

## In Search of Lost Chords: Joni Mitchell, *The Last Waltz*, and the Refuge of the Road

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Murray Lerner's film *Message to Love: The Isle of Wight Festival 1970* documents Joni Mitchell's confrontation with an unruly crowd at an increasingly chaotic three-day concert, where an audience of 200,000 watched performances by acts like Jimi Hendrix, The Who, and The Doors. Her few minutes on screen will never fit as neatly with glib proclamations of the "end of the 60s" as the events at the free concert at Tracy, California's Altamont Speedway, organized by the Rolling Stones and documented in the far more canonical film *Gimme Shelter*. But *Message to Love's* depiction of Mitchell's confrontation with the festival audience carries some of the same force. In both films, dreams seeded at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair of 1969 turn into nightmares. Like *Gimme Shelter*, Lerner's film charts the breakdown of business-as-usual at a huge, outdoor, multi-artist concert. But in *Message to Love*, Woodstock's shadow looms more literally; just after Mitchell finishes playing her eponymous anthem of tribute to the already legendary affair, her microphone is commandeered by an apparently acid-baked hippie named Yogi Joe, who rather incoherently attempts to speak up for a group of people protesting outside the festival, demanding that it be made free.<sup>1</sup> Mitchell's manager finally pulls Joe offstage, prompting a chorus of boos and jeers from the audience. Mitchell tries to start her next song, "My Old Man," but breaks off after the opening chords. After some moments of awkward hesitancy, looking distraught and rather cowed ("Listen a minute—will ya listen a minute?"), she scolds the crowd at length in a breaking voice, reminding them of the vulnerability of performing ("you've

got your life wrapped up in it”) and accusing them of “acting like tourists,” akin to onlookers she had recently witnessed at a “Hopi ceremonial dance.”<sup>2</sup>

Soon, all appears to be well; the film cuts to the final seconds of a well-received performance of “Big Yellow Taxi,” for which Mitchell even reproduces the song-punctuating giggle of the studio version. But a rift has emerged; she has suggested an insidious difference between performers and their audiences, one in which “indigeneity” stands in for the performers’ authenticity and “tourism” for the audience’s consumerism. The episode tries to paper over the fact that the boos by the Isle of Wight audience, however rude to Mitchell, were meant to protest the commodification of performance; instead, the representation of Yogi Joe’s clumsy intervention becomes a lesson on etiquette. Eventually, however, crowds do break down the fences surrounding the concert grounds and stream into the festival, as Lerner’s cameras record the festival organizers’ descent into apoplexy. Indeed, more directly than *Gimme Shelter*, Lerner’s film portends the growth of live rock as a well-oiled branch of big business in the 1970s, with performers and profits well-protected by police and professional security.

The Isle of Wight debacle represented in *Message to Love* contrasts starkly with Mitchell’s best-known appearance in a concert documentary. This piece of film comes from the aftermath of the historical transformation that Lerner’s film all but promises, in Martin Scorsese’s movie about the final concert by The Band, *The Last Waltz* (1978), planned by guitarist/songwriter/honcho Robbie Robertson as their farewell to the trials of touring. Against the background of the incident depicted in the earlier movie, her appearance in the late-70s film feels as serene as twilight on a Laurel Canyon sundeck, her status as the only woman to perform at the concert safely blended into the proceedings by her “mesmerizing” appearance as, in Greil Marcus’s words, “a goddess on the make” (2010, 82). But Mitchell’s segment exposes some weaknesses in the tightly constructed film’s efforts to assert the death and burial of the 1960s. In this chapter, I mean to unravel the way that Mitchell instigates a kind of structural breakdown in the cultural-historical narrative Scorsese and Robertson attempt to tell, in contrast to her quelling of chaos in *Message to Love*. As Scorsese’s film, through the voice of Robertson, intones and inveighs against the chaos of the 1960s and early 1970s, as represented in the figure of

“the road,” Mitchell’s appearance subtly draws out the counter-message she was articulating in her then-current album, *Hejira*, a record which depicts travel as a strange kind of refuge, a space in which ambivalence and uncertainty become forms of sustenance. Mitchell’s presence—along with the *Hejira* song she performs onscreen, “Coyote”—achieves this effect, in particular, by quietly drawing attention to The Band’s charismatic and gifted, yet troubled bass player/vocalist Rick Danko, whose interaction with Mitchell turns his appearance in the film into a challenge to the story told in the dominant key of Robertson’s romanticized masculinity.

