

# Classic Album

## JONI MITCHELL

### *BLUE*

On her career-defining fourth album, Joni Mitchell laid herself bare, revealing an emotional honesty that no singer-songwriter had dared attempt before. Almost five decades on, as *Neil Crossley* explains, *Blue* is widely regarded as an outstanding creative achievement and one of the greatest albums of all time...



**A**s epic romances go, it couldn't get much more idyllic or intense. Creatively disenchanted Mancunian pop star with a penchant for close harmony travels 5,400 miles west to throw his lot in with like-minded balladeers, helps create an album that sells by the shedload and in the process meets flaxen-haired Canadian singer-songwriter with an unparalleled creative gift. She writes songs about him, he writes songs about her, happiness abounds and their records go on to sell millions. They share a house, a piano and cats. The cats even make it into one of his songs. Together, the couple light up a new generation of dressed-down LA glitterati, fiercely driven singer-songwriters who live in a blissed-out rural paradise, Laurel Canyon, elevated high above the rush and smog of the city. The couple talk about their plans. They talk about marriage. And then... it all goes wrong.

"I had sworn my heart to Graham in a way that I didn't think was possible for myself and he wanted me to marry him," recalled Joni Mitchell in Mark Bego's biography *Joni Mitchell: Both Sides Now*, about Graham Nash, ex-guitarist of The Hollies and by then, one-third of southern Californian supergroup Crosby, Stills & Nash. "I'd agreed to it, and then I just started thinking: 'My grandmother was a frustrated poet and musician and she kicked the kitchen door off the hinges.' And I thought about my paternal grandmother, who wept for the last time at 14 behind a barn because she wanted a piano and they said: 'Dry your eyes you silly girl, you'll never have a piano.' And I thought: 'Maybe I am the one who got the gene, who has to make it happen for these two women.' And much as I loved and

## Graham Nash on *Blue*

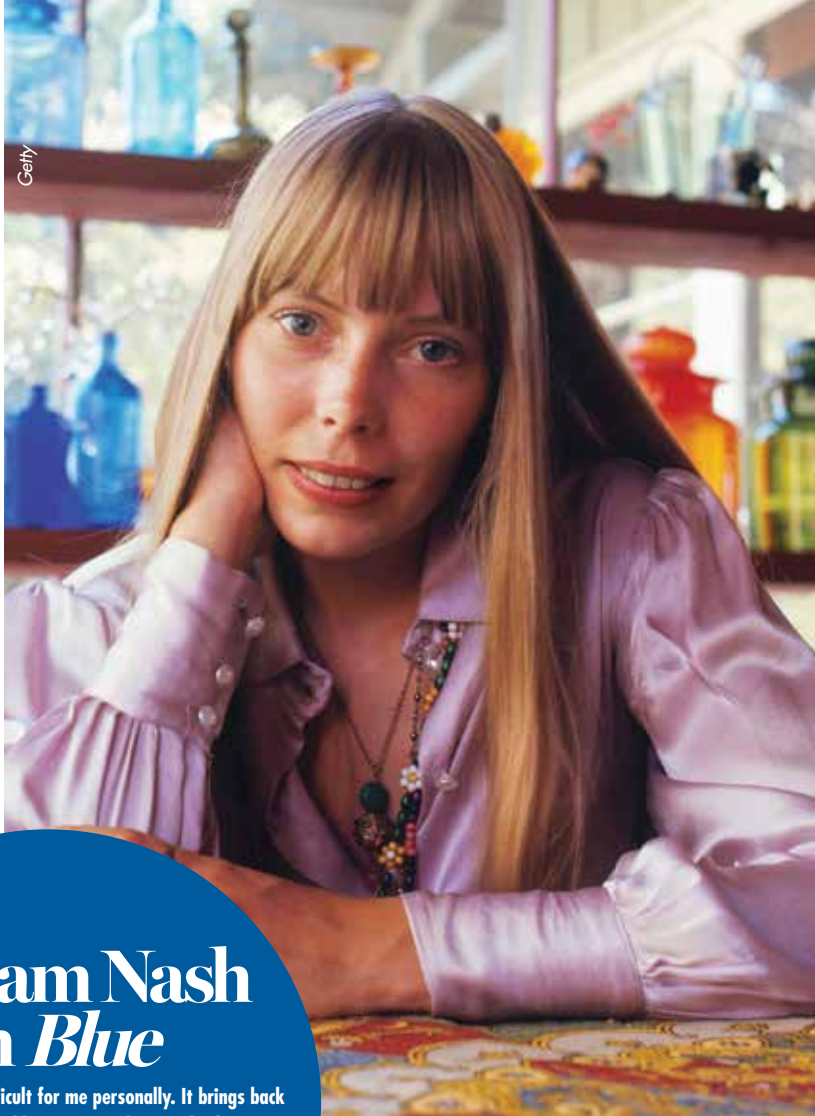
"Listening to *Blue* is difficult for me personally. It brings back many memories and saddens me greatly. It is, by far, my most favourite solo album, and the thought that I spent much time with this fine woman and genius of a writer is incredible to me. I watched her write some of those songs and I believe that one or two of them were about me. But who really knows?"

cared for Graham, I just thought: 'I'm going to end up like my grandmother, kicking the door off the hinges.' You know what I mean? It's like... 'I'd better not'. And it broke my heart."

