

. the music of  
joni  
mitchell

LLOYD WHITESELL



# THE MUSIC OF JONI MITCHELL

*This page intentionally left blank*

THE  
MUSIC  
OF

# Joni Mitchell

---

---

LLOYD WHITESELL

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2008 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Whitesell, Lloyd.

The music of Joni Mitchell / by Lloyd Whitesell.

p. cm.

Includes discography (p. ), bibliographical references, and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-530757-3; 978-0-19-530799-3 (pbk.)

1. Mitchell, Joni—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

ML410.M6823W55 2008

782.42164092—dc22 2007043693

Publication of this book was supported by the Lloyd Hibberd Publication  
Endowment Fund of the American Musicological Society

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

# CONTENTS

*Abbreviations* xi

- 1 Introduction: Pop Song and Art Song 3
- 2 Sound and Style 15
- 3 Voices and Personae 41
- 4 Thematic Threads 78
- 5 Harmonic Palette 117
- 6 Melodic Turns 148
- 7 Collections and Cycles 194
- 8 A Tribute 227

*Appendix* 230

*Notes* 232

*Bibliography* 257

*Index* 267

*This page intentionally left blank*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Fred Maus for encouragement at an early stage of this project. For conversations about method and generous advice about work in progress I would like to thank Udayan Sen, Daniel Sonenberg, and my colleagues David Brackett and William Caplin. An anonymous reader for the press was extremely helpful with suggestions for revision. Thanks go to my research assistants Heather White Luckow and Michel Vallières for their enthusiasm and insight in compiling a bibliography on the analysis of popular music.

Research for this book was carried out with the aid of an Internal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Grant from McGill University. Cynthia Leive and the wonderful staff at the Marvin Duchow Music Library offered abundant support. Les Irvin, of the Joni Mitchell Discussion List, gave invaluable help tracking down arcane details and materials. The two official Web sites are beautifully maintained treasure troves of information, making research a treat. I am grateful to Cathy Clarke of S. L. Feldman & Associates for help with permissions. A special thanks to Joni Mitchell for permission to reproduce her painting. Suzanne Ryan, Norm Hirschy, and the staff at Oxford University Press have been supportive and enthusiastic at every stage of the project. The book also received welcome assistance from the Lloyd Hibberd Publication Endowment Fund of the American Musicological Society.

I would like to thank the students in my graduate seminar on Joni Mitchell for the opportunity to share some of my ideas. Finally, thanks to Don McLean, Dean of the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, for working so untiringly to bring the artist herself to the Symposium on the Music and Art of Joni Mitchell at McGill, October 2004; to Howie Klein for smoothing the way; to David Brackett and Sarah Culpeper for their help in organizing the symposium; and to all the participants for making it a success: Line Grenier, John Kelly, Dan Levitin, Ann Powers, Jennifer Rycenga, Udayan Sen, Daniel Sonenberg, Greg Tate, and Jacqueline Warwick.

A portion of chapter 4 appeared as "A Joni Mitchell Aviary" in *Women and Music* 1 (Summer 1997): 46–54, and *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacey Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 237–50. A version of chapter 5 appeared in *Popular Music* 21 (2002): 189–209.



The following excerpts, words and music by Joni Mitchell, reproduced by permission. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

All I Want. © 1971 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Amelia. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Arrangement. © 1969 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Banquet. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Barangrill. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Be Cool. © 1981 Crazy Crow Music.  
The Beat of Black Wings. © 1988 Crazy Crow Music.  
Big Yellow Taxi. © 1970 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Black Crow. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Blonde in the Bleachers. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Blue Boy. © 1969 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Blue Motel Room. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Boho Dance. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Both Sides, Now. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Cactus Tree. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Car on a Hill. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Carey. © 1971 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
A Case of You. © 1971 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Chelsea Morning. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Chinese Café. © 1982 Crazy Crow Music.  
The Circle Game. © 1966 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Conversation. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Cotton Avenue. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Coyote. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Dawntreader. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Dog Eat Dog. © 1985 Crazy Crow Music.  
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter. © 1978 Crazy Crow Music.  
Don't Interrupt the Sorrow. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Down to You. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Dreamland. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Edith and the Kingpin. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Electricity. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
For the Roses. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Furry Sings the Blues. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Gallery. © 1969 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.

