



# The Music of Joni Mitchell

By Lloyd Whitesell

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## The Music of Joni Mitchell By Lloyd Whitesell

Joni Mitchell is one of the foremost singer-songwriters of the late twentieth century. Yet despite her reputation, influence, and cultural importance, a detailed appraisal of her musical achievement is still lacking. Whitesell presents a through exploration of Mitchell's musical style, sound, and structure in order to evaluate her songs from a musicological perspective. His analyses are conceived within a holistic framework that takes account of poetic nuance, cultural reference, and stylistic evolution over a long, adventurous career.

Mitchell's songs represent a complex, meticulously crafted body of work. *The Music of Joni Mitchell* offers a comprehensive survey of her output, with many discussions of individual songs, organized by topic rather than chronology. Individual chapters each explore a different aspect of her craft, such as poetic voice, harmony, melody, and large-scale form. A separate chapter is devoted to the central theme of personal freedom, as expressed through diverse symbolic registers of the journey quest, bohemianism, creative license, and spiritual liberation.

Previous accounts of Mitchell's songwriting have tended to favor her poetic vision, expansive verse structures, and riveting vocal delivery. Whitesell fills out this account with special attention to musical technique, showing how such traits as complex or conflicting sonorities, dualities of harmonic mode, dialectical tensions of texture and register, intricately layered instrumental figuration, and a variable vocal persona are all essential to her distinctive identity as a songwriter. *The Music of Joni Mitchell* develops a set of conceptual tools geared specifically to Mitchell's songs, in order to demonstrate the extent of her technical innovation in the pop song genre, to give an account of the formal sophistication and rhetorical power characterizing her work as a whole, and to provide grounds for the recognition of her intellectual stature as a composer within her chosen field.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Whitesell gives the critical analysis that removes the unwieldy emotion and leaves the intellectual manifestation of Mitchell's gift as his focal point. What emerges...focuses on the compositional achievement that so many miss." - *American Songwriter*

"Whitesell's book is an excellent first step in establishing a methodology with which to approach this unique catalog of late twentieth-century popular music. His multifaceted approach, involving literary, cultural, and musical analysis, offers singular insights into Mitchell's work without claiming to be either comprehensive or definitive." --*American Music*

"Whitesell brings a wide-ranging record of publication as a musicologist and a longstanding love of Mitchell's music to bear on his subject, and has produced an excellent and important addition to the available literature on Mitchell in particular, an popular music in general. He writes beautifully lucid and evocative prose, and has a keen sensitivity to poetic nuance. Prospective Mitchell scholars will find in this volume a host of analytical schema to fuel further endeavor in the field, while devoted fans will be challenged and enlightened. Most importantly, an unjustly adsent space on the shelf containing music-analytical studies devoted to a single artist has now been filled by one of the best to date."--*The Bulletin of the Society for American Music*

"Lloyd Whitesell's application of traditional analysis to popular music in *The Music of Joni Mitchell* is eye-opening in its description of Mitchell's creativity with harmony, melody, and poetry. His rich and nuanced account is an example of how to spotlight a single musician's work while avoiding the pitfalls of hagiography. It is a significant addition to the emergent bibliography on individual artists and pop music studies more broadly, as it sets new standards for close investigation of the musical elements of popular music." --*Intersections*

"A thorough music-poetic model for the study of a major pop-rock artist's work...Whitesell has produced a coherent and stimulating work with musicologically sound and critically persuasive analyses."--*Canadian Association of Music Libraries Review*

"Will prove valuable to popular music scholars...Well-organized chapters, unpretentious writing, and avoidance of unnecessary academic jargon make the book accesible to undergraduate music students while innovative poetic and musical analyses are useful for advanced music scholars. This should be a must read for anyone teaching a class on twentieth-century U.S. popular music." --*American Music Review*

"Whitesell's splendid study illuminates an impressive span of Joni Mitchell's music, offering fans and scholars alike new ways of hearing these songs. A magnificent achievement."--Ellie M. Hisama, Columbia University

"This thoughtful book is a revelation: a long-overdue scholarly examination of one of the most important bodies of work in twentieth century music. Joni Mitchell's fearless explorations defy simplistic categories of popular, jazz and art music, and Whitesell's sophisticated, rigorous analysis does her work justice. This study will be invaluable to anyone with a serious interest in contemporary music and culture."--Jacqueline Warwick, Dalhousie University

"*The Music of Joni Mitchell* brings together the richest traditions in the study of popular music. The book is detailed in its study of form and style, and a model of expert musical analysis. Just as importantly, for non-specialists, it offers a compelling account of Joni Mitchell's life and career, showing the extra-musical influences on her work and Mitchell's interaction with the broader cultural forces around her. Whitesell's admiration for Joni Mitchell is clear, but the book is rigorous and balanced, a piece of first-rate scholarship."--Will Straw, Professor of Communications, McGill University and Co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*

#### About the Author

**Lloyd Whitesell** teaches music history at McGill University. He is the author of articles on Benjamin Britten, Maurice Ravel, Bernard Herrmann, and minimalism, and co-editor of the book *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*. His research interests include queer studies, popular music, film music, modernism, music and literature, and theories of the audience.

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