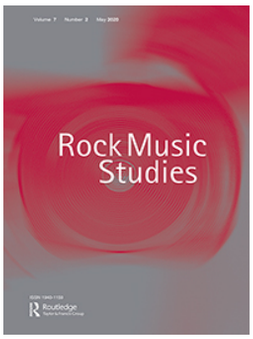

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Gender, Magic, and Innovation: The Musical Artistry of Joni Mitchell

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ABSTRACT

Joni Mitchell has long defied efforts at categorization. We cannot pin her down but we all agree that she was brilliant. Her artistry challenges scholars predisposed towards sociocultural accounts of musical performance to revisit the question of uncommon creativity. Gender – the idea that there was something distinctively feminine about her innovations – offers one avenue of inquiry. Another opens up if we pursue Mitchell's own observations about the mystical tenor of her compositional process. The latter approach ruffles our feathers as rationalists but may be necessary nonetheless if we are to maintain a connection to the magical qualities of musical experience.

KEYWORDS

Joni Mitchell; rock and roll; popular music; gender and music; musical innovation

A while back I taught a course on the history of rock and roll. When we got to the "singer-songwriter" period, I said a few words about James Taylor, Jackson Browne, and several others, then spent the rest of the class playing and discussing Joni Mitchell's music. I had been a fan since someone gave me *For the Roses* when I was a freshman in college. I spent the next several months listening intensely to that album–every night after homework was done, headphones on, suitably stoned. What I was hearing was what Mitchell's songwriting peers had heard–music of a kind that no one else was doing and no one else could touch. From the beginning of her career, Mitchell provoked these kinds of reactions from musicians who were quite accomplished in their own right.[1]

Those of us who write about music are more hesitant than those who make it to credit uncommon creativity. The strong sociological bent of contemporary music criticism has attuned us to the cultural and ideological underpinnings of esthetic judgment. Our elitism detectors activate when we encounter claims about "greatness," whether these are made about a particular composition or about a particular performer. By postmodern lights we are all prisoners of convention, and when we say we like a song or artist we are just confirming a preference for the cage that the unrelenting mechanisms of cultural identification and cultural capital have predisposed us to rate more commodious than other cells on the block. Having ruled out the possibility of escape, we entertain ourselves with highly theorized depictions of our terms of confinement.

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I am as eager for entertainment as the next person, and I propose here to investigate Mitchell's artistry with such instruments as are ready at hand. Drawing on Susan McClary's analysis of gender as a key determinant of compositional choices, I will explore the possibility that there might be something feminine in the strategy Mitchell adopted to distinguish herself from other performers on the 1960s folk circuit. Mitchell would wince at such a suggestion, so I will also consider her own account–tending more toward shamanism than feminism–of her songwriting practice. Her mystical convictions informed, at every turn, her methods of composing music and her manner of conceiving her aims and achievements as an artist. I will conclude by providing a historical context for these convictions and by cautioning fellow rationalists that we must reserve a place for the magical and ineffable in our analyses if we are to grasp, in their fullness and complexity, either Mitchell's wayward creativity or our own experiences of musical transport.

I begin with the one solid historical fact available to me–the judgment, repeatedly and expertly confirmed, that Mitchell was unique from the outset. This strategy makes three kinds of sense. First, it allows me to follow my own instincts about the best method for approaching music historically. In my view, the most promising way to say something noteworthy about music is to figure out first how it functions as music–as a creative act of composition and as an arranged performance, whether live or recorded. Such an approach foregrounds the conventions appropriate to a particular act of songwriting and the decisions made by the songwriter to construct and perform a song (use the conventions) one way rather than another. With this exclusively musical information in hand, one can then explore such nonmusical circumstances as seem necessary to invest these compositional decisions with historical or cultural significance. To proceed in the opposite direction is to turn music into a decorative art–something one might use to adorn, on the cheap, an analysis that has already generated its substantive insights from an investigation of nonmusical events.[2] The historian who applies the latter approach to the 1960s will share the frustrations suffered by the historian of the 1560s who presumes religion to be an analytic accessory–neither historian will get anywhere near the circumstances that set historical actors in particular kinds of motion at a particular moment and place. The "music first, then everything else" approach allows us to engage at the outset with the terms and categories through which the generation that made the 1960s experienced the world. These young people were, quite literally, "living to music" (Bromell 1–5)–it was the medium through which most of them encountered everything else, from love and friendship to politics and work. If Mitchell is to be given her due, she will have to be approached as an innovator whose musical discoveries helped to concoct and season this deep cultural medium.

Second, I hope to accord proper respect to those musicians who figure out how to get us thinking and feeling and moving in new ways. Only a precious few who stumble into some uncharted domain of beauty, jubilance, or insight can then imagine the forms and sounds that will open that place up to listeners. It is not easy to write a good song, let alone one equipped to build out the cultural unconscious of a mass audience. Those who succeed must then endure interviewers who pester them about their personal lives or pressing social issues but who bring no questions that would allow musicians to talk in detail about their music. Scholars who, at the expense of any discussion of craft, exhaust their best energies analyzing the cultural or political positioning of pathbreaking artists

serve mainly to adapt the habits begun by celebrity interviewers to the protocols of academic specialization. The testiness displayed by artists like Bob Dylan and Mitchell during interviews and their indifference to whatever scholars have said about them over the years thus have a common origin. Both reactions, it seems to me, are reasonable.

Third, a "music first" approach solves the dilemma I faced for the first time when I had to insert Mitchell into a decades-spanning history of rock and roll–figuring out which of her songs to highlight in what of necessity had to be a brief discussion. Instead of a broad survey of favorites chosen to illustrate Mitchell's participation in the counterculture, her sojourns in the jazz world, or the trajectory of her career as a whole, I probed two or three songs on her first album for clues to her distinctiveness as a composer and performer.

