

# review #1 music

this week's essential reading

'Revenue streams' by  
John Seabrook, *The New Yorker*

'Daniel Ek's vision, that Spotify is a force for good in the world of music, is almost Swedenborgian: salvation in the form of a fully licensed streaming-music service'

## A case of you

Joni Mitchell is one of the greatest songwriters of all time. And a new four-disc box set of her love songs showcases her talent – intense, emotional and brilliant, writes Andy Battaglia

Joni Mitchell did not become Joni Mitchell by taking the least pretentious path. From the start, when she found her calling as a singer-songwriter in the early golden dawn of the 1960s, she and her grandiloquence roamed wild and free. Why write lyrics confined to monosyllabic greeting-card sentiments? Why describe a state in a word or two when even an elaborate paragraph might not suffice? Why stay plain and folksy on guitar when super-complicated jazz chords would add so much to the sense of occasion?

Everything in Mitchell's musical world has always been lofty and big, and we're all the better for it. That extends to a new four-disc box set, *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced*. Take a moment to consider that title. Read it back over again and roll it around in your mind. Savour it. (You weren't expecting something like *Joni Mitchell's Greatest Hits*, were you?)

The story behind the set is ambitious and grand, too. Tasked with a simple job to compile some of her own love songs into a single volume for a dance project, Mitchell went through her discography and could not bear the thought of condensing so much into so little. It was supposed to be concise – just one disc's worth of material – but concision has never been her forte. Plus, there was a lot to consider: 19 studio albums, several of them effectively flawless classics, dating back to 1968.

**I couldn't work with a producer. They would have squelched my need for risk and invention**

Joni Mitchell

Mitchell simply could not stay within the lines, which is understandable. Aside from Bob Dylan, it's hard to think of many other songwriters to class in anywhere close to the same league, on a song-by-song basis and certainly in terms of a body of songs written over decades with such a sustained sense of intensity. So her list grew long, and longer – and longer still.

"I am a painter who writes songs. My songs are very visual." So goes the beginning of a book packaged with the new set, written by Mitchell herself. It's a mode of presentation that is self-effacing and grandiose at once. She is just an unwitting painter, it seems to suggest, who also happens to write songs – a passive designation, like paying someone a compliment by saying that he or she has a face made for radio. But then it takes more than a little self-regard to call one's own songs "visual". So many aspire to such a condition, and so many fall woefully short. Not Mitchell, however – as she herself knows.

Really, though, what mark of distinction could possibly be too much for an artist as preternaturally skilled and serious as Joni Mitchell? She has never eased up, never pulled back – and so many of her musical decisions have been impressive for the ways they pay so little attention to what the easiest or most sensible option might have been. That includes essentially giving music up for long periods of time, plus making more expansive or elaborate music than even her most ardent fans might have chosen on their own. It goes, too, for taking an elementary task such as crafting a career retrospective and flushing it with all kinds of feints and complications.

Here's more on the phenomenon of her visual songs, from the book with *Love Has Many Faces*: "What I have done here is to gather some of these scenes (like a documentary filmmaker) and by juxtaposition, edit them into a whole new work." A little later: "At this length, four discs, themes and ideas have time to develop – to augment and contrast – to interact with each other in a whole new way." The subject for her



**Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced**  
Joni Mitchell  
Rhino, November 24  
Dh138

**Top, Joni Mitchell at her Laurel Canyon home in Los Angeles in 1970. The musician is still active in her 70s, below.** Henry Diltz / Corbis; David Redfern / Redferns



survey is "love and the lack of it", and it all starts with *In France They Kiss on Main Street*, from Mitchell's beloved 1975 album *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. "Young love," Mitchell sings, "was kissing under bridges, kissing in cars, kissing in cafes ... kisses like bright flags hung on holidays." In the next song, *Ray's Dad's Cadillac* from 1991, an overcome schoolgirl can hardly think straight, so flush is she with dreamy thoughts of love: "When it comes to mathematics, I got static in the attic," she sings. "No sir, nothing's clear!"

It doesn't take long for the view to grow more complicated. In *You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio*, she's still high on love but suspicious too: "I know you don't like weak women, you get bored so quick/And you don't like strong women 'cause they're hip to your tricks." By the time she sings of a man on the move in an airport, "He takes his baggage off the carousel" (in *Harry's House/Centerpiece*), it's clear that she does not mean "baggage" in terms of suitcases and trunks.

