

**'CONSTANT STRANGER': EXPLORING HOW JONI MITCHELL  
APPEARS AND DISAPPEARS THROUGH LYRIC PERSONAE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines four lyric personae adopted by Joni Mitchell during the period 1968 to 1979. This period of Mitchell's career is notable for the vast quantity of albums recorded and released, and subsequently the variety of poetic guises employed. There is already considerable research into the intersection of Mitchell's life and music, with Karen O'Brien and Michelle Mercer demystifying the biographical influences on her lyrics. Although this study calls on such detail where necessary, my focus is on lyric construction and the application of modes of poetic analysis to Mitchell's songs. From this approach, I have established distinct categories of personae. The 'ingenue' and the free spirit correspond with and expand on pre-existing areas of study conducted by Lloyd Whitesell, while the celebrity and 'the only black man at the party' explore less researched and less celebrated personae. This study deconstructs Mitchell's motivation for constant reinvention and self-othering, and tests her judgements of her career against her body of work. This study argues that these speakers represent Mitchell's revolt against misinterpretation by fans and critics, and her struggle to communicate a multifaceted, changeable self.

**CONTENTS**

Introduction 4  
'Ingénue' 7  
Free Spirit 10  
Celebrity 15  
'The Only Black Man at the Party' 19  
Conclusion 23  
Bibliography 24

## INTRODUCTION

I never wanted to be a human jukebox. I think more like a film or a dramatic actress and a playwright. These plays are more suitable to me. I feel miscast in my early songs. They're ingénue roles (Joni Mitchell, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

Joni Mitchell has said that she wishes to avoid becoming a 'human jukebox', and has achieved this through a relentless reinvention of her lyric personae.<sup>2</sup> Matching her genre-defying musical development, Mitchell's lyrics offer listeners personal and theatrical speakers which elude easy classification. Mitchell's various personae demonstrate a self-fashioning which at first seeks to establish and later challenge public perception of her as an artist. She has appeared, and attempted to disappear, with personae including the torch carrier, runaway, Native American, Woodstock mystic and black hipster. Such self-conscious and self-critical roles confound the 'crazy pigeonholing' attempted by fans and critics who seek to know her.<sup>3</sup>

Not only through her lyrics but also in interviews, Mitchell continually frustrates expectations. Defining herself negatively she states: 'I belong to nothing, and sometimes that's lonely. I don't belong to a school of music. I don't belong to a race. I don't belong to a nation' (2009).<sup>4</sup> She champions self-othering and contradiction: in 2007 she claimed to be 'anti-intellectual' despite having reworked William Blake's poetry in *Taming the Tiger* (1998) and in 2008 claimed being called confessional was 'kind of insulting' despite previously referring to herself as 'a confessional poet' (1979).<sup>5</sup> These statements demonstrate

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1 Joni Mitchell, quoted by Lloyd Whitesell, *The Music of Joni Mitchell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 43.

2 Ibid.

3 Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides Now: Conversations with Malka Marom*, ed. by Malka Marom (London: Omnibus, 2014), p. 213.

4 Joni Mitchell, quoted by Anne Karppinen, *The Songs of Joni Mitchell: Gender, Performance and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 34.

5 Ibid.; Ibid., pp. 26-32.

Mitchell's desire to retrospectively rewrite the narrative of her career. Consequently, as Lloyd Whitesell summarises, 'two fans may cherish completely contradictory mental images of her music'.<sup>6</sup>

Central to this study is an interrogation of attempts to be definitive; I do not strive to make Mitchell more knowable nor discuss her every persona. Instead, this study will explore her plurality and contradictions, examining specifically the construction and deconstruction of her public image as the 'ingénue' and the free spirit, two categories inspired by Whitesell's research, alongside my groupings of the celebrity and 'the only black man at the party'.<sup>7</sup> I will examine these personae chronologically from 1968 to 1979; a period of intense creative output in which Mitchell released ten albums in just over ten years. This approach reflects the consecutive and reflexive nature of Mitchell's reinvention which is based, in her words, 'on my dissatisfaction with the previous project'.<sup>8</sup>

But rather than trust Mitchell's retrospective judgements of herself as an artist, I will draw my conclusions from close analysis of Mitchell's lyrics, using *The Complete Poems and Lyrics* (1997) as my source. Although Mitchell's music and performance deserve study, I have narrowed my approach to the construction of lyrics and often their nature on the printed page. This is because, as Christopher Ricks argues regarding Mitchell's contemporary Bob Dylan, 'the words are not the whole, but like all the elements of the song they need to be wholly effective'.<sup>9</sup>

Central to Mitchell's sense of being 'miscast' is the status these lyrics hold.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Whitesell, p. 16.

