

The Words and Music of

Joni Mitchell

THE PRAEGER SINGER-SONGWRITER COLLECTION

JAMES BENNIGHOF

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The Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection

Rolling Stone called Joni Mitchell one of the greatest and most influential songwriters ever. She received the Billboard Century Award and the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Her 1971 album *Blue* was included among *Time* magazine's "All-TIME 100" best albums—and she was honored by her native Canada with a 2007, limited-edition postage stamp.

Few singer-songwriters have been as influential as Joni Mitchell. Her song "Both Sides, Now" has been recorded over 640 times, while Bill and Hillary Clinton credit her "Chelsea Morning" as the inspiration for their daughter's name. *The Words and Music of Joni Mitchell* surveys the entire output of this legendary artist, from her 1968 debut album *Song to a Seagull* to her 2007 album *Shine*.


After a brief overview of Mitchell's career, and a chapter that explains some of the important technical features of the guitar styles upon which she draws, the book offers an in-depth discussion of every song Mitchell wrote and recorded. Proceeding chronologically through Mitchell's albums, author James Bennighof clarifies the musical content of the songs and the personality behind the music. Each brief essay describes how important musical

(continued from front flap)

features—such as instrumentation, idiosyncratic guitar tunings, harmonic structure, form, and elements of melody and rhythm—interact with the text of the song to create the unforgettable artistic statements for which Mitchell is celebrated.

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THE PRAEGER SINGER-SONGWRITER COLLECTION

The Words and Music of Joni Mitchell

James Bennighof

James E. Perone, Series Editor



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Series Foreword

Although the term “singer-songwriter” might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles are represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named here will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers, whereas others have, but all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, whereas others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject’s biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the series differ from book to book. All, however, are organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone
Series Editor

Acknowledgments

I appreciate all of my friends and family who offered support, interest, enthusiasm, and toleration (as appropriate!) while I worked on this book. Special thanks along these lines go to my wife, Dori, who introduced me to Joni Mitchell's music over thirty years ago, and whose admiration for it is still sufficient to withstand overhearing repeated playings of a single phrase and even requests to lend her ear to help to determine what was happening in an arrangement. I am grateful to my employer, Baylor University, which provides me with computing resources and facilities for all of my research, including this project. I particularly thank Sha Towers, Mandi Marshall, Jamie Duerksen, and James Floyd of Baylor's Crouch Fine Arts Library, who tracked down some bibliographical information for me. Thanks also go to Al Mendez, who took valuable personal time to help me to obtain a crucial research aid.

A.M.D.G.

Introduction: Joni Mitchell as an Artist and Composer

The current popular image of the “singer-songwriter” crystallized in the urban-folk movement of the 1960s. A myriad of performers achieved some prominence at this time, the most influential of all being Bob Dylan; others who received a great deal of recognition included artists such as Dave Van Ronk, Buffy Saint-Marie, Tom Rush, Eric Andersen, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Leonard Cohen. However, apart from Dylan and Paul Simon (who, with Art Garfunkel, migrated to urban folk from an early apprenticeship in pop-rock), the solo performer who emerged from this milieu to enjoy the greatest success as both performer and songwriter has been Joni Mitchell.

BIOGRAPHY

Roberta Joan Anderson, who would eventually be known as Joni Mitchell, was born in Fort McLeod, Alberta, on November 7, 1943, and grew up in various locales—Maidstone, Saskatoon, North Battleford—in western Canada. Her childhood was marked by several serious illnesses, including polio at the age of nine, but also manifested early interests in art, music, and creative writing. These creative impulses were accompanied by a lack of academic discipline in general, resulting in her flunking out of school in twelfth grade, then earning her high school diploma and enrolling in the Alberta College of Art in Calgary. In the meantime, influenced by a potpourri of musical stimuli, including a couple of years of piano lessons, early rock and roll, and recordings by Edith Piaf, Rachmaninoff, Miles Davis,

and Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, Anderson had begun performing locally, accompanying herself first on a baritone ukulele and later, when she could afford it with money she had made as a model, on a guitar.

Anderson became disillusioned with the highly structured curriculum of the art school and, having played in coffeehouses in Edmonton and Calgary, moved to Toronto in 1964. Influenced by performers such as Baez and Collins, she worked in women's wear while trying to break into the folk music scene in that urban center. Her fortunes were complicated by a pregnancy, but in the absence of the child's father she married a fellow performer, Chuck Mitchell, in June 1965. The Mitchells moved to Detroit as a performing duo, and the baby was given up for adoption.

