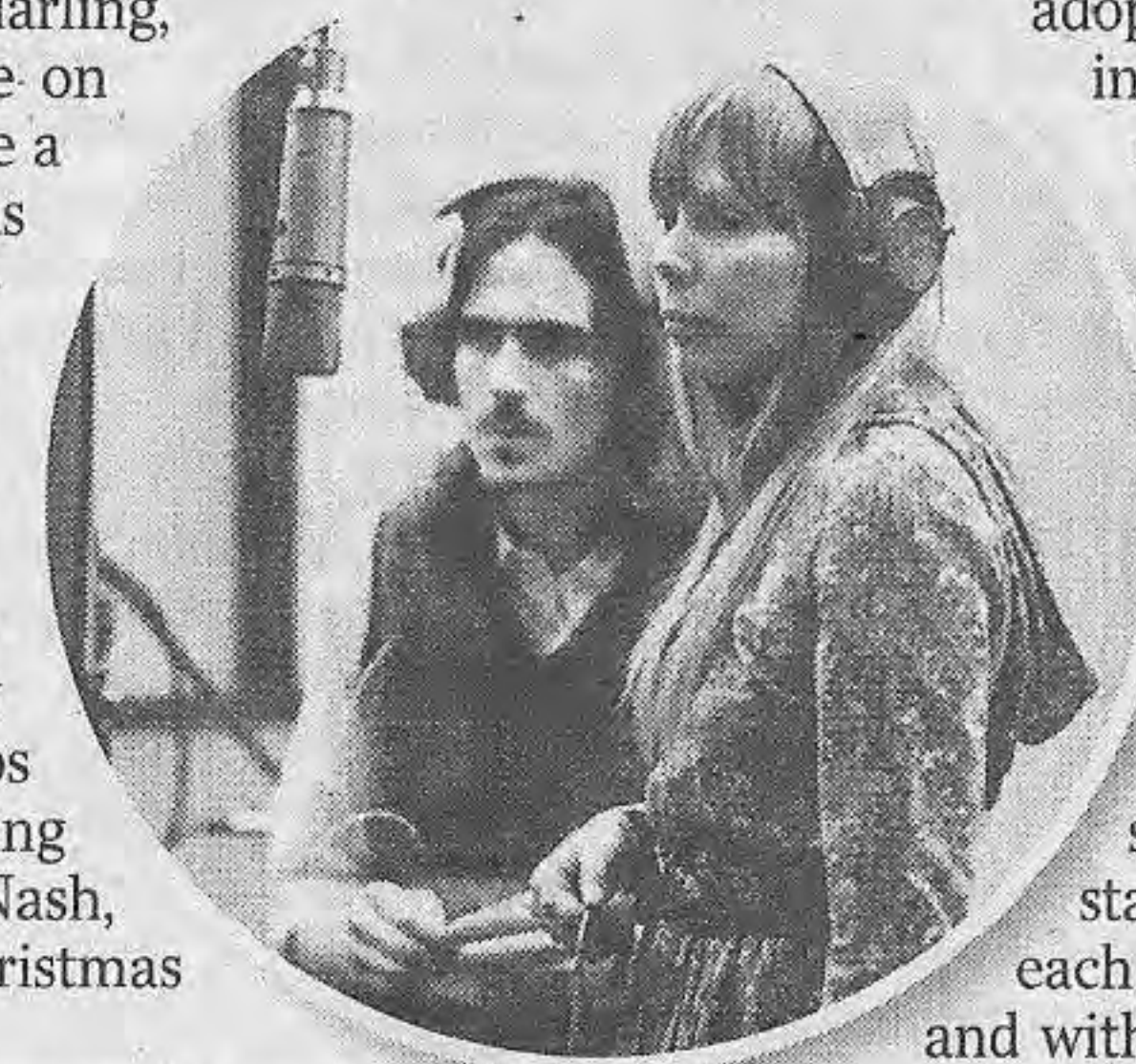
fessed. Taylor took Mitchell back to his parents' house in North Carolina for Christmas, where beside the fireplace she sang *A Case of You*, one of the cleverest love songs written. "I could drink a case of you, darling, and I would still be on my feet," sounds like a challenge as much as a declaration of passion. It has been speculated that Mitchell wrote *River* about that time, but *River* is about feeling lonely at Christmas. Perhaps Mitchell was drawing on her feelings for Nash, even as she spent Christmas with Taylor.