7 Mitchell, quoted by Whitesell, p. 43; Mitchell, quoted by Miles Parks Grier, 'The Only Black Man at the Party', *Genders Journal*, 56 (autumn 2012), 1-19 (p. 1), <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=2532>>, accessed: 25.04.17. This quotation is the purported first line of Mitchell's yet unpublished autobiography.

8 Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 126.

9 Christopher Ricks, Introduction, Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan: The Lyrics 1961-2012*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, Lisa Nemrow and Julie Nemrow (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), pp. vii-xiii (p. xi).

10 Mitchell, quoted by Whitesell, p. 43.

Mitchell's literary credibility has been dismissed by many, including Perry Meisel who writes, 'Mitchell, of course, has always tried to pass herself off as a poet by printing out her lyrics on the covers of her recordings'.<sup>11</sup> I posit that these printouts actually demonstrate the prominence of her lyrics in the consumption of her work by the listening public and form tacit commitments to literary scrutiny. The merit of Mitchell's lyrics has also been dismissed by publishers, many of whom refused to publish this source text under its literary premise:

The woman at Random House, when I was saying I wanted to do a book of poetry [...] She told me, "You're not a poet". I said, "What am I?" She said, "I don't know, but you're not a poet". Like that. I said, "Well, did it ever occur to you that I'm a new kind of poet?".<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, treating Mitchell as a 'new kind of poet' of popular song for the 1960s and 1970s, whose lyrics reward scrutiny, seems an apt reflection of the subject. Such an approach has arguably been legitimised by Dylan's 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature.<sup>13</sup>

Although, this approach has presented challenges of textual authority. *Poems and Lyrics* uses transcriptions of album recordings and does not include the variations of live performance nor Mitchell's handwritten lyrics. My source is authorised, but 'there are a few errors' and I have corroborated with Mitchell's official website where necessary.<sup>14</sup> And, of course, there are challenging minutiae. In 'Morning Morgantown' (*Ladies of the Canyon*, 1970), why is it 'and watch the morning on parade / In morning, Morgantown' and 'we'll wink at total strangers passing in / Morning, Morgantown' (p. 45)?<sup>15</sup> Is the line break Mitchell's design or informed by vocal realisation? Such phrases demonstrate the challenging diversity of Mitchell's work and the difficulty of putting lyrics to page.

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11 Perry Meisel, 'An end to innocence: how Joni Mitchell fails', *Village Voice*, January 1977, <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=412>>, accessed: 25.04.17.

12 Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 213.

13 Ibid.

14 Les Irvin (webmaster, [jonimitchell.com](http://jonimitchell.com)), email to author, 15.03.17.

15 Joni Mitchell, 'Morning Morgantown', *The Complete Poems and Lyrics* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), p. 45. All further references to Mitchell's lyrics are taken from this source and provided in brackets in the body of the essay.

## **'INGÉNUÉ'**

Mitchell's early personae from *Song to a Seagull* (1968), *Clouds* (1969) and *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) are notable for their complexity and significant as the guises which established public perception of her as an artist. This complexity is apparent in 'Morning Morgantown', in which Mitchell constructs a wide-eyed optimistic speaker. This optimism is relayed in a dawn song, as the speaker meditates on the possibilities of the 'young' day (p. 45). She imagines an archetypal American town, where 'any town you name / Morning's just the same' (p. 45), and offers the addressee this fantastical world they can explore together. Just as predictably as 'the milk trucks make their morning rounds' (p. 45), Mitchell's speaker informs her lover 'we'll rise up early, with the sun' (p. 45). The new day represents the possibility of new relationships, while reliable signifiers of small-town life provide a model of commitment for the lovers to follow. Mitchell's speaker offers this imagined world to evidence her devotion: 'the only thing I have to give / To make you smile, to win you with / Are all the mornings still to live' (p. 46). There is simplicity, not only to the register, but also her proposal; one which looks optimistically to the future and offers dreams in exchange for smiles. On these grounds, Whitesell describes Mitchell's early personae as 'fresh, innocent and unpretentious'.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the simplicity of this promise, I propose that this speaker is not as innocent as Whitesell claims. Mitchell rewrites the script of contemporary women's narratives in popular music by offering listeners a speaker who exerts sexually confident maturity. 'We'll rise up early' suggests premarital sex and communicates the speaker's desire, whilst also establishing a relationship of equals through collective pronouns. Unlike Carole King's and Gerry Goffin's 'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow', a Brill Building song that perpetuates

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<sup>16</sup> Whitesell, p. 62.

