

THE UNIQUE GUITAR

All things guitar

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2013

Joni Mitchell's Guitars & Tunings

Joni Mitchell is coming to my home town next month. Out of the three great lady folk singers of the early 1960's, Joan, Joni and Judy, Joni Mitchell was by far the most interesting guitarist. Plus, she used many very interesting guitars and many more interesting tunings.



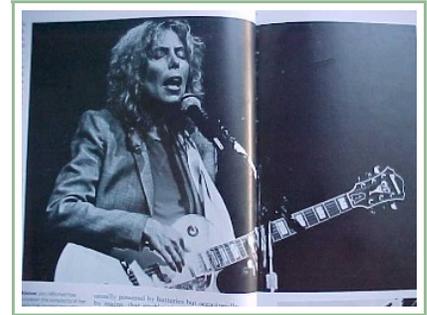
The first professional instrument she owned was acquired back in 1966 when she received a 1956 Martin D-28 from a Marine captain. The captain was in Vietnam when his tent was hit with shrapnel, injuring him.

The captain had two guitars inside his tent at the time. Joni claimed this Martin to be her best guitar ever. She wondered if the explosion did something to the modules in the wood, since the guitars sound was incredible.

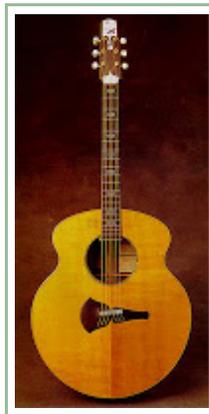
She this guitar on all of her early albums. But by the time she recorded Court and Spark; the guitar had been damaged by an airline carrier and soon after was stolen from a luggage carousel.

It was in the latter 1970's when she turned to electric guitars and preferred George Benson model Ibanez guitars which

she played through a Roland Jazz Chorus amplifier. To keep up with her unique tunings, Joni traveled with five similar Ibanez guitars.



Each guitar was strung with differing sized strings which were matched to the tuning she used. She states that the guitar has to sound crystal clear when playing harmonics. Therefore the more slack the tuning was, the heavier the strings needed to be.



During that same decade Steve Klein built her a wonderful handmade guitar in Klein's own interesting and decorative style. This instrument was visually and technically a masterpiece. The sound hole's rosette ring could be removed to provide a larger bass voice that can be tuned by affecting the air resonance of the body. The inlays are I-Ching hexagram number 56. The Wanderer graces the face and upper bout of the instrument and Don Juan's

The acoustics she now owns and uses include two Martin's; a D-45 and a D-28 and a Collings D2H and a Collings $\frac{3}{4}$ size guitar. All guitars are equipped with Highlander pickups, although she makes use of an external microphone on stage.



In 1995 Fred Walecki, the owner of Westwood Music in Los Angeles, built a unique Stratocaster style guitar for her. The body was made of lightweight German spruce and the neck was made of maple. This instrument contained a hex-pickup that could be used in conjunction with a Roland VG-8 synthesizer.



This instrument opened new options for Mitchell. Though the guitars strings maintained original tuning, the synth could alter each strings timbre and pitch. Instead of carrying around five instruments, she could now pack one guitar for her concerts, programming the Roland guitar synthesizer to match her variety of tunings.



Not only was it useful for her variety of tunings, but also for the unique sounds she could coax from the Roland synth.



More recently I have seen videos of Joni wielding a [2008 Parker Fly Mojo Flame](#) guitar. She uses this guitar as a synth controller in combination with a Roland VG-8 guitar synthesizer.

This guitar contains the built in [Hex pickup](#) and also contains a piezo pickup that allows her Parker guitar unique sounds to match her music.

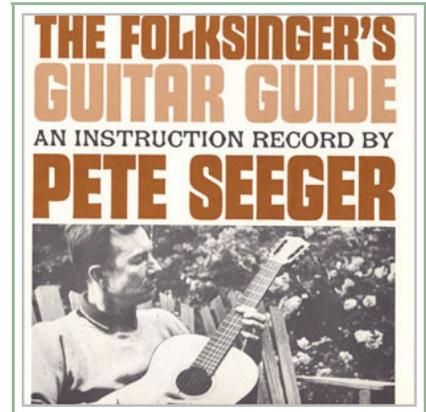
For the unfamiliar, it was during the early part of 1960's that folk music briefly became the rage. This music grew out of the clubs around Washington Square Park and [New York City's Greenwich Village](#).