Hejira. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Help Me. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
I Had a King. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Impossible Dreamer. © 1985 Crazy Crow Music.  
In France They Kiss on Main Street. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Jericho. © 1974 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Judgement of the Moon and Stars (Ludwig's Tune). © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Just Like This Train. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Ladies of the Canyon. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Ladies' Man. © 1981 Crazy Crow Music.  
Last Chance Lost. © 1994 Crazy Crow Music.  
Let the Wind Carry Me. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Little Green. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Love or Money. © 1974 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Marcie. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Michael from Mountains. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Morning Morgantown. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Nathan La Franer. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Night Ride Home. © 1988 Crazy Crow Music.  
Off Night Backstreet. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Only Joy in Town. © 1991 Crazy Crow Music.  
Otis and Marlena. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Paprika Plains. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
People's Parties. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Rainy Night House. © 1970 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Raised on Robbery. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Ray's Dad's Cadillac. © 1991 Crazy Crow Music.  
Refuge of the Roads. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
River. © 1971 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Same Situation. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
See You Sometime. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Shades of Scarlett Conquering. © 1971 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Shadows and Light. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Silky Veils of Ardor. © 1977 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Sisotowbell Lane. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Song for Sharon. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Song to a Seagull. © 1966 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Songs to Aging Children Come. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
A Strange Boy. © 1976 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.

Sunny Sunday. © 1994 Crazy Crow Music.  
Sweet Bird. © 1975 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Tea Leaf Prophecy. © 1988 Crazy Crow Music.  
Tin Angel. © 1967 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Trouble Child. © 1973 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Willy. © 1969 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey. © 1979 Crazy Crow Music.  
Woman of Heart and Mind. © 1972 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
Woodstock. © 1968 (Renewed) Crazy Crow Music.  
You Dream Flat Tires. © 1981 Crazy Crow Music.

The following excerpted lyrics by Joni Mitchell reproduced by permission. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

A Chair in the Sky. Words and music by Joni Mitchell and Charles Mingus. © 1979 Crazy Crow Music and Jazz Workshop, Inc. All rights outside the U.S. and Canada on behalf of Jazz Workshop, Inc. and Crazy Crow Music administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203.

The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines. Words and music by Joni Mitchell and Charles Mingus. © 1979 Crazy Crow Music and Jazz Workshop, Inc. All rights outside the U.S. and Canada on behalf of Jazz Workshop, Inc. and Crazy Crow Music administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203.

The Hissing of Summer Lawns. Words and music by Joni Mitchell and John P. Guerin. © 1975 (Renewed) Mad Man's Drum Music and Crazy Crow Music. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203.

# ABBREVIATIONS

## ALBUMS BY JONI MITCHELL

<i>B</i>	<i>Blue</i>
<i>BOS</i>	<i>The Beginning of Survival</i>
<i>BSN</i>	<i>Both Sides Now</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Clouds</i>
<i>C&amp;S</i>	<i>Court and Spark</i>
<i>CMRS</i>	<i>Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm</i>
<i>DED</i>	<i>Dog Eat Dog</i>
<i>DJRD</i>	<i>Don Juan's Reckless Daughter</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>For the Roses</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Hejira</i>
<i>HSL</i>	<i>The Hissing of Summer Lawns</i>
<i>LC</i>	<i>Ladies of the Canyon</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Mingus</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Miles of Aisles</i>
<i>NRH</i>	<i>Night Ride Home</i>
<i>S&amp;L</i>	<i>Shadows and Light</i>
<i>SPG</i>	<i>Songs of a Prairie Girl</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Song to a Seagull</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Turbulent Indigo</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Taming the Tiger</i>
<i>WTRF</i>	<i>Wild Things Run Fast</i>

## BOOK

Luftig	Stacey Luftig, ed., <i>The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary</i> (New York: Schirmer, 2000)
--------	---

*This page intentionally left blank*

# THE MUSIC OF JONI MITCHELL

*This page intentionally left blank*



## INTRODUCTION: POP SONG AND ART SONG

Joni Mitchell is now widely recognized as one of the foremost singer-songwriters of the late twentieth century. Since her career began in the 1960s she has produced fifteen original albums and a collaborative project with the great jazz musician Charles Mingus, as well as a number of concert albums and compilations.<sup>1</sup> By the 1990s she began to be marketed as a “classic” and was confirmed in her classic status by a series of tribute concerts and awards for artistic achievement.<sup>2</sup> Her songwriting, in its originality, creative integrity, stylistic adventurousness, and technical polish, has had great influence on musicians from many different backgrounds. Furthermore, her lyrical and musical output has acquired special cultural status as the representative voice of a self-exploratory intellectual bohemianism, shaped by the visionary ideals of the 1960s folksong revival, youth protest movements, and sexual revolution. In particular, her songs record a woman’s response to those struggles and the prospects they have opened up. Mitchell is also unique in her perspective on the North American cultural landscape, as projected through a symbolic triangulation of the urban poles of New York City and Los Angeles with the prairies of western Canada. These aspects of her writing, as well as her depth of thought as a lyricist, have received some treatment by critics in the popular press.<sup>3</sup> Her musical craftsmanship, however, still lacks a full account.

