

# 'I Came Into the Business Quite Feminine'

## Joni Mitchell's Gender Identity, 1975-76

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### Introduction

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In August 1974, performing one of her most famous songs, 'Both Sides Now' at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, Joni Mitchell followed the original lyrics, 'They shake their heads, they say I've changed', with the assertion 'Yes I have!'<sup>1</sup> This suggests that Mitchell was becoming frustrated with typecasts imposed upon her. Mitchell said in an interview with David Wild in *Rolling Stone* in 1991, 'I came into the business quite feminine', but she believes that she was forced to change due to the difficulties created by gender stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation argues that the typecasting of Mitchell during her early career as a feminine, vulnerable folk singer-songwriter had a negative effect on the critical reception of the first two albums of what is known as her 'jazz period', *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975) and *Hejira* (1976),<sup>3</sup> in which she created more 'masculine' music which mirrored her changing lifestyle. A gender-

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<sup>1</sup> This was recorded and released on Joni Mitchell, *Miles of Aisles*, LP, Asylum AB 202 (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Joni Mitchell, quoted in Miles Parks Grier, 'The Only Black Man at the Party', *Genders Journal*, 56 (Fall 2012)  
<[http://www.academia.edu/1943653/The\\_Only\\_Black\\_Man\\_at\\_the\\_Party\\_Joni\\_Mitchell\\_Enters\\_the\\_Rock\\_Canon](http://www.academia.edu/1943653/The_Only_Black_Man_at_the_Party_Joni_Mitchell_Enters_the_Rock_Canon)> [accessed 6 May 2015] (¶2).

<sup>3</sup> Joni Mitchell, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, CD, Asylum 1051 (1975); Joni Mitchell, *Hejira*, CD, Asylum 1087 (1976).

based reading of these two albums will contribute to a greater understanding of her music both during the years 1975-76 and throughout her career, and her complicated interaction with feminism.

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term ‘early period’ in relation to Joni Mitchell will cover not the dates 1968-74, defined by Daniel Sonenberg as containing Mitchell’s early music,<sup>4</sup> but the dates 1966-74 given by Stuart Henderson, as this gives more scope to examining Mitchell’s folk routes.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, however, both authors agree that the year 1974 – which saw the release of the album *Court and Spark*<sup>6</sup> – marks the end of Mitchell’s early period. I shall also refer to what is sometimes called Mitchell’s ‘jazz period’,<sup>7</sup> beginning with *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*, furthered in *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* (1977) and culminating in *Mingus* (1979).<sup>8</sup>

Within most literature on women in popular music, one can find reference to Mitchell. While there are a good number of biographies, by authors such as Sheila Weller, Karen O’Brien, Mark Bego and Michelle Mercer,<sup>9</sup> there are fewer academic publications about Mitchell. There are a few detailed theses and published journal articles examining Mitchell’s gender, sexuality and identity; rarely, however, do these discussions leave the years of her early period.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Matthew Sonenberg, ‘Who in the world she might be: A contextual and stylistic approach to the early music of Joni Mitchell’ (PhD dissertation, City University of New York 300, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Henderson, Stuart, ‘All Pink and Clean and Full of Wonder? Gendering Joni Mitchell, 1966-74’, *Left History*, 10/2 (2005) 83-109 (p. 84).

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Joni, *Court and Spark*, CD, Elektra/Asylum 1001 (1974).

<sup>7</sup> Grier (¶7).

<sup>8</sup> Joni Mitchell, *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, CD, Asylum 701 (1977); Joni Mitchell, *Mingus*, CD, Asylum 505 (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Weller, *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon – and the journey of a generation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008); Karen O’Brien, *Shadows and Light: Joni Mitchell: the Definitive Biography* (London: Virgin Books Ltd., 2001); Mark Bego, *Joni Mitchell* (Lanham: Taylor Trade, 2005); Michelle Mercer, *Will You Take Me as I am: Joni Mitchell’s Blue Period* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

Since the second and third chapters of this dissertation analyse a period of Mitchell's career not widely covered within academic literature, it draws together information from primary sources such as newspaper and magazine articles, reviews and interviews, as well as academic literature on gender stereotypes, gender performances and gender identity in music. It also analyses musical texts (studio and live recordings), in addition to album artwork. Two publications which have been particularly useful are Lloyd Whitesell's in-depth analysis of Mitchell's entire musical output, *The Music of Joni Mitchell*,<sup>10</sup> and Stuart Henderson's article 'All Pink and Clean and Full of Wonder? Gendering Joni Mitchell, 1966-74',<sup>11</sup> which provides a useful point of departure for this dissertation. Furthermore, it builds upon the concept of sex and gender as being separate entities, and gender as a performance, an idea which was developed by Judith Butler.<sup>12</sup>

### **Chapter summary**

The first chapter examines Mitchell's musical development throughout her 'early period', contextualised by the prescribed roles of female musicians at this time, discussing relevant gender theories and ideas about women in popular music to provide a context out of which the albums *Hissing* and *Hejira* arose in 1975-76. The second chapter looks at the ways in which these two albums represent a turning point in Mitchell's career, as she increasingly explored masculine tropes. The final chapter will analyse the critical and popular reception for *Hissing* and *Hejira*, and how negative opinions were shaped by gender-based stereotypes.

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<sup>10</sup> Lloyd Whitesell, *The Music of Joni Mitchell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Henderson.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

# Chapter One

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This chapter examines Joni Mitchell and gender during her ‘early’ period so as to provide a point of comparison for the years 1975-76. This is undertaken through the study of attitudes towards gender prevalent in popular music from the mid-1960s to early 1970s, while also considering relevant gender theories in musicology and sociology. It considers the restrictions on women in popular music during the mid-1960s to early 1970s in order to provide a context for Mitchell’s early period. Then it examines ‘attempts to pin her down through recognizable images of femininity’,<sup>13</sup> both in terms of the ‘folksinger’ label and the ‘woman-as-sex-object’ stereotype. Finally, it examines how she began to defy gendered stereotypes in the years shortly before the 1975-76 albums.

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Charnock, ‘Joni Mitchell: music and feminism’, *United Academics: Journal of Social Sciences*, 2/12 (2012), 90-107 (p. 97).

## Restrictions on women in popular music in the late 1960s

For women in the 1960s, a career in music entailed entering a male-centric workplace in which they had to make a number of compromises in order to fit into the music business and deal with the commercially-driven men who managed it.<sup>14</sup> The issues women in popular music had to consider included an ‘emphasis on image over musicianship’, the choice between career and family, and the requirement to fit into a male domain.<sup>15</sup> For those genres in which they did achieve success, women were not necessarily treated with respect.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, many of the individuals in girl groups remained anonymous despite the fame of the group, ‘because record companies treated them like so many interchangeable cogs in a musical assembly line’.<sup>17</sup> Frith and McRobbie claim that this is because women were seen to be unskilled and ‘a source of cheap labour’: those women who achieved success were thought to have done so thanks to their appearance rather than their musicianship.<sup>18</sup> This view existed, to some extent, at the start of Mitchell’s career, as journalists emphasised her appearance more than her music, and, when they did comment on her music, the focus was on her voice rather than her guitar-playing or songwriting ability.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Whilst this point is specifically relevant to the time period discussed in the dissertation, arguably much of it still applies in terms of today’s mainstream music industries.

<sup>15</sup> Whiteley, Sheila, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. xxv.

<sup>16</sup> The Crystals, for example, were cheated out of royalties by their producer, Phil Spector, but were unable to leave his control because he owned the name of the group. Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Echols, Alice, *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. xv.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, ‘Rock and Sexuality’ (1978), in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 371-89 (pp. 377-378).

<sup>19</sup> Stacey Luftig, ed., *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), pp. 3-6; Ray Connolly, ‘All That Money Troubles Joni Mitchell’, *London Evening Standard*, January 1970 [accessed via <[jonimitchell.com/library](http://jonimitchell.com/library)>, 5 May 2015].

The culture of modern Western societies ‘institutionalises the domination of men over women’.<sup>20</sup> This means that the beliefs held by men in the music industry are communicated through musical output, in terms of lyrical content, musical style and image. Feminist musicologist Susan McClary claims that dominant social groups establish musical codes, and that since men have had more power than women throughout history music is governed by male beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Sociologist John Shepherd too believes that music in Western classical and popular traditions reflects male hegemony.<sup>22</sup> Shepherd observes that popular music is highly commercialised and acts as ‘an agent of social control’; therefore, being the music of ‘the people’, popular music is able to influence societal behaviour and norms.<sup>23</sup> However, Shepherd also acknowledges that popular music has the ability to create an ‘oppositional consciousness’ which may challenge and subvert the implicit premises of an ‘industrial world sense’.<sup>24</sup> He provides an example of this in the way that both avant-garde jazz and progressive rock brought together ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures.<sup>25</sup> Marilyn Adler Papayanis claims that Joni Mitchell influenced a change in societal perceptions of female sexuality by openly singing about her own romantic experiences,<sup>26</sup> thus supporting Shepherd’s belief in a link between social and musical change.<sup>27</sup>

Joni Mitchell’s rise to prominence around 1967 – when she was a newly-divorced young woman – coincided not only with the emergence of women in San Francisco and

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<sup>20</sup> Peter J. Martin, *Sounds and Society: Themes in the Sociology of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Shepherd, John, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Shepherd, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Adler Papayanis, ‘Feeling Free and Female Sexuality: The Aesthetics of Joni Mitchell’, *Popular Music and Society*, 33/5 (2010), 641-656.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, p. 135.

