

Music world courts and sparks **Joni Mitchell**

IN PERSON / Canada's folksinger-poet-queen has remained an unsung hero for 20 years. A brace of awards and overdue recognition is changing all that.

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FOR the first time in about 20 years, 1996 was an *annus mirabilis* for Canada's poet-queen of music.

Joni Mitchell started the year by becoming the first woman to receive the Polar Music Prize — an honour bestowed by the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. Two Grammy Awards, added to the two she already had, followed, including one for her record *Turbulent Indigo* as best pop album. In May, the Alberta-born singer, now 53, will be one of the 1997 inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Last month, she received the Governor-General's Performing Arts Award in Ottawa.

More recently, she appeared on the popular day-time television talk fest, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* — and has achieved what other artists such as Cher and Barbra Streisand have long enjoyed: the cult status of being the focus of a female impersonation show. On Jan. 2, John Kelly's homage, titled *Paved Paradise*, in which he dons black turtleneck and black beret to croon Mitchell songs, reopens at Dance Theater Workshop in New York.

"I'm getting used to being honoured," a chain-smoking Mitchell said during a recent visit to Ottawa. "I can really get into this." By her count, Mitchell has waited about two decades to receive this relative glut of attention. Her last real bout of major commercial appeal occurred in 1974 with the release of the Grammy-winning *Court and Spark* and its hits *Help Me* and *Raised on Robbery*. A few years later, radio airplay all but dried up with the release of the *Mingus* album, done in collaboration with the jazz legend who died in 1979, and the drought pretty much persisted through her next 11 recordings.

Mitchell is at once philosophical and miffed by this state of affairs. "Artists like Madonna spend a lot of money to get themselves on the radio," Mitchell said. "It's sickening."

CANADA'S track record in embracing her hasn't been much better, at least according to Mitchell. In 1972, Neil Young asked Mitchell to accompany him to the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto. "Neil had this rush of patriotism and asked me to go up with him." (Mitchell had moved to Los Angeles in the late 1960s.) "We didn't even take guitars. But, of course, once we got there, we were asked to play. Neil wouldn't at first. But once he decided to plug in, you could hear his voice over the loudspeakers and a whole area of an old-time fiddle workshop cleared out — rushing over to hear Neil.

"But the whole attitude was that Neil and I had come back to be disruptive. Neil was so mad that he gave up his Canadian citizenship." [According to *Neil and Me* by Scott Young, the musician's father, Young did not give up his citizenship and, in fact, renewed his Canadian passport in 1980.]

Mitchell has kept her Canadian citizenship and has, since 1970, owned a home on 40 acres of land near Sechart, a 90-minute drive north of Vancouver, where she pens most of her songs. "All this time, [Canadians] have treated me like an expatriate. But I'm a Canadian resident. Nobody knows that." Now, suddenly, her industry and her country has wel-



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comed Mitchell back after virtually ignoring her.

"I've been undervalued for a long time, and it leaves a bad taste in your mouth, you know. How would you like it if you've been doing your job — an excellent job, if I may be so bold — and no one plays you on the radio and no one plays your videos? I'm still in the game, but all the doors have been closed."

Winning Billboard magazine's 1995 Century Award reinforced the isolation she has felt. "I won the award for the most undervalued artist of the century. Once that happened, everyone wanted to honour me. But don't mistake the fact. This happens to all great artists in some place in their careers. People get sick of you. The public is trained to crave the new — all these new Joni Mitchells like Ricki Lee Jones and Suzanne Vega."

Nevertheless, Mitchell is revered as an icon by a veritable who's who of today's female vocalists, including Madonna. Fellow Grammy-winner k.d. lang, who flew to Ottawa to pay homage to Mitchell at the Governor-General's fete, called the singer-songwriter "a work of art." Sarah McLachlan, who performed Mitchell's 1971 classic, *Blue*, at the awards gala, said that Mitchell's "integrity and the way she runs her life and her music" has been a "tremendous inspiration" to her.

BEYOND gratefully accepting the adulation, Mitchell also knows from where it comes. "Bob Dylan and I made the blueprint for the kind of music we perform," she said. "We set the standard. I think I'm a pioneer who helped lay the groundwork." Having recently issued two individual ret-

spectives, one called *Hits*, the other *Misses*, Mitchell is working on her 18th studio album and three books, including an autobiography, a volume of song lyrics and a coffee table book of her paintings.

Not having embarked on a concert tour since 1982 — she played one night at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival in 1994 — Mitchell may consider hitting the road again. Winding her way through a divorce from Larry Klein, her husband of 15 years who co-produced *Turbulent Indigo*, Mitchell has a new partner: musician Don Freed from Saskatoon. Mitchell is also trying to locate a daughter she gave up for adoption when she was 20 years old and a student in Calgary at the Alberta College of Art.

"I worry, because there are a lot of things she should know, her genetic background, what disease she's prone to," Mitchell recently told The New York Times. "It would be nice if she could meet her grandparents while they're still alive."

That quest, however, may be the only bit of nostalgia Mitchell is intent on pursuing. Despite having released *Hits*, some of the songs that appear on the record, including *Help Me*, make her shudder now. "They were ditties written by an ingenue," said Mitchell, as a grin stretched across a face, a face that still carries some of that fresh-scrubbed folksinger's youthfulness from the 1960s.

"I'm not interested in what I did before, and becoming a human jukebox. Imagine Simone Signoret, who was a sexpot and who liked her coffee and her booze and never had a face lift, going back to that when she reached middle age, and was overweight with baggy eyes. She did some of her best acting when she was middle-aged."