

# riffing joni

“ I was in a café smoking,  
somewhere, and a girl  
came up to me and said,  
‘I’m a manic depressive.  
I love your music, but I hate  
pictures of you. Every time  
I see you, you’re smiling  
and it makes me mad!’ ”

—joni mitchell, 1997

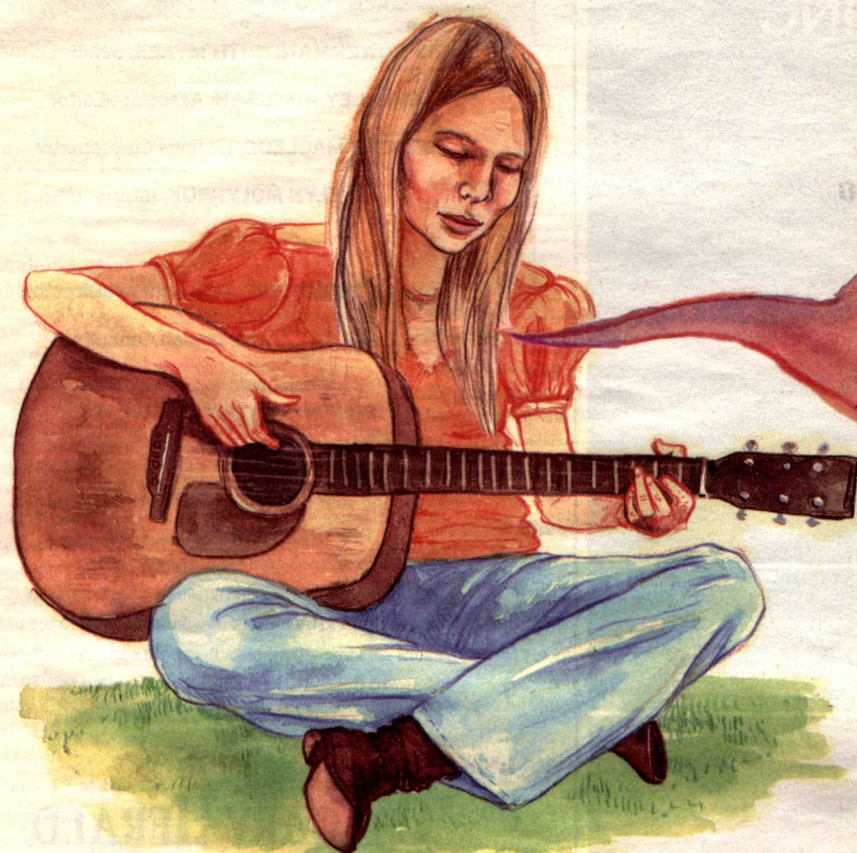




# SWERVE

02.02.07

"The fragile scarecrow image of her that comes through on TV in no way prepares one for the mature, sexy realities of Miss Mitchell in the flesh"



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Joni Mitchell is here, there and everywhere right now—which makes this the perfect time to submerge ourselves in our prairie muse.

BY SHELLEY YOUNGBLUT, SHELLEY ARNUSCH AND JACQUIE MOORE

COVER BY JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (TAKEN NOV. 28, 1968 FOR VOGUE)

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by jacquie moore

# joni's roots

Roberta Joan Anderson spent her formative baby years right here in Alberta. So why should Saskatoon get all the props for raising our girl?

It's not as if Fort Macleod has nothing else going for it. After all, the town, located 165 kilometres south of Calgary, is home to the grand old Empress Theatre, it's the future site of the Alberta police college and it's generally one of the cutest gosh-darned towns this side of Didsbury. Still, why Fort Macleod's 3,000 townsfolk let Saskatoon take cred for rearing its most famous daughter is a mystery to me.

Yup, 63 years ago Roberta Joan Anderson was born in Fort Macleod, Alberta. Not, for the record, in Maidstone or North Battleford—the Saskatchewan towns she inhabited as a toddler—and certainly not in Saskatoon which she didn't move to until age nine. Sure, Joni bought her first guitar in the 'Toon but, as she told *Billboard* magazine in 1995, the first memory she can recall took place in Fort Mac: Dust bunnies floating in a stream of sunlight above her crib.

Mitchell has described her first home, an apartment located above a drugstore as “humble,” and the street she lived on (Main) as “derelict.” But Fort Macleod is where her mom Myrtle “Mickey” Marguerite McKee, a teacher, and her dad, Bill Anderson, a grocer, got their start as a young couple. Had the Anderson family tried to make a go of it elsewhere in the early '40s—in, say, Regina where they were both from, or Medicine Hat where they got married—who knows what manner of uninspired early memories might have imprinted wee Joni? A legislative building in Wascana Park? A coulee outside the 'Hat? Indeed, were her babyhood recollections not informed by the sunshine of Fort Macleod, Joni simply wouldn't be Joni. She'd be Joan, for starters.