Los Angeles who were challenging the expectations of female musicians as sexual, passive beings, such as ‘Mama’ Cass Elliot,<sup>28</sup> but also the late 1960s Women’s Liberation Movement – otherwise known as ‘radical feminism’ – and challenges to the idea of what constitutes gender.<sup>29</sup> This meant that Mitchell was able to manage her own affairs for the very beginning of her career: she established her own publishing company (Siquomb Publishing Corp.) in 1967, and therefore avoided the interference of a record label for a short time. However, she soon became restricted by expectations from the industry and the public as she signed with the larger label *Reprise* and released her first album with them, *Song to a Seagull*, in 1968.<sup>30</sup>

According to Méliſse Lafrance, social discipline (such as the overwhelming presence of men in the music industry) means that ‘[w]omen are forced to choose to be the Other’: women therefore actively, but not freely, create their own ‘gendered identities’.<sup>31</sup> Whilst Mitchell actively pursued her own musical style, she could not freely pursue genres that did not fit with the ‘safe’, ‘girl-with-a-guitar’ image, wrongly labelled as folk. Thus, she was indeed forced to be ‘the Other’ as her gender rendered her musical options limited.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jo B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 46-48.

<sup>29</sup> Henderson, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92. There are inconsistencies as to whether the album should be called *Joni Mitchell*, eponymously, or *Song to a Seagull*, the words on the album artwork. I will call it the latter as this title is the most frequently used. Joni Mitchell, *Song to a Seagull*, CD Reprise 6293 (1968).

<sup>31</sup> Lori Burns and Méliſse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 11. See also Dorothy E. Smith, *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Later when she did pursue other styles, she received critical backlash. See Chapter Three for a discussion of this and whether it was due to gender stereotypes.

## The 'folksinger' label

Mitchell states that she 'began as a folksinger', but viewed herself in this role 'from 1963 until '65' only.<sup>33</sup> Stacy Luftig claims that Mitchell had stopped singing folksongs in 1965, the same year she married Chuck Mitchell, but she continued to be labelled as a 'folksinger' for years afterwards.<sup>34</sup> Articles such as 'Joni Mitchell: Folksongs' in *Variety* magazine (1966) confirm this.<sup>35</sup> Stuart Henderson claims that *For the Roses* (1972)<sup>36</sup> was 'the last album to seem to exhibit Joni Mitchell as a folksinger', but he doubts whether her music from this period is really folk music.<sup>37</sup> Why, then, did her music continue to be described as folk after she had moved on to her own harmonically-complex style of songwriting? In an interview with Daniel Levitin in 1996, Mitchell claims that this was due to gender-based assumptions – people 'superficially' saw 'a girl with a guitar' and could not see beyond this image to hear the musical and lyrical complexity behind the simple instrumentation.<sup>38</sup> This 'girl with a guitar' stereotype came from an emerging music industry in which to be a mainstream pop star was to be a white man. The record industry doubted the abilities of women to sell records, and therefore limited the promotion of white female performers to either folk or 'saccharine pop'.<sup>39</sup> Female folk musicians included Joan Baez and Judy Collins, who, as noted by Frith and McRobbie, abided by the stereotypes of female popular

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<sup>33</sup> Brand, Stewart, 'The Education of Joni Mitchell', *The CoEvolution Quarterly*, Summer 1976, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 12-21 (p. 22).

<sup>34</sup> Luftig, p. xiv.

<sup>35</sup> 'Joni Mitchell: Folksongs', *Variety*, September 21, 1966, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 3 (p. 3).

<sup>36</sup> Joni Mitchell, *For the Roses*, CD, Reprise 5057 (1972).

<sup>37</sup> Henderson, p. 98.

<sup>38</sup> Levitin, Daniel J., 'A Conversation with Joni Mitchell', *Grammy Magazine*, Spring (March) 1996, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 177-187 (p. 179).

<sup>39</sup> Henderson, p. 90.



musicians as passive and sensitive despite their musical talent and ‘toughness’;<sup>40</sup> it was these musicians to whom Mitchell was compared from the beginning of her career.<sup>41</sup>

Being labelled as a folksinger in the second half of the 1960s was unfortunate as, although it meant Mitchell could fulfil some listeners’ nostalgia for pastoral, non-commercial music,<sup>42</sup> she was working within a genre that was becoming unfashionable. With the emergence of folk-rock following Bob Dylan’s growing use of the electric guitar, folk clubs were closing down.<sup>43</sup> However, for those who saw past the ‘girl with a guitar’ folksinger stereotype, Mitchell began to be considered alongside male ‘composer-performers [...] who have evolved folk music into art rock’.<sup>44</sup> Mitchell has repeatedly aligned herself with Western art music, claiming, for example, that her music was actually ‘closer to German lieder’ than folk music, thanks to its use of ‘elements of romantic classicism’.<sup>45</sup> Historically, men have been more prominent than women in music composition,<sup>46</sup> so the idea of what McClary terms a ‘singer-composer’ was subversive in the 1960s.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, even in this context Mitchell came from a feminine angle, an outsider to the norm because of her gender. In 1969 she said ‘I love to hear men sing my songs, because they’re written from a feminine point of view, and men bring totally different things to them’.<sup>48</sup> It would be easy to claim that her lyrics, rather than the musical content, are what she refers to here as feminine, but we must not forget that her

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<sup>40</sup> Frith and McRobbie, p. 377.

<sup>41</sup> Brand, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> Grier (¶17).

<sup>43</sup> Susan Gordon Lydon, ‘Joni Mitchell: In Her House, Love’, *New York Times*, April 20, 1969, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 8-12 (p. 9).

<sup>44</sup> Lydon, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Brand, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> Marcia J Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> McClary, quoted in Shepherd, p. 154.

<sup>48</sup> Lydon, p. 11.

method of songwriting involved a simultaneous weaving together of lyrics and music, thinking about the ways in which one word and a specific chord might be put together to create a certain colour, which results in her ‘words and music [being] locked together’.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, her music at this time was still ‘feminine’. However, the division of her vocal range into two voices – ‘a deep, open-throated tenor and thin soaring soprano’,<sup>50</sup> which was seen as a weakness in her earliest performances, and of which she had not settled onto one of the two – perhaps suggest that at this time Mitchell was experiencing difficulties in deciding how to express her gender identity through music performance, something which she would go on to explore throughout the next decade.

### **Woman-as-sex-object**

As well as being viewed as outside of the norm and categorised into genres that were perceived as ‘acceptable’, women in music were often viewed from a male perspective through what is described by critic Nick Kent as the ‘age-old stereotypes’: one of these stereotypes which particularly applies to Mitchell is the one of ‘woman-as-sex-object’.<sup>51</sup> The ‘woman-as-sex-object’ stereotype was perpetuated in Mitchell’s early career by advertising companies. As noted by Frith and McRobbie, popular music ‘operates both as a form of sexual expression and as a form of sexual control’.<sup>52</sup> Mitchell’s music often narrates her experiences of sexual freedom and she expresses her sexuality through the storytelling aspect of her songs.<sup>53</sup> However, she was also

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<sup>49</sup> Mercer, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Naedele, ‘Outside Schwenksville’, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 24 August 1968 ‘Joni Mitchell’, *New Musical Express*, 11 January 1975 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 6 May 2015].

<sup>51</sup> Nick Kent, ‘Joni Mitchell’, *New Musical Express*, 11 January 1975 [accessed via <rocksbackpages.com>, 16 January 2015].

<sup>52</sup> Frith and McRobbie, p. 373.

<sup>53</sup> Papayanis.

controlled by her sexuality, since it was used, against her will, to advertise her 1969 album *Clouds*. Henderson argues that the slogans ‘Joni Mitchell is 90% virgin’, ‘Joni Mitchell Takes Forever’, and ‘Joni Mitchell Finally Comes Across’ which appeared on these adverts, portrayed the recording and release of the album as a sexual conquest;<sup>54</sup> the result of, as one advert that appeared in *Rolling Stone* on 26th July 1969 worded it, ‘coaxing and cajoling [and] chicanery’.<sup>55</sup>

Mitchell’s ‘sex-object’ reputation also had an unfortunate effect on her public image. Although the latter half of the 1960s saw the increased normalisation of premarital sex – shaped by the media, including popular song<sup>56</sup> – many journalists and critics remained critical of sexually-active women. *Rolling Stone* magazine named Mitchell the ‘Queen of El Lay’, and their 4th February 1971 issue featured a diagram of Mitchell’s lovers, assigning her the ‘Old Lady of the Year award’,<sup>57</sup> a portrayal that would not have been applied to notoriously sexually active male artists such as Rod Stewart.<sup>58</sup> Mitchell claims that *Rolling Stone*’s attempt to guess which of her songs were written about which men was harmful: ‘All that nonsense [...] destroys the ability of the listener to identify with the song’.<sup>59</sup>

## **Beginning to defy gendered stereotypes**

How did Mitchell begin to actively defy these various gendered stereotypes? Although throughout her early period she stood out as a woman who composed her own songs, it was not until just after the release of *For the Roses* that Mitchell seemed to heighten her

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<sup>54</sup> Henderson, p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Henderson, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Papayanis, p. 641.

<sup>57</sup> *Rolling Stone*, in Henderson, p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Bego, p. 119.

