6

Counterpoint and Embodied Expression in the Music of Joni Mitchell

This chapter focuses on Joni Mitchell's distinctive approach in singing and playing her instruments and, specifically, on her unique strategies in combining musical materials. I again invoke the idea of *gestural pairing* to explore how Mitchell leverages vocal and instrumental strategies to create a singular expressive subjectivity. Conceiving of *counterpoint* broadly as the combination of musical parts, this study of musical texture and embodiment in Mitchell's music reveals strategies in songwriting while providing a basis to better understand her unique approach to melody and harmony in relation to lyrics. Later in the chapter, I show how Mitchell's designs of layered contrapuntal texture provide an artistic foundation in her collaborations with jazz musicians and her songs with orchestral accompaniment. I further explore how gestural pairing relates directly to the expressive oppositions that animate narratives in her songs, dramatizing a tension between the artistic impulse to maintain independence, observing humanity from a distance, and the desire to surrender that independence to find human connection in love.

As a study of embodied musical expression, the aim is to explore how Mitchell communicates with the body in her songs. We cannot help but respond empathically as she expresses our common humanity through the body, moving in ways that have parallels in fundamental patterns of movement we all experience. But it is also through the body, in the ways she sings and plays instruments, that she expresses a unique subjectivity. It is this emergent expression I hope to illuminate in close readings of songs, showing how Mitchell, in her performative actions, embodies movement in songs that progresses from a more generic source domain of cultural rootedness toward a more individualized subjectivity: from familiar musical materials that are "close at hand" to new expression. In a 2013 interview Mitchell stated, "I'm fluid, you know . . .. Everything I am I am not."[1] I argue that the complex layering of musical materials with a multiplicity of implications is a natural impulse in her creativity. One dimension of this multiplicity is Mitchell's innovative use of "slash chords," in which a chord is superimposed over a bass note other than the indicated chord's root. I interrogate passages with slash chords in terms of gestural opposition, examining how independent layers in Mitchell's textures are situated as tactile physical

[1] Interview with Jian Ghomeshi, CBC News, *The National*, June 10, 2013.

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gesture but also situated culturally, shaping formal and rhetorical strategies that align with Mitchell's storytelling in her songs.

Our kinesthetic engagement with music enlists embodied knowledge: the ways we understand our own bodies in relation to the world. Musicians and listeners spatialize musical materials in relation to the human body, individualized and imperfect. Mitchell's personalized approach to songwriting and performance leverages her particular muscular abilities, which were attenuated as a result of contracting polio as a child. I argue that Mitchell radicalizes embodied musical expression by uplifting the individualized and imperfect performing body. What has been described as Mitchell's "crip virtuosity" in guitar playing (Jones 2019) leverages innovative guitar tunings in accommodating her muscular limitations. Mitchell has stated that she "had to simplify the shapes of the left hand," explaining that her left hand "is somewhat clumsy because of polio" (Monk 2012, 69). I propose that by extension, we can infer that in her piano technique as well, she may have sought to "simplify the shapes," with right-hand chords sometimes shifting over a left-hand part grounded in a single hand position. Mitchell's artistic approach to layered musical textures may have first developed as a strategy of adaptation. I explore how layered textures and superimposed musical gestures in Mitchell's music project a dynamic negotiation of mobility and immobility, creating a powerful expressive undercurrent that is evident whether she is playing piano, dulcimer, or guitar as she sings. Later in the chapter I examine how the social mediation of (dis)ability enlivens her collaborations with jazz musicians, her songs with orchestra, and her recent performances as a venerated musical elder.

Mitchell was diagnosed with polio in 1953 at age ten. The polio vaccine would not reach Canada until 1955. Mitchell and her friend Neil Young are among the survivors of the 1953 epidemic. Mitchell would spend Christmas at the polio ward in Saskatoon. She states, "I couldn't get out of bed. I was paralyzed. When they diagnosed it, they shipped me up to a polio colony, outside St. Paul's hospital in Saskatoon. The place was like a leper colony, designed to limit the spread of the harrowing disease" (Yaffe 2017, 19–20). I propose that the metaphor of paralysis is a source of productive tension in her music, connecting to broader expressions of otherness, isolation, and distancing objectivity. Importantly, Mitchell does not express this as an impediment to be overcome or concealed, but rather, as a marker of difference that is artistically positioned in transgressively resisting expected norms. Mitchell musicalizes social and physical discomfort that we might all identify with to some degree, artistically embracing that discomfort as a musical gesture of self-acceptance.

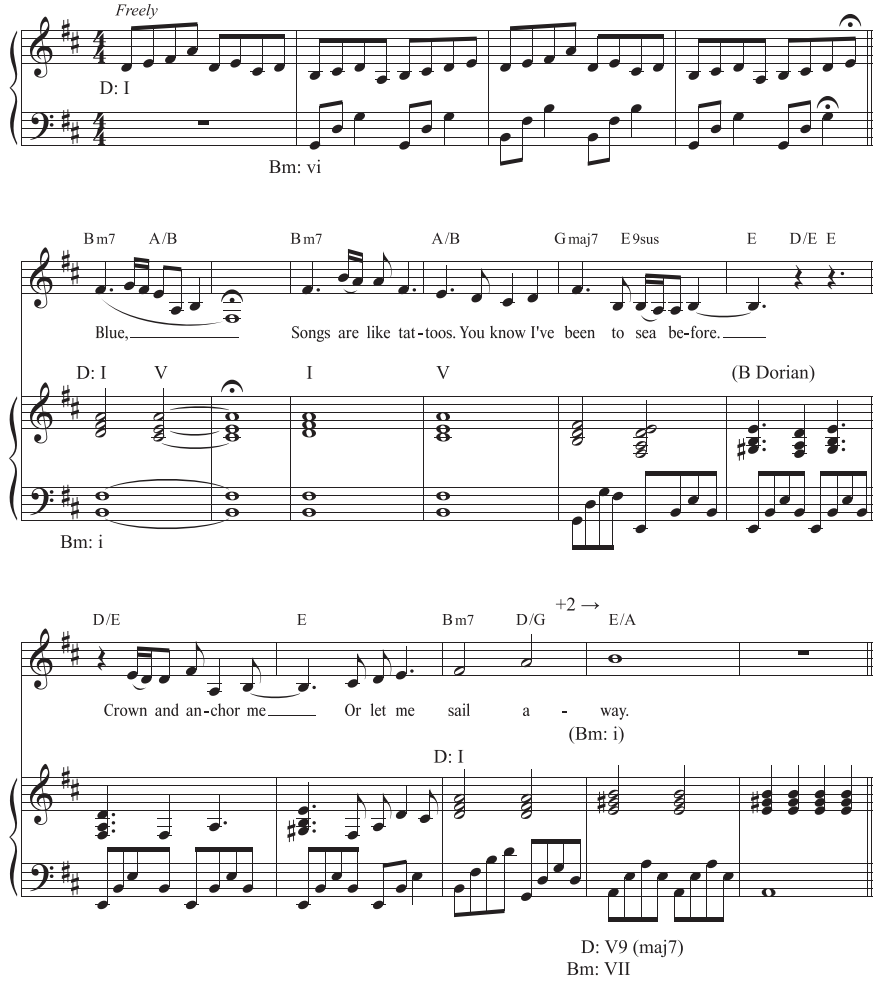
I explore how Mitchell highlights the expressive power of the singing body in narratives shaped through changes of persona and subject-position, in which a voice of enacted memory or dream is marked as out of time and out of body. This provides a means to articulate her recurring rhetorical scheme, of dramatically contrasting the allure of the internalized and independent world of the imaginative mind against a desire for human connection in the physical world. This dramatic opposition between "heart and mind" provides a site for creatively probing power relations as a female artist, as Mitchell engages with gendered tropes of identity, travel and mobility,

and artistic creation, notably in her songs with orchestra, in which the singer-pianist's interaction with the orchestra is mobilized to enact the evolving psychic state of the song's protagonist.

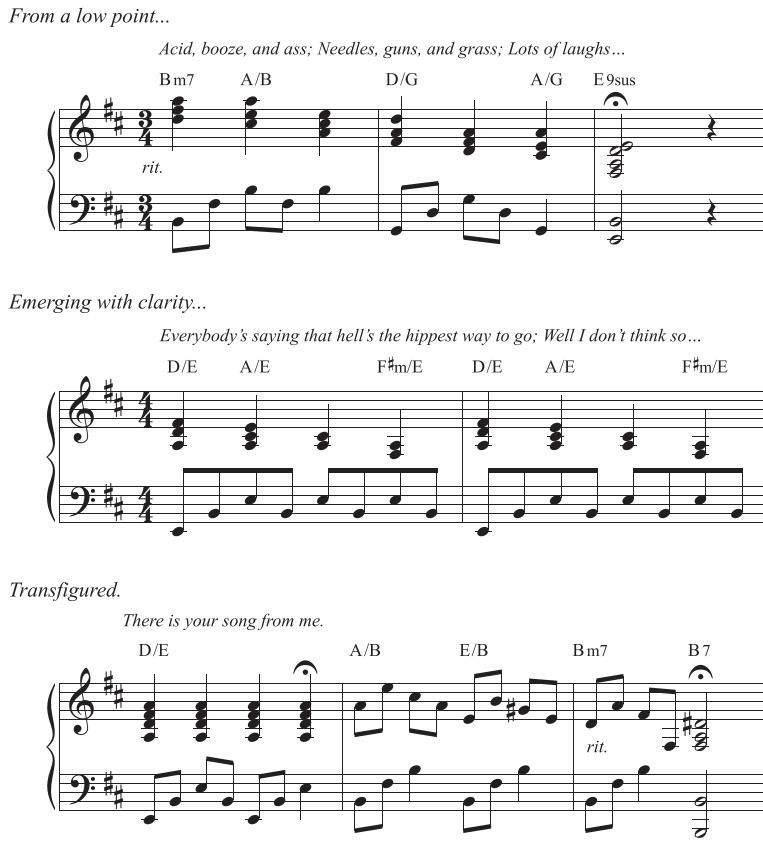
Gestural Layers in Joni Mitchell's Songs

The opening of Mitchell's song, "Blue," from the 1971 album that shares the same name, is diagrammed in Example 6.1a. The vocal melody follows a descending trajectory, like an elaborated sigh. Grounded in B minor pentatonic figuration, the melody turns to ascend up to B at the words "let me sail away." Superimposed references to B minor and D major are marked in the example. Harmonic complexities in the piano

Example 6.1a Joni Mitchell, "Blue," *Blue* (1971)



Example 6.1b Emergent narrative



part grow from fundamental idiomatic pianistic chord shapes that juxtapose the right hand irregularly against the left hand, one hand grounded and unchanging in its position while the other hand moves, shifting to follow the vocal melody. As Mitchell sings of having "been to sea before," a pastoral marker is introduced in the shifting parallel chords that create Dorian modal color.

