

# Back to the garden again: Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock' and utopianism in song

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## Abstract

*Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock' is one of the most recognisable songs about the 1969 festival, yet Mitchell did not attend Woodstock and instead wrote her song in a New York City hotel room. The song 'Woodstock', then, represents the event not as it literally happened, but as it could have been, as an idealised depiction of nostalgia for the festival and the era's utopian potential. I analyse Mitchell's song as a utopian text and investigate the political efficacy of 'Woodstock's musical and lyrical content for Mitchell, for other artists who cover the song, and for audiences who may recognise it as the festival's 'theme'. As her career continues, Mitchell abandons the folk-based style of her early albums, but keeps 'Woodstock' an active part of her performance repertoire. I trace three later versions to show that the utopianism of the original disappears as Mitchell re-imagines the song, the event and its ideological legacy.*

## Introduction

Utopian thought cannot avoid having political implications. The investigation of utopianism and the focus I give it here stems from the complicated history popular music and politics share. It should be obvious that passing reference to political events does not make a song utopian, nor does commentary on political themes or calling a body of listeners to take political action. Popular music of the latter type includes 'rally' songs, a term that indicates the songs' function as stylistic vessels for political evangelism on the part of a singer or band. Rally songs, while surely intended to inspire change, are promotional (think of music at political rallies or, more generally, music with grandiose, sing-along choruses designed to inspire audience participation) instead of utopian.

This all begs the question of what, exactly, utopianism is and what it entails. The words 'utopia' or 'utopian' get tossed around frequently and, as such, have become feeble as designations of what is (and was) a powerful concept. The classic model for traditional utopian thought is, of course, Sir Thomas More's 1516 essay, *Utopia*. To create his homonymic title, More linked two Greek terms, ού-*topia* and εὔ-*topia*. The separate prefixes of the Greek words contribute to our hybrid, modern word, since the two prefixes ού and εὔ mean 'not' and 'good', respectively; thus ού-*topia* means literally 'not-place' and εὔ-*topia* 'good-place', leaving More's title to connote a 'good-yet-not-real-place'. While the initial impetus for *Utopia* hinged on the creation

of a just political system, the implementation thereof was likely never expected. Fundamental to the tradition of utopian literature is a journey to an unknown place where the traveller (or reader/listener) is given a guided tour detailing the social, political, economic and religious organisation of the utopian society. Utopian communities are usually places where the population lives together harmoniously, and the authors of traditional texts often feature rigid laws or social codes implemented to repress unreliable, unstable aspects of human behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Since the utopian traveller departs from a real place, visits an imagined place and then returns home, such utopias represent a literary fusion of reality and fiction, the latter of which offers authors a privileged means of conveying potentially subversive messages.

Glossing – if you will allow me – over a swathe of the genre’s history, the idea of utopia in the 20th century came into heated debate. Despite the narratives of adventure and travel, theorists and philosophers thought utopias lacked real, constructive action because historical reality, in which human agency prompts the progress witnessed in the utopian community, is absent in utopian fiction. A central tenet of anti-utopianism lies in this critique: utopias exist outside history and are thus impractical (and perhaps dangerous) for the present and the future.<sup>2</sup> Famously, the early and mid-20th century saw a shift from utopian to dystopian fiction, wherein the utopian communities in question had become perfectly negative. This trend persists to this day, although some middle- and later-century theorists worked to re-establish utopianism as a viable artistic goal. Fundamental to the reinvigoration of utopian aspiration in the later 20th century was a shift of setting, a literal change of location: while most utopias of the 18th and 19th centuries were set *elsewhere* – on some imaginary island or unexplored, undiscovered region of earth – much utopian fiction of the late 20th and 21st centuries takes place in the future. Inherent to any depiction of utopia in the future – a temporal change – is a simultaneous change at the spatial level; Michel Foucault famously recontextualised the original term as ‘heterotopia’ in a 1967 article entitled ‘Des espaces autres’ (Of other spaces). This short work investigates the idea of ‘space’ in modern society, focusing on places that exist as sites of ambiguous, abnormal or euhronistic social ordering, and Foucault posits heterotopia as a phenomenon unique to physical spaces where illusory, esoteric or surreal realities coincide with normative, everyday space and time.<sup>3</sup> Such spaces are locations with alternative configurations of both freedom and control.

Utopian theorist Louis Marin, hoping to resituate utopia as a useful diagnostic for contemporary society, discusses utopianism using echoes of Foucault’s terminology: ‘the utopian moment [consists] in opening up . . . a *nowhere*, a place without place, a moment out of time, the truth of a Fiction, the syncopation of an infinity and, paradoxically, its limit, its frontier.’<sup>4</sup> Popular songs are perfect, succinct *nowheres*, hence my desire to investigate their utopian efficacy. To trace how popular music can move into the realm of the utopian is the goal of this paper, and my focal

<sup>1</sup> Vieira (2010, pp. 7–16).

<sup>2</sup> As decades of the 20th century passed, many intellectuals began to reject utopian aspiration and some, among them Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt and Jacob Talmon, attacked utopianism with vitriol and moved to equate it with totalitarianism. For more specific information about the critiques of utopianism, see Jacoby (2005), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault (1986, pp. 22–7).

<sup>4</sup> Marin (1993, p. 415).

point is the recording of a song featuring lyrics that refer and allude to a very well-known event: Woodstock 1969. The song does not promote a certain political belief, provide relief or consolation from political struggle or endorse a political candidate; indeed, it barely mentions politics at all. Because of this, the musical and lyrical gestures differ from those found in rally songs or other politically motivated music. Similarly, the sonic markers of utopianism heard in the original recording of the song are summarily stripped away as the artist re-approaches the song at later points in her career. Literary theorist Fátima Vieira notes that political-ideological utopianism seems to have a short 'lifetime' because implementation of its ideals cannot 'overcome the frontiers of the problems it tries to solve'.<sup>5</sup> Utopia's political ideals, while nourished by the immeasurable and perennial desire for change, cannot usually be fulfilled, which keeps them from aging well. Arguing for the articulation of utopianism in popular music, also not known for aging particularly well, will necessarily involve an investigation of any utopian song's existence and reception throughout consecutive decades. To that end, this paper will trace Joni Mitchell's official, studio recordings of 'Woodstock' from its inception in 1969 to Mitchell's most recent version on 2002's *Travelogue*.