*Message to Love* and *Gimme Shelter*, as well as D. A. Pennebaker’s *Monterey Pop* and Michael Hadleigh’s Oscar-winning *Woodstock* (for which *The Last Waltz* director Martin Scorsese served as an assistant director), are verité documentaries, made with handheld cameras, and shunning both narration and talking-head sequences. They all also pay attention to the unpredictable responses of the concerts’ audiences, and the generic spaces those audiences occupy. They are films whose aesthetics mirror how many prefer to imagine the sixties—as hard-scrabble, improvisatory, and organic. *The Last Waltz*, in contrast, presents a world that has moved beyond all that, depicting rock as a sumptuous and exclusive realm founded on the notion that the boundary between performers and audience is impassable. It is a tightly sealed, insular film, like the performance it depicts, which took place before a tidy crowd of 5,000, each of whom were served a traditional Thanksgiving dinner before the show. The film takes place in a relatively small, indoor performance space, and features no shots of the audience while the musicians are onstage. (Scenes of performances with Emmylou Harris and the Staples Singers were shot on a soundstage.) The concert was meticulously choreographed so that the film would avoid drawing any attention to its own process of construction. Moreover, songs are intercut with interviews with members of The Band, songwriter and guitarist Robbie Robertson in particular, which narrate (with some major gaps) the group’s history, and the reasons for giving up on touring, which, in the movie’s own terms, boil down to Robertson’s dictum that “It’s a goddamn impossible way of life.”<sup>3</sup> No surprises can disrupt the film’s structural hardware, it would seem—certainly not Joni Mitchell, whom we watch

glide onto the stage in a flowery peasant skirt and thin burgundy sweater for a performance of her then-current single “Coyote” (from the LP *Hejira*, released that same month) in which nothing, least of all an onstage interloper, threatens her contented calm and focus; 40 years later, Robertson would refer to Mitchell’s performance that evening as “like a cool breeze.”<sup>4</sup>

Mitchell is one of a series of “friends” who perform their own songs in the film with The Band’s backing: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Dr John, Neil Diamond, and Muddy Waters are among the artists on the star-studded bill, all of whom have some history of collaboration with the group, and none of whom, besides Mitchell, are women. There are a couple of ways of accounting for Mitchell’s presence at the concert, among a star-studded series of performers, each of whom played a few of their own songs with The Band backing them. One of them, almost certainly, is her connection to Robertson, who had conceived of the concert, the film, and the abandonment of touring—a decision which in the following year led to the overall demise of the group. Mitchell had met fellow Canadian Robertson on various occasions, largely in southern California in the company of a mutual friend, the record company mogul David Geffen; Robertson played guitar on “Raised on Robbery” from Mitchell’s 1974 *Court and Spark* LP and joined Mitchell and Geffen for the rollicking weekend depicted in the same album’s “Free Man in Paris.”

But Mitchell had another, less visible connection to The Band, one with less permanent musical documentation: her relationship with bassist Rick Danko, the other Band member who flanks her during the rendition of “Coyote,” plucking his bass strings affably with his eyes glued on Mitchell’s left hand as it fingers chords on her acoustic guitar. In late 1975 and early 1976, both Mitchell and Danko had joined up with Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder cavalcade, playing multiple dates with the ensemble that included Dylan, Joan Baez, Roger McGuinn, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Ronee Blakly, and others. Late in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, his hysterical, Beat-aesthetic-tinged, panicked account of the tour he tagged along on, playwright Sam Shepard—often rumored to be the man the song calls “Coyote”—notices Mitchell watching Danko, describing the scene of spectatorship in a manner that could constitute a lyrical vignette for a slightly tweaked-up “Coyote”: “Joni Mitchell is cross-legged on the floor, barefoot, writing something in a notebook. She bites her lip and looks over

