

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

Michael P. Taylor

Department of Earth Sciences
University of Bristol
Bristol BS8 1RJ
ENGLAND
dino@miketaylor.org.uk

Fiona J. Taylor

Oakleigh Farm House
Crooked End
Ruardean
Gloucestershire GL17 9XF
ENGLAND
fionajt@gmail.com



COYOTE 4:59

AMELIA 6:00

FURRY SINGS THE BLUES 5:06

A STRANGE BOY 4:17

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



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.

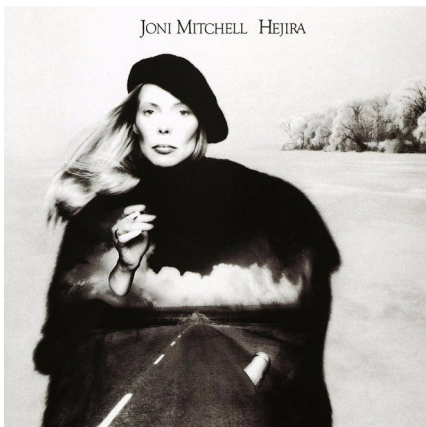
Vocals

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.

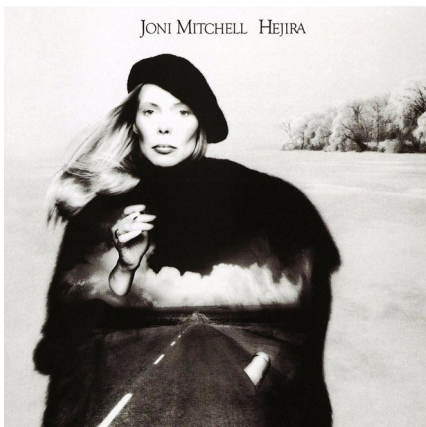
Range: wide.

Timbre: rich, gravelly.

Pitch: about a third lower.

Range: narrower.

Hejira (1976)

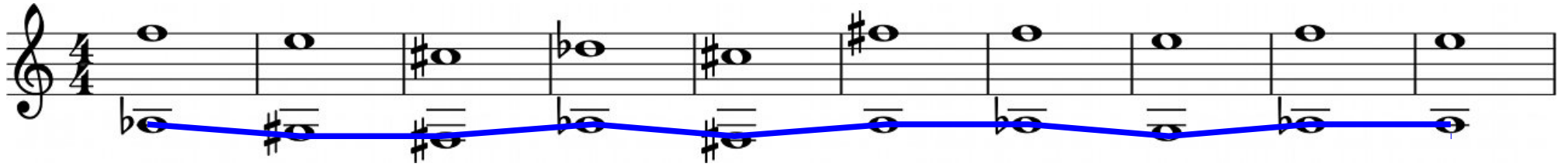


Musical notation for the first system, featuring a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and ten measures of music. The melody consists of half notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3. The bass line consists of half notes: B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4.

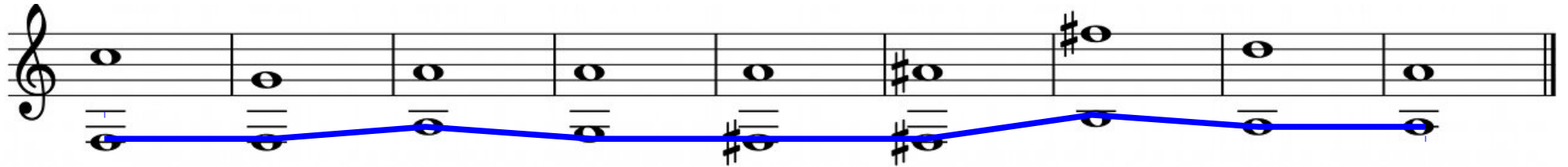


Musical notation for the second system, featuring a treble clef and nine measures of music. The melody consists of half notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. The bass line consists of half notes: B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