existing narratives for wide commercial appeal, Mitchell's composition reflects her freedom as a singer/songwriter to be both 'a dramatic actress and a playwright'.<sup>17</sup> Originally released in 1961 by The Shirelles, then rereleased by King in 1971, the King and Goffin composition also highlights the shift in attitudes regarding women's sexuality of the intervening years. Rather than subserviently saying 'tell me now and I won't ask again / Will you still love me tomorrow?', Mitchell's speaker exerts control.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Mitchell challenges the masculine stance of dominance, as exhibited by Dylan's 'stay lady stay / Stay with your man a while' in 'Lay Lady Lay' (*Nashville Skyline*, 1969).<sup>19</sup> Instead, her dawn song speakers champion women's independence and choice, as in 'oh, won't you stay / We'll put on the day' (p. 28) in 'Chelsea Morning' (*Clouds*).

Mitchell's faux-medieval speakers, distinctive to her early fictional writing, are similarly complex. These speakers arise from Mitchell's use of pre-existing literary tropes, which evoke premodern landscapes. In 'I Think I Understand' (*Clouds*) Mitchell writes, 'fear is like a wilderland' (p. 36) - wilderland being the territory beyond the Misty Mountains in *The Hobbit* (1937). Continuing this premodern mode, ordering a taxi becomes 'I hired a coach' (p. 12) in 'Nathan La Franeer' (*Song to a Seagull*), and apartments become 'tenement castles' (p. 5) in 'I Had a King' (*Song to a Seagull*). However, this language is not employed to promote a mythologised world view; a misreading which caused Mitchell's idolisation by critics as Robert Graevess's 'White Goddess'.<sup>20</sup> Instead, such artifice is employed to reveal the reality of sordid city living. In 'Nathan La Franeer', Mitchell writes:

But we crawled the canyons slowly  
 Through the burglar bells and the wishing wells  
 With gangs and girly shows

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, quoted by Whitesell, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Carole King, 'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?', *Tapestry* (A&M Records, 1971). Lyrics in sleeve.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Dylan, 'Lay Lady Lay', *The Lyrics: 1961-2012*, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Watts, quoted by Stuart Henderson, "'All Pink and Clean and Full of Wonder?" Gendering "Joni Mitchell," 1966-74', *Left History* (autumn 2005), 83-109 (p. 101).

The ghostly garden grows.

(p. 12)

Security systems as 'burglar bells' show a Los Angeles's canyon landscape marred by crime, while 'the ghostly garden grows' depicts a postlapsarian world that cannot be unspoilt.

Mitchell's early speakers are sensitive to the tension and transition between innocence and experience. In 'Songs to Aging Children Come' (*Clouds*), Mitchell confuses the singular and plural to identify as 'aging children, I am one' (p. 37) and subsequently employs this liminal, world-weary stance in 'The Circle Game' (*Ladies of the Canyon*). Although Mitchell does not explicitly acknowledge Blake's influence until *Taming the Tiger*, 'The Circle Game' forms an interestingly parallel to 'The Echoing Green' from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789). Both lyrics depict youth's transition to maturity, despondently describing the irreversibility of this process. Blake states, 'our sports have an end', and Mitchell confirms, 'we can't return we can only look behind' (p. 61).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, each writer features older people advising younger people. Mitchell writes 'And they tell him, "take your time, it won't be long now"' (p. 61), while Blake notes:

They laugh at our play  
And soon they'll say:  
'Such, such were joys  
When we all, girls and boys,  
In our time were seen  
On the echoing green'.<sup>22</sup>

These elders have experienced the passage of time, while the overarching speakers, by drawing together such voices, represent further removed timeless, omniscient speakers.

This largely undramatised subject position provides a stark contrast to the intimacy of Mitchell's dawn songs.

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21 William Blake, 'The Echoing Green', *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Richard Willmott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 16.

22 Ibid.

Such variety refutes Mitchell's attempts to post-categorise these early roles as 'ingénue roles'.<sup>23</sup> Her early personae are not artless nor childish, but accommodate seemingly contradictory elements to offer multifaceted voices. Mitchell's retrospection strives to singularly define these roles and consequently draws an unreliable summary that effaces plurality. Her motivation to reconfigure perceptions of her early work in this negative light can be explained by the following quotation:

You can stay the same and protect the formula that gave you your initial success. They're going to crucify you for staying the same. If you change, they're going to crucify you for changing. But staying the same is boring. And change is interesting. So...I'd rather be crucified for changing.<sup>24</sup>

By championing change above all else, Mitchell invents a past artistic self against which she can define and differentiate later artistic appearances and challenge fans' and critics' dissemination of their interpretations. However, this involves the unfair devaluation of this creative period. Consequently, Mitchell's words cannot be taken as impartial final statements and readers and listeners should, as D.H. Lawrence states, 'never trust the artist. Trust the tale'.<sup>25</sup>

