

## The Cyclic Nature of Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*

Susan Neimoyer

Volume 34, numéro 1-2, 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1030868ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1030868ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Neimoyer, S. (2014). The Cyclic Nature of Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*. *Intersections*, 34(1-2), 3–32. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1030868ar>

### Résumé de l'article

La recherche actuelle reconnaît que plusieurs albums de Joni Mitchell sont cycliques, ou basés sur un concept unifiant. Toutefois, *Court and Spark* (1974) ne fait pas partie de ces albums, bien que Mitchell l'ait décrit comme « un discours sur l'amour romantique ». En se basant sur l'idée que cet album pourrait avoir été conçu comme une oeuvre d'ampleur à plusieurs mouvements, cette étude examine ses composantes textuelles et musicales dans le but de rechercher ses caractéristiques unifiantes. On y met en lumière la nature cyclique de l'album, en montrant que l'unité de ce dernier repose davantage sur ses aspects musicaux que sur ses aspects textuels. Cette approche va à l'encontre de la perception habituelle de l'oeuvre de Mitchell, et propose que son travail compositionnel serait plus recherché que ce que l'on pense habituellement.

---

# THE CYCLIC NATURE OF JONI MITCHELL'S *COURT AND SPARK*

*Susan Neimoyer*

---

Some people get nervous about that word. Art. They think it's a pretentious word. ...  
To me, words are only symbols, and the word *art* has never lost its vitality. It still has meaning to me. Love lost its meaning to me. God lost its meaning to me. But art never lost its meaning. I always knew what I meant by art.

—Joni Mitchell

In his recent book on the music of Joni Mitchell (b. 1943), Lloyd Whitesell observes that many albums in Mitchell's catalogue may be classified as "concept albums," the popular music industry's term for collections of songs that are "unified or framed by a ruling idea."<sup>1</sup> While Whitesell avers that some of Mitchell's albums exhibit cyclic properties, he explains that classifying popular albums as conceptual or cyclic can be problematic, given the way they are typically put together:

[The] attribution of a special overall coherence is often a question of degree, resting on subjective judgments. After all, in assembling an album, even one without a unifying concept, most artists are careful to arrange songs in a suitable order, considering such matters as effective initial and closing gestures, internal groupings (such as sides of an LP), general emotional progression, and specific relations between adjacent songs (whether rhyming, contrasting, or linked by transitional material). I prefer to understand the possibilities of large-scale form on popular music albums in terms of a continuum stretching from the haphazard through the loosely coherent to the firmly coherent. In the middle of this continuum, there is room for disagreement over whether an album may be considered a collection or a cycle. (Whitesell 2008, 195)

Whitesell, whose book is one of the most definitive scholarly works in print on Mitchell's music, supports his view of what may or may not be classified as "cyclic" using Ruth Bingham's definition of a song cycle, which, for him, seems most applicable to Mitchell's work: "In Bingham's description of the cycle, she emphasizes that coherence is not necessarily achieved through musical means, and in fact when Mitchell constructs cycles she works primarily with textual

---

<sup>1</sup> Songs in such albums are usually either focused on a specific concept or centred on a textual theme that implies a plotline. These collections are sometimes further defined by frames, as is the case in the introductory and penultimate songs on the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album of 1967.

connections, concepts, or frames. Musical connections are supportive of a guiding textual rationale—in some cases perhaps accidentally so” (Whitesell 2008, 196).<sup>2</sup> Using this viewpoint as a governing principle for his assessment and analysis of Mitchell’s catalogue, he identifies ten of her releases as concept albums: six produced between 1968 and 1980 (*Song to a Seagull*, *Blue*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, and *Mingus*) and four retrospective compilations produced since 1990 (*Both Sides Now*, *Travelogue*, *The Beginning of Survival*, and *Songs of a Prairie Girl*). However, he allows that “some listeners may wish to present arguments in favour of others as well” (199).

This study is written in response to this invitation, offering evidence that *Court and Spark* (1974) is a song cycle and should therefore be added to the list of “inarguable concept albums” in Mitchell’s catalogue. In this album Mitchell appears to have done the exact opposite of what Whitesell identified as her “usual” practice for achieving coherence. Although underlying textual themes unify the album’s content to a certain extent, the musical elements play a more central role in forming the conceptual nucleus around which this album coalesces. These elements include motivic cross-referencing and return, segues between songs, pattern completion at key middle or background structural moments to define formal boundaries, and perhaps most surprisingly, a logical and symbolic progression of key or pitch centres that are directly related to the album’s opening gesture. The presence and frequency with which these elements appear points to an overall musical structure that is much more than happenstance. Far from being an incidental aural vehicle for conveying Mitchell’s poetry, the music on this album appears instead to be the result of a carefully planned compositional scheme in which the lyrics are only one active component. Since Mitchell’s intent is always to create “art,” all parts—text, music, and in some instances, album covers—are part of a whole. Therefore, an examination of all the unifying elements in this album—both text and music—only deepens the listener’s understanding, enabling Mitchell to achieve her stated artistic purpose: that the listener see himself or herself in the work, for “at the point that they see themselves in it, the communication is complete” (Ghameshi 2013).

### CONCEPT ALBUMS AND MITCHELL’S CONCEPT OF “ART MUSIC”

Joni Mitchell is one of the more notable singer-songwriters of the 1960s–70s, whose approach to songwriting and album organization was experimental from the beginning of her career. Although concept albums appear to have been less common to the urban folk genre out of which she emerged, they were part of a wider trend Mitchell embraced. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of popular artists saw their music as something more than

---

<sup>2</sup> More recent scholarship suggests that text may not have been the sole determinant in the conception of nineteenth-century song cycles. For example, David Ferris (2010, 398) noted that scholars are “further than ever from a definitive answer” to the question of what actually defines the quintessential song cycle, suggesting the issue is still under debate.

a short-lived consumer product. Viewing their creations as high art, they instead believed they were creating a new “classical music” that would at some future time be studied as intently as that of Mozart or Beethoven (Covach 1997, 4). This new classical music blended the pop/rock language and practice with classical forms that included multi-movement works. Although this amalgam was more the province of progressive rock, artists in other popular music genres also experimented with the idea. The Who’s rock opera *Tommy* (1969) and the legendary medley on “Side 2” of the Beatles’ *Abbey Road* (1969) album might be more obvious examples of this fusion of popular and classical music.<sup>3</sup> Chicago’s second album, *Chicago II* (1970) is an even more potent illustration. Although not a concept album, three of the four sides of this double album either include or completely comprise multi-movement works whose overall or individual titles intentionally employ art music terminology such as *ballet*, *prelude*, or even *movement*.<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1971, music critics observed unique features in Mitchell’s compositional style that lay in a nebulous area between popular and classical music. In his review of *Blue*, *New York Times* critic Dan Heckman called Mitchell’s evolving style “art song,” warning that this direction would not necessarily lead to the commercial success she had enjoyed as a “folksinger”: “I suspect [*Blue*] will be the most disliked of Miss Mitchell’s recordings, despite the fact that it attempts more and makes greater demands on her talent than any of the others. The audience for art songs is far smaller than for folk ballads, and Joni Mitchell is on the verge of having to make a decision between the two” (Heckman 1971). The “art song” terminology apparently resonated with Mitchell; in 1979 she told journalist Cameron Crowe that she preferred this description of her work over the catch-all “singer-songwriter” categorization, adding that she always knew what she meant by the word *art*, as cited at the beginning of this study (Crowe 1979, 48–9).

But what exactly does she mean by calling her work “art song?” The term’s obvious connection to Western European art music immediately poses the question of whether she is referring to the German lieder tradition or to her self-identity as a visual artist. Interviews she has given over her career seem

---

3 The fact that side 2 of *Abbey Road* (1969) is a medley does not make it art music per se. However, thematic material and similar textual references unite the entire album side into a single entity. Both melody and textual references introduced in George Harrison’s “Here Comes the Sun” reappear in “Sun King” lyrics, reinterpreted and combined with harmonic and melodic elements of “Because.” “Sun King” is a variation of the melodic hook associated with “Here Comes the Sun.” Later the final verse of “You Never Give Me Your Money” enters, accompanied by full orchestra, at the musical high point of the medley in “Carry That Weight.” This not only lends musical coherence to the entire medley, but serves as a vehicle for closure, making “The End” an appropriate coda.