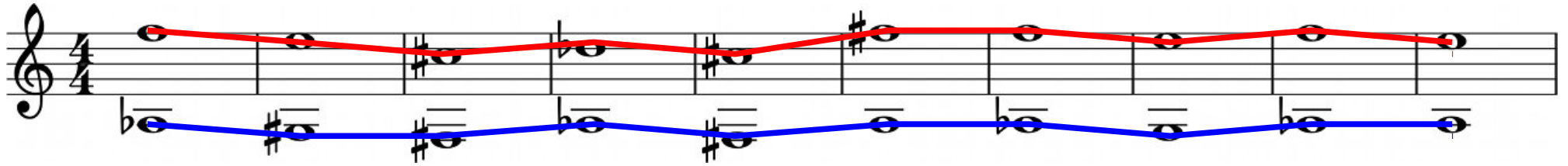




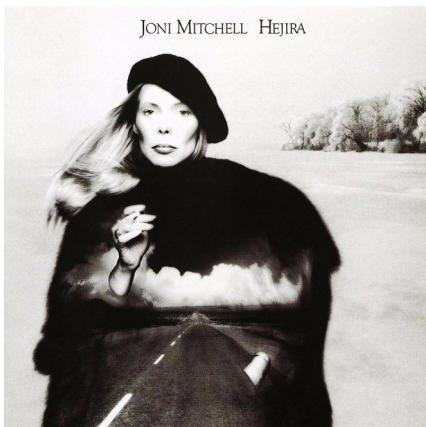
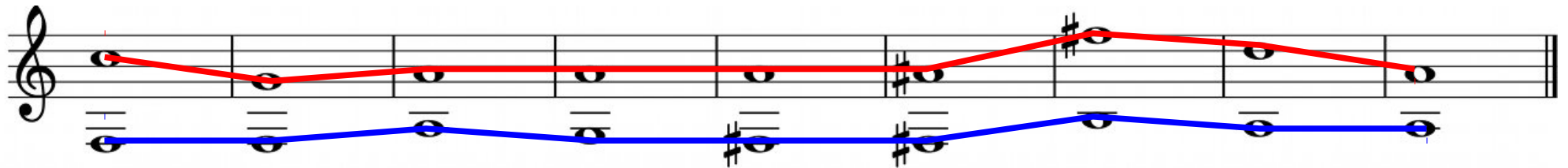
Average lowest: **G#3**



Average lowest: **G3** – a semitone below



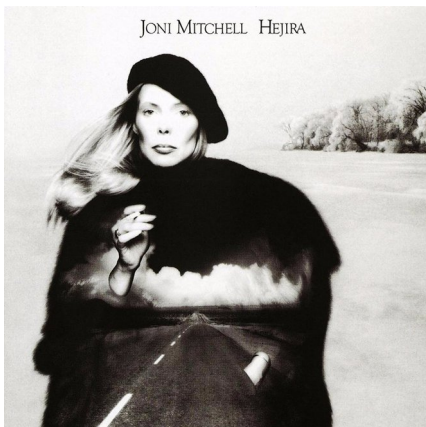
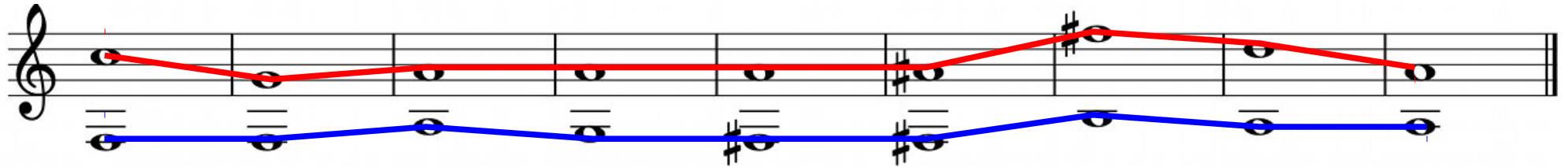
Average lowest: **G#3**
 Average highest: **D5**



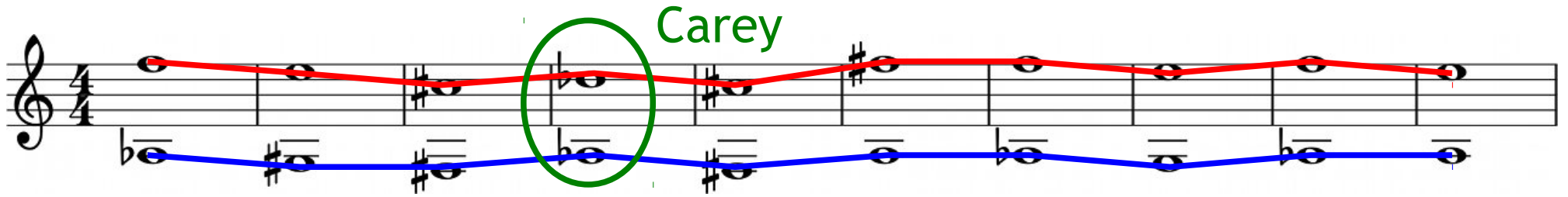
Average lowest: **G3** – a semitone below
 Average highest: **B4** – 2 tones below



