

# Discography: Joni Mitchell: Night Ride Home

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October 17, 2018



*Night Ride Home*, the first album Joni Mitchell would release in the '90s, is by no means a great album. But it's a return to Mitchell's strengths after a meandering '80s spent trapped in the hell of dated synths and blind commercialism that tripped up so many minds of her generation. It's no surprise, hearing the desiccated arena drums and incongruous MTV-star guests of 1988's corny *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* that she'd become more and more critical of the music business in the '90s, threatening to make each new album her last.

The most questionable decision Mitchell made in the '80s was to shift from personal to topical themes. These would re-emerge on 1994's *Turbulent Indigo*, but here Mitchell retreats into the exquisite sketches of her own head and others' that define her best writing. Even the song about child abuse, "Cherokee Louise," spends scarcely a bar decrying the injustice of the issue and instead focuses on what it means to provide comfort to a friend in need. It never loses sight of the individual in pursuit of the message, avoiding a common issue with political music.

More often, she's meditating on age, or indulging in the exotic fantasies that have been a troubling aspect of her art since at least *Bon Juan's Reckless Daughter* but are a little more harmless here. The *Botticelli black boy* of "The Only Joy in Town" isn't desired for his blackness but for his free spirit, the fuchsias in his hair. And while "hula girls" play a role in the Hawaiian fantasia of "Night Ride Home," the details of the locale are less central to the song than the magic of being at a strange place at the end of the day, knowing you'll wake up there again tomorrow.

Another decision that mitigated the power of Mitchell's art in the previous decade was abandoning her delicious guitar tunings for a synth-heavy palate. Guitars are back in a big way here, and it's either a testament to how distinctive her sound is or to how indelibly scratched into our brains the spidery opening chord of *Blue* is that this immediately feels like a Joni Mitchell album as soon as "Night Ride Home" opens with a hearty strum. Make no mistake, there are still tons of synths, but they're used tastefully, fluttering above "Only Joy in Town" as if to suck nectar.

*Night Ride Home* has the trappings of a classic Joni Mitchell album, but it's not as inspired as the '70s albums of which it's wont to trigger

Pavlovian associations. Like *Wild Things Run Fast* and *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* it wastes a prime chunk of real estate with an ill-advised cover, in this case a setting of Yeats' "The Second Coming" with embellishments that pale beside the words of the poet. At 51 molasses-slow minutes it exhibits the bloat of the CD era with none of the grandiosity that justified *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* clocking in at a full hour.

And it's an unfortunate fact that Mitchell is best as a songwriter when she's writing from a personal place of discontentment. Mitchell lost interest in herself as a subject around the time she married session bassist Larry Klein in 1982, in part because her relative contentment drained the well of personal drama from which she often drew, and in part because of the pervasive association of women songwriters with "confessional" art. In a 1996 interview with the *L.A. Times* she defiantly claims "Two Grey Rooms" "shows that my songs aren't all self-portraits."

As she tells it, that's a song about a German aristocrat who moves out of luxury into *two grey rooms* where he can watch his unrequited lover walk to and from work every day. The Mitchell who wrote "My Old Man," "Help Me," "Talk to Me" or "People's Parties/Same Situation" might have found this situation hilarious. How inglorious and awkward love can be! This Mitchell sees the German as a tragic figure—a dusty literary archetype rather than a person—and he's a lot less interesting that way. She's less willing to poke fun at other people than at herself.

This isn't a particularly funny album, nor is it a particularly touching one. But it feels like a Joni album, which is more than can be said about most of her '80s work. It doesn't feel compromised, nor does it feel like an attempt to chase trends or move units. By understanding her strengths and making an album that delivers on them (for the most part), she cleared a way for the more unhurried path she'd take in the years to come. No doubt this album sounded spectacular to Joni fans after her '80s wilderness, but it resembles her best work more than it embodies it.