Throughout this song, the shifting viewpoints of the protagonist are represented in the complex layering of right and left hand in the piano part. I am struck by the simplicity of the D major right-hand patterning. Like a simple piano etude at the beginning, it then takes the form of basic chord shapes that could be found in many classical pieces or pop songs. I associate the melodic piano patterning grounded on D and A with an implied agency in the music, a persona that on its own is simple and innocent, and yet tinged with sadness, as it is superimposed over the B minor grounding of the left hand. Stratification of right and left hand continues in a more tumultuous setting, as if at sea, with superimposed harmonic patterning in triple meter (see Example 6.1b). This leads to the emotional low point in the song,

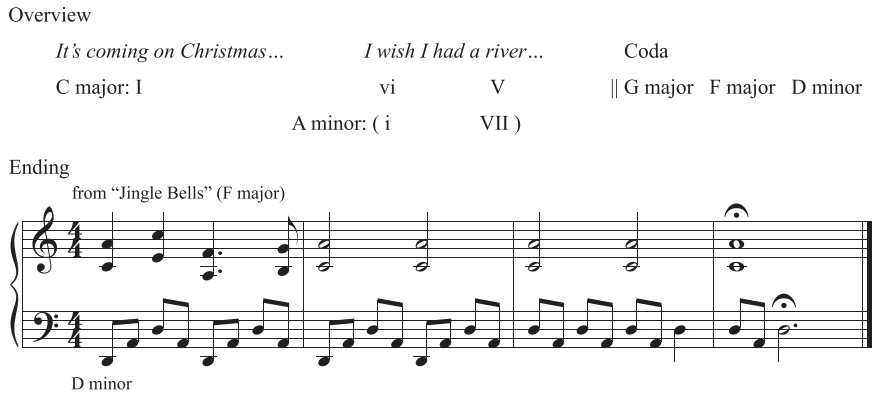
as Mitchell sings in her lowest register with audible glottal fry and irony: "Lots of laughs." Just when it seems the agency associated with the D major triad might be lost altogether, as if engulfed by chromaticism, it reemerges, simple again, but deepened with emergent expression by what has transpired.

The song's lyrics begin and end in a framing self-referential gesture, singing about song—at the beginning, "Blue, songs are like tattoos." As the protagonist navigates life and her feelings for the beloved, emphasis is placed on first-person vocal: "I don't think so. I'm going to take a look around." We can feel the protagonist weighing her choices, asserting her will. The right-hand figuration centered on the D major triad shadows the voice, often doubling the vocal melody while adding a parallel voice. At the end, the self-referential framing gesture returns. The song is objectified as an offering to the loved one: "There is your song from me." The piano figuration continues the melody while the singer is silent, projecting expression that is beyond words. Like a tattoo, the implied agency expressed through voice and piano has been etched by experience. This expressive shift is, I believe, symbolized in the final right-hand D major chord as it yields to the ironic sounding, bluesy B7 chord, with D shifted to a contradictory D♯.

The offering of the song to the beloved is, in itself, a gesture: a dramatized action in the fictionalized narrative of the song. The ending chord nicely punctuates musical oppositions in the layered texture throughout the song that seem to musically represent an emotional gulf that cannot be spanned. Through this gesture, the song attains depth as a lament of lost love, representing a protagonist who is unable offer herself to the loved one but instead offers her gift of song.

Another example that illustrates Mitchell's creativity in combining and layering familiar materials to create a unique subjectivity can be found in the ending of Mitchell's "River" (see Example 6.2). She borrows the Christmas song, "Jingle Bells," creating an ironic setting that depicts the protagonist's detached alienation and sadness. Unable to share in the joys of the Christmas season, she is filled with loss and feelings of

Example 6.2 Joni Mitchell, "River," *Blue* (1971)

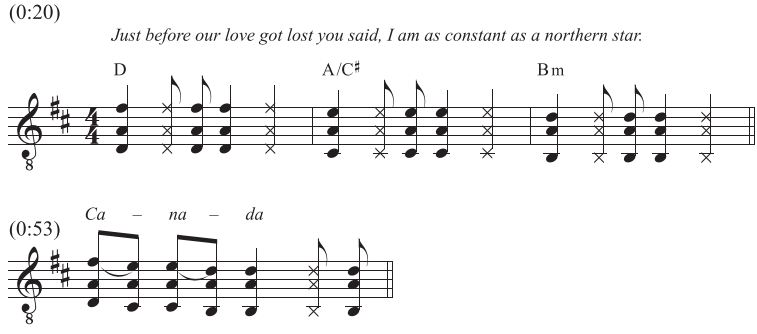


self-recrimination as she processes the ending of a relationship. As a detached observer, she wishes most for a river, frozen with winter cold, so that she might skate away on it. The last lonely vocal phrase drifts off without any resolution of tonic harmony. The final bass patterning on G–F–D forms an instance of the minor pentatonic trichord Mitchell often uses in structuring harmony. Here it has the effect of gradually directing the music further away from the C major tonal center. The Christmas melody in the right hand of the piano part is harmonically detached from the moving left-hand part, creating a tension of immobility superimposed against mobility, just as Mitchell's protagonist is emotionally detached from those celebrating Christmas. As Mitchell superimposes the Christmas melody over the moving open-fifth pedal harmonies in the left hand, we can sense the protagonist metaphorically skating away on a river of her interior thoughts. An added perspective on this song is gained if we remember the Christmas that Mitchell spent at the polio ward in Saskatoon, isolated from family and friends, eighteen years earlier. The image of "skating away" must have had significance for someone who once faced the very real possibility that she might never walk again.

The melancholy expression of "River" is dispelled in the next song on the *Blue* album, "A Case of You," which offers a glimpse into how Mitchell's strategic approach to counterpoint and musical texture also works in her songs with dulcimer. In the opening, high notes on the dulcimer form the basis for the vocal melody, to which Mitchell adds bluesy pentatonic embellishment (see Example 6.3). The lowest dulcimer notes form a parallel melody that shadows the vocal melody a tenth lower. The inner voice is a drone at the fifth that persists throughout the song. Finally, there is the slap of muted strings that provides a rhythmic backbeat. As in many of her songs, Mitchell creates her own rhythm section as she performs.

This opening gesture occurs in double time at the lyric, "Oh Canada" and again at the title line of the song, "A Case of You." A similar texture occurs in other Mitchell songs with dulcimer. In "All I Want," also from the *Blue* album, the lyrics, "I am on a lonely road and I am travelling," are metaphorically represented in moves up and down the dulcimer fretboard, which forms a kind of musical road, imbuing the vocal melody

Example 6.3 Joni Mitchell, "A Case of You." *Blue* (1971)



with an added tangibly material presence. Travel and life on the road, which has traditionally provided a narrative frame for describing male-gendered experience, is a central feature in Mitchell's later songs, as we will examine later in the chapter.

While it is possible to assign names to the chords that result in her combined parts, this alone would reveal little about the clear kinesthetic logic in Mitchell's singing and playing, as she applies a recurring textural strategy: maintaining a constant rhythmic groove on single or multiple pedal points while other instrumental voices track the vocal melody in parallel chord voicings, often introducing dissonances and harmonic ambiguities that contribute to the unique subjectivity in her music. To illustrate how this works in a song with guitar, I turn to "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire" from the 1972 album *For the Roses*.

Example 6.4a shows a vocal-guitar rendering for the first verse of the song. The special tuning of the guitar, with the lowest string on C, but all upper strings forming an open G chord, prepares the instrument for a complex juxtaposition of sounds that the song exploits. Mitchell has explained that her original approach to guitar chords came about in part as a strategy in coping with the attenuated muscularity she experienced as a result of contracting polio as a child:

> I craved chordal movement that I couldn't get out of standard tuning without an extremely articulate left hand, so, to compensate for it, I found the tunings were a godsend. Not only that, they made the guitar an unstable thing, an instrument of exploration.[2]

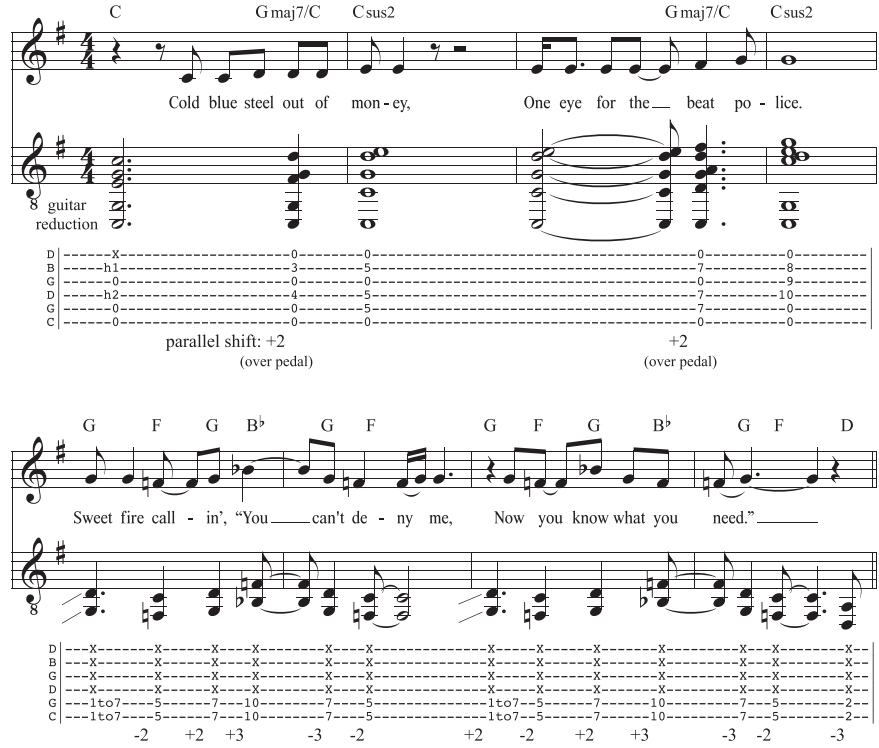
The guitar rendered "unstable" through experimental tunings accommodated Mitchell's personalized needs as a performer, allowing her to simplify fretboard chord shapes, while opening new creative possibilities for harmony and texture. As a singer-guitarist, she developed an approach in closely supporting her voice through layered textures analogous to those she created at the piano. In this song, as shown in Example 6.4a, moving voices on the guitar follow a clear trajectory up the neck of the guitar that shadows the vocal melody in the verse, against dual drones that sound a low C together with a D a ninth higher. In the first four bars, the left arm is literally engaged in following the melodic ascent, with parallel moves up the fretboard forming different voicings of the subdominant on C with the added D open string. Lyrics in the first two lines of verses depict images of a cold urban world and the search for an addict's fix.