## **FREE SPIRIT**

*Blue* (1971) represents a transformation of Mitchell's lyric personae and notable departure from her early roles. It is a largely autobiographical album in which Mitchell shakes off the faux-medieval trappings of fictional narratives to offer listeners a reconfigured persona: the free spirit. Although freedom is a constant preoccupation, featuring in Mitchell's first single 'Urge for Going' (1967) through to *Travelogue* (2002), *Blue* represents the first album on which Mitchell invents a wandering speaker from a first person, female

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23 Mitchell, quoted by Whitesell, p. 43.

24 Mitchell, quoted by Henderson, p. 83.

25 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. by Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 14.

perspective. Prior to this, Mitchell writes of male wanderers, as in 'Urge for Going': 'He got the urge for going / And I had to let him go' (p. 1). Similarly, in 'Cactus Tree' (*Song to a Seagull*) there are folkloric archetypes of 'a man who's been out sailing' and 'a man who sends her medals / He is bleeding from the war' (pp. 22-23). However, in neither song is the female speaker the wanderer. She is either the storyteller or static observer who laments, 'I get the urge for going / But never seem to go' (p. 1).

*Blue* explores this intersection of gender and freedom as a travelogue of Mitchell's therapeutic journey across Europe in 1970. The first track, 'All I Want', begins 'I am on a lonely road and I am travelling / traveling, traveling, traveling / Looking for something, what can it be' (p. 65). This opening encapsulates the meandering focus of Mitchell's free spirit persona. In 'Carey', Mitchell similarly sings 'maybe I'll go to Amsterdam / Maybe I'll go to Rome / And rent me a grand piano and put some flowers `round my room' (p. 70). She is not a traveller with a destination, but a wanderer with the world at her feet. Mitchell communicates this freedom in spatial and financial terms: she does not have romantic/familial commitments 'on a lonely road' and is liberated by disposable income. This persona is a reconfiguration of the late nineteenth-century 'New Woman' archetype for the 1970s. These figures, Ruth Bordin explains, 'despite or perhaps because of their wealth exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own'.<sup>26</sup> Mitchell is well-travelled but crucially, as Marilyn Adler Papayanis notes, she is not 'a socialite or a woman born to privilege. She's Joni'.<sup>27</sup> She sings of 'beach tar on my feet' (p. 70) and finding 'some juke box dive' (p. 65) and, in doing so, alludes to the zeitgeist of bohemianism on aspirational yet relatable terms.

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26 Ruth Bordin, *Alice Freeman Palmer: The Evolution of a New Woman* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 2.

27 Marilyn Adler Papayanis, 'Feeling Free and Female Sexuality: The Aesthetics of Joni Mitchell', *Popular Music and Society*, 33:5, 641-655 (p. 652), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.510919>>, accessed 18.04.17.

This free spirit is largely inspired by perpetual dissatisfaction. In 'California', Mitchell writes:

Sitting in a park in Paris, France  
Reading the news and it sure looks bad  
They won't give peace a chance  
That was just a dream some of us had  
Still a lot of lands to see  
But I wouldn't want to stay here  
It's too old and cold and settled in its ways here.

(p. 73)

She is ready to leave at a moment's notice, simply because the news 'looks bad' which makes her yearn for the 'dream' of hippie idealism. Explaining this restlessness to Penny Valentine on her return to the public eye in 1972, Mitchell states, 'you can be in a place until you feel completely familiar with it, or stay with a person until you feel very bored [...] so many people who are searching and travelling come to that point [...] they just can't handle it that they have to move on'.<sup>28</sup> Inability to stay in one place or with one person causes issues of statelessness, apparent in this song. It is a love song to California: 'oh will you take me as I am / Strung out on another man / California I'm coming home' (p. 74). Mitchell longs for progressive California, with its 'rock 'n' roll band' (p. 73) and willingness to 'take me as I am'. However, California is not really Mitchell's home: she hails from rural Saskatchewan, Canada and settled in Los Angeles's Laurel Canyon upon achieving commercial success. This adoptive home functions as a signifier of Mitchell's free spirit self-fashioning, as it provides a fictive geography through which she positions herself with progressives and against somewhere 'settled in its ways'.

Despite Mitchell's cynicism that you can 'stay with a person until you feel very bored', *Blue's* free spirit longs for love as liberation.<sup>29</sup> In 'All I Want', Mitchell repeats

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28 Mitchell, quoted by Katherine Monk, *Joni: The Creative Odyssey of Joni Mitchell* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012), p. 130.

