

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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# TAMING THE TIGER

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Lost cats, rediscovered daughters and the love of a new synth guitar. The end – perhaps... **BY JOHN LEWIS**

**G**UITARISTS have long been fascinated by Joni Mitchell's unorthodox guitar tunings. Old folkies might use one or two alternate tunings – the DADGAD, the dropped D – but Mitchell has built up a veritable encyclopaedia of nearly 60 over her 50-year career. Guitar magazines, internet forums and the jazz courses at music colleges are filled with debates about which arcane tuning she has used for which song, with countless tablatures and mathematical charts doing the rounds.

It must be demanding enough for those who have to keep up with her in the studio. But, for the guitar techs at live dates who had to keep her supplied with differently tuned instruments for each song – the DGDGBD, the GCGCEG, the BF#BEAE and so on – it must have been a nightmare. It was one of the reasons why she gave up touring in 1983. “The guitar is intended to be played in standard tuning; the neck is calibrated and everything,” she told *Guitar* magazine in 1996. “Twiddling it around isn't good for the neck; it unsettles the intonation. I have very good pitch, so if I'm never quite in tune, that's frustrating.”

It's why, when she played the 1995 New Orleans Jazz Festival – her first live date in more than a decade – Mitchell used a digital instrument: the Roland VG8. The actual instrument looks like a normal guitar and is physically set to standard tuning (EADGBE) but, with a flick of a switch on the effects box, the strings can be assigned to any number of tunings from song to song, or even mid-song. It made the laborious task of touring

infinitely easier for Mitchell and her band, and it was used throughout her 1998 US dates.

For better and worse, nearly every track on *Taming The Tiger* seems to have been inspired by the possibilities offered by this “virtual guitar”. And it's not just in tunings – the same technology can be used to trigger sounds that you'd usually associate with other instruments. For instance, the opening track, “Harlem In Havana” starts with the digital burlblings of what sounds like a heavily mutated steel drum, or a marimba. All of these voicings, however, are actually synth sounds being triggered by Mitchell's new digital toy, the VG8. “It's like a marimba,” says Mitchell, “but it's not like any marimba part you've ever heard because it's fingerpicked. Meanwhile, the bass string is almost atonal and sounds like a didgeridoo...” She describes the Roland guitar on the sleeve credits as her “guitar orchestra”.

“Harlem In Havana” was apparently inspired by a very young Joni witnessing Leon Claxton's Afro-Cuban circus when it visited her home town of Saskatoon in the '50s. Her parents had forbidden her from visiting, and the lyrics relish the circus's forbidden status (“*Hootchie-cootchie! Auntie Ruthie would've cried if she knew we were on the inside!*”). Despite recalling an event that happened in the 1950s, the sonic language being used couldn't be more forward looking. “*Step right in! Silver spangles, see 'em dangle in the farm boy's eyes*”, she hollers, the “*silver spangles*” mirrored by the futuristic metallic sounds made by the synth guitar. It's a curious collision of styles – Brian Blade eases ➤

JONI  
MITCHELL  
TAMING THE TIGER



Nearly every track  
seems to be inspired  
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“virtual guitar”

through a swinging shuffle rhythm, Wayne Shorter sprays his soprano sax in the gaps, while Mitchell lays punky thrash guitars over her digital chimes. Absolutely nothing released in 1998 sounded anything like this.

Even more remarkable is the album's swaggering standout track, "Lead Balloon", probably Mitchell's finest flirtation with heavy rock. Here Mitchell's chiming digital guitar duels with a low-end heavy metal solo from veteran session man Michael Landau, who often sounds like he's been patched in from a different song. It leads to some delightful, Stravinsky-like clashing harmonies that are exploited by Wayne Shorter's sly soprano sax solo. The joyous discordancy seems to suit the lyrics, which start with the female narrator shouting "Kiss my ass!" before pouring a drink over a man. "An angry man is an angry man, but an angry woman... bitch!"