This book is about music and poetry in the songs of Joni Mitchell. My subject is sound, syntax, design, and effect—how the songs are put together and how they work. I will not be judging the value of her music based on its influence, popularity, or exemplary nature as a chronicle of its times, though these are all topics worthy of consideration in their own right. Rather, I will be examining details of her craft, rummaging through her musical toolkit (her “box of paints,” as she might put it) to establish a basis for judgments about the quality of her



songwriting. I am not particularly interested in ranking Mitchell's work against that of other songwriters (to compete for the title of "the greatest" according to some presumed set of objective criteria). Nevertheless, I do feel compelled to point out that evaluation of her work has been affected by its placement within two predominant categories of cultural prestige: namely, on the disadvantaged side of the distinction between high and low art, and between male and female authorship. Prestige categories can operate as preconceptual filters, sorting artists into piles marked from the start as "superior" and "inferior" before engaging with their work on its own merits. Having been produced entirely within the context of a commercialized media industry, Mitchell's music risks being perceived as falling into a lower order of achievement in comparison with classical music. However, as Bernard Gendron has demonstrated, this general situation underwent changes in the 1960s, when certain popular musicians (notably the Beatles and Bob Dylan) began to acquire the status of serious artists rather than mere entertainers, and rock itself began to gain respect as a "legitimate art form."<sup>4</sup> Arriving on the heels of this advancement in status, Mitchell was able to overcome the lowbrow distinction to a limited extent. Already early in her career, critics were describing her music in terms of an art song aesthetic. For instance, Dan Heckman, reviewing *Blue* in 1971 for the *New York Times*, writes:

I suspect this will be the most disliked of Miss Mitchell's recordings, despite the fact that it attempts more and makes greater demands on her talent than any of the others. The audience for art songs is far smaller than for folk ballads, and Joni Mitchell is on the verge of having to make a decision between the two.<sup>5</sup>

Late in her career (1996), Joni Mitchell was awarded the Polar Music Prize by the government of Sweden; in a rare leveling of status, the other recipient of the award that year was eminent classical composer and conductor Pierre Boulez. I will return to the distinction between high and low art below.

The privileging of male over female authorship occurs in both classical and popular music scenes. This is not the place to mount an extensive argument about male domination in the popular music business.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to mention that Mitchell's 1997 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame came a full four years after she first became eligible, during which time her nomination had languished due to lack of support. Before her induction, music critic Stephen Holden had sharply criticized the Hall of Fame for its relative neglect of female musicians and their historical influence, citing this neglect as an index of gender bias in rock criticism at large.<sup>7</sup> I hasten to add, however, that my interest in promoting Mitchell's music arises not from any such perceived slights, but from its

inherent quality. Mitchell herself has generally been dismissive of gender issues altogether. In the press conference in connection with the announcement of the Polar Prize, the interviewer solicits her thoughts on being the first woman to win the prize. Mitchell responds, “Oh, I don’t like to think about that so much, this man-woman-man-woman thing. I wish we could get over that.” When pressed, she adds,

I try not to think about gender distinctions. It’s kind of like [asking], “You are the first black to receive it—how do you feel about that?” I find it an isolating question and I hope there will come a day when this distinction is not made. I’m a musician and I leave gender aside. I’m an accomplished musician.<sup>8</sup>

While I would like to draw attention to the hierarchy of prestige within popular music, according to which women’s intellectual production has been historically undervalued, I agree wholeheartedly with the view that Mitchell’s accomplishment should stand or fall on its own merits, without respect to gender.

In concentrating on distinctions of style and musical craft, I hope to avoid setting up prestige categories of my own. In the chapters that follow, I don’t mean to suggest, for example, that harmonic complexity in itself is aesthetically superior to harmonic simplicity or that complementary, closed melodic structures are superior to open-ended, dance-oriented formal processes. Rather, my aim is to develop a precise vocabulary by which to recognize her technical achievements for what they are and to identify a value system appropriate to them. Joni Mitchell’s particular brand of songwriting is characterized by its conceptual depth, structural sophistication, stylistic dynamism, and aesthetic ambition. One can value her music for these traits without casting aspersions on other brands of songwriting, which may be recognized for their skill according to slightly different or even entirely different sets of priorities (such as rough immediacy, kinetic drive, effusiveness, accessibility, trendsetting).

The characteristics I have listed for Mitchell’s music would seem to call for a value system traditionally associated with the world of high art. Mitchell herself, in numerous interviews, has appealed to the art concept as a way to convey her views on musical value.