to Rick Danko, who's smashing the shit out of a pinball machine with both kneecaps, then pounding on the sides with both fists" (Shepard 1977, 82). In a recording of a Rolling Thunder performance in Montreal on December 4, 1975, Mitchell tells the audience that she is still adding verses to "Coyote"; Shepard's little tableau suggests the possibility that Danko, or some Danko-instigated suggestion of masculinity that tempted her curiosity, is present in the song they would play onstage together a little less than a year later.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Last Waltz*, Robertson and Scorsese try hard to make Danko and pianist Richard Manuel into tragic figures, the exhibits representing the toll of the years Robertson laments. Every member of The Band is clearly fucked-up in the interview segments, but Danko and Manuel appear especially full up on intoxicants. And indeed, the years that followed this concert bear out this depiction: both struggled with addiction, until Manuel committed suicide in 1985 and Danko died, at 56 in 1999, after long-term heroin addiction. Musically, Danko's biography became a narrative of lost promise. In the early days of the group, he had been a contributing songwriter; indeed, he and Dylan cowrote the powerful, oft-covered "This Wheel's on Fire" during the *Basement Tapes* sessions in pre-festival Woodstock. Part of what makes the story tragic is also on display in the film; in the performance scenes Danko, a marvelous and original player, bounces and beams through virtually every song, radiating gracious joy. His exuberance in the moment comes off as strong enough to cover what must have been a strong sense of ambivalence, at best, about giving up on live performances—at least regular ones, with this group of men who had played together steadily for a decade and a half.

Shepard's depiction of Mitchell watching Danko during a backstage moment in the Rolling Thunder festivities helps underscore the ocular dynamics between the two during her appearance in *The Last Waltz*, in which Danko watches Mitchell's guitar playing closely. It's an all but unnoticeable detail, but one whose easy disappearance belies its capacity to undo the film's neatness, its submission to the guiding authority that Scorsese and Robertson work hard to make unassailable. *Hejira*, the album Mitchell released the same month as the concert took place, is a key intertext here, a document of meditations on travel and gender formed during an itinerant year in her own life, which included several months on the Rolling Thunder tour.

In Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, performance scenes alternate with interview segments, filmed almost a year after the concert, in which members of The Band respond to questions from the director. The film presents Robertson as the group's musical visionary and spokesperson, the one least ravaged by their history, actual details of which are fairly scant. The guitarist and chief songwriter lays out his case: The Band needs to stop touring, they are on the way toward an inevitably tragic fate to which their late contemporaries and colleagues Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin have already fallen victim. Ruggedly handsome, with a gravelly voice, bloodshot eyes, and a dense, brown helmet of blow-dried hair, Robertson reigns over the vast majority of the interview scenes. Both concert and film were his idea; accounts of the film's planning stress his degree of collaboration with Scorsese, including the production of a 200-page document of camera cues aligned with the structures of songs performed (Kelly 1980, 26). The film presents the rest of the group as either too uninterested or incapacitated to take on any real authority in telling the story of the band, concert, and film. Indeed, drummer Levon Helm, who in later years excoriated Robertson for minimizing the songwriting contributions—and thus royalty payments—of other members of the group, wrote in his 1993 memoir: "The film was more or less shoved down our throats [ . . . ] and we went along with it. Do it, puke, get out" (Helm with Davis 2000, 257). The film is as tightly controlled as Robertson's coiffure, a contrast not only to the older concert movies, but—perhaps intentionally—to *Renaldo and Clara*, the ragged and incomprehensible hybrid narrative-documentary film that Bob Dylan had constructed during Rolling Thunder.

