

Joni Mitchell's life, from six sides now

DAVE McGINN

More than 500 artists from Saskatchewan and Manitoba will take over Canada's capital for the next two weeks as Ottawa's National Arts Centre presents Prairie Scene, a festival celebrating the region's art and culture.

The fifth in a series – the NAC has already presented Atlantic Scene, Alberta Scene, Quebec Scene and B.C. Scene – the focus on the Prairies, like previous festivals, offers a chance to better understand the country.

“Learning about the country through its artists is eye-opening,” says Heather Moore, producer and executive director of Prairie Scene.

The festival covers music, dance, comedy, film and theatre, including *Songs of a Prairie Girl*, Jim Guedo's play featuring six different women who portray various aspects of **Joni Mitchell**.

Guedo created the play in 2005, when Mitchell released a compilation CD of the same name, in a sense her contribution to Saskatchewan's centennial. With dialogue taken entirely from various interviews Mitchell has given over the years, the play aims to be a theatrical version of Mitchell's life as viewed through the music from *Songs of a Prairie Girl*.

OLDER JONI

Christine MacInnis plays “the old Joni,” she says, capturing the singer as she looks back over her life and work. “I'm kind of the narrator. It's almost like looking back over [her] career.” At 53, MacInnis is Mitchell's junior by 14 years, although she does bear a striking resemblance to the singer.

“People are kind of freaked out when they see me ... especially when they're showing shots of her,” MacInnis says. To capture the fullness of Mitchell's life, MacInnis sings *Circle Game* with the other actresses at the beginning of the play and then, near its end, she alone sings *Stay In Touch*, a fitting song to conclude with, considering the lyrics: “This is really something/ People will be envious/ But our roles aren't clear/ So we mustn't rush / ... We should stay in touch.”

YOUNG JONI

Playing the young **Joni Mitchell**, Alyssa Billingsley has the task of portraying “her prairie-girl roots, the nomadic, lone child wandering on the prairie in a small town finding ways to amuse herself,” she says. That includes everything from the time when Mitchell was a 9-year-old struggling with polio, through to about age 14. “For me, having grown up in rural Saskatchewan, it's a part of me.”

Prairie, Page 3

Prairie: At the heart of the music, 'you get to the heart of a lot of the mystery'



In Jim Guedo's *Songs of a Prairie Girl*, the six Jonis take on different aspects of the singer's life through her music. GORD WALDNER/SASKATOON STAR PHOENIX

PAINTER JONI

Mitchell has always liked to say that she's a painter first and foremost – music is just her day job. The role of "painter Joni" falls to Vesti Hanson. "I'm the middle-aged, still painting, still working [Joni]," says Hanson, who played the older version of Mitchell in the original production of the play at the University of Saskatchewan.

Even though she studied Mitchell's paintings, the music was the secret to unlocking her character, Hanson says. "If you get to the heart of the music, you get to the heart of a lot of the mystery," she says. "She's very unpredictable."

Fittingly, Hanson sings a number of songs from Mitchell's work from the 1980s and 1990s, including *Chinese Cafe* and *Face Lift*.

1950S JONI

Mitchell may be best known as a folk icon from the late 1960s and early 1970s, but her musical coming of age occurred in the 1950s, when rock 'n' roll was born. Amy Matysio plays Mitchell during this period. She describes Mitchell during this time as "the rebellious teen, the dancer when she just started getting her hips going," Matysio says.

"That's when Joni was discovering where she was going. There's lots of stuff she talks about in the play about ... what she liked to do when no one else was doing it – sneaking out and going to dance halls, listening to music that no one else was listening to."

As the burgeoning rebel, Matysio, who hails from Regina, sings *Ray's Dad's Cadillac* and *Harlem in Havana*.

HIPPIE JONI

No play about the life and times of Joni Mitchell would be complete without covering the singer's hippie period in the 1960s and early 1970s, a period portrayed by Leora Joy Godden.

"It's sort of like the beginning of her boom into stardom and becoming very popular," Godden says. It's also a difficult time for Mitchell, which sees her in a bad marriage and having to give up a child. "Because a lot of the stuff that went on when she was that age was quite heavy, and you're there for all of it and what she's saying, I take on that heavy, sombre stuff," Godden says.

Those turbulent times are brought out in the songs *A Case of You*, *Let The Wind Carry Me* and *Paprika Plains*.

LATE-1970S JONI

Jacklyn Green, a member of the original cast during her time at the University of Saskatchewan, portrays Mitchell as "the musical explorer," she says. "A lot of her stuff is very different and eclectic and edgy, and this is really where she's exploring, pushing the boundaries of music." In the songs from this period, there is a "wrestling with the idea of settling down with somebody," Green says. Mitchell's experimentation is reflected by the songs *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, one of her most experimental works, and *Song for Sharon*.

Delving into Mitchell's life is "very humbling," Green says. "She's had a lot of hardship in her life, but she has no regrets. She's always moving forward."

Songs of a Prairie Girl runs May 4-7 at the National Arts Centre Studio in Ottawa.

HIGHLIGHTS

With more than 80 events in more than 30 venues, Prairie Scene has lots to choose from, but a Guy Maddin world premiere is a special highlight.

At the NAC on April 30, the acclaimed Canadian filmmaker will stage a live version of his 1988 movie *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*. The multimedia performance features a new score, live sound and special effects by a foley team and performances by members of the Icelandic bands Amiina and Múm. Other highlights:

THEATRE

Talk Lifelong friends engage in a heated debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Michael Nathanson's play. *Through Saturday*.

Gordon Winter Kenneth T. Williams's portrait of a bigoted RCMP hero and champion of first nations' rights, loosely based on the life of David Ahenakew. *May 5-8*.

DANCE

From Pow Wow to Hip Hop First-nations dance company Great Plains showcases champion singers Wild Horse and covers an eclectic range of dance styles. *May 7*.

Wonderland The Royal Winnipeg Ballet's re-envisioning of *Alice in Wonderland*. *Thursday through Saturday*.

MUSIC

Buffy Sainte-Marie The Canadian icon is joined by singer-songwriter Romi Mayes. *May 7, Bronson Centre*.

Wide Mouth Mason and the Sheepdogs The multi-Juno Award-winning band plays with old-school rock band the Sheepdogs. *Saturday*.

VISUAL ARTS

Wanda Koop: On the Edge of Experience A survey exhibition presents a wide range of works by one of Canada's most distinguished artists, including large-scale paintings from the early 1980s. *To May 15*.

Dave McGinn