

JONI MITCHELL

Complete

SO FAR ...

Joni wishes to express her thanks ...

to Joel Bernstein: "As my repertoire of tunings expanded it became necessary to have a whole fleet of guitars set up in tuning families. It was Joel's job to tune my guitars, and to do this he needed to learn at least the first eight bars of every one of my songs—therefore preserving these tunings which may have otherwise been lost, for which I am grateful";

to Henry Diltz for capturing these special moments in time with his photos;

to Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers for asking interview questions that actually pertained to the art and the music;

to Dana D'Elia and all the staff at Alfred Music who participated in the making of this book;
and special thanks to Aaron Stang for overseeing the production of this project with such care.



Produced by
Alfred Music
P.O. Box 10003
Van Nuys, CA 91410-0003
alfred.com

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ISBN-10: 0-7390-9588-9
ISBN-13: 978-0-7390-9588-1

Transcriptions by Joel Bernstein, Daniel Libertino, and Andrew DuBrock

Cover photo by Jack Robinson, The Jack Robinson Archive, LLC; robinsonarchive.com
All inside photos by Henry Diltz; morrisonhotelgallery.com

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MY SECRET PLACE

The Guitar Odyssey of Joni Mitchell

By Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

At the heart of the music of Joni Mitchell is a constant sense of surprise and discovery. The melodies and harmonies rarely unfold in ways that our ears, tamed by pop music conventions, have come to expect. Her guitar doesn't really sound like a guitar: the treble strings become a cool-jazz horn section, the bass snaps out syncopations like a snare drum, the notes ring out in clusters that simply don't come out of a normal six-string. And her voice adds another layer of invention, extending the harmonic implications of the chords and coloring the melody with plainspoken commentary as well as charged poetic imagery.

Even though all these qualities have made Mitchell one of the most revered songwriters of our time, an inspiration for several generations of musicians, the creative processes and impulses behind her music have always been clouded in mystery. A guitarist haunted by Mitchell's playing on an album like *Court and Spark* or *Hejira*, for instance, can't find much help in the music store in exploring that sound; what she plays, from the way she tunes her strings to the way she strokes them with her right hand, is utterly off the chart of how most of us approach the guitar. The only published documentation of her 30-year guitar odyssey is four single-album songbooks transcribed by Joel Bernstein, her longtime guitar tech and musical/photographic archivist, which show the real tunings and chord shapes. But that's a very small slice of a career that spans 17 albums, each one a departure—often a radical one—from what came before.

In the wake of her 1996 Grammy for Best Pop Album for *Turbulent Indigo*, which marked the stunning return of her acoustic guitar to center stage, Joni Mitchell met with me in Los Angeles to offer a rare, in-depth view into her craft as a guitarist and composer. To orient myself better in the world of Mitchell's guitar, I also spoke with Joel Bernstein, who's now based in San Francisco and helping to compile a Neil Young anthology. Remarkably, Mitchell herself relies on Bernstein's encyclopedic knowledge of her work; because she has forged ahead with new tunings throughout her career and rarely plays her past repertoire, Bernstein has at several junctures helped her relearn some of her older songs.

"There's a certain kind of restlessness that not many artists are cursed or blessed with, depending on how

you look at it," Mitchell said. "Craving change, craving growth, seeing always room for improvement in your work." In that statement lies the key to her music: seeing it as an ongoing process of invention, rather than a series of discrete and final statements.

Joni Mitchell began playing the guitar like countless young musicians of the '60s, but she quickly turned onto a less-traveled path. "When I was learning to play guitar, I got Pete Seeger's *How to Play Folk-Style Guitar*," she recalled. "I went straight to the Cotten picking. Your thumb went from [*imitates alternating-bass sound*] the 6th string, 5th string, 6th string, 5th string. I couldn't do that, so I ended up playing mostly the 6th string but banging it into the 5th string. So Elizabeth Cotten definitely is an influence; it's me not being able to play like her. If I could have I would have, but good thing I couldn't, because it came out original."

"There's a certain kind of restlessness that not many artists are cursed or blessed with, depending on how you look at it," Mitchell said. "Craving change, craving growth, seeing always room for improvement in your work."

At the same time that she departed from standard folk fingerpicking, Mitchell departed from standard tuning as well (only two of her early songs—"Tin Angel" and "Urge for Going"—are in standard tuning). "In the beginning, I built the repertoire of the open major tunings that the old black blues guys came up with," she said. "It was only three or four. The simplest one is D modal [D-A-D-G-B-D]; Neil Young uses that a lot. And then Open G [D-G-D-G-B-D], with the 6th string removed, which is all Keith Richards plays in. And Open D [D-A-D-F#-A-D]. Then going between them I started to get more 'modern' chords, for lack of a better word." As she began to write songs in the mid-'60s, these tunings became inextricably tied to her composing.

On Mitchell's first three albums, *Song to a Seagull* (1968), *Clouds* (1969), and *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970), conventional open tunings coexist with other tunings that stake out some new territory. "Both Sides Now" (capo II) and "Big Yellow Taxi," for instance, are in Open E (E-B-E-G#-B-E)—the same as Open D but a whole step higher; and "The Circle Game" (capo IV) and "Marcie" are in Open G. But it was more adventurous tunings like C-G-D-F-C-E ("Sistowbell Lane"), with its complex chords created by simple fingerings that enthralled her and became the foundation of her music from the early '70s on.

I HAD A KING

*Guitar tuning: Capo 5th fret

E-7-5-0-7-5

⑥ = E ③ = E

⑤ = B ② = B

④ = E ① = E

Words and Music by
JONI MITCHELL

Moderately ♩ = ca. 110

Intro:

E(4) Em9

mp

*Recording sounds a perfect fourth higher than written.

Verse:

E(4) Em9

Cont. rhy. simile

1. I had a king in a ten - e - ment cas - tle. Late-ly he's tak - en to paint-ing the pas - tel walls.

2.3. See additional lyrics

E(9) C/E

brown; he's tak - en the cur - tains down; he's

E/F# E Esus Esus/B G6/D G6/B F#sus

swept with the broom of con - tempt and the rooms have an emp - ty ring; he's

E/F# E Esus Esus/B G6/D G6/B F#sus E5

cleaned with the tears of an ac - tor who fears for the laugh - ter's sting.

I Had a King - 2 - 1

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Chorus:

22

Esus 5fr. 23

Esus 5fr. 23 4

E 23 4

Esus 5fr. 23

Esus 5fr. 23 4

E 23 4

I can't go back there an - y - more. You know my keys won't fit the door;

26

Esus 5fr. 23

Esus 5fr. 23 4

E 23 4

E5 23 1

Em9 23 1

1.2.

you know my thoughts don't fit the man. They nev-er can,

30

E(4) 4fr. 23 1

Em9 23 1

3.

they nev - er can. They nev - er can,

34

E(4) 4fr. 23 1

Em9 23 1

they nev - er can. They nev-er can,

38

E(4) 4fr. 23 1

E(9) 7fr. 23

they nev - er can.

Verse 2:

I had a king dressed in drip-dry and paisley
 Lately he's taken to saying I'm crazy and blind
 He lives in another time
 Ladies in gingham still blush while he sings them of wars and wine
 But I, in my leather and lace, I can never become that kind
 (To Chorus:)

Verse 3:

I had a king in a salt-rusted carriage
 Who carried me off to his country for marriage too soon
 Beware of the power of moons
 There's no one to blame, no, there's no one to name as a traitor here
 The king's on the road and the queen's in the grove till the end of the year
 (To Chorus:)