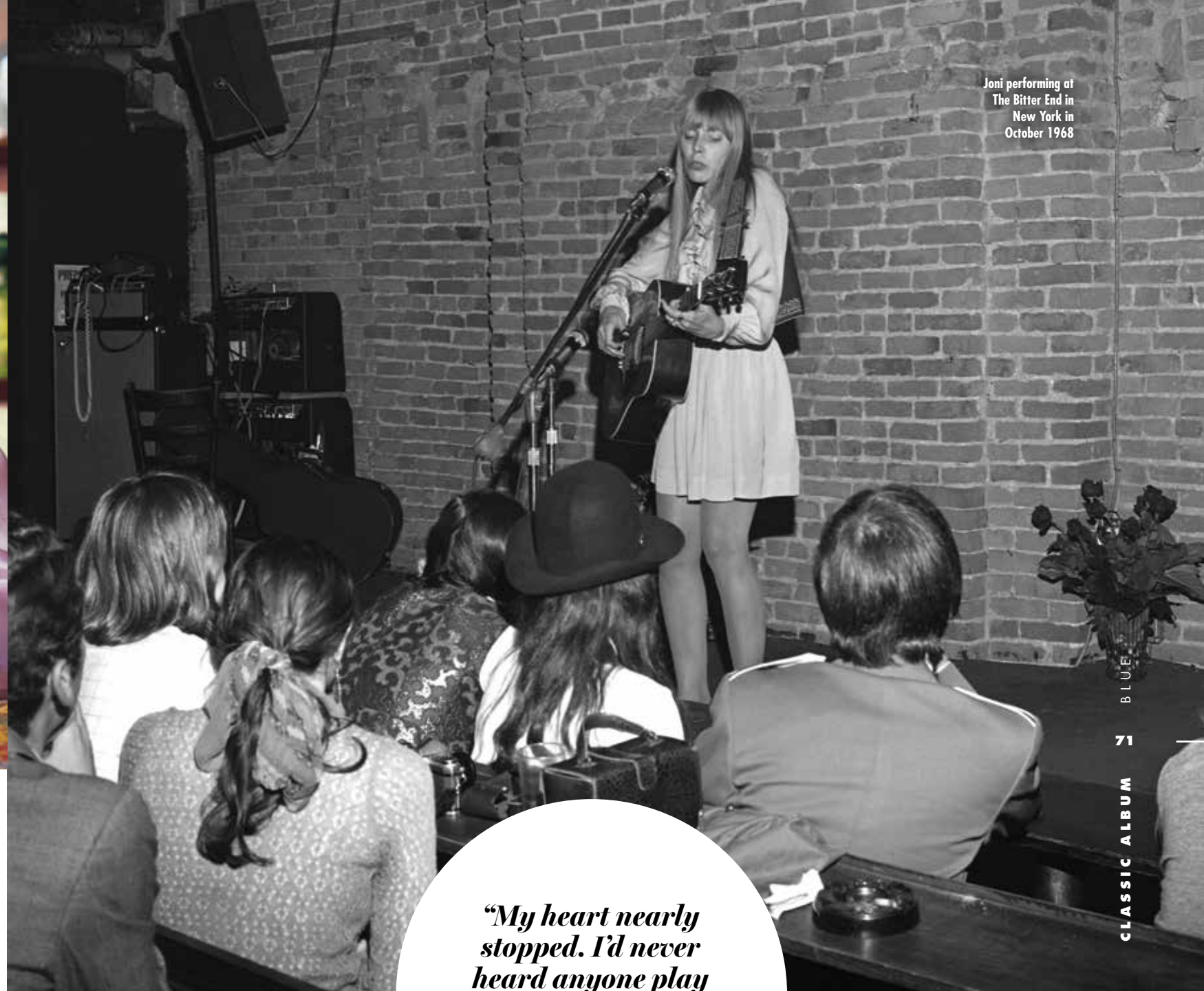
### DEFINING MOMENT

It was spring 1970, and with three solo albums behind her, Joni Mitchell had emerged as a mercurially talented and idiosyncratic singer-songwriter. Stars of the day lined up to cover her songs, including *Chelsea Morning*, *Tin Angel* and *Both Sides Now*. One year earlier, she had written the defining song of the iconic cultural event of 1969, *Woodstock*, despite not performing at the festival, watching it instead on TV from her agent David Geffen's Central Park South apartment, while CSN and a who's-who of rock's elite wowed the 400,000 crowd. Geffen wasn't convinced he could get her out of the event in time for her first major national TV appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* the following day. As it turned out, she could have made it. CSN got out with ease and gatecrashed Cavett's show, the mud from Max Yasgur's farm still visible on their clothes. Mitchell looked on, smiling graciously but looking haunted and forlorn. "My heart was just breaking," she recalled. "This was like the biggest event of my generation and I got that close to going and being a part of it."

