

# hearMUSIC

## Joni Mitchell *Shine*

In today's pop music world, more often than not, image trumps talent. Melodies are hook-laden and easily digestible; lyrics are trivial and fluffy; vocals are Pro Tool-ed to intonation perfection. What passes as a mega-hit one year dissolves into oblivion the next. However, in the midst of all the designed-for-mass-consumption music saturating the broadcasting airwaves, cramming record store shelves and suffocating the digital domain, a handful of musicians who can truly be championed as artists continue to create fine art within the confines of popular music.

Preeminent among them is Joni Mitchell, who delivers her first album of new material in nearly 10 years, *Shine*, which she says is "as serious a work as I've ever done." Released by Hear Music, the partnership between Starbucks Entertainment and Concord Music Group, *Shine* is a superb collection of 10 songs that are at once compelling and poignant, exquisite and soulful, sublime and haunting. With the exception of the CD's final track, "If," adapted from Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name, all the tunes are written by Mitchell, who says that once she started to compose again, "the dam broke and [the music] began to pour out."

Starting out as a folk-rock poet and vocalist who flew onto the pop music scene in the late '60s, Mitchell bloomed into one of the most adventurous and influential singer-songwriters of the last 40 years, with thousands of musicians, from pop stars like Prince and Shawn Colvin to jazz luminaries like Herbie Hancock and Cassandra Wilson, hailing her as a cultural hero and artistic role model. Mitchell is a true Renaissance artist who also paints, exhibits, collaborates with a ballet company and has been officially recognized as a poet (the lyrics of her song "Bad Dreams" from *Shine* will appear as a poem in the September ??? issue of *The New Yorker* magazine).

As a musician, throughout her career, Mitchell has explored a range of stylistic expression, including rock and jazz, while racking up accolades that include induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1997) and the Canadian Songwriters hall of Fame (2007). Despite the fact that she had taken a hiatus from music for nearly a decade, *Shine* ranks among the strongest albums of her legendary career.

The instrumentation on *Shine* is sparse, with Mitchell leading the way on piano and guitar and coloring the melodies with organic synthesized tones, ranging from oboe to accordion. She invites soprano saxophonist Bob Sheppard and pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz to ornament many of the tracks and employs a rhythm section, comprising drummer Brian Blade and bassist Larry Klein, to anchor some of the tunes. Special guests include Brazilian percussionist Paulino Da Costa and James Taylor on acoustic guitar.

While the CD title suggests an upbeat recording, in fact, *Shine* is a reflective album, ripe with critiques on the desecration of the earth, musings on the dangerous state of heartlessness, lamentations on the loss of the holy, sober estimations of rampant greed, and a rumination on the "worshipping [of] our ego" that ultimately leads to the "shock and awe" of war. While the outlook is grim, Mitchell weaves hope throughout the songs, such as in the end prayer to "make genius of this tragedy unfolding" on "This Place," the buoyant "tackle the beast alone" by the protagonist of the song "Hana" and the entreaty to "let your little light shine" on the redemptive title track.

"There is a deep sense of sorrow on this album," Mitchell says. "But we need sorrow for sobriety. It feels like we're all fiddling while America burns. Let's not waste the moment. We're out of balance."

Mitchell also re-envisioned one of her classic tunes, "Big Yellow Taxi," performed in joyous, humorous fashion as a momentary pause in the profundity. It arrives midway on *Shine*, she says, to keep the health-of-the-planet theme moving with a light touch after one of the CD's most despairing pieces, "Bad Dreams." She says "Big Yellow Taxi" is meant to leaven in this context, while also reminding listeners that the need to combat the ravaging of our environment is dire. "The idea of this song wasn't popular when I first recorded it, and it's not now either," she says. "It's taken people a long time to see that we have to cut back on our electricity, but we won't."

As to why she decided to sideline herself for the past 10 years, Mitchell candidly replies, "After I recorded *Taming the Tiger* in 1998, the music business no longer interested me. I didn't like the direction it was going. I didn't feel like I fit any more. I didn't want to do social commentary or romantic writing. I blocked myself. I couldn't think of a theme that I wanted to sing about. Plus, there was no incentive to grow. So, I thought, I'm finished. And that was fine with me because music was beginning to feel like a detour from my painting."

Mitchell fulfilled her Warners contract by putting out two orchestral albums on Nonesuch – the first, *Both Sides Now* (2000), comprised of jazz standards; and the second, *Travelogue* (2002), which included newly arranged versions of her old songs. "When I turned *Travelogue* in, I was told by an exec that the label thought what I had done was a work of genius, but they didn't know what to do with it," she says. "So that stuck in my craw – to be told that something is too good."