Mitchell once compared her state of self during the making of *Blue* to "a cellophane wrapper on a packet of cigarettes", although it is only in hindsight that we know just how much she was giving away.

At the time *Rolling Stone* magazine's Timothy Crosse concluded that the cryptic words of *Little Green* were "so poetic that it passeth all understanding".

When the daughter she gave up for adoption in 1965 surfaced in the late 1990s, the real meaning of lines like "a child with a child pretending", a reference to Mitchell being so young and unprepared for motherhood when she became pregnant, was revealed.

Counter to the spirit of a time when stars would drop in on each other's sessions — and with Carole King recording the equally influential album *Tapestry* down the hall — Mitchell made *Blue* with the door of her room at LA's A&M Studios locked. Taylor contributed some guitar parts shortly before their





JOEL BERNSTEIN

LADY OF THE CANYON
Joni Mitchell at home in Los Angeles in October 1970. Left: with James Taylor, recording backing vocals for Carole King's album *Tapestry* the same year

relationship petered out. "James was a walking psychological disaster anyway," Mitchell said of their lack of suitability.

After the album was made Mitchell retreated to a cabin in Canada and didn't play live for a year, but in the process of exposing herself so entirely she helped an entire generation to deal with their own

She did actually quite like clean white linen, fancy French cologne

emotional realities. With its cover photograph of Mitchell bathed in a blue light, harsh but tragic, *Blue* was her unguarded triumph. She concluded in her interview with Crowe, expressing amazement that *Blue* still means so much to people: "Truth and beauty. That's what I hope to deliver." And in a rare video post this week she added: "Fifty years later people finally get it. That pleases me."

Barney Hoskyns on *Blue* — track by track

All I Want

For all the rapturous words bestowed on *Blue*, it's rarely remarked that it starts with two bars of uncomfortable dissonance: Mitchell's strummed dulcimer chords grating against an underlying drone. Then come the first words, "I am on a lonely road and I am travelling..." followed swiftly by "I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you..." She's 27 and grappling with the agonies of intimacy and jealousy that tripped up so many of her contemporaries at that age. It's almost unbearably honest about the push-and-pull of romance — rehearsing what she really wants to tell her new beau, James Taylor, trying to grow up in ways few of us ever manage.

My Old Man

The song's opening piano phrases, at once relaxed and hinting at sadness, offer instant contrast to *All I Want*. Written towards the end of Mitchell's canyon cohabitation with Graham Nash, *My Old Man* is sweetly tender and seemingly carefree, at least until the first note of worry ("play and stay, baby") and the dip into the "lonesome blues" that sit at the core of her being. The domestic details (the bed, the frying pan) are a huge part of what make *Blue* so piercingly real, while her voice leaps from a conversational alto to the aching falsetto soprano that, in its way, is Mitchell's attempt to escape those blues.