4 The extended works on this album were written by various band members. *Wake Up Sunshine* (*Ballet for a Girl in Buchanan*), which includes the hit songs “Make Me Smile” and “Colour My World,” was written by trombonist James Pankow. The untitled three-movement work on side 3, co-written by lead guitarist / singer Terry Kath and arranger Peter Matz comprises three orchestral movements entitled “Prelude,” “a.m. Mourning,” and “p.m. Mourning,” followed by a correspondingly morose vocal ballad entitled “Memories of Love.” Keyboardist Robert Lamm is credited as songwriter of the four-movement *It Better End Soon* found on side 4, which is a set of improvisations based on the tune’s head. The title of each track is simply a numbered movement.

to contradict one another, illustrating that her perception of her own work has evolved over time. However, the consistent thread running through these interviews indicates that she sees her work in light of the visual arts. Mitchell told Leonard Feather in 1979 that she approaches writing music “very paintingly, metaphorically” (Feather [1979] 2000, 93). For Mitchell, every song or album is a unique entity and a work of fine art. In a 1974 live concert, Mitchell quipped, when fans requested that she play some of her older songs,

That’s one thing that’s always been a major difference between the performing arts to me and being a painter. Like, a painter does a painting. And he does a painting—that’s it, you know. He’s had the joy of creating it, and he hangs it on some wall, somebody buys it, somebody buys it again, or maybe nobody buys it, and it sits up in a loft somewhere till he dies. But nobody ever said to Van Gogh, ‘Paint *A Starry Night* again, man!’ (Mitchell [1974] 1990)

Alice Echols quoted Mitchell as having said her music was not meant to have the short life that popular songs typically enjoy: “My music is not designed to grab instantly. It’s designed to wear for a lifetime, to hold up like a fine cloth” (Echols [1994] 2002, 208). She told U.S. National Public Radio reporter Liane Hansen, “None of my songs on my records are folk songs ... They’re more like German Lieder ... more classical than folk” (Whitesell 2008, 233).<sup>5</sup> This was evident to critics; *New York Times* critic John Rockwell’s review of Mitchell’s *Hejira* (1976) called Mitchell “the artist best able to link folk-rock with the older Western tradition of the art song” (Rockwell 1976). Mitchell expanded on this view in 2013, during an interview conducted by Jian Ghomeshi of the CBC. Speaking of her first album, *Song to a Seagull* (1968), she said, “[The] first album is semi-classical. It’s almost like Schubert, you know. It isn’t folk music. It was kind of mislabelled from the beginning. Folksingers went out, bought it, put it on their turntables and went, ‘What?’ ... It’s more like classical arrangements on the guitar. Like it’s kind of classical guitar more than folk-style guitar” (Ghomeshi 2013).

The connection between *Song to a Seagull* and lieder tradition extends beyond Mitchell’s almost Schubertian approach to song accompaniment on the guitar. Each of the album’s two sides is given a specific title (“Part 1: I Came to the City” and “Part 2: Out of the City and down to the Seaside”), each of which is based on differing key relationship schemes (Whitesell 2008, 199–200). Like a song cycle, the album is built on dramatic storytelling elements such as strong subsidiary textual motifs and a logical dramatic progression in song order from which a story can be inferred. Mitchell also did the artwork for the album cover (suggesting the album might be considered a “total work of art”). This artwork incorporates pictorial references to song lyrics; among other things, one finds a pen-and-ink drawing of a ship on a calm sea at sunset

---

<sup>5</sup> National Public Radio is a non-profit news and information network jointly funded by the United States government and contributing listeners. Many NPR-affiliated stations are located on college and university campuses throughout the United States.

(presumably the *Dawn Treader* of the second song on Side 2), and a saguaro cactus on the back cover (referring to “Cactus Tree,” the album’s final song).

Mitchell’s attempt to connect her work with lieder tradition further resonates with an observation made in 1995 by Edward Macan, in his book on progressive rock:

[It] cannot be denied that the nineteenth-century song cycle was an important legacy to progressive rock. Nineteenth-century music and psychedelic music are both Romantic in the fullest sense of the word, sharing the same outlook, the same preoccupation with the infinite and other-worldly, the same fondness for monumental statement and the same concern with expressing epic conflicts. (Macan 1997, 41)

*Court and Spark* is perhaps more textually preoccupied with themes native to nineteenth-century vocal art music than is *Song to a Seagull*. In a filmed interview Mitchell called it “a discourse on romantic love against the backdrop of its time” (Lacy and Bennett 2003). Like nineteenth-century song cycles such as Schubert’s *Winterreise* or Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, the story implied in the album’s song order follows the familiar, even epic, arc of a romantic relationship from its beginning to its end and aftermath. As occurs in both the Schubert and Schumann song cycles, the listener is allowed an intimate view of the effect that the relationship’s demise exerts on the cycle’s protagonist. Since textual preoccupation alone does not give a work cyclic properties, the question is whether Mitchell employs further poetic techniques that lend unity to the album. This possibility will be explored below.

### COURT AND SPARK AND MITCHELL’S STYLISTIC EVOLUTION

*Court and Spark*, Mitchell’s sixth release, has been her most commercially successful album, leading *Rolling Stone* magazine to call her the “Queen of Rock” in 1974.<sup>6</sup> As with earlier releases such as *Ladies of the Canyon*, *Court and Spark* has remained popular with listeners and is considered one of Mitchell’s definitive albums. It also demonstrates a dramatic stylistic departure from the recordings that preceded it. Mitchell’s early releases are characterized by the small-scale production values more native to urban folk artists. Because of the non-intervention of David Crosby, who acted as producer of her debut album in name only, the songs on her first two albums—*Song to a Seagull* and *Clouds*—feature little more than Mitchell accompanying herself on the guitar.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Adam White, who compiled the statistics for *Billboard Magazine*’s book listing albums that received the Recording Industry of America’s (RIAA) gold and platinum awards from their inception in 1952, *Court and Spark* peaked at Number 2 on the U.S. Billboard charts (White 1990, 155). Two songs on the album—“Raised on Robbery” and “Help Me”—were released as singles, with “Help Me” reaching the Top Ten on the Billboard charts. The album achieved Gold Record status within a month of its issue, and later earned Platinum, Double Platinum, and, as of December 1997, Multi-Platinum awards from the RIAA (RIAA, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Although it was common practice for producers to “increase the production value” of popular music during this era by adding extra instruments and more elaborate arrangements, sometimes after the artist was led to believe the recording had been finished (as occurred with the addition of drums and electric guitar to Simon and Garfunkel’s *The Sound of Silence* prior to its release), Crosby

Crosby's hands-off approach made it possible for Mitchell to act as her own producer in subsequent recordings—a rare occurrence during this era. This ensured that she would have complete creative control over her work, including the supervision of song arrangements, instrumentation, and selection of the order in which songs would appear on any given album.

That Mitchell has acted as her own producer for most of her career is a significant point when considering artistic intent and a musical style that evolved over more than thirty years and through a number of discernable style periods. The progression of her musical style over her first creative period (1968–72) can be observed in the five albums released prior to *Court and Spark*, which marks the beginning of her second style period.<sup>8</sup> Three of her first four albums (*Song to a Seagull*, *Clouds*, and *Blue*) consistently maintain the folk-related style characteristic of her first creative period. A gradual influx of rock- and jazz-related idioms commences in her third album (*Ladies of the Canyon*, 1970) and continues through *For the Roses* (1972), her fifth release. This includes an expanding variety of guitar effects, Mitchell playing piano rather than guitar on many tracks, and the incorporation of backup vocals (most often done by Mitchell herself) and ensembles of varying sizes and instrumentations. Jazz musicians comprise these ensembles more often than do rock musicians and include woodwind players such as Paul Horn (the improvised clarinet solo at the end of “For Free” on *Ladies of the Canyon*) and Tom Scott (four of the tracks on *For the Roses*, 1972), whose L.A. Express serves as the backup band on *Court and Spark*.

*Court and Spark* was a deliberate stylistic departure from her earlier work. In a 2013 interview, Mitchell explained the reasoning behind this new approach:

[When] I realized how popular I was becoming was [sic] right before *Blue*, and I went, “Oh my God, a lot of people are listening to me. Well then, *they* better find out *who* they're worshipping. Let's see if they can take it. Let's get real.” So I wrote *Blue*, which horrified a lot of people ... [What] had happened is they're looking at me, and all I've done is reveal human traits. They haven't seen themselves in it. At the point that they see themselves in it, the communication is complete.

*For the Roses* went deeper ... And *Court and Spark*, by that time, you know, the masses were, you know, it was like the same thing that makes people stop at accidents. That's how they were viewing it. I thought, “Well, these people are sick” ... So to shake it off, I morphed again, and I got a band and came out “Red Hot Mama.” (Ghomeshi 2013)

*Court and Spark* was, by Mitchell's assessment, also the beginning of a six-year period (1973–9) during which she experimented with the boundaries of

---

believed Mitchell's songs were the most artistically effective when presented as originally conceived: for voice and guitar alone (Lacy and Bennett 2003). In 1968 it was still common for an artist to record a song, only to have extra instruments added later at the discretion of the producer, in an effort to make it more marketable.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell's first six albums are, in the order of their release: *Song to a Seagull* (1968), *Clouds* (1969), *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970), *Blue* (1971), *For the Roses* (1972), and *Court and Spark* (1974).

what she defined as a “song” (Garabini 2000, 115–16). Her music became even more infused with jazz elements, almost completely eclipsing the folk idiom on which her reputation had been built. *Court and Spark* is also the first of her albums to feature a backup band on every track, beginning a trend that would continue for the remainder of her career. The albums that immediately follow *Court and Spark* become more jazz-infused, gradually adding notable sidemen such as bassist Jaco Pastorius, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and pianist Herbie Hancock. Her second style period culminates in 1979 with the release of *Mingus*, which began as a collaboration with avant-garde jazz bassist Charles Mingus. This avant-garde jazz album is one of the most experimental of Mitchell’s catalogue.