### Popular music as political commentary: a brief history

A vested interest in politics or in the display of political opinions was (and is still) not generally associated with popular music. North American popular music – from ragtime hits in the 1890s to Elvis in the 1950s to the songs of contemporary pop idols – eschews political themes, preferring instead to focus on light-hearted, dance-ready tunes with intentionally unobtrusive lyrics. Themes of love dominate. Although most popular musicians consciously avoided political themes, cultural critics and other detractors leapt at the chance to charge the music with any number of politically inspired plots. Negative racial stereotyping constituted a bulk of the original accusations thrust upon popular music and continue to influence pop music criticism to this day. Even when artists deliberately sought distance from 'real' politics, their artistic products never escaped criticism for possessing political power.

And this is, perhaps, because music *does* possess political power. With the precedent set by the political content of folk and blues music (which was widely available to listeners by the 1960s), popular music began increasingly to dwell on themes other than adolescent romantic obsessions. Partially fuelled by the quickly changing geopolitical atmosphere of the 1960s and partially as an articulate response to socio-political turmoil occurring within the United States, music became a vessel through which political opinions could be projected. Kevin Fellezs discusses this shift, claiming that 'the change from rock 'n' roll to rock foreshadowed the shift to identity-driven political movements'.<sup>6</sup>

Again hearkening back to the traditions of blues and folk, some rock music of this era functioned as a call to action, as a rallying point. Creators and performers of such rally songs in the 1960s – many were old folk standards written earlier, such

<sup>5</sup> Vieira (2010, p. 21).

<sup>6</sup> Fellezs (2011, p. 52).

as ‘Tom Dooley’, ‘This Land is Your Land’, ‘Where Have all the Flowers Gone?’ and ‘We Shall Overcome’<sup>7</sup> – intended the songs to both affirm a specific set of political beliefs and to promote the intensification of those beliefs through conversion (of those who believe differently) or through action (for or against certain political causes). The songs and the stories behind their creation often bear witness to an artist’s desire to actively engage with politics. Indeed, many artists became spokespersons for a radical counterculture advocating serious political and social change in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

It would not be wrong to assess the goals of these artists as utopian; after all, the artists and their audiences alike sought real political change on a national level and often settled together in small, scattered communities where they could freely implement their ideals. Many communities (Laurel Canyon, in particular) exhibited utopianism aplenty; the songs written by members of these communities functioned as a utilitarian means to a perceived utopian end, useful as rallying points or emotional pleas about particular topics. In their book *Music and Social Movements*, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison critique music’s function in the mobilisation and implementation of political reform throughout the 1960s. Taking their cue from Herbert Marcuse’s 1969 *An Essay on Liberation*, the authors posit that social movements make available the ‘resources of culture – traditions, music, artistic expression – to the action repertoires of political struggle’.<sup>9</sup> Here, the phrase ‘action repertoires’ accurately describes how music (and other artistic products) functioned for sociopolitical activists in these communities: music – rally songs – acted as a unifying bridge between culture and political activism. The songs themselves were not utopian, even if the communities in which the songs played had utopian goals.

The usefulness of such rally songs stands in marked contrast to the efficacy of utopian songs: singers of rally songs or political anthems expect to provoke action, and the songs are *intended* to prompt political change. Songs with utopian themes have no such empirical goals. Instead of being paired with the impetus toward political action, utopian songs seem less intent on provoking action than on provoking contemplation. While utopian popular music, like utilitarian folk and rally songs, features idealistic, hopeful lyrics, it lacks the subsequent drive for any tangible implementation of its ideology. More than any other trait, the music accompanying the lyrics to such songs mark them as contemplative. Whereas rally songs often employ upbeat tempos, singable melodies (especially choruses), and easily recognisable chord progressions, utopian songs often utilise alternative musical techniques. These range from highly stylised, idiosyncratic vocal melodies to lengthy soundscapes including instrumental solos to atypical song structures to the use of unusual or uncommon instruments.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Tom Dooley’ is an old North Carolina folk song with historical roots in an 1866 crime of passion; its most famous version in the 20th century was recorded on the Kingston Trio’s 1958 album. Woody Guthrie’s ‘This Land is Your Land’, written in 1940, was designed to confront the nonsensical, self-centred American-ness Guthrie heard or saw performed when people sang Irving Berlin’s ‘God Bless America’. Pete Seeger wrote the first three verses of ‘Where Have All the Flowers Gone?’ in 1955, and the song was modified in 1960 by Joe Hickerson to include a fourth verse that created a circular pattern of life and death. ‘We Shall Overcome’ began as a gospel song that was published in 1947 as ‘We Will Overcome’ by Charles Albert Tindley. It quickly became a song favoured by political activists and was recorded as such beginning in the 1950s. By the late 1950s it had become the anthem for the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>8</sup> See Fellezs (2011, pp. 52–4).

<sup>9</sup> Eyerman and Jamison (1998, p. 7).

Joni Mitchell's song 'Woodstock' is one such song. As its title implies, 'Woodstock' alludes to an event with well-known political ties, but the event had happened by the time Mitchell wrote her song. Thus the song 'Woodstock' cannot recreate the event any more than it can force listeners to implement the political idealism for which the festival was so famous. The song can only imply, inspire and provoke a utopianism in which the author has strong hope, but for which she offers no design. Where a rally song instructs, a utopian song implies; where a folk song emotes, a utopian song evokes; and where a normative pop song hints, a utopian song hopes.

## Revising Woodstock

I've written only one protest song. That was 'Urge for Going', which was a protest against winter. And it certainly isn't going to stop winter. (Joni Mitchell<sup>10</sup>)

In August 1969, the Woodstock Music & Art Fair presented 'An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace & Music', which took place just outside the hamlet of Bethel, New York. The estimated 100,000 attendees arrived, along with 400,000 friends, and the festival's 32 musical acts performed on stage for the half-million gathered on Yasgur's farm. As promotional posters and ads had promised, Woodstock delivered three days of peace and music, despite having been declared a national disaster area by 16 August, the day after the festival began. Events from the now-iconic festival have been preserved in numerous recorded versions, including a documentary filmed onsite and released in 1970.