Although Dylan's appearance is presented as the climax of the film, the interview sections included in *The Last Waltz* short shrift The Band's work with him, suggesting a bit of Oedipal anxiety. Oddly, the movie also contains no discussion of songs, songwriting, playing, or the recording process. Robertson is the film's discursive patriarch, and the narrative he relates in the interview segments focuses on their early days, playing with Ronnie Hawkins, visiting the southern United States for the first time in the company of native informant Helm. The focus becomes not so much music as a set of hackneyed talking points from a Frommer's guide to Americana. We have a

young white band's trip to see elderly African American bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson in Arkansas. We have a long story about a hungry, broke-ass band shoplifting baloney from a grocery store. We have rubes arriving in New York and blithely checking into the "Times Square Hotel" because the name makes it sound centrally located, unaware that they are lodging at ground zero of the red-light district. In a scene that precedes the presentation of Mitchell performing, and which I'll return to, we have a brief and awkward discussion instigated by Scorsese's off-camera question, "So what about the women on the road?" Finally, we have Robertson intoning that "The road killed a lot of the great ones—Hank Williams [ . . . ] Janis, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis [ . . . ] It's a goddamned impossible way of life."<sup>6</sup> By the time of the concert and film, of course, the group was traveling to concert dates on jets in an industry whose upper echelons, since calamities like Altamont and Isle of Wight, had become increasingly corporatized.

Across Mitchell's *Hejira* LP, however, the view we get of travel and life on the road is variegated, multi-patterned, ambivalent; in a song like "Coyote," Mitchell's narrator seems simultaneously enchanted and undone in her life as a "hitcher, a prisoner of the white lines on the freeway." The album seems determined to explode the singularity of the notion of "the" road, to prevent travel from symbolizing any one thing, from standing in as a figure for any singular myth. "Hejira" is the Arabic word for journey, often used to refer to Mohammad's escape to Medina from persecution in Mecca. Multiple modes of travel populate the songs, from skateboards to 747s, as "Black Crow" suggests, in a knowingly hyperbolic manner:

I took a ferry to the highway  
Then I drove to a pontoon place  
I took a plane to a taxi  
And a taxi to a train.

For Mitchell, if anything, the road is a "refuge" (as the title of one song has it), because it offers experiences and encounters so diverse and multiple that they can't be mythologized through a single frame. It brings new forms of contact with others and oneself, and persistently proffers more of the same; it makes available and palpable new terms and concepts, new senses and forms

of perception. It continually self-undermines and regenerates. In a way, it *is*, as Robertson has it, “goddamned impossible”—but, from this orientation, largely because it is impossible to confine within a narrative. It’s not even necessarily discursive, at least in the modality of explanation—and this, for Mitchell, is a good thing, a sentiment ripened in the opening verse, in which the singer is sheltered in a non-place where “There’s comfort in melancholy/When there’s no need to explain.”<sup>7</sup> A decade ago, writer Ron Rosenbaum described the song “Amelia” in terms that resonate beautifully with the entire album: “[Mitchell] seems in some ruefully voluptuous way to be reveling in her hejira, getting deliriously deep into her disillusion and disenchantment, exploring the unmapped territory of her newfound solitude like the eponymous aviator in the dreamy solace of long motel-punctuated drives.”<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the road is not threatening and, potentially, deathly. In many ways, the ur-figure of the LP is Amelia Earhart, the addressee of “Amelia,” history’s most famous female pilot, “swallowed by the sky.” But of course, the mystery of Earhart’s disappearance, embodied in this image of a gulping sky—in contrast with the literal warning in the deaths of musicians like Hendrix and Joplin—is what attracts Mitchell, as well as the recurrent phrase “false alarm”—a figure of dissipated warning, of emotions in flight from their initial, or representable, catalysts.