29 Ibid.

variations of 'I want to make you feel free' (p. 66) three times in its closing lines, wishing this effect on her lover. In 'My Old Man' Mitchell attempts to realise such freedom, singing 'we don't need no piece of paper / From the city hall / Keeping us tied and true' (p. 67), thereby offering her relationship as committed but not constraining. However, there is an underlying tension, reflected structurally. Between every two verses are incongruously shorter verses of reflective enjambed statements:

But when he's gone  
Me and them lonesome blues collide  
The bed's too big  
The frying pan's too wide.

(p. 67)

Focus turns from stand-alone outward affirmations, 'he's my sunshine in the morning' (p. 67), to inward anxieties, as Mitchell admits her dependency on her lover.

Mitchell has proposed when interviewed, 'can two very different people come together and maintain their individuality?'.<sup>30</sup> These shorter verses provide an answer. Even though the couple are not legally bound, Mitchell still risks losing her independence. She praises him for 'keeping away my blues' but must accept dependency: 'when he's gone / me and them lonesome blues collide' (p. 67). Love as liberation is therefore an impossible dream. It is not boredom, as Mitchell incorrectly states, which kills romance, but the sequestering of personal freedom. This fear holds biographical weight, whereby the previously mentioned therapeutic purpose of *Blue* corresponds to the breakdown of Mitchell's relationship with Graham Nash. Mitchell, not wanting to settle down despite Nash's requests, left for Europe, sending a telegram to him which read: 'if you hold sand too tightly in your hand it will run through your fingers'.<sup>31</sup> This sentiment is echoed throughout the album, as in the title track: 'crown and anchor me / Or let me sail away' (p. 72). The

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30 Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 80.

31 Mitchell, quoted by Monk, p. 129.

'anchor', like the 'tied' imagery of 'My Old Man', references the constraints of romantic attachments while the extended metaphor's imperatives suggest such requirements are imposed, not freely undertaken.

Voluntary exile from the domestic sphere is a well-known impetus to wanderers throughout literary history and provides Mitchell with a solution to this question of love and personal freedom. As John Leland notes, the road 'is a male fantasy that goes back to Huck and Tom or Jesus and his disciples, who all chose starvation and travail over clean laundry and the comforts of women'.<sup>32</sup> For example, in James Taylor's contemporaneous hit 'Country Road' (*Sweet Baby James*, 1970), he sings: 'Mama don't understand it, she wants to know where I've been'.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) women are depicted outside the homosocial travellers' bonds: 'man, there's *real* woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night'.<sup>34</sup> Mitchell subverts this tradition, offering a female wanderer who escapes the domestic for the freedom to create. In 'The Last Time I Saw Richard', Mitchell writes:

Hidin' behind bottles in dark cafes  
dark cafes  
Only a dark cocoon before I get my gorgeous wings  
And fly away.

(p. 18)

The anonymity and solitude of the 'dark cafes' is rehabilitating and, as the cocoon metaphor demonstrates, provides a space for reinvention.

However, the transience of the free spirit is not an easily adopted stance. While wandering traditionally, as Simon Frith explains, represents 'a revolt against women who are identified with the home as mothers, sisters, potential domesticators', Mitchell's rebellion

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<sup>32</sup> John Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (They're Not What You Think)* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> James Taylor, 'Country Road', *Sweet Baby James* (Warner Bros., 1970). I have transcribed the lyrics from the album.

<sup>34</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 185.

not only subverts this dynamic but also exists as a revolt against socialised domestic impulses within herself.<sup>35</sup> By travelling, the free spirit refuses to perform these expected functions of womanhood, challenging both life's and literature's gender roles. Consequently, this persona is a self-critical one, as in 'River' when she chastises herself for another failed relationship: 'I'm so hard to handle / I'm selfish and I'm sad / Now I've gone and lost the best baby / That I ever had' (p. 77). Mitchell's persona is not dispassionately reckless like Kerouac's Sal Paradise, who says 'there was nothing behind me anymore, all my bridges were gone and I didn't give a damn about anything'.<sup>36</sup> She feels tormented by the past, guilty for challenging feminine expectation and longs for home.

## CELEBRITY

Simultaneous with Mitchell's free spirit persona is her acknowledgement of the privileges she gains with commercial success, which enable her wandering lifestyle. In 'Carey' she wants to live with the 'freaks' under the 'Matala moon' (p. 70), but cannot:

Maybe it's been too long  
Since I was scramblin' in the street  
Now they got me used to the clean white linen  
And that fancy French cologne.<sup>37</sup>

(p. 71)

Like Leonard Cohen's 'Do not dress in those rags for me, / I know you're not poor', a lyric Mitchell cites when questioned on this topic, she is aware of her free spirit persona's affectations.<sup>38</sup> The shadowy 'they', being the music industry later described as 'the star maker machinery' (p. 115) in 'Free Man in Paris' (*Court and Spark*, 1974), compromise her credibility with fame and fortune.