I started with "Marcie," the fourth track on the album. On a guitar in standard tuning, I played and sang the first verse, then paused to write the chord sequence on the board [Bb – A7 – Am7 – G – Gsus – G (twice), then Eb – D – C – B – Bb – A7 – Am7 – G – Gsus – G].[3] I played it again while humming the tune to highlight the complexity of the chord structure and the relationship between that structure and the notes Mitchell chose to form the melody. If this sounds beautiful to you, I told the students, then this is how musical beauty is created. Then I said "and that ain't the half of it" and played the song's bridge-like passage (*And summer goes. . .*), pausing again to put these chords (Bm – C – Bm – C – G – A – Am7 – G – Gsus – G) up for students to see. Now we could take the measure of the whole song–see, in particular, that it was made up of distinct musical ideas woven together. This enabled us to consider how well this weaving was being done and to wonder about the intentions of the seamstress. A good song, I suggested, is one that does this well: carries us from place to place and thus creates surprise, expectation, and wonder, but nonetheless hangs together somehow–brings us back home eventually and makes us feel that these varied excursions are part of a single story. In "Marcie," the convoluted chord structure allowed Mitchell to capture the complicated emotions conveyed by the lyrics of this and subsequent verses–love/loss; attachment/resentment; fierce independence/raw loneliness. These emotions, I argued, had been set loose by the decoupling of young people's experience of love and courtship from any advice or strictures handed down to them by their parents' generation. This was the 1960s, after all, and Mitchell was crafting a musical form that could capture the feelings of liberation and uncertainty stirred up when young people suddenly decided to enjoy sex and friendship in manners of their own devising. As listeners drifted through the first two lines of each verse, the second two lines of each verse, and the recurring bridge, they sampled the full range of these conflicting emotions in a heightened form–compressed in time (a four-and-one-half-minute song) and entering conscious awareness embedded in the lineaments of arresting musical sounds. Marcie thus becomes an emblem for a set of generational paradoxes, "Marcie" an innovative dramatization of the historical situation that Marcie, Mitchell, and young people generally struggled to navigate.

With all that in place, I played snatches of some standard folk songs from the period (e.g. "Where Have All the Flowers Gone"; "Blowin' in the Wind") so that students could hear the difference and appreciate the depth of Mitchell's departure. That exercise set up what I had encouraged them to view as the most decisive question: How might we account for her distinctive approach to songwriting?

This seemed like the right moment to introduce the concept of gender. The folk music scene Mitchell came up in, I noted, was dominated by men, and the conventions that

shape the music encoded a set of expectations about musical storytelling that we might with good cause call male expectations. I proposed to make this case by settling into another song on Mitchell's first album and by showing concretely how we might see gender at work in it. "I Had a King," the opening cut, seemed particularly well-suited for such a reading, so I played and sang the first verse. As with "Marcie," I put the chords up on the board and showed students just how un-folk-like they were but also how wonderfully the indistinct major-to-minor shifts and hazy chords[4] generally accompanied a narrative of gradual female enlightenment and slow-burning resentment. I supported this feminist characterization by singing the *I can't go back there any more* chorus, which makes plain Mitchell's perspective on the song's male protagonists: The kings featured in the three verses are all despots of a sort. They are blind to their own lordliness and thus alternately smug and contemptuous in their dealings with lovers. Most damningly, they all *live in another time*–the good old days when *ladies in gingham still blush[ed]* when listening to ballads about *wars and wine*. The cool folk-singing king of verse 2 woos impressionable hippie chicks as if it were still the eighteenth century and then judges them harshly for not buying into his musical and amorous routine. The *leather and lace* Mitchell wears in defiance of gingham ladylikeness suggests that she is working on a sense of identity that mixes toughness with sweetness and that such a woman will do no deferential blushing. She gets the last word in a verse that shows their lordliness for what it is and, indeed, attacks them where they are most vulnerable:

> *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 queen's in the grove and the king's on the road 'til the end of the year*

The king may be seeking pleasure as he sees fit while on the road, but who will be attending the queen while he is gone? Female protagonists in folk songs typically proclaim that they will wait forever if need be for a lover to return from a journey–like the one in Joan Baez's signature "Fare Thee Well" who promises to wait *until the rocks melt with the sun*. This is what it means to be faithful–to *never prove false to the boy I love*–and faithfulness was a cardinal virtue for female folk at least. Mitchell's last three lines suggest that once the king hits the road all bets are off and that the queen is free to pursue pleasure by her own compass. She is not levying *blame* or hunting *traitor*s, she is reporting a physical fact: The moon exerts its power on everyone. We are all–queens and kings alike–desiring subjects.

Mitchell is drawing on the folk repertoire for her cast of characters (kings, ladies), but the message she is conveying about conventional relationships reflects her ambivalence about the bohemians she encountered in the folk-music scene and in the counterculture. Her kings and troubadors activate her irrepressible need for love but follow a script that Mitchell believes to be flawed and out-of-date. The formal inventiveness of these songs, I argued, arose from her ambition as a composer to capture the emotional complexity of this situation: At once attracted to and disheartened by her chosen objects of affection, she was trying to craft a sense of herself that could withstand the emotional to-and-fro and enable her to find love outside the bounds of lordliness. She did this as a musician, but a musician with a distinctive angle on this cultural scene and a distinctive way of

using the musical conventions at hand to dramatize and interrogate that scene. Following McClary, I presumed that this distinctiveness was in some way "feminine"–that like Judith in the Bluebeard fairy tale, Mitchell was looking for the truth behind the contradictory façades thrown up by "a self-serving patriarch" (3–4) and then devising musical means for revealing that truth and exploring the realms forbidden to Bluebeard's wives. That musical quest led to the unconventional chords and chord sequences audible on her first album. In a later interview, Mitchell referred to these as "chords of inquiry"[5]–chords that do not proclaim answers or lead us to definitive endings but that raise questions and sustain carefree wanderings across indistinct borders. That description is quite consistent with the kind of analysis one finds in *Feminine Endings*. Those chords, her refusal of climactic endings, her habit of ambling casually from major to minor modes in the space of a single phrase–these gestures seem to be exactly what McClary had in mind when she credited music written by women with "broadening the range of possible musics, as it comments both on the assumptions of more traditional procedure and on the problematic position of a woman artist attempting to create new meanings within old media" (19).