There is an abrupt change in the next four bars as the persona of "Lady Release" calls to the protagonist. This is accompanied with the ominous sound of low guitar strings that invoke complex cultural associations of guitar blues music and the open fifths of rock "power chords." As the focus shifts from higher sounds on the guitar to the lowest two strings, the vocal melody shifts as well; having doubled the top notes

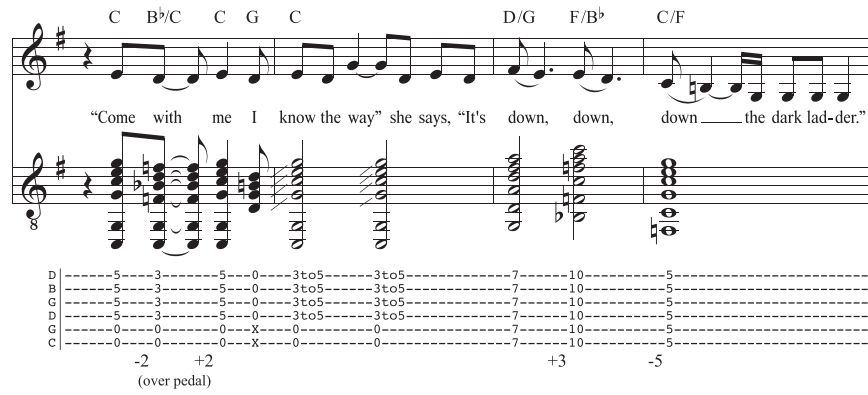
[2] Mitchell quoted in an essay by William Ruhlman, "From Blue to Indigo," *Goldmine* magazine, February 17, 1995. Accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=115. For more on Mitchell and other musicians who grappled with polio, including Neil Young and Judy Collins, see McKay (2009).

Example 6.4 Joni Mitchell, "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire," *For the Roses* (1972)

a. Verse (0:09)



b. Chorus (0:44)



in guitar voicings in the first two lines of the verse, the vocal melody now shadows the lowest string in the guitar riff. The voice and guitar here are in tandem, essentially following the same riff that is recalled from the introduction. Parallel sliding moves on the lowest two guitar strings are centered on G, while the higher strings further activate harmony on G with a percussive offbeat rhythm. The effect is not so much

vocal melody with accompaniment, but rather the enactment of a single vocal-guitar persona associated with the seductive power of "Lady Release."

This dual opposition, summarized in Table 6.1, continues throughout the song, with a dark and dangerous real world depicted with subdominant harmony grounded on the open sound of the lowest guitar string tuned to C, placed in contrast against the calling seduction of Lady Release, marked by the guitarist's physical release in tension with unfretted sounds of the upper strings in G major tuning. In this way, the special tuning of the guitar, with oppositions on C and G, provides for the musical enactment of the song's drama. Available video recordings of Mitchell's live performances of the song clearly show the contrasts in her grasped fretboard shapes and sliding shifts up and down the guitar fretboard, with the sliding guitar riff on low strings in the introduction, fretted higher strings for the moves up the fretboard in the first four bars of the verse, and return to the low strings for the second four bars.

The chorus features guitar barre chords played by fretting with a single finger, almost in the manner of slide guitar playing, which can also be observed in Mitchell's live performances (see Example 6.4b). The voice and guitar move in tandem at the words, "Come with me, I know the way." The only point where the voice and guitar separate into clearly differentiated vocal melody and guitar chords is in the chorus on the lyric, "Down, down, down, the dark ladder." Here, barre chords fretted with one finger allow the sonic potential of the altered guitar tuning to be fully realized, in parallel major ninth chords, while the vocal line descends—a clear example of Mitchell's ability to "simplify the shapes" to great effect. These guitar chords, built on G, B♭, and F form a motivic variation of the verse riff, G–F–G–B♭. Variants of this basic minor pentatonic figure recur in many of Mitchell's songs, providing one of the ways that subtle references to rock and blues styles enter into her individualized sound world. Here it forms the emotional crux in the song, expressing a descending sigh gesture of resignation that represents the feeling of release sought in the addict's fix.

In each of the songs discussed, the singing and instrumental playing are closely aligned, as instrumental lines moving in parallel with the vocal line unite in bringing out expressive dimensions of both voice and instrument. Through this gestural pairing, vocal melody is grounded in the instrument's gestural logic. Mitchell's vocal

Table 6.1 "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire." Dual oppositions

"Cold Blue Steel"	"Sweet Fire"
Outward subjectivity	Interiority
The real world ("concrete concentration camp")	"Shadow of Lady Release"
Rhythmic groove	Sensuality
Vocal follows highest note in guitar voicings	Vocal follows lowest note in guitar riff
Centered on C (lowest guitar string)	Centered on G (upper guitar strings)
Subdominant	Tonic
Drones on low C and high D	Open fifth "power chords"

melody has an enhanced material presence because it is coordinated with instrumental voice leading moves that traverse clearly articulated paths in fretboard and keyboard space. Additionally, droning pedal points widen the sonic dimensions of harmony and melody while rhythmic attacks enliven the rhythm. If there is a "basic gesture" in Mitchell's guitar work it is in her energetic and confident strumming technique, which she mobilizes in sounding personalized and sonically rich chords through use of innovative alternate guitar tunings. Pentatonic-based guitar moves on lower strings resembling blues-rock power chords and percussive muted rhythmic comping point to legacies of folk, blues, and rock playing, while her extended chords enabled through alternate tunings create allusions to jazz harmony that provide a focal point for musical collaboration and interaction on Mitchell's later albums.

Dreams and False Alarms: Gestural Oppositions in Joni Mitchell's Late Music

The *Court and Spark* album (1974) marks a turning point in Mitchell's creativity, as she forms new collaborations with jazz fusion instrumentalists. Enlarging the dramatic range and stylistic scope of her music in these songs, her vocal personae navigate harmonically rich musical environments as she engages with the ensemble. After recording with Tom Scott and members of the L.A. Express on *Court and Spark*, Mitchell would continue to collaborate with jazz fusion artists including Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius, Herbie Hancock, and Charles Mingus.

Larry Carlton, guitarist with the Crusaders and a prolific session player that had recently joined L.A. Express, comments on the process when he first entered the studio to develop arrangements together with Tom Scott. A central issue presenting both a challenge and opportunity was Mitchell's innovative guitar voicings, with chords and added tones superimposed one over another: "Humbly, I could hear the chord changes. I didn't have to watch her fingers. None of us were struggling harmonically to figure out what to do against her great chords" (Yaffe 2017, 175). This statement highlights the multivalent qualities of Mitchell's gestural approach. The chords Carlton refers to were grounded in Mitchell's embodied knowledge of the guitar, expanded and personalized through her innovative implementation of alternate guitar tunings. But for Carlton and Scott, the aural and technical point of reference was the synergetic connection these chords have to jazz practice. Carlton continues, "Joni would instinctively hear those kinds of sounds. I would just hear it and write down the chord chart. I remember her putting a cassette on and Tom Scott and I would grab pencils and pieces of paper, writing down chords" (Yaffe 2017, 175). Carlton's remark about "putting a cassette on," using Mitchell's demo tape to devise an arrangement, is also telling. Throughout Mitchell's collaborations with jazz musicians and also her songs with orchestra, a recurring collaborative strategy was to begin with Mitchell's recorded improvisation and then develop added parts to complement her singing and playing. In this respect, Mitchell's music both with jazz performers and with orchestra can be appreciated as an artistic extension of her embodied knowledge

communicated through her voice and her guitar and piano work. This also highlights Mitchell's songs as works of mediated collaboration, since improvisation, arranging, and editing in the studio were integral in the creative process.

"Help Me" from the *Court and Spark* album was Mitchell's most commercially successful single and only Top 10 hit. Her guitar work forms a foundation for the song that aligns embodied movement common to folk, blues, and rock guitar playing with the sophisticated harmonic fabric and ensemble interaction of jazz fusion music. Mitchell's vocal and guitar performance in "Help Me" is augmented through group interaction and improvisation that features Larry Carlton's solo guitar work heard in dialogue with Joe Sample's electric piano playing, punctuated with flute/woodwind chords and saxophone riffs. Group interaction is enhanced through a spatial dimension in the studio recording, with electric piano panned left, lead guitar panned right, and Mitchell's guitar and vocal centered in the mix.

Mitchell's lively rhythm guitar work in "Help Me" uses an instrument tuned to a major seventh chord.[3] The recurring chord change shown with brackets in Example 6.5 is a basic embellishing move that derives from blues-rock shuffle guitar playing, with one finger activating a shift from fifth to the neighboring sixth over the bass. Here the guitar tuning provides for barre chords with sevenths and thirteenths activated with one or two fingers on the fretboard as well as ringing open strings for the Asus2 chord that is important in the intro, verse, and instrumental interlude. Mitchell's guitar tuning infuses the referential open-string "home" sonority with a bright, jazz-inflected quality. One might imagine that extended chords personalized with so much color might have to be "earned" through more performative work in grasping the chord shape on fretboard. To hear chords resounding so freely, as sonorities made "natural" to the instrument, feels like a sonic gift. This freedom of guitaristic sound—bright, personalized, and seemingly effortless—maps directly onto the theme of freedom in the lyrics as well as a stylized coolness of expression in the music.

The song begins with a rhythmic groove centered on A, colored with added "sus2" dissonance.[4] As the verse begins (Example 6.5a), the rhythm guitar groove shifts down the fretboard in increments of two frets, from chords on A to G and then to F, as if depicting the "fallin' " that is enacted with multitracked descending vocal parts. The circularity of love's predicament is nicely represented in the cyclical chord patterning that shifts down and then back toward the Asus2 sonority, as if the protagonist is locked in a recurring pattern.

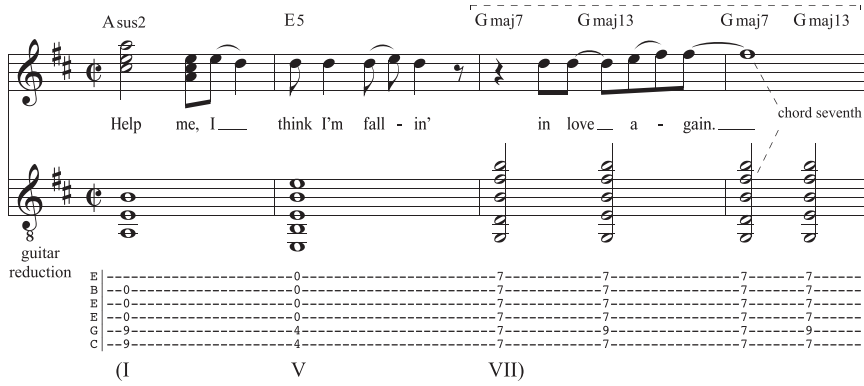
Gestural pairing between Mitchell's voice and guitar is very clear, as the vocal melody closely follows voicings in her guitar part, often vocalizing the seventh or the thirteenth of sounding guitar chords. In this way, Mitchell's guitar work serves to

[3] For this study I consulted the printed volume with guitar transcriptions by Joel Bernstein, acknowledged by Mitchell as a guitarist-technician that tuned her instruments for live performance (Mitchell 2013), and also video of Mitchell's 1974 live performance in London, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTT54TEbolE.