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



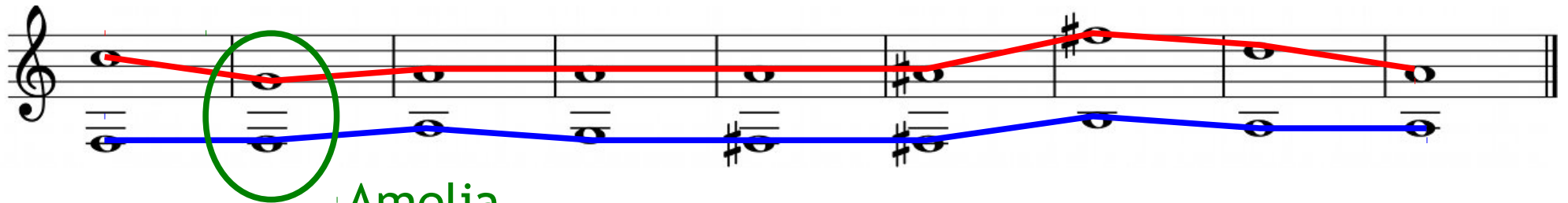
Average lowest: **G3** – a semitone below
 Average highest: **B4** – 2 tones below
 Average range: **major 10th** – 2 tones less



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)



Hejira (1976)



Timbre: clear, bright.

Pitch: high.

Range: wide.

Intervals: large (an octave or more)

Timbre: rich, gravelly.

Pitch: about a third lower.

Range: narrower.

Intervals: small (mostly 2nds and 3rds)

Song length

Blue (1971)



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%)

Hejira (1976)



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

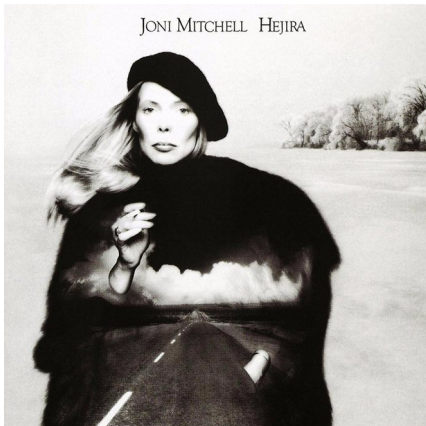
Blue (1971)



Relatively straightforward.



Hejira (1976)



Highly figurative & metaphorical.

Themes of *Blue* songs

Blue (1971)



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
10. *The Last Time I Saw Richard* – complicated relationship

Themes of *Blue* songs

Blue (1971)

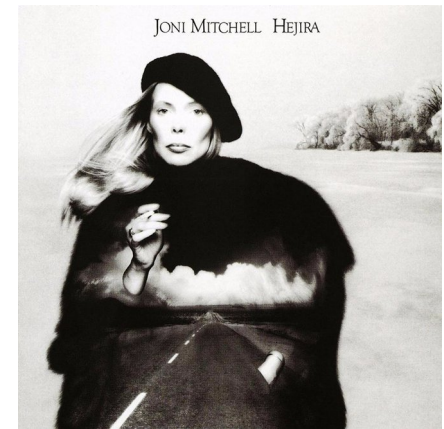


1. *All I Want* – complicated relationship
2. *My Old Man* – complicated relationship
3. *Little Green* – baby born of a complicated relationship
4. *Carey* – complicated relationship
5. *Blue* – complicated relationship
6. *California* – travel
7. *This Flight Tonight* – complicated relationship
8. *River* – complicated relationship
9. *A Case of You* – complicated relationship
10. *The Last Time I Saw Richard* – 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
9. *Refuge of the Roads* – travel

