

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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# WILD THINGS RUN FAST

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**"Hot dog darlin'!" New love, simpler songs and Lionel Richie...  
Joni Mitchell enters the '80s. BY GRAEME THOMSON**

**I**N 1980, Joni Mitchell poured considerable resources of time and energy into writing the script, curating the music and taking the lead role in a 15-minute segment of a film anthology called *Love*. Her contribution was one of nine stories written by a series of notable women, including Edna O'Brien, Antonia Fraser and Liv Ullmann. Directed by Swedish auteur Mai Zetterling, Mitchell cast herself as a black male pimp named Art Nouveau, dressed in the same garb in which she appeared on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. The music she chose to accompany her performance was by Miles Davis, but Mitchell also contributed the film's title track, on which she set the famous biblical passage on love, from Corinthians 13, to music. The film, destined from birth to be an arthouse curio, endured a tortuous post-production history and was never officially released, but the themes continued to resonate with Mitchell. *Love* was much on her mind. So was transformation.

The transition from one decade into another is a necessarily arbitrary measure of shifting tastes and trends, but Joni Mitchell's '80s would have a very different trajectory from her '70s. She ended a decade in which she had few peers with the spare, elegantly unanchored *Mingus*, her jazz instincts as overt as they had ever been. She followed it with a traditional means of slate-clearing. The double live album, *Shadows And Light*, recorded in 1979 and released the following year, roamed over her catalogue and marked the culmination of her interaction with Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius. Listening to its sometimes over-generous spotlighting of her fellow players, in hindsight *Shadows And Light*

sounds something like a farewell. It would be her last record with Asylum. Although she owed the company one more album, she left them shortly before the release of *Wild Things Run Fast* to sign with her old friend David Geffen at the newly formed Geffen Records, ending a 10-year association. The world tour that followed her new album in 1983 would be her last. Mitchell was seeking fresh sources of inspiration. She gained encouragement on a six-week writing holiday in the Caribbean in the summer of 1981, where she fell hard for The Police's "De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da", a staple during her frequent visits to the local disco. "My feet loved that record," she said, neatly encapsulating a subtle but pronounced shift away from the cerebral towards the physical.

Perhaps the most significant development was the arrival on the scene of Larry Klein, a 25-year-old American bassist who had played with Wayne Shorter, Freddie Hubbard and Joe Henderson. Shortly into the sessions, he and Mitchell became lovers, their bond cemented over chatty games of pinball on the machine at A&M Studios. His influence on the album steadily grew. "When Joni and I became involved romantically, she wanted my opinions as that project was being finished," Klein told *Jazz Times* in 2007. "We ended up working somewhat as a team." They became husband and wife shortly after the album's release, on November 21, 1982, and he went on to co-produce her next four albums.

Klein provided Mitchell with the spark she felt she needed to complete her new songs satisfactorily. Prior to that, she had been struggling to find the right mix of musicians, and had already recorded some tracks several times before she alighted on Klein and ➤



Mitchell's most direct, structured – and upbeat – set of songs for many years

Blonde ambition:  
Mitchell on the UK  
leg of her world  
tour, 1983

Joni didn't follow up on her idea to use The Police as her backing band, but their influence is apparent

drummer Vinnie Colaiuta as her rhythm section. The cumulative result of these changes was a sleeker, smoother, more obviously contemporary sound. Although Mitchell did not follow through on an initial idea to use The Police as her backing band – they were, perhaps mercifully, busy mixing in Montreal – their influence is apparent in the widely spaced sonic design. “Their rhythmic hybrids, and the positioning of the drums, and the sound of the drums, was one of the main calls out to me to make a more rhythmic LP,” she told *Musician* magazine. Guitars are often used as syncopated punctuation, while Klein’s taut fretless bass dominates several songs. Reggae was another influence, as well as the post-punk directness of Talking Heads and the freeze-dried sophistication of Steely Dan. Lionel Richie appears on two tracks. What jazz inflections there are come with a cocktail cherry on the top; the soul is chilled, and the rock brittle and trebly, with a crisp sheen.