For detractors, including some journalists, many community members of Bethel and most US citizens aligned with conservative political parties, the festival exhibited all that was wrong with contemporary American society. By contrast, many of the performers, attendees and those aligned with leftist politics believed that the festival stood for the changes they sought for America. Woodstock was, for the latter, a glimpse of one generation's utopian dream come momentarily true. Rather than sifting through historical accounts or documentaries of Woodstock, I focus on a musical artefact that stands in a liminal space – a marginal or transitional boundary of sorts – between the festival's performers, its fans and its historians.

Joni Mitchell wrote her song 'Woodstock' in 1969, but despite the song's title (and subsequent fame), Mitchell did not perform at or attend the festival. She received an invitation to perform and remembers discussing Woodstock with fellow musicians David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash, who had also been invited. All four musicians had decided in advance not to perform because Mitchell, Crosby and Stills (without Nash) were scheduled for a televised appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* on 19 August, the day after Woodstock was supposed to end; thus attending the festival might have meant missing Cavett's programme. Mitchell boarded an airplane bound for New York City, but Crosby, Stills and Nash changed their minds and departed for Woodstock without her. As Mitchell recalls:

Crosby, Stills, Nash and myself all went to the airport. Woodstock had been declared a national disaster area, so we were informed that we couldn't get in and get out. I had to do *The Dick Cavett Show* the following day, so I left the boys there, thinking they were going someplace else. But they rented a helicopter. I felt left out. I really felt like the Girl. The Girl

<sup>10</sup> Joni Mitchell to the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (1968).



couldn't go, but the Boys could. I watched everything on TV. But I don't know if I would have written the song 'Woodstock' if I had gone. I was the fan that couldn't go, not the performing animal. So it afforded me a different perspective.<sup>11</sup>

The perspective she was afforded sounds, from the above interview given in 1994, like some kind of blessing in disguise, as Mitchell purposefully reinterprets the event by positing herself as the intrigued, intelligent fan rather than a 'performing animal'. Mitchell's quote reveals the confluence of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives she held about the festival: the phrase 'performing animal' betrays her insider status in the music scene of the era, and the comment seems to indicate her awareness that the performing conditions were, for most musicians, less than ideal.<sup>12</sup>

More important than this 'insider' perspective is the detached, 'outsider' perspective described in the quote. She watched everything on TV. She's unsure that she would have written 'Woodstock' if she'd attended the festival. This is no flippant admission: Mitchell understands her distance from the event as integral to the composition of her iconic song. Although not admitted forthrightly, Mitchell suggests that her distance from the 'real' Woodstock allowed her to assume the contemplative position that utopian thought requires: utopian fiction always arises from outside, not from within a utopian system. Mitchell's perspective also stems from where she *did* perform: on Dick Cavett's show on 19 August 1969, known now as 'The Woodstock Show' because all the other guests came directly from the festival. Mitchell's status as an outsider becomes apparent when, after asking if any of the musicians would endorse a political candidate, Cavett says to Mitchell: 'I guess everyone knows you're from Canada. Your work is sort of unpolitical in general [sic].'<sup>13</sup> When responding, Mitchell briefly stalls out of alarm (or offence) before choosing, ultimately, to fall back on the familiar Canadian trope that 'in Canada we never do anything very political' and explaining that she writes about love and other things she understands.<sup>14</sup>

By skirting the issue of politics with her clever quip, Mitchell circumvented the topic of her own musical upbringing, which began when she taught herself chords on the ukulele from a book authored by Pete Seeger, took her through various Canadian folk clubs in Saskatchewan, Alberta and Ontario, and ended with her time in Toronto, where she married folk singer Chuck Mitchell in 1965. The folk music scene in Canada was, at that point in the early 1960s, alive with political activism; Toronto, in particular, was home to numerous student-run activities ranging from women's rights organisations to unions for peace to an anti-draft committee. The so-called 'new nationalism' in Canada also included what one historian calls 'a strong vein of anti-Americanism' because many young Canadians loathed the

<sup>11</sup> Joni Mitchell, interview with Josh Simon, *Life Magazine* (August 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Her probable reasons for offering such a perspective are many: aside from anecdotes she likely heard from friends who *did* perform at Woodstock, her own festival experience from similar events (notably the 1970 Isle of Wight Festival) was largely negative. As she recounts in 2003's *Woman of Heart and Mind* documentary, the Isle of Wight concert drove her to stop performing, move back to northern Canada and isolate herself while she composed the material for her 1971 album *Blue*. Joni Mitchell, interview in *Woman of Heart and Mind* (Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Author's transcription from 'Disk 1: August 19, 1969', *The Dick Cavett Show: Rock Icons* (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Daphne Productions, Inc., 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Author's transcription from 'Disk 1: August 19, 1969', *The Dick Cavett Show: Rock Icons* (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Daphne Productions, Inc., 2005).

economic ties their country had to 'an American society wracked by civil rights protests, the Vietnam conflict and an aggressive military-industrial complex'.<sup>15</sup> Although Mitchell has never been explicit about her involvement in any of the above movements or organisations, she actively performed as a folk singer at venues (folk clubs and coffee houses around Toronto, in particular) that were notorious hotbeds of political activism.<sup>16</sup>

In neglecting to mention this, Mitchell indicates that she, like fellow Canadian folk singers Gordon Lightfoot and Neil Young, may have felt that 'it was kind of silly ... to write protest songs, being a Canadian. After all, people could say, "What the hell is a Canadian doing protesting against an American problem?"'<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, along with Young and many others, had relocated to the United States because the opportunities for discovery there vastly outweighed those available in Canada. As she lived longer on American soil, she inevitably became more entwined with the country's population, its problems and its politics. The resultant mindset – derived from her frequent travel between the two countries – is something Canadian literary scholar Northrop Frye defines as integral to Canadian national identity.<sup>18</sup> Mitchell's political views existed in a state of flux, ungrounded as either wholly American or wholly Canadian and bridled by her status as a perpetual outsider. This existence between two nations left its mark on her music, itself a unique hybrid of varied stylistic influences, which Kevin Fellezs terms 'a broken middle [between genres] through which transition inspires and motivates transformation'.<sup>19</sup> Transition through this broken middle, an existence between two worlds, a homeless (or at least country-less) brand of politics: these aspects of Mitchell's life radiate through her work and infuse her music with the expansiveness, longing and hope with which she builds her song 'Woodstock'.