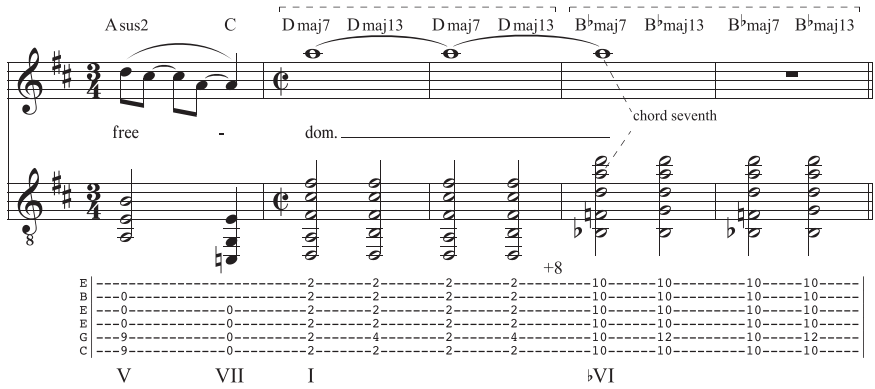
[4] The sus2 chord is favored by Mitchell in both her guitar and piano work. She recalls discussing "sus chords" and added-note chords with Wayne Shorter, explaining her conception of chords with added second or suspended fourth as powerful markers of musical intention intended to provoke the imagination, calling them "chords of inquiry" (Marom 2014, 74–75).

Example 6.5 Joni Mitchell, "Help Me," *Court and Spark* (1974)

a. Verse (0:05)



b. "Freedom" interlude (0:30)



c. Gestural Trajectory

Intro	Rhythmic groove establishes the Asus2 as a referential sonority.	
Verse	Shifts by 2 frets, from A, to G, to F	*Help me, I think I'm fallin'*
Interlude	Tonic on D emerges. Chromatic submediant and mediant harmonies	*Freedom*
Bridge	Move to subdominant on G. Invocation of memory	*Didn't it feel good?*
Coda	Shifts by 3 frets on D – F (tonic – chromatic mediant)	

amplify dimensions of her enacted vocal persona. The lyrics mobilize Mitchell's recurring narrative framework in exploring tensions between the conflicting impulses toward human intimacy and independence, here expressed as the enjoyment of romance positioned in opposition to a fear of being hurt. The verse depicts apprehension and even a bit of stylized panic in friction with the excitement and pleasure of new love. The impulse toward freedom wins out, with a dramatic upward melodic

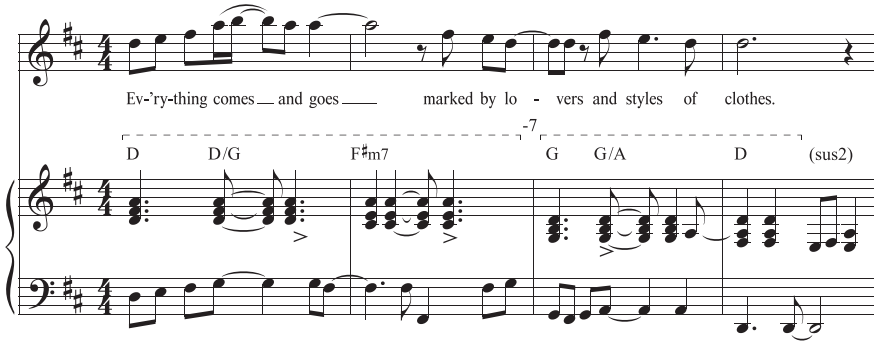
sweep on the word "freedom," as the Asus2 chord attains dominant function. Here tonic harmony on D is established for the first time, as a syncopated metrical change further marks a formal and rhetorical shift in the song (see Example 6.5b).

Mitchell mobilizes the Asus2 chord in two progressions with root movement on a trichord common to pentatonic-based rock harmony, with A–E–G later pivoting to A–C–D, as she elaborates those basic patterns with more dense and chromatic harmonic movement. The elevation of personal freedom in the lyrics correlates with shifts to extended chords on the chromatic submediant and mediant, as if to represent an enactment of musical freedom outside the containment of diatonic harmonies. This illustrates how embodied musical gestures can operate at hierarchical levels. As noted previously, chord root movement on a pentatonic trichord serves in organizing a basic level of harmony and instrumental tactile space in Mitchell's songs, providing a generic foundation for her richly layered and personalized musical textures.

There is a return to the recurring barre chord guitar groove on G, the subdominant, in a bridge that shifts focus to an invocation of memory, distancing the intimate liaison as a retelling of past events ("Didn't it feel good?"). There is a touch of ironic expression here. While the song has a cool and upbeat feeling throughout, this masks a potentially darker emotional quality of detachment, representing partners who enjoy love's flirtations but only at a protective emotional distance. This uneasy balance between sensuality and guarded detachment persists without resolution into the ending coda, with the barre chord guitar groove oscillating between tonic on D and chromatic mediant on F.

Court and Spark further marks a turning point as the first of Mitchell's albums with a song conceived as a large-scale work with orchestra. Mitchell and Tom Scott would win the Grammy award for Best Arrangement Accompanying a Vocalist for "Down to You" in 1975. Mitchell's vocal and piano work in the song is augmented with orchestra as well as her cadre of L.A. Express players. The song is a reflection on a one-night stand, and more broadly, about change, disappointment and recovery, and ways that life's experiences challenge one's convictions. After a piano introduction, which previews the initial ascent of the vocal melody in left hand (0:14), the verse begins (0:33) with a texture in which the piano left hand doubles the vocal melody, supporting the voice while leaving the harmonic fabric restless and unsettled, like the psychic state of the protagonist (see Example 6.6).

Example 6.6 Joni Mitchell, "Down to You," *Court and Spark* (1974)



The example also illustrates how Mitchell's layered approach to harmonic elaboration propels motion while shaping larger gestures. The right hand is a nearly exact two-measure sequence of a very basic pianistic move, with a parallel shift down a perfect fifth, as shown with brackets. If the right hand were heard alone, it would simply articulate four chords, I–V–IV–I, mobilizing a simple hand position that beginning pianists learn. This simplicity in the right hand is important in suggesting direct and authentic pianistic expression, perhaps also communicating a quality of innocence and vulnerability. But combined with the left hand, the piano part is enlivened and personalized with harmonic movement implying seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords. In addition, the gestural pairing of the piano bass melody with the voice seems to enlarge the dramatic enactment of the vocal persona, as if to suggest that the vocal melody and the bass together represent a singular agency moving through the harmonies.

The song is principally in D major, but stepwise harmonic shifts are important, as the intro and coda center on E and an orchestral interlude in the middle shifts down to C. These key changes can be understood as larger moves reflecting Mitchell's keyboard work, with neighboring chord patterning in one hand often shifting by step against a stationary bass or chord. After the first verse, there is a change in personic environment as the protagonist ventures out into a world of urban nightlife, signaled with a modal shift on D minor (1:20). Here, keyboardist Joe Sample adds a bit of funky clavinet to signify the protagonist's visit to the "pickup station." The resulting liaison leaves her with a feeling of emptiness the next morning. A harmonizing chorus of vocal parts multitracked by Mitchell cries out "Love is Gone," signaling an emotional low point (2:18). But immediately after this, a bassoon solo enters on the ending vocal note of C♮, as if continuing the vocal melody, initiating an upward turn in melodic motion that will build in the orchestral texture (2:33). An orchestral-piano interlude seems to enact the protagonist's psychic transformation as it moves through key areas of C and G, with shifting chords heard over pedal points. A passage for full orchestra and piano in C major with triplets (2:58) signals hopeful expression.

After a transition featuring solo instruments in turn—harp, horn, and flute (4:06), then oboe and clarinet (4:21)—there is a return for the final verse (4:37). Strings join in with the piano accompaniment, enhancing an implication that the starting lyric, "Everything comes and goes," may be more positive—that life's challenges and dark times will pass. The refrain line, "down to you" takes on new meaning as it recurs in changing musical contexts. At first, there is implication that the protagonist is struggling and searching, but by the end, she expresses an emerging confidence and self-actualization. The song uses second-person narrative throughout, as if inviting the listener to imagine the protagonist's experiences as their own.[5] At the end, this takes the form of a subject-position shift into that of the *guide persona*. As Mitchell's protagonist seems to directly address the listener, to offer *us* comfort in our experienced aloneness,

[5] Lloyd Whitesell discusses a quality of immediacy found in Mitchell's songs that use second-person subject, in which the protagonist speaks of herself as "you" rather than "I," citing Leonard Cohen's song, "Suzanne" (1967) as a precedent ("Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river"). He describes the unique mirroring or doubling effect this creates, providing access the speaker's inner thoughts, while at the same time, "by using the typically outward-directed second person, the songwriter makes it easier for the listener to identify with her subjective experience and enter into that psychically enclosed space of reflection" (2008, 52–53).

the words seem to acquire deeper philosophical meaning. Ultimately, we make decisions and experience change inwardly, within consciousness, and in this sense, we are each existentially alone. Mitchell's song is a wake-up call, a challenge to take personal responsibility in navigating life: "You can crawl. You can fly, too. It's down to you."

Where in the fictionalized world of the song is the vocalized protagonist? At the beginning of the song, she is immersed in her own thoughts, pondering how things once "held high" become changed or lost over time, "as the days come down to you." She is, in a sense, stepping out of time to comment on time itself. There is then a rhetorical shift as she goes "down to the pickup station." This world has its own temporality. We hear the funky clavinet at the imagined nightclub, and we learn how she feels about her encounter the next morning. Then in the final verse we sense, along within her newfound clarity, an increased quality of physicality in inhabiting the present moment, as the vocalized protagonist seems to speak directly to us: "It's down to you." We will later see how in "Paprika Plains," as in "Down to You," Mitchell uses the orchestra to help illuminate her narrative in moving through changes in imagined time, space, and consciousness. At a broad level, we might regard this as a kind of gestural pairing, in which the orchestra helps in enacting the emerging self-actualization of the protagonist.

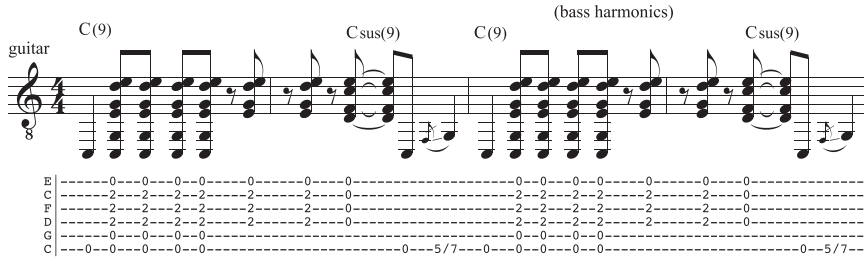
On the *Hejira* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* albums, Mitchell develops increasingly dramatic applications of gestural pairing to enact gendered personic relationships, creating virtual worlds for her travel narratives of life on the road. The *Hejira* album is unified through an overall theme of travel. Mitchell states that she wrote the songs during and after three journeys she took in late 1975 and the first half of 1976. Throughout the album, travel correlates with musical mobilities, as imaginary roads or perhaps roads remembered from personal journeys provide a rich source of metaphor that may correlate with musical pathways, trajectories, and destinations. Road narratives, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), had traditionally been the purview of men. The protagonists in Mitchell's music of the road are therefore doubly removed as outsiders, as strangers in a strange land and as women. We will explore how Mitchell appropriates the trope of masculine freedom and adventure on the road and makes it her own, examining the first two songs from *Hejira*, "Coyote" and "Amelia," and also Mitchell's most ambitious composition with orchestra, "Paprika Plains," which forms Side 2 of her 1977 double album, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*.

