

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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CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM

RELEASED 23 MARCH 1988

The guestlist expands to include Tom Petty, Peter Gabriel, Willie Nelson and Billy Idol. But is Joni, once again, on the retreat?

BY SAM SODOMSKY

“**I** SEE something of myself in everyone”, Joni Mitchell sang on the title track of 1976’s *Hejira*. Like many of her lyrics, this one can be scoured for meaning. Its most obvious interpretation is that it addresses the fuel of her songwriting – crafting stories where she inhabits a variety of characters and moods without sacrificing her core identity. But the lyric could also be a comment on her massive influence during the ’70s, as her conversational tone, jazz inflections and odd guitar tunings turned from idiosyncrasies into omnipresent signifiers of the singer-songwriter genre. Following her relentlessly innovative run, however, the lyric took on a different meaning during the following decade. Fans started seeing less of Joni Mitchell in her own music, with a series of synthier, poppier records that deviated drastically from what they perceived as her characteristic sound. Like Neil Young – also newly signed to Geffen Records that decade – Mitchell started focusing on work that reflected a disinterest in catering to expectations, dismissing concepts of consistency or coherency.

In 1988, Joni Mitchell capped off her strange and polarising decade with *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*. It’s a breezy, meditative album that mostly eschews the experiments and political bent of its predecessor, 1985’s Thomas Dolby-assisted *Dog Eat Dog*. “It’s not so hard-hitting, not so emphatic,” Mitchell said of the record at the time of its release, tying the music to her happy marriage with collaborator Larry Klein: “I guess I’m on the brink of maturity, too.” *Chalk Mark* is a reflective

record – “a series of characters commenting on different times,” as she explains it. The variety of perspectives allows Mitchell to touch on some of her most fruitful subject matter: the pursuit of love, the mistreatment of the environment, the perils of the media. But she was not merely summarising past successes. *Chalk Mark* is a subtly ambitious record, effective in both refining her vision and widening her scope.

“Like a filmmaker,” Mitchell has said, “I cast people in my songs.” In a sense, *Chalk Mark* is her most high-profile, blockbuster release. The LP boasts a stellar cast, with appearances from Peter Gabriel, Billy Idol, Tom Petty, Don Henley, Willie Nelson, Wayne Shorter, The Cars’ Benjamin Orr, and Wendy and Lisa, recently departed from Prince’s *Revolution*. Mitchell had long considered the idea to bring in guests to voice the characters in her songs, but *Chalk Mark* was the LP on which she chose to fully enact it. The process began as a simple matter of proximity – collaborating with artists in nearby studios. “Then it became fun,” Mitchell explains, “and I just started calling people when I would think of them.” Even with its impressive roster – spanning genres from jazz to classic country to new wave and beyond – *Chalk Mark* is no straightforward ‘duets’ album. As one would expect from an artist who defined herself by always taking the path less travelled, Mitchell turned her most collaborative, marketable record in years into one of her most understated and intimate.

The album kicks off with “My Secret Place”, an atmospheric ballad that pairs Mitchell’s voice with ➤



A breezy, meditative album that mostly eschews the political bent and experiments of its predecessor

Peter Gabriel's. A singer who spent the '80s much like Mitchell spent the '70s, experimenting with various media and reinventing himself with each album, Gabriel's influence is clear throughout the album. Like Gabriel's 1986 breakthrough *So*, *Chalk Mark* finds its heartbeat in Manu Katché's percussion, guiding the songs with propulsive intensity. But whereas Katché's rhythms on *So* were built to reach the cheap seats at football stadiums, *Chalk Mark* keeps its pop ambition below the surface, favouring subtler sounds. In "My Secret Place", Katché establishes a slow, sensuous backdrop, as Gabriel and Mitchell's voices tie together to the point of becoming sonically inseparable. They finish each other's sentences and sing in unison, an aural equivalent of a couple who've accidentally started to dress the same. "I don't talk much to anyone", Mitchell sings, "but you're a special case".

Other tracks take a similar approach, with Mitchell bringing in personalities that reflect her own, absorbing their influence and playing off them. "Snakes And Ladders" features Don Henley and, as the album's first single, gives Mitchell the spotlight, with Henley offering quiet counterpoints in the background. The country standard "Cool Water" is a perfect showcase for Willie Nelson; it's an album highlight that further illustrates Mitchell's range. Her otherworldly arrangement does little to modernise the song's old-school Americana charm but, as always, Mitchell sings folk melodies with the same nuance and attention she applies to Charles Mingus compositions. Her voice surges with passion, supplementing the lilting folk song with urgency. Nelson, meanwhile, dips into his lowest register, offering a sense of stern disillusionment to Mitchell's desperation.