What emerged was her most direct, structured – and upbeat – set of songs for many years. It is not, perhaps, a sound that has aged terribly well, at least in contrast to the more elegant productions of her earlier records. At times, *Wild Things...* seems to herald the sound of coming yuppie-dom with all the depth and lasting sustenance of a frothy cappuccino, but it has considerably more heart than that suggests. As the music veers between uptempo affirmations and more meditative contemplations, so the lyrics combine expressions of profound love – often via some of the most simple, unguarded writing of her career – and more wistful acknowledgements of passing time. In her late thirties, Joni appears preoccupied with the interplay between past and present, keenly aware that everything – friendships, love affairs, cherished neighbourhoods, old values – is in flux. The opening “Chinese Café/Unchained Melody” provides the LP with its tag-line manifesto – “*Nothing lasts for long*” – a thought at once liberating and sad. It’s a lush, languorous, sweetly melodic scene-setter, laying down a marker in terms of mood and message. “*Middle class and we’re middle-aged, wild in the old days*”, she sings. “*Your kids are coming up straight/My child is a stranger, I bore her but I couldn’t raise her*”. The song is entwined with signifiers from those “*old days*”, punctuated by snatches of “*Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*” and “*Unchained Melody*”, as well as a pointed nod to “*Big Yellow Taxi*”: “*Putting up sleek concrete/Tearing the old landmarks down now/Paving over brave little parks/Ripping off Indian land again*”. As they do throughout, universal themes underscore the deeply personal. The song’s retrieval of “*Unchained Melody*” begins as ’60s nostalgia and ends as an expression of naked commitment: “*I need your love, I need your love...*”

Many times on *Wild Things...*, Mitchell aspires to nothing more complicated than to sing her newfound happiness to the world. Indeed, there are moments where love

seems to have deprived her of her better judgement, as on a purely anodyne cover of the 1957 Elvis Presley hit “(You’re So Square) Baby, I Don’t Care”. “*Solid Love*” is better, and far lighter on its feet than its title suggests. It’s a perky filigree, a hint of a pop-reggae rhythm in its choppy guitar, the warm breeze of her Caribbean holiday filling its sails. She sounds quite astoundingly happy: “*We got a chance – hot dog darlin’! – no more fly-by-night romance*”. Where once love came like a disease, now it arrives as a blessing. “*You’re my hope, you’re my happiness*”, she sings. It’s an almost artless expression of joy at two souls who have caught a break in a Hollywood “*where hearts are going under*”. “*Underneath The Streetlight*” is a sligher yet even sparkier declaration – “*I love ya!*” – of devotion.

Yet without wishing to deny Mitchell all the good things in life, the album is better when she’s surfing the ambivalences, ambiguities and insecurities. “*Man To Man*” is featherlight synthetic soul music, a slightly ominous musing on her romantic wanderlust – “*A lot of good guys gone through my door*” – and her fear at committing to a new love: “*When I saw you standing there I was scared/I thought, oh I hope he can care*”. “*You Dream Flat Tires*” is an overly busy little rocker, dominated by Michael Landau’s shrieking guitar, Klein’s syncopated bass groove, and Mitchell’s metaphor of love as a fast car, which her paramour seems to wish to take off the road for a while. As she spits out lines berating his romantic cowardice, Lionel Richie is tasked with making the case for the male respondent: “*Woman she bounce back easy/But a man could break both his legs*”. “*Be Cool*”, on the other hand, is a finger-snapping, wryly amusing note-to-self to keep emotions in check and worries out of sight, no matter what the provocation. “*Don’t get jealous/Don’t get over-zealous/Keep your cool/Don’t whine/Kiss off that flaky Valentine/You’re nobody’s fool*”. This is the sharp end of new love, albeit often hidden beneath a cloak of breezy positivity. It flashes its blade more than a few times on the album. The title track is a brief, rather inelegant hunk of art-house rock, with squalls of electric guitar from Steve Lukather and frequent time shifts. A slightly hysterical tale of two new lovers hurtling along on the

## CRITICS’ VERDICT

“There is the persistent suggestion that she’s slumming in the cheapest throes of dime novel romance, and it’s ludicrous that the progenitor of the scorched skyline of the *Hejira* set should want to settle for something so facile.”