Mitchell reluctantly assumes this celebrity persona from a highly critical stance. Her

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35 Simon Frith, quoted by Papayanis, p. 650.

36 Kerouac, p. 165.

37 Spelling of 'Matala' corrected from erroneous 'Mattala' in source text.

38 Leonard Cohen, quoted by Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 53.

assessments of fame sometimes form cynical quips, as in 'River': 'I'm going to make a lot of money / Then I'm going to quit this crazy scene' (p. 77). However, most frequently, Mitchell meditates on the conflict between fame and artistic integrity. This preoccupation features in her early writing in 'For Free' (*Ladies of the Canyon*), released after Mitchell received her first accolade for 'Best Folk Performance' in 1969. This narrative lyric is notable for its pivotal positioning. Mitchell, the celebrity, stands 'on a noisy corner' and notices a busker across the street: 'he played real good / On his clarinet, for free / Now me I play for fortune' (p. 47). This comparison is a source of self-criticism. Later reiterating 'I play if you have the money' (p. 47), Mitchell contrasts herself with the busker who plays independently of financial incentive, thus suggesting that music industry money compromises her authenticity. This idealised busker is positioned in 'the street' (p. 47) like the hippies of 'Carey', whereas Mitchell is 'in a good hotel' and 'shopping today for jewels' (p. 47). Her privilege gains her access to exclusive spheres, but both spatially and figuratively distances her from this bohemian ideal. Mitchell has since confirmed, 'I began to feel to separate from my audience and my times, separated by affluence'.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, Mitchell chooses commercial success over this ideal, symbolised by the signal change, as she crosses the corner away from the busker. However, this decision is not taken without hesitation, as the ellipsis implies:

I meant to go over and ask for a song  
Maybe put on a harmony...  
I heard his refrain  
As the signal changed  
He was playing real good, for free.  
(p. 47)

In Mitchell's later work, she reflects on the sacrifices of choosing this path. In 'Song for Sharon' (*Hejira*, 1976), which I believe to be her most complex poetic lyric, Mitchell contemplates 'shaking off futility' (p. 167) of a life lived solely in pursuit of personal success.

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<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 53.

'Shaking off futility' is attempted through gambling and similar pursuits, described with bleakly humorous religious irony and double meaning: 'I'm headed to the church / To play Bingo / Fleece me with the gamblers' flocks' (p. 166). Each attempt is undermined by a wry awareness of its ineffectualness. Obtaining material possessions is another such distraction and is undercut by an acknowledgement of what she is *not* buying:

I went to Staten Island, Sharon  
To buy myself a mandolin  
And I saw the long white dress of love  
On a storefront mannequin.

(p. 166)

Mitchell is buying musical instruments, representative of her career, not a wedding dress, symbolic of relationships she sacrificed. Similarly, the advice of friends and family, 'Dora says, "Have children!" / Mama and Betsy say, "Find yourself a charity"' (p. 167), highlights Mitchell's lack of maternal fulfilment.<sup>40</sup>

The song is haunted by ghosts of lives Mitchell could have led. While Mitchell chooses the mandolin, she notes: 'some girl's going to see that dress / And crave that day like crazy' (p. 166). Sharon, the song's addressee, represents the life Mitchell left behind in Saskatchewan: 'When we were kids in Maidstone, Sharon / I went to every wedding in that little town' (p. 167). Sharon fulfils this childhood fantasy. Mitchell writes, 'Sharon you've got a husband / And a family and a farm' (p. 168), to which she juxtaposes her lot as 'the dream's malfunction' (p. 167). Mitchell depicts her love life with casual dissatisfaction: 'I left my man / At a North Dakota junction' (p. 167). There are serial relationships, demonstrated by 'love's a repetitious danger' (p. 167), but no permanence of a 'family and a farm'.

The closing couplets poignantly compare what both women sacrifice in choosing careers or families. Sharon cannot look to 'the land and the sky' (p. 168) like the wandering

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<sup>40</sup> Mitchell had a child while unmarried and studying at art school. The child was adopted and Mitchell had no other children.

