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Albrecht Schneider
Arne von Ruschkowski
(eds.)

Systematic Musicology: Empirical and Theoretical Studies

PETER LANG
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Systematic Musicology: Empirical and Theoretical Studies

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Jan Clemens Moeller

Comments about Joni Mitchell's Composing Techniques and Guitar Style

Summary

The article (written to expand on findings reported in Moeller 2011) explores some of the musical and instrumental features found in songs of Joni Mitchell. Peculiar guitar tunings as well as chord structures that in part seem to have been derived from such tunings, are given special attention. Two songs, one from an early phase of her career (*The Circle Game*, 1969) and another (*Refuge of the Road*) from one of Mitchell's "classic" albums of the 1970s (*Hejira*, 1976) are analyzed. Transcriptions of parts of the songs are provided to illustrate features and textures of these songs.

1. Introduction

Joni Mitchell (born November 7, 1943) no doubt is one of the most respected and at the same time perhaps the most underrated singer and songwriter of the last century. The "Rolling Stone" magazine even called her one of the greatest and most influential songwriters ever. She received countless awards, such like the Billboard Century Award and the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and she also was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Nevertheless, there is a great difference between the early years of her career and the reception she found (or, rather, missed) in later years. While her song "Both sides, now" (1969) was covered more than 640 times, her album "Mingus" (1979) failed to attract the attention of a wider public and did not even see significant radio airplay. In regard to musical concepts and instrumental techniques, Mitchell always was the artist that explored the world of non-standard tunings like no other. Starting in the mid-60s, when she began to compose songs in conventional open tunings such as open G (DGDGBD) or D (DADF#AD), she also developed a number of quite unusual tunings. Joel Bernstein, who in a way is her "tuning-archivist" said that *while (she was) tuning her guitar from one open tuning to another she came upon unlooked – for intermediate chords whose tone-color immediately resonated with her. She thus began to compose in tunings that had never even explored before.* Mitchell herself commented: *For years everybody said 'Joni's weird chords' and I thought, how can they be weird chords? Chords are depictions of emotion. These chords that I was getting by twisting the knobs on the guitar until I could get the chords that I heard inside that suited me – they feel like my feelings. You know – I called them-not knowing (technical names) – 'chords of inquiry' – they have a question mark in them. There were so many unresolved things..... those chords suited me, and I'd stay in unresolved emotionality for days and days.*¹

¹ A comment she made in a DVD-documentary of her's *Woman of heart and mind: A life story* (2003; the passage is found at time code position 23:11).

In the 135 songs that she wrote for guitar she used more than forty different tunings. So-called conventional open tunings (open G, open D, or D modal) she uses in less than 19% of her songs. There are tunings that she employs for just one or two songs. To remember all these different tunings Joni Mitchell doesn't use the note names for each string. She just writes the name of the lowest string and then numbers which represent the fret numbers at which one plays one string to tune the next open string. The standard tuning EADGBE becomes E55545, and an open G tuning she notates D57543.

A tuning like F#BEAC#F# she would notate F#55545. So what is important is the relative tuning of the strings and it's easy to recognize that E55545 and F#55545 have the same relative tuning of the strings and just the root note is different. So when I mention that there are more than forty tunings this means there are forty different tunings of strings.



2. Analyses

In what follows, I'm going to show some aspects of her guitar style and her harmonic perception. The first example is from her third album *Ladies of the canyon* released in 1970.

Example 1 is the transcription of the guitar intro of the song *The circle game*. The guitar is tuned to open G (DGDGBD / D57543), and the capo is on the fourth fret, so it is sounding B².

The song offers a straightforward fingerpicked accompaniment, harmonies that are quite simple, all the typical aspects for urban Folk style. Also, we see a regular verse-chorus form, each composed of four four-bar phrases. However, the intro has 5 bars and provides a little tension to the clear structured song and it does not start with the tonic triad as could be expected in a conventional folksong.

The chord changes are I Bm Am7 I Bm Am7 I Bm Am7 I G C G I G I. Starting with a Bm (b6)/chord and followed by a Am7-chord. This movement B-A is repeated three times until finally the tonic triad G is introduced.

² The capo is on the 4th fret. Therefore a G chord played sounds at the pitch B. To make reading easier, I transcribed the piece in question in G-major.

Example 1: Joni Mitchell: *The Circle Game*, Intro

The circle game

Joni Mitchell

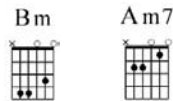
Guitar

Guitar tuning
DGDGBD

Git.

