

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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SHINE

RELEASED 25 SEPTEMBER 2007

The last act. Bad dreams delivered with grace and beauty – and a valedictory ride in the Big Yellow Taxi. **BY JASON ANDERSON**

ARRIVING nine years after her last album of new material with *Taming The Tiger*, and five years after her second classics-gone-orchestral collection *Travelogue*, the appearance of *Shine* was a surprise to everyone – and possibly to Joni Mitchell most of all. It wasn't her style to go back on her word, having made it perfectly clear in 2002 that *Travelogue* would be her final recorded work. What's more, she had plenty of other ways she wanted to spend her seventh decade.

One was painting, a passion that had long outranked music anyway – as she said to an interviewer in 2000, "I have always thought of myself as a painter derailed by circumstance." Such was her productivity, she was able to present 60 new works in *Green Flag Song*, a collection that opened at Los Angeles' Lev Moross Gallery in November 2006 and was her first major exhibition since 2000.

Her second priority was the family she rediscovered when she met Kilauren Gibb, the daughter she'd given up for adoption when she was an art student in 1965. Like so many of Mitchell's relationships, this too would have its tensions and problems, but she revelled in her unexpected new role as a grandmother to Gibb's kids. Otherwise, Mitchell – content not to be tethered to any man since her divorce from Larry Klein in 1994 – divided her time between her homes in California and Vancouver, where she liked watching old movies on TV and, of course, smoking.

That should've been the end of Mitchell and the

music business, especially since she'd fulfilled the last of her Warners contract with *Both Sides Now* and *Travelogue*. But in late 2006 she admitted to an *Ottawa Citizen* reporter that she was working on a new album, though she swore that no record company would ever make any more money off one of her releases. ("The record labels are criminally insane," she told *The Citizen*, "ugly, screwed up, crooked, uncreative, selfish.")

There was also word of a new dance work by the Alberta Ballet that would be set to nine Mitchell songs, including two new originals, an update of "Big Yellow Taxi" and an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's "If". Co-created by Mitchell and choreographer Jean Grand-Maître, *The Fiddle And The Drum* prominently featured her artwork and set and video design when it premiered in Calgary in February 2007.

Then in July came news that her new music would be made available by the same people who brought you the Venti Chai Tea Latte. Three years before, Starbucks had approached Mitchell about curating a compilation of favourite songs for the Artist's Choice series on the coffee chain's Hear Music imprint. Her subsequent immersion in other people's music – with songs by Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis and The New Radicals all making the cut for the collection that appeared in 2005 – got her gears going again. She'd also enjoyed delving into her own back catalogue for the mid-decade trio of compilations for those horrible record labels she used to contend ➤



JONI MITCHELL

SHINE

Joni Mitchell

Shine

The appearance of *Shine* was a surprise to everyone – and perhaps to Joni Mitchell most of all

with: *Dreamland* and *Songs Of A Prairie Girl* for Rhino/Warner and *The Beginning Of Survival* for Geffen.

As for new material, she claimed that one haiku was all she'd written in the previous 10 years. Then one evening in Vancouver, after watching seals swimming and a blue heron soaring over a perfect Pacific Ocean vista, she went to her piano and composed "One Night Last Summer", the beatific instrumental that became the opener for the album no-one expected. "There was such a sense of well-being and gratitude," she'd later say of the moment that the dam broke.

Despite the persistence of health issues (including her battle with the mysterious condition known as Morgellons disease), she somehow found the energy to prepare a dance production, an art exhibition and a new album all at once. "I'm doing the work of four 20-year-olds," the 63-year-old bragged to *The New York Times* in February 2007, back when she wasn't sure if the album would be called *Shine* or 'Strange Birds Of Appetite'. "I've never worked so hard in my life." She was particularly pleased to combine her music and artwork in a piece that demonstrated her love of dance, "something that's never really been publicly expressed". She'd long resented the opinion that her songs were no good for dancing.