Mitchell. However, Mitchell envies Sharon's seemingly simple life: there is an accusatory jealousy to Mitchell's direct address, as she writes 'you still have your music' and 'you sing for your friends and family' (p. 168). Clearly, Mitchell no longer feels ownership over her work. By releasing music, her private lyrics become public records, 'like open letters' as she has explained, open to mass interpretation and criticism.<sup>41</sup> This is the irony of Mitchell's artistic ideal: she wants people to appreciate good music and therefore laments the public's ignorance of the busker, but when too many people listen too intently, she fears losing control of her creation. This unease translates into Mitchell's performances, including her disastrous 1970 Isle of Wight Festival set, where she chastised the unruly crowd: 'I get my feelings off through my music [...] it's very difficult to come out here and lay something down. I think that you're acting like tourists, man'.<sup>42</sup> It is no surprise that this reluctant celebrity has reportedly cancelled more shows than she has performed.<sup>43</sup>

### **'THE ONLY BLACK MAN AT THE PARTY'**

This fourth persona constitutes a collection of identities adopted during the late 1970s, when Mitchell's music departed from folk pop melodies into jazz arrangements. This musical shift towards a historically black genre, was mirrored by a persona Mitchell self-consciously constructed to remake or, arguably, mask her image. The black, male street hustler persona, Art Nouveau, was created to express what Mitchell saw as 'a black poet trapped inside me'.<sup>44</sup> He was also constructed in protest of early personae for which Mitchell had become publicly known. 'I have always struggled with', Mitchell explains, 'being stereotyped as a magical princess that I got earlier in my career'.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the young

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41 Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, p. 80.

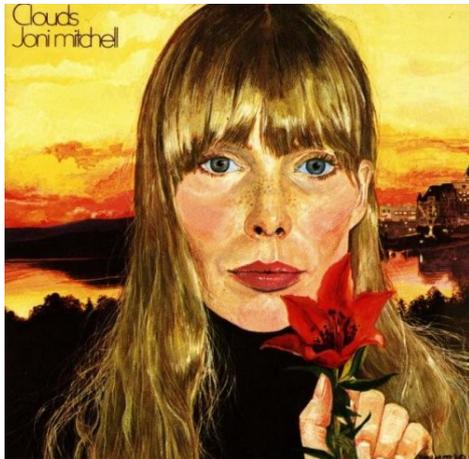
42 Mitchell, Susan Lacy, dir., *Woman of Heart and Mind* (Universal, 2008).

43 Monk, p. 104.

44 Mitchell, quoted by Karppinen, p. 119.

45 Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*, pp. 44-45.

woman on *Clouds* who sings of 'ice cream castles' (p. 40), Mitchell appears on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977) in blackface, hiding in plain sight, as the swaggering Art Nouveau.<sup>46</sup>



To discuss the lyric implications of Mitchell's black male personae, I must

momentarily discuss the possible justifications for Mitchell's appropriation of blackness.

Katherine Monk suggests, '*DJR* was proof that Joni Mitchell wasn't just an artist on a creative odyssey; she was entirely self-aware of her personae, her place in the universe, and her innate potential for recreation'.<sup>47</sup> However, I argue that it does not confirm Mitchell's awareness of 'her place in the universe', but betrays a lack of cultural sensitivity.<sup>48</sup> What does Mitchell mean when she describes herself as a 'black poet'?<sup>49</sup> Perhaps, it is her tribute to what she sees as the indebtedness of pop music to black musicians; she has stated that 'all modern music is black'.<sup>50</sup> Or perhaps, as Miles Parks Grier argues, this 'black male persona earned her legitimacy and authority in a rock music ideology in which her previous incarnation, white female folksinger, had rendered her either a naïve traditionalist or unscrupulous panderer'.<sup>51</sup> Either way, as Grier notes, 'Mitchell has shown that her

46 Mitchell, *Clouds* (Reprise, 1969); Mitchell, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (Asylum, 1977).

47 Monk, p. 13.

48 Ibid.

49 Mitchell, quoted by Karppinen, p. 119.

50 Mitchell, quoted by Christopher John Farley, 'Burning Bright', *Time*, 24th June 2001, <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,140169,00.html>>, accessed: 25.04.17.

51 Grier, p. 1.

transcendence of racial boundaries, at least, depends upon others, upholding their essential function [...] heart comes from the soulful blacks of the south'.<sup>52</sup> In both scenarios, Mitchell is oblivious of her privilege to adopt and discard these roles without the oppression of such an identity, demonstrated in her repeated claims that 'I have experienced being a black guy on several occasions'.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, she internalises or accepts essentialist gendered and racial dichotomies that girls do not make authentic music and blacks are more soulful. This similarly explains why Mitchell disparages her early work using the feminine label, 'ingénue'.<sup>54</sup>

Lyricaly, nowhere is this attempt to self-other more apparent than *Mingus* (1979), an album created partly in collaboration with and partly in tribute to the late jazz composer, Charles Mingus. Mingus composed the music, while Mitchell wrote accompanying lyrics – many of which feature her embodying the musician, as echoed in contemporary reviews like 'Joni Mitchell makes Mingus sing'.<sup>55</sup> In 'A Chair in the Sky', Mitchell writes as Mingus, contemplating death: 'I'm waiting / For the keeper to release me' (p. 200). She communicates the regrets of life's end:

In daydreams of rebirth  
I see myself in style  
Raking in what I'm worth  
Next time  
I'll be bigger.