Another highlight here is "Man From Mars", one of Mitchell's finest ballads, and one that has already become something of a jazz standard, inspiring covers by the likes of David Sanborn, Jacqui Dankworth and Chaka Khan. The song was originally written for the 1996 film *Grace Of My Heart*, which was loosely based on the life of Carole King and which featured other fine Brill Building pastiches, including Bacharach and Costello's "God Give Me Strength". The film version, sung by Kristen Vigard and lip-synched by actress Illeana Douglas, keeps us in the '60s, with spartan backing on piano, pedal steel and banjo. Mitchell's own version takes us into digital territory, with soft, metallic synthetic voicings that recall the gentle futurism of Peter Gabriel's "Don't Give Up". But it's the contours of the melody that make this song so memorable, with Mitchell floating and improvising over the chords, like a Coleman Hawkins tenor sax solo. Even the daftest lyrics ("I can't get through the day/Without at least one big boo-hoo") can tug at the heartstrings, so it's rather sobering to discover that the song was actually inspired, not by some grand romantic split, but by Joni Mitchell's cat Nietzsche, who disappeared for two weeks.

"Love Puts On A New Face" is a drumless ballad that recalls the Pastorius/Mitchell duels on 1976's *Hejira*, and has a similar airborne quality to many of those tracks, with Greg Leisz's pedal steel strongly reminiscent of Larry Carlton's liquid lead guitar lines on tracks like "Amelia" or "A Strange Boy". It's one of the six songs that features the loyal Shorter on soprano, who floats in and around the gaps in the melody. "He crawls over notes and has a relationship with them," says Mitchell. "He is always welcome to scribble all over my songs."

The same interplay between Greg Leisz's spacey pedal steel and Mitchell's heavily chorused guitar comes on "No Apologies", this time with Brian Blade providing delicate percussion duties. It starts with a

## CRITICS' VERDICT

"The melodic invention and intelligent lyricism full of allusion and metaphor is as dazzling as ever... And those elusively beguiling, textured Mitchell melodies still seem to use chords no-one else has yet discovered."

NIGEL WILLIAMSON, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 1998

reference to the horrific true story of two US soldiers kidnapping and raping a 12-year-old Japanese girl while stationed in Okinawa in September 1995. The line "He said the soldiers erred in judgement/They should have hired a hooker" is based on the shocking statement by US Navy Admiral Richard CMacke, commander of the US Pacific Command. Mitchell, however, uses this as a springboard for an unfocused piece of socio-political hectoring, her scattershot anger quickly dissipated across an endless range of problems that span the world. "Lawyers and loan sharks are laying America to waste", she says. "As drug lords buy up the banks/And warlords radiate the oceans/Ecosystems fail". As the *Village Voice* critic Steven Anderson pointed out, "When Mitchell intends to be angry, she ends up sounding merely perturbed."

Of course, we're all familiar with the paradox of choice: how technology, in pursuit of endless variety, can often stifle us and paralyse us into repetition. And, weirdly, the limitless novelty afforded by the Roland VG8 seems to have had this effect on Mitchell. It's as if she has run through the countless guitar effects at her disposal and settled on just one of them – a heavily chorused, slightly flanged voicing that recalls the opening chords of Prince's "Purple Rain". It's used on more than half of *Taming The Tiger*'s tracks. Even more problematically, six of the 11 tracks on the album are in exactly the same key – C major – something that might have been pointed out to Mitchell if she'd had a producer offering constructive criticism.

It leads to a real sense of sameness, especially as we go into the last half of the album, where most of the tracks are virtually solo, drumless exercises, with Mitchell providing very similar accompaniment for herself on synth guitar, keyboards and bass. What rescues these songs, however, are the unusually personal lyrics. The title track seems to allude to the Grammy award ceremony that Mitchell attended in February 1996, when her album *Turbulent Indigo* was a surprise winner of the big prize, Best Pop Vocal Album. It starts with her leaving the auditorium to have a cigarette, in a parking lot surrounded by rented cars. "I'm a runaway from the record biz", she muses, over layers of synth guitar and washes of synthesised noise, "From the

Lady in red,  
LA, 1998

hoods in the hood and the whiny white kids/Boring!" It's not usually interesting to hear artists complain about the music industry, and often rather undignified for musicians of a certain age to complain about the next generation, but the image of Joni Mitchell being judged alongside music titans like Alanis Morissette, Babyface and Hootie And The Blowfish is an amusing one. "As the radio blared so bland/Every disc a poker chip, every song just a one-night stand/Formula music, girly guile/Genuine junk food for juveniles". (The song's backing is effectively reprised as an instrumental on the 'hidden' final track, "Tiger Bones".)

