

“The Hexagram of the Heavens, the Strings of My Guitar”: Joni Mitchell’s Crip Virtuosity

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Joni Mitchell’s musical “voice” has been described by critics and fans as idiosyncratic, innovative, and even visionary, but never as disabled. Mitchell (née Roberta Joan Anderson) is a survivor of childhood polio and has lived with post-polio syndrome (PPS) since the 1980s. A degenerative condition, PPS exacerbates the muscle weakness in her lower back, arms, and hands left by poliovirus; it also causes intermittent nerve inflammation that manifests as chronic pain. Polio and PPS directly impact Mitchell’s musicianship in specific ways. When first she started to play baritone ukulele, then later the guitar, Mitchell lacked the dexterity necessary to produce complex chords and intricate fingerpicked accompaniment. Instead, she relied on “an adaptability and resourcefulness that is often underdeveloped in those whose bodies fit smoothly into the prevailing, sustaining environment” (Garland-Thomson 2011, 604). Mitchell cultivated a novel approach to the guitar comprising many alternate tunings; unorthodox chord voicings (the exact arrangement and register of pitches in a chord); chord sequences more like jazz and classical music than the folk genre with which she is so often (mis)identified; a repertoire of simplified left-hand chord shapes; and an idiosyncratic right-hand technique that incorporates a plectrum, detailed fingerpicking, rhythmic strumming, pizzicato, and other effects. By changing its physical properties, Mitchell adapted the guitar to her body, queering the fretboard and creating a new idiom which constitutes one form of what I call *crip virtuosity* (Straus 2006, 2008, 2011; Lerner and Straus 2006).

Crip virtuosity is a queer concept with necessarily stretchy boundaries that must be adapted to the bodies of individual musicians. In academic-activist

parlance, crip/cripping is akin to queer/queering inasmuch as both function as more radical forms of the identities “disabled,” “gay,” or “lesbian,” active processes of progressive social-political transformation, and strategies for interpreting a variety of cultural texts, including the “text” of instrumental techniques.¹ One happy result of all this criping is the expansion of our notion of musical virtuosity. By closely attending to styles of musical expression and the role of the body in performance, composition, and listening, crip virtuosity reminds us that, in Tobin Siebers’s memorable phrase, “situated knowledge adheres in embodiment” (2008, 23).

From an ablest perspective, crip virtuosity seems like an oxymoron. How could persons with disabilities (PWDs)—so often numbered among those bodies that do *not* matter—perform virtuosically?² How do we understand crip musicianship without resorting to cliché narratives of heroism (the Beethoven model), romanticized suffering (the Schubert model), or pejorative exceptionality (greatness *in spite of* disability) (Straus 2011)? A one-size-fits-all answer to these questions belies the intertwined political projects of disability activism and theory which attend to bodily specificity in nuanced ways. Therefore, this chapter focuses on a single case study—the guitar technique of singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Joni Mitchell—in the hopes of initiating a broader discussion of crip virtuosities.

To date, there have been few critical analyses of Mitchell’s music and none from a disability studies perspective. As Carl Wilson recently surmised, “the few books on Mitchell have been limited, either too hagiographic or subsuming her under second-wave feminism or California lifestyle-ism.”³ With a few exceptions, writing about Mitchell tends to plumb her work for autobiographical trivia, matching this song to that ex-lover or life event, without engaging with critical questions about her compositional, performance, or recording practices or issues like race, gender, sexuality, or politics.⁴ My examination of Mitchell’s guitar technique is, therefore, intended to move away from facile biography or uncritical diva worship. Nevertheless, certain events in her life remain important, so I begin with a brief “pathography” to contextualize my later comments about Mitchell’s crip virtuosity.⁵ Second, I examine the history of two seemingly antithetical terms: “crip” and “virtuoso.” Third, I analyze one of the most striking elements of Mitchell’s music—harmony—using the lens of

crip virtuosity. Finally, I discuss Mitchell’s novel guitar technique as a form of crip virtuosity that attends to the particularities of her disabled body.

Pathography: Joni Mitchell

Joni Mitchell contracted polio in October of 1952. Decades later, she recalled falling ill with a painterly eye to detail:

I dressed myself that morning in pegged gray slacks, a red and white gingham blouse with a sailor collar, and a blue sweater. I looked in the mirror, and I don’t know what I saw—dark circles under my eyes or a slight swelling in my face—but I said to myself, “You look like a woman today.”