"Coyote" leverages a strategic troping of blues-rock and jazz elements. The song employs a very economical chord progression, with chromatic mediant E♭ leading to dominant and tonic, and a change to the subdominant as the protagonist fills in details of her story (see Example 6.7). With Mitchell's guitar tuned to a C major triad with added ninth and eleventh, fretboard hand shapes common to blues and rock are mobilized to sound extended ninth and thirteenth chords that are often fretted with one finger, as shown in Example 6.7a. A bright chorusing guitar tone further enlivens the sound.[6]

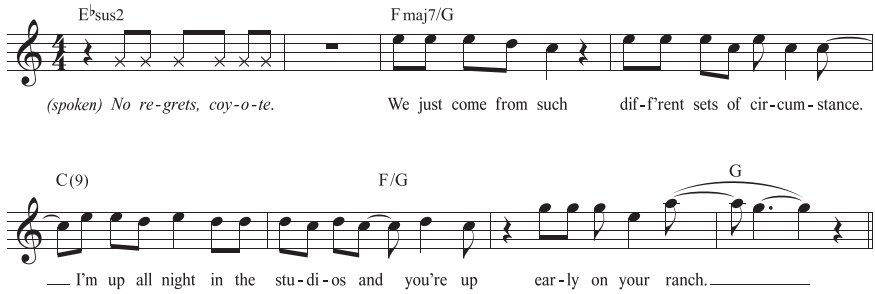
[6] There are video performances of "Coyote" available that display Mitchell's contrasting vocal and guitar work in different settings, including a three-guitar 1976 performance with members of The Band that can be seen in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, the 1979 *Shadows and Light* live version with Jaco Pastorius, and an intimate performance with Bob Dylan from Scorsese's semifictional documentary of Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Review* tour released in 2019. Mitchell has commented that her experiences in travelling with the 1975–76 Rolling Thunder tour inspired some of the travel narratives on the *Hejira* album.

Example 6.7 Joni Mitchell, "Coyote," *Hejira* (1976)

a. Intro



b. Verse



c. Irregular 14-measure phrase rhythm in the verse

No regrets, coyote…	4+4	♭III–V–I–V
You'll be brushing out a brood mare's tail…	4+2	IV–I
There's no comprehending…	4+4	♭III–V–I–V
And still feel related…	4+2	IV–I
Racing away. You just picked up a hitcher…	2+4	♭III–V (Last time extended: +6 measures)
On the freeway.	4+4	I

Hejira would be the first of four albums Mitchell would record with bassist Jaco Pastorius. The unique agential qualities projected through his distinctive fretless electric bass playing create powerful contrasts against Mitchell's vocal and guitar work that contribute to gendered implications of virtual agency in the music. In "Coyote," the bass has a multidimensional presence that at times dominates the texture, as Pastorius plays both low-end bass riffs and high harmonic chords. His bass harmonics are often voiced in fourths, as he touches multiple strings on a single fret, resulting in added layers of harmony that dynamically interact with Mitchell's guitar work. Pastorius multitracked the low and high bass parts for the studio album, paralleling Mitchell's practice of often overdubbing her vocals, but the live 1979 performance of "Coyote" for the *Shadows and Light* album shows that Pastorius was also adept in creating his contrapuntal and multidimensional bass work in live performance.

The powerful gestural pairing projected by Mitchell and Pastorius parallels the binary opposition of personae represented in the lyrics, as the song's female protagonist encounters a male animal that is both attractive and dangerous, a "coyote." In this way, gestural pairing seems to attain gendered qualities, so that the fretless bass sonority seems to express a male-gendered counterpart to Mitchell's presence, perhaps even implying a musical personification of the fictional coyote figure. The musical social interaction between Mitchell and Pastorius even expresses a *tactile* intimacy through the sensuality and delicacy of the guitar and bass work, with both instruments further enlivened with pulsating chorus effect.[7] At the same time, it manifests a jazz aesthetic of individual expression, as the larger-than-life musical personae of Mitchell and Pastorius seem to move freely through the song, sharing the virtual musical space while following highly individualized independent trajectories. This, too, seems to map onto the song's fictional characters, as they enjoy their romantic attraction while maintaining a degree of guarded independence.

As a road song of travel, "Coyote" describes a quality of shared intimacy among passing strangers. Mitchell enacts a protagonist describing her experience with cool detachment, telling her story through a vocal patter of dramatized rhythmic speaking (see Example 6.7b). As diagrammed in Example 6.7c, the song has an irregular fourteen-measure phrase structure, with Mitchell's conversational lyrics extending across six- and eight-bar units. This irregularity in phrase rhythm, with potential eight-bar units compressed to six, enacts a feeling of continuous stream-of-consciousness storytelling.

Traveling freely on her own, Mitchell's protagonist is like a detached observer, watching and narrating her own actions in a romantic encounter that might threaten to undermine her cool independence. At the end of the verse, there is a change in persona subject position, as the protagonist directly addresses her "coyote": "You just picked up a hitcher, a prisoner of the white lines on the freeway." This rhetorical shift implies a reversal in the gendered balance of power: perhaps it is she that is the more dangerous one in the encounter—a captive already seduced by the addictive allure of the road. This change in the narrative is underscored with a change in vocal quality, as the conversational mode of the vocal shifts to more melodically stable and sustained singing in Mitchell's high range, which is further dramatized and elongated on a dominant thirteenth chord the final time through the verse structure. It is a gesture of resignation tinged with irony, as she accepts her fate to remain a prisoner of the road, at least for now.

The second song on *Hejira* is "Amelia," a tribute to the pioneer aviator Amelia Earhart, in which Mitchell self-referentially comments on her own detachment as an artist/traveler through the metaphorical lens of Earhart's intrepid flights.[8] The song

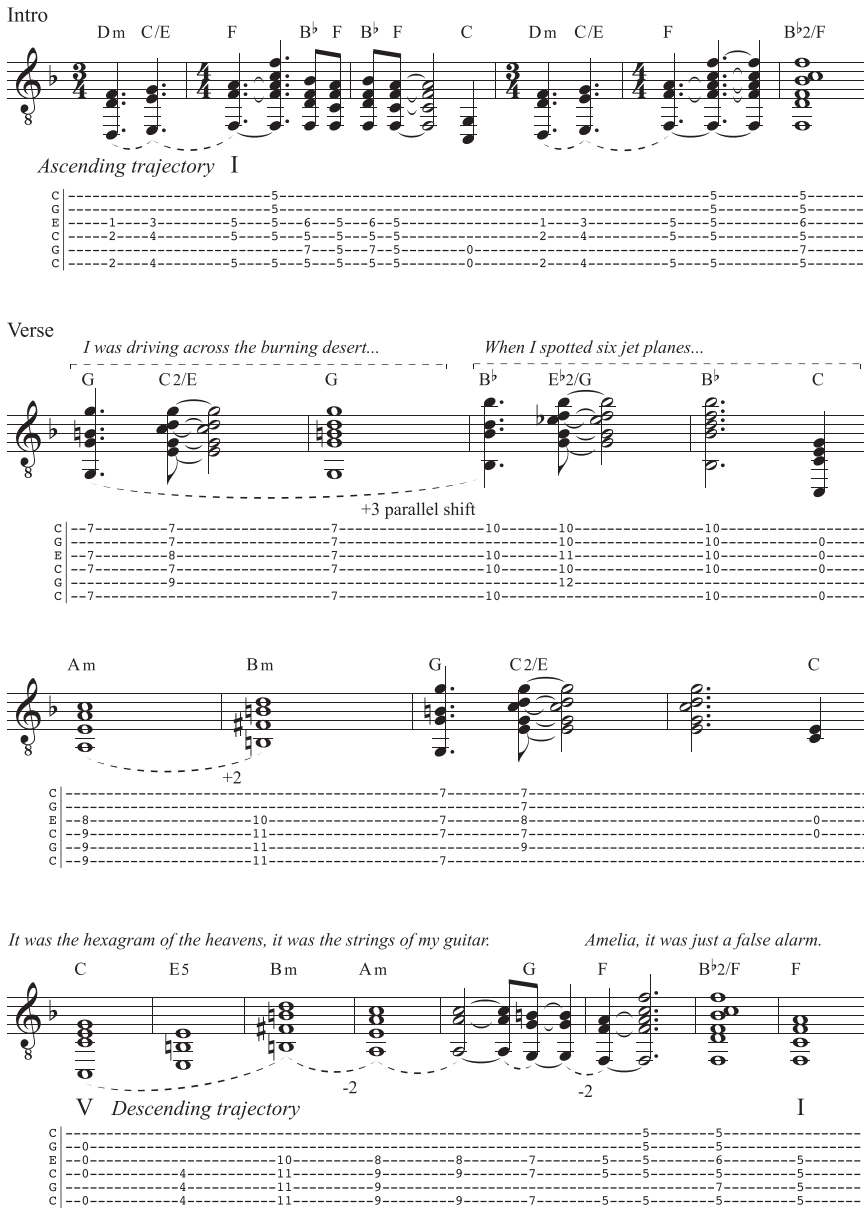
[7] A chorus effect is produced through an audio process in which a sound is re-sampled with a slight change in pitch just milliseconds after the initial note is played. These sounds, vibrating slightly out of sync with one another, create a textured effect simulating a "chorus" of instruments. According to Mitchell, Pastorius started using an amp with on-board chorus effect after hearing Mitchell's setup with the Roland Jazz Chorus amplifier, invented in 1975, a year before *Hejira's* release. (Interview in *Musician Magazine*, December 1987, accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1756.)

[8] Amelia Earhart was the first female aviator to complete a nonstop solo flight cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1932. It is thought that she died in the Pacific in 1937 while attempting a circumnavigational flight around the globe.

also appears in a live version with Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius on *Shadows and Light* (1980) and in a version with orchestra on the *Travelogue* album (2002).

Phrase rhythms are vividly underscored with guitar trajectories and harmonic shifts with audible fretboard slides that depict the narrative of striving higher ("in clouds at icy altitudes") and the resignation of falling back to Earth. Mitchell directly acknowledges the guitar as a powerful metaphor in the opening (see Example 6.8).

