

hearMUSIC

Joni Mitchell
SHINE
TRACK-BY-TRACK

On the album cover, from the song, "If I Had a Heart":

Holy Earth
How can we heal you?
We cover you like a blight...
Strange birds of appetite...
If I had a heart I'd cry.

1. "One Week Last Summer" (instrumental)

(From the CD liner notes:

"I stepped outside of my little house and stood barefoot on a rock. The Pacific Ocean rolled towards me. Across the bay, a family of seals sprawled on the kelp uncovered by the low tide. A blue heron honked overhead. All around the house the wild roses were blooming. The air smelled sweet and salty and loud with crows and bees. My house was clean. I had food in the fridge for a week. I sat outside 'til the sun went down. That night the piano beckoned for the first time in 10 years. My fingers found these patterns that expressed what words could not. This song poured out while a brown bear rummaged through my garbage cans.")

"This was originally titled 'Gratitude,' and it was the first piece I wrote for this album. I was in my house north of Vancouver, and I was feeling so grateful for this place that I've owned since 1969. I'd written a lot of my songs here — nearly all of *For the Roses* and *Court & Spark*, but that was on a baby grand which proved to be too big for the space. I finally replaced it with a spinet that has an old Wurlitzer five-stop electric keyboard in it.

After 10 years of not playing the piano or my guitar, I sat down at the spinet and this just poured out in the spirit of I'm-so-happy-to-be-here. I was just ripple watching and cleaning my house, watching the shoals change and Big Bird flying over. It was cheap thrills at a time when nothing in Hollywood made me feel good. I started playing the piano and at first came noodles, a nucleus of sound. Then the dam broke and it began to pour out.

Later in the studio I added the orchestration. I had called my engineer, Dan Marnien, to get me a composer's synthesizer that had good orchestral colors. On past albums I had jobbed out the arrangements, but I wanted to do my own this time. I laid down the meat and potatoes of the tune and then I painted over

that, skimming a little color around the notes, going back to my palette to see what colors worked best.

Then I called Bob Sheppard in to play saxophone. This is the only song he plays alto saxophone on. All the others are soprano. It was his decision to play alto, and it was good call."

2. "This Place"

"This song is about preventing a catastrophe.

When I first moved to this place in B.C., it was rural and the land's function hadn't been designed. It contained the remnants of the logging industry and most of the people who lived here were poor. No one knew about it. I knew that sometimes a famous person moving in can start a gentrification movement, so I've been very quiet here for 30-plus years. But now, five miles away on the Sunshine Coast, developers are beginning to clear cut areas so the wealthy people can build houses and bring in their yachts. And then we learned that we don't own the mineral rights to our land. A company started poking around, wanting to tear a mountain down for gravel, then build a giant conveyor belt out into the ocean where the gravel would be picked up by huge diesel-powered boats several times a day. The deal ended up falling through, but it still concerns everyone living here.

The song talks about my neighbor, caretaker and friend, Hans, who says, 'When I get to heaven, if it is not like this, I'll just hop a cloud and I'm coming back down here...' It ends with the line about having the 'genius to save this place.' I remember an actor in L.A. telling me once that everyone's a genius. I didn't agree with him, but then I thought, wouldn't it be nice if that were true."

3.

"If I Had a Heart"

"I spent a couple of years in anger. I had fallen into a place where there was a lot of shaming and blaming, which I believe is the lowest level of evil. It conspires to having a bad heart – a heart poisoned with anger. I did a lot of weeping for what's happening to the earth when I was in my 20s. I could see a lot of things coming. Now I feel kind of inoculated to what people are now just discovering. If they're waking up and seeing it, they're in pain and they're feeling helpless.

This is a lamentation that asks the question, what can we do when we feel feeble, when we feel that things are so out of hand. How can we heal the holy earth? I may feel like a flea on a dinosaur, but I'm still kicking it in the shins."

4.

"Hana"

"I wish I could remember the name of this great old movie from the '30s that I based this song on. The story is about a woman who literally shows up at a house in the middle of a blizzard. It's set in the Depression and she's selling kitchen utensils door to door. She literally comes in from the cold, sees the dire

living situation of this school-teacher husband and his wife and kid, and becomes like an angel to them. She offers to be their maid, make their money stretch and get them back on the right track. Hana is a wily, street-wise, Irish woman who has a generous heart but also a hidden motive for being in this town: to visit her illegitimate son who was adopted by a rich family. I identified with her, but she was way ahead of me. She's exemplary in the way she dealt with life."

5.

"Bad Dreams"

"The chorus line, 'Bad dreams are good/In the great plan,' came from my grandson, who said this when he was 3 years old. My daughter, grandson and I went to see the play version of 'The Phantom of the Opera.' He was all dressed up and had been really well behaved during the play. But afterwards when we went to a restaurant, he was tired and hungry and started acting up. To try to stop his tantrum, I pointed to the theater across the street where the play had been performed and told him that the Phantom lives in a tunnel under the old house. Basically I was resorting to telling him a black fairy tale to keep him quiet. When he settled down, my daughter said, 'It's a wonder sometimes that he doesn't give me bad dreams.' He responded by saying, 'But Mamma, bad dreams are good in the great plan.'

And I said, how do you know that? And he replied that he didn't know. All I know is that this was one of the few profound things people have told me in person. (Another one was a guy telling me once, 'Joni, Joni, keep up the divine dissatisfaction, but don't worry.')