After I got outside, I was walking along with a school friend, and at the third block, I sat down on this little lawn and said “I must have rheumatism,” because I’d seen my grandmother aching and having to be lifted out of the bathtub. I complained a bit more but still went and spent the day in school. Next day, I woke and my mom said, “Get up, come!” I said, “I can’t.” She didn’t believe me and yanked me out of bed, and I collapsed. (White 1995, 13–16)

Alone in North Castleford’s children’s polio ward, 100 miles from her home in Saskatoon, the self-described “broken doll” endured blistering compresses wrapped tight around her paralyzed legs to prevent muscular atrophy and fell asleep each night to the mechanical rhythms of iron lungs.⁶ Her mother came to visit just once and wore “a mask over her face and a haunted look in her eye,” and her father never came.⁷

Her mother left a small Christmas tree on a bedside table in the polio ward, which young Joan was allowed to keep illuminated for an hour after the official lights-out. To the consternation of her nurses, she entertained herself by singing Christmas carols, loudly. When her doctor, himself a polio survivor who used a wheelchair, told Joan that she would be unable to return home for Christmas because she could not walk, the precocious child resisted. One night, Mitchell told the angel atop her Christmas tree, “I am not a cripple,’ and [she] said a little prayer, some kind of pact, a barter with God for [her] legs, [her] singing.”⁸ With a determination that shocked and surprised her doctors, the young girl regained use of her legs through grueling physical therapy and eventually

returned to her home and family. However, her body bore the stigmata of polio. Her spine was “twisted severely forward in a curvature called lordosis, and then back to the right in a lateral curve called scoliosis [. . .] One leg was impaired, but the muscles didn’t atrophy, so there was no withering,” and the muscles of both hands, especially the left, were weakened (White 1995, 15–16).

Although Mitchell was “born too soon [. . .] to benefit from the imminent introduction of [polio] vaccines, [she was] born at just the right time to feel the beat of the rock and pop worlds of youth music, the counterculture, and beyond” (McKay 2013, 23). As a teenager, she caught the rock-and-roll bug, excelled at various dance fads, and scandalized her conservative peers by sneaking off to the “wrong” side of town where the music was better for dancing. If polio and rock and roll “shaped (misshaped) [her]; the 60s shaped [her] again” (McKay 2013, 31). During her brief stint at the Alberta College of Art, Mitchell bought a copy of Peter Seeger’s *How to Play Folk-Style Guitar* and “went straight to the [Elizabeth] Cotten picking. Your thumb went from the sixth string, fifth string, sixth string, fifth string.”⁹ However, polio-related muscle weakness made her clumsy on the fretboard. Her left hand could not move between chord shapes easily, and her right hand “ended up playing mostly the sixth string but banging it into the fifth string.”¹⁰ A few years later, friend and singer-songwriter Eric Andersen introduced Mitchell to open-chord guitar tunings which proved to be the catalyst that launched decades of musical exploration and innovation.

Mitchell seldom writes songs about her own disability. In fact, the only such reference occurs in a relatively late song, “Come in from the Cold” (1991). The evocative line, “I feel disabled by these bonfires in my spine,” could index either a physiological experience or describe being overwhelmed by emotional intensity. She makes passing references to physical disabilities in other songs: an “aging cripple selling Superman balloons” (“Nathan La Franeer,” 1968), and bluesman Furry Lewis, “propped up in his bed with his dentures and his leg removed” (“Furry Sings the Blues,” 1976). “A Chair in the Sky” (1979) captures jazz bassist Charles Mingus’s paralysis from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). In other songs, like “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970), “Sex Kills” (1994), and “This Place” (2007), illness and disability serve as conceits for ecological, political, and cultural conditions while, in the song “Dog Eat Dog”

(1985), Mitchell paraphrases Nietzsche to anthropomorphize corruption, singing “Money is the road to justice, and power walks it on crooked legs.”¹¹ While disability is not a substantial trope in Mitchell’s lyrics, it is the defining characteristic of her guitar technique.

Crippling virtuosity

In the late twentieth century, a remarkable era of disability activism culminated with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Following the tradition of feminist, queer, and antiracist activism, some disability activist-intellectuals resignified terms like “crip” (a variant of “cripple” that functions as both verb and adjective) and “cripping” (gerund). According to Carrie Sandahl, “cripping spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects [and exposes] the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity” (2003, 37). Both Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer place “crip” at the fulcrum of feminist, critical race, and queer theories (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006). “To crip” is to resist what McRuer calls “compulsory able-bodiedness” (2006, 2). In expanding Adrienne Rich’s influential notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” (which sets up straightness, binary gender, and reproductive sex as “normal” and serves, therefore, to police expressions of “deviant” gender and sexuality) (Rich 1980, 631–660), McRuer posits that systemic compulsory able-bodiedness establishes the absence of disability (broadly defined) as “normal” embodiment. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson assigns to this privileged subject position the neologism “normate.”¹² A tool of compulsory able-bodiedness, the *medical* model of disability supposes that intervention, treatment, and ultimately cure are desirable to “correct” a disabling condition. By contrast, the *social* model of disability arose from the activist culture of the 1980s and 1990s and proffers that compulsory able-bodiedness “produces disability” using a cultural logic similar to “the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness” (McRuer 2006, 2). The straight and able-bodied rely on the queer and the disabled for their intelligibility.