Git.

Mitchell often uses the same fingering to create chords or sonorities and just moves it along the neck of the guitar, like in bars 1-3.



(the same fingering in the intro)

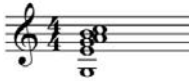
These fingerings which let open strings ring is another stylistic feature of Joni Mitchell's guitar style. Here it is the G which rings throughout all chords and it gives a special character to the Bm-chord (b6), which almost sounds like a B/Gmj7-chord, and in the Am7-chord the open G is the 7th. This example is quite easy to understand.

Example 2 is much more sophisticated but it employs similar composition techniques, for example parallel chord movements. This song is from the album *Hejira* released in 1976 and is called *Refuge of the Roads*. The main theme of this album is traveling and being on the road. The songs were for the most part written by Mitchell while traveling by car from Maine to Los Angeles. The album title is a transliteration of the Arabic word 'hijra', which means "journey".

The tuning that she developed for this song is unique. As it seems it was only used for this song. The guitar is tuned CACFAC (C93533), apparently a F-major-Chord. The

third string is tuned to the root note F, with the sixth, fourth and first string tuned to C (as 5th) this tuning is slightly different from a conventional open tuning, where, like in the example above (open G = DGDGBD), the root note is much more present. Here we have 3 times the 5th (C) and 2 times the 3rd (A) and only one root note (F), which however is not the lowest note in the tuning. If this were the case, the tuning might at least give a stronger tonal perception of a F-major triad. But here it is the fourth string (viewed from bottom) that is tuned to F. On the recording, Mitchell is doubling her guitar playing though not exactly in regard to onsets of notes, which gives a kind of small delay effect besides the chorus effect that has been added to the guitar tracks to yield a brighter sound. As Mitchell explained: *On Hejira I doubled the guitar and I doubled it in a way that Wayne Shorter and Miles double on Nefertiti. It's like silk-screening – it's not tight doubling. I'm playing the part twice but there's some variations on it so they're not perfectly tight - they're shadowing each other in some places.*³

The song starts with this chord



which is far beyond a so called slash-chord, because it is a mixture of at least three chords. In fact it contains essential notes of an E-minor, an A-minor and a C-major chord, all at the same time, but it sounds more like a Gsus4 chord, even with the lack of the 5th. This seems a clever choice, because the resulting complex chord is harmonically far away from the F-tuning, and like in *The circle game* she does not start this song with the tonic chord. But here Mitchell goes much further. While in the intro of "The circle game" she starts with a Bmb6-chord, which is a chord that is normal for a song in a G-major scale, she decided in this instance to place a chord with notes that are not in the F-scale. Here it is the B (sharp) which is the diminished 5th.

The next chord is a kind of a Bbmaj9 chord



which is followed by a strong C-major triad



³ Interview with Chip Stern, Musician, January/February 1995

which is soon altered with the ninth and eleventh (D and F#)



the same movement is repeated two steps down and



just with beginning of the vocal the key is settled and becomes F-major.



With the refrain the key changes to C-major with this strong C-major triad.



Followed by the this F-major chord (2nd inversion)



How ambivalent the function of the same chords can be becomes clear in bar 25. Here the same chord that in bar 1 sounds like a Gsus4, in the C-major context sounds more like a Em7. The commentary that Wayne Shorter (famous American jazz saxophonist) made about Joni Mitchell's chords underlines this: *Joni didn't play the guitar with an academic or clinical approach. It was like she was going where her vocabulary guitar-wise took her. And there was variation. They put the music in front of me, and then I'd start play and close my eyes instead of looking at a B or D7 chord, because it wasn't actually those chords anyway. It was the inversion of something, and the chord would*

*sound like it was from Asia. Some other chords sounded minor-ish, or besides minor, you could say melancholy, sentimental, questioning. Some harmonic chords you'd hear in Stravinsky, Bartók, those kinds of chords.*⁴

The bass lines played by Jaco Pastorius (famous jazz/fusion bass player, b. 1951, d. 1987) on this recording does not have an importance for the perception of the harmonies. The transcription shows that he almost only plays melodic figures (even though his playing is great and the sound of his fretless bass really fits to the song). Maybe it is because the songs on which he played were already recorded and finished by the time that Joni Mitchell asked him to join. The function that his bassplaying had in groups like Weather Report, his divinely rhythmic playing combined with his virtuosity, the way he used “chime tones” (flageolets, harmonics) that has influenced thousands of bass players is absolute worth to be studied more closely, however, this would be beyond the scope of this article. In “Refuge of the road”, being the first work of Mitchell and Pastorius recording together, his playing is more melodic and subtle than in recordings he did before.⁵

