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THE TORONTO STAR

SPOTLIGHT

ENTERTAINMENT • PEOPLE • TELEVISION

Sunday, October 16, 1994 Section B

Ear's Joni

'Tough cookie'
Joni Mitchell
delivers a tart
earful on music,
art and being
Canadian

By PETER HOWELL
ROCK CRITIC

Joni Mitchell smiles as she holds up a cardboard human ear, which she's just pulled out of a copy of her new CD, *Turbulent Indigo*. "Isn't this great?" she says, looking as happy as a kid who has just found a swell toy in a box of Cap'n Crunch.

"I wanted to put one in every copy of the album, but the record company told me it would cost too much money. So I had to settle for just a few thousand promotional copies."

A symbolic reference to her favorite artist, Van Gogh, who sliced off his own ear in a mad moment, the cardboard ear is Mitchell's way of poking fun at herself.

She does this often, although it is easy to take her self-deprecation — and her tart remarks about her Canadian homeland — as evidence of bitterness or career burn-out.

"You think it's self-effacing," she corrects her interviewer, during a recent Toronto visit. "That's a Canadian's interpretation of what it is. It's black humor, it's Irish, it's irony what I'm saying to you."

The humor is black, indeed, if one is to find mirth in the frustration the 50-year-old songwriter, painter and poet feels these days about being a Canadian. Returning to the pop spotlight after 11 years away from touring and several years without an album, she's perceived by many to be living the life of an L.A. hot-shot, even though she still spends several months each year in the B.C. coast home she's owned since 1970.

"I'm mad at the Canadian populace," she says, in a tone that seems more angry in print than it does in person.

"I'm a good singer and a good writer, and I'm hurt. It's not me being self-effacing, it's just true emotion."

Mitchell explains her remarks with an anecdote of how she and fellow Canuck Neil Young once dropped into Toronto's annual Mariposa Festival in the early 1970s. They hadn't come to perform, but they were quickly asked to, and once Young got up on stage, they both felt "all this negativity," from old-time Mariposa folkies, who acted as if the two were lording their status as stars in the U.S.

"It hurt us a lot, and Neil became an American over it — that was it," Mitchell says.

Turbulent Indigo sequenced like paintings at an art exhibition

"We'd been rejected on both ends: rejected at the beginning, because we weren't good enough, because we were Canadian, and now we'd gotten too big. The Canadian attitude is, 'Oh, you want to stick your head above the crowd? We'll be glad to lop it off for you.'"

She frequently returns to her feelings about this country — which, as from any Canadian family member, are a mixture of love and hate, even her moaning about high taxes here — but it's not just this country and its foibles that gets her going.

The songs on *Turbulent Indigo*, her 17th album (out Oct. 25), are sequenced like paintings at an art exhibition, and both the title track and Mitchell's self portrait on the cover allude to Van Gogh.

Too bad most CD buyers won't get their own cardboard ear, so they can be let in on the secret of Joni's wicked sense of humor.

Her new songs touch on a world of bleak themes, both past and present: "Sex Kills" bemoans a crazy society ("Everyone hates everyone!" she cries) where sex sells products while AIDS kills people; "Not To Blame" sadly asks why men who beat women seem to get away with it; "The Magdelaine Laundries" is the true horror story of long-ago Irish home for wayward girls, who once inside were never allowed to leave.

Then there's the album title track, born out of Mitchell's hurt and anger after she was asked several years ago to speak about art at a government-sponsored conference in her hometown, Saskatoon.

Titled "We're Going To Make Van Goghs," the conference featured Mitchell as closing speaker. She made an impassioned speech about the importance of art, and railed against the conference's title and its affirmative action mandate, offended by its cookie-cutter approach to creating artists.

"They said, 'We're going to make Van Goghs out of women, native Canadians and other ethnic groups,'" Mitchell recounts, as she chain-smokes another cigarette and sips cranberry juice.

"That shows the pursestrings are going to open up to all of Canada's 'useless people' — women, new immigrants and Indians, right?"