## TEXTUAL ISSUES

*Song to a Seagull* is clearly a cycle or concept album unified by recurring textual themes, particularly the idea of geographic location. Six years later, when *Court and Spark* was created, Mitchell was at the beginning of a stylistic evolution that affected her music, her poetry, and the way the two interacted with one another. While the music takes on a greater organizational role, it is also more subtly interwoven with Mitchell’s poetry, allowing for more varied textual unification. This section will address the more significant textual features that argue in favour of the cyclic nature of *Court and Spark*, particularly song order and recurring textual themes.

### Textual themes and the cycle’s plot

During the era in which *Court and Spark* was created, producers customarily determined the song order on popular albums. However, Mitchell’s recording contracts nearly always granted her complete artistic control of her output, allowing her to act as her own producer. In 1982 Mitchell explained her philosophy when acting in this role:

Well the way I look at it, I’m not the authority. I’m probably the one that worries the most about it. The authority is really the basic structure itself. Either an idea or concept complements that basic structure or it messes it up ... The way I see the producer—and remember, I’m kind of an anti-authoritarian type—is as a spirit-squasher. I know there are good producers, in all fairness, and that they’re necessary in some arenas, but so many times I’ve seen them become like a director on a movie set ... who’s another kind of spirit-squasher. The artist’s opinion is diminished and there’s an act of condescension between director and artist, and that act is an insult to the intelligence of the artist. Once it’s perceived, there’s no climate for artists to surpass themselves. (Brooks 1982, 9)

When speaking specifically of *Court and Spark* later in this same interview, Mitchell said she is always “very protective of [her] structure,” being careful that the musicians of the L.A. Express “wouldn’t just scribble all over the architecture of [her] music” (14). If the artwork (either song or album) is the authority in Mitchell’s eyes, and she intended this album to be a “discourse



on romantic love,” it seems reasonable to deduce that the song order here was deliberate. She would no doubt have seen it as a significant part of the “architecture” she took such care to protect.

In this light, the song order on *Court and Spark* takes on more significance than it has perhaps been given credit. Mitchell’s vision of the album as a discourse speaks more in favour of a logical, integrated textual progression that is more cyclic than random ordering. Moreover, a closer examination of the lyrics reveals recurring textual motifs that run through most of the songs on the album, the most pervasive of which are freedom versus commitment and sanity versus madness. Both motifs are intensified at key moments with religious imagery, which infuses the protagonist’s struggle to maintain her freedom and sanity with bitter irony.

The madness motif is introduced almost immediately in the album’s first track, “Court and Spark” (see table 1). Here the female protagonist describes her new love interest as having “a madman’s soul,” who “dances up a river in the dark.” “Help Me” describes the initial euphoria of new love as a “crazy feeling” that the woman knows will mean trouble for her. In the fourth and fifth songs (“People’s Parties” and “The Same Situation”) she says, “I told you when I met you / I was crazy” and describes herself as being “tethered to a ringing telephone / In a room full of mirrors.” Later in “Just Like This Train,” each verse ends with some version of the sentiment: “Jealous lovin’ll make you crazy.” These implications prefigure the subject matter of the final two songs. “Trouble Child” describes the painful inner world of the protagonist’s mental breakdown, while “Twisted” expands upon that theme, bringing the madness motif to full fruition, as occurs in a piece built upon cumulative form techniques. We don’t understand that everything on the album points toward the final two songs until we arrive, perhaps almost as surprised by the outcome they depict as the protagonist herself.

The song order on the album follows the familiar Mitchell arc of a romantic relationship, this time with greater focus on its aftermath for both parties (Klein 2000, 2). This arc may be less apparent because, as is usual to her songwriting approach, Mitchell plays the role of storyteller (Ghomeshi 2013; Whitesell 2008, 41–77). As narrator, she takes on the persona of each character, frequently offering their points of view in first person, creating a “she said, he said” or a “she did, he did” scenario. Although most of the songs are told from the woman’s perspective, “Free Man in Paris” and “Raised on Robbery” are either about the male love interest or are presented from his viewpoint, providing a glimpse of who he is—or who the storyteller *thinks* he is.

Following this implied scenario, the first seven songs—“Court and Spark” through “Down to You”—describe aspects of the relationship itself (see table 1). In “Court and Spark” and “Help Me,” the female protagonist meets an intriguing man and, despite her better judgment and desires for personal freedom, falls in love with him. This seduction is depicted in evangelical terms. The man can read her mind and is a messianic figure who “cleansed himself” by “sacrificing his blues.” As a “convert,” the female protagonist feels unworthy of him: “I couldn’t let go of L.A. / City of the fallen angels.” In “Free Man in Paris,” the

**Table 1. *Court and Spark* Songs, Narrative Stance, and Suggested Plot**

Song title	Point of view	Character speaking	Plot event
<i>The relationship</i>			
"Court and Spark"	Outward	Protagonist	Protagonist meets an interesting man and he courts her
"Help Me"	Inward	Protagonist	Protagonist muses on her mixed feelings about getting into another romantic relationship
"Free Man in Paris"	Storyteller	Narrator / male love interest	Man talks about his career and dreams
"People's Parties"	Inward	Protagonist	Protagonist describes a Hollywood party she attends with her new boyfriend; focus on how uncomfortable she feels
"The Same Situation"	Inward	Protagonist	Protagonist expresses serious doubts about the relationship
"Car on a Hill"	Outward	Protagonist	Protagonist waits for her boyfriend to come home, but he never does; fade-out ending implies he has left her
"Down to You"	Inward	Narrator or protagonist	Protagonist grieves the loss of the relationship, resorts to a one-night stand to curb her loneliness.
<i>The aftermath of the relationship</i>			
"Just Like This Train"	Outward	Protagonist	Protagonist waxes philosophical and sarcastic about the fickle nature of romantic relationship
"Raised on Robbery"	Storyteller	Narrator	Man spurns the advances of a prostitute in a bar and walks out
"Trouble Child"	Inward	Narrator or protagonist	Protagonist goes mad, institutionalized for treatment
"Twisted"	Outward	Protagonist	Outward manifestation of the protagonist's madness

man, an archetypal hippie from the San Francisco Bay area associated with the music business ("So he buried the coins he made / In People's Park"), shares his experience-based views of that fast-paced world.<sup>9</sup> The woman's insecurities emerge in the following three songs, which are also described in otherworldly terms that continue the metaphorical connection between a committed relationship and organized religion. This is most literally stated in both bridge sections of "The Same Situation," suggesting the relationship has begun to falter. First the protagonist recounts,

Still I sent up my prayer  
Wondering where it had to go

<sup>9</sup> Although publications such as *Rolling Stone* commonly speculated on which of the many men in Mitchell's life each of her songs from this era represented, the male character in this suggested plot seems to be more archetypal than representative of one particular individual. As "a discourse on romantic love against the backdrop of its time," viewing the male character as an archetype makes the most logical sense.

With heaven full of astronauts  
And the Lord on death row

Then the second time her pleas become more pointed and even desperate:

Still I sent up my prayer  
Wondering who was there to hear  
I said "Send me somebody  
Who's strong, and somewhat sincere." (Mitchell 1998, 120)

"Car on a Hill" (the sixth song) implies that the relationship ends unexpectedly in a poignant, almost cruel way. The protagonist waits for her boyfriend to come home one evening. However, the repeating fade-out ending, which consists of repeating chords built on suspensions, suggests that he never comes. "Down to You," which is the musical high point of the cycle, is an ironic "break-up song" that portrays the protagonist's emotional devastation as she realizes the relationship has ended.

The album's final four songs provide glimpses of the aftermath of the break-up. The woman first waxes prosaic about the fickle nature of romantic relationships in "Just Like This Train." "Raised on Robbery" then portrays the man as unready for even a casual sexual encounter: he spurns a prostitute who tries to pick him up in a bar. The final two songs make it clear that the woman's "jealous lovin'" really did drive her crazy. "Trouble Child" depicts the melancholy, frightening inner world of the protagonist's mental breakdown, while "Twisted," written by Annie Ross and Wardell Gray, adds a more sardonic coda to the cycle, portraying the outer manifestations of the protagonist's madness. Mitchell called "Twisted" an "encore piece," explaining that she had always loved it, and it seemed to fit here. Further, because she had recently undergone psychotherapy, she felt she had earned the right to sing it (Marom [1974] 2000, 70). In the context of the implied plot, the presence of a cover version of a song written by someone else suggests that through her mental breakdown the protagonist has lost not only her love, but also the freedom she so cherished. With the loss of freedom, she has lost her individual voice as well and can no longer speak for herself.