Little Green

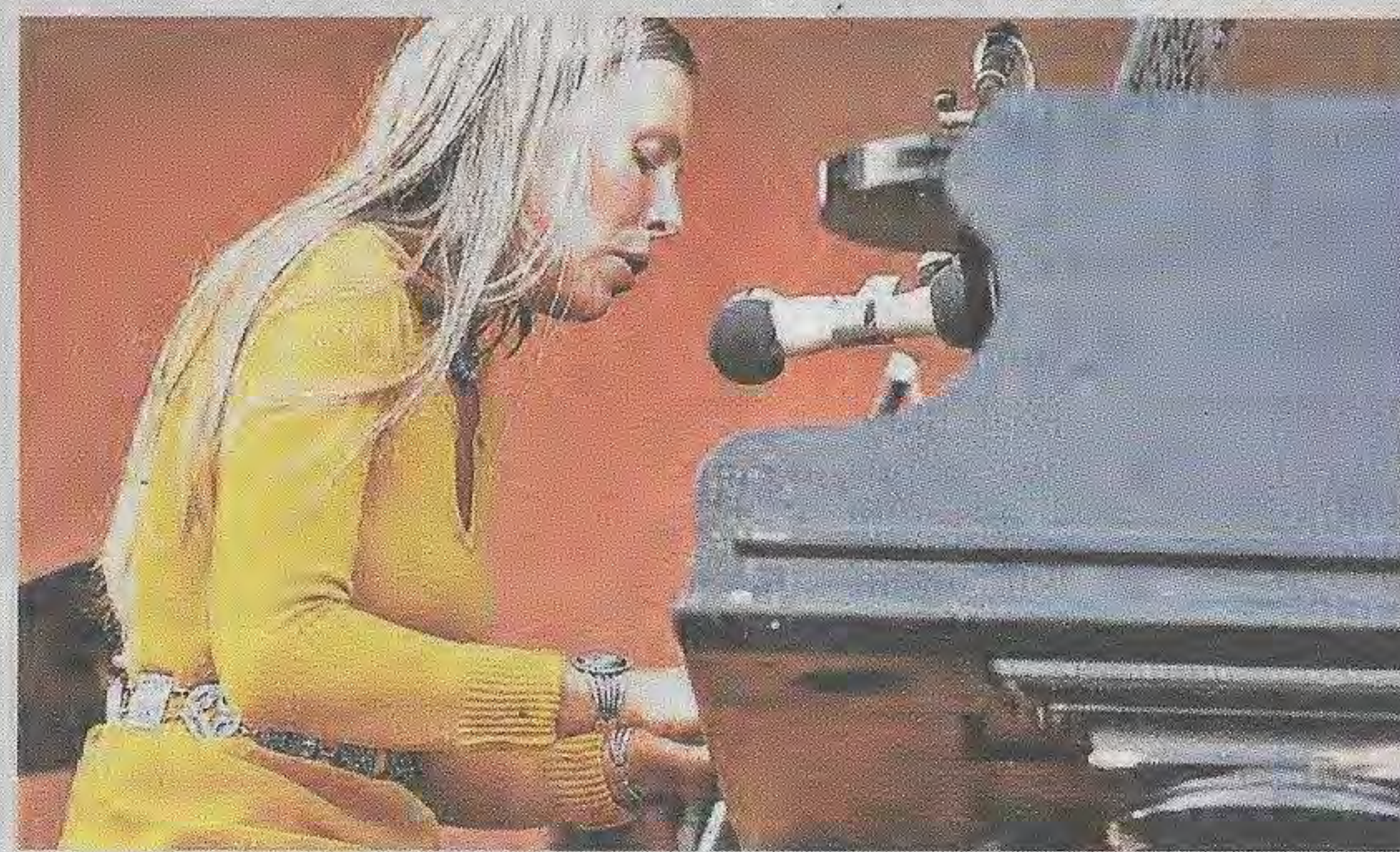
The only song on *Blue* that would have fitted on her earlier, folkier albums, *Little Green* was written in 1967, two years after Mitchell (a "child with a child pretending") had given up a baby daughter for adoption. Its inclusion here suggests she could no longer disown the guilt and grief she had carried after making the hard choice between motherhood and freedom in mid-1960s Canada. The picked guitar phrase recalls *The Circle Game* but is clearly more personal — even if you don't know what it's about. Wishing her daughter a "happy ending", Mitchell couldn't have known she'd be reunited with Kilaren in 1997.