Likewise, the virtuoso and the cripp can be cast as doppelgängers, opposites whose respective value is embedded in the terms used to describe each category. Virtuosity is a prized attribute in most musical traditions. Extraordinary musical prowess matters; spectator-listeners thrill at the seemingly effortless execution of technical feats. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a specifically musical virtuosity came into existence during the seventeenth century.¹³ However, as James Deaville points out, such

general dictionary definitions do not address the diversity and complexity of [virtuosity] or the host of contradictory meanings and interpretations that not only cut across centuries of music-making and virtually every style type, but also play out in other disciplines and professions, ranging from dance and theater to jurisprudence and theology. (Deaville 2014, 277)

Things grow more complicated “in the habitus of Western civilization [because] we use [‘virtuosity’] to describe artistic or sport performances, the public presentations of teachers, clerics, and other speakers, accomplishments in work contexts, and even love-making” (Deaville 2014, 276). There also exist older, more arcane meanings; a secondary definition describes the virtuoso as one “with special knowledge of or interest in the work of art or curios.”¹⁴ Finally, virtuosity shares a common etiology with “virtue” and all of its moralizing implications. A virtuoso, then, may be a scholar, musician, artist, connoisseur, or other such person of *great worth* whose esteem is measured by the value of their contributions to culture, society, or history. Ghosts of these older definitions haunt modern usages of the terms, for virtuosos are prized, revered, rewarded, and removed from run-of-the-mill folk.

Historically, too, People with Disabilities (PWDs) have been set apart, though in ways that have none of the cultural cache and glamour of the virtuoso. Terms like “crippled,” “retarded,” “lame,” “gimp,” “slow,” “queer,” and “freak” exclude PWDs from the category of “the human.” Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, sequestration in asylums or institutions banished PWDs from daily life, and so-called ugly laws made it illegal for “unseemly” or “unsightly” persons to be seen in public (see Schweik 2009). One venue in which PWDs could achieve some success was entertainment, but it came at a cost. PWDs with visible disabilities were put

on display (sometimes posthumously) in circus sideshows, freak shows, and carnivals. Perhaps the most (in)famous exhibition was that of Sarah Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus. An African woman of the Khoi people, Baartman became a spectacle due to steatopygia, a genetic characteristic of some sub-Saharan African women, including the Khoisans. The condition leads to substantial deposits of tissue around the buttocks and thighs and gives individuals a distinctive callipygian shape. Throughout England and continental Europe, spectators paid to gawk at Baartman’s body. After her death, her preserved skeleton and a cast of her body were put on display until the late-1970s. Savants and prodigies (some of whom we might now identify on the autism spectrum) shocked audiences with their musical accomplishment *in spite of* their “pitiable” conditions. Remnants of the freak show are very much part of twenty-first-century popular culture. The *Got Talent* franchise spectacularizes PWDs like Susan Boyle for the seeming incongruence between their status as “freaks” and their ability to perform beautiful music.¹⁵ Because her pain condition and muscle weakness are forms of invisible disability (unlike guitarist Django Reinhardt, whose hands sustained damage in a fire) Mitchell could pass as “normate.” Yet her music has been frequently Othered when fellow musicians and journalists describe her “weird” chords or her unusual style of playing the guitar.

Music remains rooted in assumptions about the normate body (*Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson 1996, 8). For instance, most musical instruments, when played traditionally, require two arms, two hands, and ten functional fingers while others, including organs and modern pianos, require two legs and two feet as well to manipulate their pedals. According to Alex Lubet, professional-level classical music performance “requires physical technique that is at once highly developed and highly standardized” (2011, 3). However, “the protocols of jazz [and here, one might add, other forms of popular music] provide better opportunities for musicians with disabilities not only to perform, but to perform in ways that are actually expressions of lives with disabilities” (Lubet 2011, 42). To an extent, Lubet romanticizes popular music practices, which are governed by rules and conventions, albethey different ones from concert music. The rock guitar or jazz saxophone virtuoso improvises (rather than reads from a score) rapid, complex passages with

precision and agility but also practices those licks with diligence and regularity. Likewise, the virtuoso gospel or R&B singer makes difficult vocal runs seem effortless, even if she eschews the bel canto aesthetic of classical singing. Even great punk musicians have to perform “badly” in the *right* way (Fabbri 1981, 52–81). However, Lubet’s core insight is valuable. Broadly speaking, popular music is more hospitable to idiosyncratic performance techniques, including those of PWDs.

