

**The Music of Joni Mitchell.** By Lloyd Whitesell. New York: Oxford, 2008. 288 pp. ISBN-10: 0195307992 ISBN-13: 978-0195307993 \$22.95 paperback.<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd Whitesell's study of Joni Mitchell presents a thorough music-poetic model for the study of a major pop-rock artist's work. Mitchell's career spans four decades and over twenty albums, constituting a rich and diverse body of music with strands of folk, jazz and rock unified by her unique talent. After having placed Mitchell in relation to the art song, Whitesell proposes a partition of her oeuvre into four artistic periods: the first four folk-oriented albums leading up to *Court and Spark* (1974), the experimentation with jazz stylings leading up to *Wild Things Run Fast* (1982), which ushered in a period in which she drew more on mainstream pop, and the albums after *Night Ride Home* (1991), characterized by retrospection. The chapters that follow divide Mitchell's music into five areas. The first of these, "Voices and Personae," analyzes such aspects as the manner in which a poem addresses an audience, its mode of delivery; representation, or how fictional worlds are depicted; syntactical construction of voice (e.g., first-person subject); and manner of vocal performance. This paves the way for a discussion of the types of personae constructed by Mitchell. Indeed, it is in these types – the ingenue, the mystic bard, the torch carrier, and others – that we get a sense of the range of Mitchell's lyrics and their sophistication in both tone and content.

In "Thematic Threads," Whitesell examines the themes that run through Mitchell's work, subsequently identified as "traps" (usually a relationship), quests, bohemia, talent, and flight, most often expressed in relation to personal freedom. This is one of the strongest sections of the book, effectively melding music-technical observations with vivid descriptions that are precise, yet evocative. He concludes: "The pull of freedom in its multiple guises forms a grand theme running through Mitchell's songwriting. Right from the beginning, we feel the tug of a counterweight. Imagery of weaving, dancing, dreaming, and flying is tangled up with imagery of entrapment, stone (hardening, sinking), hollowness, and illusion." (115)

In the chapter on harmony, Whitesell tackles the thorny problem of reconciling traditional functional analysis with the kinds of progressions and sonorities that rock musicians invent. The problem is exacerbated by Mitchell's unorthodox guitar tunings and freely poetic phrase structures that result in unusual harmonic sequences. (There is a footnote that describes how Victor Feldman who, in addition to being a much-sought-after session musician also authored a book about chord progressions, was unable to appreciate Mitchell's harmonic progressions and had to leave the session for which he was hired.) Whitesell classifies Mitchell's work into five categories that sometimes overlap: modal, polymodal, chromatic, polytonal, and pedal point. It is a useful way of hearing the music since it groups the pieces in ways not normally expected, but nonetheless defensible at least in terms of general schemes. At the bar level, however, Whitesell seems obligated to regress to more conventional musical-analytic language. For example: "The song [Rainy Night House] begins with a long instrumental prelude, Schumannesque in its expansiveness. The tonic Am chord is cramped and depressed by elements of a G triad in the right hand (thus sounding as A7sus). Subsequent moves to a clear G

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(VII in A Aeolian) provides a sense of alleviation. The next harmonic pass takes us through Bb, whose Phrygian influence imparts another depressive shading. The third pass expands on these dualities: G issues into a breath of C major elation, while Bb harshly runs up against its tritone relation (E) on the way to the cadence. The outcome of all of this preparation is a shock of dislocation as the curtain opens with an abrupt move to the key of Dm.” (134)

EXAMPLE 5.13. "RAINY NIGHT HOUSE," CHORD CHANGES

Intro (in A): ||: A7sus Am7 | A7sus Am7 | G | G:| C | Bb | Am | G | G |  
Aeolian (Phryg)  
 | C G | F | Bb | Bb | Em | Em | Am | Am |  
(Phryg)