<sup>59</sup> Joni Mitchell; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 119.

interest in escaping gender stereotypes and forming a new gender identity. In 1973, Mitchell revealed her feelings: ‘I don’t wanna be vulnerable anymore!’<sup>60</sup> She may have been referring to one – or perhaps both – of two things, which are discussed in depth by Stuart Henderson. Firstly, her feelings of isolation and vulnerability could have reflected her status as a woman in the music industry: if she were to take on a more masculine persona, she could be part of the industry and be able to be considered alongside critically-successful male performers.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, she may have been referring to the vulnerable image of the solo performer, compared to the power and confidence expressed by a band, since a larger number of performers enables a larger sound, and size is equated with power,<sup>62</sup> which was considered to be a more masculine side of rock.<sup>63</sup>

In the same year, Mitchell hired the progressive-rock band L.A. Express, with whom she toured and recorded two studio albums: *Court and Spark* (1974) and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975). Considering that the two albums featured almost the same musicians, *Court and Spark* was by far the most commercially and critically successful, reaching number two in the U.S. Billboard Pop Albums chart.<sup>64</sup> The next two chapters consider the reasons for this.

## Conclusion

Mitchell’s early career was made possible because of increasing female liberation, but was restricted by her male-dominated record label and marketing company. Stereotypes

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<sup>60</sup> Malka Marom, *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2014), p. xxi.

<sup>61</sup> Henderson, p. 99.

<sup>62</sup> For more information on this concept in relation to Western art music, see Citron.

<sup>63</sup> Henderson, p. 99.

<sup>64</sup> Jason Ankeny, ‘Joni Mitchell’, *AllMusic* <<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/joni-mitchell-mn0000270491>> [accessed 6 May 2015].

of Mitchell as a folk singer and a sex object were established in her early period, but she expressed a desire to escape this image in 1973, and began to masculinise herself and her music as a way to challenge stereotypes. The next chapter explores how she took this further in the years 1975-76.

## Chapter Two

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Between 1975 and 1976, Joni Mitchell's music underwent a transformation. She began to explore features of jazz and world music, and, more confident performing with a male band, frequently matched the other band members by dressing in dark suits rather than the flowing dresses she had worn in 1974,<sup>65</sup> reflecting the increasing masculinisation of her music.

As Henderson observes, studies on women in rock music, such as Gillian Gaar's *She's A Rebel* and Ellen Schwartz's *Born a Woman*,<sup>66</sup> focus on women who appropriate the roles of 'male' rockers.<sup>67</sup> Female rock stars such as Grace Slick of Jefferson Airplane and Janis Joplin had to undertake 'a process of self-masculinisation [to overcome] the restrictions brought about by their womanliness' and achieve

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<sup>65</sup> *Old Grey Whistle Test*, BBC 2, 19 November 1974.

<sup>66</sup> Gillian Gaar, *She's A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (New York: Seal Press, 2002); Ellen Schwartz, *Born a Woman: Seven Canadian Women Singer-Songwriters* (Winlaw, BC: Polestar Press, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> Henderson, p. 85.

commercial success.<sup>68</sup> Whilst, to some extent, Mitchell also became ‘one of the boys’ by employing a male band,<sup>69</sup> the male rocker role is not so easily applied to Joni Mitchell, whose music and image became more ‘masculine’ in other ways. This chapter examines the ways in which Mitchell’s music of the years 1975-76, during which she released the albums *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975) and *Hejira* (1976), demonstrates an increased masculinity. It discusses her foregrounding of the electric guitar; creation of a rich bass timbre through choice of guitar model, bass guitarist, tunings and vocal tessitura; harmony and tonality; male lifestyle, and, finally, adoption of a male persona.

## The guitar

Musical details such as pitch and timbre signify gendered meanings that either belong to a particular genre or to a longstanding ‘tradition of musical semiotics’.<sup>70</sup> According to Sara Cohen, ‘[p]articlar instruments, sounds, structures and styles may [...] connotate male or female stereotypes’ when collective musical meanings are shared within particular social or cultural groups.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, different markers are used in different genres to affirm masculinity. Within rock music, the electric guitar is a marker of masculinity: the instrument is not often associated with women in popular music,<sup>72</sup> and the ‘demonstrations of phallic power’ read in its use are, according to Whiteley,

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<sup>68</sup> Levent Donat Berköz, ‘A Gendered Musicological Study of the Work of Four Leading Female Singer-Songwriters: Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell, Kate Bush, and Tori Amos’, (PhD dissertation, City University London, 2012), p. 47.

<sup>69</sup> Jerry Garcia; quoted in Frith and McRobbie, p. 377.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Walser, ‘Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender’, *Runnin With The Devil: Power, Gender, and Masculinity in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 113.

<sup>71</sup> Sara Cohen, ‘Men Making a Scene’, in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 37-49, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Mavis Bayton, ‘Women and the Electric Guitar’, in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 37-49 (p. 37).

evident displays of ‘masculinism’ in rock culture.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, Mitchell’s use of the electric guitar can be read as an attempt to assert a masculine identity. There is a conventional belief in studies of rock music that non-masculine rock puts the voice to the foreground and uses acoustic instruments.<sup>74</sup> Mitchell attempted to bring the guitar to the forefront alongside the voice during the period under investigation in three ways.

Firstly, she reduced the prevalence of the piano, which had featured heavily in her music since 1970. Where the piano does feature, we can read a gendered meaning. For example, ‘Shades of Scarlett Conquering’ from *Hissing*, the first song on the album to foreground the piano, begins with a solo introduction played on the instrument. This is something that Mitchell had done frequently on her previous albums, especially *Ladies of the Canyon*,<sup>75</sup> and here it is suited to the description of the female character Scarlett, who is obsessed with romantic films and believes ‘a woman must have everything’.<sup>76</sup>

Secondly, she creates a ‘signature chorused electric sound’ which is most evident in the eight bar introduction to ‘Coyote’.<sup>77</sup> On *Blue*, Mitchell switches between the guitar, piano and dulcimer:<sup>78</sup> however, on *Hejira*, her only instrument is the guitar, which she plays on every track in either a lead or rhythm style. This would have had a bold effect onstage, as many of Mitchell’s previous performances involved her transitioning between different instruments. As late as her 1974 performance on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, for example, she plays zither, piano and acoustic guitar both as a soloist and with a band.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove*, p. xvii.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>75</sup> Joni Mitchell, *Ladies of the Canyon*, CD, Reprise 6378 (1970).

<sup>76</sup> ‘Shades of Scarlet Conquering’, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

<sup>77</sup> Jesse Gress, ‘Under Investigation: Joni Mitchell Complete So Far...’, *Guitar Player*, November 2014, 90-98 (p. 95).

<sup>78</sup> Joni Mitchell, *Blue*, CD, Reprise 2038 (1971).

<sup>79</sup> *Old Grey Whistle Test*.

Thirdly, the guitar and bass feature prominently in the mix throughout *Hejira*. Mitchell said of bassist Jaco Pastorius, who she employed in 1976, that '[a]lthough I wanted a wide bass sound, his was even wider, and he insisted that he be mixed up so that I was like his background singer'.<sup>80</sup> This meant that she had to double her guitar to match his strong sound, leading to a very guitar-heavy mix.<sup>81</sup>

### **A bass timbre**

Mitchell also makes use of the guitar, as well as the bass guitar and her low voice, to focus on bass timbres. Whiteley has remarked that on Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody', '[t]he heavy timbres of the lower voices [...] traditionally connote the masculine'.<sup>82</sup> Mitchell takes this idea further by extending the bass timbre from the voice to the overall sound of the song through instrumentation. The first evidence of her search for a rich bass timbre is in her interest in the unusually-shaped Steve Klein acoustic guitar, known for its 'rich bass tone', which she first used on the final mix of 'Don't Interrupt the Sorrow' from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.<sup>83</sup> This guitar was designed for Mitchell's lower tunings, and the tone could be lowered further by removing the rosette ring of the sound hole.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers, 'My Secret Place: The guitar odyssey of Joni Mitchell', *Acoustic Guitar*, August 1996, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 219-230 (p. 226).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226. Mitchell continued her efforts to bring the guitar to the forefront later in her career; in the recording for *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* (1988), Mitchell multitracked the guitar part up to twenty four times in an attempt to encourage people to listen to her guitar playing. She suggested of her previous guitar recordings: 'maybe it's just too thin and silvery sounding. If I beef it up and make a whole section of the guitars, maybe they'll notice how these chords are moving and stop calling it folk music.' Rodgers, p. 227. Joni Mitchell, *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*, CD, Geffen 24172 (1988).

<sup>82</sup> Sheila Whiteley, 'Which Freddie? Constructions of Masculinity in Freddie Mercury and Justin Hawkins', in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 21-38, (p. 25).

<sup>83</sup> David Gans, 'Steve Klein: Radical Luthier?', *BAM*, 7 March 1980, pp. 38-39, p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> Rick Turner, 'Joni Mitchell's Custom Klein', *Acoustic Guitar*, January 1994 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 5 May 2015].



However, on *Hejira* Mitchell took this search for a richer bass sound further. While on *Hissing* the band is ‘mixed down in relation to the vocal [...] in order to direct attention more fully toward [Mitchell’s] delivery of the lyrics’,<sup>85</sup> the mix in *Hejira* brings the bass to the forefront; so much so that its title track ‘comes across as a duet between voice and bass guitar’.<sup>86</sup> Underwhelmed by other bassists with whom she had worked or who she had heard, Mitchell employed Pastorius, whose style of playing was more melodic; he fulfilled Mitchell’s desire for a bassist who played the bass guitar as a lead instrument,<sup>87</sup> rather than ‘putting big, dark polka dots along the bottom of the music, and fence posts’.<sup>88</sup>

Pastorius’ importance to Mitchell’s sound during this period is highlighted on the song ‘Hejira’, on which he plays two separate bass lines. The first line mostly consists of open fifths:<sup>89</sup> whilst this is far from the ‘polka dot’ notes, it still fulfils the instrument’s most common function of providing a harmonic bass. The second line, however, is higher in pitch and more rhythmically varied, more closely resembling a melodic line. These two lines together form the most prominent content of the song, overriding the free vocal melody in terms of memorability.

