Musical progress and emotional stasis from *Blue* (1971) to *Hejira* (1976).

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What happened in between?
Blue (1971)  
Hejira (1976)

For the Roses (1972)  
Court and Spark (1974)  
The Hissing of Summer Lawns (1975)
Harmonic language

*Blue (1971)*

Complex guitar chords.
Simple progressions.

*Hejira (1976)*

Simpler chords.
More complex progressions.
Harmonic language

*Blue* (1971)

- Complex guitar chords.
- Simple progressions.
- Very little additional instrumentation.

*Hejira* (1976)

- Simpler chords.
- More complex progressions.
- Rich instrumentation.
- Bass not underpinning chords, but acting as a solo instrument.
Vocals

*Blue* (1971)

Timbre: clear, bright.

*Hejira* (1976)

Timbre: rich, gravelly.
Vocals

Blue (1971)
Timbre: clear, bright.
Pitch: high.

Hejira (1976)
Timbre: rich, gravelly.
Pitch: about a third lower.
Vocals

Blue (1971)
Timbre: clear, bright.
Pitch: high.
Range: wide.

Hejira (1976)
Timbre: rich, gravelly.
Pitch: about a third lower.
Range: narrower.
Average lowest: $G\#3$

Average lowest: $G3$ – a semitone below
Average lowest: G#3
Average highest: D5

Average lowest: G3 — a semitone below
Average highest: B4 — 2 tones below
Average lowest: **G#3**
Average highest: **D5**
Average range: **augmented 12th**

Average lowest: **G3** — a semitone below
Average highest: **B4** — 2 tones below
Average range: **major 10th** — 2 tones less
Carey

Average lowest: G#3
Average highest: D5
Average range: augmented 12th

Amelia

Average lowest: G3 — a semitone below
Average highest: B4 — 2 tones below
Average range: major 10th — 2 tones less
Vocals

Blue (1971)
Timbre: clear, bright.
Pitch: high.
Range: wide.
Intervals: large (an octave or more)

Hejira (1976)
Timbre: rich, gravelly.
Pitch: about a third lower.
Range: narrower.
Intervals: small (mostly 2nds and 3rds)
Song length

10 songs
min 2:50 (*This Flight Tonight*)
max 4:20 (*A Case of You*)
total 2141 seconds = 35:41
average 214 seconds = 3:34

Average song longer by 2:12 (62%)

9 songs
min 4:15 (*A Strange Boy*)
max 8:40 (*Song for Sharon*)
total 3114 seconds = 51:54
average 346 seconds = 5:46
Lyrics

*Blue* (1971)

*Relatively straightforward.*

*Hejira* (1976)

*Highly figurative & metaphorical.*
Themes of *Blue* songs

1. *All I Want* — complicated relationship
2. *My Old Man* — complicated relationship
3. *Little Green* — baby born of a complicated relationship
4. *Carey* — complicated relationship
5. *Blue* — complicated relationship
6. *California* — travel
7. *This Flight Tonight* — complicated relationship
8. *River* — complicated relationship
9. *A Case of You* — complicated relationship
Themes of *Blue* songs

1. *All I Want* — complicated relationship
2. *My Old Man* — complicated relationship
3. *Little Green* — baby born of a complicated relationship
4. *Carey* — complicated relationship
5. *Blue* — complicated relationship
6. *California* — travel
7. *This Flight Tonight* — complicated relationship
8. *River* — complicated relationship
9. *A Case of You* — complicated relationship
Themes of *Hejira* songs

1. *Coyote* — one-night stand
2. *Amelia* — early aviation
3. *Furry Sings the Blues* — urban decay
4. *A Strange Boy* — complicated relationship
5. *Hejira* — pilgrimage
6. *Song for Sharon* — complicated relationship
7. *Black Crow* — dislocation
8. *Blue Motel Room* — complicated relationship
Themes of *Hejira* songs

1. *Coyote* — one-night stand
2. *Amelia* — early aviation
3. *Furry Sings the Blues* — urban decay
4. *A Strange Boy* — complicated relationship
5. *Hejira* — pilgrimage
6. *Song for Sharon* — complicated relationship
7. *Black Crow* — dislocation
8. *Blue Motel Room* — complicated relationship
Effect of all changes

Blue (1971)

The work of a precocious girl
- Immature
- Self-obsessed
- Indecisive

Hejira (1976)