He does not play in the intro of the song, he just starts when the key becomes clear (bar 11, F-major, he antedates the F in bar 10). Only in the refrain when the key evidently becomes C-major he adds some rhythmic phrases (bar 21) but as soon as the intro is repeated he switches again to melodic phrases (bar 28 to 33).⁶

Joni Mitchell describes her perception of harmonies like this: *I think because men need to solve things and to come to conclusions – the “sus” chord – there’s a law that Wayne Shorter told me: never stay on a sus chord too long; never go from one sus chord to a sus chord. Well, I know I’m going from a sus chord to a sus chord to sus chord- you know, chords of inquiry, because my life was full of questions: When are they gonna drop the big one?” “Where is my daughter?” You know there are so many unresolved things....those chords suited me, and.....I’d stay in unresolved emotionality for days and days... so here’s a depiction – why can’t you just go three chords unresolved like that, and then when you hit a major, or even minor, in a progression – boom – you know, it’s quite a dramatic change coming out of that into a resolution.*⁷

Refuge of the Road is exactly structured like this. First, we have an intro where a defined mode (major or minor) is not present, then the verse seems to be in F-major, but a lot of Joni’s “inquiry”-chords are used (bar 13 and 15). However, when the refrain is introduced (bar 21) there is this strong C-major-chord (bar 21) and the second inversion of

⁴ Mercer 2009, 109.

⁵ *The album was already finished at that time. And then Jaco came out and added bass on four tracks....And more melodic than he was playing before that* (A conversation with Ingrid Pastorius by Wally Breese, 1998. Retrieved from www.jonimitchell.com).

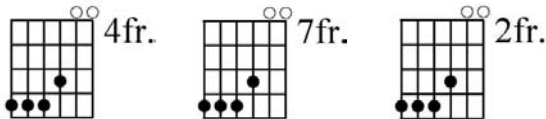
⁶ There is definitely a difference in the way he plays between this album and the albums that he participated afterwards. On the next album “Don Juan reckless daughter” he is playing much more basic rhythms while he continues to add melodic elements. This is due to the fact that he was not involved in the basic recordings of the 4 “Hejira”-songs. He just added his bass on already finished songs. So his genius was restricted. But exactly this made him invent a different way to play his bass that he afterwards used for different projects, too.

⁷ See DVD-documentary on Mitchell titled *Woman of heart and mind: A life story* (2003).

the F-chord which give this dramatic change and resolution that even the “inquiry”-chord in bar 25 sounds like Em7 in this context.

After looking into some of the harmonic textures, let us now redirect attention to Joni Mitchell’s guitar style. The interesting thing is that Joni Mitchell always uses only a few fingerings. For “Refuge of the road”, she uses only four fingerings. But because of the open string tuning totally different chords are created with the first fingering.

The first fingering is played in 7th, the 10th and the 5th fret.

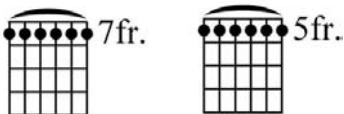


The resulting notes/tones are

GEGB AC
 BbGBbD AC
 FDFA AC

The 1st and 2nd string ring open (A and C). And what the 9th and the sus4 is for a G is the major 7th and the 9st for Bb, and the 3rd and 5th for the F.

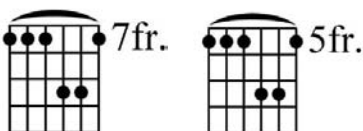
The second fingering is simply a full Barré.



The chords resulting are

GEGCEG
 FDFBbDF

The third fingering:

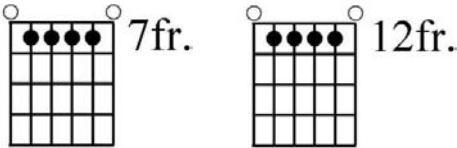


The notes/tones resulting are

GEGDF#G

FDFCEF

Finally, the fourth fingering is



resulting in the chords

CEGCEC

CACFAC

As to the method of finding fingerings resulting in chords and sonorities, Joni Mitchell gives this account: *There are certain simple fingerings that were difficult in standard tunings. My left hand is not very facil; my right hand is extremely articulate. At the time that I began to write my own music, Eric Andersen showed me open G and D modal, dropping down the bass string, I had always heard beautiful melodies in my head, so I just tuned the guitar to those chords, or slipped into a tuning so that the shapes made by the left hand were simplified.*⁸

Pragmatically this explains the way she creates: simple fingerings for the left hand while the right hand that is playing accentuated and sometimes intricate rhythms.⁹

⁸ Hinton 1996, 89.