In January 1970, Mitchell took the decision to take a break from her incessant touring and in the spring, following the breakup with Nash, she travelled to



Cetty



Joni performing at The Bitter End in New York in October 1968

**"My heart nearly stopped. I'd never heard anyone play like her, I'd never heard anybody sing like her"**

DAVID CROSBY

Europe. Mitchell's European odyssey was intended as a 'time out' from her increasing fame. But the split with Nash would provide a rich lyrical seam for her fourth studio album, *Blue*, a raw, soul-bearing and utterly compelling work.

### EARLY YEARS

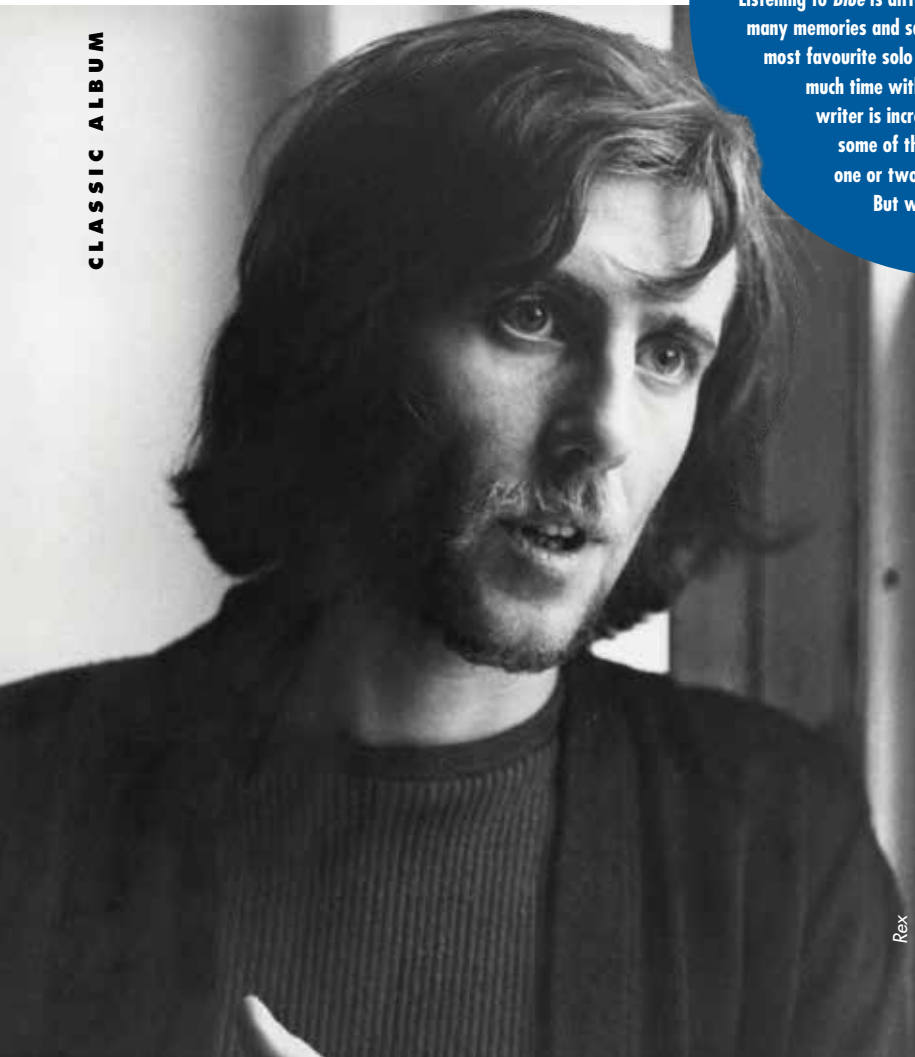
*Blue* was a career-defining moment for Joni Mitchell, who from her early years had a clear vision of where her future might lie. Born Roberta Joan Anderson in Alberta, Canada in 1943, she contracted polio at the age of nine and would stare out longingly from a window, dreaming of escape and waving at the one train that passed daily along the railway track adjacent to her family home in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

By the mid 60s, she was singing in clubs in Saskatoon and across western Canada, before going on to busk in the streets and nightclubs of Toronto. In 1964, she

became pregnant by a Calgary artist called Brad McGrath, giving birth to a daughter before giving her up for adoption, following a desperate marriage-of-convenience to fellow Toronto folk singer, Chuck Mitchell.