In Detroit, Joni Mitchell (whose first name was apparently an alteration of "Joan" inspired by "Bonli," an art teacher's signature that she admired)¹ expanded her musical connections significantly. She and her husband developed relationships with many touring artists who came through the city, such as Neil Young, David Blue, Andersen, and Rush. She became very active as a songwriter, and, even as the Mitchells were dissolving both their musical and their marital partnership and Joni was relocating in Greenwich Village, her reputation began to spread when singers such as Van Ronk, Rush, and Saint-Marie recorded her songs. One of many performance opportunities led Saint-Marie to bring Mitchell to the attention of Elliot Roberts, who began to represent her and negotiated her first recording contract with Reprise in December 1967.

The resulting album, *Song to a Seagull* (sometimes also called *Joni Mitchell*, apparently as a result of an error by the label),² was released in the following March. It was followed in regular succession by *Clouds* (May 1969), *Ladies of the Canyon* (April 1970), *Blue* (June 1971), and *For the Roses* (October 1972). These albums had exhibited a steady stylistic evolution, incorporating various influences into the basic urban-folksinger atmosphere that Mitchell had initially established, but a distinctive point of arrival was reached with the jazz/pop flavor of *Court and Spark* (January 1974).

Continued explorations, including an increased reliance on jazz musicians, resulted in *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (November 1975), *Hejira* (November 1976), and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (November 1977). This last effort, an ambitious double album with a variety of instrumental textures, caught the attention of legendary jazz musician Charles Mingus, who approached Mitchell about collaborating with him on what was to be the most unorthodox project of her career. While the immediately preceding albums had created some uncertainty among her listening public, Mitchell's own assessment was that *Mingus*, released in June 1979, "pretty much cost me my airplay, my radio presence."³

The nine studio albums that preceded *Mingus*, then, were created while Mitchell was tracing a familiarly ascending pop-star trajectory from discovery to reliable bankability. On the other hand, the seven original studio

albums that have appeared in the thirty years since *Mingus—Wild Things Run Fast* (October 1982), *Dog Eat Dog* (October 1985), *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* (March 1988), *Night Ride Home* (February 1991), *Turbulent Indigo* (October 1994), *Taming the Tiger* (September 1998), and *Shine* (September 2007)—have been accompanied by a wide variety of labels, management, hiatuses, and collaborators. Not surprisingly, their popularity has ranged widely as well; at times, albums were almost allowed to go out of print, while, on the other end of the spectrum, *Turbulent Indigo* won a Grammy Award for Best Pop Album. Interspersed among these studio projects have been various live albums, tribute albums, recordings of Mitchell's and others' material with full orchestra, and compilations, as well as projects for other media such as DVD releases. (And Mitchell has continually pursued her painting endeavors as well.)

The Grammy that Mitchell won for *Turbulent Indigo* is only one of the many awards and accolades that she has garnered. These include three other Grammys (Best Folk Performance, for *Clouds*; Best Arrangement Accompanying Vocals, shared with Tom Scott, for “Down to You”; and Best Recording Package, for *Turbulent Indigo*) and several additional Grammy nominations. While only one of her singles has made the Top 10 (“Help Me,” at #7), *Court and Spark* and *Miles of Aisles* each went to #2 on the album charts, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* reached #4, and *Hejira* rose to #13. Besides the Grammys, two of her most outstanding awards have been the *Billboard* Century Award in 1995 and the Swedish Polar Music Prize in 1996.

Recognition has also come in the form of performances and recordings of Mitchell's songs by other musicians. For example, as of July 2009, the JoniMitchell.com website listed 646 recordings of “Both Sides, Now” alone. Such listings tend to combine a wide variety of types of recordings, of course—albums by major artists appear intermingled with bootleg live recordings, performances by obscure artists, and offerings by college and high school bands. Even these latter categories convey something about an artist's influence within the culture, but the record is quite impressive if one merely looks at the first category. Leaving aside tribute albums and work by her own frequent collaborators, Mitchell's songs have been recorded by prominent performers as varied as Judy Collins and Bob Dylan, Robert Goulet and Andy Williams, Paul Desmond and Stan Getz, Frank Sinatra and Barbra Streisand, k. d. lang and the Indigo Girls, Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson, Natalie Cole and Phoebe Snow, Wynonna Judd and Randy Scruggs, Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow, Steven Curtis Chapman and Amy Grant, and Prince and James Brown.

THE SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Although many artists have indeed recorded Mitchell's work, the vast majority of her songs are also found on her own albums and, particularly

because this study addresses her as a singer-songwriter, these performances will constitute its focus. As is often the case, her rate of production slowed considerably as her career progressed, so that ultimately forty-five years or so of songwriting have produced some 167 songs for her albums. Each of these songs will be considered here.