RICHARD COOK, NME, NOVEMBER 27, 1982

“There are no immediately noteworthy classics here, though several tracks pack something of a likeable punch on first hearing... She is making music with the realistic and graceful perception of someone who realises that this is 1982.”

CAROL CLERK, MELODY MAKER, NOVEMBER 27, 1982

squealing tyres of their passions, both aware that they’re made of combustible material, it ends on a note of vulnerability: “*What makes you run, wild thing?*”

The muffled warning cries in these songs are rendered explicit on “*Ladies’ Man*”, a slice of slick blue-eyed soul, on which Mitchell pulls no punches in expressing her reservations about her new beau. The music complements the uneasy mood. “*Ladies’ Man*” has a queasy early-’80s Hollywood edge, reminiscent of Steely Dan in its bleached bad vibes. “*Couldn’t you just love me like you love cocaine*”, sings Mitchell, her heightened emotions leaving her suddenly exposed in the face of an unreliable lover playing “*cocaine head games*”. It’s neither the first nor the last time drugs seep in. There are ambiguous “*fast tracks in the powder white*” on the title track, and on “*Moon At The Window*”, the “*rattle rattle rattle, in the spoon and the glass*”.

The latter happens to be the album’s one unequivocal moment of Class A writing. It finds Mitchell returning to a jazzier sensibility, a meandering meditation of burbling bass, whispering brushes and Wayne Shorter’s conversational soprano sax lines, beautifully evoking what Klein later described as a “*musical argument between a man and a woman*”. It’s a perfect setting for a late-night drama in which Mitchell appears as a woman cast into darkness by the end of a relationship and life’s other sundry iniquities, haunted by “*ghosts of the future/Phantoms of the past*”. Her light has been stolen, and all that remains is the moon, casting illumination while also throwing a mocking light on the scene. She sings with her lightest, loosest inflections, buoyed by some wonderfully tight harmonies.

*Wild Things...* ends with the title song from that ill-fated film from 1980. A soothing jazz meditation, dominated by Shorter’s lyrical horn and Joni’s calm, clear vocal, “*Love*” is a fairly faithful interpretation of the oft-quoted passage from Corinthians 13: “*As a child I spoke as a child/I thought and I understood as a child/But when I became a woman/I put away childish things*”. And so Mitchell’s 11th album circles back to the opening themes of “*Chinese Café*”, acknowledging the never-ending need to change, and the mastery of one human emotion above all others. Love and transformation, right to the end. ●

## TRACKMARKS WILD THINGS RUNFAST

1	Chinese Café/ Unchained Melody ★★★★	9	Man To Man ★★★★	(vocals, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, piano, electric piano), Larry Klein (bass), Michael Landau (electric guitar), Steve Lukather (electric guitar), John Guerin (drums, backing vocals), Vinnie Colaiuta (drums), Larry Williams (Prophet synthesiser, tenor saxophone), Russell Ferrante (Oberheim synthesiser), Wayne	Shorter (soprano saxophone), Larry Carlton (guitar), Victor Feldman (percussion), Kim Hutchcroft (baritone saxophone), Lionel Richie (vocals), Charles Valentino, Howard Kinney, James Taylor, Kenny Rankin, Robert De La Garza, Skip Cottrell (backing vocals)
2	Wild Things Run Fast ★★	10	Underneath The Streetlight ★★★		
3	Ladies’ Man ★★★	11	Love ★★★★		
4	Moon At The Window ★★★★			Label: Geffen	
5	Solid Love ★★★			Recorded at: A&M Studios and Devonshire Studios, Los Angeles	
6	Be Cool ★★★			Produced by: Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein	
7	(You’re So Square) Baby I Don’t Care ★★			Personnel: Joni Mitchell	
8	You Dream Flat Tires ★★★★				Highest chart position: UK 32; US 25