### Plot-supporting textual symmetry

The plot proposed above is supported by the order in which the songs on the album appear (table 1). The story is framed on both ends of the album by pairs of songs with related textual themes: "Court and Spark" and "Help Me" at the beginning, and "Trouble Child" and "Twisted" at the end. Each pair of songs presents the female protagonist from two narrative perspectives: first, the outward image she projects as one might in a face-to-face conversation; and second, her inner world, where she speaks either to herself or about herself in the third person as a more detached observer. In "Court and Spark," where the protagonist's focus is outward, the narrative tone is consistent with the manner in which one might tell a close associate how the lovers met. Conversely, "Help Me" obviously comes from the female protagonist's innermost voice:

Help me  
 I think I'm falling  
 In love again  
 When I get that crazy feeling, I know  
 I'm in trouble again.

(Mitchell 1998, 113)

The switch from outward to inward focus at the beginning of the textual frame is reiterated in reverse order (inward to outward) in the final two songs. "Trouble Child" presents the inner world of the protagonist's mental breakdown, whereas "Twisted" reflects her outward behaviour. With the exception of "Free Man in Paris" and "Raised on Robbery," the alternating inside-to-outside narrative perspectives continue throughout the album. Both "People's Parties" and "The Same Situation" present the female protagonist's inner state, but they are linked by a musical transition that suggests Mitchell might have conceived them as the two halves of a single song. "Car on a Hill" is again presented in a narrative style similar to the title track, making it another of the female protagonist's outward expressions.

The text of "Down to You" is written in the third person and is therefore more cryptic. Whether the storyteller is speaking directly to, about, or as the female protagonist (using "you" in the more colloquial sense) is never quite clear. Following the reasoning that a single popular song can contain a "multiplicity of voices," and that "the author 'inside the text' may inscribe the author 'outside the text,'" this song could actually present the thoughts of both the female protagonist and the narrator (Brackett [1995] 2000, 16). Either way, the text is clearly more descriptive of the woman's inner state, perhaps told in the third person because her inner self is so detached from reality that she sees her actions from the perspective of an observer.

"Just Like This Train" then reverts to the protagonist's outside world. The narrative tone is once again more objective, as one relating thoughts or feelings to an associate. It is self-analytical: the protagonist compares her life to a train that's never "on time" and has "count[ed] lovers like railroad cars." The biting humour in this song, in lines such as "I can't find my goodness / I lost my heart / Oh sour grapes" further suggests an outward focus. The self-deprecating "Oh sour grapes" line suggests that she is outwardly putting the best face she can on her broken heart.

The placement of "Free Man in Paris" and "Raised on Robbery" demonstrates further plot-related symmetry. Both songs, which are about the male love interest, are placed in mirror-image positions in relation to one another: the third song from the beginning and the third song from the end, respectively. Both songs are presented from the viewpoint of the objective storyteller, as is evident in the first two lines of "Free Man in Paris": "'The way I see it,' he said / 'You just can't win it'" (Mitchell 1998, 115). Every succeeding line is presented by the narrator as if the man had spoken it himself, so the quotation marks next to the word "You" are the last in the written lyric. "Raised on Robbery" also begins in the third-person narrative voice of the storyteller:

He was sitting in the lounge of the Empire Hotel  
 He was drinking for diversion  
 He was thinking for himself  
 A little money riding on the Maple Leafs  
 Along comes a lady in lacy sleeves  
 She says ...  
 "Let me sit down here  
 Drinking alone's a shame. (126)

These two songs do not follow the previously discussed outside-to-inside or inside-to-outside narrative pattern. Instead, their placement, as third song from either the front or back end of the album, defines the boundaries of the romantic relationship itself. The female protagonist is alone at both the beginning and end of the relationship—whether alone with her thoughts in the relationship's giddy early days, or alone with her neuroses after its demise.

### MUSICAL ISSUES

The musical characteristics exhibited in *Court and Spark* offer further evidence that this album was most likely conceptualized as a cycle. In fact, viewing the music from a cyclic standpoint provides the only rational explanation for why some musical events happen at all. Such recognition presupposes that the music on this album was created through careful compositional planning—something for which the singer-songwriters of this era are not always given credit. Because Mitchell and her contemporaries are lumped in the same genre as Bob Dylan, the supposition follows that their music is little more than a convenient vehicle through which a text may be conveyed. However, Mitchell's discussion of her creative process on more than one occasion reveals that her approach to songwriting is the reverse of this assumption. She explained in a 1985 BBC radio interview that she writes the music—specifically the harmonic structure—before adding melody and text:

So on an excursion such as that [the improvisation that was developed into] "Paprika Plains" (*Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, 1978), you'll find chords ... you'll just find your hands rocking on some figure and that becomes in the improvisation a place that you locate mentally and record and return to. And from there comes the development of a song ... I don't usually add melody until I have a completed structure. Then I'll sit around and hum it ... and then once the melody which is a counterpoint to the chords is pretty much jelled, then I begin to work with the lyric. As I add the lyric I'll modify that melody, you know, to incorporate the poetry. (Hale 1985)

Because the lyrics are created to fit the music rather than the other way around, analysis of the music takes on greater significance. If, for Mitchell, the communication is complete only when the listener sees himself or herself in the song, understanding the music in conjunction with the lyrics only deepens the comprehension of the whole.



Example 1. *Court and Spark*, opening gesture, or “chords of inquiry”

### The album’s opening gesture: “Chords of Inquiry”

*Court and Spark* begins with a three-measure passage, played alone by Mitchell on the piano, which consists of a simple three-chord pattern (E–D–E–G), followed by a transitional phrase centred on G (see example 1). Although this passage seems harmonically innocuous, the gesture is completely unrelated to the remainder of the song. Indeed, Mitchell plays the F# at the end of the gesture as if it were marked with a fermata, aurally separating it from everything that follows. If this were classical music, one would immediately ask what function this opening gesture might serve.

Mitchell explained in a filmed interview that her songs are often based on what she calls “chords of inquiry.” Certain chords or chord patterns depict emotions for her; she prefers sonorities or progressions that “have a question mark in them” (Lacy and Bennett 2003).<sup>10</sup> The gesture that opens *Court and Spark* is constructed almost exclusively of simple triads, but quite clearly “has a question mark in it” in at least three respects. First, its aural separation from the title song seems deliberate—so much so that it was omitted by the publisher from the sheet music, as were passages in other songs on the album that didn’t fit then-current norms for popular sheet music.<sup>11</sup> Second, the opening three triads are voiced in second inversion, providing Mitchell’s requisite “question

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell’s songs often begin with what jazz musicians would call “sus chords”—chords with suspensions in them, which feature one or more sets of second intervals. She also frequently uses ninth chords whose third is missing, and the fifth, seventh, and ninth form a seemingly distantly related triad over the chord’s root. Both types of “chords of inquiry” can be found in songs on *Court and Spark*. For instance, “Help Me” begins with Mitchell strumming an Asus2 on the guitar, and these specialized ninth chords are particularly prominent in the coda of “The Same Situation” (see example 5). Ninth chords voiced in this manner were part of a common harmonic language used by some of Mitchell’s singer-songwriter contemporaries—most notably James Taylor (with whom Mitchell had a romantic relationship in the early 1970s) and Carole King. However, unlike those of Taylor and King, Mitchell’s ninth chords don’t always retain the harmonic function (usually as a dominant) implied by the bass note. Although they can be found in much of the popular music of the early 1970s, sonorities like these appear with particular frequency on James Taylor’s *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon* (1971) and on nearly every track of Carole King’s *Tapestry* (1971), *Rhymes and Reasons* (1972), and *Fantasy* (1973).

<sup>11</sup> These omissions include lengthier instrumental interludes, such as the seventeen-measure coda at the end of “The Same Situation,” the two-minute instrumental break between verses of “Down to You,” and passages that serve as both transition and introduction, such as the opening four measures of “People’s Parties.” While it is common knowledge that the published sheet music of any popular song cannot be considered its “definitive version,” the piano transcriptions and reductions in this instance are surprisingly true to the recordings. As a result, omissions are all the more notable because they are sometimes nonsensical. By omitting the transitional four measures at the beginning of “People’s Parties,” the printed version of the song begins in the middle of a phrase (Mitchell 1974, 84).

mark” by placing more emphasis on the melodic line and drawing the ear’s attention away from the chords’ roots. Third, the cadence on G in m. 2 is open-ended, as a question would be. Rather than providing an immediate response, the transitional phrase in m. 3 leads the ear away from the question just posed, via the F#, into a narrative-style passage that is more obviously the title song’s actual introduction.

