

Wanderlust: Joni Mitchell's Hejira

By Anthony DeCurtis

An alluring woman wears black, bohemian garb, the outfit of an artist, and, as she extends her arms and runs, those garments provide her with wings of flight. "I'm like a black crow flying/In a blue, blue sky," she sings. In another photograph, she stares directly at the viewer, her skin as white as the frost-covered landscape and the winter sky. An image of a long, empty highway penetrates deep into her body. She calls herself "a hitcher/A prisoner of the white lines on the freeway."

Another picture reveals a woman in a wedding dress standing demure in the distance. "I saw the long white dress of love/On a storefront mannequin," a voice sings, "... Some girl's going to see that dress/And crave that day like crazy." The woman in the photo floats on a frozen lake that blurs into the sky at the horizon, her dress as white as the ice and the clouds. A dancing man in black, presumably her groom, glides freely across the ice and transfixes her. They seem to exist in entirely different worlds, his seductive performance and her mesmerized longing all that unites them.

Those snapshots from a dream constitute the art work for Joni Mitchell's Hejira, an extraordinary album about flight in all its aspects - physical, emotional and spiritual. Those lyrics provide part of that dream's soundtrack. Beyond flight, Hejira is also about the reasons for flight - love and the fear of love, the promise of love and its failure, the search for love and its elusiveness, the terror and the secret, whispering satisfactions of being alone, in motion, free. "Love stimulated my illusions/More than anything," Mitchell sings, but unraveling those illusions from anything that might pass as reality is a tricky business. Doing so elicits stark admissions ("Maybe I've never really loved/I guess that is the truth/I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes") and sly, Byronic rhymes ("Well, there's a wide wide world of noble causes/And lovely landscapes to discover/But all I really want to do, right now/Is ... find another lover!").

When Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina in 622 - the flight that gives us the term "hejira" and the date from which the Islamic world reckons time - he was fleeing persecution and death, running to preserve his faith. A determinedly independent female artist writing on the cusp of the American biennial - Hejira came out in 1976 - Mitchell took flight for the far more private reasons of a crumbling relationship. But, in the richest literary tradition, her inward and outward journeys simultaneously mirror and relieve each other. She could escape her inner life in the spontaneity of her travels; at the same time, she could flee engagement with others amid the intricacies of her inner life. "Till I started analyzing ... And it made most people nervous," she sings. "They just didn't want to know."

Hejira, then, is partly a travelogue in which the place names mount up as the heroine moves on and recounts the tales of her going - New England, North Dakota, Beale Street, Bleecker Street, even Staten Island and the Wollman Skating Rink. The music is as free as the album's restless spirit. Many of the songs don't have drums, and the rhythms move on a moment's impulse with the sinuousness of Mitchell's electric guitar and the elasticity of her vocal and lyric lines.

The melodies expand until they are more like unpredictably recurring allusions to melody rather than clearly delineated phrases. And Jaco Pastorius's bass sidles, nudges and cajoles its way into the upper registers of the lead parts like a friend interrupting a conversation with something important to say, like a former lover who refuses a fate in the background, like a memory that will not accept being forgotten. His sounds, in other words, unnervingly underscore the haunted sense of Mitchell's songs.

More than twenty years after its initial appearance, Hejira still makes a stunning, nearly intimidating impression. Because Mitchell is virtually alone among the great singer-songwriters for making musical contributions that are as significant as her lyrics, it has become easy to overlook how truly remarkable her lyric writing is. Particularly in the two songs on the album addressed to women, "Amelia" and "Song for Sharon," she discovers a language - and an supple vocal style in which to articulate that language - that moves indistinctly between poetry and prose, speech and thought, cool abstraction and erotic revelation.

As powerfully emotional as it is, Hejira is, at its most profound, an exploration of the prisonhouse of the self. "And the power of reason/And the flowers of deep feelings/Seem to serve me/Only to deceive me," Mitchell sings on "Song to Sharon." Encountering the tangled, contradictory sources of our motivations, swirling in the funhouse reflexivity of all our perceptions - those are journeys as voluptuous and frightening as any trek along the lost highway.

Hejira sketches a roadmap to the wanderings of the soul, and intimates that losing and finding yourself may not be as different as they first might appear. Neither state of awareness is permanent, after all. And, as you swing through each only to drift again into the other, the questions that arise easily overwhelm any answers that may briefly take shape, before evaporating in the shimmer of the rearview mirror.