Example 6.8 Joni Mitchell, "Amelia," *Hejira* (1976). Guitar reduction



An image of the vapor trails from six jet planes, seen while driving across the desert, provides for an imagined association between Earhart in flight and Mitchell with her guitar: "It was the hexagram of the heavens, It was the strings of my guitar." Mitchell states that this idea came to her during her own journey traveling across the Arizona desert: "I was driving, I did look up and see six jet trails and they did remind me of the strings of my guitar—and they got me to thinking about Amelia Earhart."[9] The vast openness of geographical space and lofty altitude is further depicted sonically through Larry Carlton's atmospheric guitar playing, with harmonics and pitch bends employing slide and volume pedal in a manner that could be mistaken for a pedal steel guitar. This is heard, panned left in the mix, in dialogue with a jazz-inflected vibraphone part, panned right, played by Victor Feldman.

The gestural trajectory of Mitchell's guitar work is organized through linear motion (marked with dotted lines in Example 6.8) that exploits the open-C tuning, ascending through movement on D, E, and tonic F in the intro. Throughout the song, chords are elaborated with an embellishing subdominant move requiring minimal motion with two fingers. With lateral motion that literally ascends up the fretboard, the embellishing subdominant move happens at fret 5 in the intro (on F) and again in the verse at fret 7 (on G), then shifting up three frets to fret 10 to articulate a chromatic mediant relationship (G to B♭). After completing an ascent to the dominant through chords built on A, B, and C, the second half of the verse articulates a linear stepwise move downward, as if metaphorically returning to Earth, through chords built on C, B, A, G, and F.

The recurring refrain articulates a rhetorical shift as Mitchell's protagonist directly addresses the imagined aviator: "Amelia, it was just a false alarm," elaborating the tonic with an embellishing subdominant chord that conveys a quality of resignation. This expresses Mitchell's recurring theme of freedom and independence positioned in opposition to a relationship that could threaten that independence. Mitchell's protagonist is lamenting the lost love of a man after having "crashed into his arms." But ironically, her road traveling away from love is both "cursed and charmed." As Mitchell's enacted protagonist is determined to navigate life independently, the failed relationship is actually a *false* alarm, in the sense that the prospect of knowing true love and relinquishing one's independence might be truly terrifying.

In enacting a poignant eulogy on the loss of Amelia Earhart during her pioneering flight around the globe, the song projects an expressive arc that leads to an emerging transcendence. Mitchell's "Amelia" is a gendered narrative of empowerment in championing a woman's impulse to live adventurously and independently, inverting the limiting social norms that have privileged such exploits as the purview of men. This transcendent expression in the song is especially powerful in the 2002 version of the song on the Grammy-winning *Travelogue* album, with expansive orchestral arrangement by Vince Mendoza.[10] Mitchell's vocal with orchestral setting expands the range

[9] Joni Mitchell interview with Doug Fischer, *Ottawa Citizen*, October 8, 2006, accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1459.

[10] Vince Mendoza received two Grammy awards for Best Arrangement, Instrumental and Vocals, for his work on Joni Mitchell albums, for the 2000 orchestral version of "Both Sides Now" and for the 2004 version of "Woodstock" on Mitchell's *Travelogue* album.

of expression to a more mythical dimension, dramatizing Earhart's pioneering flight as a metaphor for human striving and, specifically, a gendered subjectivity valorizing strong women with a singular vision to strive for that which might be out of reach. It is an ode to the power of imagination in striving for a lofty goal and an acknowledgment of the great sacrifices one may make to pursue that goal.

A Canadian Pastorale: "Paprika Plains"

Mitchell's most ambitious song with orchestra, "Paprika Plains," was created during a period of recovery. She states:

> What happened there was I got sick again and I spent a year in bed—a couple of months in hospitals and then in bed. And one day I got up and then I went to my piano and I sat down and I could not hit a wrong chord. I was like a savant. So I called up dear Henry, who was my engineer and I said, 'Henry, I don't know what's happening but I'm an idiot savant. I can't hit a wrong chord. We've got to go into the studio.'[11]

Describing her creative ability after experiencing illness as that of an "idiot savant," we again see Mitchell self-identifying through her creativity and impairment, challenging traditional notions of the idealized, able-bodied body. The resulting two-hour piano improvisation would be edited at the Hollywood A&M studios with producer-engineer Henry Lewy to form the piano part in a sixteen-minute work occupying a full side of the double album, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. This burst of creativity was complemented with copious lyrics, some not making it into the recorded song, that are nonetheless included in the album's liner notes. The orchestral part arranged by Michael Gibbs would be added in New York after Mitchell's piano work. The jazz combo section emerging at the end of the song was recorded with drummer John Guerin, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and bassist Jaco Pastorius in London.[12] Mitchell comments, "We went to England to put Jaco and Wayne on the tag which was spectacular. That's the first time I played with Wayne. We overdubbed him onto the tag of 'Paprika Plains.' So, it was done like a film. It was done on location in different spots."[13] The texture builds over time in the song, with focus on piano and voice first, then orchestral sound, and finally the jazz combo near the end, reflecting the process over time in which it was created.

[11] Interview with Jon Pareles, Luminato Festival, June 16, 2013. Accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=3269.

[12] Blair Jackson, BAM magazine, January 1996, accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=2688.

[13] Interview with Jon Pareles. There is also a piano passage incorporated in "Paprika Plains," originally intended for a different song, that was recorded seven months after the principal piano part, resulting in a very slight difference in intonation. Mitchell explains how Charles Mingus noticed this tuning discrepancy and mentioned it when they first met; the observation inspired a bond of mutual admiration as both artists could discern this passage as being slightly out of tune.

A Csus2 piano chord serves as a principal sonority throughout the song, often superimposed over moving left-hand voices to form composite chords of varied harmonic implication (see Example 6.9a).[14] In addition to chords that have suspended chord members in the harmonic sense, there is a larger expressive connotation of chords texturally and rhythmically suspended over a moving bass line that is not fully grounded on the tonic. Mitchell's bold sense of timing is always at work in the song, as she delays through long spans of time, creating a feeling of suspended time, with long gestural arcing motions that eventually reach goal points on tonic chords fully supported with low bass and rich orchestral sound. At the beginning, the piano left hand articulates a gestural arc in moving rhapsodically against the Csus2 sonority for more than a half-minute, before finally settling on root-position tonic harmony to articulate the initial downbeat of the verse (see Example 6.9b).

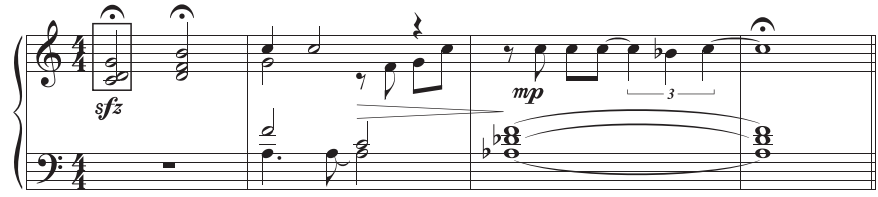
Mitchell powerfully shapes qualities of musical time and temporality in the song. The song opens as if depicting the "real" time of a protagonist at a bar or dancing venue. The sound of rain drumming on a galvanized roof implies a rural location. She withdraws from those she is with, visiting the washroom and then going outside "to get some air." An imagined dream sequence unfolds, in which Mitchell draws from childhood memories growing up in central Saskatchewan. While one can imagine that perhaps the protagonist steps out of the dance bar for only a short time, the introspective journey through remembered time set with orchestra is broad in scope, suggesting an expanse of temporal distance and the spatial vastness of the Canadian Prairies. Example 6.9c shows the pivotal moment in this imagined journey, as the protagonist is "floating off in time" (2:00). The vocal melody aligns with the piano left-hand part, recalling the texture previously noted in the earlier orchestral song, "Down to You."

This imagined change is highlighted with a prolonged tonic with fifth in the bass, as if deferring or "suspending" root support in the bass might further imply suspending time. Through repetition and Mitchell's bold sense of timing in prolonging the chord, it is marked for significance. This compares to Robert Hatten's concept of the "pedestal" or "arrival" tonic $\frac{6}{4}$ chord. The chord is heard as an arrival point, sustained for a full four measures before the formal return for the second verse. As Hatten describes, the chord in this configuration "no longer is dependent on its resolution to the dominant, but stands on its own, as a poetically enhanced tonic." Mitchell's right-hand C sus2 chord "sounds presentational, as though elevated, and on a pedestal" (Hatten 2004, 24). This has the effect of musically forewarning that the protagonist is, indeed, "floating off in time," disengaging from the external and immediate world of the dance bar to enter an internal world of memory. In the second verse, as orchestral strings enter (2:21), Mitchell recalls a childhood experience of something like a parade in her hometown. The complex subjectivity of this reminiscence is both nostalgic

[14] In rendering my musical examples for "Paprika Plains," I studied the full score transcription based on Michael Gibbs's original 1977 score, prepared by Dave Blackburn and Michael Dunn, available at jonimitchell.com.

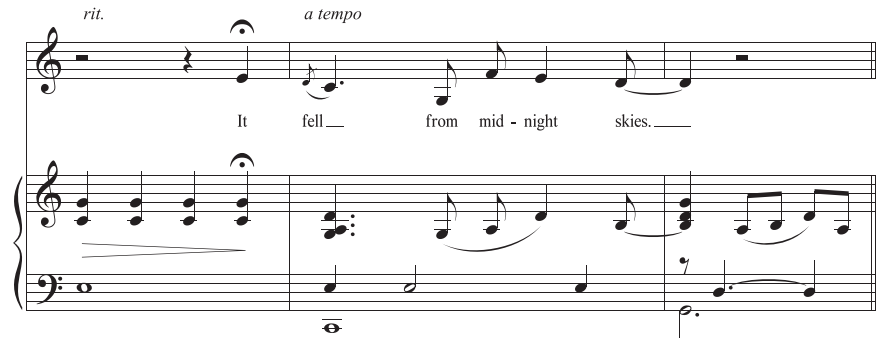
Example 6.9 Joni Mitchell, "Paprika Plains," *Don Juan's Restless Daughter* (1977)

a. Intro



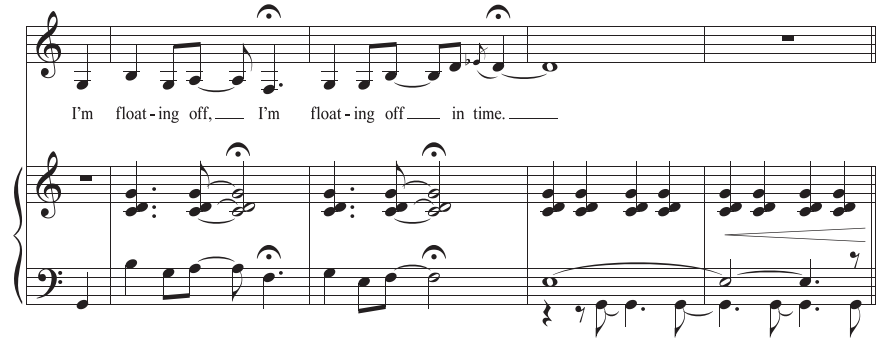
C sus2 chord *Left and right hand disengage. Chromatic descending bass.*

b. Verse beginning (0:32)



