

# Joni Mitchell

A paragon of the singer-songwriter's craft, Joni Mitchell has explored folk, jazz, blues and a host of tunings in her long and illustrious career.



Joni Mitchell, playing her Martin D-28 live on stage

## Info

## Will improve your...

**KEY** D major  
**TEMPO** 83 bpm  
**DVD** Folder 4

- ✓ Strumming with muted chords
- ✓ Knowledge of open D tuning
- ✓ First finger barre chords

**B**orn in Fort Macleod, Canada, in 1943, Joni Mitchell relocated to the US in 1965 and settled in southern California. Her talent as a songwriter was immediately obvious with classics like *Big Yellow Taxi*, *Chelsea Morning* and *Both Sides Now* heralding the arrival of an exciting new voice on the American songwriting scene. The aforementioned songs were quickly covered by other folk artists that served to spread her name and appeal even further. She released her debut album *Song To A Seagull* in 1968 with *Ladies Of The Canyon* (1970) and *Blue* (1971)

following close after. During the 1970s her music took on a strong jazz influence and she began working with future jazz legends Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius and Michael Brecker.

As a guitarist, Mitchell has a unique approach to the instrument as virtually every song she has composed features an altered tuning. In fact, she has used over 50 different tunings during her career. Our Joni-style lesson opts for open D (D-A-D-F#-A-D), as this is one of her more accessible tunings and is also used in some of her most popular work (including *Big Yellow Taxi*). I've used a capo as this brightens the sound up considerably – in the early days Joni would capo up at the 2nd fret and sometimes the 3rd and 4th in order to accompany her voice. So in addition to giving the sound more clarity the capo would help her sing within her vocal register more easily and allow her to choose the chord shapes that felt best under her fingers for each given song.

Joni developed two interesting solutions to deal with the huge amount of altered tunings she has used over the years – first, and most practically, she has been using a Roland VG MIDI system since 1995, which allows her to program in all the altered tunings without actually having to re-tune the guitar. Secondly, she has a fascinating system of remembering the tunings. By way of an example she would notate this month's tuning as D-7-5-5-4-5 where the first letter indicates the tuning of the sixth string and the ensuing numbers tell her

“A capo would help Joni sing within her register and allow her to choose chord shapes she liked”

which fret she would have to fret each string at in order to find the pitch to tune the next open string. Clever stuff!

Another key feature of her strumming style is the muting of strings, as we find here – she will keep a steady 16th-note (semiquaver) strumming pattern but add variety by releasing her fretting-hand fingers at points to give a percussive, muted quality. This is tricky to mimic at first as you have to really think where the accents and percussive parts are. As usual, persevere with it and you'll find a great new dimension to strumming parts. **SR**

GAIN

BASS

MIDDLE

TREBLE

REVERB

## Get the tone

Early on you can see Joni playing her Brazilian-bodied, Rosewood Martin D-28. Later she went on to electric and an Ibanez George Benson model, a Parker Fly and a custom-built acoustic by luthier Steve Klein. Most recently, she has played a Martin D-28, D-45 and a Collings D2H. These examples are perfect for acoustic; if you also play electric, a clean, chorused tone with delay.

**LISTENING SUGGESTIONS** To hear this side of Joni's playing check out early albums such as *Song To A Seagull*, the often overlooked but brilliant *Ladies Of The Canyon*, and the legendary *Blue*. For more inspiration check out the live DVD *Shadows And Light*, which features the stellar line-up of Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius and Michael Brecker. Other great Joni albums include *Court And Spark* and the wonderful *Hejira*.