In her speech, she argued artists can't be created by government fiat. Her comments offended some bushy-bearded artisans in the room ("They looked like the Smith Brothers," Mitchell says), who walked out as she was speaking. They later told reporters they weren't going to listen to "some rich rock star" tell them about art.

"You wanna make Van Goghs/Raise 'em up like sheep..." Mitchell sings in "Turbulent Indigo," but her feelings about Canadian culture and attitudes are barely touched on in the song.

Another new song, "Bor-

☛ Please see Joni's, B5



MIKE SLAUGHTER/TORONTO STAR

TURBULENT FEELINGS: Returning to pop spotlight after 11 years, Joni Mitchell says she's "mad" at Canadians who treat her like an egotistical L.A. hotshot.



JOHN MAHLER/TORONTO STAR

NO FISTICUFFS: Sure, sparks sometimes fly between *Face Off* debate show hosts Judy Rebick and Claire Hoy, but most fireworks come from needling guests.

Face Off's Hoy and Rebick: No Punch and Judy show

By LYNDA HURST
STAFF REPORTER

It's moments to taping time, and the two hosts are draining their coffee and agreeably sharing a muffin. Judy Rebick is blowing her nose, again — ah, autumn in Toronto — and Claire Hoy, to all intents and purposes, is talking to himself. "Am I leaning far enough to the left?" he asks the thin blue air. "I mean, it's very difficult for me to lean to the left, you know."

Transpires he's been blocking Rebick's camera shot and must, ergo, lean. Or so the invisible director, in a control booth far, far away, is telling him through

an earpiece.

Hoy notices Rebick is drinking from a foam cup while he's using a china mug. This confuses him. She's the one "who has to be environmentally correct," he announces to no one in particular. "I do not."

Hoy is jumpy. The topic of tonight's show was belatedly decided upon and, heaven help us, it is Bosnia. What's the deal with Bosnia? he asks a passer-by. Why are they fighting?

Tick tock. A final pat of the powder puff. Then, showtime.

Canada, the viewer is told, has spent \$350 million in the benighted Bosnian conflict and lost 10 Canadian lives. A sud-

denly authoritative Hoy demands the troops be pulled out; a suddenly cold-free Rebick says the least Canada can do is stay in to help save other lives.

But the sparks won't fly tonight. It is an interesting, if flat-tish, show. The two guests, a retired brigadier-general and a journalist, agree to disagree. When they depart the set, Hoy shrugs and says, "Thank God you guys knew something."

There is nothing wrong with being, well, just informative when you can't muster a little righteous indignation. Svend Robinson and gay rights will be

☛ Please see Saying, B6

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Bright Lights . . . David Storch

Stage actor flushed with excitement

BY VIT WAGNER
THEATRE CRITIC

Heaven knows Canadian stage actors have every reason to keep their expectations of fame, glory and riches to a modest minimum.

At the age of 30, David Storch is enjoying his first taste of the big time, with a starring role in the acclaimed commercial revival of George F. Walker's *Nothing Sacred*, currently running at the Winter Garden Theatre.

Storch, relaxing amid the polished splendor of a dressing room he shares with co-stars Randy Hughson and Michael McManus, describes the chief material reward of his elevated status.

"Most of us involved in this show are used to working in theatres with a single, shared bathroom and a sign that says, 'Do not flush toilet during performance.'"

"And here we are working in an astonishingly beautiful space, with probably 25 separate toilets at our disposal which we can flush as often as we like — just for the heck of it."

Finally the folks back home in Alberta can rest easy. Storch admits that his family, though supportive, expressed concern when he switched from archaeology to fine arts at the University of Alberta in the early '80s. That led to a stint at the National Theatre School, followed by steady employment, beginning with a 1987 production of *Babes In Arms* at the Huron Country Playhouse in the resort town of Grand

Bend, Ont.

"For years, through theatre school and the first few years after that, my relatives would say, 'So what do you think you'll do eventually?' Which was essentially a way of saying, 'What do you hope to do when you grow up?'"

"Maybe they thought I'd say, 'I'm going to give up this hobby of mine and go back to archaeology.' Or study law or something like that. Or maybe they were hoping I'd say, 'I want to be a movie star.' In fact, this is exactly where I want to be."