Furthermore, Mitchell’s unusual guitar tunings contribute to this bass tone. Whereas ‘her tunings started at a base of open E and dropped to D’,<sup>90</sup> on ‘Amelia’ she uses the open tuning C G C E G C, and on ‘Hejira’, she employs the tuning B F# C#, E,

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<sup>85</sup> Whitesell, p. 187.

<sup>86</sup> Whitesell, p. 211.

<sup>87</sup> Mark Scott, ‘Anniversaries: “Blue” and “Hejira” – Mile posts on a Lonely Road’, *JoniMitchell.com*, 17 June 2011  
<<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=2384&from=search>> [accessed 2 November 2014].

<sup>88</sup> Rodgers, p. 225.

<sup>89</sup> Open fifths are a unifying feature of the album *Hejira*: ‘Furry Sings the Blues’ and ‘A Strange Boy’ both use open fifth motives in their intros. See Whitesell p. 212.

<sup>90</sup> Rodgers, p. 222.

F#, B; this lowers the bottom string by a perfect fourth and the second string by a minor third, and contributes further to the bass timbre.

In addition, Mitchell's voice, considerably lower in the 1975-6 period than in her early period, contributes further to this bass timbre. Her voice was beginning to change in the early 1970s. Whereas on both the lead vocal and the backing vocals of 'Songs to Aging Children Come' (*Clouds*, 1969) she easily sings in a high tessitura with a somewhat relaxed technique,<sup>91</sup> she displays difficulties from the opening track ('Morning Morgantown') on *Ladies of the Canyon*,<sup>92</sup> in which the highest notes of the song show small signs of strain and are frequently flat in pitch. Her voice is divided into two contrasting registers, but she sounds more comfortable in her lower voice. Describing Mitchell in 1972, journalist Leonard Brown said 'her frail voice, always dependant on glottal gimmicks,<sup>93</sup> was showing the strain of over-exploitation'.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, it would appear to be debatable whether her almost sole use of the lower register from 1975 was intentional. However, in an interview in 1972, Mitchell said that she was tempted to go in the direction of developing her lower, stronger, register alongside a band at some point in the future.<sup>95</sup> This suggests that her use of the lower register of her voice from 1975 was intentional and linked to the idea of masculine strength enabled by a band.

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<sup>91</sup> Joni Mitchell, *Clouds*, LP, Reprise 6341 (1969).

<sup>92</sup> 'Morning Morgantown', *Ladies of the Canyon*.

<sup>93</sup> By 'glottal gimmicks', he is likely referring to Mitchell's tendency to switch between registers mid-phrase. For one of many examples of this, see the phrase 'I wanna free him' on 'Conversation', *Ladies of the Canyon*.

<sup>94</sup> Leonard Brown, 'Roger Kellaway & Joni Mitchell', *Los Angeles Free Press*, 8 December 1972, pp. 25-26 (p. 26).

<sup>95</sup> Penny Valentine, 'Exclusive Joni Mitchell Interview: Part Two', *Sounds*, 10 June 1972, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 45-55 (p. 55).

## Harmony and tonality

Harmony and tonality also play an important role in the portrayal of masculinity in Mitchell's music. Susan McClary has demonstrated that it is possible to read certain key structures as either masculine or feminine. She personifies musical structures, describing the passing of modulations as the music 'conquering other keys'.<sup>96</sup> She claims that it is common, especially in Western classical music, for a piece to begin with a strong 'masculine' theme, explore other 'feminine' themes, but ultimately return to the masculine theme in the tonic, so that the masculine always triumphs.<sup>97</sup> The same idea is manifested in rock music in the commonly-used pattern of conflict-climax-resolution.<sup>98</sup>

In Mitchell's early period, her songs often have a 'sense of open-endedness': in 'Sisotowbell Lane', for example, from the album *Song to a Seagull* (1968), she creates a directionless feeling through 'a series of suspensions, delays and implications'.<sup>99</sup> The majority of her songs before 1974 are modal, most frequently utilising the Myxolydian mode which has major thirds and sixths but a minor seventh. Unlike major and minor scales, the modes she uses do not have a leading note that pulls towards a resolution upwards to the tonic. This absence of goal-orientated direction generated by an infrequency of cadences creates a feeling of limitlessness which the French feminist Luce Irigaray theorises as an aspect of female sexuality.<sup>100</sup>

In *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*, however, the majority of songs are polymodal, consisting of multiple modes based on one particular tonal centre. The tonal

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<sup>96</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 155.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>99</sup> Whitesell, p. 130.

<sup>100</sup> Berköz, p. 129.

centre creates a sense of grounding, reducing the feeling of open-endedness, and the switching of modes means that a leading note is more frequently employed. Two of the songs on *Hissing* which do not, in fact, have many leading notes are songs about weak women: ‘Edith and the Kingpin’ describes women as men’s prey, and ‘Shades of Scarlett Conquering’ describes a woman who has been made frail by her romantic and emotional complexities. Although Mitchell may not have been conscious of her different harmonic palettes as she had a limited knowledge of music notation and theory, ‘harmony was a primary medium of what she wanted to express’.<sup>101</sup> Therefore she may have intentionally chosen harmonies which lack a strong cadential pull to express these weak female characters, while composing the other songs with more masculine harmonies.

### **A male persona**

Mitchell has compared herself to both a playwright and an actress, as she creates theatrical roles in her songs.<sup>102</sup> However, she admits that she feels she is not always suited to some of the theatrical roles she creates, such as in ‘Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire’, from *For the Roses* (1972),<sup>103</sup> which she claims would be more suited to a man’s voice.<sup>104</sup> This is an example of how she recognises gender and creates both male and female music as a songwriter.

There are two songs on *Hejira* in which Mitchell plays a male character. In ‘Furry Sings the Blues’, Mitchell imitates the voice of Walter E. ‘Furry’ Lewis by reaching into the lower range of her voice and slurring the words ‘I don’t like you’. This might

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<sup>101</sup> Whitesell, p. 118.

<sup>102</sup> Steve Warden, Interview on Q107-FM, Toronto, September 1994 [accessed via <[jonimitchell.com/library](http://jonimitchell.com/library)>, 5 May 2015].

<sup>103</sup> ‘Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire’, *For the Roses*, CD, Reprise 5057 (1972).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

indicate that by 1976 she was comfortable with a band and able to take on a male voice without the fear of losing her femininity, a feeling which she had experienced in 1974 and responded to at the time by creating an ‘exaggerated construction of feminine beauty’, with a perm, more make-up, evening gowns and knee-high boots.<sup>105</sup>

Nevertheless, it is a caricature of another person’s voice which has no relation to her own, and is undermined by the comical tone of its performance. Therefore, this in itself does not indicate an increased masculinity in Mitchell’s music. In terms of theatrical roles in this particular song, her persona is either male or female but never androgynous. This suggests that in 1976 she did not feel yet that as a woman she was sufficiently able to ‘act out’ a male role.

On the other hand, she also lowers her voice in order to emulate the voice of the male character on ‘Coyote’. In this song, there is less of a distinction between her own voice and that of the male ‘coyote’ character: the difference in pitch is not as marked, nor is it obviously comical, and whereas in ‘Furry’ Mitchell introduces the protagonist’s voice with the lyric ‘[h]e points a bony finger at you and says [...]’, in ‘Coyote’ she provides no lyrical framing of this second voice. Therefore, because of the blurred distinction between herself and the male ‘coyote’ character, I would argue that this is a marker of increased androgyny.

Mitchell’s adoption of a male voice is such that by the penultimate track of *Hejira*, ‘Blue Motel Room’, it is evident that her portrayal of a female voice is ironic. She reverts from being a member of the band to imitating a jazz lounge singer as a female soloist. She sings at a pitch that is almost uncomfortable for her, so that while it is still clearly a woman singing, it bears similarities to a man trying to imitate a female voice. This illustrates that the high-pitched, feminine voice that Mitchell sang with in

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<sup>105</sup> Henderson, p. 99.

her early period is no longer authentically representative of herself, contrasting with her now more comfortable or ‘natural’ lower voice. This is similar to the Lambert and Hendricks standard ‘Centerpiece’ which features in the middle of ‘Harry’s House/Centerpiece’ on *Hissing*, in which the piano played by jazz pianist Joe Sample is improvisatory, quite virtuosic, and in a jazz idiom. This is not Mitchell’s characteristic playing style, and her voice is higher and lighter than in the surrounding ‘Harry’s House’ material, while the singer dedicates herself to her partner with lines such as ‘nothing’s any good without you’.<sup>106</sup> This is another example of her ironically portraying a more feminine woman as desired by men such as the male composers of this jazz standard, which contrasts with her more masculine self at this time.

### **A male lifestyle**

Mitchell’s lifestyle mirrored the increasingly masculine music that she produced: she aligned her lifestyle to that of a male, rather than female, musician. She did this in three ways.

Firstly, in employing a male band, Mitchell became ‘one of the guys’.<sup>107</sup> Mitchell stated in an interview that she ‘always preferred men’s company’,<sup>108</sup> but that she has struggled to be taken seriously by male musicians; in particular, she claims that she struggled to direct the male bassists with whom she worked because they felt themselves superior to her, prompting the search for a less conventional bassist which resulted in her collaboration with Pastorius.<sup>109</sup> As Whiteley outlines, this is a common experience of women with musical expertise in a male rock environment: they tend to

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Harry’s House/Centerpiece’, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

<sup>107</sup> Bego, p. 189.