I put a capstone on this argument by subjecting "The Pirate of Penance" to a similar reading. In this wildly inventive song on the same album, Mitchell creates a love triangle, stages a murder of the sole male participant (the pirate), and has the two women involved (Penance and the dancer) defend themselves in two distinct voices. The chords of inquiry, the major/minor inflections, the writing of very different kinds of music to carry the two voices–everything is deployed to tell a story of male presumption and female vengeance. Mitchell paints the pirate in colors familiar from "I Had a King"–author of the lamest come-on lines (*I know he told her love was treasure, and they would reap the fullest bounty*), he only comes to port for his own pleasure. He used to regale Penance with *sailing stories by the fireplace* but abandoned her and now tells the same tales to the dancer. Penance tries to cast suspicion on the dancer for the murder, but Mitchell gives Penance the only motive introduced (a lover's rejection) and then concocts for her a transparently weak alibi (was it Saturday when it happened? Really? Well, *I was at sea then*). "The Pirate of Penance," I concluded, simultaneously deploys the conventions of folk balladry and subverts them to enable the forging of a female artist's perspective and the creation of new, feminine meanings. It may sound like a folk song, but, on close inspection, it flaunts its renunciation of the simple chords and pat arrangements of folk songwriting and does so to help us look more critically at what men and women in the 1960s did to each other in the name of love.

At the time, I thought this feminist reading of Mitchell's artistry was quite compelling. I lose my bearings in McClary's discussions of Monteverdi and Schoenberg, do not follow performance artists like Laurie Anderson, and never liked Madonna's music enough to listen attentively to any of her albums, but *Feminine Endings* impressed me nonetheless as an example of just what academics interested in music might get from theory. I had spent my graduate-school years wrestling with Althusser, Foucault, Jameson, and the like, so I had a considerable investment in the theory business and eagerly consulted McClary's work for help in decoding Mitchell's musical interventions. These efforts seem to have been rewarded: I came away with an explanation that was at once applicable to female musicians generally and, I was pleased to discover, to an individual artist I had listened to for years.

I have since changed my mind. The experience of women is central to Mitchell's story, but I no longer think we gain anything substantial by framing it within a theory of gendered discourse. Indeed, I think doing so leads our exploration of uncommon artistry into a dead end and misconstrues the sequence of musical events–the history–in which Mitchell participated. So, along with being enraptured by Mitchell's music, I have now come around to her view of the gender question. She, as is well known, wanted nothing to do with feminist readings of her music and looked forward to a day when distinctions between male and female, or black and white, were not made in the world of music. As she so succinctly put it, "I'm a musician and I leave gender aside."[6]

My decision to look beyond gender to find a satisfactory explanation of Mitchell's artistry became sensible after several developments that I experienced as unrelated but that were conspiring nonetheless to push me in the same direction. For starters, I no longer expected much from theory. I realized, for example, that I had learned far more about rock and roll from Nick Bromell's rambunctious and impressionistic *Tomorrow Never Knows* than from any Gramsci-quoting treatise in cultural studies or literary theory. I had also begun to spend more time playing music again–relearning old songs, writing new ones, performing for family and friends. I rediscovered at these moments the vital roots of musical performance–the yearning for individual self-expression and communal pleasure-seeking that has inspired people in every age and clime to sing, drum, strum, and blow in spirited communion with members of their tribe. The more frequently I gratified that yearning, the more habituated I became to viewing music from the perspective of a practicing musician. As that habit hardened, it occurred to me that I might bring that perspective into the classroom. Instead of consulting a general mode of analysis–a theory–to extract meaning from musical events, I could remain in the realm of the concrete, approaching sounds and sensations as an amateur participant in the music-making process and offering only such explanations as helped us better understand that process. Long live rock indeed, if at this remove it retains the power to turn a studied Althusserian into a naive empiricist.

I had grown frustrated with my course in rock and roll history for many reasons, but the most nagging was the necessity it imposed to survey a lot of ground quickly, which made it difficult to settle for long in the realm of the concrete. This circumstance prompted me to design a more narrowly focused course–"Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the 1960s"–that would allow me to follow, album by album, the changing character of the songs these musicians composed during the decade and then relate them to other dramatic changes ongoing around them. I proceeded as I had in the Mitchell lecture–singing the songs myself, putting chords on the board, emphasizing the craft required to assemble the ingredients of music-making into original performances. My goals in the course were to show how these particular artists became musical trailblazers and to look for commonalities between the music they created and the modes of expression and activism developed by other historical actors during the decade.

For the Beatles,[7] I lingered particularly long on "If I Fell" and "I'll Be Back," both from *A Hard Day's Night*, released just a few months (July 1964) after The *Ed Sullivan Show* TV performances and the first album to contain only originals. I wanted to situate the "early Beatles" musically–before marijuana and the Maharishi, before *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*–and these two songs seemed most amenable to the kind of reading I had given to Mitchell's early songs. In that spirit, I sang the introduction to "If I Fell," then put up

the chords (D#m – D – C# – A#m7; D#m – D – Em7 – A) so students could admire the sheer number of chords and the (for a rock song) unorthodox manner (a chromatic descent) in which they were put together. I then called attention to certain chord choices at specific moments in the body of the song. The first verse ends with a nice but simple turnaround (Gm7 – A), but the second ends with an unexpected, eyebrow-raising seventh (D7) that propels the song into a classic Lennon-McCartney bridge (*'Cause I couldn't stand the pain* . . .). The D7 leads naturally to a G, but our expectations are then disrupted by another Gm7, a shift that gives the bridge its unique sound and also begins the transition (Gm7 – D – A) back home so that verse 3 might begin as expected. This pattern continues until the end, where the Gm7 reappears in conjunction with the title words to create a lovely and logical conclusion.