The book begins with a discussion of some important principles in the musical styles upon which Mitchell draws in her compositions, so as to enable the reader to understand how her choices when using these styles are significant. Following this preliminary explanation, each of Mitchell's songs is addressed, generally in chronological order of appearance on an album. The discussion of each song describes the central textual ideas and explains how they are presented within the song's poetic and musical form.

In the course of this process, where appropriate, the ways that textual ideas relate to Mitchell's own experiences will be taken into consideration. Such issues pertain to most singer-songwriters, who tend to draw at least some significant amount of their material from their own lives. Even by this standard, though, many of Mitchell's songs were strongly autobiographical, especially for the time in which they were written, and many who have written about her have noted this. One of these observers, Michelle Mercer, has examined this dimension of Mitchell's work quite thoroughly.⁴ In an interview with Mercer, while acknowledging the autobiographical element in her writing (as she has done, generally and with reference to specific songs, on many occasions), Mitchell at the same time emphasized the importance of the experiences being applicable to many listeners:

The beauty as a listener is you have an option. Either you can see yourself and your humanity in the songs, which is what I'm trying to do for listeners. Or you can say, "That's the way she is" and equate the songs with me. The richest way, the way to get the most out of it, is to see yourself in it. The ones that do, whether they call it autobiographical or not, are getting it.⁵

In many cases, the primary significance of a song's having originated in one or more personal experiences may relate to practical creative issues—for example, this genesis may have provided Mitchell with a robust initial impetus for writing the song, and perhaps with specific details that make the song more compelling to the listener, rather than primarily providing the listener with revelations about her own life.

In my discussions, I use any of this information that I believe can shed light on what a song can convey. Ultimately, however, I focus on how the song does what it clearly does or can do for any listener, rather than on speculating on issues that are ultimately outside the song as heard. (In fact, in some instances I may be more tentative than I need to be when

identifying individuals who are commonly understood—and conceded by Mitchell—to be the primary referents of a song or passage.) Related to these issues is the fact that when, within the discussion of a song, the “singer” is mentioned—for example, discussing her thoughts, perspective, experiences, and so on—the term refers to the persona adopted within the song, who may have more or less in common with Mitchell herself. (It is usually made clear within a song that this person is a woman; even when the lyrics are not explicit in this regard, these discussions assume that this is the case.)

The discussion will also explore ways that the various musical elements of the song interact with the lyrics to form a self-contained work of art—ways that, for example, such features as melodic contour, relationships among harmonies and keys, rhythmic interplay, distinctive instrumental textures, and dramatic implications of additional voices shape and interpret the ideas expressed in the text.⁶ In addition, in many cases the role played by the song in the context of the album on which it appears will also be addressed. All of these points should shed some light on the artistic merit of the songs: while in most cases no attempt will be made to quantify *how valuable a song might be*, it is hoped that this information will help to show *how a song might be valuable*.

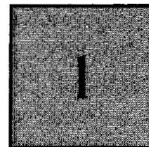
These inquiries into the workings of individual songs are often presented in a fairly dense way in order to maximize information in the space available. Each is most informative if the reader is listening to the song in addition to reading about it (or if the reader at least has a vivid memory of Mitchell’s recording of the song). For even more detailed study, the reader may wish to consult a sheet-music transcription of the piece. In Mitchell’s case, the availability and usefulness of these publications varies, in large part because the songs’ instrumentations pose a range of transcription problems. The songs that are accompanied predominantly or exclusively by acoustic guitar would seem to be fairly easy to transcribe and publish in a compact way, except that the profusion of tunings that Mitchell uses complicates this process. Some transcriptions can be found in a variety of publications, and quite a few guitar-tablature presentations are available on the Internet (although many of these are not faithful to the recording in one way or another, and it is very uncommon to find the music for the melody notated). The most comprehensive source in this regard, though, is *Joni Mitchell Complete* (Alfred Music Publishing Co., 2006), which provides tunings, chord diagrams, and indications of strumming patterns for most of the guitar-based songs prior to *Shine*. This compilation (which also bears the designations “Guitar Songbook Edition” and “Limited Edition”) has proven invaluable in the writing of this book, particularly with regard to making clear the ways in which guitar tunings and fingerings are handled. However, it has two drawbacks: first, it includes quite a few

inaccuracies; and, second (perhaps at least partly for that reason), it has, for at least some of the time since its publication, been unavailable for purchase.

Many of the songs that are accompanied predominantly or exclusively by a piano are transcribed in the vocal/piano songbooks that were released to accompany Mitchell's albums and in larger collections as well; however, it is important to remember that such transcriptions are often altered in order to incorporate the vocal melody into the piano part, as well as for ease of playing. As is commonly the case with other artists, however, songs with an accompaniment that is more complex than a solo acoustic guitar or piano are much less accurately represented in such songbooks. In almost all cases, it is simply not possible to reproduce the actual recorded combination of instruments in a playable piano accompaniment without departing significantly from the original. In these cases, it is often most helpful for someone studying the music to ignore the piano part that is provided, or to use a simple lead-sheet presentation (just sung melody, words, and chords), which might be found in sources such as *Joni Mitchell Complete*.