I was only a folk singer for about two years. . . . By that time, it wasn’t really folk music anymore. It was some new American phenomenon. Later, they called it singer/songwriters. Or art songs, which I liked best. Some people get nervous about that word. Art. They think it’s a pretentious word from the giddyap. To me, . . . the word *art* has never lost its vitality.<sup>9</sup>

Mitchell has asserted the importance of the classical music tradition in the formation of her tastes.<sup>10</sup> She has likened aspects of her songwriting to classical composition, claiming affinities with the expressive miniatures of German Lieder and the harmonic palette of Debussy—once even referring to herself as “a composer in the small, modern form.”<sup>11</sup> Often, in light of her concurrent interests as a painter, she will refer to visual arts: she speaks of the song “Paprika Plains” [DJRD] as “the most experimental and bewildering piece [to compose], but it was always moving forward, always changing, much in the same way that Picasso paints. . . . He’s always working toward his own satisfaction, that’s his only criteria.”<sup>12</sup> Another telling remark occurred off the cuff during a live concert in 1974 (captured on the *Miles of Aisles* album). As Mitchell adjusts her guitar tuning between numbers, fans compete for her attention, calling out a dozen different requests. This prompts the following philosophical observation:

That’s one thing that’s always been a major difference between the performing arts to me and being a painter. Like, a painter does a painting and he does a painting, that’s it, you know, he’s had the joy of creating it, and he hangs it on some wall, somebody buys it, somebody buys it again, or maybe nobody buys it, and it sits up in a loft somewhere till he dies. But nobody ever says to him, you know, nobody ever said to Van Gogh, “Paint ‘A Starry Night’ again, man!”

These quotations indicate a personal creed favoring artistic ambition over populism, creative integrity over accessibility, and aesthetic value over market value. The last quoted remark also somewhat paradoxically upholds the ideal of the finished, durable artwork (the “masterpiece”), even within a context of live performance. In a more recent statement, Mitchell alludes to a similar concept while modifying it in an important way: “My music is not designed to grab instantly. It’s designed to wear for a lifetime, to hold up like a fine cloth.”<sup>13</sup> Here, her reference to textiles evokes a concept of art that is less removed from everyday life, one that acknowledges repeated use or enjoyment and allows more “give” to the work as it adapts to different listeners. We might bring all these various nuances together and suggest a “fine art” model for the appreciation of Mitchell’s songwriting. The term “fine art” has the advantage of encompassing a broad range of practice in various media, including both high art and artisanal crafts.

In downplaying popularity and accessibility as creative goals, Mitchell is not announcing a willful intent to write difficult music. There is no question that her songs are designed to move and please listeners. Nevertheless, such an attitude (“art” before “pop”) is maintained in tension with the reigning values of the popular music industry.<sup>14</sup> As Daniel Sonenberg has observed, Mitchell benefited

from significant restructuring within the industry at the outset of her career. The increasing profitability of the long-playing record and rise of FM radio “reduced the demand on rock artists to attain instant stardom” and allowed for more breathing space to foster an original musical sensibility.<sup>15</sup> Mitchell and others were able to approach their music as both popular expression and fine art, thus bridging the gap between traditions commonly segregated into high and low forms. Mitchell was recognized at the time as a particularly strong proponent of such an approach. According to *New York Times* critic John Rockwell, her work in the 1970s established “her claim as the artist best able to link folk-rock with the older Western tradition of the art song.”<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, he says:

The pop people have by now created their own artistic traditions and . . . their traditions have begun to merge, in some still vague and elusive sense, with the mainstream of high art. Today, there are a number of supposedly “pop” performers who are in no reasonable way distinguishable from “artists” . . . . Joni Mitchell . . . is such an artist—as serious and experimental as they come.<sup>17</sup>

The label “singer-songwriter,” one of the terms that evolved in response to the new approach, attempts to capture this sense of an intermediate aesthetic space. Defined neither entirely in commercial terms (as with “hit” or “star”) nor in terms of high culture (as with “composer”), the new description plots a continuum between the dual poles of accessibility and artistry. But what does it mean to fall between the two traditions? What are the consequences of bridging high and low cultures? The meeting of Pierre Boulez and Joni Mitchell on equal footing at the Polar Music Prize press conference provided an occasion to address such questions. Boulez is asked about the possibility of breaking down barriers. He replies:

Each time I meet journalists I am asked, why did you work with Zappa? That was the first time I broke down this imaginary but real barrier between the world of symphonic music and a music of another kind. . . . We in the kind of serious world have a lot of heritage and sometimes it is very heavy to assume that this heritage is yours and you have to continue in that direction. In the other world, you don't have this burden and they are more spontaneous and vital from this point of view and surely I think both worlds would have to benefit from each other. The vitality of the one world should be introduced in the world of classical music and vice versa. A kind of values should be introduced in the world of actuality [in the sense of *actualité*, current events]. I think this exchange should happen more often.

It is interesting to note Boulez's delicacy with labels. He uses a variety of terms for the world of art music (symphonic, classical, "kind of serious") while resisting specific terms for music of "another kind," other than the notion of the current music scene. He avoids the prestige labels of high and low culture altogether. Yet he does ascribe certain attributes to each world—spontaneity and vitality in the one case; seriousness, heritage, and an implicit set of "values" in the other. What might these unspoken values be?