It is also perhaps the time to draw attention to an obvious fact: Mitchell is a woman, while all of the other characters in the story thus far have been men. Utopian theorist Alessa Johns traces the origins of feminist utopian literature back to the mystical, religious texts of the early Renaissance period and posits that many themes commonly considered 'feminist' were, in fact, present from the 15th century onwards.<sup>20</sup> In arguing for why utopian thought has been important for, and consistently written by, women throughout history, Johns provides three inter-related reasons: first and foremost, gender equality has never existed, so it must be imagined; secondly, given the limited political, economic and social clout of women throughout the ages, they have had to seek out cultural activities (and particularly artistic or literary representations) as the most logical means for dispersing utopian thought to the largest possible audience; and lastly, in creating feminised versions of utopia, literature offered women a socially viable venue for discursive and ideological deviance. Mitchell, 'the Girl [who] couldn't go', composed 'Woodstock' in a hotel room immediately after her somewhat ostracising appearance

<sup>15</sup> Edwards (2009, p. 88).

<sup>16</sup> See Edwards (2009, pp. 55–93).

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Lightfoot, quoted in Edwards (2009, p. 93).

<sup>18</sup> 'To feel "Canadian" was to feel part of a no-man's land ... one wonders if any other national consciousness has so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested built into it' Frye (1976, p. 117).

<sup>19</sup> Fellezs (2011, p. 149).

<sup>20</sup> Johns (2010, pp. 174–99).

on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Was it perhaps her status as ‘the Girl’ and as the Canadian whose ‘work is sort of unpolitical’ that drove the composition of this utopian text? Is ‘Woodstock’ a form of ‘discursive and ideological deviance’?

Analyses of the song by other scholars describe it variously as ‘a gutsy, raw, soulful celebration’, as ‘stark and haunting’, as ‘flush with utopian dreams of peace and renewal’ and as ‘a lament for solo voice and keyboard’.<sup>21</sup> Two of these characterisations stand out: ‘Woodstock’ as utopian, and ‘Woodstock’ as lament, both of which come from Lloyd Whitesell’s book, *The Music of Joni Mitchell*. ‘Woodstock’, I argue, may be both, as it eschews overt political commentary in favour of subtlety and metaphor: half a million strong going to get their souls free in the garden at Yasgur’s farm, watching the bombers ride shotgun in the sky and turn into butterflies above our nation. Mitchell offers a very personal adaptation of a very public, politicised event, and perhaps what makes her song so arresting, much more so than other political rally cries of her era, is precisely the fact that its political allusions sound expansive and yet eerily personal. The immediacy of the musical gestures from the song’s original recording lend a magnitude to the lyrics that other songs of the era do not possess. Mitchell’s lyrics offer an intimate glimpse into an idealistic encounter in a utopian space as the song sounds forth, and Mitchell captures the utopian aura of Woodstock without being bound to any of the actual events.

Untangling ‘Woodstock’s content first takes us to Mitchell’s lyrics, which offer overt enough utopian signifiers that they can be (and usually are) excerpted as the only basis for the recording’s efficacy. The simple verse-chorus form lends repetition and familiarity to the song, key ingredients to its success and simultaneously integral to Mitchell’s pairing of the lyrics with non-normative musical accompaniment. The lyrics display only one overt political reference: ‘I dreamed I saw the bombers/riding shotgun in the sky/and they were turning into butterflies/above our nation.’<sup>22</sup> Yet this single political reference says enough. Mitchell’s peers notoriously and vehemently protested the Vietnam conflict, and Mitchell’s turning of bombers into butterflies captures both the political idealism of Woodstock and the blissful naïveté with which many members of her generation lived. But Mitchell does not posit her butterflies as a panacea; she *dreams* the solution. Rather than write a rally song or a protest song, ‘Woodstock’ flutters along the margins of the political *and* the realistic. And in so doing, the song disperses Mitchell’s utopia to the largest possible audience imaginable: decades upon decades of listeners.

The lyrics of ‘Woodstock’ do provide a cursory indication of the song’s utopianism, but if analysis stops with the lyrics, the nuances of Mitchell’s music and its effects remain unexamined. Mitchell’s success in conveying utopianism lies equally in the subtle musical gestures of the song. The ostracism of her experience on *The Dick Cavett* show prompted more than mere lyrical choices: when Mitchell recorded her original version of ‘Woodstock’ in 1969, the sound she created was unlike anything she had recorded on her prior two albums, and it was a sound she never recreated. The use of an electric Wurlitzer instead of a piano is one of the more interesting

<sup>21</sup> David Cleary, review of ‘Ladies of the Canyon’ by Joni Mitchell, *Allmusic*, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/ladies-of-the-canyon-r13208/review> (accessed 4 April 2011); ‘Woodstock’, in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodstock\\_song](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodstock_song) (accessed 4 April 2011); Whitesell (2008, p. 33).

<sup>22</sup> Joni Mitchell, ‘Woodstock’, *Ladies of the Canyon* (Reprise Records, 1970).



musical decisions; the sustained hum of the Wurlitzer captures something that a piano cannot, allowing the open fourths and fifths of the accompaniment to linger and echo as though fading slowly into a great distance. Similarly, the looped backing vocals (see measure 45 of the transcription, [Example 1](#))<sup>23</sup> ring out like chants of approval after Mitchell's imperative call to 'get ourselves back to the garden'. The vocal improvisations with which the song ends stray outside the normative realm of Mitchell's studio work. Taken together, these musical gestures infuse

Joni Mitchell

*Tempo Rubato*

*In Time*

Example 1. 'Woodstock' transcription.

<sup>23</sup> While I am aware that many transcriptions of 'Woodstock' exist, both published and unpublished, the transcription provided here was made from scratch, that is, without the use or consultation of any other transcription of the song. Any similarities between this version and others is purely coincidental.

19

came up-on a child of god he was walk-ing a-long the road and I

23

asked him where are you go-ing and this he told *behind the beat*

26

me: I'm go-in on down to Yas-

29

- gur's farm. I'm gon-na join in a rock n roll band. I'm gon-na

Example 1. (continued)

32  
 camp out on the land, I'm gon-na try and get my soul  
 A<sup>b9</sup>sus4 Ebm11

35  
 free. — We are sta - r dust, we are  
 Ebm11 A<sup>b9</sup>sus4

39  
 go — l - den and we got - to get — our -  
 A<sup>b9</sup>sus4 Ebm11

42  
 selves back to the ga - ar - ar - ar  
 D<sup>b</sup>sus G<sup>b</sup>6/B<sup>b</sup> A<sup>b9</sup>sus4

Example 1. (continued)

45 *vocal backup*

den.