The concluding chapter of the book provides a brief summary of Mitchell's work as a whole. Here I review the various professional circumstances and stylistic milieus in which she has worked, as well as some techniques and themes that have been significant throughout her career. Following this chapter, a discography provides a list of the albums and songs discussed in the book, a bibliography documents the sources cited, and an index includes the songs and important names, terms, and ideas that the book addresses.

Stylistic Contexts



Every singer-songwriter who has gained a broad following has drawn on a variety of musical styles, and Joni Mitchell is no exception. Because she has thus engaged “classical,”¹ folk, rock, blues, jazz, and ethnic traditions, it would be misleading to interpret all of her music in the context of a single set of stylistic norms. However, at any given point in a song, some style or range of styles will usually be evident. The elements of the style(s) include certain norms that in turn create a context for interpreting the significance of some musical events. For example, if a song draws most of its notes from a scale that is familiar within a style, a chord that uses other notes may convey a different perspective, a sense of surprise or disruption, or a need for resolution. Similarly, if most of a song uses a single meter (as is the case within most styles), the insertion of a measure in a different meter might convey a sense of extension, uncertainty, instability, or contemplation. (Often the ideas expressed in the text will affect the listener’s interpretation of such an event.)

These examples illustrate divergences from norms that styles might establish within a song, but comparable observations might be made about events that conform to a stylistic norm. For example, if four-measure phrases are present in the beginning of a song, a continuation of that pattern might convey simplicity, stability, inevitability, security, and the like. Or if a particular chord is established in the beginning of a song as a stable sound, ending the song on that chord might indicate finality, resolution, certainty, and so on.

All of these effects tend to be most common and pronounced when the norm is one that is common in one or many styles with which the listener is familiar apart from the song in question. This is the case for all the examples of norms that have been given—emphasis on a particular scale, consistent use of a single meter, normative use of four-measure phrases, and establishment of a harmony as central or stable are all common within many styles. There are many other such norms, especially when one considers norms that are more specific to certain styles, such as certain twelve-bar harmonic patterns within blues music.

Some of these stylistic norms are simple enough that their significance is obvious as a song is being discussed. This is often the case in the realm of temporal elements such as rhythm or meter (for example, establishment of a normative meter within a song) or in the realm of arrangement (for example, establishment of a basic group of instruments with respect to which an added instrument might play a distinct role). Many other norms are not engaged in the discussions of Mitchell's music in this book. But there are several, particularly in the realm of pitch—notes, scales, harmonies, keys—that bear some explanation here, particularly for readers unfamiliar with music analysis, so as to clarify their significance when they arise in the discussion of specific songs.

TONIC PITCH AND HARMONY

Probably the most common and the most fundamental of these is the establishment of a specific pitch as central and stable. When a song or other musical composition is said to be in a particular key, the note named fills this role—if a song is in the key of G major, G is the central pitch. Ordinarily this note gives the greatest sense of closure and stability at the end of a song, and the melody lines of the vast majority of folk songs, hymns, simple popular songs, and similar pieces end on it. This note is technically called the *tonic* note (although the discussions that follow may refer to it more descriptively, as the “central,” “stable,” or “home” pitch, for example).²

If a simple song consists of harmonies as well as a melody line, it will normally end on a harmony that is based on the tonic note. This, at its most complete, will consist of a chord that includes the tonic note, a note two steps above the tonic note (in the case of G, this would be B, since the musical alphabet returns to A after reaching G) and a third note two steps above the second (this would be D). Such a group of three notes is called a *triad*, and the triad that is thus constructed on the tonic note is called the *tonic triad*. When the chord is played in a song, there may be several of each of the notes, but to be a completely satisfying ending, the chord must use the tonic note as both the bass note (meaning the lowest note, regardless of the instrument playing it) and the most prominent

melodic note. (The simplest and most common way of fingering a G chord on a regularly tuned guitar to conclude a song in G would include these notes, from lowest to highest: GBDGBG; two other common fingerings that provide equally satisfying conclusions produce the slightly different GBDGDG and GDGBDG.)