By 1967, Mitchell had relocated to New York's Greenwich Village and was establishing herself as a singer-songwriter of note. In July that year, she wowed the Newport Folk Festival, alongside artists such as Leonard Cohen, Joan Baez and Judy Collins. One month later, she was playing the Gaslight South Café in Coconut Grove, Florida when David Crosby – who had recently been unceremoniously dropped from The Byrds – strode into the room.

"Walked into a coffee house in Florida," he recalled emotionally in the BBC documentary *Hotel California: From The Byrds To The Eagles*. "She was singing... my heart nearly stopped. I'd never heard anyone play like



Rex

her, I'd never heard anybody sing like her and I'd most especially never heard anyone write like her, and still haven't heard anybody write like her."

### WAY OUT WEST

Sonically, Mitchell sounded like no one else. Her lyrics were raw and soul-bearing, blending evocative imagery with heartfelt emotion. Vocal lines were delivered in a pure and assured mezzo-soprano, skipping, soaring and gliding effortlessly across tumbling piano motifs or complex guitar chord structures, the latter delivered in a frequently bewildering and inspiring array of open tunings. Crosby went on to produce Mitchell's first album *Song To A Seagull* on the Reprise label in 1968, resisting record company attempts to fill out the sound with lush FM folk-rock affectations. "I did not do a very good job of producing her first record," he admitted. "But I did do one wonderful thing, which was keep everybody else off it. That was a good thing."

By the end of 1968, Mitchell and Crosby had become the latest in a community of musicians moving west, making their home in the most tranquil of settings – Laurel Canyon in the Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles. In May 1969, Mitchell's second studio album, *Clouds*, was released. Among its 10 tracks were her own versions of songs that had already been covered by other artists, including *Both Sides Now*, a colossal hit 18 months later for Judy Collins.

**David Crosby**  
produced Mitchell's  
debut album for  
Reprise in 1968



Rex

## Exclusive Showcase

"David Crosby had been thrown out of The Byrds and hadn't found CSN yet, so he was bumming around town in a VW bus with a Porsche engine," recalled biographer and screenwriter Carl Gottlieb in the BBC documentary *Hotel California: From The Byrds To The Eagles*. "And one night, David says 'Come up to the house and we'll get high' – and he always had the best dope, so it was like being invited for wine tasting at Baron Rothschild's house. About three or four in the morning, we're pretty wasted, and David said: 'There's someone I want you to hear', and comes back downstairs with Joni Mitchell, live, with a big guitar. She played songs that hadn't even been recorded yet, nobody had heard that music, nobody had heard that voice. And for us, it was like a hallucination."

# The songs

## Core personnel

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, Appalachian dulcimer, guitar, piano  
**Stephen Stills** Bass and guitar on *Carey*  
**James Taylor** Guitar on *California*, *All I Want* and *A Case Of You*  
**Sneaky Pete Kleinow** Pedal steel on *California* and *This Flight Tonight*  
**Russ Kunkel** Drums on *California*, *Carey* and *A Case Of You*

## Main production credits

**A&M Studios**, Hollywood, California  
**Engineer** Henry Lewy

**Recorded** January to March 1971

**Released** 22 June 1971

## 1 ALLI WANT

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, Appalachian dulcimer  
**James Taylor** Guitar

It's entirely fitting that the Appalachian dulcimer, the iconic instrument of *Blue*, is the very first sound heard on the album – rhythmic and lilting. It also appears on *Carey*, *California* and *A Case of You*. With only three or four strings and a simple diatonic fret pattern, it is generally regarded as one of the easiest string instruments to learn and was picked up by Mitchell before she travelled in Europe. The traditional way to play the instrument is to lay it flat on the lap and pluck or strum the strings with the right hand, while fretting with the left.

Mitchell first encountered the instrument when she met a dulcimer maker at the 1969 Big Sur Festival. "I had never seen one played," she told Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers of *Acoustic Guitar* magazine in August 1996, in an article posted on [www.jonimitchell.com](http://www.jonimitchell.com). "Traditionally, it's picked with a quill, and it's a very delicate thing that sits across your knee... Anyway, I bought it, and I took off to Europe carrying a flute and this dulcimer, because it was very light for backpacking around Europe. I wrote most of *Blue* on it." *All I Want* is believed to be about James Taylor, who adds acoustic guitar on the track. "I want to knit you a sweater/ Want to write you a love letter/ I want to make you feel better, I want to make you feel free," sings Mitchell, while also acknowledging that she feels the urge to "wreck my stockings in some juke box dive".