<sup>108</sup> Joni Mitchell and Morrissey, ‘Segment 2’, *Words and Music*, Reprise PRO-CD 8610 (1996).

<sup>109</sup> Rodgers, p. 225.

be marked as intruders.<sup>110</sup> McClary provides an explanation for the exclusion of women from certain roles in music, claiming that ‘in Western culture, music is always in danger of being perceived as a feminine (or effeminate) enterprise altogether’.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, a way of ‘asserting masculine control’ over music is to exclude women in some way.<sup>112</sup> Bayton also affirms that women are seen as outsiders in certain rock circles because rock’s ‘masculinity’ is preserved by the exclusion of girls.<sup>113</sup> As a result, it is rare for female singers to contribute to composition, and even rarer for them to have skills in production.<sup>114</sup> Even for a singer to play on her own records in the 1960s was generally disallowed.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, even very early on in her career when she ceased to sing folk songs and began composing her own using the guitar, Mitchell was fulfilling a role most commonly filled by men. However, she was still doing so within the ‘safe’ category of female singer-songwriter: her crossing over into the genres of rock and roll and jazz placed her outside of the genres in which women could take on a leadership role without defying convention. While employing an all-male band, Mitchell refused to align herself with the stereotypical image of the woman as less-educated singer supported by the ‘serious’ male musicians.<sup>116</sup> By playing guitar, composing her own songs, and developing what she describes as a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with the band L.

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<sup>110</sup> Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>111</sup> McClary, p. 151.

<sup>112</sup> McClary, pp. 151-52.

<sup>113</sup> Bayton, ‘Women and the Electric Guitar’, p. 41.

<sup>114</sup> McClary, p. 153.

<sup>115</sup> Janis Ian; quoted in Michele Kort, *Soul Picnic: The Music and Passion of Laura Nyro*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), pp. 29-30.

<sup>116</sup> Lucy O'Brien, p. 40.

A. Express' leader Tom Scott,<sup>117</sup> she became integrated into the band as a respected musician, and 'one of the guys'.

Secondly, Mitchell took on the lifestyle of a male rock musician through her sexuality. Earlier in her career, Mitchell's attractive appearance and sexuality had been used to sell her albums, despite her musical prowess. According to McClary, 'throughout Western history, women musicians have usually been assumed to be publicly available', and many 'have had to fight hard against pressures to yield'.<sup>118</sup> However, since the mid-1970s, Mitchell's musical expressions of her sexuality no longer conformed to the male view of female sexual desire, i.e. 'woman as man sees her'.<sup>119</sup> In the lyrics of *Hissing* and *Hejira* she is not a submissive object of sexual desire, but is subjectively sexually active. On 'Don't Interrupt the Sorrow' (*Hissing*), Mitchell quotes a lover as saying 'your notches, liberation doll'.<sup>120</sup> This reference to the notches on a bedpost or on a man's belt demonstrates her use of sexuality as a means of liberation. However, the music itself is not overtly sexual in character, and the line 'he pins me like a serpent to that Ethiopian wall', recalls both a phallic symbol and the male sexual dominance associated with Islamic Ethiopia.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, she is recalling a relationship in which she was still submissive and restricted by a man. In 'Coyote', on

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<sup>117</sup> 'Studio Star', Newsweek, January 13 1975 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 5 May 2015].

<sup>118</sup> McClary, p. 151.

<sup>119</sup> Luce Irigaray; quoted in Rosemary Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 226.

<sup>120</sup> 'Don't Interrupt the Sorrow', *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

<sup>121</sup> Reidulf Knut Molvaer, *Socialization and social control in Ethiopia* (Memmingen: MZ-Verlagsdruckerei GmbH, 1995). Snakes are a theme throughout this album: the word '[H]issing' in the title could refer either to hosepipes and sprinklers or to the sound of a snake. This imagery is reinforced in the album artwork which features men pulling a large snake across an outer-city field, and Mitchell's drawn-out 's' sounds in the lead vocals of the title track.



the other hand, Mitchell's sexuality is more male in character, as she describes the setting of a one-night stand.<sup>122</sup>

Thirdly, Mitchell's music consistently makes reference to being 'on the road', a lifestyle choice that has 'long been coded as [a symbol] of male freedom'.<sup>123</sup> While Mitchell explores this theme in her other albums, especially *Blue*,<sup>124</sup> on *Hejira* this becomes a unifying theme. Mitchell describes being alone and on the road, which is a feature of male rock.<sup>125</sup> On *Hejira*, Mitchell appears to live a male lifestyle – in 'Coyote' she describes returning home from the recording studio 'as the sun is ascending'. In 'Song for Sharon', Mitchell draws direct comparisons between the life choices of herself and a childhood friend. She describes how when she was younger 'it was white lace [she] was chasing', but whereas Sharon has 'a husband / And a family and a farm' and sings for a hobby, Mitchell is still a 'reckless fool' for 'the ceremony of the bells and lace' but has 'left [her] man' and chosen to prioritise her career.<sup>126</sup> Rather than look for a husband, she just wants to 'find another lover', hinting at multiple short-term sexual relationships.

## Conclusion

It is evident, therefore, that Mitchell was restricted by her gender and resulting stereotypes in her early period. We can perceive her assumption of 'masculine' traits which blur her gender as an escape from this, and an attempt to take on the music

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<sup>122</sup> Janell Lucille Carroll, Kari Doray Volk and Janet Shibley Hyde, 'Differences Between Males and Females in Motives for Engaging in Sexual Intercourse', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 14/2 (April 1985), 131-139.

<sup>123</sup> Walser, p. 115.

<sup>124</sup> The opening track, 'All I Want', for example, begins with the line 'I am on a lonely road and I am travelling'. 'All I Want', *Blue*.

<sup>125</sup> André Nôvoa, 'Musicians on the Move: Mobilities and Identities of a Band on the Road', *Mobilities*, 7/3 (2012), 349-368.

<sup>126</sup> 'Song for Sharon', *Hejira*.

business in a different way: she makes herself less ‘feminine’ as a means of escaping her role in a patriarchal society.

Walser argues that a ‘forged’ masculinity, through a demonstration of male power in heavy metal for example, does not necessarily mean that the performers themselves possess this male power; instead, it is a ‘spectacle’ and a means through which the performers and listeners can ‘demonstrate their manhood’.<sup>127</sup> In a similar way, Mitchell’s creation of ‘masculine’ music does not necessarily indicate that she sees herself as male. Rather, it is a means through which she can explore a less stereotypically feminine version of herself in the medium of her music.

However, according to John Shepherd ‘because people create music, they reproduce in the basic qualities of their music the basic qualities of their own thought processes’.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, Mitchell’s personal gender identity is expressed, to some extent, both intentionally and unintentionally, in her music. Although at the time of composing and recording *Hissing* in 1975, Mitchell may have still been exploring masculinity as a means of escaping the stereotypes established in her early career,<sup>129</sup> by *Hejira* in 1976 her male musician lifestyle was more in line with the increasingly masculine music that she was performing. She became less afraid of losing her femininity and more confident in taking on a male persona in her music. A review in the late 1970s stated that ‘[s]he no longer is the girlish Joni Mitchell’, indicating that her attempt to escape the stereotypes established in her early period through an

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<sup>127</sup> Walser, quoted in Cohen, p. 28.

<sup>128</sup> Shepherd, p. 12.

<sup>129</sup> She began this journey to some extent on *For the Roses* in 1972, where she incorporated new textures and jazz inflections, and *Court and Spark* in 1974, with her employment of a band.

increased masculinity was successful.<sup>130</sup> However, whether her 1975-76 albums were critically successful is a different matter.

## Chapter Three

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Joni Mitchell has, according to Luftig, always ‘had a difficult relationship with the press’.<sup>131</sup> She achieved enormous success with her early solo acoustic albums, but as her musical style evolved, Mitchell alienated some fans and received mixed reviews and low album sales from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s.<sup>132</sup> Luftig believes that although the albums Mitchell released between 1975 and 1979 were among the least

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<sup>130</sup> Carla Hall, ‘The New Joni Mitchell; The Songbird of Woodstock Soars Into Jazz’, *Washington Post*, 25 August 1979, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 107-112 (p. 107).

<sup>131</sup> Stacey Luftig, ed., *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), p. xiv.

<sup>132</sup> However, she was honoured with prestigious awards in the late-1990s, including but not limited to, *Billboard’s* Century Award (1995), The National Academy of Songwriters’ Lifetime Achievement Award (1996), and an induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1997). ‘Sony/Atv Music Publishing And Joni Mitchell Enter Into Worldwide Agreement’, *Business Wire*, 26 August, 1997 [accessed via <[jonimitchell.com/library](http://jonimitchell.com/library)>, 5 May 2015].

well received, they are some of her best.<sup>133</sup> With *Hissing* and *Hejira*, Mitchell experienced commercial success: following on from *Court and Spark* and the live album *Miles of Aisles*, which both peaked at number one on the U.S. charts, *Hissing* peaked at four, and *Hejira* at thirteen. However, neither album provided a hit single to rival the success of ‘Help Me’ from *Court and Spark*, her only US Top Ten single, and they have not been afforded the status of ‘classic’ albums in the same way as her early recordings.<sup>134</sup>

In 1996, Mitchell released a set of compilations titled *Hits* and, somewhat ironically, *Misses*.<sup>135</sup> The vast majority (thirteen out of fifteen) of the songs on the former, considered to be her most popular based upon chart performances, are from her early period, and none are from the 1975-76 years, whereas she chose for *Misses* the songs that she would like to have released as singles.<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell chose to only include two songs from the 1975-6 period on the latter. However, this is not due to a lack of confidence in the quality of *Hissing* and *Hejira*; on the contrary, Mitchell said ‘I feel the best of my work is on neither of these [compilations]’, claiming that her best work is ‘the more innovative material’.<sup>137</sup>

Although there are many aspects which contributed to negative reviews of Mitchell’s music in the years 1975-6 – which deal with ‘finger-pointing’, sexuality, genre and pretentiousness – these all can be reduced to issues of gender.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Luftig, p. xv.

