Set the Controls for the Heart of the Strum

*Joni Mitchell Archives Vol. 4: The Asylum Years(1976-1980)*, Joni Mitchell

*Electric Lady Studios: A Jimi Hendrix Vision,* Jimi Hendrix

*Luck and Strange*, David Gilmour

*Trip the Witch*, Trip the Witch

It's been intriguing in the last couple of decades to not only see constant reissues and box sets but also the endless releases of 'official bootlegs', alternative versions, studio takes, demos and rehearsals as musicians realise they need different income streams now that the music business has fallen apart and we all have online access to just about everything ever released, including the most obscure bands we can choose to listen to.

There's something strange about it really. Surely an album was the best version the band or artiste could play and produce at the time? Why would anyone go back and tweak it? Add new vocals, rearrange it, remix it or compile all the versions of songs that eventually resulted in the official album?

I can see the attraction of live versions, where songs often have a different dynamic approach or include different musicians, not to mention changing setlists offering different sequences and contexts. But there's nothing worse than rehearsals that fall apart in the middle or endless jamming, however famous the participants. I like putting on an album and playing it through from start to finish, as intended at the time of release.

But Robert Fripp, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell – and many others – disagree. Although nothing compared to some of the huge King Crimson and Bob Dylan box sets, there have not only been four collections of remastered Mitchell albums issued, but also been four accompanying archive sets of material related to her albums. The fourth volume of archive Mitchell material from 1976-1980 strangely includes live music from 1975 but evidences that tracks from *Hejira* were being played well before the studio recordings and show that it was in the studio, and on later tours, that the music changed radically. In 1975 these songs sat comfortably with much older songs.

Although Mitchell had reversioned songs as jazz-lite with the L.A. Express for the *Miles of Aisles* live album, and Larry Carlton and Victor Feldman appear on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, it was Jaco Pastorius' bass that seems to have been the most instrumental in changing the compositional structures and arrangements of Mitchell's new stretched-out compositions. The live tracks and demos here also show a similar aesthetic at work for *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, an album I find difficult to like, despite it seemingly emerging from the same pool of songs.

The next album, *Mingus*, was totally different though. Ostensibly a collaboration with the aged and dying jazz bassist Charles Mingus, Mitchell organised some research and development sessions with a wide range of jazz and electric jazz players, most of which were abandoned in favour of the returning Pastorius and percussionist Don Alias, a more prominent part for Wayne Shorter, and the arrival of Herbie Hancock and Peter Erskine in the line-up. It's an awkward, difficult album to get in to, possibly too jazz for Mitchell's fans, and too song-based for Mingus fans. Repeated listening revealed some wonderful tunes and music but it was in the main received in a fairly cool manner by critics and fans.

*Archives Vol 4* includes some of those 'early alternative' versions from *Mingus* as well as tracks by the live band who were recorded for the film and double album *Shadows and Light*. Here, Pastorius was joined by whizzkid guitarist Pat Metheny, and it is their interplay and texturing, along with featured solos, that really brings songs from Mitchell's last few albums to life. After that release, Mitchell would move labels, from Asylum to Geffen, and start her descent in to awkward overproduced attempts at pop, aided and abetted by the likes of Thomas Dolby.

This new box set is certainly the most interesting one so far (and is likely to stay that way as far as I am concerned) as *Hejira* and *Shadows and Light* remain – along with *Hissing*... – her best albums, and *Mingus* her most intriguing, but it also makes what many of us perceived as a 'jump' to *Hejira* less so, more part of a slowly changing musical and personal landscape. The box set feels like a repackaging of several unofficial live recordings that many will already own (especially the Bread and Roses benefit concert which has a couple of outstanding duets with Herbie Hancock and has seen several 'semi-legitimate' releases). I can't help feeling a sense of being shown how a magic trick works, and whilst some of the embryonic versions and demos are interesting, they end up sending me back to the finished albums rather than wanting to listen to the works-in-progress again.

*Electric Lady Studios: A Jimi Hendrix Vision* is a 3CD set that includes almost 40 unreleased tracks recorded between June and August of 1970 by the new-look Jimi Hendrix Experience at Electric Lady Studios, just before the bandleader's tragic death a month later. They feature Billy Cox on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums, and like the (Joni) Mitchell, lots of the music is demos or alternate versions of mixes from different studio sessions, with several songs repeated in different takes.

Hendrix was fascinated by the studio and how to use it as an instrument. He'd already explored using feedback as an instrument in its own right, used pyrotechnics, fashion and attitude as devices to entertain, and made some hard funk-rock live with Band of Gypsys. Now, he wanted to continue experimenting and refining...

Although the music is mostly (officially) unreleased, listeners will know the majority of these tracks from various posthumous albums. 'Drifting', 'Freedom', 'In from the Storm' and 'Midnight Rider' are all here, along with other snippets, rehearsals, alternative takes and – of course – a 26-minute jam medley. Hendrix is always good for a listen, but this is a tired and cynical promotional tie-in with a film of the same title which explores this period of Hendrix's life and music. I appears to exist solely to tempt hardcore fans to empty their wallets.

*Luck and Strange*, David Gilmour's recent album, is all new however. The disappointment here is how tired and predictable it all is, especially the cliché lyrics throughout. We have 'the theatre of my soul, 'the promise of eternal youth', 'the road to hell is paved with gold' [not a lot of people know that], 'empty skies' and 'dark and velvet nights'. I mean come on, surely somebody, indeed almost anybody, can do better than that?

In the main the songs plod or, if you prefer the terminology, move at a stately pace, with only occasional guitar solos to remind you who David Gilmour is and what he is or was capable of playing. Let's face it, we are talking Pink Floyd. The very brilliant Pink Floyd, who produced *Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here* and *Animals*. It is the moments when keyboards echo, recalling the sonar effect of 'Echoes' and when the guitar goes into soaring overdrive that we want, not the half-arsed polite strumming and riffing evident elsewhere.

Even this new studio album on CD includes a 'jam session' with the same title as the album (the Blu-Ray apparently includes two more 'orchestral version' tracks). 'Luck and Strange (original Barn jam)' is exciting upon the first couple of listens, mostly because it wakes you up after boredom has set in. However, repeated listens reveal it to be a pretty bog-standard blues, simply retreading old familiar ground. I'm glad Gilmour is out there making new music (and have no time for Roger Waters or his music) but surely he could come up with something more interesting?

If, like me, you like Pink Floyd, you will enjoy Trip the Witch's self-titled album from 2021 which I recently discovered. It kicks off with the best Yes sounding track by a non-Yes band, even to the point of including guest vocals from Jon Anderson, but quickly moves into Pink Floyd pastiche, all atmospheric synths, echoing guitars and busy drums. There's an occasional diversion for one or two surf-prog tracks (no really; imagine Dick Dale in Yes or Pink Floyd) but in the main this is accomplished music that almost but not quite tips into actual Floyd chord changes or structures. It's a great mix of atmospherics, surreal ambience, hard rock and new-wave psychedelia. And there's no recycling, alternative versions, demos or bullshit, just rock solid sound.

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(1340 words)