Mitchell has said her music and poetry are more deliberate, calculated creations (as opposed to painting, which for her is intuitive) (Ghomeshi 2013). Critics have noted this quality in her music since very early in her career, calling it “carefully constructed” and “fully composed, with rhythmic and textural intricacies in its own right” (Traum 1967, 8; Whitesell 2002, 175). One cannot therefore help but wonder, given the distinct separation of the opening gesture from the title song, whether the album as a whole might be a response to or working out of the question or “problem” posed here. If this were a classical work, one might immediately explore how or if the E–D–E–G chord progression, or “chords of inquiry,” exert an influence on the music that follows. Because modality is typical in Mitchell’s harmonic palette (making VII a common pre-tonic chord if a pitch centre is given a Mixolydian modal inflection), the E–D–E motion in the opening gesture in the very least suggests a motivic axis that could be realized harmonically, melodically, or both (Whitesell 2002, 176–78). The question is whether Mitchell does any or all of those things here. Keeping these possibilities in mind, the influence the opening gesture exerts will be enfolded into the discussion below.

### A logical and symbolic succession of keys or pitch centres

Unusual harmonies and chord progressions, which arise in part from her use of open guitar tunings, are among the hallmarks of Joni Mitchell’s music (Feather [1997] 2000, 97). Although her harmonic practice on *Court and Spark* might be more “mainstream,” stylistically closer to that of her singer-songwriter contemporaries than her other work, it appears to play an integral role in both text painting and in the unfolding of the proposed plot. As table 2 illustrates, all but two of the songs on this album are in one of only four key or pitch centres: E, D, A, and C.<sup>12</sup> Even the two seemingly extraneous keys, G and F# minor, are related to one or more of the four primary pitch centres either functionally, through a common connection to the opening “chords of inquiry,” or both. For example, F# minor, the key centre for much of “Car on a Hill,” is the relative

---

<sup>12</sup> E, D, A, and C are key centres that share common first-position chords used by beginning or amateur guitar players. However, this point may have little relevance for Mitchell, who often uses “open” guitar tunings of her own invention. One might also attribute the more triadic nature of songs on *Court and Spark* to either the constant presence of a backup band, Mitchell’s more frequent use of the piano (her piano skills seem at least somewhat limited), or both. One anecdotal source suggests that Mitchell used “open” guitar tunings on this album, despite the implied relationship between the most common key centres and first-position guitar chords. In his description of the recording sessions for “Free Man in Paris,” singer/guitarist José Feliciano recalled offering Mitchell advice on her guitar playing: “She was playing with her guitar in an open tuning ... so I pointed out that although open tunings are nice, they can be restrictive. I said that she’d be better off just to tune her guitar in the normal way. She didn’t like that. I think it put her off me a little” (Black 2004).

**Table 1. *Court and Spark* Keys or Pitch Centres and Song Forms**

Voice leading Background	Song title	Key, mode, or pitch centre	Characteristics	Form
E	"Court and Spark"	E minor	Mixolydian inflections when major modes are tonicized	AABAA
D	"Help Me"	A to D	Verses and bridge begin in A, end in D	AABA
	"Free Man in Paris"	A major	Mixolydian inflections	ABAB
	"People's Parties"	D mixolydian		strophic
	"The Same Situation"	D, G–A minor	Intro in D Verses: G to Am. Bridge in A, coda ends in A minor.	ABAB ABCAB
	"Car on a Hill"	F# minor to A	Verses begin in F# minor, end in A major. Instrumental break centres in A. Coda ends in A.	
E	"Down to You"	E, D, G, D, E	Intro begins in E, moves to A. Song body in D, verses. Cadence on E. Instrumental break mostly in G, although A and D are tonicized. Coda tonicizes and ends in E.	ABA'CA
	"Just Like This Train"	C major	Lydian modal inflections	ABA
	"Raised on Robbery"	C "mixolydian"	12-bar intro. "Chuck Berry–style" blues (form begins on IV)	16-bar blues
G	"Trouble Child"	C to G	C pitch centre vague, feels more like a lengthy tonicization due to recurring ostinato ending on G	AABAB
	"Twisted"	D mixolydian		ABA

minor of A, one of the four common keys. F# is also the held (and therefore emphasized) "pivot pitch" between the opening gesture and the formal introduction of the title track. E and D as key centres are part of the "chords of inquiry," as is G, which serves as a pitch centre in both "The Same Situation" and "Trouble Child." G is also the dominant of C—the key centre for both the protagonist's and the love interest's "aftermath songs" ("Just Like This Train" and "Raised on Robbery").

A quick overview of where and when these key centres occur suggests that their placement, via the order in which individual songs appear, might be deliberate, implying a symbolic connection between pitch centres and the plot proposed earlier. The practice of associating key centres with individual characters or concepts is, of course, a feature common to many song cycles. It is also consistent with Mitchell's concept that songs are musical paintings (Feather 2000, 93). Keeping in mind that painting is Mitchell's "primary language" (Ghomeshi 2013), key or pitch centre might function as a colour of paint that can be varied in hue or shading through modal inflection—a trait recognized as part of Mitchell's common harmonic practice (Whitesell 2002, 173–83).



Mitchell's commentary on this issue is a bit contradictory: while she claims to never know what key she's playing in, she has also noted at least once that pitch centre can carry musical and even symbolic significance. While describing the creation of "Paprika Plains" (*Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, 1977–78) in 1985, she explained that "C was home and that then you could venture out anywhere, and if you were meandering out there and you felt like you were lost, you wandered home to C. And then you departed again" (Hale 1985). Likewise the progression of pitch centres is logical enough to suggest that as Mitchell fleshed out the lyric content of the songs for *Court and Spark*, certain pitches and the colours they implied, if not the key centres themselves, became associated with characters and events in the story Mitchell intended to tell. It seems more than coincidental that E, D, and A are the pitch centres most closely associated with the romantic relationship (the key of C never appears until after the relationship has ended). Moreover, E, D, and G appear as pitch centres only when the female protagonist is speaking to or about herself, as in "Court and Spark," "People's Parties," or "Trouble Child." This strongly implies that E, D, and G—the three harmonic components of the opening gesture—may be signifiers of the female protagonist.

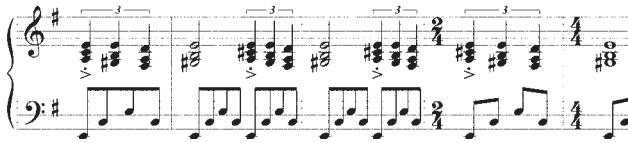
A as a pitch centre, on the other hand, seems to be specifically associated with the male character. "Free Man in Paris" is in A, which is the only song in which the man's speaking voice occupies all but a few words of the text. This is not, however, the first time A appears as an influential pitch. It is first emphasized in the "knocking" triplet figure introduced in m. 4 of "Court and Spark." In a subtle bit of text painting, the A, as the dissonance in a 4–3 suspension, acts as an insistent "foreign object" that is resolved only momentarily (example 2). When the triplet figure is then altered to create the plagal cadence at the end of each section of the song, the A, subdominant in the key of E, naturally begins the figure (example 3).

Mitchell further uses A as a pitch centre that struggles to dominate keys associated with the female protagonist. A as a conflicting key centre first appears in "Help Me," where each verse begins in A, but ends in D. Although "Free Man in Paris" is solidly in A, the A versus D conflict resumes in the introduction of "People's Parties," where Mitchell plays an A triad with a D bass on the acoustic guitar, reducing this power struggle into a single chord and pairing the protagonist inextricably with her lover (example 4). This sonority appears not only in the song's introduction but also at the beginning of each stanza of poetry.

The psychological and emotional enmeshment portrayed by this vertical sonority is further borne out in "The Same Situation," which follows without pause, bridged by a modulatory transitional phrase. The song is a litany on the question, "How and why did I get myself into this?" and has a key centre that is deliberately ambiguous, featuring another pair of conflicting pitch centres: G and A. Although G (the cadential sonority from the "chords of inquiry") is the pitch centre, the circling chord progression on which the verse is built (C–G–D/E bass–E–Am) makes the end of each of these progressions increasingly powerful. The repeating cadences on A minor create musical question marks



Example 2. The “knocking” triplet figure, “Court and Spark” mm. 4-7



Example 3. Extended plagal cadence that ends each verse in “Court and Spark”



12-string acoustic guitar



Example 4. Final measures of “Free Man in Paris” and the introduction to “People’s Parties”

that enhance the meaning of the text, carrying such contextual weight that the few cadences that occur on G are rendered almost impotent by comparison, further weakened by the addition of major sevenths and ninths. Ultimately, A triumphs over G in the fourteen-measure tag at the end of the song. While the strings play a plaintive melody in 3/4 time accompanied by an A minor pedal, one hears the piano’s right hand playing quarter-note quadruplets on a G triad against it in a four-against-three rhythmic pattern (example 5). Although the quadruplets are an almost visual portrayal of the lyric “I called out to be released,” they are strikingly reminiscent of the “knocking” triplet figure in the introduction to “Court and Spark.” However, the roles have been reversed here: the protagonist, not her lover, is knocking or pounding on the virtual doors or walls that imprison her. Chillingly, the knocking gradually slows, weakens, and disappears completely, swallowed by the A minor harmony that carries the final four measures.