*Final chorus*

We are sta - r dust, — We are

mi - lion year - old car - bon

go - l - den and we

caught in the de - vil's bar - gain

got to get — our — selves back to the ga - a - a - r - den. —

Chords: Ebm11, A♭9sus4, Ebm11, D♭sus, A♭9sus4, G♭(add2), Ebm11

Example 1. (continued)

'Woodstock' with an aural atmosphere that allows the song to hover between the realms of the familiar and the foreign, the real and the ideal, the good-place and the not-place of a pop song.

Throughout 'Woodstock', Mitchell implements a blues progression based on a modally inflected E-flat scale. She plays the keyboard introduction with so much rubato that the metre proves difficult to establish until she sings, and even when she begins the first line of text, her vocals drift above the keyboard accompaniment, offering a complex series of elisions across and within bar lines. Perhaps the most elusive of her vocals occurs at the chorus (beginning in measure 36 of transcription, [Example 1](#)): on the word 'star', she hits an A-flat that elides, via appoggiatura, with a G-flat. The next note, a D-flat occurring on the word 'dust', outlines the enigmatic open fourth of the keyboard introduction. The next phrase 'we are golden, and

we' moves between the notes E-flat and D-flat, but within the span of an entire octave and above a iv chord over an A-flat in the bass, offering listeners constant motion between an unstable A-flat minor chord with added fourth (the D-flat) or a stable A-flat minor chord with the fifth in Mitchell's vocal line. Continuing that phrase of text and concluding the chorus with 'got to get ourselves back to the garden', Mitchell's vocals sink steadily downward until she reaches the rumbling low A-flat. On the word 'garden' Mitchell sings a series of descending vocal notes that create a hemiola over the steady duple metre of the accompaniment.

Noticeable in the chorus are Mitchell's backing vocals, the untexted choral harmonies appearing as closing material after she sings her low A-flat on 'garden'. In her final reiteration of the chorus (see 'final chorus' of transcription, [Example 1](#)), Mitchell alters the patterns she set earlier in the song: instead of closing the final chorus with the wordless backing vocals, she layers her voice in quartal harmonies behind the words 'billion year old carbon' and 'caught in the Devil's bargain'; instead of falling steadily to the low A-flat on 'garden', her vocal line rises to reach a high E-flat.

Finally, at the close of the chorus, she bursts forth into a melismatic vocal outpouring spanning the entire vocal range previously established in the song ([Example 2](#)). Throughout 'Woodstock', Mitchell's vocal quality changes as she sings in different registers, but this is especially apparent in the closing melisma. The high notes seem to embody idealism with their clear, straight tone and their shaky, almost timid sustain, while the low notes get plunging vocal slips along with massive vibrato. Again we find Mitchell's vocal line offering contrasting rhythms over the steady duple metre of the accompaniment. After holding a high E-flat (beginning in measure 13 of [Example 2](#)) for two and a half measures, the song closes with a short recapitulation of the introductory bars and ends on an open, quartal chord.

These final moments of the song are mysterious, elusive and strange. Mitchell transcends the historical fact of Woodstock the festival and in its place offers 'Woodstock' the song, a momentary glimpse of what might have been as realised by a mind, a voice, that might have been there. The echoing, openly modal harmonies of the song couple with the quasi-spiritual journey of the protagonist and the affective timbre and range of Mitchell's singing voice and combine to produce the political utopianism inherent to the song. The reason for the song's subsequent fame, I believe, lies in the subtlety with which Mitchell handled the political idealism of the event and her reaction to it. Many of her Woodstock-era peers wrote songs flush with utopianism, but a utopianism conveyed with much heavier hands. Consider Bob Dylan's 'The Times They Are a-Changin'', written in 1963 and included on his 1964 record of the same name. Its well-known lyrics are subtle, pointed, and refer to various political issues of the 1960s, including environmental destruction and the ever-widening generational split. But the heavier hand comes in the form of vocal delivery and musical accompaniment; Dylan's song sounds like a folk standard, and his vocal delivery grounds the lyrics thoroughly in lived experience. The listener is not invited to contemplate utopianism but to recall the harsh conditions that prompted the writing of such a song.

As opposed to Dylan's, Mitchell's song has little grounding in reality. Rather than flaunting the utopianism of the festival – itself an untidy sobriquet for the idealism of an entire era – with rallying, upbeat refrains or rollicking rock riffs, Mitchell solemnly accompanies herself as she retells the tale, always hopeful, utopian with every breath, but sung with the knowledge that Woodstock was already history. And it was a history from which she, the Girl, had been excluded, so she wrote a



≈ 4:26

Chord changes:  $E_b m_{11}$ ,  $A_b 9 \text{ sus} 4$ ,  $E_b m_{11}$ ,  $A_b 9 \text{ sus} 4$ ,  $G_b/B_b$ ,  $A_b 9$ ,  $G_b/B_b$ ,  $A_b 9 \text{ sus} 4$ .

Annotations: *rushed*

Example 2. 'Woodstock' closing melisma.

new one. Mitchell's unique voice and ear for sonic landscaping reveal a distinct way of merging the personal with the political, artistically intertwining each so that one is never extractable from the other. Some might hear this confluence as a lament, and although the term's connotations of grief and formal musical strictures are absent from Mitchell's song, the ritual characteristics of lamenting involve notions of transition between this world and another, thereby making lament and utopia terms more closely related than most would originally assume. Nevertheless, the term lament fails to capture 'Woodstock's hopeful utopian implications. Thus I propose another term to more fully connect 'Woodstock' with its politically utopian themes: nostalgia.

Example 2. (continued)

### Nostalgia, a brief history for the uninitiated or forgetful

The word nostalgia has become so commonplace in colloquial parlance during the 20th century that it might surprise some to learn of its origins: a 17th century Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, coined the word to refer to a medical affliction commonly seen in military men on active duty tours. Nostalgia was literally homesickness, and the symptoms (which we would now call psychosomatic) were of great concern to military commanders and doctors because maintaining morale was crucial for a troop's success. The term lost its medical ties through the course of its usage in the late 19th and 20th centuries, as nostalgia began to refer less to an individual's longing for home than to a widespread, collective longing for lost times. As Simon Reynolds observes, the term 'originally referred to a longing to return through space, rather than across time; it was the ache of displacement'.<sup>24</sup> And because the nostalgia of an earlier age was both personal and physical, there existed actual remedies; a homesick soldier could be sent home and thus 'cured' of nostalgia.