Most students could appreciate from even a first listening that this was a pretty song. Some recalled being moved by the sweeter version sung by Evan Rachel Wood in the 2007 film *Across the Universe*. With that to go on, I proposed to show them the wellspring of musical beauty. Yes, the vocals and the harmonies in particular are captivating; the lyrics convey a poignant plea for love and understanding. But most of what is appealing in this song, I argued, resides in its manner of composition, its structure. Whatever meaning it was supposed to impart to listeners could not be parsed from lyrics functioning as poetry but from the whole thing–words and music together in well-crafted collaboration. To make the case, I referred back to the last line of the introduction–*And I found that love was more than just holding hands*. These are songwriters who first gained attention with a song called "I Want to Hold Your Hand," so this phrase here–placed at the end of a musical passage that does not recur in the song–is a clear signal that something new is unfolding, that love has gotten complicated. The chord choices play to these complications. The harmonic shift initiated by the D7 at the end of the second verse provokes an emotional shift as well, from the tender pleading that precedes it to the bitter recollection of the *her* who had broken the singer's heart and, in the next verse, to a fantasy of revenge (. . . *she will cry when she learns we are two*). The surprising swerve from the major to the minor of the same chord (G) complements the singer's vacillations from one mood to another. As was the case with Mitchell's first songs, the complex song structure of "If I Fell" works to accommodate perplexities that have arisen in the house of love. The song resonates emotionally because it takes risks musically at a moment when romantic adventurousness was in vogue among the millions of young people tuned in to the Beatles. These were untutored listeners seeking entertainment, but the structural inventiveness of Lennon-McCartney songs was audible nonetheless and essential to their appeal. As these songs evolved and proliferated, they remodeled the expectations that young people brought to popular music and, after repeated listenings, to their friendships and courtships.

I turned next to "I'll Be Back," the last track on *A Hard Day's Night*. Here again, I argued, is a smooth-on-the-surface teenage love-angst song with an involuted structure. Between the verses, Lennon and McCartney intersperse two different bridges, each devised to showcase a different emotional reaction to the heartbreak being recalled in the song. The first (F#M – Bm; E – D – E – D – E) is tender and beseeching (*I love you so/ I'm the one who wants you. . .*). When they replay that bridge a second time (use the same chords for a third bridge), the mood is the same (*I want to go/but I hate to leave you. . .*). In the second bridge, which travels along a more extended set of chords (Bm – Bm7 –

C#m – F#m – B7; E – D – E – D – E), a bit of male bluster and wounded pride bleed through, as the singer tries, without success, to regain his lover's affections by leaving her first. The verses feature an unusual progression from minor to major using five chords (Am – G6 – Fmaj7 – E – A) that all share a note (E) and thus, when played in sequence, envelop the changes in a droning hum. The music thereby evokes the same indecision as is articulated by the singer, who cannot decide whether he is going or staying. Lennon and McCartney use a similarly executed minor-to-major progression (the Bm – Bm7 – C#m – F#m – B7, above) to push the second bridge onto the same track as the first and third. By doing this, they make sure that each bridge ends with the same *oh oh*s and thus propel us by a familiar route back to the Am at the beginning of each verse. The Am-A motif figures as well in the instrumental introduction and the fade-out at the end, which lends coherence to a song that, in its parts, exhibits considerable musical and emotional variability.[8]

My discussion of love and innovation in the Beatles' songwriting culminated with an analysis of "Norwegian Wood" (*Rubber Soul*), which cries out for such treatment. In this folk-sounding tune, Lennon narrates a situation in which all of his expectations and desires are defeated–he is invited up to a woman's room quickly enough, they share some wine, she says *it's time for bed*, but then she announces she has to work in the morning, mocks his disappointment, and leaves him to sleep in the tub. She is long gone when he awakes in the morning. This is a complete reversal of the usual roles played by a woman and a man in a casual courtship kind of tale, and the music is equally unconventional, with the main aural event being a major-minor switch (E – Em) in the middle of each verse. The male suitor tells his tale in the major mode (*I once had a girl …. I sat on a rug…*) and responds to the woman's assertions (*she asked me to stay …. she told me she worked…*) in the minor. As the carnal ambitions of the singer are being thwarted, the normal progression of a folk song in E is being derailed. He gets no satisfaction, but the listener finds amusement in a song that embodies the sensation of bumbling through a bewildering romantic situation. Harrison's sitar adds an exotic touch, but the surrealism of the scenario is inscribed in the architecture of the song. By 1965, love might be considerably *less* than holding hands for male suitors with the same sexual expectations as their fathers. Suitors and songwriters alike had to reinvent themselves to keep up with changing sexual mores and, more concretely, with the women coming of age during the 1960s who, unwilling to abide what their mothers settled for, were determined that these changes proceed in due time.

Joni Mitchell, of course, was one such woman, and my interpretation of Lennon and McCartney's musical achievements called to mind my analysis of her songwriting innovations. That recollection was now a troubling one. The foundation of the McClary-inspired reading of Mitchell's early songs–the presumption that there was something distinctively feminine about her compositional strategies–had been fatally damaged by my close reading of a few Beatles songs. The formal similarities were too striking to ignore or theorize away. To be sure, their music sounded different–Mitchell was a folk-style singer playing solo on an acoustic guitar in odd tunings; the Beatles were a rock combo, singing either like Little Richard or the Everly Brothers, in standard tuning–but it was built the same way for the same purpose. The chromatic descent that structures the verses of "Marcie" resembles the chord sequence in the introduction to "If I Fell." If the chords in "I Had a King" were chords of inquiry, so too were the ones that give "I'll Be

Back" its air of indecision. Clearly, Mitchell's distinctiveness did not reside in distinctively feminine compositional gestures.