The sexiest of these songs is “Coyote,” which may be either the most flirtatious song about fucking or the most graphic song about flirting ever written, an ambiguity underwritten and accelerated by the fact that the title character is alternately a male human and an actual, wild coyote. A few specific details provide ballast for seeing Sam Shepard as the model for the song’s protagonist, such as the reference to Nova Scotia’s “Bay of Fundy,” where the playwright kept a waterside home. But I prefer to hear Mitchell’s ode to life as a “prisoner of the white lines on the freeway” as a more general luxuriation in the frame-shifting of movement, a sentiment underwritten by the light touch of her syncopated guitar strumming as it gently leads the song’s loping rhythm and melody. The road is a place of serial impressions, in which a “farmhouse burning down” quickly changes into “some road house lights/Where a local band was playing,” and in which the narrator, recognizing that Coyote has “a woman at home” and “another woman down the hall” seems titillated by



the precariousness surrounding his advances.<sup>9</sup> The road, in this portrayal, is a space of flirtation; in this verse, that flirtation is explicitly sexual, but the LP as a whole finds an erotic charge more broadly in the road as a space that cultivates the constant raising of questions, the continual renewal of possibility.

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A moment in Robbie Robertson's recent autobiography is richly suggestive:

After dinner, Joni told me she had a new song almost finished. There were a couple of acoustic guitars in the living room, and she picked one up, changed the tuning, and motioned for me to pick up the other. Then she soared into the cosmos with her angelic voice. I tried to follow her on guitar, but between her unusual tunings and obscure fingering, I was a man in search of lost chords. (2016, 408)

The contrast between Mitchell's and Robertson's aesthetic-psychic imagination of the road might seem overdetermined, in advance, by the simplest understanding of the cultural politics of gender. Robertson's depiction of the road is authoritative, agonized, romantic, masculine; Mitchell's, in her contemporaneous work, is speculative, questioning, fluid, feminine—as non-solid as her brief pre-appearance in *The Last Waltz* through a scrim, singing backup from backstage on Neil Young's "Helpless." The way this buried conflict registers structurally in *The Last Waltz*, however, is messier, and draws out Rick Danko as an unassuming counter-authority to Robertson.

Mitchell's appearance in *The Last Waltz* takes place just past the midpoint of the film. It is brief and, ostensibly, reprises the mise-en-scene of all the performances presented in the film: she walks out on stage, and sings "Coyote" standing, playing acoustic guitar, in the space where most of the "special guests" appeared, in between guitarist Robertson (to her left, our right) and bassist Danko (to her right, our left). To this point in the film, Danko hasn't had much screen time during the interview scenes, and if he does not come off as quite as wasted as Richard Manuel, he is still, clearly, substantially wrecked. But it's Danko who de facto introduces Mitchell's scene, at the end of an interview segment in which Band members respond to the question from Scorsese about "women on the road." In this sequence, Robertson stays uncharacteristically quiet. The question brings Manuel to the fore with the exclamation, "I love

'em! That's probably why we've *been* on the road!" Levon Helm demonstrates both his visual acuity and his negative feelings about the project by attempting to lean out of the frame as he softly asserts, "I thought you weren't supposed to talk about that stuff." The segment turns into a full-blown introduction to Mitchell, though, when Danko says, "As we've grown, the women have grown." The film seems to endorse this patronizing comment by turning to a shot of Mitchell's back as Robertson intones to the crowd, "Who? Joni Mitchell, right." Offered up to the film's audience as representative, if "grown," woman, Mitchell walks onstage, bows to the crowd, and kisses Robertson on the cheek. She strums the opening chords and rhythm of "Coyote"; after a measure or two, the group fall in behind her.

With the film's serial presentation of The Band-backed guest performances, it's easy to miss a couple of formal peculiarities that have just appeared on the screen. One is that Mitchell is the only performer we have seen—or, over the course of the movie, do see—emerge from backstage; she is shown from the back walking out to greet the musicians. Another is that the film and sound editing are markedly choppy here than in the other segments; there is an awkward cut after she kisses Robertson to the first chord of the song, an edit which excises any embrace of recent Rolling Thunder fellow traveler Danko. It is as though the film doesn't quite know how to integrate what happens when a woman walks into its frame, and this difficulty has a kind of musical analogue in the gentle gallop of the song, which contrasts greatly with the swampy blues foundation—The Band's favored musical idiom—that underlies the songs they perform with the other "friends."

