

## **Sorana Santos – Sound, Semantics, and Structure in Jazz Songwriting; Developing Cross-Genre Approaches. RHUL Travel Award Report.**

As a cross-genre interdisciplinary musician, the work of Joni Mitchell features strongly in analysing the breaking of patterns of expectation in music, and its implication on genre-creation and cross-genre composition.

Although Mitchell began her career as a Folk singer, her body of work grew to include Jazz and eventually Rock music, working across genres without necessarily beginning a new one. This foray into the cross-genre world of self-defined Folk-Jazz was initially met with disapproval and resistance from critics used to hearing her work in a more tonal context - consequently, her cross-genre albums did considerably less well than her preceding work. However, she is now widely recognised as having made one of the most significant contributions to the development of songwriting in the twentieth century. In terms of research, this potentially indicates that an analysis of Mitchell's input could develop schema for building significant outputs in current songwriting practice. With that in mind, this project – made possible by the Santander and Royal Holloway Travel awards – enabled field research into Joni Mitchell's seminal album, *Hejira*, to take place.

2016 commemorates the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the release of Joni Mitchell's seminal album *Hejira* which multi Grammy-Award-winning Mitchell wrote over the course of three journeys taken during late 1975 and early 1976. The final and most famous of these was that of spring 1976 where, driving solo from Maine, Mitchell returned to LA via the East Coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and the three southern US deserts, writing the bulk of *Hejira* in transit.

This field research involved not only recreating the solo drive from Maine to LA and analysing the musical content of *Hejira* itself, but also collecting interviews with those involved and inspired by it, as well as gathering footage, audio, and photographic evidence of cross-genre music-making in the USA, thus placing the album in a broader context. In addition to this, this research trip functioned as an opportunity to compose cross-genre works en route and have lessons with musicians working across genres themselves, further informing the research.

Interviews were held with: venue owners who had booked and hosted Mitchell in both the Northern Territories and Duncan, Arizona; entertainment professionals in South Carolina who had connections to her work and its philosophical content; cross-genre New York Jazz Musicians, whose work draws heavily on Mitchell's influence in their respective Trad Jazz, Singer-Songwriter, and Modern Jazz traditions; and street bands in Atlanta and New Orleans deriving their style from Latin, Pop, Rock, and Country Music styles. Many of the musicians also permitted my attendance at their rehearsals. I was also able to interview and browse the catalogues of Folk societies such as Folk New England, who held records on Mitchell's early tours.



[New Orleans Street Band]

From this it was possible to conclude a certain inevitability to Mitchell's cross-genre developments, due in part to the diverse range of Popular songwriting styles that emerged in the USA - to which she would have been exposed to via both hers and other musicians' experiences.

From an ethnomusicological standpoint, undertaking this trip also enables a more authentic interpretation and performance of *Hejira*, since the work is difficult to portray live owing to the lyrical references to locations and situations Mitchell encountered on the journey itself. In songs such as *Amelia*, for example, she draws parallels between pilot Amelia Earheart's pioneering flights across the Atlantic, her journey as a female musician on the vanguard of her profession, and the physical journey she undertakes across the desert.

The numerous interviews, photographs, footage, compositions, lyrics and contacts created on the journey have been crucial in the development of both my research and professional practice; through being given the opportunity to hone the focus of my research and obtain significant insights into my practice, I have also been able to apply my research to several new contexts - for example, giving a talk on Lyrics and Poetry at Kings Place – and for this I am grateful for the generous support of both Royal Holloway and Santander.

