

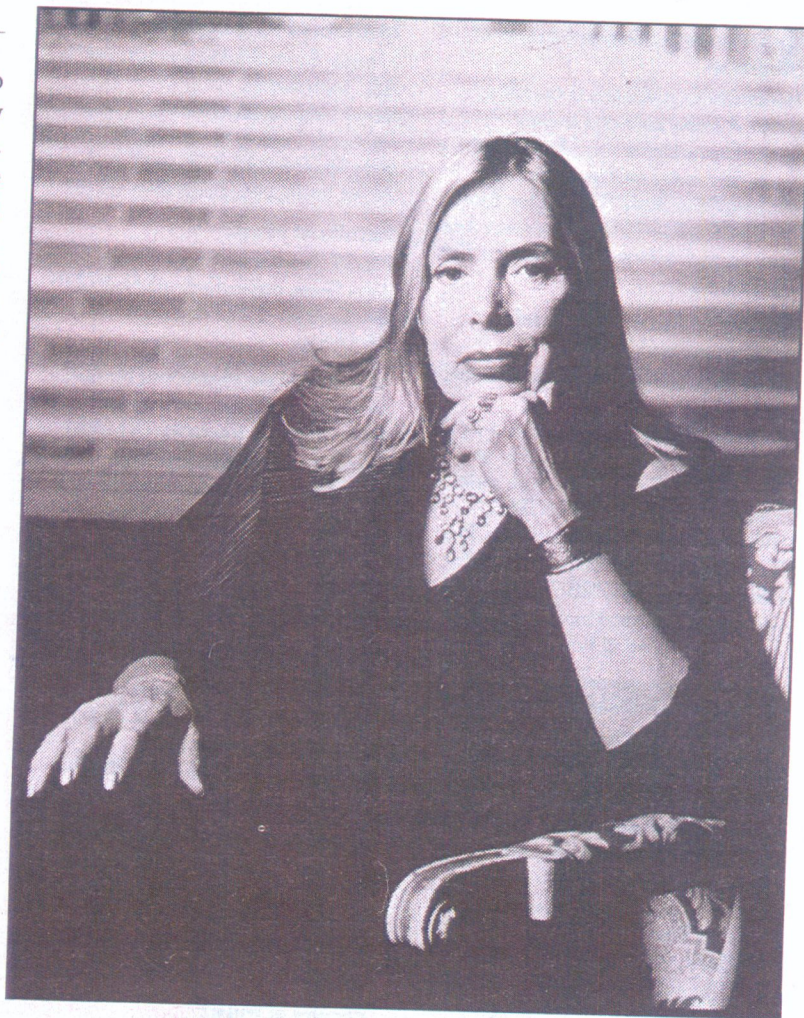
Honouring Joni

IAN POPPLE

Sometimes the reason to award an honorary degree is self-explanatory. This is usually the case when the nominee has achieved worldwide acclaim in their chosen field; singer, songwriter and musician Joni Mitchell certainly falls into this category. Over her 36-year recording career, Mitchell has produced perhaps the most significant and consistent collection of work by any artist of her generation, and is known for her progressive musical style, unique vocals and profound lyrics. There's little doubt that she has had a real impact on the arts in Canada — if not the world — influencing contemporaries like Bob Dylan and Crosby, Hills, Nash and Young, and more recently the careers of fellow Canadians k.d. lang and Alanis Morissette.

This week, Mitchell was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by McGill's Faculty of Music, and a day-long symposium was held to explore and discuss her work.

Artistically, Mitchell is a real rounder — she also writes poetry and paints — but it is music for which she is best loved by her many fans. In the '60s and early '70s, at the start of her career, Mitchell had a series of hits, including "Circle Game," "Woodstock" and "Big Yellow Taxi." She was considered a folk singer during this period, but her music was far more complicated, both harmonically and lyrically, than contemporary folk music.



Canadian musician Joni Mitchell

"Joni is incredibly innovative in terms of her song structure and harmonics," explained McGill music professor Daniel Levitin, a moderator at the Mitchell symposium. "She broke from the standard Tin Pan Alley format of verse-verse-chorus very early in her career." Not only did Mitchell use more than the classic three chords common in popular music, she also favoured unusual chord sequences and

harmonies that became her trademark.

In the mid '70s and early '80s, as her music and vocal style matured, she adopted jazz chords and rhythms, and recorded with jazz greats like Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock. Her most recent music includes orchestral versions of some of her earlier work. Mitchell has borrowed from so many different cultures and blended so many styles it is

simply unfair to place her music in a single category. "She would probably bristle if you tried to pigeonhole her, and rightly so," said Levitin. "She has a truly unique musical style."

This sentiment was also echoed by music theory professor Lloyd Whitesell, an expert on Mitchell's music. His symposium presentation was called "Exploding the Song Cycle: Joni Mitchell's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*." "Only Joni Mitchell can bring together Latin percussion, classical orchestra and an array of musical dialects, from British folk ballads to blues, rock and jazz fusion," he said.

According to Levitin, the proposal for this honorary degree was quickly agreed upon by those in the Faculty of Music. But it took the hard work of dean of music Don McLean, and Howie Klein — a board member of McGill's Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Music Media and Technology and former president of Joni Mitchell's recording label Reprise Records — to make it possible. For someone who has already received so many honours — the *Billboard's* magazine's Century Award for creative achievement, the Governor-General's Performing Arts Award and multiple Grammys, among others — Joni Mitchell's acceptance of McGill's Honorary Doctorate of Music was far from a foregone conclusion. "Joni is very busy, and taking time away from her painting is a big sacrifice," said Levitin. "We were privileged to have her visit the university and accept this award."