## 2 MY OLD MAN

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, piano

Fluid, strident piano intros this track, Mitchell's heartfelt paean to former lover Graham Nash, with whom she shared brief but idyllic domestic bliss in her Laurel Canyon home. *My Old Man* contains many of the compositional elements that would become Mitchell's trademarks through her career, as Dave Blackburn notes in his transcription of the track at [www.jonimitchell.com](http://www.jonimitchell.com). These include melodic and harmonic chromaticism, triads played over bass notes that aren't the root notes, and temporary modulations of key, often in rapid succession, Blackburn says. He also notes the "very interesting journey the bridge takes us on, from the home key of A through the keys of F# and B in the space of a few bars". Early

## The songs *continued*

glimpses of Mitchell's jazz sensibilities can be heard on this track, adds Blackburn, in a "very exotic" G#min13 chord ("But when he's gone, me and them lonesome blues collide") and the Lydian mode that Mitchell uses on the resolving F# chord. Lyrically, the tone is direct: "He's my sunshine in the morning/ He's my fireworks at the end of the day/ He's the warmest chord I ever heard/ Play that warm chord, play and stay baby". A heartfelt and enduring tribute to the man she loved.

### 3 LITTLE GREEN

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, guitar  
Written in 1967, this beautiful and immensely sad song concerns the baby daughter Joni Mitchell gave up for adoption in February 1965. "I lost my daughter at 21. I had to give her up because I was broke, no place to take her, no money to take her. That was very traumatic," she recalled. The form, filled out by Toronto Hospital when her daughter was put up for adoption simply said: 'Mother left Canada for US to pursue career as a folk singer'.

Mitchell named her daughter Kelly Dale Anderson, choosing the name after the colour, Kelly Green. The girl was initially placed in foster care before being given up for adoption. "An unhappy mother does not raise a happy child," said Mitchell. "It was difficult parting with the child, but I had to let her go." She and her daughter were reunited in 1997, after a former roommate of Mitchell's at art school sold the story to a tabloid newspaper.

The sole accompaniment on the track is Mitchell's fingerpicking on an acoustic, probably her Martin D-28. The tuning DGDGBD is used as a starting point, with the capo then applied to the 4th fret, transposing the tuning to GCGCEG. A warm and wonderfully controlled vocal by Mitchell perfectly evokes the sentiment of the song. "So you sign all the papers in the family name/ You're sad and you're sorry but you're not ashamed, little green/ Have a happy ending".

### 4 CAREY

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, Appalachian dulcimer  
**Stephen Stills** Bass, guitar  
**Russ Kunkel** Drums

From the loose, tasteful groove of Stephen Stills' bass to Joni's swooping, airborne vocal performance, there is a glorious exuberance to this track, an excitement that reflects the thrill of travel and adventure.

Her voice here is high and light – a "helium voice", as she once described it. Written in spring 1970, during her time living with a hippie commune in Matala, on Crete, the 'Carey' in question was larger-than-life US ex-pat Cary Raditz, a cane-carrying chef who would tuck his mane of bright red hair into a turban. Or, as Mitchell refers to him in the song: "The bright red devil who keeps me in this tourist town".

Mitchell would often mention the village when introducing live performances of *Carey* and references to Matala abound in the song, a spirited slice of acoustic rock 'n' roll that evokes a sense of escape and endless possibility.

Like most of the tracks, Mitchell wrote *Carey* on the Appalachian dulcimer she took on her travels in Europe, but she missed having a guitar, eventually buying one for \$50. "I was craving a guitar so badly in Greece," she told Rodgers in *Acoustic Guitar* in 1996. "It was a terrible guitar, but I hadn't played one for so long, and I began slapping it because I had been slapping this dulcimer. That's when I noticed that my style had changed."

This percussive style can be heard clearly on *Blue*, both on dulcimer and guitar. "I thought that slap came purely from the dulcimer, until I saw a television show [recently] that I did the day after Woodstock, where Crosby, Nash and Stills showed up. Stephen slapped his guitar, which is a kind of flamenco way of playing it, so I would have to cite Stephen Stills also as an influence in that department. But it was latent and not conscious. It wasn't like I studied him and tried to play like him, but I admired the way he played."

### 5 BLUE

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, piano  
Speculation abounds about the subject of this final song on Side One of the album, although James Taylor seems a strong contender. Whoever it concerns, this devastating title track is one of Joni Mitchell's most private songs, profoundly sad and tender. It's been said that the album *Blue* is, in essence, poetry set to music, a fact amply borne out here.

"Blue songs are like tattoos/ You know I've been to sea before/ Crown and anchor me/ Or let me sail away".

Mitchell's voice is majestic and assured against the crests and falls of the stark piano accompaniment and there is a powerful emotion at play here. "I was demanding of myself a greater and deeper honesty, more and more revelation in my work in order to give it back to the people," Mitchell said of the writing of the album in the documentary, *Woman Of Heart And Mind: A Life Story*. "It goes back into their lives and nourishes them, changes their direction and makes lightbulbs go off in their heads."