It is worth noting in this regard that McClary's broad knowledge of music compelled her at a critical analytic moment to loosen considerably the connection she had hoped to establish between gender and form. This reckoning occurs amidst a detailed discussion of a Madonna song: "It must be conceded that male musicians could construct forms along these lines if they wanted to do so–there is nothing essentially feminine about what Madonna is doing in this piece." Since this concession would appear to undermine her main thesis and preferred analytic strategies, she digs in her heels immediately thereafter in this way: "But most men would not perceive that there was a problem in the standard narrative …" (161). So it is finally not the musical forms that are gendered but the dissatisfaction one might feel with existing forms, and thus the urge to innovate. This fallback position seems to me less defensible than McClary's original, formal conception of the feminine–the perception of inadequacy, along with the crafting of new forms to overcome conventional constraints, was common to male and female performers at this time. All the most innovative songwriters during this period–Dylan, Lennon and McCartney, Mitchell–had issues with the "standard narrative." Mitchell's facility with complex song structures, her skilled use of major-minor shifts to dramatize strange twists in romantic plots, and her preference for chords that meandered and dithered rather than rushing directly to loud climax all bear witness to a reconstruction in pop music already underway when she first started writing her own songs. Love, as it was experienced by young people in the 1960s, was central to this reconstruction. Gender, which surely figured in the way these men and women experienced courtship and commitment, did not thereby get inscribed into the formal innovations developed by musicians to score those experiences.

How, then, can we fit Mitchell into this reconstruction project and still honor the brilliance of her contributions to it? The first step is to acknowledge the central role played in this project by Lennon and McCartney. One might think that this is unnecessary, but the Beatles are still routinely stiffed when fellow musicians are handing out commendations for consequential influence. Dylan's traveling companions recall that he was floored when he heard the first Beatles singles on the radio–their chords and harmonies were "outrageous," he said, and they were pointing the direction music now "needed to go" (Scaduto 203–04). Yet, when asked in 1965 about the impact the Beatles might have had on him, Dylan asserted that they had no influence "on his songs or sound" (McGregor 161). In his memoirs, Dylan credits Bertholt Brecht and Hank Williams for lighting his path as a composer (95–97, 272–76). Mitchell admitted to being captivated by *Rubber Soul* and covered "Norwegian Wood" during her coffeehouse days ("Under the Influence"; Weller 226–27). When asked to list her important influences, however, Mitchell usually invokes Debussy or the German lieder tradition (Whitesell 6). But come now–Dylan and Mitchell owe nothing to Lennon and McCartney?! Both Dylan and Mitchell matured as songwriters at a time when Beatles singles saturated the airwaves and their albums were spinning on turntables everywhere–including, one must assume, Woodstock and Laurel Canyon. If the Beatles did not influence Dylan and Mitchell, the two were quite alone. Blues purists like Jagger, Richards, and Clapton, folk purists like Garcia and Kaukonen–all these highly skilled musicians abandoned their quest for purity for the pleasures of Beatles-style performance

and composition. Indeed, Lennon and McCartney had a leg up in this game precisely because they were freer than their peers of the burdens of vernacular authenticity. While other young musicians on both sides of the Atlantic burrowed into the venerable genres, Lennon and McCartney mastered the techniques at work in hits written by the Brill Building teams (e.g. Goffin and King, Mann and Weil) for groups like the Drifters and the Shirelles and by Smokey Robinson for the Miracles and other early Motown acts. And, unlike the Brill composers or Robinson, Lennon and McCartney incorporated into this songwriting style the full array of rhythms available in the music of Elvis and Little Richard, Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry. This is the musical inventory Lennon and McCartney had at their disposal as they strove to capture the promise and perils of love as it presented itself to young people in the 1960s.

Mitchell came up in the folk scene but shared Lennon and McCartney's appreciation of commercial styles of music. She liked Tony Bennett "as a kid" and believed that "there's a lot of the Andrews Sisters" in her vocal arrangements. The record she recalls having "worn thin" in high school was *The Hottest New Group in Jazz* by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, who caused a stir in the late 1950s by putting witty lyrics to melody and horn lines in songs from the Count Basie and Duke Ellington repertoires (Hinton 73, 35; Yaffe 186).[9] Mitchell's song structures owe a great deal to the Brill composers, and she seemed particularly fond of Carole King's "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," a song the Beatles covered in their Hamburg days (Yaffe 33; Everett 96, 187).[10] Even as she was working the coffeehouse circuit, Mitchell was already well-positioned to discover that the conventions of folk composition were inadequate for someone with a broad palette of musical ideas in her head. Like Dylan and the Beatles before her, Mitchell was keenly aware that neither folk nor '50s-style rock and roll were spacious enough to allow exploration of the social situations that young people encountered during the 1960s. As she saw it, her experimentation with unusual tunings generated chords that were sufficiently "complex" to dramatize in sound the "emotional nuances" she was after. When strung together in "weird" ways, these chords allowed her to communicate the "confusion" young women experienced in a world without reliable "guidelines" to follow (Hinton 49, 80; Weller 248). Mitchell thus inhabited the same cultural situation as Lennon and McCartney and exhibited a similar ambivalence–clinging to traditional aspects of relationships even as she strained against the lordliness that tradition empowered men to assume as they pursued relationships with women.[11] And, as we heard, Mitchell found compositional strategies like those of Lennon and McCartney useful in dramatizing this ambivalence, even as she developed a manner of guitar-playing and vocalizing that was entirely her own. She retained and refined these strategies as she journeyed through all the post-folk phases of her long career and valued her mastery of them–her abilities as a composer–above her other achievements as a musician (Marom 252).[12]

With this, I felt I had an explanation for Mitchell's artistry that made sense historically. I had redrawn her genealogy–inserted her in a songwriting tradition shaped in great measure by the Beatles–but otherwise corroborated her own account of what she was up to as a musician. The historian in me may have been satisfied, but the musician sensed that something was still missing. The successful completion of my empirical investigation did not bring me any closer to understanding the wonder I felt when I first listened to *For the Roses*. I had fulfilled my ambition to stay close and true to the music. The historical developments I had referenced to thicken my musical analysis were commonplace. I had

sacrificed neither musical nor historical specificity on the altar of theoretical loftiness. But this explanation did not specify just what it was that made me stay behind in my dorm room while my friends dispersed to parties and bars. What, exactly, had I heard, and why did those sounds affect me so powerfully? Why, in particular, did Mitchell's songs stir me to begin the work–learning the guitar, gaining confidence as a vocalist, writing my own songs–that would allow me to progress from living to music to actually making some?