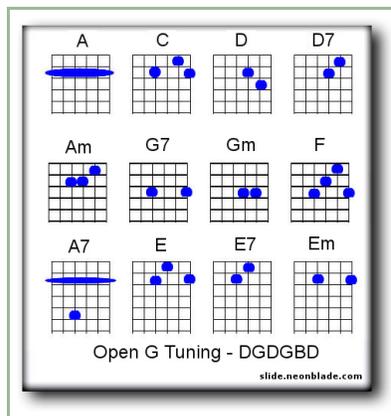


Many famous players started due to their love of acoustic blues music. The clubs attracted a hotbed of musical talent. Name a well known folk artist and you can be sure he or she got their start by playing at one of these club.

Joni states she purchased Pete Seeger's How to Play Folk-Style Guitar. She was so proficient that she skipped ahead of the book's lessons and learned to fingerpick the way Elizabeth Cotton picked on her famous song "Freight Train." And though she may not have mastered that alternating 1 – 5 bass line, Mitchell did come up with her own style.



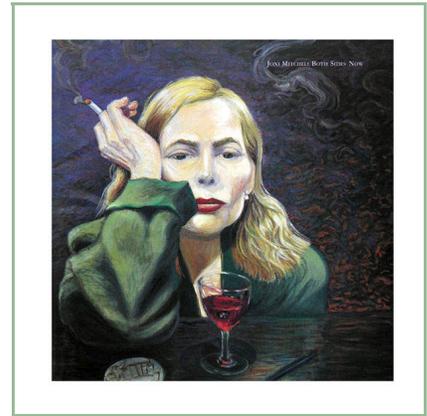
Like many guitar greats, the way she strokes and picks the strings with her right hand is the heart of her guitar sound. Her style went beyond finger picking as she concentrated more and more on song writing.



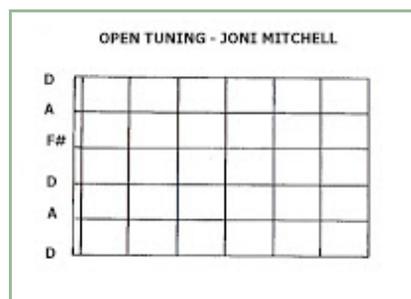
Early on she caught on to some of the open tunings of blues players. From there she built up a bevy of tunings for her songs.

For instance she says the simplest tuning in her opinion is D modal (DADGBD). She also utilizes other simple tuning in open G (DGDGBD) and open D (DADF#AD).

For her two most well known songs, Both Sides, Now and Big Yellow Taxi she uses a capo on the second fret and tunes to open E (EBEG#BE). She makes use of the capo along with the diverse tunings. For Marcie she tunes to CBDFCE.



Mitchell claims she experiments by attempting to play her songs with different tunings to get a larger sound. She visualizes sounds as colours and shapes. To date, Mitchell said that she has used 51 tunings. Some tunings recur at several pitches. Generally speaking, her tunings started at a base of open E and dropped to D and then to C, and these days some even plummet to B or A in the bass. This evolution reflects the steady lowering of her voice since the '60s, which occurs in all of us as we get older.



Mitchell has come up with a way to categorize her tunings that reminds me of Nashville Notation. Since the guitar is tuned in fourths which occur on the fifth fret, standard tuning is 5 5 5 4 5

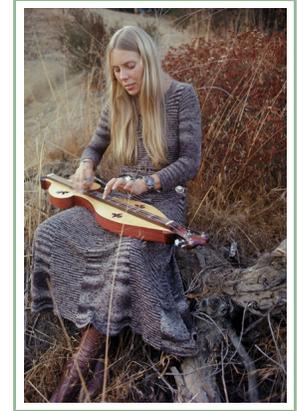
with E as the bottom string.

Her tunings include 7 5 or 7 7 for the bottom strings. As an example, Free Man in Paris utilizes D A D G B D (the 7 5

tuning).

For those who are interested, the only published documentation of her 30-year guitar odyssey is four single-album songbooks transcribed by Joel Bernstein, her longtime guitar tech and musical/photographic archivist, which show the real tunings and chord shapes.

Joni Mitchell frequently turns to the dulcimer in her on stage performance. During a back packing trip Mitchell did not take a guitar, but did bring the dulcimer and a flute, learning to play both instruments.



I may add that Mitchell is also an accomplished pianist. And I cannot leave out the fact that in the 1970's Joni was very dissatisfied with the standard bass style of the

era. She came across a bass player from Florida named Jaco Pastorius, who gave a very interesting flavor to her songs. And of course Pastorius became one of the most recognized and sought after bass players of his era.

Here it is 2013 and Joni Mitchell is still singing and playing her songs to the delight of her fans and admirers.

Check out her fingerings in this 1970 video.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcrEqIpi6sg#at=24>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7agB7jriyUU#at=20>



Posted by Marc at 2:45 PM