Through most of the scene, we are positioned on Robertson's side, looking over at Mitchell, with Danko in the background. We are looking, then, at Mitchell, but also at where Danko is looking, and his eyes are riveted on one part of Mitchell's body: her left hand, fingering out the song's chords. In preparing for the concert, The Band had only a few weeks to learn songs by nearly a dozen guest artists, so it's not surprising that he would be watching Mitchell's hand for the chords and changes; musicians playing in blues-based idioms in ensembles often rely on vision, in this manner, to suture them into the music. The positions of a guitarist's fingers on the fret board provide a kind of map, or code, for musicians who play without printed notation. But

in this instance, because of the unconventional way(s) Mitchell plays guitar, tuning her strings in ways generated by her own ear, the fingered frets are not producing the notes they usually do. The object of Danko's gaze is providing him with no information, no semiosis. Like Mitchell's framing of the hejira, it resists the confinement of sign and symbol.

Joni Mitchell's nonstandard guitar tunings comprise one of the most distinctive aspects of her music. Early in her career, like many folk and blues guitarists, she began to move away from standard tuning (from low to high strings, E-A-D-G-B-E) toward open tunings—tuning the open strings of the guitar to a particular chord (usually G- or D-major), creating a dronier sound as multiple open strings ring out with the root note of the song's key, basically throughout the composition. At some point after the release of her first album, as her compositions became more formally complicated, she became fascinated with developing her own, highly idiosyncratic tunings, often to “sus” or suspended chords—although, in general, she developed tunings only from how they sounded to her and had no idea what chords and notes she was playing. On “Coyote,” her guitar is tuned to a D-minor 11 chord, a very rare one indeed in the blues-based rock idiom. As a result, the positions in which she places her fingers on the fretboard are completely opaque to other musicians. Mitchell has said, “I'm handicapped in communicating with other musicians,” and that she often has no idea how to identify the chords she plays in any communicable musical sign system (Marom 2014, 75). Consequently, her collaborations in the 1970s, as she did more ensemble playing while her songs became more complex, were marked by lengthy transcription sessions; a participating musician who, unlike most working in popular idioms, had an operative knowledge of music theory, would identify Mitchell's chords for the other players. In the case of The Band, classically trained keyboardist Garth Hudson played this role during the rushed rehearsals for the *The Last Waltz* concert.

Unconventional tunings produce unconventional finger positions; virtually unheard-of tunings produce never-before-seen fingerings. Sight underwrites the sounds musicians make when everyone knows where the fingers go for a specific chord, but in Mitchell's *The Last Waltz* scene, watching Danko watch Mitchell's fingers, the spectacle is one of sight *not* working, at least not in a way

that produces knowledge for the bassist in any conventional manner. Mitchell has detuned not just her guitar, but that lynchpin of cinematic spectatorship itself, the male gaze. Mitchell was not unfamiliar with this dynamic of vision, one that, in Robertson's words in his recent memoir, put her collaborating musicians "in search of lost chords."

In her book of interviews with Malka Marom, the Canadian writer shows Mitchell a photograph of her sitting on a lawn, playing guitar, alongside Eric Clapton, David Crosby, Mickey Dolenz, and an unidentified baby. Her response to the photo:

Eric Clapton is watching my hands, his mouth is gaping open because he couldn't figure out what I was doing: "What is she doing? How is she getting those sounds?"

People would comment on my hands from the start, like when Chuck Mitchell and his partner then, Lauren James, came to see me. Lauren James went, "Look at her right hand," and Chuck went, "Hell, look at her legs." [laughs] (Marom 2014, 72)