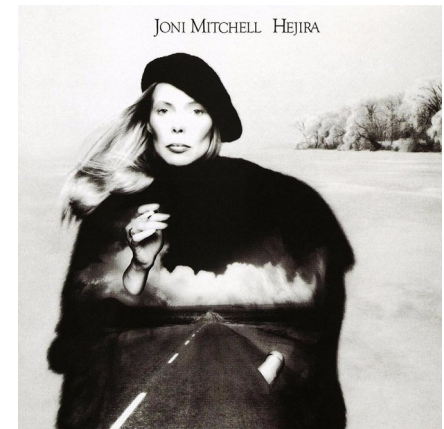
Hejira (1976)



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
9. *Refuge of the Roads* – travel

Hejira (1976)



Effect of all changes

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



The work of a precocious girl

- Immature
- Self-obsessed
- Indecisive

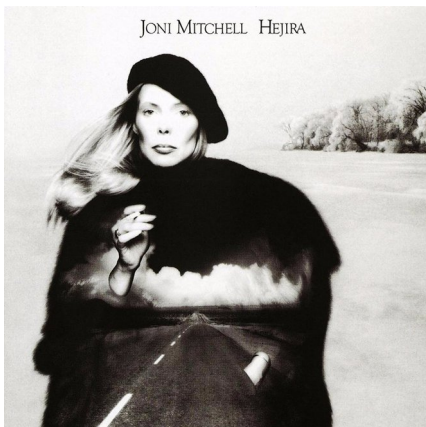
The work of an accomplished woman

- Mature
- Self-possessed
- Comfortable in her own skin

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



But!

Themes

Blue (1971)



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



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

Hejira (1976)



Themes

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



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

=

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

**Emotional
stasis**

Real theme of nearly all songs

“We love our loving
But not like we love our freedom.”
— *Help Me, Court and Spark*.

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



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.

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



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*)

Village Voice, January 1977.

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



Real theme of nearly all songs

“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.”

— Alex McPherson,

"Joni Mitchell: 10 of the best"
(writing about *A Case Of You*)
The Guardian, 30 April 2014.

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



Hejira is more integrated than *Blue*

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

- harmonic dislocation
- inconstancy
- instability
- misdirection

Blue (1971)



Hejira (1976)



1. Harmonic dislocation

Coyote (start of album)

Guitar introduction in C.
Vocal entry on E \flat .



2. Inconstancy

None of the songs has a chorus.

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

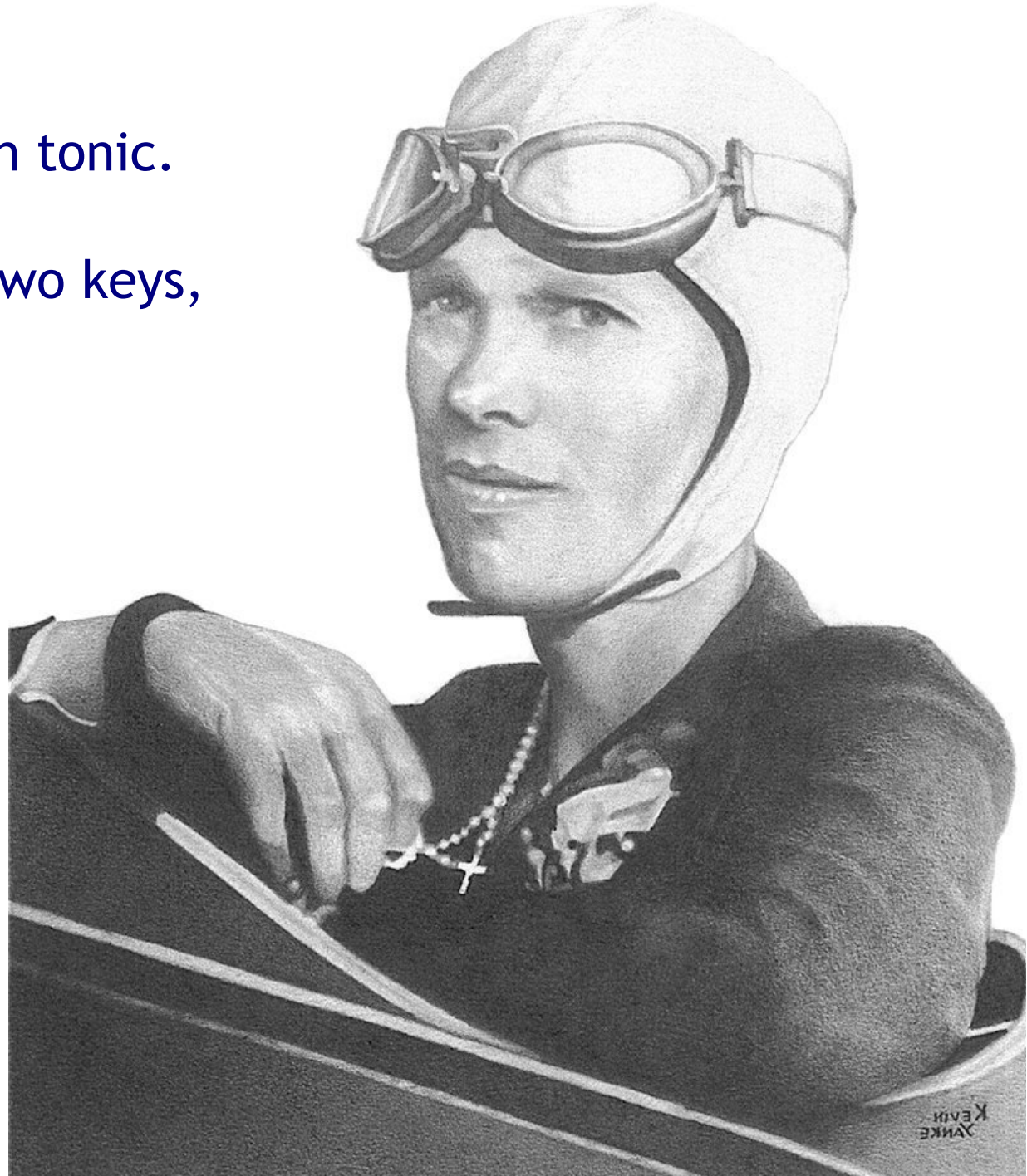
Melody is subtly different
in every verse.