<sup>134</sup> Ankeny.

<sup>135</sup> Joni Mitchell, *Hits*, CD, Reprise 46326 (1996); Joni Mitchell, *Misses*, CD, Reprise 46358 (1996).

<sup>136</sup> Melinda Newman, ‘Joni Mitchell offers ‘Hits’ and ‘Misses’’, *Billboard*, 24 August 1996, 108/34, p1. 3p. (p. 130).

<sup>137</sup> Newman, p. 133.

<sup>138</sup> In a profile by William Ruhlman in 1995, Mitchell claimed that the humour she put on her records in the mid- to late-1970s contributed to the critical backlash she experienced in these years: although she had played her own humorous songs in her very early sets to keep the audience attentive, these songs were not included on her debut album, so she became typecast, creating difficulties when she tried to reintroduce humour onto her records.

### **‘Finger-pointing’**

Mitchell creates female characters in her songs that are oppressed by men, while also criticising a patriarchal society in what appears to be a feminist agenda. Although Mitchell has always rejected the ‘feminist’ label,<sup>139</sup> I would argue that this is due to an aversion to the Women’s Liberation Movement that has been common since the late-1960s,<sup>140</sup> as there was a popular conception of feminists as ‘women who want too much’.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, within the caricature of second wave feminism formed through popular culture, ‘to take on certain positive aspects of “masculinity” would have been unthinkable’,<sup>142</sup> so Mitchell may have seen her own performances of gender as in opposition to what she perceived to be ‘feminism’. Mitchell’s music and lyrics, on the other hand, suggest that she shared certain beliefs with the feminist movement.

In her early period, Mitchell largely wrote autobiographical songs from a first person perspective.<sup>143</sup> However, *Hissing* represents a turning point, as she uses a combination of first, second and third person to criticise a patriarchal society, religion,

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However, ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ (*Ladies of the Canyon*, 1970) is delivered with a light-hearted tone of voice and finishes with Mitchell’s laughter, one of many examples of humour on Mitchell’s early records, therefore, I will not discuss this as a reason for critical unpopularity. William Ruhlman, ‘From Blue to Indigo’, *Goldmine*, 17 February 1995, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 21-40 (p. 34).

<sup>139</sup> Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, p. 12.

<sup>140</sup> Mitchell said in an interview that the women’s movement ‘created an aggressive-type female with a sense of entitlement that’s a bit of a monster’. Mitchell, quoted in Andrew Walker, ‘Joni Mitchell: Why the Fuss?’, *BBC News Magazine*, 9 April 2007 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/magazine/6532705.stm>> [accessed 5 May 2015].

<sup>141</sup> Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, p. 3.

<sup>142</sup> Ana Marie Cox, Freya Johnson, Annalee Newitz and Julian Sandel, ‘Masculinity without Men: Women Reconciling Feminism and Male-Identification’, in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 178-199, p. 179.

<sup>143</sup> Karl Dallas, ‘Joni, The Seagull from Saskatoon’, *Melody Maker*, 28 September 1968, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 6-8 (p. 7).

bohemia and binary distinctions. Mitchell reflects that in *Hissing* she switches from ‘I’ to ‘You’, and that this was unsuccessful because listeners felt she was pointing a finger,<sup>144</sup> whereas ‘I’ is safer because listeners can choose whether or not to identify with the singer.<sup>145</sup> This might explain the enduring popularity of *Blue*, as the use of the first person and the feeling of intimacy produced by simple instrumentation gives the singer an appearance of authenticity,<sup>146</sup> and also allows the listener to identify with the singer. Furthermore, the abstract, vaguely defined worlds and identities that Mitchell created in the majority of her early songs using fluid non-syntactic language is, according to Berköz’s reading of the French feminist Luce Irigaray’s writings, symbolic of female sexuality in its demonstration of ‘multiplicity’,<sup>147</sup> linking the text and the female body in her lyrics,<sup>148</sup> and therefore may have been seen as a more acceptable lyrical approach for women musicians than the more direct language Mitchell used in *Hissing*.

Mitchell uses this finger-pointing device to criticise issues of religious patriarchy and sexual dominance, as discussed in the previous chapter, in ‘Don’t Interrupt the Sorrow’, and she criticises the bohemian art and music scene in ‘The Boho Dance’. However, she also points the finger through third person portraits of women in unfavourable circumstances; this gives a more subtle impression of criticising a patriarchal. Whereas Mitchell wrote about other women in her early period, they were

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<sup>144</sup> This ‘finger-pointing’ device was a feature of the early 1960s folk revival which was influenced by, and later rejected by, Bob Dylan. See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and social movements: Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 127.

<sup>145</sup> Daniel J. Levitin, ‘A Conversation with Joni Mitchell’, *Grammy Magazine*, Spring (March) 1996, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 177-187 (p. 183).

<sup>146</sup> For more on authenticity and identification, including this particular form of authenticity called ‘first-person authenticity’, see Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 200-01.

<sup>147</sup> Berköz, pp. 102-04.

<sup>148</sup> Berköz, p. 113.

largely uncritical, and about romantic tragedies: ‘Marcie’ and ‘Cactus Tree’ are two examples from her debut album *Joni Mitchell* (1968). In ‘Ladies of the Canyon’, from the 1970 album of the same name,<sup>149</sup> she describes three of her friends – Trina, Annie and Estrella – who, like her, either lived in or stayed in Laurel Canyon at the end of the 1960s.<sup>150</sup> Although it describes a setting of domesticity, especially Annie with ‘cats and babies ’round her feet’, it is a portrait of contentment. Mitchell’s voice is multi-tracked, and this gives an impression of a community of women joining in with her song. Berköz argues that this song is an example of the aforementioned feminine multiplicity because of the possibility that Mitchell is portraying different aspects of herself and her femininity through these three female figures.<sup>151</sup>

This contrasts with the less favourable portraits of fictional women on *Hissing*, two of which in particular – ‘The Hissing of Summer Lawns’ and ‘Harry’s House/Centerpiece’ – are subtle social commentaries. The same device of multi-tracking the vocals is used on these two songs, but this time the vocals have an eerie quality. On the former, they sing the words ‘darkness’ with a reverb effect to give the impression of a community of women singing from empty houses in the distance. On the latter, they repeat ‘you love me’, also with reverb, in the passage segueing into the middle section ‘Centerpiece’, and again on the second verse of this section: this gives the impression of a community of women experiencing the same emotions. This time, however, there is less evidence of Mitchell expressing her own femininity as, apart

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<sup>149</sup> *Ladies of the Canyon*.

<sup>150</sup> See: Estrella Berosini, ‘Estrella talks about the song Ladies of the Canyon’, *JoniMitchell.com*, 25 March 2008 <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1872>> [accessed 8 April 2015]; Annie Burden, ‘Thoughts on the song Ladies of the Canyon and the time’, *JoniMitchell.com*, 4 May 2008, <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1867>> [accessed 8 April 2015]; Trina Robbins, ‘Trina talks about the song Ladies of the Canyon’, *JoniMitchell.com*, 19 April 2008 <<http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1864>> [accessed 8 April 2015].

<sup>151</sup> Berköz, p. 106.

from the quotation of ‘Centerpiece’, she abandons use of the first person. Therefore, women may have found it more difficult to identify with Mitchell as a woman without feeling their own lifestyles were being criticised.

I would argue that these two songs are social commentaries because they criticise the husbands of the women and the social environments that have led to their unfavourable circumstances. For example, on ‘The Hissing of Summer Lawns’, Mitchell uses metaphors of possession and imprisonment: ‘He gave her a diamond for her throat [...] He put up a barbed wire fence [...] There’s a heatwave burning in her master’s voice’.<sup>152</sup> On ‘Harry’s House/Centerpiece’, two conflicting verses focus on the husband’s life at work and then the wife’s life at home: this separation of the two verses emphasises the emotional disconnection between the two protagonists.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, the phrase ‘their paper wives and their paper kids’ and the naming of ‘Harry’s house and Harry’s take home pay’ show the anonymity and interchangeability of the men’s wives and children, alluding to, and criticising, the belief that a wife is an object to be possessed by her husband.

It has been a recurring idea in feminist thought that ‘marriage functions as a cornerstone of patriarchy’, as a means by which a man gains possession of a woman.<sup>154</sup> Second wave feminism questioned marriage and domesticity, and ‘sought to unite women through a sense of a shared oppression’,<sup>155</sup> just as the above-mentioned songs portrayed a sense of community of oppressed women.

Therefore, despite Mitchell’s attempts to distance herself from the feminist movement, her songs accord with some of its tenets. As the Women’s Liberation

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<sup>152</sup> ‘The Hissing of Summer Lawns’, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

<sup>153</sup> ‘Harry’s House/Centerpiece’, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

<sup>154</sup> Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 269.

<sup>155</sup> Sue Thornham, ‘Second Wave Feminism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), 29-42, p. 33.