Root-position tonic harmony emerges. Left and right hand realigned.

c. Verse ending (2:07)



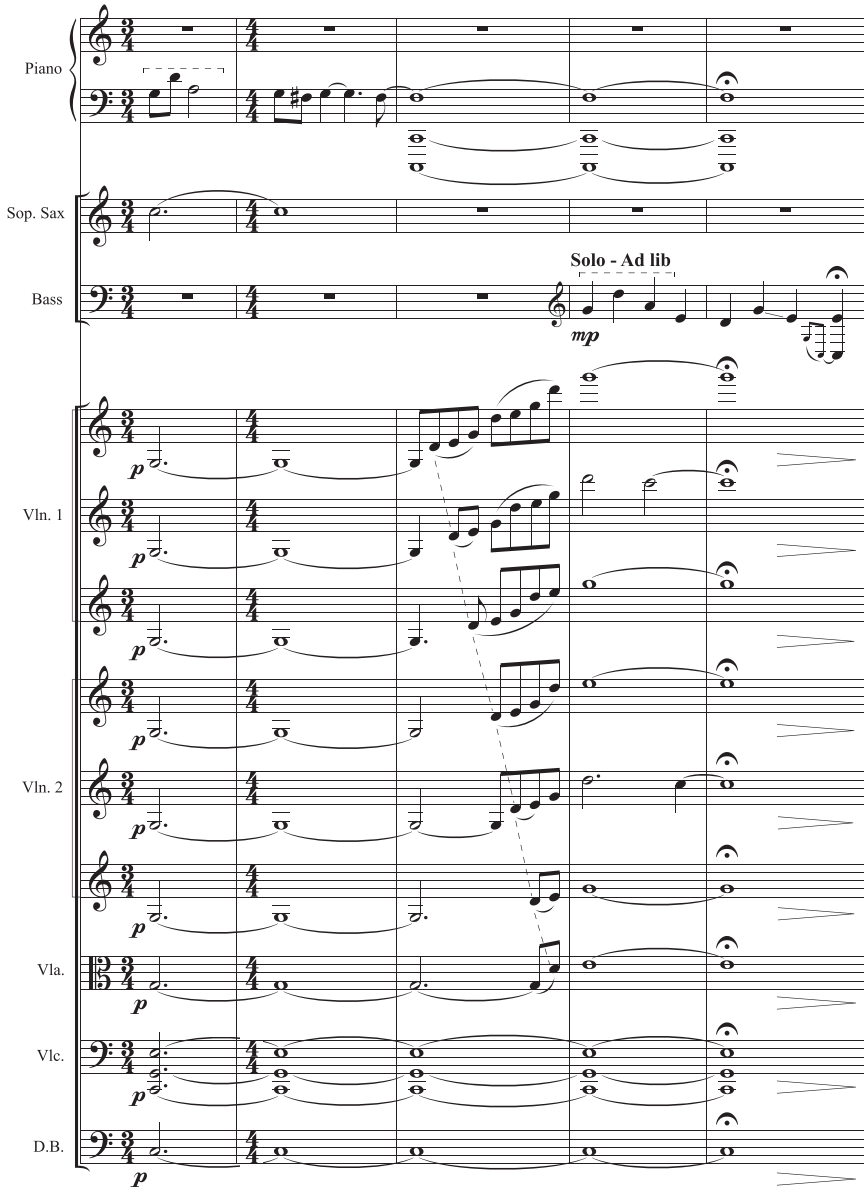
Voice aligned with bass. *"Arrival" tonic* $^{6}_{4}$

and critical, as it also intermingles inferences to the subjugation of Native North Americans.[15] This childhood memory, in which she would "tie on colored feathers" and "beat the drum like war," is musically punctuated with drum-like chordal attacks on the piano. The multivalent expressive scope of the music simultaneously depicts

[15] Mitchell's references to persons of indigenous and African descent on the album have been critiqued and analyzed. See, for example, Janet Maslin's review of *Don Juan's Restless Daughter* in *Rolling Stone*, March 9, 1978, accessed at https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=256. For a broader perspective on race, gender, and Mitchell's guises of public persona, see Monk (2012, 1–26).

Example 6.9 Continued

d. Final chord with bass solo (15:45)



Final emergence of root-position tonic. Canonic string texture. Bass solo: a final gesture of independence.

an earlier time remembered, the adult protagonist telling her story, and the vastness of Canadian Midwest geographic space.

The dream sequence is punctuated with a climactic shift to the chromatic submediant (E♭), as Mitchell self-narrates her imagined inward journey: "I dream Paprika Plains" (4:12). With dramatic call-and-response opposition, Mitchell's solo voice

alternates against a powerfully energized orchestral texture with cascading woodwind figuration, divisi strings, horns, tam-tam, and piano. A fully supported tonic chord emerges from Mitchell's piano on a repeated G drone (4:38), which articulates a shift to compound meter while continuing to musically represent suspending time, as if setting up the orchestral tonic chord (4:48) with a "pedestal" $\frac{6}{4}$. These are two instances of gestural pairing, in which Mitchell seems to musically steer the trajectory of the orchestra through her vocal and piano work.

After an orchestral interlude, Mitchell's protagonist leaves her dream world to reenter the dance bar (11:57), enacting a kind of multiple subjectivity as she directly addresses the listener in telling her story, or her potential lover, while also narrating her changing state of mind as a character in the story: "As I'm coming through the door, I'm coming back, I'm coming back for more!" (12:25). Jaco Pastorius's resounding bass enters *for the first time* to underscore this moment (12:38), here again projecting agential implications in instrumental sound that closely align with the fictionalized progress of the protagonist. This leads to the emotional crux of the song, as the protagonist reconnects with her external world. There is a quality of gestural release in the vocal melody as the protagonist overcomes resistance, surrendering to the attraction of love, "No matter what you do, I'm floating back, I'm floating back to you!" (13:18).

The song's three-part structure provides a frame in staging a fictive motion through time, space, and evolving personal consciousness. Shifts in vocal persona and perceived subject-position are crucial in projecting this dramatic arc.[16] As Mitchell's storytelling persona shifts into a voice that articulates dream, it is, in that sense, a voice disembodied. Then later, as Mitchell narrates her transformation back into the materiality and temporality of the song's fictive world ("I'm floating back to you!"), the moment is charged sensually, even erotically, as we understand that what pulls her back is the desire to be physically present with the loved one.

The dream sequence forming the middle section has actualized the protagonist's journey in acquiring self-knowledge; she can now face her external world on her own terms with greater confidence. Her newly found sense of freedom in moving forward personally is celebrated in the emerging jazz-inflected groove. Like other formal junctures in the song, Mitchell steers the shift into the new section, with punctuating piano chords that set up Wayne Shorter's soprano sax solo (13:42). Centered in the key of G, this passage can be interpreted as projecting a structural dominant in the overall formal organization of the song. It is Shorter's saxophone that very gently eases the music into the final tonic chord on C (15:42). As shown in Example 6.9d, a dissonant F♯ or ♯11 in the piano, heard against the smooth C add9 chord in strings, seems to express a final dissonant affirmation of individuality. The swelling sound of strings builds upward in canon (15:54), setting up the bass to offer a final comment.

Pastorius's concluding fretless electric bass solo (15:58) projects a subtly ironic gesture in asserting difference. As marked in Example 6.9d, the solo bass echoes the melody in the piano three measures earlier; the G–D–A melodic figure elegantly

[16] For parallels in film that manipulate perception of image, temporality, and voice, see Chion (1999, 49). Chion's provoking observations on voice in film have stimulated my thinking about voice in song.

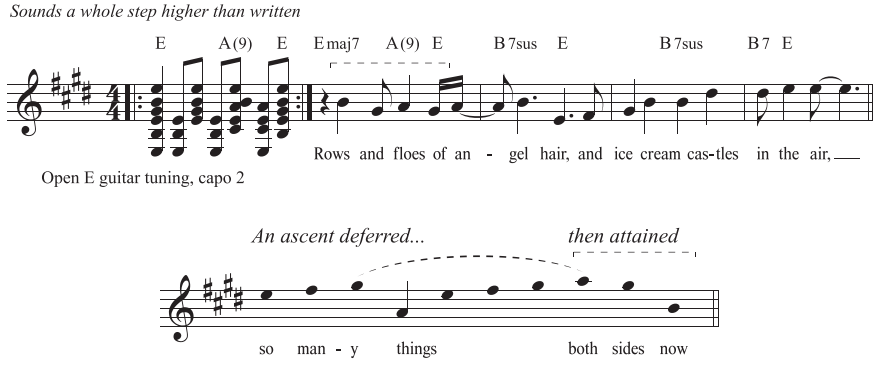
recalls the Csus2 chord from the opening of the song, here shifted to a G position and superimposed against the pedal on C. If we think of a final tonic chord as a moment of stability, signifying musical and social unity, then this ending nicely encapsulates Mitchell's ambivalence in asserting difference to the very end, representing a kind of comfort in the discomfort of human connection.

"Both Sides Now" in 1969, 2000, and 2022

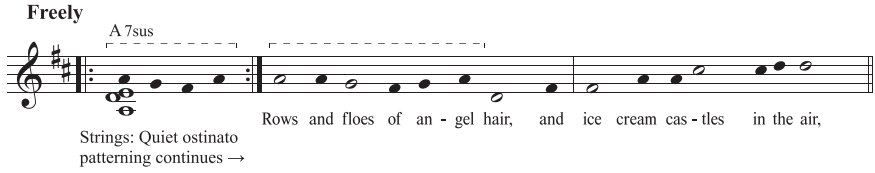
Example 6.10 highlights three performances of Mitchell's iconic song, "Both Sides Now," spanning more than fifty years. Part of the pleasure in hearing this music is in sensing the progressive journey of the enacted protagonist, which is amplified in an expressive arc spanning the three versions, from that of a youthful protagonist wise beyond her years, to a venerable elder still young in spirit. In this trajectory, Mitchell represents with authority the circular narrative in the song, of looking at life "from both sides now," that "now" representing a moment in contemplating time's passage at different stages of life experience. With a mix of first- and second-person subject positioning in the song, Mitchell's performances enact an oracle guide persona of progressively increasing depth.