⁹ See also Moeller 2011, 119.

Example 2: Joni Mitchell: *Refuge of the Roads*

Refuge of the Roads

Joni Mitchell

Vocals

Guitar

Guitar tuning
CACFAC

Bass

Voc.

Git.

Git.

Bass

2

Refuge of the Roads

8

Voc. 

Git. 

Git. 

Bass 

12

Voc. 

Git. 

Git. 

Bass 

Refuge of the Roads

3

16

Voc. 

Git. 

Git. 

Bass 

20

Voc. 


Git. 


Git. 

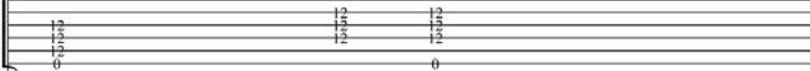
Bass 

4


Refuge of the Roads

Voc. 

Git. 

Git. 

12	12	12
12	12	12
12	12	12
0	0	0

Bass 

Voc. 

Git. 

Git. 

7	7	7	6	0	0	9	0	0
7	7	7	7	0	0	10	0	0
7	7	7	7	0	0	10	0	0
0	0	0	7	7	7	10	10	10

Bass 

Refuge of the Roads

5

27

Voc.

27

Git.

Git.

Bass

29

Voc.

29

Git.

Git.

Bass

The musical score for 'Refuge of the Roads' is presented in four staves. The top staff is for the Vocals (Voc.), which is mostly silent with a few notes. The second staff is for the Guitar (Git.) in treble clef, showing a complex melodic line with many accidentals and slurs. The third staff is for the Guitar (Git.) in bass clef, showing a simple bass line with fingerings (0, 9, 10) and a percussive rhythm. The bottom staff is for the Bass, showing a simple bass line with a few notes and a final rest.

3. Conclusion

There are several techniques that determine Joni Mitchell's style of guitar compositions. Firstly, she is using (with only one exception) open tunings. When she started to compose her own music in the sixties she used more conventional open tunings (like drop D-DADGBD used for "Free Man in Paris" 1974 or open G-DGDGBD used for "The Circle Game" 1970) but with the years she became more and more radical. Some tunings like CGEbFBbD that she uses for "The wolf that lives in Lindsey" (from the 'Mingus' album 1979) are besides being considered as a tuned slash-chord (here Cm with Bb or Cm11), and are certainly a challenge for any guitar. The strings are tuned so low that the C she often strikes percussively rattles and clatters, but she managed to make this sound an integral part of the composition.

Secondly, we should mention her parallel motion of fingerings. She often moves the same fingering along the neck and fretboard of the guitar, thereby keeping the relative positions of the fingers of the left hand in a certain configuration. Quite often, some of the strings are played "open" (no finger used on these strings). The open strings that ring well in resonance with the guitar (especially in open tunings, cf. Schneider 2011) are another reason for molding these special chords that lack a clear mode.

Thirdly, there is the recurrent feature of simple fingerings. Maybe it is just because of her weak left hand, but the fingerings Mitchell uses are simple. Some fingerings she even employed in different tunings (the first fingering she uses in "Refuge of the roads" occurs also in the song "Amelia" on the same album though with a different tuning). Fourthly, the right hand's playing is done percussively. Over the years, a progress in the use of the right hand could be observed. When Mitchell started to play guitar in the 1960s she was picking the strings much more like folk musicians usually do (that is, mostly in regular patterns according to the meter of a particular song), but then she developed her own style, which makes use of the thumb and the fingers nearly independently, creating almost polyrhythmic patterns, slapping with the heel of the hands on the strings.

This article considers only exemplary aspects of Joni Mitchell's music which is complex in many respects, and moreover has undergone changes in the course of her long career spanning several decades. However, there are some persistent features in particular in her use of the guitar both in regard of the chords and sonorities she creates as well as her unique style of playing.

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