(p. 201)

And the frustrations of debilitating illness: 'but now – Manhattan holds me / To a chair in the sky' (p. 201). Structurally, this is recognisably Mitchell's poetic voice. The speaker

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52 Ibid., p. 4.

53 Mitchell, quoted by Carl Swanson, 'Joni Mitchell, the Original Folk-Goddess Muse, in the Season Seemingly Inspired by Her', *New York Magazine*, 8th February 2015, <<http://nymag.com/thecut/2015/02/joni-mitchell-fashion-muse.html>>, accessed: 25.04.17.

54 Mitchell, quoted by Whitesell, p. 43.

55 Leonard Feather, 'Joni Mitchell Makes Mingus Sing', *Down Beat*, 6th September 1979, <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=95>>, accessed: 25.04.17.

contemplates decisions, but in the closing lines decides against them, producing a tonal shift. This device is employed in 'Court and Spark' (*Court and Spark*), as Mitchell contemplates love's possibilities, however ultimately states, 'but I couldn't let go of L.A. / City of the fallen angels' (p. 112). There is a trend for Mitchell's speakers making plans, considering their options, but not acting on them.

This singing Mingus is also thematically recognisable as Mitchell. Controlling musical legacy, the desire to be 'raking in what I'm worth', is a preoccupation which, as demonstrated, haunts her work. This confrontational stance is reflected in the purported, controversial first line of Mitchell's yet unpublished autobiography, which references Art Nouveau's debut at a Halloween party: 'I was the only black man at the party'.<sup>56</sup> The 'daydreams of rebirth' also correspond with Mitchell's attempts to accommodate her multifaceted identity through artistic reinvention. This struggle is apparent in 'Down to You' (*Court and Spark*), in which Mitchell addresses herself in the second person singing,

Constant stranger  
You're a brute – you're an angel  
You can crawl – you can fly too.  
(p. 123)

As the chopping and changing hyphenation shows, Mitchell constantly struggles to accommodate and communicate the contradictory elements of her self.

Ultimately, Mitchell does not make Mingus sing but enacts aspects of herself through this masquerade; Mingus is merely a cipher. When she asks in 'God Must Be a Boogie Man', 'Mingus one, two or three / Which one do you think he'd want the world to see' (p. 199), she could plausibly be talking about her own series of personae. Perhaps this is because such concerns are universal artistic concerns. Is it simply that all artists worry about their reception and legacy? What is more likely is that, as Carlo Wolf summarises, 'Mitchell's

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<sup>56</sup> Grier, p. 1.

*Mingus* is riddled by self-doubt masquerading as homage'.<sup>57</sup> These lyrics do not represent Mingus; they are unmistakably Mitchell, as she projects the doubts that plague her more autobiographical personae onto the jazz musician. Clearly, she can never become Mingus, just as she could really experience life as Art Nouveau. They are both theatrical personae which, although played to the hilt, remain figurative and literal costumes.

## CONCLUSION

The diversity of personae discussed is testament to the difficulty Mitchell faces in articulating a multifaceted and changeable self. Her personae challenge the limited roles available to women writers in popular music. Each reinvention is a revolt against the last; *Mingus* represents the ultimate challenge to listeners who wish to preserve Mitchell as a mythic folk goddess. Mitchell does not want to be tied to anybody, least her former selves, and these personae demonstrate her continual attempts to write her own legacy. She has posed in interviews, 'will the real me please stand up?'; clearly, Mitchell is aware of the numerous personae she adopts which make it impossible to definitively categorise her.<sup>58</sup> Instead, readers and listeners must be satisfied with complex fragments, to look at her from both sides, and still not know her at all.

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57 Carlo Wolf, 'On Record, She Pays Tribute to Charles Mingus', *Burlington Free Press*, 26<sup>th</sup> August 1979, <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=3465>>, accessed: 25.04.17.

58 Mitchell, quoted by Tom Gerry, "'I Sing My Sorrow and I Paint My Joy": Joni Mitchell's Songs and Images', *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 2 (summer 2011), 209-221 (p. 217).

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