The album's most upbeat number is "Dancing Clown", a dizzying rock song that updates the old-school spirit of 1982's *Wild Things Run Fast* with *Dog Eat Dog*'s swirling soundscapes. The song features Billy Idol grunting his way through the role of a bully to Tom Petty's snivelling gentleman, with Mitchell shining through as the object of their affections. Unlike some of the album's more natural pairings, this one is appealing mostly for its novelty. Petty and Idol's respective vocal styles add little to Mitchell's narrative, and neither of them has the charisma to go toe-to-toe with her. In the song's charmingly homemade video, Idol and Petty are absent; it's just Mitchell in her kitchen, dancing with her cat, banging on pans, and air-guitaring with a broom. This visual representation for the joy of solitude makes an even stronger point than the song's ill-fated love story. It's fun and cathartic, where the song feels awkward and overcrowded.

The sprawling "Lakota" makes more successful use of an unlikely guest. Iron Eyes Cody opens the track with an a cappella chant before a bed of synths

CRITICS' VERDICT

"This...is the maturer, more cosmopolitan woman, not the scrawny hippie who sang those jewels about drinking a case of you and so on. This one wouldn't leave her sleeping bag in your bathroom, but she might own a Filofax with the phone numbers of Peter Gabriel, Silly Billy Idol, Willie Nelson and Tom Petty."

CHRIS ROBERTS, MELODY MAKER, MARCH 26, 1988

"With a tasteless assortment of famous friends virtually destroying some of the tracks... Joni is ignoring her fans' instincts with her eager participation in this super groupiness. Too many cooks are making the broth bland."

MICHELE KIRSCH, NME, MARCH 26, 1988

converts it into a fiery singalong. According to Mitchell, when she showed Iron Eyes an early version of the song, he instantly agreed to collaborate, telling her, "You've got the haunting." The activist and actor – best known for portraying the Native American with a tear in his eye in an iconic Public Service Announcement – is a ghostly presence in the song, with a tough but tender voice that reappears mostly to add emphasis to certain lines. The arrangement is one of the album's finest moments, with a tempo that stutters and stretches beneath Mitchell's layers of harmonies – her voice emerging in all its phrasings and colours, from a scratchy whisper to a searing falsetto. By the time the song reaches its riveting double-tempo finale, Mitchell has exorcised her myriad personalities, delivering the song's most potent metaphor: "I am Lakota", she sings, "fighting among ourselves".

Joni's internal conflict is inherent through the rest of the album. In "Number One", she sings about the competitive nature of pop culture, where your reputation – and thereby your future – is often beyond your control. For an artist whose finest work often went misinterpreted and underappreciated ("Fame is a glamorous misunderstanding," she once said), her words hit doubly hard. The percussion comes not from Manu Katché, but from Mitchell's own programming of a tape flipping within a reel. The looped sound serves as the song's heartbeat, and it also symbolises the day-to-day monotony of Mitchell's recording career. It calls back to the late nights she described in 1976's "Coyote", "getting home with my reel-to-reel" just as the sun ascends. By the late '80s, Mitchell had become even more of a dedicated craftswoman, making records that might not have been her most successful, but covered new ground with every move.

With the psychedelic "The Reoccurring Dream", Mitchell made a song unlike any she had written. Sampling a variety of television advertisements on the album's most disorienting track, "The Reoccurring Dream" sounds like the logical endpoint to the decade's experimentation: an epilogue to the dystopian pop of *Dog Eat Dog* and a counterpoint to some of *Chalk Mark*'s more subdued work. "Dreamer, dream on", Mitchell sings, with a tone of amusement and sarcasm, as disembodied voices promise love and happiness to anyone

who'll listen. It's at once the album's most confrontational moment and its clearest statement of purpose: beneath these songs, with their ambient production and friendly collaborations, lies an uneasy songwriter with a growing disillusionment towards the world around her. Beneath *Chalk Mark*'s beatific exterior, it is one of her most incisive and self-reflexive works.