If one were asked to list the stereotypical connotations of high art, the following descriptions would probably come to mind:

- serious, edifying
- profound
- complex, subtle
- carefully constructed
- enduring in value, establishing a cultural heritage

The stereotypical connotations of low or popular art would call up a contrasting list:

- entertaining
- vital, authentic
- simple, common
- spontaneous, immediate
- novel, topical in value

Furthermore, the comparative cultural status of the two categories has tended to confer evaluative weight, so that the traits of high culture are judged to be refined and aesthetically superior, those of low culture vulgar and aesthetically inferior. But it is not very difficult to expose this whole descriptive/evaluative grid as prejudicial. In the first place, none of the properties listed are exclusive to either culturally defined category: plenty of classical music idealizes simplicity and the common touch while some is deliberately vulgar; likewise, popular musicians are not categorically bereft of refinement, profundity, or careful attention to craft. In the second place, aesthetic superiority is not automatically conferred by cultural status; after all, there is no shortage of second- and third-rate classical composers. Popular music scholar Simon Frith puts it this way:

To assert the value of the popular is also, necessarily, to query the superiority of high culture. Most populist writers, though, draw the wrong conclusion from this; what needs challenging is not the notion of the superior, but the claim that it is the exclusive property of the "high."<sup>18</sup>

In short, designations of “high” and “low” have to do with the question of prestige or cultural regard and are not to be equated with aesthetic distinctions. A range of attitudes toward creative expression can be encountered in both cultural spheres. Still, the first set of attributes above (especially the notions of edification, durability, and technical skill) has an established history of association with high art traditions, the second set (especially entertainment, immediacy, and accessibility) with popular traditions. It is possible to distinguish between approaches closer to an art model or a popular model without saying anything about relative superiority.<sup>19</sup> It follows that one can appreciate hybrid or intermediate forms like the singer-songwriter repertoire as popular expression or as fine art. When Mitchell praises Leonard Cohen’s work for its “deeper thought,” she is applying the fine art standard of profundity.<sup>20</sup> When Noel Coppage ends his review of *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* with these remarks—“I hope I’ve made it clear that this isn’t much of a party record; you’ll have to deal with it privately, as you would read a book. But it should keep you occupied for about as long as you want it to—and how often does ‘popular’ music do that?”<sup>21</sup>—he is suggesting a listening approach favoring seriousness and edification over immediacy and entertainment. Finally, John Rockwell, in a review of *Hejira*, argues for the careful construction and enduring value of Mitchell’s music and in the process deems it worthy of the high cultural regard usually reserved for art song traditions:

Like all of Miss Mitchell’s work, *Hejira* is not for comfortable background listening. This is no boogie album, no soothing collection of pop tunes with handy hooks. Instead it is a series of personal statements couched in the idiom of sophisticated Los Angeles folk rock, but assembled with all the care of a Lied by Hugo Wolf. As such it is something not to be sampled casually and put aside, but to be savored seriously over the years.<sup>22</sup>

For a long time, representatives of high musical culture have looked on popular music with suspicion (when they haven’t overlooked it altogether), despising it as lacking complexity, profundity, and the like. With the trend toward legitimation in the general culture as well as the rise of popular music studies in academia, such a viewpoint has become more difficult to maintain. But meanwhile, some champions of popular music for their part remain suspicious of the values associated with high musical culture. We should beware a sort of reverse discrimination, whereby structural complexity and technical sophistication are decried as elitist, pretentious, or ideologically loaded. Not all critics have been as approving as Coppage and Rockwell of the aesthetic ambition evident in Mitchell’s career.<sup>23</sup> In the academic sphere, the analysis of complex structural relations is sometimes construed as a wholesale valorization

of certain popular genres and styles over others. As popular music scholar David Brackett warns:

Analytical work . . . that uncritically accepts the basic tenets of Western music theory has tended to accommodate popular music to some notion of a canon of masterworks through either “legitimation” or “pluralism.” “Legitimation” works by selecting music for analysis that contains a type of complexity that responds well to techniques designed for Western art music. . . . Sheet music or transcriptions are typically used to show sophisticated pitch relationships which, it is implied, are every bit as worthy of study as those found in the masterpieces.<sup>24</sup>

For my part, I agree that an uncritical attitude toward analytical precepts and the process of canonization is untenable. Nevertheless I hope that as listeners, we would be prepared to appreciate technical skill and subtlety wherever we encounter it, without enshrining it as a necessary standard of value.

What I offer, then, in this book is a set of analytical tools geared toward understanding Joni Mitchell’s skill and achievement as a songwriter. Close musical analysis can unlock hidden aspects of song construction and lead to a more precise grasp of technical innovations and the idiosyncrasies of an original style. Analysis need not alienate listeners from the music they love. The incisive knowledge of the scholar can go hand in hand with the intimate knowledge of the fervent fan. In Brackett’s words, analysis can compel the listener “to engage forcefully with the object of study, to learn it thoroughly and to hear it in new ways.”<sup>25</sup> This endorsement, couched in the language of intellectual fascination, is not that far removed from the language of love. Along the same lines, I see no reason to divorce discussion of music’s syntactic aspect (analysis narrowly defined) from its expressive, semantic, or cultural aspects (music criticism). These various aspects of musical meaning are wholly interrelated. My primary focus on analysis addresses a deficiency in the literature on Joni Mitchell; but wherever possible, I try to connect analytical detail to an awareness of the living musical experience in its power, beauty, and cultural reach.