I went to Staten Island, Sharon / To buy myself a mandolin / And I saw
the long white dress of love / On a storefront mannequin / Big boat
chuggin' back with a belly full of cars / All for something lacy /
Some girl's going to see that dress / And crave that day like crazy //
Little Indian kids on a bridge up in Canada / They can balance and
they can climb / Like their fathers before them / They'll walk the
girders of the Manhattan skyline / Shine your light on me Miss Liberty
/ Because as soon as this ferry boat docks / I'm headed to the church
/ To play Bingo / Fleece me with the gamblers' flocks // I can keep my
cool at poker / But I'm a fool when love's at stake / Because I can't
conceal emotion / What I'm feeling's always written on my face /
There's a gypsy down on Bleecker Street / I went in to see her as a
kind of joke / And she lit a candle for my love luck / And eighteen
bucks went up in smoke // Sharon I left my man / At a North Dakota
dream's malfunction / Love's a repetitious danger / You'd think I'd be
accustomed to / Well I do accept the changes / At least better than I
used to do // A woman I knew just drowned herself / The well was deep
and muddy / She was just shaking off futility / Or punishing somebody
/ My friends were calling up all day yesterday / All emotions and
abstractions / It seems we all live so close to that line / and so far
from satisfaction // Dora says "Have children" / Mama and Betsy say
"Find yourself a charity / Help the needy and the crippled or put some
time into Ecology" / Well there's a wide wide world of noble causes /
And lovely landscapes to discover / But all I really want to do right
now / Is find another lover // When we were kids in Maidstone, Sharon
/ I went to every wedding in that little town / To see the tears and
the kisses / And the pretty lady in the white lace wedding gown / And
walking home on the railroad tracks / Or swinging on the playground
swing / Love stimulated my illusions / More than anything // And when
I went skating after Golden Reggie / You know it was white lace I was
chasing / Chasing dreams / Mama's nylons underneath my cowgirl jeans /
He showed me first you get the kisses / And then you get the tears /
But the ceremony of the bells and lace / Still veils this reckless
fool here // Now there are twenty-nine skaters on Wollman Rink /
Circling in singles and in pairs / In this vigorous anonymity / A
blank face at the window stares and / stares and stares and
stares / And the power of reason / And the flowers of deep feeling /
Seem to serve me / Only to deceive me // Sharon you've got a husband /
And a family and a farm / I've got the apple of temptation / And a
diamond snake around my arm / But you still have your music / And I've
will got my eyes on the land and the sky / You sing for your friends
and your family / I'll walk green pastures by and by

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 6th 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)



Tells us to feel conflict

Hejira (1976)



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.