Just as modern nostalgia lacks its ties to historical medicine, so too does it lack a remedy. Social theorist Svetlana Boym devotes an entire book to the social and political ramifications of modern nostalgia, noting that its expression has two general manifestations: as restorative nostalgia, which aims to return to or recreate a previous political era and often takes the form of conservative fundamentalism (whether religious, political, or both), or reflective nostalgia, which eschews politics and embraces, instead, the fleeting provocation of nostalgia through art.<sup>25</sup> Boym discusses the differences between the two by noting that proponents of one, restorative nostalgia, believe that there is indeed a 'cure' for the modern ailment, while the believers in reflective nostalgia understand that the past cannot be recovered, that there can be,

<sup>24</sup> Reynolds (2011, p. xxv).

<sup>25</sup> Boym (2002).

in effect, no remedy for the modern nostalgic condition. Mitchell's 'Woodstock' falls into the latter category, as the song provokes (indeed, perhaps even laments the loss of) the ephemeral memories of an irrecoverable past.

Boym locates the potential for reflective nostalgia in all of the arts – literature, graphic arts, music, film, dance – and dwells on the bittersweet reverie successful artistic products can evoke. Boym's work, although comprehensive, is not the first to broach the topic of nostalgia and its function in artistic products. In the early decades of the 20th century, philosopher and utopian theorist Ernst Bloch wrote extensively about nostalgia and its expression in art, focusing particularly on the ties between nostalgia and music. Bloch emphasised music's unique ability to enliven nostalgia by displacing its longing for the past with renegotiated dreams for the future; he believed that music alone possessed the 'power of nostalgia', a power he linked directly with utopian thought.<sup>26</sup> Nostalgia in music is not simply remembrance steeped in melancholic sentimentality, but a recreation of what might have been coupled with an active longing for what still could be. For Bloch, music evokes nostalgia of an alternate, less common kind: not memory, but hope, and not for experiences, but for dreams.

Mitchell's dreams were many: some explicitly acknowledged, some tangentially evoked. She chose to create a musical realisation of the aura and idealism of Woodstock, and the political utopianism she achieved lies in her refusal to simply memorialise the festival or proclaim its political efficacy. The song succeeds as an evocation of a generation's utopian impulse, and Mitchell's musical choices propel 'Woodstock' beyond the facts of the event itself because the song is not *about* the event itself. The lyrics may conjure sentimental memories for those who attended the festival, a fact of which Mitchell was surely aware, but the music of the song promotes nostalgia of an alternate kind: nostalgia for the utopian naïveté of a hopeful generation and its political dreams. 'Woodstock' summons this nostalgia and breathes life into it, offering a sonic utopia in which the dreams of a hopeful generation can continue to thrive. This is 'Woodstock's ideological deviance, its utopian legacy: just as 'Woodstock' helped transform its originator from excluded fan to arbiter of utopianism, so too does it transform its listeners. Here, we can return to the designation of Mitchell's song as existing in a liminal (or Foucault's heterotopian) space: while the song plays, the experience of 'Woodstock' as a transitional boundary or marginal space becomes available to listeners. The song both can and cannot take a listener back to the summer of 1969 but, alas, no matter where 'Woodstock' takes you, the song is an experience that comes with all the characteristic trappings of utopia: simultaneously a 'good-place' and a 'no-place', the song sounds forth and dissipates immediately, presenting a musical utopia in which Joni Mitchell, other musicians and, indeed, perhaps even historians can dwell, if only for five peaceful minutes.

### Recreating 'Woodstock'

That's one thing that's always been a major difference between the performing arts, to me, and being a painter. A painter does a painting and that's it. You know, he's had the joy of creating it and he hangs it on some wall. Somebody buys it. Somebody buys it again. Or maybe nobody buys it and it sits up in a loft somewhere 'til he dies. But he's never, I mean, no one ever said to

<sup>26</sup> See Bloch (1971).

Van Gogh, 'Paint us Starry Night again, man!' You know, he painted it. That was it. (Joni Mitchell<sup>27</sup>)

Mitchell's version of 'Woodstock' on *Ladies of the Canyon* is not, so to speak, the final word on the subject; the song has had a varied and multifaceted history for Mitchell and for countless other musicians, artists and fans. Recalling Fatima Vieira's assessment that political utopianism does not age well, I want to trace the history of this song and its reception through the 20th century and argue that the fate of 'Woodstock' offers substantial support for Vieira's claim. The song has been, to date, recorded by 281 other musicians, and the number continues to grow.<sup>28</sup>

Most closely related to Mitchell's original record on *Ladies of the Canyon* is Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's (henceforth CSNY) cover of 'Woodstock' released on their own 1970 album, *Déjà Vu*. Their rendition, rather than Mitchell's original, received near-immediate fame, likely due in part to the fact that they were a more famous act in 1970 than Mitchell, whose career had just begun to attract large-scale, nationwide media attention. The version of 'Woodstock' on *Déjà Vu*, despite its fame, lacks the utopianism of Mitchell's original. Lloyd Whitesell spends some time discussing the CSNY version in *The Music of Joni Mitchell*, calling their cover 'ecstatic' while Mitchell's is 'stark' and 'haunting'.<sup>29</sup> Whitesell's choice of adjectives here is apt, as the differences between the two versions of 'Woodstock' are indeed pronounced. Most basically, the CSNY version casts the song in G-major and departs radically from the vocal melody outlined in Mitchell's original recording. There is a jaunty, rollicking romp through the garden.

David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash (without Neil Young) attended Woodstock, and their experiences at the festival come to bear when they recast Mitchell's 'Woodstock' as a blues-rock tune. The lyrics of 'Woodstock' articulate what Mitchell *perceived* as the hopeful promise of social and political change tied up in the festival's theme, and when put in the hands of a band who *actually* experienced what Woodstock had to offer, the lyrics lose all ties to the utopian space Mitchell creates in her original recording. The recasting of 'Woodstock' as a blues-rock song reflects CSNY's attempt to record a version that they might have actually played at the festival. Mitchell's could never have been intended as such. The sonic landscape she creates in both lyrics *and* music allow the song to resonate as a good-place and especially a not-place. For Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 'Woodstock' too easily equates with Woodstock, the mostly good, very real place they remember from August 1969.