The establishment of a tonic pitch and harmony is common across the vast majority of styles upon which singer-songwriters such as Mitchell draw. Such central sounds can thus provide a context for musical significance apart from any more specific stylistic expectations. For example, if a song ends on a note other than the tonic note or a harmony other than the tonic harmony (as occurs in many instances in Mitchell's music—for example, nontonic note in "Sweet Bird," nontonic harmony in "Otis and Marlena," and nontonic note *and* harmony in "Willy"), or if it avoids the tonic harmony throughout (as is the case in "Impossible Dreamer"), the music will create particular implications for the text. (Other examples, relating to text in varying ways, include "Blue Boy," "Blue," "The Magdalene Laundries," "Yvette in English," and "Man from Mars.")

PRIMARY SCALE

Most popular songs establish not only a central pitch and harmony, but also a primary scale. The scale is a set of notes with a structure that is determined by the distances (called "intervals") that separate them from one another and from the tonic note. The most common of these is the *major scale*, which can be seen in the white keys on a piano with the note C as the tonic note. The intervals that separate neighboring notes in this scale from one another are either *whole steps* (seen on the piano keyboard where a black key is found between two adjacent white scale keys) or *half steps* (seen where no black key intervenes between adjacent white scale keys), and the specific sequence of whole and half steps relative to C defines the major scale. (A major scale can be formed starting on any pitch, but the same sequence of whole and half steps must be maintained, which makes it necessary to substitute one or more black keys for white keys.)

It is quite common for songs to use primary scales other than major scales; those found most often in Mitchell's music are *modal scales*, or "modes." These use the same sequence of whole and half steps found in major scales, but the tonic note is located in a different position within this sequence. The sequence (again, as found in the notes played by the white keys of a piano) is generally called *diatonic*; the two modes most commonly used by Mitchell (or within urban-folk-pop in general) are the *Aeolian mode*, in which the tonic note would be located on A within the white keys, and the *Mixolydian mode*, in which the tonic note would be located on G within the white keys. Each of these scales most distinctively differs from a commonly heard "classical" scale in that it includes a

whole step, rather than a half step, below the tonic note—the Mixolydian scale differs from the major scale in this way, and the Aeolian scale differs from classical minor keys in this way. For this reason, the prominent use of the note a whole step below the tonic note, whether in the melody or in a harmony, is often said to sound “modal.” (Unlike some singer-songwriters, Mitchell hardly ever uses a true minor key, preferring instead Aeolian; as an example, if she were writing such a song with a tonic note of A, she would be much more likely to use E minor chords, which include G naturals—lying a whole step below A—than to use E major chords, which include G sharps that lie a half step below A, as would be the practice in classical music.)³

In addition to major scales and diatonic modal scales, one other kind of scale should be mentioned in connection with Mitchell’s music; this is the *pentatonic scale*. As its name suggests, the scale includes just five notes that differ from one another (as opposed to the seven in a diatonic scale). Such scales might exhibit several different interval structures, but the structure that is most common by far in Western folk music, and the one that applies occasionally to Mitchell’s music, is exemplified by the black keys on a piano (the significance of this for Mitchell is discussed with reference to “Woodstock”). The same interval structure could be drawn from white keys (combinations would include CDEGA, FGACD, and GABDE) or from a combination of white and black keys; such a scale is often called “minor pentatonic” if its tonal center is located a whole and half step below the next pitch in the scale, and “major pentatonic” if pitches in the scale are found one and two whole steps above the tonal center.

Most or all of the notes in a song’s melody will be drawn from the primary scale, as will most of the notes in the chords of the song. It is often the case that a simple folk song in a major key restricts itself entirely to the notes of its scale; on the other hand, almost any classical composition in a major key beyond the simplest child’s piano piece would draw on notes outside the scale. Much jazz music draws freely enough on various notes that it would be difficult to specify a precise collection of notes as “the” scale (although this is not the case for all jazz). In the much more frequent cases in which a primary scale is clearly projected, however, notes outside the scale are commonly called *chromatic*, and their effect is often either to present a striking contrast or to place temporary emphasis on a pitch other than the tonic note—for example, a chromatic F#, used instead of the diatonic F# in the key of C major, might tend to place emphasis on G—or both effects might be simultaneously achieved. Few of Mitchell’s songs restrict themselves in melody and accompaniment to the notes in a single major scale or mode (two exceptions that use a major scale are “River” and “Strong and Wrong”), and so the discussions of the songs in this book will often refer to chromaticism that is achieving one or both of these ends.

HARMONIC STRUCTURE

It is important to understand not only the pitches that are used in songs such as these but also the ways that the harmonies they form are deployed within a song. This has already been discussed with respect to the tonic harmony, which implies a kind of stability that can be used as a point of arrival or a point from which a passage can depart. The degree to which other harmonies are significant varies from passage to passage and from artist to artist. In some cases, the choice of harmonies might principally reside in their general quality (for example, very dissonant or very chromatic), while their specific succession seems rather arbitrary; in others, the placement of harmonies with respect to one another might be very clearly significant.