The beginning of the song is based on a haiku I had written – the only poetry I had written in 10 years:

The cats are in the flowerbed
A red hawk rides the sky
A little dog is chewing on a book of matches.

Well, the little dog didn't fit the melody, but the rest did. So, those two lines and the 'If' poem by Rudyard Kipling were the only words I had in my head when I started the album.

It's true there's a sorrow and despair in this song. But it's factual. Rather than make a sad sack out of myself, I figured, let's talk turkey and face facts. It's not that I have a negative view. And I don't want people to think, 'Oh, Joni, she's suffering.' If people are seeing me confessing to something, they're missing the point of this song. Even though I'm using 'I,' I'm hoping people won't think this is autobiographical, but that they will see themselves in it. Certainly I see myself in that grocery list of failures – like being selfish, forgetting to be grateful, focusing on the me me me.

As for the superheroes saving the day, children who grow up with those fantasy figures may end up being frustrated by this rough world. Fantasy escape may not necessarily be the best toy for the troubles that lie ahead.”

6.

“Big Yellow Taxi (2007)”

“This song ended up in the ballet. It’s the only song like it in the ballet and on the album. It’s the encore of the ballet, which doesn’t usually have one because it’s dance. But [choreographer] Jean Grande-Maitre said, ‘Joni always has encores, so we must have one.’ I chose to revisit this song and do it so that it has an element of humor in it. I came across a doo-wop pattern and kept going with it. The chorus sounds like bop. I came up with an arrangement that is very French-circus sounding and uses instrumental sounds, like the accordion, that some people may consider square. It works great for the ballet encore – it dances perfect without drums – and on the album, the song keeps the theme going and lightens the feel after ‘Bad Dreams.’

Why is this song still viable? It’s taken people a long time to see that we have to cut back on our electricity, but we won’t. The idea of this song wasn’t popular when I first recorded it, and it’s not now either because we’re drowning in pop culture.”

7.

“Night of the Iguana”

“This is loosely based on the film of the same name [director John Huston’s 1964 screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play] where Richard Burton plays the role of an alcoholic preacher who loses his church because he was seduced by a woman. But he’s not defrocked of his clerical collar. He ends up leading a bus tour to Mexico that stops in a funky, rundown place where once again he has to deal with temptation. The song fits in with the theological/ecological theme of the album.

I added cello and sax and then electric guitar into the mix after I had the tune itself. Then I had Brian Blade come in to hit really hard on his drums, and Larry Klein play out the bass sketch I had written.”

8.

“Strong and Wrong”

“This was one of the last songs written for the album. Originally I had a different syncopation to the melody. I wrote it instrumentally, like I did with all the other songs on the album. At first I was going to keep it as an instrumental and use it as a hidden track. There was such a spontaneous beauty to the melody, and I had a hard time getting beyond the ‘breaking away’ phrase I was thinking of when I was looking for lyrics.

The words came to me after seeing a National Geographic documentary on the gnostic gospels where two of the experts agreed that Jesus was easily amused and had a childlike sense of humor. They based that assertion on a

passage about Jesus in a black robe laughing his head off at his disciples. Behind the scenes of the show, the two experts ended up getting into a bitter dispute, which spoke to me about what that scene is all about anyway: Jesus seeing his disciples worshipping their own egos. He's laughing at their foolishness.

So, the song is talking about Christianity worshipping egos, like Bush saying that he talked with God last night. I see it as him having a little chat with his ego. Then there are the men loving war, like *Jesus Camp* [the documentary film about the evangelical church summer camp that espouses teaching children to be members of the "army of God"]. It's a militant camp where 3 year olds are being told to stand up for God. It's terrifying. To me, it's the most nonspiritual warp of Christianity to date."

9.

"Shine"

"These lyrics were born over a period of time, and the song could have been 14 minutes long instead of seven. In a sense, 'Shine' is reminiscent of that old Sunday School song about letting your light shine. I heard the words of the chorus first, but I didn't know what the song was going to be about.

When I recorded it, I was sick so a doctor prescribed some penicillin, which I had an allergic reaction to. I was delirious, stressed out, and we worked all night long. I was so delirious that I was playing way back on the beat. The tone of it reminds me of the *Blue* album. I was also very sick when I recorded that.

When I was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame in Toronto in January 2007, I had demos of the *Shine* songs with me and played them to some friends at a party afterward. James Taylor told me that he had to play on this song. I wasn't sure if anyone could because it was created in such a rare spirit. But James came in anyway and I asked him to play short figures like a saxophone. So you can hear fractions of James' guitar playing here."

10.

"If"

"My friend called me up and read this Rudyard Kipling poem to me over the phone. As soon as I heard it, it resonated with me, and I wanted to set it to music. I love the opening line: 'If you can keep your head/While all about you/People are losing theirs and blaming you.' So, I wrote down the words, went to my house in Vancouver and made a song out of it. It's the only song that I wrote up there on the guitar.

The poem is written from a soldier's perspective, so I rewrote some of the poetry. Kipling wrote, 'If we can fill the journey/Of a minute/With 60 seconds worth of distance run/Then you'll be a man, my son.'" I disagree with him, philosophically speaking, that endurance gives you the inheritance of the earth. My experience tells me that the earth is innocence, with wonder and delight, which is renewable. The blue heron on my property flies overhead, and I'm a 3 year old. I'm filled with wonder and delight. So I rewrote that part of the poem

as 'If you can fill the journey/Of a minute/With 60 seconds worth of wonder and delight.' Kipling's version is macho; I wanted to get the feminine principle into the poetry."