As 'Woodstock' lived past Mitchell's original recording and the CSNY cover garnered widespread popularity, the song and its meaning evolved for Mitchell. 'Woodstock' is among a small number of her early songs that she has continued to perform throughout her career. Lloyd Whitesell notes that 'this song [is] unique in that she chose to thoroughly redesign its sound, not once, but twice'.<sup>30</sup> When

<sup>27</sup> This audio clip is on Mitchell's 1974 album, *Miles of Aisles*, a record of her tour undertaken that same year. Mitchell, by all accounts, addresses the audience after a song ends and listeners begin yelling out requests for her to sing her older material. The quote is her response.

<sup>28</sup> The online database and fan site [jonimitchell.com](http://jonimitchell.com) catalogues Mitchell's work and tracks its ongoing impact in popular culture. A compilation of covers that have been recorded for each of her songs is listed at the bottom of each song's individual page. See 'Woodstock', <http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=75> (accessed 12 April 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Whitesell (2008, p. 34).

<sup>30</sup> Whitesell (2008, p. 33).

Mitchell re-approached the song, she shied away from recreating the atmosphere of the original, as though the sound she achieved with the earliest version represented something untouchable. Discussing Mitchell's later studio recordings of 'Woodstock', Whitesell posits that the aura of the original version is handled with 'retrospective distance from the utopian groundswell of the youth movement and its exuberant, messy festivals.'<sup>31</sup> To appropriate lyrics from one of Mitchell's later songs: 'Ah, nothing lasts for long, nothing lasts for long.'<sup>32</sup>

The first re-recording preserved on a studio album – again, the focus here is on Mitchell's 'official' publications of the song – dates from 1974's *Miles of Aisles*, an album of songs performed live on tour that same year. This version of 'Woodstock' presents a radically changed musical style, one that Mitchell undertook over the course of the 1970s. This stylistic period saw Mitchell's most commercially successful (in terms of contemporary sales and Billboard charts) albums, *Court and Spark* and *Miles of Aisles*, as well as her most harshly criticised, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*. During the 1970s Mitchell began touring with a jazz-rock fusion group, the LA Express, led by Tom Scott, and her sounds evolved to include new instrumental arrangements (including electric bass, electric guitar and saxophones), a focus on jazz stylings and large-scale formal innovations.

The version of 'Woodstock' included on *Miles of Aisles* represents her work with the LA Express during this period; while the lyrics and general melodic contour of the song remain, it is now undergirded with a lively, danceable sound. Noticeably absent are the melismas of the original, and Mitchell avoids the extreme vocal range of the earlier version by transposing the song down from E-flat to B – which brings the high notes down into a much more 'normal' range – and by removing the plunges into her lower register that had been so notable in the original studio recording. The band, likely in pursuit of more danceable rhythms, sped up the song considerably and, as a result, 'Woodstock' sounds funky and disco-ready, any hint of its contemplative expansiveness overpowered by its ebullient dance rhythms. The song changed from a mystical and haunting sonic evocation of a spiritual journey to a slinky, sexy romp. Mitchell's voice is self-assured in the 1974 version, a stark contrast to the raw vocal slides and elisions she enacts in the original. Speaking of this period (the 1970s) in her career, Mitchell says: 'Now, being on the stage with a whole group of people, I can go back and say, "weren't we great?" if we were or "oh, weren't we awful!" if we were. So [performance] was not such a lonely thing. I [didn't] want to be vulnerable anymore!'<sup>33</sup> Her attitude in performance and on record, in effect, matched the new sound she and the LA Express created: confident, happy, somehow liberated.

But this new sound came with musical baggage: the disco and funk rhythms undergirding the 1974 'Woodstock' come with their own musical rhetoric. As Alice Echols argues persuasively in her recent study, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, disco played a central role in the identity politics of the 1970s, helping to broaden the contours of what blackness, femininity, sexuality, and male homosexuality signified in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Reading escapism or

<sup>31</sup> Whitesell (2008, p. 35).

<sup>32</sup> Joni Mitchell, 'Chinese Café/Unchained Melody', *Wild Things Run Fast* (Geffen Records, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Joni Mitchell, interview in *Woman of Heart and Mind* (Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Echols (2010, pp. 7–13).



hedonism into disco neglects the fact that massive audiences used this music to negotiate the boundaries of interpersonal identity; the music creates a moment in which transcendence becomes momentarily available to listeners and perhaps particularly to dancers. By updating 'Woodstock' to fit the popular (danceable, confident, sexy) inclinations of a new decade, Mitchell strips the song of its utopian efficacy, and she may have purposefully done so. If we take her previous comments seriously, Mitchell implies that her musical environment in the 1960s was too vulnerable, too spiritual and too lonely. Thus Mitchell cast off her old style to embrace the lively, communal potential of the dance band she now commanded.

Mitchell's second re-recording of 'Woodstock' dates from another live tour undertaken in 1979 and eventually offered on 1980's *Shadows and Light* album and DVD. Mitchell had not yet abandoned her use of a large, live band – although personnel had changed to include a thoroughly jazz-focused ensemble including Pat Metheny, Lyle Mays, Jaco Pastorius, Michael Brecker and Don Alias – but the version of 'Woodstock' included on *Shadows and Light* presents Mitchell performing alone. She relinquishes the Wurlitzer for an electric guitar, the instrument on which she gained broad acclaim and on which she performed most comfortably. Indeed, the performance of 'Woodstock' on this album could be summed up concisely as 'more comfortable'. She defuses tension of the original recording by restraining the vocal phrases to fit neatly within bar lines and never engaging in the melismatic vocal wanderings of the original. She declaims the lyrics with a matter-of-factness that borders on irony, and she eliminates the modal ambiguity in favour of brief, crisp, stable harmonic progressions with C-minor as a tonal centre.