In contrast to recent books by Richard Middleton, Allan Moore, and Ken Stephenson, whose concern is to elaborate a coherent theoretical system applicable to a wide range of popular music, my scope is more modest and pragmatic: the illustration of some useful concepts custom designed for a specific repertoire.<sup>26</sup> Some of the tools I use derive from traditional poetic criticism, some from the traditional analysis of art music. These have been adapted as needed to accommodate characteristics of style, form, and syntax peculiar to popular music traditions in general and Mitchell’s music in particular. I have benefited from the growing

body of scholarly literature devoted to the analysis of popular music. One question which has caused a certain amount of controversy in this field is the inherent suitability of analytical concepts originally designed for art music.<sup>27</sup> I hold with the view (articulated by John Covach, David Brackett, and others) that there are significant areas of overlap between various art music and popular music traditions<sup>28</sup> and that analytical techniques borrowed from art music can be useful as long as they remain flexible and sensitive to different generic conventions.<sup>29</sup> Such hybrid analytical practices, developed on an ad hoc basis, are especially appropriate to a songwriting approach that seeks to bridge traditions.

The objects of my analyses are sound recordings. That is to say, the primary material of study is aural experience rather than printed scores. In contrast to art song repertoire, which is conceived as abstractable from any particular performed version, the singer-songwriter repertoire more closely marries authorship and original performance; thus analysis entails sensitivity to authorial interpretations of songs as performed. For most songs I consider a single specific performance as captured and produced by Joni Mitchell in a definitive recorded version; in a few cases she has recorded more than one version. The commercially released songbooks are themselves generally transcribed by ear from recordings. However, even when they are carefully done, market-driven conventions often take precedence over faithful notation. For instance, songs may be transposed to avoid complex key signatures (true of Mitchell's early songs performed in F# and D b), and piano accompaniments are frequently changed to incorporate the vocal line in the right hand. In Mitchell's early career, her guitar accompaniments were generally converted to standard tuning. In some of the songbook collections that do faithfully notate her alternate guitar tunings (namely, *Hits*, *Misses*, and *Joni Mitchell Complete (Guitar Songbook Edition)*), every song (even if originally performed on piano) is arranged willy-nilly for guitar performance. For such reasons, transcriptions in this book are my own, aided by reference to the published songbooks, whose reliability I have carefully checked against my own listening perceptions.<sup>30</sup> I have done my best to identify and describe sounds faithfully and with precision, but occasionally, certain musical details (e.g., meter, harmony, figuration) are ambiguous or obscured by sound layering. In such cases there may be more than one valid interpretation of the phenomena. Questions of performance technique (such as inquiry into Mitchell's extensive use of alternate guitar tunings and fingerings) are not my subject here.

In the chapters that follow, I offer a survey of Mitchell's output, with many discussions of individual songs; but I have organized the material by topic rather than chronology. This allows for variety in analytical approach (each chapter exploring different parameters, such as poetic voice, harmony, melody, and large-scale form) as well as in analytical focus (different sections concentrating variously



on single songs, entire albums, themes recurring between albums, and style periods). Instead of attempting to cover every song, I delve into different aspects of her songwriting craft by way of selected illustrative examples.

In chapter 2 I present an overview of Mitchell's dynamic stylistic evolution from 1966 to 1998 according to four distinct periods. In the first period she takes an acoustic folk aesthetic as the point of departure for various explorations into intricate poetic structure, rhapsodic expression and idiosyncratic instrumentation. The second period, initiated by the album *Court and Spark* and climaxing with the *Mingus* collaboration, is marked by a dramatic shift toward jazz stylings, an integral backup band, and highly polished production. The third period (representing Mitchell's least-known work) mingles forays into mainstream upbeat pop with brittle synthesized soundscapes and a tone of political indignation. The fourth period, tinged with nostalgia, returns to a largely acoustic palette, while fusing aspects from previous periods. I illustrate salient aspects of each period—such as poetic style, changing vocal production, genre references, melodic writing, instrumental timbre, and figuration—by discussing representative songs. This overview introduces many of the topics that will receive extended treatment in subsequent chapters as well as providing a general chronological framework for the individual analyses in the remainder of the book. The chapter ends by focusing on one of Mitchell's signature songs, “Woodstock,” which unfolds its own distinct narrative of changing sound and style as it has traveled with her throughout her career.