### 6 CALIFORNIA

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, Appalachian dulcimer  
**James Taylor** Guitar  
**Russ Kunkel** Drums  
**Sneaky Pete Kleinow** Pedal-steel guitar

Mitchell wrote the song while living in France, during her European odyssey of spring 1970, and it is a song of yearning – a stream-of-consciousness travelogue for the creative climate she had experienced, and missed, in the golden state. Once again, the Appalachian dulcimer predominates on this track, which became the second single from the album. The song recounts her time in France, and her travels to Spain and Greece. Many critics have hailed the song as one of the highlights of *Blue* and praised the subtlety of production, particularly James Taylor's nifty guitar playing and Russ Kunkel's superbly understated hi-hat and kick-drum pedal work. Other instrumental highlights include Sneaky Pete

## Talent For Tunings

Joni Mitchell's penchant for open tunings (where strumming the guitar's open strings plays a specific chord) was inspired by country blues players. She's used around 50 tunings in her career. Beginning with open D and open G, she began to develop a sound that would single her out from most of the other singer-songwriters on the burgeoning 60s folk scene. In 1968, Eric Clapton sat spellbound on the lawn of 'Mama' Cass Elliott's house in Laurel Canyon, as Mitchell performed the song *Urge For Going* while David Crosby sat by her side. "Joni was there and doing her famous tunings," said photographer Henry Diltz, in Barney Hoskyn's book *Hotel California: Singer-Songwriters And Cocaine Cowboys In The LA Canyons, 1967-1976*. "Eric sat and stared at her hands to try and figure out what she was doing."

Rex



James Taylor and Joni recording backing vocals on Carole King's hit album *Tapestry*

*After journeying through France and Spain, Mitchell visited the island of Formentera, where she wrote some of the songs for 'Blue'*

By the release of her third studio album, *Ladies Of The Canyon*, in April 1970, Mitchell was deeply involved with Graham Nash. For him, this happy time yielded the song *Our House*, which featured on the Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young mega-hit album *Déjà Vu*. Mitchell in turn wrote *Willy* – her nickname for Nash – which appeared on *Ladies Of The Canyon*. All seemed blissful. But by the end of the year, the relationship was over.

### EUROPEAN ODYSSEY

Mitchell set off on her European journey in spring 1970. While travelling, she learned to play the Appalachian dulcimer, an instrument that would become a defining feature of *Blue*. After journeying through France and Spain, she visited the island of Formentera, where she wrote some of the songs for *Blue*, and spent time with a cave-dwelling hippie community in the village of Matala on Crete. It was from Matala that she wrote to Nash. "I remember getting a telegram from Greece from Joni," he recalled, "the last line of which was, 'If you hold sand too tightly in your hand, it will run through your fingers.' It was Joni's way of saying goodbye to me."

Nash wasn't the only romantic interest informing the lyrics on *Blue*. When Mitchell returned from Europe in the summer of 1971, she began an intense relationship with singer-songwriter James Taylor, visiting him on the set of the movie *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The songs *This Flight Tonight* and *Blue* both contain references to Taylor, which range from his heroin addiction to a sweater she knitted for him.

In January 1971, Joni Mitchell entered A&M Studios in Hollywood to start work on the album that would become *Blue*. The engineer/ ▶

## Vinyl Remaster

In 2006, Warner Bros. Records included *Blue* as part of its Audiophile Reissue Series of LP releases from the original master tapes. The album was cut by Steve Hoffman on his all-valve cutting system at RTI on 180g vinyl. At the time, the gatefold reissue was deemed to be the very best pressing of Joni's Mitchell's masterpiece, completely remastered and pressed on 180-gram HQ vinyl.

Cathy

Kleinow's wonderfully judged pedal steel, which swells in as Mitchell sings "Oh, it gets so lonely".

Lyrically, Mitchell longs for the liberalism of counterculture Laurel Canyon. "Sitting in a park in Paris, France/ Reading the news and it sure looks bad/ They won't give peace a chance/ That was just a dream some of us had", before going on to acknowledge what she sees as inertia and conservatism in Europe. "I wouldn't want to stay here/ It's too old and cold and settled in its ways".

### 7 THIS FLIGHT TONIGHT

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, guitar

**Sneaky Pete Kleinow** Pedal-steel guitar

Not for the first time on this album, a track that evokes the heady rush of travel, yet one that is tinged with longing and loss. It recounts Mitchell's regrets as she leaves her lover on a flight and wishes to return, as a falling star burns up "above the Vegas sands". "Blackness, blackness dragging me down/ Come on, light the candle in this poor heart of mine... Turn this crazy bird around/ I shouldn't have got on this flight tonight".