Example 6.10 Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"

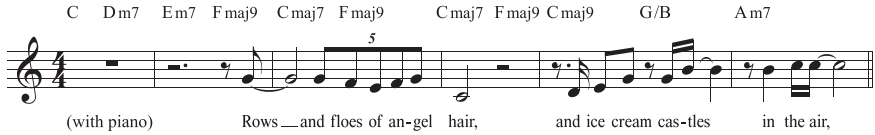
a. *Clouds*, 1969



b. *Both Sides Now*, 2000 (reduction)



c. Live performance at the Newport Folk Festival with Brandi Carlisle (2022)



In Mitchell's recording of "Both Sides Now" on her second album, *Clouds* (1969), guitar work in open-E tuning is remarkably economical. Virtually all fretboard movement shifts between frets 4 and 2, mostly using two fingers to create moving stepwise lines in sixths over ringing open strings. This provides for smooth, ongoing continuity in the guitar accompaniment that Mitchell leverages expressively as she sings, often doubling a moving guitar line in her vocal. The guitar in E with capo on fret two provides for a sounding key a whole step higher, positioning the music registrally for a strong contrast in vocal tone quality between Mitchell's lighter head voice and darker chest voice sound as the melody shifts higher and lower.

In the rendering shown in Example 6.10a (which again, actually sounds a whole step higher in the recording), the dominant note on B serves as a mediary anchoring point in the vocal melody. The melody explores "both sides" in registral space around that note, first descending to tonic, then ascending to tonic with an audible crescendo and increase in physical vocal support. But then continuing still higher with lighter vocal tone, perhaps into an elevated spatial zone that has not yet been fully "earned," there is a sudden fall a major seventh, as if enacting a fall from grace: "So many things I would have done," and in a later verse, "And if it hurts, don't let them know." After this setback, the melody at the chorus projects new confidence in starting the phrase at a lofty height. The motive from the opening, B–A–G♯ is now rotated: A–G♯–B and positioned in the higher octave. The angular melody is colored by different timbres across regions of Mitchell's vocal space, as a more comfortable melodic fall through the consonant major sixth on G♯–B seems to express composure, connecting with the smooth voicing in sixths on the guitar. The chorus melody shifts up and down repeatedly through the motive, as if exploring the liminality between highs and lows. Vocally and metaphorically, Mitchell's melody projects the agency of a personified character that has lived through setbacks, transcended limitations, and now attains freedom in navigating life's highs and lows. Then, as if remembering from a place of attained experience, the melody glides down to the stability of the tonic in the lower range on E4.

Through this energetic trajectory, agential forces projected through the vocal melody express an underlying meaning in the song: the movement through highs and lows (both sides) in love and in life, in spite of all obstacles and uncertainties (clouds), leads to an emerging state of grace grounded in experience, in which past moments, never fully understood (love's illusions), are recalled in memory as markers of a full life. If there is any doubt that this song is about marking the passage of time, and how perceptions change over time experienced, then this is made more explicit in the coda (4:06). Mitchell boldly takes her time, poignantly shaping the rhythm and sound for ten measures—nearly half a minute, creating a musical reflection that situates the song more profoundly as a memoir of lived experience. This quality would be even more vividly foregrounded in Mitchell's version with orchestra recorded more than thirty years later.

The three performances of "Both Sides Now" are notably different in tempo and vocal tessitura—successively slower and lower—and contrasting in both their

vocal-instrumental resources and the social agencies they project. But for any listener familiar with this song as a cultural marker for the late 1960s, the later versions carry the nostalgic aura of the song's "classic" setting as a powerful *virtual* presence. The 2000 orchestral arrangement also shows the influence of early twentieth-century composers including Debussy.[17] Example 6.10b provides an abstracted rendering to visually suggest how layered ostinato patterns, derived motivically from the vocal melody, provide a metrically static sonic environment for the vocal while subtlety implying an impressionistic allusion to Mitchell's pentatonic-based "sus chords." The flexibility of pentatonic-based patterns and pedal tones in fusing with implied chord changes further marks a connection with the voicing of harmonies in Mitchell's original guitar work. The long, arched trajectory in moving broadly through phrases, one large-scale "beat" to the next, further aligns with Mitchell's gestural shaping of musical and metaphorical time that have been noted in her previous orchestral songs, with tonic $\frac{6}{4}$ harmonies and orchestral pedal tones contributing to the musical setting as a sonic space for contemplating time and memory. As the song unfolds, electric bass and quiet drums support the vocal as much as the swelling strings.

The impression conveyed through Mitchell's 2000 vocal performance of "Both Sides Now" with orchestra is that of a mature observer, surveying lived experience over a vastness of time and memory that is matched by the expansive sonic space of the recording. The quality of the voice is rich and resonant while conveying the embodied markers of physical age and wear.[18] Situated a major third lower, the higher notes are not marked with a pronounced shift to head voice as in the earlier recording. With more unified vocal timbre, Mitchell at times extemporizes around the upper boundary of the melody, pushing higher in ways that the earlier recording did not, vocally communicating confidence as well as an implied acknowledgment of loss, as in the lyrics, "something's lost but something's gained." In musical style her performance connects with a great tradition of jazz singers that have performed with orchestra. With freedom in rhythmic timing, commanding presence, and smooth jazz-inflection, she approaches the performance in the manner of a jazz vocal soloist. Timing is delayed and conversational, with the melodic line broken and fragmented in separating words, suggesting an earned authority in commenting on the original vocal melody without an obligation to fully render it. Wayne Shorter's soprano saxophone also provides a nostalgic personic presence (3:04), creating the virtual implication of a familiar companion.

In revisiting the song at the 2022 Newport Folk Festival with Brandi Carlisle, the sensitively played piano part, with chord changes played quietly, two to the bar, gives

[17] The 2000 *Both Sides Now* album is a collection of classic jazz songs sung by Mitchell along with two of her original songs, "A Case of You" and "Both Sides Now," all arranged with full orchestral accompaniment. The song "Both Sides Now" is last on the album, serving as the conclusion in a programmatic suite of love songs. Notably, in performing the songs from the *Both Sides Now* album on tour, Mitchell would open with Debussy's "Nuages" (Clouds), the first movement from Debussy's *Nocturnes* orchestral suite (1897–1899), as a preconcert overture.

[18] For perspectives on Mitchell's voice as it carries a trace of age, time, and experience, see Elliott (2015) and Baker (2019).

an impression of cocktail bar piano, providing a comfortable setting as Mitchell holds court (see Example 6.10c).[19] Surrounded by a group of supporting younger performers, Mitchell participates in a celebration of multigenerational collaboration that poignantly connects with the cyclic temporal imagery in the song. In the live 2022 video, all the musicians, particularly Brandi Carlisle and Wynonna Judd, can be observed as they are closely attuned to Mitchell. One senses that they are there not so much to share the spotlight but rather as supporters and ready enablers. This underscores an aspect of ensemble music that is always present in a satisfying performance. Performers do support and enable one another, each contributing their unique abilities. This performance especially highlights that social dimension of music making. Carlisle, Judd, and the others are ready in their supporting role, attuned to Mitchell's embodied gestures. Part of the pleasure in listening to the performance is in this expression of multigenerational gendered comradeship. Just as Mitchell has served them as an enabling woman artist through her works, they are affirmed by the privilege of returning the favor. The progression of embodied expression spanning the versions, from the exuberance of youth to aged experience, is here represented in a singular performance. At the end, she laughs, as if shaking off the veneration of those gathered, further connecting with the youthful expression of the original song.

Conclusion: A Woman of Heart and Mind

The discipline of counterpoint might seem arcane and academic, far removed from the creative intentions of a songwriter as intuitively brilliant as Mitchell. In this chapter I have approached Mitchell's counterpoint as part of a creative strategy grounded in embodied knowledge. Note-against-note relationships derive organically from a larger gestural process, in which Mitchell juxtaposes performative actions to form musical layers, superimposing chord shapes and pedal points that fit the hand naturally on the fretboard or keyboard. These instrumental layers interact with the vocal melody, supporting the singing voice with a tangible instrumental logic, enriching it with an added material presence. In this way, Mitchell uses familiar musical materials to create a powerfully original musical commentary, indexing her music for voice and instruments to the body with a clear gestural logic.

Mitchell's juxtaposition of combined musical actions results in an organic connection to jazz harmony, forming the basis for her important creative collaborations with jazz musicians, where her wide-ranging creativity manifests in even greater freedom in the combination of musical parts. Her artistic confidence in navigating the interactions among musicians in her albums from 1974 onward forms an essential attribute of her late style. Mitchell's musical personae are illuminated—her musical gestures attain context and depth—through dynamic interactions that notably feature

[19] Accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxiluPSmAF8. Mitchell would receive a Grammy award for this live concert, released on the *Joni Mitchell at Newport* album (2023).

saxophonist Wayne Shorter and bassist Jaco Pastorius. In these songs, the independence of parts enacting strong individualized personae contributes directly to the richness of Mitchell's fictionalized musical worlds, while also leveraging the artistic freedom in devising individual parts that is a hallmark of jazz performance practice.

In this chapter we have touched on Mitchell's varied guises as she enacts her characters in wide-ranging personic environments. She constructs an urban-pastoral retreat for her "canyon" woman on earlier albums, portrays an independent artist-traveler on her more experimental and collaborative jazz-influenced songs, and enacts her guise as jazz singer in songs with orchestra, connecting with a legacy of great jazz singers she admired including Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan. Mitchell's narratives of restlessness and isolation valorize the independent artist and the adventurous woman, while also marking her protagonists as tragic outsiders who may be distanced from loved ones and the refuge of family. As we listen, we may empathetically recognize and further process our own experienced traumas. Unresolved tensions in guitar and vocal sound serve to musically illuminate the imperfect and unresolved human relationships depicted in songs, as Mitchell's restless traveling steers away from cliché fictions of the happy ever after. Mitchell is fearless in leaving her tensions unresolved, resisting the implied authority of resolution in favor of multivalent ongoing narratives with characters who are both flawed and heroic.

Recalling Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, the body is the link between mind and environment through which we understand the world. Like all musical phenomena, Mitchell's layered textures with slash chords are enactments of embodied knowledge, as Mitchell leverages kinesthetically organized oppositions of left hand against right in piano textures or spatial fretboard trajectories in guitar work with altered tunings. As embodied knowledge is culturally situated, it is conceptualized differently by individuals with diverse orientations. Mitchell intuitively understood this, leveraging her collaborations with jazz musicians and orchestral arrangers to broaden the scope of her creative reach. In discussions about these collaborations, the topic of chord changes always seems to come up. Mitchell understood her own harmonies in term of mobilizing her embodied knowledge, through her literal grasp of combined shapes on the keyboard and fretboard, leaving it to her collaborators to interpret her gestures through their own technical and cultural frames of reference. As Mitchell states in working on *Hejira*, "with the great players, all I had to say was 'Play what you feel.' They'd make a chart, so they knew what the harmonic structure was" (Yaffe 2017, 230). That statement encapsulates a unity of heart (play what you feel) and mind (make a chart) that has been used, in one format or another, throughout the ages in creating songs.

Joni Mitchell, like Bob Dylan, has innovated by intuitively developing a distinctive musical language. But intuition is always grounded in experience. These chapters on Mitchell and Dylan have explored how musical intuitions are situated as embodied knowledge. Music's rich contrapuntal layers are indexed to bodily movement and socially constructed in terms of the cultural coding they invoke. In Chapters 7 and 8, we further examine social interaction in music by two celebrated bands, the Beatles and Steely Dan.