As is so often the case, what was missing was hiding in plain sight. While scouring the many interviews with Mitchell for insights into the ways of musical innovation, I had been intrigued by her frequent detours into the realm of the mystical. She frequently attributed her success in coming up with new material to a determination to stay in touch with "the miraculous." A fresh musical idea is something you "stumble upon" while cultivating a "climate" of emotional receptiveness; the same raw sensitivity that sometimes leads to depression also opens "the gateway to the look-within place." She believed that what our culture treats as a "nervous breakdown" might be better understood as a "shamanistic conversion," an episode wherein one's "nerves are on fire" and one gains possession of "sharper senses." Mitchell consistently referred to Charles Mingus, Wayne Shorter, and Jaco Pastorius as "magicians" and "shamans," thereby conferring a susceptibility to the miraculous upon the musicians she most respected (Marom xxiii, 66, 92, 63, 58, 131–32, 143). She projected this taste for magic back into her childhood, recalling that she "tried for weeks to change candle wax into jewels after I saw an alchemist do it in [the film] [*The*] *Tales of Hoffman*[*n*]." Like many young people coming of age in the 1960s, Mitchell delighted in the charmed world Tolkien created in *The Lord of the Rings* and once considered writing a book about mythical kingdoms (Hinton 23, 58).

Mitchell's sense of the miraculous was tightly bound up with her experience of the 1960s generally and the counterculture in particular. The wide-eyed admiration that suffuses "Woodstock" (the song) with a sense of wonder was genuinely felt. She commended the spirit of "brotherhood" and the "idealism" on display at the 1969 festival and in the various local scenes she visited and inhabited. The time she spent living with other hippies in a cave in Greece, she recalled, was a "lovely life, far better than being middle-class in America." She regretted that her sudden celebrity had deprived her of the opportunity to delve more deeply into "alternative lifestyles, communal living and that kind of experimentation." She missed the kind of musical scenes where performers and listeners were all "in it together," before the imperatives of money-making drove a wedge between remote stars and adoring audiences. She shared the ecological consciousness of the counterculture, berating the human species for "[h]ow ignorant it is of sharing this planet with other creatures" and mourning the absence of a "spirituality addressed to the earth." When asked whether she considered herself a Canadian or an American, Mitchell replied that she was "like a salmon," her identity grounded not in the "artificial categories" of nationality but in her sensual connection to a piece of land. Commercial success allowed her to buy some coastal property in British Columbia, a "magical place" where she formed relationships with blue herons and robins (Weller 301; Marom 53, 4, 200, 60; Hinton 92–93). Mitchell's political views were filtered through a "regionalist" radicalism and rested on the hope that some kind of place-based "ancestral worship" might spark in us the realization that "[o]ur whole lifestyle is carcinogenic, modernity and technology." Paradise had been paved, but "Eden" still awaited anyone who could

somehow "get back to the state of mind before the fall," back before "dualistic mind" emerged within the garden and engineered its destruction (Marom 200, 253–54, 193). Mitchell bore witness to the shortcomings of the counterculture–its superficiality, how readily it "retreated into drugs" (Hinton 93), how it more frequently reproduced than challenged traditional gender stereotypes–but its defining values animated, over the course of a long career, her music and her opinions.

The historian had noted all this, but the rationalist presumed that there was no room for notions of the miraculous in a sober historical explanation. I had removed theory from my intellectual toolkit but had not disturbed theory's hatchery–the Cartesian conceit that reasoning occurred in some more rarified domain than did strumming and singing and thus generated more reliable descriptions of those acts than could be found in the mystical interpretations of music-makers themselves. We politely tolerate muses and shamans in the shoptalk of artists, but, as scholars, are impelled by the founding principles of scholarship to translate such superstitious notions into terms that do not offend rationalist sensibilities.[13] So, on we grind with our plain sociocultural facts–race, gender, class, generation, market–grouping artists by physical features or commercial genre and then sequestering them with theories that seal the borders of cultural exchange and mandate harsh treatment for anyone caught wandering freely across them in search of the techniques or lore needed to feed a clamorous artistic imagination. The magical qualities of music and, more generally, the mystery of wild creative abandon cannot survive such a regimen.

But, I realized at long last, it was just those qualities that made my encounter with *For the Roses* powerful enough to bump me off the rails in 1973 and haunt me thereafter. I had been to parties and bars before, but I had never been to the places these songs carried me. They functioned like sacred groves–enchanted spaces where one might experience a kind of illumination unavailable elsewhere. Mitchell explored the depths and heights of romance as she and her cohort chose to pursue it, mixed what she learned with ideas gathered from a diverse cast of musical predecessors, heated that concoction in the fire of a visionary imagination, and so created–in a single act of magical transformation–original songs and fresh possibilities. As I extended my stay in the aural space her music created, I too acquired "sharper senses"–a heightened awareness called forth by my desire to travel the alluring byways illuminated by these songs and a newly focused determination to seize the opportunities waiting at the end of this journey for mobilizing emotions and intellect–*heart and mind*–in my own quest for affection and enlightenment. Mitchell's artistry was an alchemical achievement, my enchantment with it the mark of a musical bewitchment. While under this spell, reasoning, strumming, and singing felt like kindred undertakings, each one a joint exercise of feeling and thought, all of them productive in equal measure of pleasure and insight. We learn as we love–in relationship with living beings and an animate earth. The queen is in the grove for sure, and the power of the songs she wrote while wintering there resides in their ability to draw listeners, even if for only a moment, into a charmed place.