Even with its star-studded cast and complex lyrics, *Chalk Mark*'s biggest revelation is its simplest, and it arrives at the very end of the record. "A Bird That Whistles (Corrina, Corrina)" is based on a traditional folk song, but more notably, it's based on traditional Joni Mitchell songs. After settling into a deeper register for most of the decade, her voice soars back into her *Blue*-era falsetto, telling a simple story about love lost. She's backed by little more than her own acoustic guitar, but there's also some jazzy fretless bass – echoes of Jaco Pastorius' work on *Hejira* – that swerves between her words like affirmation from an old friend. The song foreshadows her cosy return to form with 1991's *Night Ride Home* and 1994's Grammy-winning comeback *Turbulent Indigo*, and ends the record on a gorgeous, all-too-brief note. Here, Joni sounds at peace with herself, or rather, with all of her selves. "I don't fit in anywhere and I don't dare indulge in hope for this record," Mitchell told *Spin* at the time of *Chalk Mark*'s release. Her words reflect the hardness of an artist whose work had long confounded critical and commercial audiences, often growing in acclaim only with the passing of time. "Obviously, these things are frustrating to me," Mitchell continued, "but I've come to accept that I must write what I feel when I feel it and can't make my life unravel in a particular way."

Chalk Mark was seen as something of an improvement following *Dog Eat Dog*, but as Mitchell expected, its reception was unremarkable – a continuation of her stagnant commercial and critical appeal prior to her '90s comeback. It further proved that Mitchell's best work arrived at its own pace, and that the rules that apply to the rest of the industry never quite worked for her.

While taking her even further from the limelight than her purposefully esoteric '70s experiments, Joni's '80s work did so

She would never
make an album
as glossy and
high-profile again



while making more concessions than ever to commercial radio. From *Wild Things'* catchy love songs to *Dog Eat Dog's* ambitious art-pop and *Chalk Mark's* bevy of guests, Mitchell could have been mistaken for an artist with newfound commercial drive. In fact, *Chalk Mark* sounds more like Mitchell following trends (casting the album with some of the most popular male recording artists of the time was certainly no coincidence), after an entire career spent establishing trends and swiftly swerving away. If *Chalk Mark* has aged more than some of her other albums, it's because of how of-its-time it must have seemed upon release – the sound of pop radio filtered through Mitchell's lens. Shortly before the record came out, a *Saskatoon Star* Phoenix reporter even managed to eke out some optimism from Mitchell about the album's potential appeal: "I think people are ready to like me again," she said.

While Mitchell's writing always sought self-knowledge by looking outward (remember: she saw something of herself in everyone, and not the other way around), she also longed for acceptance on her own terms. "Will you take me

as I am?" she asked repeatedly in "California", a centrepiece on *Blue*, whose emotional tension arrived from knowing she would never receive an affirmative answer. It's a thought that occurs to her again on *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm*. "Will they shower you in flowers?" she asks in "Number One". "Or will they shun ya/ When your race is run?" Adept as ever at translating her deepest anxieties into poetry, Mitchell was also growing closer to learning the answer to that question.

In the years to come, as Mitchell's legacy became cemented with a new generation

of singer-songwriters who saw her as a patron saint of individuality, she would record several well-received records. She would never make one as glossy and high-profile as *Chalk Mark*, but she would use its best moments – the hushed intimacy of "My Secret Place", the dignified throwback of "A Bird That Whistles" – as templates for her work to come. In retrospect, *Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm* is the almost-happy ending to a tempestuous part of Mitchell's career, and the runway from which the rest of her story took off. ●

TRACKMARKS CHALK MARK IN A RAIN STORM

1 My Secret Place ★★★★	Ladders ★★★	Ocean Way, A&M, Sound Castle, Galaxy (all LA); Ground Control, Santa Monica, CA	Michael Landau, Steve Stevens (guitar), Wayne Shorter (sax), Thomas Dolby (marimba), Willie Nelson, Iron Eyes Cody, Julie Last, Peter Gabriel, Tom Petty, Don Henley, Wendy Melvoin, Billy Idol, Benjamin Orr, Lisa Coleman (vocals)
2 Number One ★★★★★	9 The Reoccurring Dream ★★★★★	Personnel: Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar, keyboards, drum prog), Manu Katché (drums, percussion), Steve Lindsey (organ), Larry Klein (bass, keyboards, congas prog, bk vocals),	Highest chart position: UK 26; US 45
3 Lakota ★★★★★	10 A Bird That Whistles ★★★★	Label: Geffen	
4 The Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms) ★★★	Produced by: Joni Mitchell, Larry Klein	Recorded at: Ashcombe House, Bath, The Wool Hall, Beckington, UK; Artisan, The Village,	
5 Dancin' Clown ★★			
6 Cool Water ★★★★★			
7 The Beat Of Black Wings ★★★			
8 Snakes And			