Crip virtuosity, then, refers to forms of exceptional music-making that are rooted in disability; they would not exist as such without particular disabling conditions. Thus, it may be more appropriate to speak of *crip virtuosities*, as no two crip virtuosos will travel the same path to artistic creation. Some use prosthetics (Def Leppard drummer Rick Allen); others develop techniques to exploit the unique possibilities of their extraordinary bodies (Django Reinhardt). Further, crip virtuosities can be learned by the able-bodied or differently disabled PWDs. Anyone willing to experiment with the techniques can crip their own musicality in ways that align with a vision of a world where the “fluidity of [the term crip] makes it likely that [its] boundaries will dissolve” (Sandahl 2003, 27).

Crippling harmony

Joni Mitchell is often (mis)cast as a folk musician, but she is a musical misfit, a stylistic wanderer, and an innovative technician who eschews labels—especially those of genre (with all their attendant ideological baggage).¹⁶ In its harmonic complexity, melodic inventiveness, and formal experimentation, Mitchell’s music has more in common with jazz, some classical music, and the edgier corners of progressive pop than with folk. Speaking broadly, harmony in much popular music can be inconsequential in and of itself. Regarding basic pop music harmonic idioms, Middleton suggests that, “If you can construct a song over a single riff, or a repeating 12-bar blues chord-sequence, then you can use the same riff or sequence to create a somewhat different song tomorrow; so can someone else” (Middleton 2000, 72; see also Middleton 1990, esp. chapter 7). What performers do within the harmonic framework

matters, on the whole, more than the chords as such. However, harmony is one of the most interesting aspects of Mitchell’s musical “misfitting.”

In 2005, Mitchell candidly told the California Commonwealth Club that “all of the chords in standard tuning sounded hackneyed to me [. . .] I craved chords you couldn’t get off the guitar.”¹⁷ Critical of the Western penchant to equate happy feelings with major harmonies and sad emotions with minor chords, Mitchell’s “chords of inquiry” balance the dissonance and consonance of her own physiological and psycho-emotional experiences.¹⁸ “My whole life was full of questions,” she writes. “Will I survive this disease? Will I ever walk again? Where is my daughter? Is she alright? Will we nuke them? Will they nuke us? Is there a mate for me?” (Mitchell 2014, 14). Childhood polio, the emotional trauma of giving up a child for adoption, the stresses of being a woman in a misogynistic culture, the disappointments of failed romances, the lingering effects of PPS, environmental degradation, and right-wing political agendas created a persistent dissonant buzz in the background of daily life. Mitchell’s chords reflect these tensions. She began to use harmony to express the complexity of human feeling, not just her own emotions. For example, she describes minor chords as

pure tragedy; in order to infuse [them] with a thread of optimism, you add an odd string to the chord to carry the voice of hope. Then perhaps you add a dissonant because in the stressful society we live in dissonance is aggressing against us at every moment. So, there’s an inquiry to the chords comparable to the unresolved quality of much poetry. (Whitesell 2008, 119)

Her exploration of alternate tunings began with simple open chords like those used by blues guitar and banjo players, for example open-D [D A D F# A D] and open G [D G D G B D]. In time, the restless musical misfit craved more nuanced sounds, and she expanded her repertoire of tunings to include harmonic extensions beyond the seventh, biting dissonances, and jarring suspensions. Tuning “down” (decreasing tension on the strings) extended the range of the guitar considerably below that of standard tuning, which has as its bass limit a low E2. There are passages throughout Mitchell’s oeuvre that are impossible to play in standard tuning because the instrument simply cannot produce the necessary notes, especially bass notes as low as Bb or A. As her

tunings grew increasingly complex, Mitchell developed her own system to keep track of the patterns: letter names indicate the pitch class of the sixth (lowest) string and numbers indicate the fret at which adjacent strings are tuned. Standard (or Spanish) tuning (E A D G B D) would be written as E-5-5-5-4-5, a pattern familiar to anyone who has ever tuned a guitar; open-D tuning becomes D-7-5-4-3-5. For non-musically literate players, this system is rather intuitive. You don't need to know specific pitches, but you do need a sensitive ear and perhaps a few extra sets of guitar strings.