Keith Thomas, in his account of religious beliefs in medieval Europe, documents the decline of magic in the seventeenth century, as the foundations of mystical thinking were steadily eroded by the "mechanical philosophy" of the scientific revolution. While this narrative of decline seems well-adapted to the course of mainstream religion and normal science, it obscures the fate of magic in the world beyond. Scientific materialism

triumphed as a handmaiden to industrial technology. The mechanical philosophy had little to offer those who lived beyond the earshot of actual machinery, whether in indigenous communities as yet unvanquished by conquerors and settlers or in rural townships prior to the arrival of combines and chemicals. It was also firmly rejected by many who knew it up-close–the Romantics, bohemians, and hippies from the metropolitan citadels who adjudged Descartes's science a cold, brutal affair and the progress it proclaimed inimical to our worthiest impulses and ambitions.

Mitchell's anti-rationalist mysticism, then, was far from idiosyncratic. It linked her to a tradition of romantic rebellion and visionary self-expression with deep roots in history and many achievements–political and artistic–of which it legitimately might boast. More to the point here, her embrace of the magical signaled her commitment to a mode of consciousness that proliferated in the 1960s–indeed, became the preferred manner of thinking for many members of an oversize generation. Philosophically, this segment of the 1960s generation had come to reject the dualisms that flourished in the wake of Descartes's revolution in science–between reason and emotion, mind and body, science and ethics, humans and the rest of the natural world. Politically, these young people believed that their far-flung experiments in being together in new ways would push society in a peaceful and egalitarian direction and do so more effectively than would old styles of organization building or institutional lobbying. Philosophical holism thus conduced to political ecumenicism, but of a laid-back, largely unarticulated sort easily shoved to the sidelines by the hard-edged separatisms–Black Power and radical feminism, in particular–that commanded so much attention in the latter half of the decade.

Gary Snyder, a participant observer of hip and hippie undertakings, formulated perhaps the most discerning characterization of the non-separatist 1960s. In his view, the counterculture represented an upwelling of the "great subculture" that "runs without break from Paleo-Siberian Shamanism and Magdalenian cave-painting; through megaliths and Mysteries, astronomers, ritualists, alchemists and Albigensians; gnostics and vagantes; right down to Golden Gate Park." Accordingly, much of what we need to live together peacefully and responsibly was readily available in "the most creative aspects of our archaic past." If we could train ourselves to see back beyond the "murderous" ideologies of the twentieth century, beyond Cartesian scientism and the Inquisition, way back beyond monotheism and the fatal elevation of humanity above all else in the world, we would find a trove of common mythic knowledge. These stories are a part of everyone's cultural lineage if you peer far enough into the past and thus are accessible now to anyone, regardless of race, gender, or any other marker of sociocultural difference. Snyder's disinterest in the separatist solutions to racial and patriarchal injustice that gained credence at the end of the 1960s did not arise from some inscribed insensitivity to pain or insult but from a notion of liberation grounded in what we all once shared and could share again if we could just get our heads straight. Snyder's respect for the wisdom found on the mythic and mystical end of the cultural spectrum made him, as it made Mitchell, a strong advocate of ecological responsibility and a sharp critic of industrial modernity (*Old Ways*; "Why Tribe" 115, 113; "Buddhism" 93).[14]

The spirit of a non-separatist radicalism also animated the perspective from which James Baldwin approached the burning issues of his time. A fierce critic of racial injustice, he urged his contemporaries to see that "love"–which he defined as "the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth"–was "more important than

color." The greatest challenge facing Americans during that time of social unrest, he argued, was to relearn what it meant "[t]o be sensual . . . to respect and rejoice in the force of life." For that to happen, white Christians needed to recall that what they valued most in their religion was born "long before color was invented." Such liberation as the righteous of any race might hope for in the present, he concluded, awaited the resurrection of "the energy that was buried with the rise of the Christian nations" (95, 71, 43–44).

To venture into the mystic during the 1960s was to join a varied and ample crowd of cultural rebels and social critics. Mitchell's ideas about the miraculous may be alien to academic scholarship but they were native to the great subculture. It was as a member of Snyder's lineage of shaggy vagantes that she gloried in the possibility of making "genderless, raceless music" and cherished above all the freedom to ignore "borderlines" of any sort (Marom xxiv). Mitchell's songs are filled with insights into and outrage over the injustices women faced in bohemia and suburbia, but these same songs invited people into a realm where all and sundry might meet nonetheless in loving communion. Like Baldwin, Mitchell linked freedom with sensuality: Achieving any kind of meaningful liberation required that one surrender to a "force of life" that operated below–and was indifferent to–social distinctions. At considerable emotional cost, she made herself vulnerable to that force and wove a joyful veneration of it into her songs.

If scholars are to preserve some role for uncommon creativity in their explanations of musical events, we may have to reserve some space in them for occurrences that defy scholarly explanation. Consider Mitchell's own description of her songwriting technique–tuning her guitar in a way called forth by the natural setting she occupied, learning her way around that tuning while in a "trance-like" state of concentration, finding the chords in it that could act as "liaisons" between the varied emotions that welled up as the song came together (Hinton 260; Marom 70–71). Mitchell battled for love and respect as a woman in an unusually turbulent age, but she composed music by following a procedure common to shamans of every era–seeking out an emotional, bodily experience sufficiently strong and unnerving that she acquired a fresh perspective on the musical conventions at her disposal and a new feel for the instruments (guitar and voice) she used to communicate her discoveries to an audience. Mitchell emerged from this mystical state with a performance style so arresting that the completed songs in recorded form became a part of the medium through which distant, unknown listeners experienced their loves and their lives. That may be the most dependable factual account we can manage of Mitchell's artistry, and it is shot through with magic.

