

SHINE

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*Mitchell's last album contained her first new songs since *Taming The Tiger*, serenely accepting the world's ills without fear or rage. But did she exit the stage with a career highlight?*



K NOWING THAT THE Grande Dame of Rock's Great Generation was more Norma Desmond than Greta Garbo, few fans believed her when in 2002 Joni Mitchell announced her flounce from a music industry that cared only for "golf and rappers".

She'd released no new songs since 1998's *Taming The Tiger*, claiming that the reappearance of daughter

Shining: Joni and Wayne Shorter (right) at an All-Star Tribute To Herbie Hancock (at piano), Kodak Theatre, LA, October 28, 2007.

Kilauren, given away for adoption when she was 21, had depleted her songwriting gift. (Though she took great joy in her grandchildren, the mother-daughter relationship would prove fractious.)

Nor was her three-octave voice what it was thanks to a compressed larynx and nodes on her vocal cords (she refused to admit that smoking since the age of 10 might not have helped). But it would transpire that ➤

JONI MITCHELL

SHINE



JONI MITCHELL'S

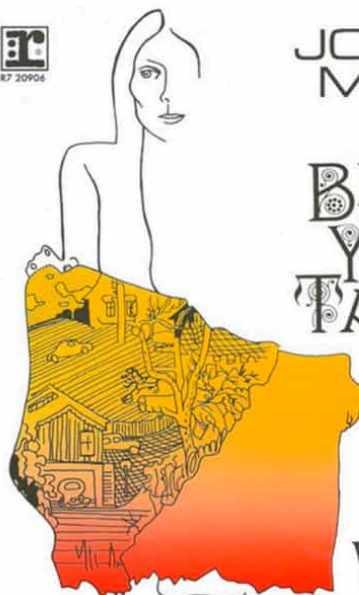
THE FIDDLE AND THE DRUM
BALLET SOUNDTRACK

CO-CREATED WITH JEAN GRAND-MAITRE
AND THE ALBERTA BALLET



JONI
MITCHELL

BIG
YELLOW
TAXI



Woodstock

treatment and time off were great healers. Had that not been so, *Shine* might have remained as it began: a collection of sumptuous instrumentals, tunes that came from her happy place.

That happy place was a British Columbia shoreline property north of Vancouver she'd owned since 1969, where she'd written most of *For The Roses* and *Court And Spark*. Communing with nature one day barefoot in the sun – in *Shine*'s sleevenote she vividly recalled the salt air, roses in bloom, heron, seals, bees and crows – she felt inspired for the first time in 10 years that evening to sit down at her spinet and “my fingers found these patterns that expressed what words could not. This song poured out while a brown bear rummaged through my garbage cans.”

ONE WEEK LAST Summer (retitled from the original *Gratitude*) never did find words, and with Bob Sheppard's alto saxophone and Joni's synthesizer colouring – she describes her musical process in the painterly terms of her other great artistic endeavours on canvas – the instrumental beautifully set the mood for the album.

“There's no rhyme or reason to her creative drive,” says album bassist Larry Klein, who despite their marriage ending 12 years before continued working with Joni. “She'll go through a period where nothing is coming, then all of a sudden she'll just feel like writing again. After she gets about three or four songs, she'll start feeling, ‘Oh, this is actually the new album.’”

“I think it was satisfying for her to get back into her routine of staying out all night in the studio, smoking cigarettes and making music. Songs started coming, some born out of experimentation with a simple Yamaha synth, some written conventionally on guitar or piano.”

TRACKS



Side 1

One Week Last Summer

This Place

If I Had A Heart

Hana

Bad Dreams



Side 2

Big Yellow Taxi (2007)

Night Of The Iguana

Strong And Wrong

Shine

If

Every song started as a melody with retrofitted lyrics sharing themes and moods. “I did a lot of weeping for what's happening to the Earth when I was in my twenties,” she told Starpulse, accompanying the album's original release via branches of Starbucks. “I could see a lot of things coming. Now I feel kind of inoculated to what people are now just discovering. If they're waking up and seeing it, they're in pain and they're feeling helpless.”

HER OWN LIFE a saga of illness, anger, pain and healing, on almost every song Joni bestows the blessing of serenity upon our self-destructive greed, weakness and credulity. *Shine*'s centrepiece is its title track, rooted, she thought, in the Sunday school song *This Little Light Of Mine* but over its creation emerging as a secular prayer set to music of transcendent beauty: “Shine on the dazzling darkness that mends us when we sleep,” she sings. “Shine on what we throw away and what we keep.”

Her voice is never raised and those trademark suspended chords of doubt and enquiry enrich the reverie on a tour de force; *Shine* itemises humanity's irretrievably overdrawn account both environmental and spiritual – not for the first time she has the church in her sights – with a loving beauty that accepts it all without fear or rage.

Also perhaps sparked by a childhood memory awoken by her grandchildren — the Tin Man's song *If I Only Had A Heart* from *The Wizard Of Oz* — *If I Had A Heart* laments, “Holy war/Genocide/Suicide/Hate and cruelty... How can this be holy?/If I had a heart, I'd cry.” No less hushed and hallowed, *Bad Dreams* and *Strong And Wrong* also conjure the bitter heresy running throughout the album: perhaps we as a species cannot but perish by our own grasping hands, so let us at least go gracefully to our doom.

Hana denies us the hope of religious salvation, and spiritual crisis is the theme of *Night Of The Iguana*, her retelling of the 1961 Tennessee Williams play about a defrocked American priest down Mexico way in a lush, humid, polyrhythmic extravaganza featuring some of her most virtuoso guitar. Though Joni says she based the song on the 1964 John Huston movie starring Richard Burton, Larry Klein remembers them enjoying a stage production starring Richard Chamberlain and Raymond Massey: “She was always inspired by Tennessee Williams' work.”

For all her empathy with our fallen state, Joni could not resist the told-you-so satisfaction of reprising 1970's eco-warning *Big Yellow Taxi* (originally rearranged as an encore for the ballet *The Fiddle And The Drum* she devised with choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre for the Alberta Ballet incorporating a number of her songs old and new), heightening the original's counter-intuitive skittishness with a “very French-circus sounding” arrangement including accordion.

Because “it resonated with me”, the album's final track is her setting of Rudyard Kipling's poem of philosophical advice, *If*, rewriting “macho” lines “to get the feminine principle into the poetry”, thus ending – perhaps her last words to us in song – “You'll be alright/'Cos you've got the fight/You've got the insight.” ●



Evergreen: Joni at the *Shine* album launch, New York, September 25, 2007.