Mitchell's more complex tunings can be easily explained using this method. She gave one such tuning the fanciful moniker "California Kitchen."¹⁹ The open strings are tuned to C G D F C E, or a "C11 sus2" chord. In "Joni Notation," the tuning would look like this: C-7-7-3-7-4. It's not necessary to know what type of chord it is, only how it sounds. This exact chord voicing is impossible in standard tuning because the guitar cannot produce the lowest pitch in that register. While a guitarist can produce this chord in a different voicing, to do so requires difficult hand positions, and the resulting chord lacks the unique timbre and movement between notes in the chord of Mitchell's. Finally, some tuning patterns can be used with a variety of different bass notes; others push the instrument's capabilities so far that they cannot be transposed because such drastic reduction of string tension prevents a pitch from sounding, while increasing the tension snaps the higher strings.

Most of Mitchell's tunings use open strings as the tonic, and bar chords at each fret place the building blocks of harmony literally at her fingertips; barring at frets V and VII respectively produces subdominant and dominant harmonies.²⁰ In many of the "more radical tunings, the ringing open strings take on a different sort of drone quality—[which she uses] between chords as a sort of connecting thread" (Rodgers 1996, 19). Mitchell thinks of this as a basic wash applied to the canvas of a song.

If I start a canvas now, to get rid of the vertigo of the blank page, I cover the whole thing in olive green then start working the color into it. So every color is permeated with that green. It doesn't really green the colors out but antiques them, burnishes them. The drone kind of burnishes the chord in the same way. The color remains as a wash. These other colors then drop in, but always against the wash. (Rodgers 1996, 19)

Still, Mitchell’s “‘modern chords’ [. . .] have an overall softness to them, with consonances and dissonances gently playing off each other” (Rodgers 1996, 18). Her complex, dissonant chord structures and unusual harmonic sequences pique our ears, which have grown accustomed to a fairly limited number of harmonic patterns in popular music. The unique sound of these harmonies results from a combination of alternate tunings and Mitchell’s right-hand technique, which I discuss in more detail later.

Crippling technique

While “an interesting tuning can be fertile ground for writing a song,” Mitchell cautions that “it’s how you work the tuning with your hands and compositional sense that counts” (Rodgers 1996, 20). Recall that the “social model” demands changes in the built world that respond to the bodies of PWDs. Likewise, crip virtuosity alters both instruments and techniques to match the bodies of musicians with disabilities. Standard tuning can be understood as the “normate” guitar environment, created around the assumption that players possess two hands and ten dexterous fingers to travel along the fretboard and the coordination to strum or to fingerpick. Mitchell’s tunings constitute an intervention, a change to that environment in response to the particular capabilities of her body. Accordingly, the patterns of standard tuning no longer work—like rearranging the letters on a keyboard each time you sit down to type. Traversing the neck of her crippled guitar feels, looks, and sounds very different than playing in standard tuning because the physical and auditory coordinates have changed. Each tuning has “its own little universe of sounds and possibilities,” so Mitchell has to learn anew where to put her left-hand fingers (Rodgers 1996, 20), though there are “certain things that you’ll try from tuning to tuning that will apply” or carry over into others, resulting in a degree of technical consistency (Rodgers 1996, 18). Her style also requires a keen internal sense of rhythm to execute complex syncopations, cross-rhythms, and contrapuntal lines beneath vocal melodies that twist and turn in unpredictable ways over surprising harmonic progressions. Although Mitchell’s crip virtuoso style doesn’t require the kind of dexterity needed for a

Brian May or a Bonnie Raitt guitar solo, it takes patience, time, and diligence to master. And it ain't easy!

Because she could never “begin to learn the neck like a standard player, linearly and orderly [Mitchell had] to think in a different way,” which she often describes as “*moving blocks*” (Rodgers 1996, 18, emphasis added). For weakened, less dexterous, and immobilized fingers, moving a block may be a more accessible task than fine motor skills or intricate finger work typically associated with guitar virtuosity. “Rather than forming her hand into complex chord shapes like a standard guitar would,” Les Irvin (webmaster of the official Joni Mitchell homepage) says, “[she] was able to play bar chords, for example lay down just one finger across all six strings [. . .] That allowed her left hand to do less work and at the same time get interesting chord combinations” (Ingles 2007). Because Mitchell keeps her fingers in relatively static positions as they glide up and down the neck, chords sound in exactly parallel voicing, a guitar transposition of the impressionist musical technique known as “harmonic planing.” For example, using only open strings and bar chords at V and VII produces the exact arrangement of intervals between different notes in the chord, at different pitch levels. She frequently uses hammer-ons/offers to break up the monotony of exact parallel voicing in a single song.