Movement was shortened to ‘Women’s Lib’ by the male-dominated media to mock and trivialise it,<sup>156</sup> so Mitchell, a woman pointing the finger at a chauvinistic society, was seen in a negative light. As she said in 2007, ‘the angry artist is attractive in a male but in a female is a bitch’.<sup>157</sup>

## Sexuality

Mitchell has been criticised for her lack of attractiveness and sexual appeal at this time. Sean Nelson, for example, calls her mid-1970s music ‘unforgivably sexless’.<sup>158</sup>

Mitchell struggled with an image of sexual availability since the previously mentioned advertisement of Warner Brothers for *Clouds* ‘that has both helped and hurt her, and that she has never entirely escaped’.<sup>159</sup> She believes that this advertising strategy came from the confusion over her youthful appearance, leading to her being perceived as an innocent girl to be sexually corrupted.<sup>160</sup> This might explain why her later albums were criticised: fans expected more of this confusingly promiscuous yet innocent girl, but were instead confronted with a more mature and less vulnerable version of Mitchell.

Conversely, Mitchell does confront the topic of sexuality in these years. However, rather than portraying the counter-cultural values of sexual freedom as the vague lyrical references to desire and extra-marital sex present in her earlier albums,<sup>161</sup> she sings directly about a form of sexual freedom most available to men at this time, involving subjectivity and the pursuit of one night stands. In an interview in 2006,

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<sup>156</sup> Gamble, p. 339.

<sup>157</sup> Joni Mitchell, in Neil McCormick, ‘Joni Mitchell: still smoking’, *The Telegraph*, 4 October 2007 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 5 May 2015].

<sup>158</sup> Sean Nelson, *Joni Mitchell’s Court and Spark* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 88.

<sup>159</sup> Ruhlman, p. 36.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Papayanis.

Mitchell talked about how it was considered ‘aggressive’ at that time for a woman to behave in the way she portrays on ‘Coyote’ (*Hejira*), claiming that ‘[t]hey wouldn’t have said it if it had been written by a man’.<sup>162</sup> Since ‘the sexually active woman can only be juxtaposed as aberrant’ to the traditionally pure patriarchal model of womanhood,<sup>163</sup> Mitchell’s sexual desire, which at this time appears to have been more stereotypically masculine in character, was seen as unhealthy. Although her appearance had changed and she was performing on stage among men as a ‘serious’ musician, the fact that ‘[w]omen on the stage are viewed as sexual commodities regardless of their appearance or seriousness’<sup>164</sup> meant that her attempt to subvert the stereotype, as well as her open sexual affirmation, may have caused confusion.

## Genre

Genre may have been one of the reasons for the rejection of Mitchell’s music from the period in question. Genre is ‘a logic through which ideas about race, gender, and social class are created, debated, and performed’.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, playing around with genres as a musician inherently invites controversy, such as the usually complimentary jazz writer Conrad Silvert’s calling *Hissing* ‘obscure, congested and confusing’.<sup>166</sup>

Mitchell’s music between 1975-76 reflects an increased exploration of other genres, especially jazz. Whitesell argues that *For the Roses* (1972) contains jazz inflections, especially in jazz musician Tom Scott’s woodwind solos on the songs ‘Cold

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<sup>162</sup> Doug Fischer, ‘The Trouble She’s Seen’, *Ottawa Citizen*, October 8 2006 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 5 May 2015].

<sup>163</sup> Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, p. 52.

<sup>164</sup> McClary, p. 151.

<sup>165</sup> Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>166</sup> Conrad Silvert, ‘A Special Tribute to Charles Mingus’, May 1979 [accessed via <jonimitchell.com/library>, 5 May 2015].

Blue Steel and Sweet Fire’ and ‘Barangrill’.<sup>167</sup> *Court and Spark* takes this further: Mitchell’s backing band features members of the jazz-rock fusion group the L.A. Express; she emphasises elements of her style which are shared in jazz, such as harmonic complexity, flexible melodies, and syncopated hooks, to ‘evoke an affinity with jazz’,<sup>168</sup> and the album closes with the Annie Ross and Wardell Gray jazz standard ‘Twisted’. However, although the album presents features of jazz music and some jazz pastiche, it is still a pop album. Her arrangement of ‘Down to You’, for example, is complex, but ‘still utterly a pop song’.<sup>169</sup>

*Hissing*, on the other hand, is a more evident foray into jazz. Whereas *Court and Spark* was a departure from folk, *Hissing* was a move towards jazz-rock fusion, as Mitchell employed the fusion band L.A. Express and other jazz musicians. Mitchell, however, claims that while her own guitar playing is not folk, neither is it jazz, because there are ‘laws to jazz chordal movement’ which she mostly disregards.<sup>170</sup>

The writer and broadcaster Andrew Collins shares the view of many that Mitchell’s ‘abstract jazz phase was seemingly designed to put us all off her in the 70s’.<sup>171</sup> Mitchell’s albums in her jazz period were generally unfavoured by critics at the time because of their hybridity, pleasing neither fans of folk and rock/pop nor jazz purists.<sup>172</sup> Critics of *Mingus*, for example, remarked that her voice ‘is not really that of a jazz singer’.<sup>173</sup> The early 1970s saw ‘questions about whether fusion was an ill-

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<sup>167</sup> Whitesell, p. 21.

<sup>168</sup> Whitesell, p. 23.

<sup>169</sup> Jessica Hopper, review of *Joni Mitchell: The Studio Albums 1968-1979*, *Pitchfork*, 9 November 2012 <<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17269-the-studio-albums-1968-1979>> [accessed 5 April 2015].

<sup>170</sup> Rodgers, p. 221.

<sup>171</sup> Andrew Collins, quoted in Walker.

<sup>172</sup> Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, p. 12.

<sup>173</sup> Michael Watts, ‘Joni...er...um’, *Melody Maker*, 16 June 1979 [accessed via <[jonimitchell.com/library](http://jonimitchell.com/library)>, 5 May 2015].

advised clash between, or a creative merging of, jazz and rock.’<sup>174</sup> Therefore, young musicians who, in addition to Mitchell, explored this musical possibility, such as Tony Williams, John McLaughlin and Herbie Hancock, ‘generated critical heat in the 1970s’<sup>175</sup> because of the way these ‘ain’t jazz, ain’t rock’ musicians were both within and outside of genre categories.<sup>176</sup> This led to an alienation of Mitchell’s old fans because, as she claims, ‘[w]hen [she] began experimenting, people weren’t ready for it’.

This position between genres offered an opportunity to balance between inhibiting limits such as those imposed by ‘cultural chauvinisms’.<sup>177</sup> This meant that jazz-rock/fusion music allowed Mitchell to escape the limits previously imposed on her by her gender in other genres such as folk and pop/rock. The critical unpopularity of this musical territory, however, was the price to pay for Mitchell’s aims of overcoming the established gender stereotypes. While glam rock had ‘gender-bending tendencies’ in contrast with ‘the stridently masculinist world of jazz’, the more commercially successful jazz-rock/fusion bands were those that did not confront gender: Lifetime’s album *Emergency*, which involved aspects of gender-bending, was treated with a shockingly silent critical reception and was not at all commercially successful.<sup>178</sup>

Mitchell’s early music appealed to women, who could listen to her music ‘in order to make sense of their own emotional experiences’.<sup>179</sup> Her record label Reprise’s

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<sup>174</sup> Fellezs, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 7. While this term is generally synonymous with ethnocentrism, it is used by Fellezs in reference to social biases in musical genres such as sexism.

<sup>178</sup> Fellezs, p. 122.

<sup>179</sup> Charnock, p. 97. Many of the references to Mitchell in films and novels portray her as a prime example of the kind of music that middle-aged women longing for somewhere to outsource their emotions might listen to, using this significance to aid the narrative. See: Hornby, Nick, *About A Boy* (London: Penguin Publishing Group, 1999); *Love Actually*, dir. Richard Curtis (Universal, 2003); *The Kids are All Right*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko (Focus Features, 2010).

advertises for *Ladies of the Canyon*, with the use of a fictional character named ‘Amy’, ‘capitalized on but also helped to construct’ this impression of Mitchell.<sup>180</sup> Whereas the novelty of a woman singing about her own experiences ‘constituted an act of self-defiance’ to critics in the early 1970s,<sup>181</sup> fitting in with the rise of second wave feminism, her increasing socialising with men and rejection of feminism in the mid-1970s was at odds with the impression that listeners had developed of Mitchell from her previous advertisements and music.<sup>182</sup> Since ‘[g]enre is a way of defining music in its market’, record labels create an image to sell to audiences, requiring the musician to perform in certain ways to contribute to this sense of genre.<sup>183</sup> Because some people ‘live in genre’ as a means of establishing their identity through music, authenticity in terms of whether new releases are true to a certain genre becomes a ‘necessary critical value’.<sup>184</sup> Therefore, Mitchell’s new jazz-inflected music was seen as inauthentic: ‘[a]s far as the rockers were concerned, [a] betrayal, and definitely to the folkies’.<sup>185</sup> Although exploring jazz-rock/fusion enabled Mitchell to undergo a transformation of increased masculinity, it brought with it a decreased popularity, especially among her older fans.

## **Pretentiousness**

One of the reasons Mitchell’s albums from the mid-1970s were overlooked may be due to a perception that her music is musically complex to the extent that only elitist music

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<sup>180</sup> Charnock, p. 98.

<sup>181</sup> Charnock, p. 99.

<sup>182</sup> Charnock, p. 100.

<sup>183</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 75-76.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>185</sup> Rodgers, p. 225.

fans might enjoy it.<sup>186</sup> She does little to counteract this perception, saying ‘sometimes I get so far ahead I look like I’m behind’ to excuse critical unpopularity.<sup>187</sup> Mitchell claims that John Lennon told her that *Court and Spark* is ‘the product of overeducation’, and that if she wants a hit she should ‘Put a fiddle on it!’<sup>188</sup> However, according to Nelson, *Hissing* is ‘even more “overeducated”’.<sup>189</sup> This may stem from the perception that Mitchell believes herself to be both a poet and a composer of ‘high’ art music, as I will now discuss.

