Hejira Highs

With their pitch-perfect readings of Joni Mitchell's music, Hejira have been dazzling audiences across the UK. As the album the band is named after turns 50, Peter Jones meets bandleader Pete Oxley and singer Hattie Whitehead to uncover the alchemy of their sound

Anyone who has heard them will probably agree that the most impressive bearer of the Joni Mitchell torch these days is a band known as Hejira. *Jazzwise* readers, of course, were on to them early – we featured them in 'Taking Off' in our February 2024 issue. For those who missed it, a swift recap: guitarist Pete Oxley has run The Spin jazz club in Oxford for 25 years. As a great admirer of Joni Mitchell, particularly the period covered by her 1980 live album *Shadows and Light*, it crossed his mind in 2022 to organise a special night of her music at the club.

Musically, it would be a rather daunting task: *Shadows and Light* features some of the most extraordinary jazz musicians of the modern era. Having studied Pat Metheny for many years, Oxley felt reasonably comfortable taking on the electric guitar role himself. The rest of the band were Chris Eldred on keys (for Lyle Mays), Ollie Weston on reeds (for Michael Brecker), Dave Jones on fretless bass (Jaco Pastorius) and Rick Finlay on drums (Don Alias). Later he added percussionist Marc Cecil to the line-up. The all-important vocal/acoustic guitar slot was taken by Hattie Whitehead.

The one-off gig at The Spin sold out, and Oxley quickly added a second night, which also sold out. Since then the project has snowballed, with 150 gigs throughout the UK, culminating in 2026 in a nine-date American tour. Live recordings taken from those performances have now been released as Hejira's second album.

Joni Mitchell's left hand was weakened by polio as a child, restricting her dexterity on the guitar, a problem she solved by using different tunings, many of which were her own invention. This resulted in an entirely personal sound, chord inversions that other guitarists would never find, leading to melodies that were equally unique.

A consummate musician as well as singer, Hattie Whitehead had few qualms about tackling the odd guitar tunings. "I already played in several different open tunings anyway, so it wasn't a new thing to me when we started this project." She initially discovered them on a website, as well as listening to the *Shadows and Light* album and comparing the information. "I've also adapted slightly so I'm not using a different tuning for every single song." As for the emotions and messages in the music, Hattie recognises what a well-rounded person Joni Mitchell is, a woman "that's so aware of herself, and so aware of the world, and so in touch with emotion."

Pete Oxley is also in awe of Mitchell's songwriting. "When I heard Joni, it was like a whole other level of singer-songwriter. The melodies were so beautiful and the way she sang, her pitch, her sound, and all these beautiful melodies, such unusual melodies, and with her open tunings, and these made-up chords of hers. So when I came to wanting to do this music, and I started transcribing songs, I listened to 'Hejira' – the song 'Hejira'. I was completely amazed, it's a three-chord song, with two interludes between each verse. And because the melody is so beautiful, and the voicings are so unlike a standard three-chord song, it never struck me that that's what it was. Not only the melodies and the voices, but also the lyrics. I really got stuck into the lyrics and found the poetry of those songs in particular completely striking, and poetry in its own right."

Hattie maintains that Hejira are not a tribute band. "Originality is in the way that you perform the song – you make that performance your own. The more we play this repertoire, the more meanings pop out in the lyrics that I can apply to my own existence, and that's the original thing we're doing. We're enjoying it as ourselves doing it rather than pretending to be someone else playing the songs, which is what I imagine a tribute band's thing to be."

As well as a guitarist of rare sophistication, Pete Oxley is a canny business operator, with the organisational skills and technical know-how to capitalise on his band's potential. "A big thing that's happened for us is the use of YouTube. That's been really, really helpful. I made these videos, put them up online. They'd only just gone up, and one of them got quite a lot of attention – the actual song, 'Hejira'. So quite quickly it went up to 50,000 views, which I'd never had in any of my original music. And some useful people started seeing it – promoters were seeing it. You know, the word got out a little bit." It certainly did. At the time of writing, that video had reached 228,000 views.

Commercially, Hejira has the advantage of appealing to audiences way beyond jazz: folk fans, obviously, given Joni Mitchell's musical history, but also rock – perhaps veering into yacht rock – hooking in the sort of people who like Americana in the vein of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Doobie Brothers or Steely Dan. This genre fluidity has opened the door to the sort of festivals and venues that might baulk at the idea of promoting pure jazz.

"We've been selling out at places like the Stables at Wavendon, which holds about 400, St George's in Bristol, we had more than 500 there. Great venue. Jazz Café, we've now sold it out three times. That's 500. So, you know, the audiences

are developing. We've spread the word by playing as many venues around the country and playing as often as we can. Right up to Scotland, Ireland as well – we've been to Ireland a couple of times."

Such was the intensity of touring during the first year, with 50 gigs all over the UK, that Hattie, who has her own career as a singer-songwriter, told Pete she was finding it all a bit much. "She said, I really need to limit it to about 35, more or less. But the rest of the band were saying, actually, we'd like to do more than 50 a year! So the only solution was to try and find other singers. And we've been incredibly fortunate in finding two other great singers who also can play guitar, who also love Joni's music, and also bring their own thing to the band. So, they're not emulating Hattie, just like Hattie doesn't emulate Joni."

The deps are Immy Churchill and Jana Varga, who hails from Slovenia (readers may wish to check out Varga's gorgeous rendition of Joni Mitchell's 'Love' on YouTube). In case of anyone else's unavailability, Pete Oxley has also found deps for each musician in the band. "I'm the only one that is sort of undeppable," he adds, "because I'm in charge."

The 2026 American tour was a feat of quite extraordinary luck, as well as judgement. First, an email arrived out of the blue from a promoter in Syracuse, New York, saying that he'd seen the band's videos, and wanted them to come and play at the festival he'd been running for 40 years. Learning that American work visas would cost $7,000 and take at least six months to be processed, Pete realised that extra gigs were urgently needed. Then he remembered someone else who had contacted him 18 months earlier from a theatre in Pennsylvania, who now offered them dates which fitted in.

Another email arrived, this one from someone who had enjoyed the Hejira show at The Stables, mentioning that he didn't go to gigs very much because his work was organising gigs for bands in America. Oxley couldn't believe his luck. "We met up the next day, and he became our agent in America, and filled in the rest of the dates." And the luck didn't end there. Another American got in touch – again after seeing the band's YouTube videos. He turned out to be an experienced tour manager, who ended up not only supplying all the equipment and instruments they needed, but driving them between gigs, culminating at the Iridium in New York.

Lucky? Certainly. But of course, the harder Pete Oxley works, the luckier he seems to get. "I'm surprised there hasn't been another band doing this," he muses, "so we've got a little niche. And within that niche, there's still quite a lot of gold to mine."

Hejira play Jazz Cafe, London (16 Nov), Brighton Dome Corn Exchange, Brighton (28 Nov), The Voodoo Rooms, Edinburgh (10 March 2027), and Saint Luke's, Glasgow (11 March 2027)

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– Hattie Whitehead



Pete Oxley (left) and Hattie Whitehead (right)