There are certainly some passages in Joni Mitchell's music in which the succession itself is not particularly noteworthy. For example, the collection of chords in general might be consistent with other elements of the passage that are more significant. In such a case, little attention is paid to the succession within the discussion of the passage.

It is very often the case, however, that the specific choices Mitchell makes are quite significant. She herself has certainly believed that this is the case: in a (characteristically assertive) discussion of her stature as compared with that of other female singer-songwriters in 1990, she said: "They don't have any chordal sense. Most of them don't have any idea of architecture in their chordal movement. . . . When it comes to knowing where to put the chords, how to tell a story and how to build a chorus, none of them can touch me."⁴ In order for these choices to be effective, a listener need not have a formal knowledge of music theory; he or she needs only to be familiar with the style or styles upon which a passage is drawing, so as to base his or her understanding of the significance of specific choices on the customary expectations for harmonic motion in the style. Therefore, the interpretation of Mitchell's harmonic treatment depends on an understanding of the customary harmonic principles in the styles that apply to her work. These fall in four categories: classical-music norms, the importance of bass motion, situations that modify or partially incorporate classical-music norms, and the ways that the mechanics of guitar tunings and fingerings might interact with all of these.

CLASSICAL MUSIC NORMS

Specific patterns ordinarily govern the way that the harmonies in classical music progress to one another. These patterns do not by any means always apply in popular music, but when they are present, they convey a purposeful sense of motion; in the discussions to follow, such conformity to classical norms might be described as moving forward in a "strong" way, or the

like. (When the patterns are not present, the music may not have such a sense of propulsion, or such motion may be achieved in some other way.)

These patterns are ordinarily described in terms of *root motion*. The fundamental harmonies in classical music are ordinarily conceived as being triads, such as the tonic triad described above as being constructed on G. Such a triad can be constructed on any note of the scale; for example, the scale of G major consists of the notes G-A-B-C-D-E-F#-G, and can continue in both directions—. . . D-E-F#-G-A-B-C-D-E-F#-G-A-B-C . . .—and so one could construct a triad, for example, on D (skipping notes as was done with G): D-F#-A. The note on which the triad is constructed is called the *root*, and chords are usually identified by their roots' locations in the scale, with a Roman numeral that indicates order position: in the key of G major, with the given scale, the tonic triad built on G is identified as "I," the triad built on A (A-C-E) as "ii," that built on B (B-D-F#) as "iii," and so on. (Upper- or lower-case Roman numerals indicate that the triads are "major" or "minor," respectively, as determined by their interval structures: the lower two notes of a major triad are separated by two whole steps and the upper two by a whole step and a half step, while a minor triad reverses this pattern.)

Since each note of the major scale can serve as the root of a different triad, seven triads can be constructed from these diatonic notes. Furthermore, any of the triads can be further embellished by adding an additional note above (still skipping notes) to create a "seventh" and/or even a "ninth"—for example, based on D-F#-A, such chords would be D-F#-A-C and D-F#-A-C-E, respectively. These added notes create dissonances whose need for resolution fosters forward motion to other chords; in classical music, then, they are rarely used with the stable tonic chord (and ninth chords are also fairly uncommon in classical music).

A few kinds of motion among these chords are most common and strongest in classical contexts (and these tendencies are the same for triads and seventh and ninth chords, so the following discussion will focus on triads for simplicity). Strongest of all is a concluding motion from V (D-F#-A in this key) to I (G-B-D); the V harmony is called the *dominant* harmony, and motion from it to the tonic chord is called *descending fifth* motion because the roots encompass five scale steps. The model of the descending fifth can also be seen in strong motion from ii (A-C-E) to V and from vi (E-G-B) to ii.

A second common root motion is that of an *ascending second*, most frequently seen in motion from IV (C-E-G) to V and from V to vi. It is quite common that a classical phrase will work its way from I through IV and/or ii to V before the V harmony returns strongly to I, and Mitchell occasionally draws on this pattern (one example, in the key of C major, is the introduction to "Willy," which adheres rather closely to classical norms throughout). The IV chord, with a root located a fifth *below* that of the

tonic chord, is called the *subdominant* harmony and often has a “softer” association than that of the dominant chord because it does not imply such immediate dynamic motion to the tonic chord. The three chords involved when one refers to a “three-chord” folk song or rock song are I, IV, and V in the song’s key (although they don’t necessarily follow the sequence that I have described; for example, one very typical blues pattern customarily follows V with IV). Motion from V to vi is often called “deceptive,” in that it subverts or delays eventual motion from V to I (some examples of this are found in “Willy,” “Cherokee Louise,” “Sunny Sunday,” “The Sire of Sorrow (Job’s Sad Song),” and “Shine”).