Carey

This track, one of *Blue*'s signature songs, returns us to the dulcimer strumming of *All I Want* and is Mitchell's most vivid report from the peripatetic "time-out" year of 1970. Unable any longer to resist the lure of "clean white linen" and "fancy French cologne", she bids a whimsical farewell to lover Cary Raditz, a "bright red devil" with a walking cane, and to her months of slumming it as a hippy in a Cretan cave. It's the first of three tracks on *Blue* that are lightly infused by rock'n'roll, even if you can barely make out the drummer Russ Kunkel. Raditz later became an investment analyst.

Blue

The album's exquisite title song — as coolly melancholic as Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* — follows *Carey* in the way that *My Old Man* follows *All I Want*. It's Mitchell alone over troubled



ON A LONELY ROAD Joni Mitchell at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970

piano chords that combine the styles of Laura Nyro (one of Mitchell's few acknowledged peers) and Jimmy Webb (one of her new LA friends). It also brings us squarely back to America and the post-hippy unease of the new decade, as well as to her doomed and consuming affair with the heroin-addicted Taylor: "Acid, booze and ass/ Needles, guns and grass..." Rufus Wainwright, who sang it for Mitchell at her 75th birthday party, said it was "nice to sing something from the perspective of the person living with the addict".

California

Another of *Blue*'s postcards from Old Europe, *California* gives us Mitchell in Paris, en route home via Formentera (from where she sent Nash a telegram telling him their relationship was over). She's checking the latest news on America's fruitless war in Vietnam and letting go of the Sixties dream of peace. She's strumming her dulcimer again, backed by Taylor and the Flying Burritos' pedal-steel player Sneaky Pete Kleinow, dreaming anew of Laurel Canyon. (She says she'll even kiss a cop on Sunset Boulevard.) California remains a beckoning, beguiling paradise for this restless Canadian.

This Flight Tonight

Blusteringly covered by the Scottish rockers Nazareth, who had an unlikely hit with it, *Flight* supposedly tells the tale of Mitchell's abrupt and impulsive return to LA as she was about to be introduced to Taylor's east coast family. Spooked by "that look so critical" in his eyes, she's plunged into "blackness, blackness dragging me down" as she stares through the plane's porthole window at night-time America below. An acoustic strummer in her *Big Yellow Taxi* mode, the song conveys the full obsession of her feelings for the rising male star of mellow Seventies sensitivity.

River

All of Mitchell's social and romantic

angst can be heard in this song of longing for escape or avoidance. *River* jumps from the longing for a Canadian Christmas — its piano intro mimicking *Jingle Bells* — to bitter guilt at pushing ex-boyfriend Nash away. "I'm so hard to handle," she sings with stark self-awareness, "I'm selfish and I'm sad/ Now I've gone and lost the best baby that I ever had." The willingness to be direct and transparent about exactly who she is ("I'm gonna make a lot of money, then I'm gonna quit this crazy scene") was shocking to her Canyon contemporaries... but then so was her delight at being loved "so naughty" by Salford's Nash.

A Case of You

Blue's most beloved song is a touchstone of the singer-songwriter moment, a confession of the pain of intimate attachment and the perils of being helplessly drawn to "those ones that ain't afraid". Echoes of Leonard Cohen, another former lover of Mitchell's, are implicit in the song's central metaphor, particularly the line about being "in my blood like holy wine". This is Mitchell at her most desolately solitary, a "lonely painter" in "a box of paints", striving to convince herself that Taylor had touched her soul — and she his.



The Last Time I Saw Richard

Back at the grand piano in A&M's Studio C, Mitchell recalls her old folkie friend Patrick Sky (who died just a month ago). "Richard" himself has settled into a humdrum bourgeois life of TV and dishwashers, leaving Mitchell alone in a dark café ("I don't want nobody coming over to my table"). But the café turns out to be "only a dark cocoon before I get my gorgeous wings and fly..." One might say that *Blue* is itself that dark cocoon. Barney Hoskyns is the author of *Hotel California: Singer-Songwriters and Cocaine Cowboys in the LA Canyons, 1967-1976*, published by Harper Perennial. His new book, *God Is in the Radio*, is published by Omnibus next month