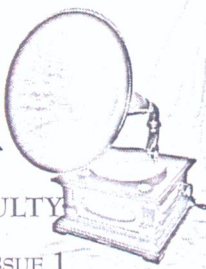


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Joni Mitchell Visits the Faculty of Music

by Rezan Onen-Lapointe

Many young adults are familiar with classic songs like "Big Yellow Taxi," "Woodstock," and "The Circle Game." Few know that they were written and first performed by Joni Mitchell, and fewer still know that she has expanded over her career far beyond folk music. She began singing at age nine, entertaining other patients in the hospital where she was being treated for polio. Mitchell taught herself guitar, went to art school, and became involved in the Calgary, Alberta folk music scene. Moving to the United States, she became famous as a folk singer, particularly with her album "Blue." Mitchell used many complex and experimental guitar chords in her folk music, as well as unusual tunings. She soon began to use unusual instruments as well, such as a dulcimer that she acquired in Greece. Her later forays into jazz found her collaborating with greats like Wayne Shorter and Charles Mingus. Currently, Mitchell considers herself to be retired from the music scene, and no longer performs. She has since devoted herself to personal expression through visual art.



Dr. Mitchell with Dean Don McLean

This past month, Joni Mitchell was invited to the Faculty of Music to receive an honorary doctorate. The event lasted two days, the first consisting of a day-long symposium and the convocation, and the second a special question-and-answer with music students.

"When it comes to women's music in the twentieth century, Joni Mitchell stands as the pre-eminent trailblazer. With musings in almost every genre, Mitchell paved the way for many other popular female singer-songwriters." – ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE

People attending the symposium, including many die-hard fans, heard speakers on a multitude of topics, ranging from Mitchell's influence on feminism, to her integration of the jazz idiom into popular folk music, to their various personal experiences through her music. Among the speakers was McGill music history professor Lloyd Whitesell, who taught a graduate seminar on Mitchell's music last year.

At the end of the day speakers and audience members had a special surprise: Mitchell herself stepped up on stage to participate in the closing round-table discussion. Though she did not perform at the convocation that evening, the Jazz Orchestra paid tribute to her with arrangements of her songs by McGill composition students. After the performance, the composers even got a little individual feedback.

But we came to truly understand the spirit of this woman firsthand on the second day. That evening saw a long line-up (reminiscent perhaps of one of Mitchell's concerts) outside C-201 in the Music Building. Not everyone could be admitted, and music students were given priority. While waiting for the guest of honour to arrive, one student asked if Mitchell would be smoking in the room. The answer was an apologetic "yes," at which the student nearly leapt for joy. "Trust me," said moderator Dan Levitin. "You're going to have a much better time with her if she smokes." Mitchell kept anxious fans waiting a full half hour, but when she did arrive, she was placid, radiant, and impeccably fashionable.

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