There was also a fourth project. Produced for the Canadian network Bravo and partially financed by Mitchell, the television version of the ballet may have been her most satisfying achievement of all, since it "transcended stylistic problems that I've had to deal with". She didn't even mind not making her money back. (Sadly, the Alberta Ballet's plans for another ballet with Mitchell in 2014 were cancelled when she was unable to whittle her shortlist of 42 songs down to a number that could be feasibly performed in *The Fiddle And The Drum*'s more love themed follow-up.)

Yet for all the pride and excitement Mitchell exuded as these works entered the world, the content itself expressed a much darker perspective. Consisting of photographic images that Mitchell snapped of her malfunctioning TV and then digitally modified, artistically embellished and arranged into triptychs, *Green Flag Song* offered an unremittingly grim vision of America's post-9/11 war on terror along with many other haunting sights of suffering, degradation and destruction. She described the theme of the show as "war, revolution and torture" – sales for mugs and T-shirts in the gallery gift shop were presumably slow.

War was also the central fixation in *The Fiddle And The Drum*, which combined the dancers' sometimes militaristic movements with many of the same images and some of her angriest and most caustic songs of the previous two

CRITICS' VERDICT

"There's an elegiac beauty to these tracks, Mitchell seeming ready to leave behind this angry, overcrowded world. But they fail to dramatise the predicament, and that's always been her strength as a writer."

STEPHEN TROUSSÉ, UNCUT, OCTOBER 2007

decades, including *Turbulent Indigo*'s "Sex Kills" and *Dog Eat Dog*'s "The Three Great Stimulants".

The lyrical content of the eight original new songs on *Shine* was often no rosier. After opening the album with the lilting, Debussy-like "One Week Last Summer", Mitchell gets straight down to business with "This Place", a lamentation for the devastation of the environment around her once-pristine West Coast retreats. "Money makes the trees come down", she sang in the lower-register warble familiar from the revised classics on *Travelogue* and *Both Sides Now*. "It makes mountains into molehills, big money kicks the wide wide world around".

Over the plaintive piano figure of "If I Had A Heart", she further decries the state of the world and the religiosity used to justify injustices and atrocities: "Holy war, genocide, suicide, hate and cruelty", she sings in the opening verse. "How can this be holy? If I had a heart I'd cry". She later complains how all this pain and horror "makes you feel so feeble now", though as much as her voice has changed owing to her tobacco habit and various laryngeal complaints, she doesn't sound it.

The machismo, ignorance and war-mongering ways of President Bush and his hawkish acolytes come under fire in "Strong And Wrong". Mitchell can't help but wonder how, even after thousands of years of civilisation, we humans are "still worshipping our own ego" and using "shock and awe" as its ultimate ethos. The number of things worthy of her ire increase once again on *Shine*'s title track, on which she targets everything from the "evaporating seas" and "Frankenstein technologies" to the Catholic Church and "asshole" drivers who run red lights while talking on their cellphones.

But as was not the case for so many of the songs Mitchell wrote after her political awakening with *Dog Eat Dog*, such outpourings of rage and rancour do not dispel the grace and beauty of their successors on *Shine*. Evidently continuing to compose on piano after her breakthrough with "One Week Last Summer", Mitchell's playing is emotive and enthralling throughout. With a thoughtful arrangement that supports her piano with horns, synthesisers,

samples of strings and Greg Leisz's pedal steel, "Bad Dreams" sounds so exquisite that no amount of spite in the lyrics can detract from the song's sheer loveliness.

Just as well judged are the contributions by Larry Klein on bass and guitar, Bob Sheppard on soprano and alto sax, and drummer Brian Blade. The latter's subtle rhythmic underpinning for "If I Had A Heart" and the title track (which also includes some picking by James Taylor) confirms Blade's status as Mitchell's most sensitive and skilful musical collaborator in the final decade of her recording career.