Both “Car on a Hill” and “Down to You” have dual pitch centres—shifting F# to A (keys associated with the man) and D to E (keys associated with the protagonist), respectively. In this, too, the key selection seems symbolic.

The image shows a musical score for an instrumental tag. It is written in 3/4 time and G major. The score is divided into two systems. The first system consists of a 'Strings' part and a 'Piano' part. The 'Strings' part has a melodic line with some grace notes. The 'Piano' part has a bass line and chords, with some triplets and four-measure rests. The second system consists of 'Stgs.' and 'Pno.' parts. The 'Pno.' part has a 'lower strings' section. The score ends with a double bar line.

Example 5. “The Same Situation” instrumental tag

Although the protagonist is speaking in “Car on a Hill,” she is talking about her boyfriend who, like the fade-out ending suggests, all but disappears at the end of the song, as does his home key. This is the last time we hear the key of A in anything except as an occasional passing tonicization. It therefore makes sense that “Down to You,” which begins in D and ends in E, is written in the protagonist’s keys. She is left to herself to pick up the pieces of the relationship that has just abruptly ended.

“Just Like This Train” is in C, but the sudden drop down to this pitch level is not as jolting to the ear because Mitchell has prepared the listener for it in several places during “Down to You,” the song that immediately precedes it. Most notable among these places is the bridge, which is composed entirely over a C/D bass chord, which acts as a tension-building pedal over which a three-note melodic motive is varied and repeated. In context of where it appears in the cycle, C as a key centre bears a symbolic connection to emotional conditions lying outside the frame of the relationship defined by the E–D–E axis in the “chords of inquiry.” It is a “lower” pitch, suggesting an emotional letdown and therefore may be a harmonic “response” appropriate to songs dealing with the aftermath of the relationship. Musically, it lies outside the boundary set by the “chords of inquiry,” yet is related to them via its dominant, G. It is where both parties go after the relationship ends.

The harmonic “flat line” created by C serving as the key centre for two songs in a row—“Just Like This Train” and “Raised on Robbery”—particularly after the harmonic variety displayed in the key centres of the preceding songs, implies that the breakup may have been hard on both parties. But for the female protagonist in particular, the C pitch centre may be illustrative of the depths to which she sinks, both away from self-respect and sanity. The key centre of “Trouble Child” is perhaps appropriately ambiguous; it seems to be in both C

and G at the same time, thus fusing a relationship between C and the G from the “chords of inquiry.” “Twisted” serves as a sardonic coda for the cycle. It is in D, suggesting, if the pattern of characterization by key centre is still intact, that the woman might be in a phase of recovery; she never returns to E, because she is clearly not the person we met at the beginning of the cycle.

### “Chords of Inquiry” as underlying voice leading

The foregoing discussion of key relationships has alluded to the idea that in addition to the opening gesture’s influence on issues of pitch centre, it also acts as an underlying motive that functions as a scaffolding in the deep background upon which the entirety of the album is built. This “controlling motive” surfaces at key structural moments during the cycle.

The “chords of inquiry” appear either as key centres or as opening sonorities of songs related to the romantic relationship (see table 2). “Court and Spark” is in E minor, beginning on E chords in both the album’s opening gesture in m. 1 (E major) and in the actual introduction in m. 4 (Em7). “People’s Parties” is in D, suggesting a middle-ground realization of the E-D-E axis implied in the opening gesture. Then, despite vacillating between G and A minor, D is prolonged in the background of “The Same Situation” via the opening A/D bass sonority that also begins each verse.

The second E major chord from the opening gesture first reappears as the opening chord in the transition between “Car on a Hill” and “Down to You,” despite D serving as the primary key centre for the majority of the song. The first few measures of this transition are, in fact, a harmonic variation and expansion of the “chords of inquiry,” minus the repeated E triad (example 6). Although the second sonority in this passage is a Bm7, Mitchell has preserved the second-inversion voicing of the D triad in the right hand. We see the E-to-D motion from the opening gesture once again at the end of the first verse, where the E triad, again in second inversion, appears as an accented passing chord (example 7). E major is heavily emphasized again at the end of the tune, which, because of its lengthy instrumental break, carries greater musical weight over the album as a whole. Its weight is further emphasized because the E–D–E axis pattern running through the deeper middle ground of the album is completed in the coda of “Down to You” (example 8). Given that the bulk of this song is in D, identifying the coda of “Down to You” as the structural moment where the axis pattern is completed in the background (symbolizing the end of the romantic relationship) is the most logical explanation for the unusual emphasis placed on E major in this song, particularly why it ends in E.

While the end of “Down to You” acts as the background closure of the E-D-E axis, the full E-D-E-G pattern suggested by the “chords of inquiry” is fully completed on the background level in the penultimate song on the album. Although the key centre of “Trouble Child” is ambiguous at first, G is the tonic that emerges at the end of each verse, as well as at the end of the song itself. Given that Mitchell called “Twisted” an “encore piece,” it seems that she considered “Trouble Child” the actual end of the cycle. Therefore it seems fitting that the cycle’s final piece before the encore be in the key of the final “chord of

*Repeat and fade*

Elec. Piano

Pno.

"Car on a Hill" tag

E D (Bm) G

Transition to "Down to You" introduction

Example 6. Transition between "Car on a Hill" and "Down to You"

lone - li - ness

In the violins

*rubato*

*rit.*

Example 7. "Down to You," transition from bridge to verse 2

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes:

- Lead vocal:** A single staff with lyrics: "you it all comes down to you".
- Backup vocals:** A single staff with harmonic accompaniment.
- Pno. / Harp:** A grand staff with a *Piano* section in the upper register and a *Harp* section in the lower register.
- Cello:** A single staff with a melodic line.

The second system includes:

- Pno. / Harp:** A grand staff with a melodic line in the upper register and a rhythmic accompaniment in the lower register.
- Cello:** A single staff with a sustained, low-frequency accompaniment.

The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C).

Example 8. "Down to You" coda

**Table 3. Transition Types**

Song title	Ending key	Type of end/transition	Basis of transitional material
"Court and Spark"	E	Hard cadence	None, but final chord is V of beginning chord in next song, E—retained in soprano voice of harmony as common tone
"Help Me"	D	Fade vamp on D-Fmaj7 to new introduction in A	Rhythm and chord progression on lyric, "freedom"
"Free Man in Paris"	A	Hard cadence, final chord is V of first chord in next song	Variation/inversion of introduction but with softer edges
"People's Parties"	D	Attaca to next song	Rhythm based on vocal lines in "People's Parties" interpreted in next context
"The Same Situation"	A minor	Hard cadence, no transition	None
"Car on a Hill"	A minor	Vamp/variant of quarter-note triplet figure, fade into piano intro	Based on quarter-note triplet figure and variant in instrumental break
"Down to You"	E	Hard cadence	New intro in C based on bVII-I harmonic figure realized melodically in final gesture of song
"Just Like This Train"	C	Fade repetition of intro	No transition
"Raised on Robbery"	C	Hard cadence	No transition
"Trouble Child"	G	Hard cadence, but with single muted jazz trumpet line	Based on jazz riffs in "Twisted"
"Twisted"	D	Hard cadence	Tag based on introduction

inquiry." Given the topic of the text, the song may also serve as the ultimate sad response or resolution to the question posed at the beginning of the album by the opening gesture.