Two moments in this version stand out as paradigmatic of her new conception of the song. The first occurs when Mitchell sings the line 'I don't know who I am'. In the original, her voice rises steadily to a high E-flat and she allows wide, slightly off-key vibrato on the word 'am' before descending into the lines, 'but you know life is for learning'. In *Shadows and Light*'s 'Woodstock', the delivery of these lines borders on recitation rather than singing; Mitchell swiftly offers the line 'I don't know who I am' as her voice sinks into a low range. She declaims these words – speaking with little musical inflection – with such terseness that the emotional content changes drastically. In 1969's 'Woodstock', these lines ring out as though reinforcing their claim; she really does not know who she is and struggles with this realisation. The 1979 retelling sounds like the reading of well-rehearsed lines. Or perhaps it states a simple and self-evident truth: she has, by now, lived long enough that the question of self-identity seems less urgent.

The second vital difference stems from the inclusion of new text: in the original, Mitchell sings one last iteration of the chorus, ending with 'got to get ourselves back to the garden', which rises to another high E-flat before closing with her evocative textless melisma. In this later version of 'Woodstock' she sings the last chorus, pronouncing the word 'garden' with its two syllables neatly declaimed as eighth notes and, in place of the closing melisma, offers a new line of text: 'back to some kind of garden'. This terse addition unravels the utopianism as much as any other change to the song; she speaks of the garden as though it were a suburban backyard. Rather than the mystical, quasi-Edenic realm of the original 'garden', this version takes place in 'some kind of garden', a description-less anywhere.

Both re-recordings of 'Woodstock' lack the utopian qualities of the original, albeit for different reasons: 'Woodstock' from 1974's *Miles of Aisles* has been

transformed into a song for use, a pop tune, a dance beat, and the roots of Mitchell's song reach back to a different, here absent, source. In this version, the contemplative utopianism of the original 'Woodstock' vanishes into a haze of funky backbeats. 'Woodstock' from 1980's *Shadows and Light* alludes more directly to the original in its instrumentation and performance, although the musical indicators of utopianism have been stripped away to reveal the lyrics at their most clinical and detached. This latter version serves as the basis for Mitchell's further recordings of 'Woodstock' throughout the 1980s and 1990s, creating what Mitchell seems to consider the most 'classic' version of the song. Not until 2002's *Travelogue* (which was intended as her farewell project) do we hear a different version of 'Woodstock', here orchestrated by Vince Mendoza. Mendoza obviously used the original sound of 'Woodstock' from *Ladies of the Canyon* for inspiration, and his orchestration stems from the earliest version of the song. Despite the new and very different instrumentation, this version of 'Woodstock' is a cover.

If the original version of 'Woodstock' articulates a complex, many-layered nostalgia – a sonic recreation of what might have been with images of how it might have happened and a dream of how it might still thrive – the version of 'Woodstock' for 2002's *Travelogue* involves nostalgia of a different sort. Mendoza seems to hope, by returning to the original version for the basis of his orchestration, to provoke nostalgic remembrance on the part of the audience. *Travelogue*, initially intended as her farewell project, marks the end of Mitchell's remarkable 40-year career, and consumers of this album were likely seasoned fans who had known, followed and loved her work for many decades. Here, nostalgia is simply fond remembrance.

The temptation with these three large-scale revisions of 'Woodstock' is to interpret them as purposeful rejections of the 1969 original's utopianism. I prefer, instead, to consider them as thoughtful, retrospective revisions brought about as the idealism of the original aged. The song continues to speak to Mitchell, and in one of the interview sessions for 2003's *Woman of Heart and Mind* DVD, Mitchell admits the following:

Fame made me really nervous and uncomfortable. I began to dislike more and more being a public person, so I isolated myself and made my attempt to *get back to the garden*. I moved up into the Canadian back bush to a small sanctuary where I could be alone. Lived with Kerosene, stayed away from electricity for about a year. . . . I took my own advice and *I got myself back to the garden*. Well, I am too urban, as it turns out, and in a year or so I was back in the cities again.<sup>35</sup>

'Woodstock' continued to impact Mitchell's life well beyond its impassioned inception because the fame that *Ladies of the Canyon* garnered for Mitchell continued to impact her life and career. Not only that, but Mitchell attempted a literal enactment of the song's famous imperative, only to see it fail. The 'garden', in retrospect, was not as ideal as it originally sounded. It comes as no surprise, then, that Mitchell's relationship to the song – and particularly to the *sound* of the original recording – changed as her career progressed. Mitchell's ongoing transformation of 'Woodstock' indicates an awareness that she, too, believes the original exists as a utopian space, simultaneously bound by the physical sound she created and by the influence the song exerted. Fittingly, the third and final re-recording on *Travelogue* serves as an epitaph for her relationship with the song: Mitchell finally allows,

<sup>35</sup> Joni Mitchell, interview in *Woman of Heart and Mind* (Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2003), emphasis mine.

through Mendoza's orchestration, a rekindling of the original sound, only to find herself unable to re-enact the vocals.

Nostalgia continues to feature prominently in the affect of 'Woodstock', as artists continue to reinterpret and cover the song. The ongoing renewal and reinterpretation of 'Woodstock' indicates an engagement with the song as a historical text – a tacit acknowledgement that its utopianism has aged – but also suggests an awareness that the song's content still speaks to contemporary audiences. By the 1990s – when 'Woodstock' covers became more commonplace in the folk or rock repertoire – artistic reasons for covering the song likely stemmed from a variety of inspirations: a desire to pay tribute to Mitchell (who was, by then, recognised as one of the premiere songwriters of the century), a hope of reviving 1960s-era sociopolitical activism, or a simple desire to play a well-known, crowd-pleasing tune. As with Mendoza's orchestration of 'Woodstock', many cover versions fall into the first and third categories, where an attempt to pay tribute to Mitchell's skill and success mingles with other, perhaps more personal nostalgic memories.

The hope of recreating the progressive, political atmosphere of the late 1960s is, however, misplaced in connection with Mitchell's song. 'Woodstock' barely touches on themes of politics, preferring instead to dwell in the liminal spaces between evocative political allusions and contemplative reflection. The song was never meant to be used as a rally cry for political action, a fact that even Mitchell's later re-recordings support. The history this song has lived since 1969 demonstrates the impact, effect and scope utopianism in popular music can achieve. In the right hands, such utopianism can truly fuse the 'good-place' with the 'not-place' of a pop song. In the wrong hands – even those of the song's composer/author – a song's utopianism can be rendered inert and without access to the unique moments and memories that originally made it sing.

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