A third common type of root motion is that of a *descending third*, and this is most commonly found in classical music between any two chords on the chain I–vi–IV–ii–vii^o–V.⁵ One can see from the IV–ii segment of this set of possibilities that both of these chords, in that order, might precede the V chord. (Although any of these descending-third pairs might appear without the whole chain, one can find a rather large segment of the chain, followed by two descending-fifth moves, in the progression G–Em9–C–Am–D–G (I–vi9–IV–ii–V–I), from “Shiny Toys.”) Motion of an ascending third is not common in classical music, and this is why a passage that fluctuates back and forth between two chords with roots a third apart, as often happens in Mitchell’s music, will tend to seem static.

This discussion of harmonic motion has so far focused on “diatonic” harmonies, that is, harmonies formed entirely from notes within a (major, in this case) key. As has been mentioned above, “chromatic” notes—those that are not found within the key—can also be used, and they usually place emphasis on another pitch and/or add color. Often a raised pitch in a chord will emphasize another pitch. For example, in the key of G, a ii chord, A–C–E, might be altered to A–C#–E; it would still lead to a V chord (D–F#–A), but the raised C# would lead even more strongly to D, the root of that chord. One way of thinking of this is that the altered chord would be the strong V harmony in the key of D, and so D is being treated momentarily like a stable tonic. The earlier discussion of descending-fifth motion implied that a classical passage could move by what is called a “circle” of descending fifths among diatonic chords (vi–ii–V–I, that is, E–G–B to A–C–E to D–F#–A to G–B–D). Chromatic alterations could revise the first two chords to become E–G#–B and A–C#–E, respectively. (Various references to diatonic and chromatic circles of fifths are discussed, for example, with respect to “Chelsea Morning,” “Rainy Night House,” “See You Sometime,” “This Place,” “Hana,” and “Strong and Wrong.”)

Other chromatic harmonies often add color and contrast, especially when they involve shifts with respect to chords that they immediately follow or precede. One common example of this is found in major triads whose roots are a third apart—for example D major (D–F#–A) and B \flat major (B \flat –D–F), in which the F#–F \flat shift, combined with the retained D, creates

the effect. (Some examples of this are discussed with reference to “Songs to Aging Children Come,” “Morning Morgantown,” “Coyote,” and “Impossible Dreamer.”) An analogous effect can be created by a similar juxtaposition of keys; such keys, considered distantly related—as compared with closely related situations, in which the tonic chord of each key is a diatonic chord in the other—create a striking effect that might emphasize two sharply distinguished textual perspectives, for example. The many references to chromaticism in the following discussions draw on these principles to varying degrees.

As thus described, ideas drawn from classical music can create a sense of harmonic direction in a song. Although this is the case both when somewhat typical classical harmonic motion is present and when it is somehow clearly being avoided or contravened, and it is important to understand these principles in order to interpret the significance of such passages, in much of her music Mitchell either does not draw directly on these principles or does so only in a very general way (for example, using the V–I conclusion or using chromatic principles in a passage that is not otherwise particularly classical in its harmonic flavor). There are many other, more ad hoc ways of conveying some sense of purpose in harmonic motion, but one important element in this regard is clearly projected bass motion.

BASS MOTION

If there is a perceptible logic to the bass line (which could consist of the notes played by the electric or string bass, but also can simply be whatever notes are the lowest sounding ones at any particular point), the listener can form a clear idea of direction, regardless of the harmonies that are being played or the ways they might relate to one another. This is particularly important in the case of Mitchell’s music, because some of her “unusual” harmonies are distinctly characterized by the combination of a harmony with a seemingly unrelated bass note.⁶ One kind of logic would be conformity to classical norms, so that if the bass line follows a typical classical pattern, the listener will tend to accept the significance of that pattern, even if the harmonies do not fully reinforce it. For example, in the sample key of G, if the bass moves at the end of a phrase from D to G, the listener will understand that there is some sense of V–I conclusiveness, even if the chord over the D is not a D–F♯–A V harmony.

The bass can convey logic unrelated to classical norms, as well. The simplest example of this would be for the bass to present a predictable pattern of motion, and the simplest example of this is stepwise motion in a single direction. Such patterns are occasionally pointed out in the discussions of songs. In order to follow these points, it is important for the reader to know how to tell what notes are sounding in the bass line of a specified

harmonic series. In the notation used here, if there is no slash (/) in the designation of a chord, or if there is a slash with a number to its right, no matter how complex the designation is, the letter given is both the root of the chord and the bass note. If a letter name appears to the right of the slash, the information to the left of the slash describes the harmony, and the letter name to the right specifies the bass note, whether this note belongs to the harmony or not. Thus, the bass note is C for all of the following: C, Cm6/9, Csus7, Fmin7/C, and B♭maj7/C. Sometimes, in fact, harmonies over a bass note or bass line are so transient or otherwise relatively insignificant that I will refer to the harmonic situation by the bass note, saying, for example, that “E♭ chords move to C chords.”