Poignantly, in this vignette in Marom's book, she looks back at an image of a man looking at her, and that man, virtually a knighted figure in the annals of rock guitar, is left in a feminine position, with his mouth "gaping open." Moreover, Mitchell here presents herself as a dilemma for straight male musicians: Do they look at her hands or at a more traditionally erotic (and highly legible) object of vision like her legs? In her scene in *The Last Waltz*, Rick Danko has made his choice, sending his gaze toward Mitchell's hand in a manner that veers off the routes traveled by conventional, heterosexually structured markers of gendered difference. That Danko, Clapton, and the rest can't identify the chords also means they can't *hear* them—they need vision to identify what, for Mitchell, is a self-generated aural formation. Their ocular failure repeats an auditory failure. For Mitchell, this acoustic failure—the evasiveness of her chords' *sound*—is also gendered. In the same interview with Marom, Mitchell discusses the confusion her frequent use of suspended chords—whose harmonic structure creates, for many listeners, a sense of tension—has posed for male collaborators: "I used to call them, not knowing

what a sus chord was myself, I called them chords of inquiry. They have a question mark in them. They're sustained. Men don't like them because they like resolution, just like they do in life" (Marom 2014, 74). In fact, plenty of rock songs use suspended chords, but Mitchell makes them more frequent and more central—less like brief variations of a song's staple chords—than tends to happen in rock songwriting. In spatial terms, the idiom of travel, this tenor of irresolution gives her music a sense of detachment from origin and destination. It underwrites an ethos, charted in *Hejira*, of wandering and flirtation as ways of being.

"Coyote" is five-and-a-half minutes long in *The Last Waltz*; it gently unravels at the end, perhaps because putting together a tight ending was a low priority on The Band's rushed schedule.<sup>10</sup> The film moves along. Mitchell reappears for the all-hands version of Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" that closed the concert, in advance of several jam sessions and an encore. Her accrued screen time hardly makes her a presence of any exceptional weight in the film.

Yet her performance does reverberate, in another sequence, focusing on Rick Danko. It was Danko who, in effect, introduced Mitchell into the film by awkwardly assimilating her into its chapter on the topic of "women on the road." It was Danko who drew attention to the spectacle of her sound, irreducible to naming, manifest in her fingers' arrangement on the guitar frets. Slightly later, the film devotes an interview sequence to Danko alone; it is the longest sequence in which a member of The Band appears without Robbie Robertson present. It is also the most extended sequence in this two-hour lamentation of "the road" in which someone is *moving*, is actually engaged in a physical journey, however miniature. This part of the film begins with Danko, in an echo of Mitchell's stage entrance, shot from the back as he walks through the halls of Shangri-La, The Band's studio and recreation complex in Los Angeles, giving Scorsese a tour. As docent to this tourist and his accompanying camera operator, Danko describes the individual rooms, and at first, we appear to be on our way into another Robertson-style tale of romance. "This used to be a bordello," he begins, apparently launching into another narrative akin to the ones told earlier in the film by Robertson, stories designed to cement The Band's fit with American myth. But in Danko's demeanor and disposition, that sort of narrative can't take hold. As we emerge into the facility's recording

studio, his story about the building's past trails off, "You can't believe most of what you hear, but [inaudible]."

A struggle drives this scene. On the one hand, it seems designed, again, to affirm Robertson's argument by showing Danko as road-ravaged, a shell of the man who cowrote "This Wheel's on Fire" with Bob Dylan in a basement in pre-festival Woodstock. Danko isn't as articulate as Robertson, the segment seems meant to suggest. But there is a subversive eloquence to his inarticulateness in uttering, haltingly, with his back to us, "You can't believe most of what you hear, [mumble]," a statement whose form and content so deeply contrasts with Robertson's stories and discursive domination of the film. The bassist troubles that flow of chatter and continues to do so when Scorsese asks what he's going to do now that The Band has ceased to exist. Danko doesn't respond in words. Instead, sitting behind the mixing board, he cues up a recording of "Sip the Wine," a song from his forthcoming, eponymous, first foray into solo LPs, a song which, in its simple lyrics and bare-bones, repeated 1-4 chord pattern contrasts starkly with the formal complexity of a song like Mitchell's "Coyote." It's hard not to imagine that Scorsese and Robertson included Danko's song precisely because it sounds, in a manner sad and steeped in pathos, like a trashed, anemic version of a Band song. The camera focuses on Danko as he looks down at his lap, listening and, the implication seems to be, confronting the specter of having to learn how to live sitting still.