The more she's able to depart from the dyspeptic perspective of *Shine*'s most political material, the better the songs get, too. Her love of those old movies on TV surfaces strongly on two standouts. Inspired by John Huston's 1964 film version of Tennessee Williams' play about a defrocked priest's misadventures on a bus trip in Mexico, "Night Of The Iguana" boasts the album's most startling and adventurous musical setting, Mitchell situating a wry sketch of Richard Burton's lead preacher character amid a murky, menacing swell of synths, a gloriously distorted guitar sound and a mild mariachi rhythm. Mitchell said she didn't remember the name of the movie for "Hana", but it's probably *White Banners*, a 1938 melodrama about a poor Irish woman who arrives in a Midwestern town and ingratiates herself with a family there while concealing the true reason for her arrival: the desire to see the son she was forced to give up for adoption years before. Though it's a plotline with obvious personal resonance for Mitchell, the song is airy and playful rather than pained, with Sheppard's sax and her vocal line darting in and around programmed beats.

Another work that resonated just as strongly for her was "If–", a poem that Rudyard Kipling originally wrote in 1895 as a tribute to Leander Starr Jameson, widely regarded as the epitome of civilised manhood and fortitude in colonial-era Britain. Though she loved many of the lines, she found some too macho, as you might expect of a poem written from a soldier's perspective. Introducing a "female principle" to Kipling's poetry, she changed the last part of "If we can fill the journey/Of a minute/With 60 seconds' worth of distance run/Then you'll be a man, my son" to "With 60 seconds' worth of wonder and delight/Then the Earth is yours and everything that's in it". Such amendments also enhance the flow of her playing and singing, resulting in a supple, jazzy treatment that's as entrancing as the most mellifluous sequences of *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*.

The delightful rendition of "Big Yellow Taxi" is another respite from *Shine*'s heavy weather. Her pioneering eco-anthem became part of *The Fiddle And*

Evidently continuing to compose on piano, Mitchell's playing is emotive and enthralling throughout

Grand dame:
at the Canadian
Songwriters Hall
of Fame Gala, Toronto,
January 2007



The Drum when Grande-Maitre told Mitchell that their ballet needed an encore. She chose to revisit “Big Yellow Taxi” and emphasise its element of humour. Starting with a doo-wop pattern that she liked, she lightens it further with a “very French-circus-sounding” arrangement complete with the wheezes of an accordion sample. Investing it with a joyful vocal performance, she was understandably pleased about how well it worked for the ballet (“It dances perfect without drums,” she says). Even so, she believed the song’s warning would fall on ears that were just as deaf as they’d been in 1970. “It’s taken people a long time to see that we have to cut back on our electricity,” she later wrote of the song, “but we won’t.”

Thankfully, the yellow-shirted

dancers don’t seem too concerned about humankind’s imminent doom as they cavort for one last time in *The Fiddle And The Drum*. It’s a telling moment when a serious-faced female dancer wearing a businessman’s overcoat and toting a briefcase speed-walks back and forth through the company. Though she

momentarily cows them, they don’t allow her to spoil their fun. The dark and dour concerns on Joni’s mind evidently lose the same battle with *Shine*’s counterforces of lightness, resulting in a more luminescent and pleasurable sort of swansong than anyone had a right to expect. ●

TRACKMARKS SHINE

1. One Week Last Summer ★★★★★
2. This Place ★★★
3. If I Had A Heart ★★★★★
4. Hana ★★★★★
5. Bad Dreams ★★★
6. Big Yellow Taxi (2007) ★★★★★

7. Night Of The Iguana ★★★★★
8. Strong And Wrong ★★
9. Shine ★★★★★
10. If ★★★★★

Label: Hear Music
Produced by: Joni

Mitchell
Recorded at: Castle Oaks Productions, Calabasas, California
Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, piano, guitar, various instrumentation), Bob Sheppard (alto and

soprano sax), Greg Leisz (pedal steel), Brian Blade (drums), Larry Klein (bass, guitar), Paulinho Da Costa (percussion), James Taylor (guitar)
Highest chart position: UK 36; US 14