The work of an accomplished woman
- Mature
- Self-possessed
- Comfortable in her own skin
But!
Themes

*Blue (1971)*

Conflict between
commitment (= love)
freedom (= career)

= 

*Hejira (1976)*

Conflict between
commitment (= love)
freedom (= career)
Themes

Blue (1971)

Conflict between commitment (= love) freedom (= career)

Hejira (1976)

= Emotional stasis

Conflict between commitment (= love) freedom (= career)
Real theme of nearly all songs

“We love our loving
But not like we love our freedom.”
— Help Me, Court and Spark.
Real theme of nearly all songs

“The conflict between freedom for art's sake and the need for love forms the basis of most of her songs.”
— Ariel Swartley.
“The Siren and The Symbolist”
(review of Hejira).
Rolling Stone, 10 February 1977.
Real theme of nearly all songs

“... a capricious lover resisting fantasies of domesticity even while the hausfrau within her was rattling around the kitchen in a constant huff about how fickle her own lovers seemed to be.”

— Perry Meisel,

“An end to innocence: how Joni Mitchell fails” (review of Hejira)
"If anything was really in Mitchell's blood like holy wine, it was the tension between romanticism and cynicism that recurred again and again throughout her career — a tension she seemed to revel in rather than show any real interest in resolving. She was too smart for either position, but also too smart to remove herself entirely from each."
*Hejira* is more integrated than *Blue*

The music expresses the conflict
Even when the words skim over it.

- harmonic dislocation
- inconstancy
- instability
- misdirection
1. Harmonic dislocation

*Coyote* (start of album)

Guitar introduction in C.
Vocal entry on E♭.
2. Inconstancy

None of the songs has a chorus.

Song for Sharon has ten verses. Not a single repeated lyric.

Melody is subtly different in every verse.
3. Instability

Most songs refuse to land on tonic.

*Amelia* see-saws between two keys, a tone apart.
3. Instability

Most songs refuse to land on tonic.

*Amelia* see-saws between two keys, a tone apart.

*Refuge of the Roads* melody is mostly on non-triad notes. Except “It made most people nervous”. Then lands back on 6\(^{\text{th}}\) for “refuge”.
4. Misdirection

“There’s no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get …”

— Coyote
4. Misdirection

“There's no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone …”

— Coyote
4. Misdirection

“There's no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote
4. Misdirection

“There’s no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote

“We got high …”

— A Strange Boy
4. Misdirection

“There's no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote

“We got high on travel …”

— A Strange Boy
4. Misdirection

“There's no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote

“We got high on travel
And we got drunk …”
— A Strange Boy
4. Misdirection

“There's no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote

“We got high on travel
And we got drunk on alcohol …”
— A Strange Boy
4. Misdirection

“There’s no comprehending
Just how close to the bone
and the skin
and the eyes
and the lips you can get
And still feel so alone
And still feel related.”
— Coyote

“We got high on travel
And we got drunk on alcohol
And on love, the strongest poison
and medicine of all.”
— A Strange Boy
Blue (1971)

Hejira (1976)

Tells us to feel conflict

Makes us feel it
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

Last two songs:

“You lay down your sneaking round the town honey
And I'll lay down the highway.”

– *Blue Motel Room*

chooses security.
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

Last two songs:

“You lay down your sneaking round the town honey
And I'll lay down the highway.”
— *Blue Motel Room* chooses security.

“It made most people nervous
They just didn't want to know
What I was seeing in
the refuge of the roads.”
— *Refuge of the Roads* chooses freedom.
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

Last two songs:

“You lay down your sneaking round the town honey
And I'll lay down the highway.”
— *Blue Motel Room*
chooses security.

“It made most people nervous
They just didn't want to know
What I was seeing in
the refuge of the roads.”
— *Refuge of the Roads*
chooses freedom.
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

“You lay down your sneaking round the town honey And I'll lay down the highway.”

— *Blue Motel Room* chooses security.

But *Blue Motel Room* is a lounge-jazz pastiche. Joni is playing a role.
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

*Refuge of the Roads* is stylistically consistent with the rest of the album.

“It made most people nervous
They just didn't want to know
What I was seeing in
the refuge of the roads.”

— *Refuge of the Roads* chooses freedom.
Blue is ultimately about abandoning relationships
So is Hejira
Musical progress and emotional stasis from *Blue* (1971) to *Hejira* (1976).

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