A sense of urgency and regret permeates the track, as Mitchell's stripped-down jazz timbres are enhanced by bursts of emotive pedal steel from Sneaky Pete Kleinow. Mitchell's tuning for the track is a variation of open G (DGDGBD), with the bottom string tuned right down to a very low G. The key for the song is Ab, so her actual tuning is Ab Eb Ab C Eb.

The track was the B-side of first single *Carey*. It was reworked in 1973 by Scottish hard-rock band Nazareth, a powerful, driving version that was a hit in the UK, Canada and Germany. Mitchell was impressed with the makeover. When she subsequently played a gig in London, she told the audience: "I'd like to open with a Nazareth song".

### 8 RIVER

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, piano

A Christmas theme pervades this, the third track on Side Two of the album, in which Mitchell refers to her relationship with Graham Nash.

"He tried hard to help me, you know he put me at ease/ Lord, he loved me so naughty he made me weak in the knees/ I wish I had a river I could skate away on/ I'm so hard to handle, I'm selfish and I'm sad/ Now I've gone and lost the best baby that I ever had".

The sparse piano arrangement only heightens the sense of loss and longing. James Taylor was all-too-familiar with *River*, having first heard the song when Mitchell played it at her home in Laurel Canyon. "I've known it from the time it was written, and I've always loved it," he told the *Washington Post* in 2006. Despite never being intended as a holiday song, it is inevitably heard at Christmas. More than 100 artists have covered the track, including Taylor himself, who put it on his Christmas album. *River* has also been licensed for use in numerous Hollywood films and TV shows, such as *The Wonder Years* (1988), *Ally McBeal* (2000) and *ER* (2007).

### 9 A CASE OF YOU

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, Appalachian dulcimer

**James Taylor** Guitar

**Russ Kunkel** Drums

Few songs showcase Joni Mitchell's mercurial

talents as a writer and performer quite so sublimely as *A Case Of You*. As with many of the tracks on *Blue*, Joni Mitchell's break-up with Graham Nash is cited as the inspiration for this song, although, somewhat bafflingly, there has also been speculation that it could be about James Taylor or Leonard Cohen. It is one of Mitchell's best-known songs and has been covered by numerous artists, including Prince, who played it throughout his career, and English singer-songwriter James Blake, who created an inspired and moving rework.

There's a magnificence to Mitchell's vocal delivery and beautiful soaring cadences, a high point being the upward surge of "Oh Canada". The sparse instrumentation is a perfect platform for her voice to alternate between warm intimacy and soaring falsetto. "Oh you are in my blood like holy wine/ You taste so bitter and so sweet/ Oh, I could drink a case of you darling/ And I would still be on my feet/ Oh I would still be on my feet".

The track features some wonderfully light touches from Russ Kunkel on drums. Kunkel was a top session drummer of the 1970s and early 80s, working with artists of the era, such as Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Carole King, Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt.

### 10 THE LAST TIME I SAW RICHARD

**Joni Mitchell** Vocals, piano

Mitchell saved her saddest song for the final track on this masterpiece of an album. A mournful and introspective ballad, *The Last Time I Saw Richard* may be a reference to her first husband Chuck Mitchell and their brief marriage. Certainly, it's an immensely poignant account of romantic disillusionment and a cynical portrait of a man who encompasses the lost promise of the 60s. In the song's lyric, the 'Richard' of the title informs Joni: "All romantics meet the same fate someday/ Cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark café".

She goes on to catalogue his fate with brutal, clinical precision. "Richard got married to a figure skater/ And he bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator/ And he drinks at home now most nights with the TV on/ And all the house lights left up bright". In spite of despair, Mitchell finds hope in the transformative powers of beauty, love, art, and human connection, however transient they might be. A perfect end to a sublime album.

## Guitar's The Star

"During the Vietnam war, I played in Fort Bragg for soldiers coming back from and going to the war," Mitchell told Martin Simpson in *Guitar Player* magazine in 1995. "There was a captain there who'd been to Vietnam and returned, and he had two instruments that he'd taken with him... shrapnel hit his tent and demolished one guitar. The only surviving thing was a Martin D-28, which I'd always wanted but couldn't afford. One night after I'd played, he told me: 'Joni, you're better than Peter, Paul And Mary, and you should have this guitar,' and he told

me the history of it. Being an independent girl, I said: 'I couldn't take it as a gift, but I'll buy it off you'. So he sold it to me for nothing, really. That guitar, which I used for at least my first four albums, was superb... Every acoustic player that ever touched that guitar just drooled over it, and it even stood up to my tunings, which put a lot of stress on the neck. It just seemed to eat that up. It travelled well, through hot and cold, and it was my true love. Anyway, it finally was stolen off a carousel in Maui, of all places, and that was the end of it."