In 1977, *Village Voice* published an article accusing Mitchell of ‘pretentious’ lyrics and ‘self-absorption in art’, particularly in reference to *Hejira*.<sup>190</sup> Perry Meisel criticises the album cover as displaying Mitchell ‘in the guise of a poet’, and claims that she ‘has always tried to pass herself off as a poet by printing out her lyrics on the covers of her recordings’, but that her lyrics are only legitimate when sung.<sup>191</sup>

Furthermore, the stylistic presentation of an album cover ‘contributes to a sense of album identity that will, or so the marketer firmly hopes, encourage the buyer to spend her money’.<sup>192</sup> Therefore, if the cover of *Hejira* could be seen as a pretentious attempt on Mitchell’s part to present herself as a poet,<sup>193</sup> there is a possibility that this may have discouraged album sales.

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<sup>186</sup> A recent example of Mitchell’s fans’ elitist status is on an episode of the talent show *The Voice*, on which the panel-member and country-singer Blake Shelton, referring to himself and the contestant, neither of whom had previously heard ‘Help Me’ – compared to the other judges who declare their admiration for Mitchell – exclaims, ‘There’s two normal people here’. Whether or not Shelton has previously listened to Mitchell’s music, he perpetuates a belief that Mitchell’s music is not made for, or appealing to, the average listener. ‘Live Playoffs’, *The Voice*, NBC, 7/16, 11 November 2014.

<sup>187</sup> Luftig, p. xv.

<sup>188</sup> Newman, p. 130.

<sup>189</sup> Nelson, p. 90.

<sup>190</sup> Perry Meisel, ‘An end to innocence: how Joni Mitchell fails’, *Village Voice*, 24 January 1977, in *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Stacy Luftig (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 79-85 (p. 80).

<sup>191</sup> Meisel, p. 82.

<sup>192</sup> Cynthia J. Cyrus, ‘Selling an Image: Girl Groups of the 1960s’, *Popular Music*, 22/2 (2003), 173-193 (p. 174).

<sup>193</sup> As well as confrontational, perhaps, as Mitchell faces the camera directly.

However, it soon becomes apparent in Meisel's article that his thoughts are underscored by sexist assumptions. He implies that Mitchell's main appeal is in the 'heart-throbs' brought about by her voice and melodies, and criticises her attempts to move on from her reputation as the 'Queen of El Lay' as pretentious.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, in 1996, Mitchell did refer to herself and songwriter Laura Nyro as 'composers and poets'.<sup>195</sup>

Furthermore, Mitchell has made a number of claims in which she seems to attempt to align herself with 'high' art forms in music.<sup>196</sup> She believes that her music is 'closer to Debussy and to classical composition' than to folk music.<sup>197</sup> This might appear to be her disregarding folk music as a simple, or 'low' art form, but in reality she is referring to her harmonic language and chordal movement (using chords that move in parallel motion), which, she claims, is closer to Debussy.<sup>198</sup> However, while it may be true that this prevents her music from fitting strictly into the genre of jazz, it is also dubious whether her harmonic language has anything in common with techniques of classical composition. Rather than prove that her music is 'overeducated', this demonstrates her lack of formal education in classical music and composition. In reality, upon entering into the world of jazz musicians, Mitchell stood out due to her absence of formal musical education and her 'musical illiteracy'.<sup>199</sup> Her occasional inability to articulate herself was coupled with a sense of feminine inferiority when in the position of leading men.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Meisel, in Luftig, pp. 79-80.

<sup>195</sup> 'Interview', Details, July 1996 [accessed via <[jonimitchell.com/library](http://jonimitchell.com/library)>, 5 May 2015].

<sup>196</sup> Whitesell, pp. 3-14.

<sup>197</sup> Rodgers, p. 221.

<sup>198</sup> Rodgers, p. 221.

<sup>199</sup> Fellezs, p. 174.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Sue Neimoyer reinterprets Whitesell's discussion of Mitchell's concept of 'high art', denying that Mitchell truly thought her music was like 'art song', and claiming that 'when Mitchell calls her work "art song", the term refers not to the *Lied* tradition of Schubert and Schumann but to the act of creating a 'visual' artwork through words, music, and vocal characterizations.<sup>201</sup> However, Mitchell's claim that her music that was labelled as folk was 'closer to German lieder, or it had elements of romantic classicism to it'<sup>202</sup> clarifies that the use of the term 'art song' was in fact a direct reference to the art song tradition in Western Classical music.

The idea of a woman composer would have been met with hostility: in the social structure of the classical world, 'the (male) composer is exalted while the individual (female) player has low status',<sup>203</sup> and women composers have been marginalised from the received canon for social and political reasons.<sup>204</sup>

We can wonder why Mitchell's albums in these two years generally fail to be considered as 'classic' (the popular music equivalent of a canonical 'great work'), whereas *Blue*, as well as, occasionally, *Court and Spark*, have permeated western culture, continue to be listed among 'best albums' lists, and are cited as points of influence for more recent artists.

In her reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*,<sup>205</sup> Sherry B. Ortner states that while woman creates human life, which she describes as a 'perishable', man must create artificially with technology and symbols, and as a result 'he creates

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<sup>201</sup> Emphasis as written. Sue Neimoyer, review of *The Music of Joni Mitchell* by Lloyd Whitesell, *American Music*, 27/4 (Winter 2009), 517-520 (p. 518).

<sup>202</sup> Ruhlman, p. 28.

<sup>203</sup> Mavis Bayton, 'How Women Become Musicians', in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 237-257, p. 240.

<sup>204</sup> David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: the Key Concepts* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 48.

<sup>205</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. HM Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).



relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects'.<sup>206</sup> If this is true, women are seen to create finite beings, whereas men are seen to create objects that last. Therefore, it would be seen as appropriate that a female musician creates music for the temporary enjoyment of consumers, whereas a male musician creates a transcendent work of art. To deny the predominance of musical 'great works' to men by allowing women a number of 'great works' would question the perceived natural roles of men and women in acts of creativity.

It is easy to see why *Blue* and *Court and Spark* are permitted this status. The confessional and personal nature of *Blue* makes it the album to most epitomise what Mitchell describes as the 'depth and emotionality' of her music. According to her, the traits that are required to enjoy this kind of music 'are bred out of the white, straight males'.<sup>207</sup> Therefore, it is an album that is most appreciated by women, and so its resulting popularity may necessitate its inclusion on such lists as one of the few albums to fulfil the perfunctory role of representing female listeners. *Court and Spark's* inclusion, on the other hand, may be due to a combination of its undeniable commercial success and the inclusion of a male band playing in a rock 'n' roll-influenced style that might appeal more to men.

## Conclusion

The denial of a canonical status to *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*, then, is due to the gendered criticisms in the press of Mitchell and her music in the mid-1970s. These criticisms were born out of the confusion upon hearing a woman's voice – with

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<sup>206</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Louise Lamphere, Joan Bamberger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-88 (p. 75).

<sup>207</sup> Walker.

which one might be familiar from her earlier, more feminine, hits – in a critically unpopular and misunderstood jazz-rock style that was a fusion of the male-dominated rock and jazz genres, and with a masculine, guitar-heavy, bass timbre. Furthermore, with this music in which Mitchell sang openly about her sexuality in an era in which this was still a contentious topic, and sometimes in a male persona, came a seemingly feminist agenda and a self-importance to which women were not seen to be entitled, contributing to a critical backlash.

## Conclusions

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Mitchell's status as a woman within the male-dominated music industry meant that she was faced with the challenge of overcoming stereotypes in the press and in the marketing of her albums which portrayed her as sexually desirable, and the gendered perception that her music belonged to the category of 'folk'. This mirrored her lifestyle, in which she increasingly rejected societal expectations of women in favour of a more male way of living as a musician, but this challenge to normative gender behaviour contributed to the poor critical reception of *Hissing* and *Hejira*, compared with the undoubted success of her preceding album, *Court and Spark*. We can therefore see that Mitchell's popularity, at least concerning her music up until 1976, has been intrinsically linked to, and restricted by, gender stereotypes. The analysis of the 1975-76 albums as musically masculine is new, and, I hope, sheds a new light on Mitchell's music at this time.

A priori, it is surprising to hear that Mitchell rejected, and continues to reject, feminism, despite evidence to the contrary in her lyrical content, particularly on *Hissing*. However, her expression of masculinity through music indicates a complex gender identity that prevents her from identifying with second-wave feminism.

Given the scope of this dissertation, there have been necessary omissions. I have focused on Mitchell's musical output and how it mirrored her lifestyle, but I would have liked to have included discussion of her physical appearance, and how her choice of clothing, make-up and hairstyle changed in the years studied, progressing from Henderson's analysis of this in the preceding years. I also would have liked to have considered Mitchell's role as producer, on which there is very little information available.

I have covered perceptions of Mitchell's music in the context of Western culture with a focus on the USA, but it would be interesting to compare the USA with Britain and Canada because of their differing interactions with cultural issues such as feminism and race. There is also scope for further study on more recent perceptions of Mitchell's music, and the aforementioned comparisons drawn with folk singer-songwriters from the 1990s to now, coupled with Mitchell's very recently increased media portrayal due to her involvement in a *Vogue* fashion campaign and her well-documented hospital admission. A further area of research is the link between age and gender and the interaction between the apparent dichotomies (the validity of which she questions in 'Shadows and Light' from *Hissing*) of youthfulness and maturity, and femininity and masculinity, in Mitchell's music.

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