The salve to this scene may lie in the title track from *Hejira*, in which Mitchell counsels, "there's comfort in melancholy/when there's no need to explain," an observation made from a characteristically directionless, non-instrumental depiction of travel "in some vehicle." That is, what Danko needs at this moment is less talk, less badgering from the film's discursive authority, more succor drawn from the ways movement undermines explanation. He might also take some solace from "Refuge of the Road," with its imagery of "spring along the ditches," and "good times in the cities" circumventing the threat of a "thunderhead of judgment" she associates with "analyzing" and "her old ways."<sup>11</sup> In this fantasy, Mitchell proffers Danko something that he might not have been able to hear, but may have caught a glimpse of in Mitchell's hands—something that may well have served him better than Robertson's "thunderhead of judgment" that dictated the story of The Band, who broke

up at some point right around the taping of the film's interview segments, a year after the final concert performance. She offers access to a road outside of judgment, to a search for lost chords that is, as we've seen, a search for something one can't identify in advance.

Robertson wants to sign off on The Band—he wants to leave his sole signature on The Band's songs and on its story. In the story his film *wants* to tell, Danko's song "Sip the Wine" sounds so sad and desiccated because it's the detritus left after Robertson's sundering of the group. But Mitchell's disruption won't let this happen, won't succumb. "You just picked up a hitcher/A prisoner of the white lines on the freeway": the song and the album from which it comes are deeply drawn to the road as an inescapable place, an inescapable way of being—rather than a simple form of escape. Despite their eminent talents, Robertson and Scorsese seem unable to free themselves of another prison: the entitled Americanness (in Robertson's case, adopted) of believing one always has access to freedom, that one can always get away, escape, de-attach. Danko, staring a hole in his lap or watching Mitchell's fingers, embodies the spirit of Mitchell, though their relationship seems a sadly missed encounter. And yet, what at first seemed a merely halting inarticulacy becomes a deep will to attachment, a far more inviting engagement than just another story of roadkill.

## Notes

- 1 Mitchell wrote the song in a New York hotel room during the festival, having stayed in the city to avoid missing a scheduled appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*.
- 2 *Message of Love: The Isle of Wight Festival*, DVD, directed by Murray Lerner. 1996. Sony Music Video, 1997. As if infected by the problems of the festival, Lerner's film did not find adequate financial backing for release until a quarter of a century after it was shot.
- 3 *The Last Waltz*, dir. Martin Scorsese (1978), MGM DVD 2006. As for the gaps, the story the group tells makes remarkably little mention of their relationship with Bob Dylan, such as their work on his legendary 1966 "going electric" tour or the bare-bones Woodstock collaborations that later became known as *The Basement Tapes*.

- 4 At the live concert, Mitchell sang three additional songs, all from *Hejira*. The Robertson quote is from his memoir *Testimony* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2016), 482.
- 5 Joni Mitchell, “The Rolling Thunder Revue—Montreal Forum December 4, 1975,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgS-xfQbqQ> (accessed: May 15, 2017).
- 6 Elvis Presley died ten months after the concert, so this interview marks the distance from which (at least some of) these segments were filmed, even though the film implies that they were filmed backstage or around the time of the performance.
- 7 Mitchell, “Hejira,” *Hejira*.
- 8 Ron Rosenbaum, “The Best Joni Mitchell Song Ever,” *Slate.com*. [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_spectator/2007/12/the\\_best\\_joni\\_mitchell\\_song\\_ever.2.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_spectator/2007/12/the_best_joni_mitchell_song_ever.2.html) (accessed: May 14, 2017).
- 9 Mitchell, “Coyote,” *Hejira*.
- 10 Mitchell also sang backup on Neil Young’s performance of “Helpless” from offstage; in the film, she is presented in silhouette, behind a scrim. At the concert, she performed two other songs of her own, “Furry Sings the Blues” and “Shadows and Light,” and, alongside Young, sang backup on The Band’s “Acadian Driftwood.”
- 11 Mitchell, “Refuge of the Road,” *Hejira*.

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