Like the impressionist composers she admires, Mitchell makes timbre (tone color) an essential component of her style, and she achieves a myriad of novel sounds because of the “slackness” (the decreased tension on the strings) of her tunings. Strings buzz, rattle, and pop as they vibrate along the neck, and Mitchell incorporates these extra-musical elements into her strumming, sometimes using a pick, her fingernails, or her hand to click and slap the strings to exaggerate the effect, as in the opening riff of “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” (1972). She sometimes snaps single strings (in classical music known as a “Bartók” or “snap pizzicato”) which adds both a strong rhythmic accent and a percussive effect that is especially audible in “The Wolf that Lives in Lindsay” (1979). Her light touch also results in frequent high harmonics more often than most guitarists regularly employ.

To facilitate movement between different tunings, Mitchell groups them into closely related families which allows her to “twiddle” only a knob or two at a time rather than risk breaking a string or causing extreme instability in the overall intonation. Family resemblances between tunings become clear when

they are written in Mitchell’s notation style. Table 1.1 contains several such “relatives.” Most feature strings five and four tuned at the seventh fret while the upper three strings exhibit some variations. Following Mitchell’s lead, I have grouped some of the most common left-hand “blocks” into families. Those in Table 1.2 use open and bar chords with slight variations, for instance, the addition of two or three fingers at higher adjacent frets. Table 1.3 consists of chord shapes anchored by the index finger on the third string. Mitchell discovered these shapes through a process of trial and error, and the shapes here represent only the most common among her songs. Diagrams read left (sixth string) to right (first string); numbers indicate the fret at which a particular string is pressed. However, these shapes produce chords with varying degrees of consonance and dissonance at any fret.

The song “Cactus Tree” (1968) features an open major chord turning E-7-5-4-3-5 with a capo at the second fret so that the studio recording sounds in F#-Major with a persistent tonic pedal point (Table 1.4).²¹ Using only a few

Table 1.1 Guitar tunings

Joni Notation/ Tuning	Chord Type	Open Chord Voicing	Example Songs
X-7-5-4-3-5	Major, root position	R-5th-R-3rd-5th-R	Amelia, Both Sides, Now
X-5-7-5-4-3	Major, second inversion	5th-R-5th-R-3rd-5th	The Circle Game, Little Green
X-7-7-5-4-3	Major Sus 4	4th-R-5th-R-3rd-5th	Otis and Marlena, Underneath the Streetlight
X-7-7-2-3-5	Major add 9	R-5th-9th-3rd-5th-5th	Cherokee Louise, Night Ride Home
X-7-7-3-7-4	Major add 9, add 11	R-5th-9th-11th-R-3rd	Coyote, Just Like This Train
X-7-7-3-2-5	Sus add 9 (no 3rd)	R-5th-9th-4th-5th-R	Hejira, Slouching Towards Bethlehem
X-7-3-5-2-5	Minor 11th	R-5th-7th-3rd-11th-7th	Moon at the Window, Sex Kills

X indicates the variable pitch of string 6.

Source: From author’s data.

Table 1.2 Shapes based on an open or bar chord

Chord Shape Name	Left-Hand Fingering
A: The Six Open Strings	0-0-0-0-0-0
B: Open + 2	0-0-0-11-0-11; 0-0-0-3-3-0; 0-0-0-2-2-0; 0-0-4-3-0
C: Full Bar	5-5-5-5-5-5;; 10-10-10-10-10-10
D: Partial Bar	0-0-7-7-7-7; 4-4-4-4-0-0
E: Full Bar + 2	5-5-7-5-6-5; 7-7-7-9-9-7

*0 indicates an open string. Numbers indicate the fret at which each string is depressed.

Source: From author's data.

Table 1.3 Shapes anchored by index finger on String 3

A: 0-2-0-1-0-0
B: 0-0-2-1-0-0
C: 0-2-0-1-0-3
D: 2-3-4-1-0-0

Source: From author's data.

closely related left-hand shapes, Mitchell creates flowing contrapuntal lines against the resonant open strings by fingerpicking with her right hand, using her thumb to consistently pluck the sixth string to create a tonic drone in the bass. In this case, the moving blocks consist of the same two- or three-finger shapes, oscillated between two frets.