Verse (in D)  
 Phrase 1, 2: ||: Dm | Bb | A7sus Am7 | A:|  
Aeolian minor

Phrase 3: | Dm | G | C | F |  
Dorian

Phrase 4: | Bb | Dm | C | Am | Am | G | G | Dm | Dm | Dm | Dm |  
Aeolian Dorian

Listening to this passage does not seem, at least to me, to elicit a Phrygian “depressive shading,” no matter how hard I try to hear it (although I do hear the “C major elation” after the first repeat). And the “abrupt move” is expected as the instrumental prelude hovers around the dominant, notwithstanding the various harmonic digressions (even Whitesell admits that the G sounds like A7sus). The problem with a progression like this is that our common analytic language and the expectations it creates is inadequate and only seems to work sporadically. I would also argue (with Victor Feldman perhaps) that parts of this progression do not make much sense. Given the somewhat pedestrian piano accompaniment, especially in the “prelude,” some of the chord changes seem like throwaways, biding for time before getting to the verse. (Tellingly, in the 1974 version, the intro has been transformed into a more elegant and harmonically simplified pattern based on D, A, and Bb, one that segues effortlessly into the verse.) The verse, however, does work harmonically, especially since the melody lands on a pronounced C#, supporting a clear dominant function at the end of phrase 1 and 2. What I am getting at, though, is that traditional analysis sometimes hinders our understanding and appreciation. And Whitesell comes to a similar conclusion at the end of his chapter: “As we have seen, Joni Mitchell’s harmonic palette is multivalent, subtly shaded, and highly distinctive ... She creates novel structures from the most commonplace resources and incorporates bold experimentation into engaging, exuberant grooves.”(147)

"Melodic Turns" focuses on phrase structure and contour, presenting a number of intriguing examples of flexible phrase rhythm and metrical disruption. For example, in the discussion of "Coyote," a discrepancy between the melodic and harmonic cycles results in the harmonic progression starting to repeat before the melody has finished: a sixteen-bar rhyming scheme is supported by a fourteen-bar harmonic cycle. Mitchell solves this by dropping material from a subsequent phrase to catch up with the harmonic progression. Especially during Mitchell's second artistic period (1974-82), with albums such as *Hejira* and *Mingus*, she seems to be

working with a liberated sense of melodic and harmonic structure. Much of it is perhaps driven by innovative poetic devices, but I believe it may also be the result of working with adventurous jazz musicians such as Jaco Pastorius and Wayne Shorter. Although it is not something that Whitesell dwells on, Pastorius and Shorter were both musical forces to be reckoned with. Each contributed significantly to the development of Mitchell's music during her second period. Pastorius, in particular, with his unique electric sound and melodic complement in the upper range, clearly helped define the sound and sense of freedom of these albums. Similarly, the onset of Mitchell's third period (1982-91) was marked by her relationship with her bassist husband-to-be, Larry Klein. While initially he may have been continuing where Pastorius left off, it was in his role as a producer that Klein contributed to Mitchell's move to a more pop-oriented songwriting. These are speculations, but given the nature of music as conceived in the recording studio, the results of such collaborations should not be ignored.

As mentioned, the book begins by comparing the pop and art song and, as a means of bringing this connection to a close, Whitesell reintroduces it in the penultimate chapter, "Collections and Cycles." There has always been debate about what constitutes a "concept album" in pop-rock music, the prime example being *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band*. But there has been little agreement as to the degree of coherence and the manner in which it is established. Whitesell convincingly argues that thematic coherence, musical or poetic, is evident in about half of Mitchell's albums. *Hejira* is the exemplar, with the "grand themes ... [of] fortune, mortality, and ... travel – in particular, flight for the purpose of survival," which roughly corresponds to the meaning of the Arabic word used for the title of the album (204). But there are purely musical thematic connections as well between songs: rhythmic hooks and the pronounced use of the bIII chord as a distinguishing harmonic colour. Whitesell's argument for coherence in *Hejira* spans ten pages, with numerous and compelling demonstrations of connections between textual and musical elements. Fourteen pages are given to *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. With its more precariously stated theme of recklessness, the album's "experimental ruptures and disjunctions call for a more flexible, receptive attitude on the part of the listeners, who must create their own connections in making sense of the overall concept ... In giving freer reign to disparity, while never abandoning an implied coherence, Mitchell is exploiting an ambiguity at the heart of the song cycle genre itself." (226)

Whitesell has produced a coherent and stimulating work with musicologically sound and critically persuasive analyses. Although there may be hints of seeking to legitimize Mitchell in his discussions of the art song and the song cycle, the emphasis is on demonstrating the unique features of her music. Especially impressive is the way in which poetic and musical insights are integrated, thereby reflecting Mitchell's own *modus operandi*. The method that emerges from this investigation provides a much-needed alternative for the study of popular music.

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