At long last, in any case, I had an account capable of accommodating the spell Mitchell had woven around my head back in 1973. We need not posit the existence of ghosts or witches to account for an experience of being haunted or enchanted. We do not need a deity to render meaningful our encounters with the ineffable. Music, preferably but not necessarily accompanied by a mind-opening intoxicant, can be magic enough. Speaking as a well-credentialed psychologist, William James argued long ago that "rational consciousness" was separated by the "filmiest of screens" from mystical states of mind and marveled at how the latter could intrude upon the former "at a touch . . . in all their completeness." After examining the testimony of religious mystics and pondering his own experiments with nitrous oxide, James concluded that "[n]o account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded" (305). If that conclusion seems reasonable, then so too should this proposition:

No account of such load-bearing music as Mitchell constructed will be complete without some acknowledgment of its mystical properties. Such an assertion aligns scholarly opinion with the views expressed by many practicing musicians and attunes our empirical investigations to the varieties of experience that inspired most of us, scholars and artists alike, to love music in the first place.

Notes

1. Only Jimi Hendrix has inspired as many of these kinds of stories, which makes sense since he and Mitchell both got altogether new sounds from a guitar. Biographers routinely reproduce these stories in their accounts of Mitchell's early career–see, for example, Hinton 83–126; Yaffe 64–113. For the iconic photo of an awe-struck Eric Clapton staring at Mitchell's hands as she performs on Cass Elliot's lawn, and Mitchell's commentary on that encounter, see; Marom 72–73.
2. Bromell laments the failure of historians to give music its due in the making of the 1960s and provides a long list of examples (5–6, 185–86).
3. To play Mitchell's music in standard tuning is to sacrifice some of the texture of her chords and much of the rhythmic precision, but doing so works well enough to illustrate the basic structure of her songs. I reproduce the chords here in the same spirit that I put them on the board for students–to showcase their complexity and uniqueness and to enable some consideration of her choices. My argument here is not musicological and requires no knowledge of music theory, but readers might get more out of it if they listened to the songs being discussed.
4. In musicological terms, "[t]he song cannot decide on its mode" (Whitesell 18). Whitesell is a musicologist and provides helpful technical analyses of Mitchell's songs and style phases.
5. Marom 74–75. She even gives these chords a feminine cast–"Men don't like them because they like resolution, just like they do in life" (74). For a detailed explication of these chords as elements of a rich and distinctive "harmonic language," see Whitesell 117–47.
6. Whitesell 5. Some other examples: "I'm not a feminist. That's too divisional for me" (Hinton 74); "I was never a feminist. I was in argument with them" (Marom 62); "I'm a thinking female but I'm not a feminist" (Marom 251). For a discussion of Mitchell's determination to distance herself from feminism, see Echols 33.
7. For an analysis of Dylan's songwriting trajectory in the 1960s, see Lloyd.
8. This track makes no other "best Beatles songs" lists, but Ian MacDonald notes that it was one of Lennon's personal favorites and labels it "one of the most concise and integrated songs the Beatles had so far created" (119–20).
9. If they really were, as Mitchell said, "her Beatles," then one might wonder why her cover of "Twisted" (*Court and Spark*) stands out so dramatically from all the music she had recorded until then. Even on this jazz-inflected album it sounds almost like a novelty piece. As she moved wholeheartedly into jazz, she seems to have found more opportunities to develop a vocal style that bears resemblance to that of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. On the albums before *Court and Spark*, that influence is hard for me at least to hear. Perhaps "her Beatles" were the real ones. We often forget just how good Lennon and McCartney were as vocalists–warmly expressive at times, coarse and powerful when that was appropriate, traversing a broad melodic range with a keen ear for rhythm (i.e., synching lyrical phrasing with the variable rhythms and moods of the rock songs they were writing). We forget, too, the regularity with which musicians coming out of the folk and blues scenes felt obliged to distance themselves from performers–the Beatles and the Kingston Trio especially–who wore matching suits and sweaters and courted a mass, rather than a hip, popularity.
10. For a musicological account of the forms of popular music and Mitchell's relationship to them, see Whitesell 148–57.

11. Lordliness hardly disappeared in Beatles songs, but in support of my argument here one might notice that Lennon and McCartney felt simpler songs were sufficient to convey baser emotions–e.g. "Run for Your Life" (*Rubber Soul*), a straightforward rocker that conveys an unambiguous sense of male resentment at even a hint of female independence. The same pattern is visible in the Rolling Stones' early repertoire–the macho swagger of "Under My Thumb" rides a bare blues riff and concedes little to nuance or contrast, while the tender understanding shown in "Ruby Tuesday" to a woman who "just can't be chained" blossoms within a more elaborate complex of melodic and rhythmic ideas.
12. Anyone who asked Mitchell about young female performers she might have "influenced" usually received a lecture about composition: "These girls. . .don't have my chordal sense. . . [and] don't have any idea of architecture in their chordal movement. . .When it comes to knowing. . .how to tell a story and how to build a chorus, none of them can touch me" (Hinton 254–55).
13. Scholars who round an analytic corner and find themselves face-to-face with a prolific, *sui generis* artist like Mitchell typically resort to "genius" as the best of available explanatory options. Whitesell takes this step at the end of his introduction. His claim, made simultaneously, that he uses this term only in moments of "musically induced weakness" (14) highlights the dilemma of academic music scholarship: All explanations, if they are to be taken seriously, must meet professional standards of rational argumentation, but it seems certain that there just is no rational explanation for wild creative abandon. Invoking "genius" is a way of acknowledging that fact, while admitting one's embarrassment at doing so is a way of signaling to academic readers that you have recovered your strength and are ready to soldier on with some sober scholarship.
14. Snyder is thus well-represented in collections edited by Sessions and McKibben. Hawken credits Snyder for helping him see the continuities linking new and old (indigenous) styles of environmental stewardship (5).

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