Chapters 3 and 4 share an emphasis on the lyrics to the songs. In chapter 3 I explore a particularly vivid aspect of Mitchell's songwriting and performing style: the colorful array of lyrical voices and personalities she brings to life. My discussion pays special attention to details of poetic technique. In the first section of the chapter, I make reference to an extensive range of song lyrics to suggest the flexibility and nuance to be found in Mitchell's creation of fictional personae. After systematically mapping out categorical distinctions of poetic mode, representation, syntax, diction, and vocal performance, I illustrate their use through the analysis of an entire poem. In the second section of the chapter, I highlight five character types of special importance in her work.

Chapter 4 takes a more sweeping view of poetic themes. I focus on a favorite thematic preoccupation—personal freedom—as explored by way of potent symbols of confinement, the journey quest, bohemianism, creative license, and spiritual liberation. Here analyses of individual songs are mustered with an overarching goal in mind: to demonstrate the complexity and profundity of Mitchell's poetic-musical thought, her provocative coupling of personal and universal concerns, and her rhetorical assurance in articulating and engaging with some of the pressing cultural issues of her generation.

In chapter 5 I turn to musical detail work, considering the extent of Mitchell's harmonic innovation, an aspect that clearly sets her apart from her songwriting peers. My harmonic analyses are carried out in conjunction with poetic and expressive interpretation. Through a representative survey, I demonstrate how her songs fall under five broad categories of harmonic organization: modal, polymodal, chromatic, polytonal, and pedal point. Mitchell's work is especially impressive for its thoroughgoing exploration of alternatives to single key structures and the major/minor system. In conversation, she has equated this experimental harmonic practice ("chords of inquiry") with the musical articulation of a critical perspective.

In chapter 6 I study the structural intricacy underpinning Mitchell's melodic writing. The first section of this chapter introduces vocabulary basic to popular song form and shows how she devises variations on the standard forms. The second section examines the internal structure of formal sections, highlighting Mitchell's nonformulaic approach to phrase construction. Phrase proportions are often irregular, due to devices such as harmonic extension and metric disruption. Phrases commonly relate to one another through audible patterns of parallelism, contrast, and complementarity; I introduce a concise method of diagramming such relations. I also spend some time clarifying the principle of hierarchic cadences and complementary pairings (what Allan Moore calls the "open/closed principle"), an issue plagued by terminological confusion.<sup>31</sup> This principle, crucial to Mitchell's melodic style, has not yet been carefully theorized in popular music studies. In the third section of this chapter I turn to the expressive effects made possible through the sculpting of melodic contour. Along the way I characterize two dramatic paradigm shifts in her approach to melodic writing, one occurring in the mid-1970s and another in the early 1980s.

Chapter 7 places individual songs in the context of larger formal spans, tackling the question of coherence at the level of the album. From her beginnings Mitchell was interested in trying out both song collections and song cycles, that is, loose groupings of diverse characterizations (*Clouds*, *Ladies of the Canyon*) as well as "concept" albums organized by connecting frameworks (*Song to a Seagull*, *Blue*). I analyze large-scale form in three albums, pondering just what kind of unity is at stake. Elements to be considered include recurrent imagery, thematic and motivic interconnections, consistency of expressive tone, narrative and tonal planning, and visual design. The centerpiece of the chapter is a comparison of two consecutive albums from the late 1970s whose cyclic characters could not be more different. Where *Hejira's* songs of the open road are tightly interlinked in theme and consistent in sound, the double-LP *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is multifarious, sprawling, and contradictory. By way of a coda, chapter 8 reflects on the significance of a high-profile collective tribute to Joni Mitchell released on the Nonesuch label in 2007.

Though analytical terminology is handled in a cumulative fashion, I have tried to make it practicable for readers to approach individual chapters out of order according to their interests. The flow of the book would have been more streamlined had I reduced the sheer number of songs discussed. But I have preferred to err on the side of variety and inclusiveness, in the hopes of extending the book's usefulness as a compendium as well as a preliminary study. Some songs make multiple appearances under different rubrics (e.g., "I Had a King," "The Dawntreader," "Song to a Seagull," "Woodstock," "Amelia"). Readers comparatively new to Mitchell's work may wish to begin by learning a limited number of songs and tracing a progress through the book by way of these stepping stones.

The analyses that follow do not pretend to be comprehensive. By no means have I covered everything of note regarding Mitchell's harmonic language, thematic resonance, or my other chosen topics. Moreover, many fascinating musical aspects touched on in passing—such as rhythm, timbre, instrumental figuration, studio production, and mixing—deserve extended consideration in their own right. But in developing substantial scholarly inquiry into the areas of style, voice, theme, harmony, melody, and large-scale form, I have had four broad goals in mind: discovering initial points of entry into a rich and relatively uncharted body of popular song; laying the groundwork for future analytical inquiry; providing practical models of analysis for use in the classroom; and establishing a basis for evaluating Joni Mitchell's stature as a songwriter. Given my earlier caveats about cultural prestige, I realize that this last aim bears an ironic similarity to the Great Man approach toward music history, used so effectively to exclude women (and other classes of people) in the past. In focusing on one remarkable artist's individual achievement, my intent is not to wedge her into a position of rank or bury her under a weight of symbolic importance. I would rather view this project in terms of a visit to a busy workshop, with an emphasis on the appreciation of skill, ingenuity, design, polish, and knowledge of materials. But in moments of musically induced weakness, I have been known to refer to her as a genius.