### Recurring triplet-related motives

Another musical element that seems to confirm the cyclic nature of *Court and Spark* is the previously mentioned "knocking" triplet figure that first appears in the introduction of the title track. When it first enters in mm. 5–7 of "Court and Spark" (see example 2), it seems no more than a subtle bit of text painting that introduces A as the "foreign object" pitch. When it recurs later in the song (example 3), it takes the form of an extended and reversed version of what Allan Moore called the "extended plagal cadence" (Moore 1995, 191). Moore's version of this cadence is VII-IV-I (which in this tune would be D-A-E); Mitchell reverses the VII and IV, adding an intermediary tonic chord, making the progression IV-I-VII-I (A-E-D-E). Although Moore emphasizes the commonality of the VII-I cadence in popular music, Mitchell's use of it here appears to serve another text-related purpose. Here A and E (IV and I in this key) are the two sonorities on which greater emphasis is placed. This is accomplished by accenting the A chord at the beginning of the figure, then holding the final

E chord for two beats. Thus although the figure is made of four sonorities, one perceives the IV and I as its primary harmonic components. The three-fold repetition of the figure not only communicates the insistence of the “knocking,” but emphasizes the cadential formula’s plagality. It sounds like a series of repeated “Amens,” reinforcing the religious imagery in the lyrics. Since the man is described in evangelical terms and the protagonist’s acceptance of him akin to a religious conversion, the plagal cadence here is analogous to the “Amen” response one might hear sung by a choir at a religious revival.

The triplet figure, or others that allude to it either rhythmically or gesturally, recurs periodically in strategic places throughout the album, particularly in songs connected to the romantic relationship. It appears in the coda of “The Same Situation” first as a triplet, then expanded into a quadruplet (see example 5). Here the connection to the initial triplet figure in “Court and Spark” is two-fold. The rhythm recalls the “knocking” figure, and the repeated G triads symbolize the woman pounding on the walls of the emotional prison in which she finds herself.

The twenty-six-measure instrumental break in “Car on a Hill” is based almost entirely on the triplet figure, both literally and figuratively. It is first introduced quite cleverly three measures into the interlude by the interjection of a  $\frac{3}{4}$  bar (m. 24), which suspends the driving beat throughout the break, creating the impression of a more ethereal space where the sense of time is nearly lost (example 9). A rhythmic variation of the triplet figure also appears in this interlude. Here Mitchell takes the idea of three notes grouped together and relaxes the stricter triplet rhythm. She begins with the  $\frac{3}{4}$  bar in the third measure of the interlude (m. 24) with quarter notes on each beat, then softens the strict three-related rhythm two measures later by syncopating it. Three measures later this figure is transformed into a syncopated pair of arpeggiated triads, which is a variation of the introductory material played by the piano at the beginning of “The Same Situation” (example 10). One immediately hears the rhythmic relationship between what has come before and the triplet figure the moment it enters in m. 29. That Mitchell sees the arpeggiated figure and the triplets as interchangeable is confirmed as the break continues, with the two figures alternating back and forth. These figures are again united in the fading tag at the end of the song, perhaps again for symbolic reasons. Since the triplet figure always appears in some context related to the male love interest, the pairing of the triplet figure and its related arpeggiated eighth-note figure may symbolize the ongoing conflict between the protagonist and her lover—something that ends with this song.

The triplet figure resurfaces at one more symbolic juncture in “Just Like This Train.” In the concluding verse, quarter-note triplets are used to accommodate keywords in the acerbic lines, “Dreaming of the pleasure I’m gonna have / Watching your hairline recede, / My vain darling.” The triplets occur on the words referring to the ex-lover’s receding hairline, adding to the bitter sarcasm of the lyric. More significantly, the triplet figure appears in a line where the protagonist is referring directly to her ex-boyfriend, further connecting the figure to his character.



The image displays a musical score for the instrumental break of "Car on a Hill". It consists of four systems of staves. The first system shows a vocal line with the word "hill" and a piano accompaniment. The second system features an electric piano part with two specific phrases circled in black, with arrows pointing to the third system. The third system includes electric guitar and electric piano parts, with lyrics "Doo doo doo doo doo doo" and "Hoo doo doo doo". Chords E, Dm7, and Am7 are indicated, along with the instruction "elec piano comps on chords given here". The fourth system shows the electric piano part with lyrics "Yeah ch - ch - ch".

Example 9. "Car on a Hill" instrumental break

### Transitional material between songs

In addition to harmonic and motivic elements that link the songs on this album, they are also connected through transitional material that clearly unifies them into a single narrative. These transitions are generally of two types: (1) a passage carried through the track-separating bands on the original LP, which, through the extension of musical material that precedes it, either softens or eliminates the effect of a hard final cadence; or (2) an introduction that recalls material from some pertinent part of the song immediately preceding it, through either quotation or variation. Table 3 summarizes the types of transitions between songs in the cycle. The two right-most columns may refer to the introduction of the song below it.

Introduction, "The Same Situation"

"Car on a Hill," mm. 25-28

Example 10. Comparison of introductory figure in "The Same Situation" and "Car on a Hill" mm. 25-28

One could point out many things about the musical aspects of these transitions. For example, it seems significant that the introduction of "Free Man in Paris" is based on the harmonic structure and rhythm of the figure that accompanies the word *freedom* in the preceding song (example 11). The link between the two is clearly a musical allusion to the dichotomy between autonomy and commitment, and more particularly the longing for no commitments, which is what the chorus of "Free Man in Paris" describes.

Sometimes transitions carry the musical commentary beyond the final cadence of a single song, as is evident in the transition between "People's Parties" and "The Same Situation." In the introduction to "The Same Situation," the piano begins by playing the accompanimental material for "Situation," but in the key of "People's Parties." The key doesn't change until the singer enters. While the D pitch centre of the introduction serves as a dominant preparation for G, the change of key seems a little abrupt, perhaps even purposely so.

Perhaps the most poignant of these overlapping transitions is the passage linking "Car on a Hill" and "Down to You" (see example 6). As previously pointed out, "Car on a Hill" ends with alternating variations of the quarter-note triplet figure. Although the tag of "Car on a Hill" fades out, the melody line of the piano introduction takes the eighth-note rhythmic variation of the figure

**Table 3. Transition Types**

Song title	Ending key	Type of end/transition	Basis of transitional material
"Court and Spark"	E	Hard cadence	None, but final chord is V of beginning chord in next song, E—retained in soprano voice of harmony as common tone
"Help Me"	D	Fade vamp on D-Fmaj7 to new introduction in A	Rhythm and chord progression on lyric, "freedom"
"Free Man in Paris"	A	Hard cadence, final chord is V of first chord in next song	Variation/inversion of introduction but with softer edges
"People's Parties"	D	Attaca to next song	Rhythm based on vocal lines in "People's Parties" interpreted in next context
"The Same Situation"	A minor	Hard cadence, no transition	None
"Car on a Hill"	A minor	Vamp/variant of quarter-note triplet figure, fade into piano intro	Based on quarter-note triplet figure and variant in instrumental break
"Down to You"	E	Hard cadence	New intro in C based on bVII-I harmonic figure realized melodically in final gesture of song
"Just Like This Train"	C	Fade repetition of intro	No transition
"Raised on Robbery"	C	Hard cadence	No transition
"Trouble Child"	G	Hard cadence, but with single muted jazz trumpet line	Based on jazz riffs in "Twisted"
"Twisted"	D	Hard cadence	Tag based on introduction

in the first of the two repeating measures and restates it much more slowly and freely in the new key. The tempo and manner in which the figure is played indicates what has happened more eloquently than any lyric could. While it is not the most complex of the transitions, it is one of the most communicative—adding yet another teasing bit of evidence that the album is a song cycle.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted a number of textual and musical elements that argue in favour of the cyclic nature of one of Joni Mitchell's most commercially successful albums. It has been shown that although oblique on the surface, two sets of conflicting textual ideas—freedom versus commitment and sanity versus insanity—run through the entire album, loosely tying the songs together and suggesting a plotline that follows the arc of a romantic relationship. This plotline is also unique in that the final four songs on the album describe aspects of the relationship's aftermath for both parties involved.

Perhaps the most intriguing facet of *Court and Spark*, however, is that the album's cyclic properties are strongly supported through musical elements—a point that runs counter to what has been defined as Mitchell's more usual rationale of organizing cycles around textual connections. The presence of unifying musical elements suggests that for Mitchell, the music on this album may

but not like we love our free dom

Trpts

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "but not like we love our free dom". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). A black box highlights a section of the piano accompaniment corresponding to the word "freedom", showing a change in meter from 4/4 to 3/4 and back to 4/4.

"Help Me" cadence on "freedom"

Woodwinds

Acoustic guitar

The image shows a musical score for the introduction of "Car on a Hill". It features woodwinds and acoustic guitar. The woodwinds part is in treble clef, and the acoustic guitar part is in bass clef. A black box highlights the beginning of the piece, which starts in 4/4 time and changes to 3/4 time. An arrow points from the box in the "Help Me" score above to this box.

"Car on a Hill," mm. 25-28

Example 11. "Help Me" cadence on the lyric "freedom" versus "Free Man in Paris" introduction

fill a more significant role than that of a convenient vehicle for conveying the text—a common assumption for singer-songwriters whose output is perceived to have followed in the stylistic footsteps of Bob Dylan. However, recognizing that the music exerts a stronger influence on the outcome of the whole is more in line with the way Mitchell has described her songwriting process. Because she has said she usually creates the musical structure first, her lyrics may serve a different function. If the harmonic structure or individual chords represent emotions or ideas to Mitchell, the text then becomes an articulation of the music, fusing both into a single entity like an item cast and hardened in a mould. Looking at Mitchell's music this way adds a new significance to the "careful construction" music critics described in her music from very early in her career ("Joni Mitchell" 1969).