"The Crazy Cries Of Love" is a rare co-write, with lyrics by her then boyfriend Don Freed. One of the few songs on the album with a full band – featuring Larry Klein, Brian Blade and Greg Leisz rattling through a fast 6/8 swing rhythm – it's a playful and tender song of idealised love that recalls one of Mitchell's own lyrics: "They were laughing, they were dancing in the rain/They knew their love was a strong one". Freed also appears as an incidental character on two further tracks. Mitchell describes "Face Lift" as "another morbid little Christmas song" and it is reputedly

She lays punky thrash guitar over digital chimes. Nothing released in 1998 sounded like this



based on her returning to Saskatoon for Christmas and feuding with her mother, who was apparently annoyed at Freed's presence ("She made me pay/For gleaming with Donald down her street"). It's a revealing little miniature that suggests that even a fiftysomething megastar can get told off by her mother ("She said, 'Did you come home to disgrace us?' I said, 'Why is this joy not allowed? For God's sake, I'm middle-aged, Mama!']"). It's one of the most confessional songs that Mitchell has ever written.

"Stay In Touch" was also inspired by Mitchell's burgeoning love affair with Freed. However, Mitchell has agreed that the references to the tentative start of a relationship ("Our roles aren't clear/So we mustn't rush") seemed to chime perfectly with the much publicised story of the reunion with her daughter Kilauren Gibb. Mitchell had given birth to her in 1965 as a 21-year-old art student, after a brief relationship with an artist called Brad MacMath, and travelled to Toronto to put her up for adoption. Gibb, who was adopted by an upper-class Toronto family and went on to model internationally, was reunited with Mitchell in March 1997, in a fanfare of publicity. The words "Part of

this is permanent/Part of this is passing/ So we must be loyal and wary/Not to give away too much/Until we build a firm foundation" would prove to be instructive in Mitchell's problematic relationship with her daughter. Musically, it's a minimal setting, and instead of Wayne Shorter it's Mark Isham who provides a Miles Davis-inspired *obbligato* on a Harmon-muted trumpet.

Last of all – before the hidden final track – is a rare cover version, an old waltz entitled "My Best To You". Written by Gene Willadsen and Isham Jones, it was originally recorded in 1942 by the slightly corny big band crooner Jimmy Cash, and has since been interpreted by dozens of

artists, including Lulu Belle & Scotty, Slim Whitman, Eddy Howard, David Frizzell and the Hanson Family Singers. Mitchell, a fan of old westerns, says she first heard the 1949 version being sung by The Sons Of The Pioneers, the country & western troubadours who appeared in dozens of oaters in the '30s and '40s. Greg Leisz's pedal-steel guitar is in keeping with cowboy spirit, but Mitchell's backing – all arpeggiated synths, burbling bells and wobbly fretless bass – is defiantly futuristic. If this was going to be her final album – as many thought at the time – Mitchell was going to end it while looking both into the past and the future. ●

## TRACKMARKS TAMING THE TIGER

- |                                 |                              |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Harlem In Havana ★★★★★        | 7 The Crazy Cries Of Love ★★ |
| 2 Man From Mars ★★★★★           | 8 Stay in Touch ★★           |
| 3 Love Puts On A New Face ★★★★★ | 9 Face Lift ★★               |
| 4 Lead Balloon ★★★★★            | 10 My Best to You ★★         |
| 5 No Apologies ★★★★★            | 11 Tiger Bones ★★            |
| 6 Taming The Tiger ★★           |                              |
- Label: Reprise  
Produced by: Joni Mitchell

Recorded at: Joni Mitchell's home studio, Bel Air, LA  
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (voice, guitars, guitar orchestra, bass, keyboards), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Greg Leisz (pedal steel), Brian Blade (drums),

Larry Klein (bass), Michael Landau (low lead guitar on "Lead Balloon"), Mark Isham (trumpet on "Stay In Touch"), Femi Jiya (backing vocals on "Harlem In Havana")  
Highest chart position: UK 57; US 75