MODIFICATIONS OF CLASSICAL MUSIC HARMONIC PRACTICE

There are several ways that nonclassical harmonic techniques modify or partially incorporate classical music norms. When a song uses a mode, rather than a major scale, it cannot use the same harmonies that are ordinarily used in a major scale, but others might take on analogous roles. The most common of these situations relates to the V–I arrival motion that would occur in a major key. If, instead of using the G major scale (G-A-B-C-D-E-F♯-G), a song uses G Mixolydian (G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G) or G Aeolian (G-A-B♭-C-D-E♭-F-G), each of which includes F, a whole step below G, rather than F♯, a half step, an arrival on the tonic chord might be preceded by a minor triad (v, D-F-A) rather than a major triad (V, D-F♯-A), or even by a VII triad (F-A-C). In each case, the listener would still understand the idea of arrival, but the chord preceding the tonic chord would sound different from the V chord (and might be heard to lead a little less strongly than would the V chord, since, in the classical tradition, the half step F♯-G is heard as stronger than the whole step F-G).

Other harmonic techniques involve the use of nonclassical harmonies. Dissonant and/or chromatic harmonies convey a general sense of style—often, especially in the first half of Mitchell’s career, they (along with other elements) provide something of an index of where a song falls on the folk-to-jazz continuum (in general, the more dissonant or chromatic, the more toward the jazz end). But they can also play a more functional role within a song, in that motion from consonant and/or diatonic to dissonant and/or chromatic can provide a kind of contrast that is analogous to the contrast between different keys, and thus can relate to textual contrast in the same kinds of ways. In such cases, often the more consonant and/or diatonic harmonies are most naturally associated with stable or resolved situations, while more dissonant and/or chromatic harmonies might be associated with turmoil or uncertainty—but such common practices can certainly be varied.

GUITAR TUNINGS AND FINGERINGS

A final consideration with respect to Mitchell's incorporation of various musical styles into her music is the way that her distinctive guitar tunings and fingerings intersect with the styles upon which she draws. The following discussions of individual songs will reveal some ways that these tunings can affect how they are projected and shaped. However, it is appropriate to make a few observations here as the tunings relate to the principles discussed in the chapter.⁷

As examples in the discussions will show, a particular tuning usually implies a particular tonic note. Most often the pitch to which the lowest note on the guitar is tuned will fill this role. Often, though, the tuning can also establish an unusual tonic *harmony* as well. As a simple example, while classical music will always use either a major triad or a minor triad as the tonic harmony, the open (unfingered) strings of the guitar might form a complex, dissonant chord, which Mitchell may use as the central, touchstone harmony to which the song relates, perhaps beginning and/or ending with this sound, as a classical song would do with its tonic chord.

This principle can be extended further. Having selected a tuning, Mitchell often settles on a limited number of chords in addition to that projected by the open strings. These are often formed by favored, simple fingering positions. The simplest of all of these is an unelaborated "barre," in which a single finger is laid across the neck of the guitar at a particular fret; this reproduces the open-string harmony at a different pitch level. Mitchell has other favored fingerings as well—configurations that remain the same as tunings vary, indicating that, when experimenting with new tunings, she has often tended to try out these familiar fingerings and gravitate toward tunings in which the resulting sounds seem potentially fruitful to her.⁸

Once a limited number of (usually relatively unusual) chords has been selected for a song, Mitchell may well use them in a way that is analogous to the way the most common diatonic chords are used in a classical piece.⁹ The open-string chord might serve a tonic function, as already suggested, but others might have functions that vary similarly to the way that ii, IV, or V chords' functions vary in classical music. The exact way that these functions relate to one another would be quite different from that which is evident in classical music. To give two examples:

1. The fact that Mitchell often relocates a single finger configuration along the neck of the guitar to create different chords often gives rise to more "parallel motion"—all notes moving in the same direction from one chord to another—than is customary in classical music.
2. The fact that many of her fingerings let some open strings ring often results in several complex chords sharing several pitches.

These rather straightforward examples only hint at further variations; for example, the tonic-like chord is often not simply the open strings of the guitar, in which case many of the principles related in the previous two paragraphs would remain but would be reconfigured. Of course, such complexities are only a microcosm of the complexities that come into play when all of these music-stylistic considerations interact. The discussions that follow will give some examples of how this can happen. However, I must acknowledge that it is not possible for me to come close to exhausting the observations that can be made about this music, and therefore I hope to provide the reader with some means to embark on many fruitful further investigations.