Still, despite Mayor Shawn Patience's claim that “if you ask anyone who our most famous resident was, they'd say Joni Mitchell,” I've found no evidence of shrine, plaque or ice-cream flavour commemorating the woman in her birthtown. When I attempted to locate the house she was born in, Mayor Patience led me three miles north of town, where I spoke to a dairy farmer who agreed to help me discover if a young Mitchell had once inhabited his family's farmhouse. While the farmer was extremely keen, and questioned the “oldtimers” in the area on my behalf, he came back regretfully empty-handed and, at one point, interrupted my questions with a hesitant “And Joni Mitchell is...?”

Likewise, the local realtor he later led me to with hopes she could help with land-rights research had no idea if Mitchell had lived in Fort Macleod proper or on the outskirts. In any case, she seemed more eager to pass me on to someone she knew in Saskatoon. At a local cafe, Java Spot, where the filming of a scene from *Brokeback Mountain* is



commemorated with posters on the walls, owner Victor Patal has done nothing in tribute to Joni because, he says, “She only lived here for a few years!” What's that got to do with anything? I think. I tell Patal that the movie star Fay Wray only lived in Cardston until she was two, and they've got a 10-foot billboard in her honour.

When I questioned the mayor about the above photo—featured in *Voices, The Work of Joni Mitchell*, produced by the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon—I began to wonder if perhaps it was me, not Fort Macleoders, who didn't understand the significance of Joni being a native. Mitchell, Patience patiently told me, took this portrait of herself and layered it over another image she'd taken of the side of a bookstore in town. The “Macleods” sign, it turns out, was actually made by none other than the mayor—the photo of the man on the ladder is his own self-portrait. “I know exactly when that sign was there,” he says. “Joni would had to have taken the photo in the early '90s. Nobody even knew she'd come to town; there was no fanfare. That's how she wants it.” He went on to sum up Mitchell's music and artwork as “simplicity and complexity, care and respect all in one. She sees the world from a unique point of view, she appreciates what many take for granted, she sees that *light*.”

These traits, Patience says, are “shared by many in Fort Macleod—they're what make us unique. I suspect if Joni moved back she would find it just like putting on her favourite pair of slippers and wonder why she hadn't come back sooner.”



# joni riffs on joni

## **Songs To A Seagull 1968**

"Never is my joy completely joyous there is always a thread of dissonance running through it. My joy always is against a backdrop of a world in trouble. The cords are more complex than simple emotions. Pop music likes its happiness major and its tragedy minor."

## **Clouds 1969**

"'Clouds' was inspired by a moment in a book. This guy is up in a plane looking down at clouds and I was up in a plane looking down at clouds."

## **Ladies of the Canyon 1970**

"Man is a cancer on this globe and he was supposed to be the custodian. I am mad at my species and always have been and it leaks into the pieces from 'Woodstock' on."

## **Blue 1971**

"If they are going to worship me they should know who they are worshipping. I didn't want a deception and I also didn't want the inequity of being placed on a pedestal. I wanted to create a persona that was actual so that if I had any insight to pass on, and I took the

responsibility seriously, since I had a public voice I better be presenting something nourishing and useful."

## **Court and Spark 1974**

"It's a man's business and rather than complain about it you have to develop some strength. You can't just go fluttering about like Madam Butterfly."

## **Hissing of Summer Lawns 1975**

"A lot of it is image first. You envision the imagery and you transcribe it into words and you parquet it into the melody."

## **Hejira 1976**

"Hejira was a cleansing process. I was very pensive driving across America solo. That's when most of that was written. It comes more to life if you take the same journey."

## **Wild Things Run Fast 1982**

"I was at a café somewhere, smoking, and a girl came up to me and said, 'I'm a manic depressive. I love your music, but I hate pictures of you. Every time I see you, you're smiling and it makes me mad!' So there's a

person who thinks, 'I'm suffering, she's suffering.' If they see evidence otherwise, they feel I'm inauthentic. Whereas I feel more ambidextrous: I suffer, I enjoy. I suffer, I enjoy."

## **Chalk Mark In A Rainstorm 1988**

"The critics have not been kind to me for many years but I get my nurturing and my will to go on from the man or the woman in the street."

## **Night Ride Home 1991**

"We thought of it ('Come In From The Cold') like a teaser from a movie."

## **Travelogue 2002**

"I would call myself a penitent of spirit, not a confessor. The point is not to confess. The things where I have revealed my own foibles or frailty are generally within the context of the work to create a very human character and therefore a rich character full of human experience."

—compiled by Jaelyn Molyneux from Tony King's three-part special on Joni Mitchell's music, which aired on CKUA in late January. [www.ckua.com](http://www.ckua.com)

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