Open and alternate tunings facilitate the execution of precise fingerpicked figures in songs like “The Dawntreader” (1968), “The Priest” (1970), “Sunny Sunday” (1994), and “The Wolf that Lives in Lindsay” (1979) (the latter also a fascinating study in guitar timbres). According to Joel Bernstein, Mitchell's early albums contain

some very fine, detailed fingerpicking—note for note, there are very specific figures. As time goes on, she gets into more of a strumming thing until it becomes more like a brush stroke—it's a real expressive rhythmic thing. Her early stuff doesn't really swing, there's not jazz stuff going on in it, and she's not implying a rhythm section as much, whereas now she obviously has a lot going on in the right hand. It's at the same time simpler and deeper. (Rodgers 1996, 21)

Her sense of rhythm and accent creates complex contrapuntal accompaniments as she deftly maneuvers around an unwavering underlying beat. Open tunings

Table 1.4 Moving blocks in "Cactus Tree"

0 6 0 5 0 0	0 4 0 3 0 0
0 6 0 5 0 3	0 4 0 3 0 4

Source: From author's data.

also facilitate movement around the entire neck of the guitar, and Mitchell's songs often require playing well above the twelfth fret and harmonics. Another common technique involves the juxtaposition of fretted strings high on the neck with ringing open strings below them, as heard in the opening riff of "Chelsea Morning" (1969), and in songs like "Barangrill" (1972), "Just Like This Train" (1974) and "Harlem in Havana" (1998). Mitchell conceives of her guitar as an orchestra in which "the treble strings become a cooljazz [sic] 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" (Rodgers 1996, 18).

Playing in alternate tunings is dangerous. All that "twiddling around isn't good for the instrument, generally speaking. It's not good for the neck"—which is calibrated for standard tuning. In adapting her guitar to match her body's capabilities, Mitchell risks real damage to her instrument. Strings break under the strain, and necks twist, warp, and bend in ways that mirror the impact of polio on her own spine. Consequently, Mitchell has been very selective about the guitars she uses, opting for instruments whose necks can withstand the differing levels of tension. Mitchell's slack tunings also unsettle the intonation, and she admits to being frequently frustrated by such tuning problems. To compensate, she cultivated a nimble left-hand touch to bed the strings as little as possible while also facilitating fluid movement up and down the entire length of the neck. This, in turn, helps keep her instrument in tune, but even her light left-hand touch is sometimes "defeated by the extreme slackness of some of her tunings" (Rodgers 1996, 21).

By the end of the mid-1990s, PPS and other health problems made it impossible for Mitchell to perform. As she told Jody Denberg in 1998:

I was diagnosed as having [PPS], which they said was inevitable [. . .] that forty years after you had the disease [. . .] the wires that animate certain muscles are taken out by the disease and the body in its ingenious way. The

filaments of the adjacent muscles send out branches and try to animate that muscle, so it's kind of like the [Energizer] bunny. The muscles all around the muscles that are gone begin to go also because they've been trying to drive this muscle for so long [. . .] the weight of the guitar became unbearable. Also, the acoustic guitar requires that you extend your shoulder out in an abnormal way. [. . .] Some of the damage to my back, in combination with that position, was very painful.²²

In the 1990s, “genius luthier” Fred Walecki of Westwood Music built for Mitchell a custom-made, “thin as a wafer [. . .] two-and-a-half pound” guitar out of German spruce that “fit [her] hip and even kinda cups up like a bra.”²³ Walecki equipped it with a Roland VG-8 processor that could digitally manipulate the sound coming out of an amplifier to virtually create her tunings while leaving the guitar itself in standard tuning. For the first time in her career, Mitchell could play her songs with precise intonation and without pain. The instrument facilitated a return to the stage in the late-1990s and inspired a new album, *Taming the Tiger*.

Conclusion

Both critical studies of the music of Joni Mitchell and crip studies of music are emergent, interdisciplinary subfields. Accordingly, this chapter intends to contribute to ongoing conversations among scholars across both groups, by facilitating a move away from hagiography and toward a more rigorous analysis of musical technique and performance. To that end, I put forth the concept of “crip virtuosity” as one way to think about the extraordinary body in performance. In this case, it can account for the idiosyncrasies of Mitchell’s playing that result directly from the lingering effects of childhood polio and PPS. Just as disability activists sought to change the built environment to facilitate access by the broadest number, thereby interpellating more people into the category of “human,” Mitchell adapted the guitar to suit her bodily specificity by queering the fretboard and finding a new way to traverse and make musical sense (as knowledge and sensation) of it, thereby expanding the category of “virtuoso.” Hers is not the only form of “crip virtuosity,” but

an instructive first case study, one remarkable form of disablist music-making that can go unnoticed in a culture of compulsory able-bodiedness.

