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 didn't become Joni Mitchell by taking the least preventative path. From the start, when she found her calling as a young songwriter in the golden days of the 1960s, she and her grandiloquent nameless band left fields for greener pastures. Why write lyrics to a Monica Lewinsky song? Why dictate a state in a word or two when even an elaborate paragraph might not suffice? Why write plains and fancies on guitar when super-complex 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'll all the better for it. That extends to a new four-disc box set, Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Suite, Waiting to Be Danced, released today (Rhino, November 24).

Mitchell simply could not stay within the lines, which is understandable. Aside from Bob Dylan, it's hard to think of any other songwriter 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. In her first great period, and longer and longer still, she was a painter who writes songs. Her songs are a visual lyric.

She begins the opening of a book packaged with the new set, written by Mitchell herself. It's a mode of presentation that is self-effacing and grand at once. She is just an unwitting painter, it seems to suggest, who also happens to write songs—a passion designation, like painting someone else's face, who has a face made for radio. But there is a huge difference between a face that is painted and a face that is yours. In a book of this sort, anything else would be confusing.

Really, though, what mark of distinction could possibly be too much for a woman artist so temperamentally skilled and serious as Joni Mitchell? All has never eased up, never pulled back. In her case, no mistake, sacrifices, or cultural decisions have been imperative for the ways they put so little attention to the ways the greatest or most sensitive option might have been taken. That includes essentially totally going music up for long periods of time, plus making more expansive or elaborate music than over her most ardent fan base might have chosen on their own. It goes, too, for taking on elementary task such as realizing a career retrospective and fluxing in all kinds of fonts and producers. 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 those images (like a documentary filmmaker) and by just picture, edit them into a whole new world.

"At the length, these disc, themes and ideas have time to develop and contrast with each other in a new whole way."

The subject for her