

## HOLE NOTES

by Dale Turner



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## LADY OF THE CANYON

## Joni Mitchell's altered-tuning innovations

**CANADIAN-BORN JONI MITCHELL** originally intended to be a fine artist and considered herself a hobbyist musician in the early Sixties, occasionally playing paid gigs to support her painting studies. That all changed by the mid Sixties, when personal issues, including needing to give a child up for adoption, inspired her to channel her troubled thoughts into original songs—music that would soon be covered by established folk artists like Tom Rush and Judy Collins, who had a Top-10 hit with Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" in 1967.

In 1965, Mitchell moved to the U.S., performing her own material in coffee houses and folk clubs along the East Coast. At a Florida gig in 1967, she met David Crosby (soon to form Crosby, Stills and Nash), who was floored by her soaring voice, innovative use of altered tunings and profound lyrics. He convinced her to move to California and encouraged Reprise Records to release her solo acoustic debut (*Songs to a Seagull*) in 1968. By the end of that decade, Joni Mitchell was a household name. This month, I'll examine the tunings and techniques of this legend's signature songs.

Originally released as the B-side of "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio" in 1972, the song "Urge for Going," reminiscent of **FIGURE 1**, is actually one of Mitchell's earliest compositions (her first to achieve commercial success, as recorded by country performer George Hamilton IV in 1967). It's also one of her few songs written in standard tuning (played with a capo at the third fret). This passage is highlighted by step-wise note movements—scalar lines, albeit plucked arpeggio-style—resulting from fretting notes high up the neck while the open top string rings in their midst.

Playing the complete Mitchell discography would require literally 50-plus altered/open/slack tunings. Some of her more manageable tunings include *double drop-D* (low to high, D A D G B D) and *open G tuning* (low to high, D G D G B D). Mitchell used double drop-D on "Free Man in Paris" (*Court and Spark*), and **FIGURE 2** is similar to that song's strummed opening (she plays the song with a pick.)

Performed in open G tuning and with a capo at the fourth fret, **FIGURE 3** is a fingerstyle pattern inspired by "Circle Game" (*Ladies of the Canyon*). If you're still in double drop-D, simply lower your fifth string's pitch one whole step, to G.

FIGURES 1 and 3 are played fingerstyle: p = thumb, i = index finger, m = middle finger, a = ring finger.

FIG. 1

## Standard tuning, capo 3

All tablature positions are relative to the capo.

All music sounds in the key of D minor, a minor third higher than written.

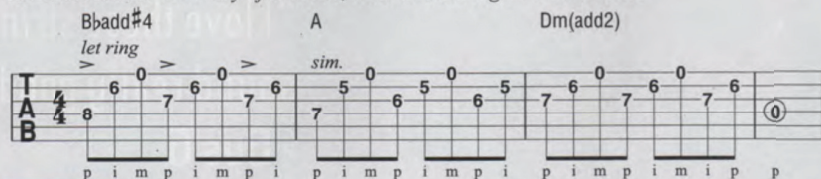


FIG. 2

## double drop-D tuning (low to high, D A D G B D)

□ = downstroke V = upstroke

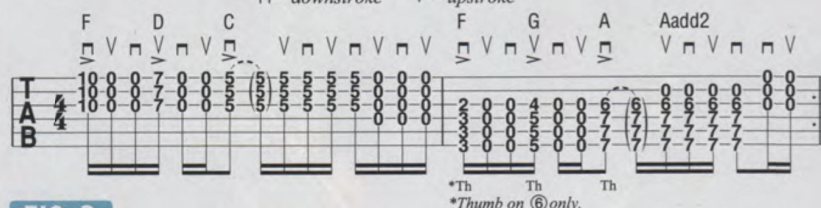


FIG. 3

## open G tuning (low to high, D G D G B D), capo 4

All tablature positions are relative to the capo.

All music sounds in the key of B, a major third higher than written.

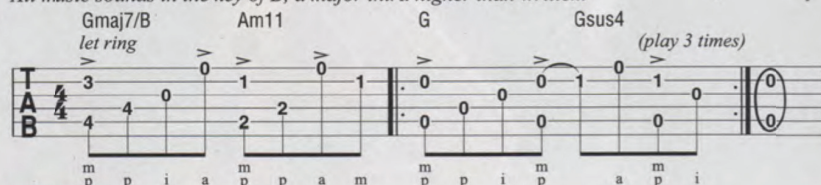
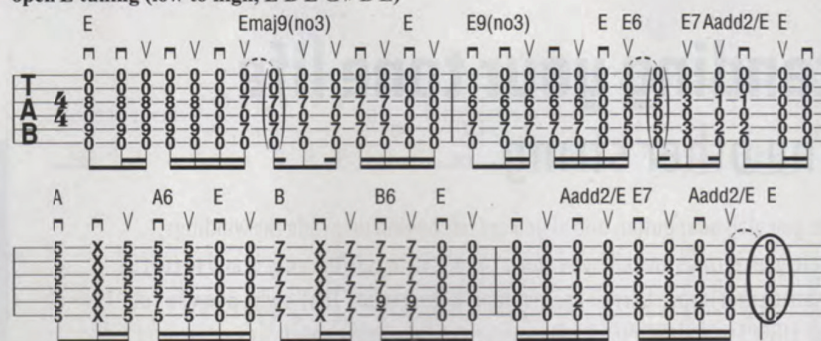


FIG. 4

## open E tuning (low to high, E B E G# B E)



Many classic Mitchell cuts are fashioned from tunings for which the open strings form a chord. Some of her most popular songs, like "Big Yellow Taxi" (*Ladies of the Canyon*) and "Chelsea Morning" (*Clouds*), are in open E

tuning (low to high, E B E G# B E). **FIGURE 4** is a composite of some of the moves used in both songs, featuring 16th-note strums and sliding note pairs on the third and fifth strings, sandwiched between ringing open strings.

**Musician's Institute instructor and author/transcriber DALE TURNER played all the instruments/voices on his latest CD, *Mannerisms Magnified* (www.intimateaudio.com).**