# 2

---

---

## SOUND AND STYLE

Joni Mitchell is one of those modern artists who maintain a constant sense of adventure and unpredictability in their work, treating style not as a dependable personalized manner but as a changing field of possibility. She likens herself to Miles Davis and Pablo Picasso in this regard.<sup>1</sup> The towering influence of both figures derives in part from their dramatic stylistic experimentation over the course of long careers. Picasso's path from the postimpressionism of his youthful contemporaries through primitivism, cubism (analytical and synthetic phases), and classicism was impetuous and marked by sudden ruptures. Davis, "the innovator of more distinct styles than any other jazz musician," restlessly explored new approaches from cool jazz to modal playing to fusion, while refusing to define his creative impulse by any single approach.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell herself has covered ample ground, moving from folk roots through inventive encounters with jazz, world music, and synthesized pop. Her protean character as a songwriter means that any two fans may cherish completely contradictory mental images of her music. This fact was brought home to me with a jolt when I attended Mitchell's performance at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in the spring of 1995. Mitchell was playing a solo set at one of the large open stages. Only one week earlier, she had acquired a new electric guitar fitted with a Roland VG-8 controller to facilitate her multiple alternate tunings.<sup>3</sup> She began the set with "Sex Kills," a searing social critique released on *Turbulent Indigo* the year before. The stern persona adopted in her recent work together with the unexpected aggressive electric sound struck me with the excitement of a new stylistic venture. However, one thirty-something female fan near me listened for about twenty seconds before spluttering, "I can't take this," and elbowing her way out of the crowd. (Mitchell recalls the moment: "I started with 'Sex Kills,' playing this diabolical kind of Jimi Hendrix/fuzztone sound, just for the hell of it, and I think a lot of people were quite annoyed.")<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, after the concert, as I joined a small

group of admirers in search of the backstage exit area, it was hard not to notice an undaunted spirit of the sixties frolicking on the grass in full wizard costume (robe and conical hat) while clutching a Joni LP.

Clearly, Joni Mitchell's audience is a heterogeneous bunch. There are "universal" Joni fans who have stayed with her for the whole trip as well as devotees of favorite periods in her career. In this chapter, I want to convey a sense of the breadth of her style by sketching the overall arc of her musical evolution. But I also plan to outline a succession of loose stylistic periods to use as a framework for later discussion. I freely admit that this periodic grouping is my own interpretation; others may well hear things differently. Nor do I mean to imply that the music within each period is stylistically static or homogeneous. Mitchell's invention is typically multidimensional and open to all sorts of byways. Nevertheless, we can point to common preoccupations spanning several albums and contributing to a cumulative sense of direction.

I hear Mitchell's work from 1966 to 1998 as falling into four distinct periods, defined according to the studio albums released between the following dates: 1968–1972 (five albums), 1974–1979 (five albums), 1982–1988 (three albums), and 1991–1998 (three albums).<sup>5</sup> The beginning of each successive period is signaled by an album announcing a bold new departure in sound and style: in 1974 the album is *Court and Spark*; in 1982, *Wild Things Run Fast*; and in 1991, *Night Ride Home*. I have chosen specific songs to illustrate the stages in Mitchell's musical journey.

## FIRST PERIOD (1966–1972)

Mitchell wrote her first song, "Day after Day," in 1964 when she was twenty. She started writing her own material in earnest the following year after forming a folksinging duo with husband Chuck Mitchell and after the traumatic experience of giving her daughter up for adoption.<sup>6</sup> However, the earliest songs she chose to include on commercial recordings ("Night in the City," "Song to a Seagull" [both SS], "I Think I Understand" [C], and "The Circle Game" [LC]) date from 1966. The year 1966 thus marks the start of Mitchell's official published work.<sup>7</sup> All four of her first albums include songs written while she was on the touring circuit during the two years before her recording career was launched in 1968.

With the opening number on her debut album, "I Had a King" (1968, SS), Mitchell was in effect introducing herself as a recording artist to a wider audience. Presented simply as a solo for voice and guitar, the song evokes the ambience of the waning folk scene in its quiet presence, its strophic form, and its troubadour imagery.<sup>8</sup> Mitchell's voice modulates between tones of fragile simplicity and bardic solemnity. But these seemingly modest resources reveal great artistry