The four discs in the box set are separated out with subtitles, and there's a little story lurking in their succession. Act 1: Birth of Rock 'n' Roll Days. Act 2: The Light Is Hard to Find. Act 3: Love Has Many Faces. Act 4: If You Want Me, I'll Be in the Bar.

Love does not play the saint or go unscathed in such a narrative arc. In *Court and Spark*, the song that opens the second section, love is temperamentally compared to "a madman's soul". In *Comes Love*, to those wondering what might bring about protection, Mitchell sings, "Nothing can be done." In *The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey*, she poses a question for the ages: "Of the darkness in men's minds, what can you say?"

It's not all dark. The third disc opens with *You're My Thrill*, a straightforward song of devotion. "You're my thrill," Mitchell sings. "How my pulse increases/I just go to pieces/Every time I look at you." Eight songs later, by *Be Cool*, she sounds more measured: "If there's one rule to this game/Every-

body's gonna name/It's be cool." That's not bad advice for making one's way through *Love Has Many Faces*, either. The songs source from the whole of Mitchell's career, and the sudden changes in sound and tone can make for occasionally jarring effects. Back at the beginning, after the sumptuous mid-70s sound of *In France They Kiss on Main Street*, the jilting early-90s synthesizer in *Ray's Dad's Cadillac* cannot be described as anything other than unfortunate. Disagreements between the respective sounds of decades far apart are staged all throughout, with the older songs, especially ones from her classic period from 1971's *Blue* to 1976's *Hejira*, generally winning handily in terms of general aesthetic.

But pleasing aural detours abound, no matter the era. In the book, Mitchell devotes a lot of attention to the bizarre soundscape in *The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey*, which makes use of real recorded wolf sounds and Mitchell herself just banging and scraping an acoustic guitar. She also takes pride in songs that teem with edits and allusions to songs by others, such as the bit of the Righteous Brothers' ever-familiar *Unchained Melody* that flitters through her own *Chinese Cafe*. "I create back-flashes in my songs by cutting old songs into them," she writes.

Of her many idiosyncrasies of the sort, she continues: "I couldn't work with a producer. I found that out early. They were tyrannical and trendy. They would have squelched my need for risk and invention. They would have straightened out all the quirks and oddities and steered me towards the dog race where the bigger profits were."

It's a fortuitous turn of fate that Mitchell was so in love with what she was doing when she wrote so many indelible songs and when she set out to reassemble them, too. Among its many charms, for all its apparent choices in everything from overall concept to design, *Love Has Many Faces* most of all offers a chance to listen to Mitchell listening to herself. She seems to have definitely found affection in her music, if nothing else. And really, what's not to love?

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Frieze*, *The Paris Review* and more.

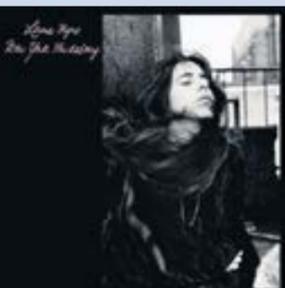
### ▶ the playlist

From New York  
1960s folk to  
reflective pop



**Joan Baez, Vol 2**  
Joan Baez  
(Vanguard, 1961)

The second album from the American folk singer, which was composed of traditional songs, was positively received and entered the US Top 20. It was also nominated for a Grammy and featured a widely praised cover of The Carters' *Pal of Mine*.



**New York Tendaberry**  
Laura Nyro  
(Columbia, 1969)

An homage to her home city, the album is viewed by critics as her most accomplished. The tone is darker than her previous works, but it is searingly honest and uses jazz musicians, an orchestra and a rock band, although these are used sparingly.



**The Reminder**  
Leslie Feist  
(Cherrytree, 2007)

Many will be familiar with Mitchell's compatriot because her song *1234* was used in an Apple ad and on *Sesame Street*. But this album is a work of quality – with catchy and reflective pop songs, including *Sealion*, an adaptation of a Nina Simone tune.



**Little Earthquakes**  
Tori Amos (Atlantic, 1992)

This debut album is arguably Amos's best and most personal. Recorded in three phases, it includes the classics, *Silent All These Years*, *Winter and Little Earthquakes*, and *Little Earthquakes*, in top-albums-of-all-time lists.