In *Court and Spark*, Mitchell has employed unifying musical elements with the deftness of a skilled composer, and too consistently for the music to be anything but carefully planned. One might ask how this could have been possible, given that Mitchell had little to no formal musical education and claims to be largely unaware of many of music's more technical aspects. Ignorance of traditional musical terminology, theory, or practice does not necessarily preclude the ability to carefully plan the music one writes. Mitchell told Jian Ghomeshi in 2013 that while painting is more intuitive for her, the creation of music and poetry are deliberate, even calculated acts. She briefly described her basic

compositional method, much of it aurally based, to music journalist Leonard Feather in a 1979 interview: “I see music very graphically in my head—in my own graph, not in the existing systemized graph—and I, in a way, analyze it or interpret it, or evaluate it in terms of a visual abstraction inside my mind’s eye” (94). Although Mitchell’s idiom lies in the realm of popular music, the process she describes is in fact conscious composition, her “internal graphing system” not far removed from that of classical avant-garde composers who experiment with alternative notational systems. The unifying musical elements of *Court and Spark* identified here argue in favour of that conscious composition—a process not exclusive to any particular genre of music. Any composer, regardless of genre, employs similar systems of internal evaluation and organization during the compositional process.

The study of Joni Mitchell’s music is in its infancy. As scholars develop ways of looking at her unique output, both text and music need to be addressed without attributing greater importance to one or the other. Where the two are often created together or in close succession, to emphasize one over the other in importance may mean to miss significant components that would lend a deeper understanding and appreciation of the whole. If, as Mitchell recently said, understanding is complete only when one sees oneself in the work (Ghomeshi 2013), perhaps looking at the way the two interact and support one another is a step toward that understanding. In the case of *Court and Spark*, ignoring the way the musical elements unify the album into a single narrative may mean to miss the message contained in her “discourse on romantic love.” As Mitchell told Ghomeshi, the point is that each of us sees ourselves in the music—we identify with *Court and Spark*’s protagonist, in all her insecurities, uncertainties, hurt, and even insanity. For when we see ourselves, or human nature, in the music, the communication is complete.

#### REFERENCES

- Beatles, The. (1967) 1987. *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Produced by George Martin. EMI CDP 7 46442 2, CD.
- . (1969) 1990. *Abbey Road*. Capitol CDP7 464462, CD.
- Bingham, Ruth O. 2004. “The Early Nineteenth-Century Song Cycle.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, edited by James Parsons, 101–19. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Black, Johnny. 2004. “The Best Songs Ever! Free Man in Paris.” *Blender* (September). <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1171&from=search>.
- Brackett, David. (1995) 2000. *Interpreting Popular Music*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brooks, Ben. 1982. “Joni Mitchell’s Independent Art.” *Music Connection: The Alternative Trade Publication* 6 (24): 1, 9, 14–15.
- Chicago. 1970. *Chicago II*. Produced by James William Guercio. Columbia KGP 24 CS 9962, LP.

- Covach, John. 1997. "Progressive Rock, 'Close to the Edge,' and the Boundaries of Style." In *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, edited by John Covach and Graeme Boone, 3–31. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crowe, Cameron. 1979. "Joni Mitchell: The *Rolling Stone* Interview." *Rolling Stone*, 26 July, 46–53.
- Echols, Alice. (1994) 2002. "'The Soul of a Martian': A Conversation with Joni Mitchell." In *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks*, 207–20. New York: Columbia University Press. Originally published as "Thirty Years with a Portable Lover." *Los Angeles Weekly*, 25 November.
- Feather, Leonard. (1979) 2000. "Joni Mitchell Makes Mingus Sing." In Luftig 2000, 89–103. Originally published in *Downbeat*, 6 September.
- Ferris, David. 2010. Afterword. In John Daverio, "The Song Cycle: Journeys through the Divine Landscape," revised and edited by David Ferris. In *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Rufus Hallmark, 363–400. New York. Routledge.
- Garabini, Vic. 2000. "Joni Mitchell Is a Nervy Broad." In Luftig 2000, 113–33.
- Ghomeshi, Jian, prod. 2013. *CBC Music Exclusives: The Joni Mitchell Interview*. Canadian Broadcasting Company. Broadcast 15 June. <http://music.cbc.ca/standalone/embeddedvideopage.aspx?type=concerts&object=CBC-Music-Exclusives-The-Joni-Mitchell-Interview-2013-06-04&videotitle=The-Joni-Mitchell-Interview-A-CBC-Music-Exclusive&permalink=%2Fembedded%2Fconcerts%2FCBC-Music-Exclusives-The-Joni-Mitchell-Interview-2013-06-04%2Fvideos%2FThe-Joni-Mitchell-Interview-A-CBC-Music-Exclusive>.
- Hale, Tony. 1985. "Rock Master Class Interview." Broadcast 29 December. Capitol 98.5, UK. Transcribed from the audio by Lindsay Moon. <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=646&from=search>.
- Heckman, Dan. 1971. "Pop: Jim Morrison at the End, Joni at a Crossroads." *New York Times*, 8 August.
- "Joni Mitchell." 1969. *Rolling Stone*, 17 May. <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=312&from=search>.
- Klein, Larry. 2000. Liner notes in Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides, Now*, 2. Reprise Records 9-47620-2, CD.
- Lacy, Susan, and Stephanie Bennett, prods. 2003. *Joni Mitchell—Woman of Heart and Mind: A Life Story*. London: Eagle Rock Entertainment, DVD.
- Luftig, Stacey, ed. 2000. *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Forty Years of Commentary*. New York: Schirmer.
- Macan, Edward. 1997. *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marom, Malka. (1974) 2000. "Joni Mitchell: Self-Portrait of a Superstar." In Luftig 2000, 66–74. Originally published in *Maclean's*, June.
- Mitchell, Joni. (1968) 1990. *Song to a Seagull*. Produced by David Crosby. Reprise 693-2, CD.
- . 1974. *Court and Spark*. Piano-vocal score. Crazy Crow Music, division of Warner Publications.

- . 1998. *Joni Mitchell: The Complete Poems and Lyrics*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, division of Random House.
- . *Miles of Aisles*. (1974) 1990. Live double LP with Tom Scott and the L. A. Express. Elektra B000002GWN, CD.
- Moore, Allan. 1995. "The So-Called 'Flattened Seventh' in Rock." *Popular Music* 14 (25): 185–201.
- RIAA. "Searchable Database." [http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=SEARCH\\_RESULTS](http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=SEARCH_RESULTS).
- Rockwell, John. 1976. "Joni Mitchell Recaptures Her Gift." *New York Times*, 12 December.
- Sonenberg, Daniel. 2003. "'Who in the World She Might Be': A Contextual and Stylistic Approach to the Early Music of Joni Mitchell." PhD diss., City University of New York.
- Traum, Happy. 1967. "Joni Mitchell." *Rolling Stone*, 17 May.
- White, Adam. 1990. *The Billboard Book of Gold and Platinum Records*. New York: Billboard Publications.
- Whitesell, Lloyd. 2008. *The Music of Joni Mitchell*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## ABSTRACT

Current scholarship recognizes several of Joni Mitchell's albums as being cyclic, or based on a unifying concept. *Court and Spark* (1974), however, is not numbered among them, despite Mitchell's having described it as "a discourse on romantic love." Following the inference that this album may have been conceived as an extended, multi-movement work, this article examines both its textual and musical aspects, seeking unifying characteristics. The cyclic nature of the album is uncovered, showing it to be more unified from a musical perspective than a textual one. This approach is the opposite of Mitchell's perceived norm, suggesting her compositional process may have been more sophisticated than is currently thought.

## RÉSUMÉ

La recherche actuelle reconnaît que plusieurs albums de Joni Mitchell sont cycliques, ou basés sur un concept unifiant. Toutefois, *Court and Spark* (1974) ne fait pas partie de ces albums, bien que Mitchell l'ait décrit comme « un discours sur l'amour romantique ». En se basant sur l'idée que cet album pourrait avoir été conçu comme une œuvre d'ampleur à plusieurs mouvements, cette étude examine ses composantes textuelles et musicales dans le but de rechercher ses caractéristiques unifiantes. On y met en lumière la nature cyclique de l'album, en montrant que l'unité de ce dernier repose davantage sur ses aspects musicaux que sur ses aspects textuels. Cette approche va à l'encontre de la perception habituelle de l'œuvre de Mitchell, et propose que son travail compositionnel serait plus recherché que ce que l'on pense habituellement.