Notes

- 1 Transgender activist and author Kate Bornstein advances a similar argument around the terms “tranny” and “transgender” in her book *Kate Bornstein Is a Queer and Pleasant Danger* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012) and in the 2014 documentary of the same name. According to Bornstein, “I understand ‘tranny’ to be a radical, sex-positive gender identity. Tranny is to trans person as fag is to gay man or dyke is to lesbian.” Bornstein also writes about this in a blog post which can be found here: http://katebornstein.typepad.com/kate_bornsteins_blog/2014/05/tranny-revisited-by-auntie-kate.html (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 2 In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Judith Butler excludes any reference to disability.
- 3 Carl Wilson, “Chords of Inquiry,” *Bookforum* (September 2017). https://www.bookforum.com/inprint/024_03/18474 (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 4 Notable exceptions include Lloyd Whitesell’s *The Music of Joni Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University, 2008); Eric Lott’s *Black Mirror: Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2017); Amy Kintner’s “Back to the Garden Again: Joni Mitchell’s ‘Woodstock’ and Utopianism in Song,” *Popular Music*, 35.1 (2016): 1–22; and Matthew Jones, “Back to the Garden: Socio-Ecological Critique and the Music of Joni Mitchell,” a paper presented at the 2008 meeting of Feminist Theory and Music in Greensboro, NC.
- 5 Pathography is “the study of the effects of an illness on the writer’s (or other artist’s) life or art, and the effects of an artist’s life and personality development on [their] creative work,” Robert J. Campbell, *Psychiatric Dictionary*, 6th edn (Oxford: Oxford University, 1989).
- 6 Rene Montagne, “The Music Midnight Makes: In Conversation with Joni Mitchell,” *NPR* (December 9, 2014). <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=369386571> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 7 *Ibid.* It was not uncommon for polio wards to prohibit family visits due to the risk of contagion.
- 8 Timothy White, “Joni Mitchell,” 14. Mitchell regularly recounts this story. For a detailed account, see Lucy O’Brien, *Shadows and Light: Joni Mitchell, The Definitive Biography* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2002), 24–27.

- 9 Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers, "My Secret Place: The Guitar Odyssey of Joni Mitchell," *Acoustic Guitar* (August, 1996). Reprinted in *The Complete Joni Mitchell: So Far* (Los Angeles: Alfred Publishing, 2014), 17–21.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Joni Mitchell, "Come in from the Cold," *Night Ride Home* (Hollywood: Geffen Records, 1991); "Nathan La Franer," *Joni Mitchell* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1967); "Furry Sings the Blues," *Hejira* (Asylum Records, 1976); *Mingus* (Asylum Records, 1979); "Dog Eat Dog," *Dog Eat Dog* (Hollywood: Geffen Records, 1985).
- 12 In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 1996), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the normate as the "veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries [and] through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings" (8).
- 13 *Oxford English Dictionary*, "virtuosity." <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223847?redirectedFrom=VIRTUOSITY#eid> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 14 *Oxford English Dictionary*, "virtuoso." <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223848?redirectedFrom=virtuoso#eid> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 15 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). In nineteenth-century Europe, around the time Ludwig van Beethoven was losing his hearing, rudimentary schools for the deaf and blind were established on the periphery of cities like Vienna. For more information, see Joseph Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially chapters one and two.
- 16 I intentionally borrow Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notion of the misfit as it relates to disability studies in her "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia*, 26.3 (2011): 591–609.
- 17 Joni Mitchell, "Earth Day Speech" to the California Commonwealth Club (April 22, 2005). <http://www.commonwealthclub.org/events/archive/podcast/joni-mitchell-earth-day-speech-42205> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 18 Mitchell began using this term at some point in the 1970s. She describes her descriptive language for harmony in an interview with Malka Marom in Marom's *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words* (Ontario: EWC Press, 2014), 74–75.
- 19 It's unclear when Mitchell first derived this whimsical name, but in a 1967 radio interview with Gene Shay, she describes this specific tuning using the "California Kitchen" moniker. When asked by Shay why she chose that specific name, Mitchell flatly responded "That's what I called it." Clips of this interview can be heard in Paul Ingles, "The Emergence of Joni Mitchell," *Public*

- Radio International* (September 24, 2007). <http://www.prx.org/playlists/6475> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 20 I use these terms to refer to the chords built on the fourth and fifth scale degrees, respectively, not to describe harmonic function as in Western classical music. Mitchell incorporates a variety of harmonic idioms ranging from so-called functional harmony to modal progressions and mixtures of the two. For a thorough description of Mitchell’s harmonic palette see Whitesell, chapter 5.
- 21 Mitchell sometimes performs “Cactus Tree” in Open-D (D-7-5-4-3-5) with a capo at the fourth fret. In a 1974 broadcast of the BBC’s *Old Grey Whistle Test*, she performs the song in Open-D with the capo on the second fret, creating a tonal center. Whitesell’s work on Mitchell’s harmonic palette has been rather helpful here; see 120–125.
- 22 Jody Denberg, “A Conversation with Joni Mitchell,” *KGSR-FM* (September 9, 1998).
- 23 *Ibid.*

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