

Joni Mitchell's and her I Ching Guitar

The *I Ching* -- linking Richard Wilhelm, Carl Jung, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and this guitar



From [Joni Mitchell's I Ching guitar](#)

essay by Brian Charles Clark and Nisi Shawl

In the Jan. 1994 issue of *Acoustic Guitar*, Rick Turner wrote,

Steve Klein built this amazing and beautiful guitar in 1977. This guitar was built for Joni Mitchell, and it is a great example of what can happen when a musical and visual artist teams up with a luthier. It was designed for Mitchell's low open tunings, and the removable soundhole rosette/ring allows the guitar's air resonance to be tuned accordingly for different

amounts of bass. Mitchell collaborated on concepts for the inlays, which include *I Ching* symbols in the fingerboard and around the soundhole; the *I Ching's* hexagram number 56, the *Wanderer*, graces the face and the upper bout. *Don Juan's* crow flies on the peghead, and the wandering theme continues on with the mountains and the road." In fact, the eight trigrams run up the neck of the guitar, heaven at the nut and earth at the top of the neck. Heaven is bass! Hejira, one of Mitchell's several masterpieces, was recorded and released in 1976, the year before this guitar was made. Lu, hexagram 56, pretty much describes the album's mood of not staying together, of fire on the mountain that "does not tarry," in Wilhelm/Baynes' words, of a wanderlust that drives one onward toward the greener pasture on the other side of the hill. There is at least one direct reference to the Changes and another more coded one in Hejira. Here's the direct reference from "Amelia": I was driving across the burning desert when I spotted six jet planes leaving six white vapor trails across the bleak terrain. It was the hexagram of the heavens, it was the strings of my guitar, Amelia, it was just a false alarm. Amelia refers to Amelia Earhart, the wanderlust-driven pilot who became a ghost of aviation. She was swallowed by the sky. The vapor-trail hexagram is the Creative, Ch'ien, composed of six unbroken lines. Through persevering action in what is right, one ascends to heaven, as Earhart did. The other reference to the *I Ching* among the songs on Hejira is in "Song for Sharon," an epistolary position statement in which Mitchell lays out her reasons for her wanderlust and her dissatisfaction with any sort of status quo. People tell you this, she writes, people tell you that, But all I really want to do right now Is find another lover. Nisi Shawl drew my attention to the following verse, pointing out that "repetitious danger" is a reference to K'an, the Abysmal: Sharon, I left my man at a North Dakota junction and I came out to the Big Apple here to face the 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. Like the Creative, the Abysmal is one of the eight doubled hexagrams and "The name of the hexagram, because the trigram is doubled, has the additional meaning of 'repetition of danger,'" according to Wilhelm/Baynes. Like Mitchell's emblematic *Wanderer*, and again per Wilhelm/Baynes, "In danger all that counts is really carrying out all that has to be done... and going forward, in order not to perish through tarrying in the danger." As to how one might become "accustomed to" "love's... repetitious danger" I'm not sure: is it the serial monogamist not "tarrying" or the wanderer who wants only "to find another lover" who dodges danger? I was willing to leave this question unresolved, or at least unexplored, but Nisi Shawl has thought about this a great deal and wrote this: I have received this hexagram in the past. The doubled danger mentioned is inherent in the world, and not the querent's fault, according to Wilhelm/Baynes: "...the hexagram is intended to designate an objective situation to which one must become accustomed, not a subjective attitude." When I was given K'an by the oracle, I took comfort in the idea that the way to pass through the danger it revealed was implicit in the hexagram itself. Movement is part of the picture, as with the quick flame passing over the mountain meadow shown in Lu, but there's more than that going on. Persistence is implied in the way water is said to fill up "all the places through which it flows." It doesn't tarry, but neither does it "shrink... from any plunge." Water in a ravine is K'an's image. Water issues out of a ravine not by climbing the walls surrounding it, which would be against its nature, but by finding and claiming the lowest limits of what imprisons it, making them its own. It only rises when there's nowhere to sink. How to love like this? By loving without shrinking from the plunge. By remaining true to love's essential nature, which is to give and to accept. And by not resisting love's movement, which elsewhere on Hejira, in the lyrics to "Strange

Boy,” Mitchell likens to “the pull of moon on tides.” Earlier in her recording career, Mitchell’s love songs seemed to assume the permanence of whichever relationship she was writing about—or if not its permanence, at least its primacy. Each love was an epoch, an epic. From Song to a Seagull’s “I Had a King” to “Tin Angel” (the opening song on *Clouds*), from Ladies of the Canyon’s “Willy” through the bittersweet longing of “A Case of You” on *Blue*, up to the wistful regret of “See You Sometime” on *For the Roses*, she celebrates or mourns the lover, not the love. But in the words to “Help Me,” on *Court and Spark* she acknowledges that all this has happened before; she’s falling in love “again.” The danger is no less potent because of its repetition. All that has changed is her awareness of it. And all the more so with *Hejira*. By this point, Mitchell has adjusted to her objective situation and become accustomed to the dangerousness of love. She sees clearly in “Coyote” that she has “no regrets” for filling up that romantic gully and overflowing it, muses on how it felt to be “newly lovers” with the “Strange Boy,” and languidly offers to negotiate terms of endearment in a “Blue Motel Room.” She doesn’t refuse love, but she does refuse to become stuck in it, in any moment of its motion. Everything changes and the power of art, which Richard Wilhelm, in one of his lectures on the *I Ching*, calls a meeting of spirit (heaven) and soul (earth), can bring us to the way of the Tao. The final song on *Hejira*, “Refuge of the Roads,” aided and abetted by Jaco Pastorius’s otherworldly bass guitar, transcends emotional cares and woes and accepts the “clicking... wheel of fortune” as a natural and innocent state of being: I pulled off into a forest, crickets clicking in the ferns. Like a wheel of fortune, I heard my fate turn, turn, turn. And I went running down a white sand road, I was running like a white-assed deer, running to lose the blues to the innocence in here. These are the clouds of Michelangelo, muscular with gods and sun gold. Shine on your witness, in the refuge of the roads.³⁰⁰