Getty

**"Blue' turned forever on its head the notion of what a songwriter was expected to be"**

BILL FLANAGAN

producer was Henry Lewy and with the exception of James Taylor, Stephen Stills, pedal-steel player Sneaky Pete Kleinow and drummer Russ Kunkel, these were closed sessions.

Mitchell continued to use alternative open tunings on her guitar to allow easier access to augmented chords and notes in unexpected combinations. While the four guest musicians contributed to some tracks, much of the album is solely Mitchell's voice, accompanied by her dulcimer, piano or guitar. The spacial starkness only elevates the power and intensity of the songs. Mitchell sounds utterly alone in her sadness, transforming her melancholy into tender, sublimely beautiful art.

"On the *Blue* album, there's hardly a dishonest note in the vocals," Mitchell told journalist Cameron Crowe of *Rolling Stone* in 1979. "At that period of my life, I had no personal defences. I felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes. I felt like I had absolutely no secrets from the world and I couldn't pretend in my life to be strong. Or to be happy. But the advantage of it in the music was that there were no defences there, either."

By March, completed masters for *Blue* were ready for production. The album was to have been released in a slightly different form, with two older songs, *Urge For Going* and *Hunter (The Good Samaritan)*. But these were removed to make way for new tracks *All I Want* and *The Last Time I Saw Richard*. The one older track that did make the final album was *Little Green*, written in 1967 about the daughter she had given up for adoption.

### LEGACY IN BLUE

*Blue* was released on 22 June 1971. It's a sad irony that an album marking a creative and career-defining moment should have been marred by heartbreak. Three months earlier, James Taylor, on his own dizzying ascent to fame, left her. Mitchell was devastated. "During the making of *Blue* I was just so thin-skinned and delicate that if anybody looked at me, I'd burst out in tears," she said. "I was so vulnerable and I felt so naked in my work. My individual psychological descent coincided, ironically, with my ascent into the public eye. They were putting me on a pedestal and I was wobbling."

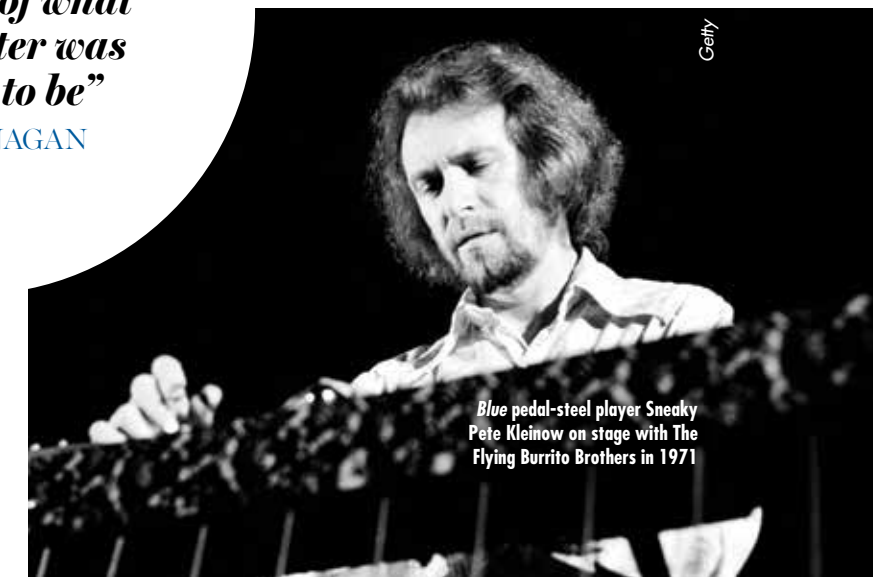
*Blue* is regarded as both the greatest relationship album ever and the greatest break-up album ever. No songwriter had ever laid themselves so bare on record. "I remember playing it for Kris Kristofferson and he was kind of shocked by it," recalled Mitchell. "He said: 'Oh Joni, save something of yourself'. I think he felt I had revealed too much, or something. I'd made myself too vulnerable."

On its release, *Blue* reached No. 15 on the Billboard 200 album charts and No. 3 in the UK album charts. In January 2000, *The New York Times* chose it as one of the 25 albums that represented "turning points and pinnacles in 20th-century popular music".

"*Blue* turned forever on its head the notion of what a songwriter was expected to be," said writer Bill Flanagan. "And people didn't just love her the way people love The Rolling Stones or Motown. They really felt 'this woman by the light of this record player is looking into my soul'. You know, a very confusing place for the artist to find herself, too."

Stephen Holden, music critic for *The New York Times*, was equally effusive.

"It was naked, pulsating, great poetry," he reflected. "*Blue* just went to a level of psychic pain and honesty that no one else had ever written before and no one has written since." ●



*Blue* pedal-steel player Sneaky Pete Kleinow on stage with The Flying Burrito Brothers in 1971

Getty