That dismissal appeared to be the final straw for Mitchell. She had already abandoned playing both the piano and guitar following *Taming the Tiger*. This latest event convinced her that it might be best to never play music again. "I figured that as long as I'm creating, I don't have to do this job anymore," Mitchell says. "Besides, I never really cared much for most of the perks in the pop music world anyway."

However, a confluence of experiences, beginning in 2005, inspired Mitchell to rethink her decision to quit music for good. While reviewing her songs for a box set of her Geffen Records albums she had recorded in the '80s, she began to reflect on her oeuvre. "As I was listening to my work, I thought that I haven't really finished," she says. "There's a journey going on here that isn't complete. I didn't know where it would culminate, but I knew that I wasn't finished yet as long as I could play with authenticity despite being in the midst of today's look-at-me music business."

Soon after, Mitchell was approached by Starbucks Entertainment to participate in its "Artist Choice" series of compilation CDs sold in Starbucks. "The company sent me copies of other artists' lists, but that was at a time when I truly hated music," she says. "I couldn't listen to CDs or the radio. It got to a point where I couldn't remember what I liked about music. But when I was asked to put together a list of 12-14 songs that I loved, that forced me to remember those songs that knocked my socks off."

Mitchell assumes that some artists phoned their picks in the next day. She took much longer to compile her list of songs that ranged from Billie Holiday and Miles Davis to Chuck Berry and the New Radicals. "This was one of those life-and-death matters," she recalls. "If I can get this right and remember why I loved music so much, I might have another record in me."

That proved to be the initial impetus for Mitchell to return to her own music. After retreating from her Los Angeles home to her longtime coastline house north of Vancouver in the summer of 2005, Mitchell felt so grateful to be back to what she's calls her 72-acre "heartbeat" that one night her piano "beckoned for the first time in 10 years," she writes in *Shine's* liner notes. "My fingers found these patterns that express what words could not." Over the course of a couple of months, she wrote four new piano melodies, none of which had lyrics.

Then two other factors played major roles in Mitchell's reentry into the pop music world: her collaborative work with choreographer Jean Grande-Maitre of the Alberta Ballet on *Dancing Joni: The Fiddle and the Drum*, a ballet based on her more provocative music, and her creating a new series of artwork based on photos she took of her malfunctioning flat screen television set. "There were pulsating green images on the screen and I started to take thousands of snapshots of them," she says. "I organized the photos into themes, one of which

was assembled into a triptych book on war/torture/revolution." She eventually had those photos enlarged into prints and placed on canvas for an art show in Los Angeles (and later in New York) on the theme.

While preparing for the L.A. opening, she received a call from Grande-Maitre asking for her blessing on his ballet. Upon hearing what songs he had chosen, Mitchell told him, "Some of those songs feel a little light and fluffy for the times. Lately I've been concentrating on the Iraq War and other human atrocities. If you want to use songs about that, you're going to have to use some of my least popular ones."

Grande-Maitre agreed, which set Mitchell in motion to collaborating on the project. She began to pen lyrics to some of the instrumental tunes she had written to bring a freshness to the musical mix ("If I Had a Heart," "If" and the "Big Yellow Taxi" redux appear in the ballet). She also incorporated some of her photo images into the ballet's set design. Not only did *The Fiddle and the Drum* open to rave international reviews in its February 2007 premiere in Calgary, but it fired Mitchell up to bring to light her long-awaited new album. "The ballet brought everything together – the poetry, the music, the artwork," she says. "It was the thrill of my life."

Because of her association with Starbucks Entertainment (which also licensed a limited reissue of *Blue* that was sold in Starbucks stores), Mitchell says it was an easy decision to release *Shine* on the newly formed Hear Music label. "We had various offers," she says, "but I figured why not work with people who I've enjoyed a good relationship with. They're actually the people who helped to remind me of what I loved about making music in the first place."

As for the overall impact of *Shine*, Mitchell holds out hope that the album can raise awareness. "It may be too late," she says. "We may be on course for massive troubles as a species. I'm not imparting knowledge. I'm hoping that I can help people ask questions about how to stop the destruction of the planet."

Mitchell also found *Shine* to be personally significant. "A lot of this album is about my own growth," she says. "It's about how I'd like to be, about things I'd like to grow to be as I keep developing my values system. It's like the character in my song 'Hana.' I'd like to be more like her: with a lot of discipline, with a lot of high thought."

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