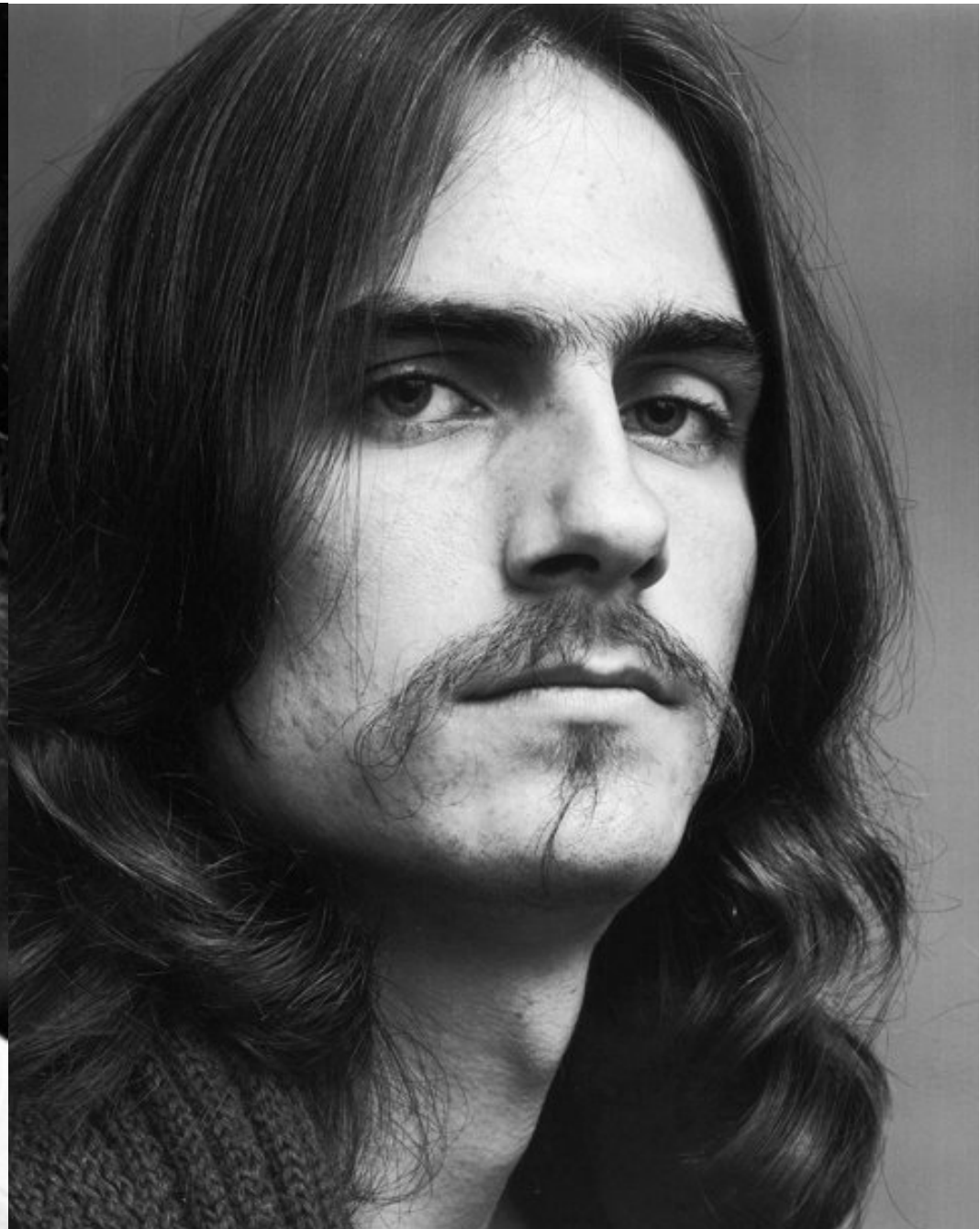
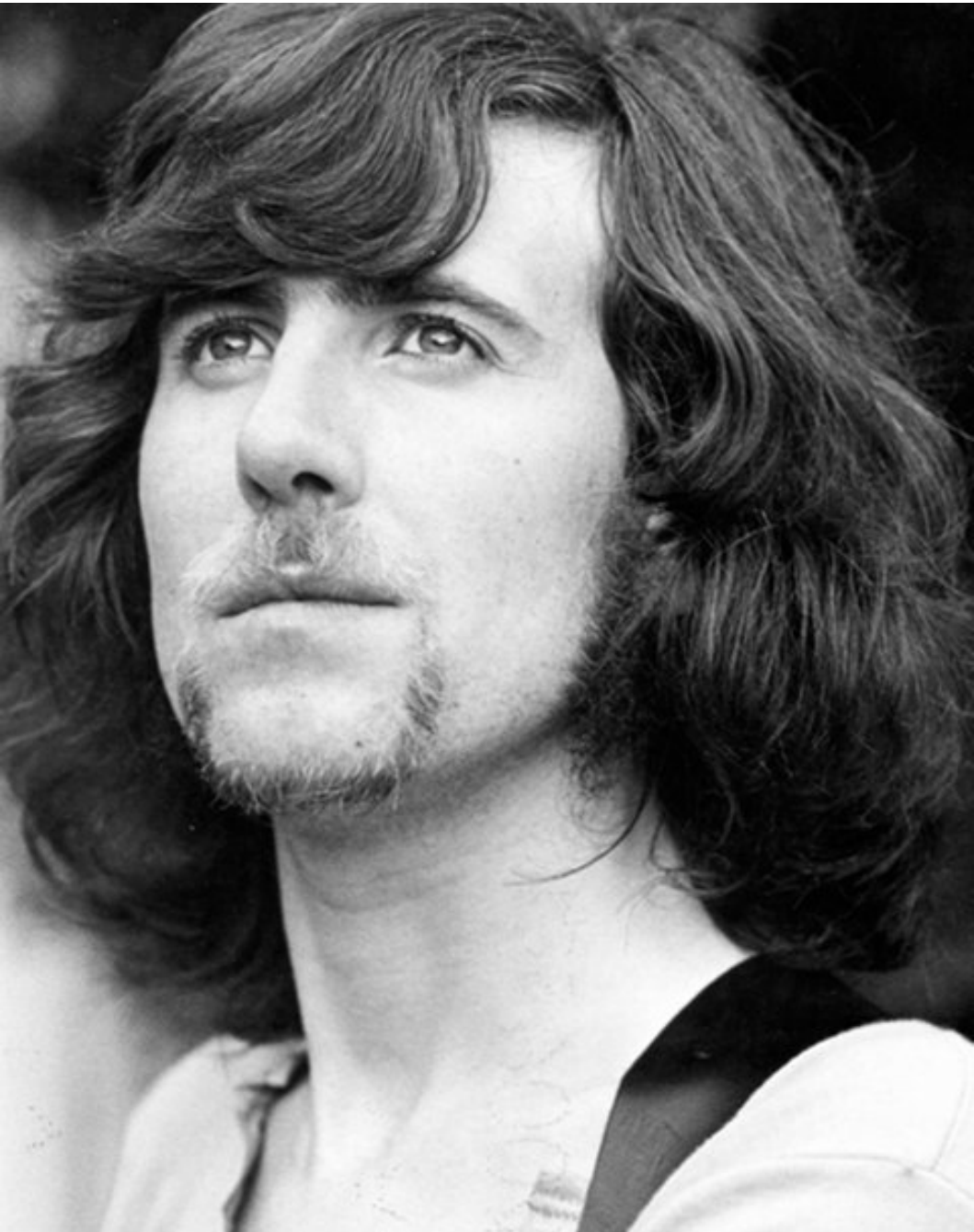
Does *Hejira* reach a conclusion?

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).

Michael P. Taylor

Department of Earth Sciences
University of Bristol
Bristol BS8 1RJ
ENGLAND
dino@miketaylor.org.uk

Fiona J. Taylor

Oakleigh Farm House
Crooked End
Ruardean
Gloucestershire GL17 9XF
ENGLAND
fionajt@gmail.com



COYOTE 4:59

AMELIA 6:00

FURRY SINGS THE BLUES 5:06

A STRANGE BOY 4:17