Although based in Toronto for the past seven years, Storch has been employed mainly in the West. He has worked with both the Prairie Theatre Exchange and the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg and currently enjoys what he calls a "friendship" with Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary and the Belfry in Victoria, where he is slated to play the title role in *Henry V* next year.

In Toronto, he has taught acting in George Brown College and been featured in a handful of shows. Most notably, he earned a Dora nomination for his spaced-out, dread-locked performance last spring in the 10th anniversary of Judith Thompson's *White Biting Dog* at Tarragon.

He was invited to audition for *Nothing Sacred*, also starring Eric Peterson and David Fox, after subbing for Greg Spottiswood in a smaller scale commercial revival of Walker's *Theatre Of*

The Film Noir last year at Factory Studio Cafe.

As Arkady in *Nothing Sacred*, Walker's adaptation of the 19th century Russian novel *Fathers And Sons*, Storch plays an idealistic young man who shares the revolutionary desires of his nihilistic pal Bazarov (Hughes), without the same disdain for his fellow man.

"Even the idea that a heart will get broken or someone's dreams will get crushed is intolerable for someone with as much social conscience and compassion as Arkady . . ."

"Technically it's a big challenge. It's a treat, in the sense that there is almost an equal balance of humor and pathos. It's hard work."

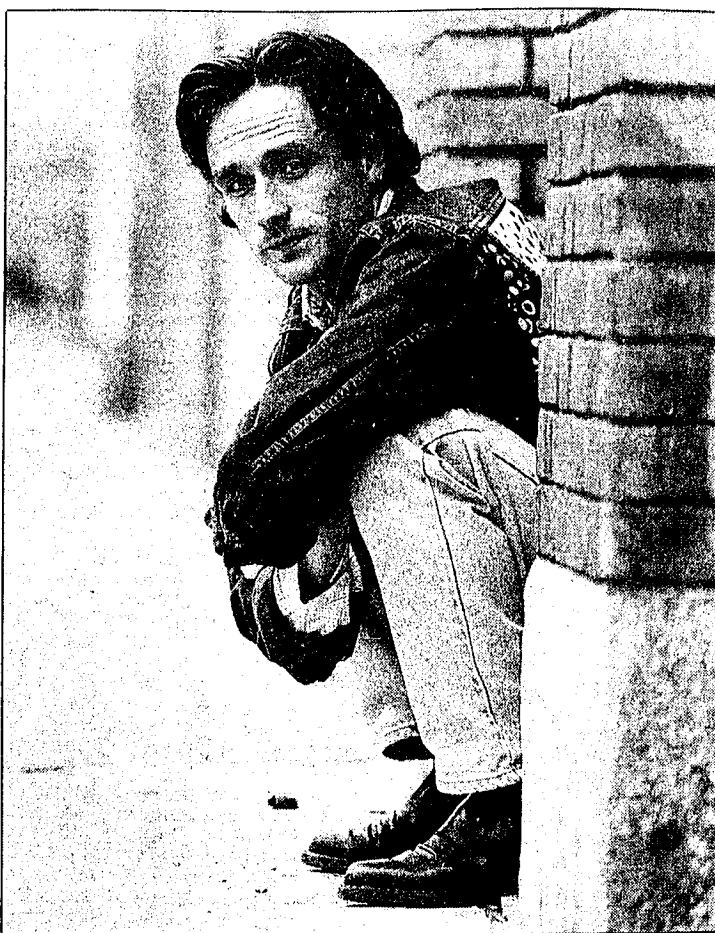
But rewarding work, too. Storch takes special pride in being part of a Canadian production that is trying to survive in a commercial market dominated by foreign mega-musicals.

Unlike some of his co-stars, however, he doesn't have any money invested in the show. For a very good reason.

"If I had had five thousand bucks kicking around, I certainly would have invested. I have no money invested because I don't have any money."

What's money when you've got porcelain?

Bright Lights profiles up-and-coming Canadians who aren't household names . . . yet.



RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR

A STEP UP: Storch takes special pride in playing idealistic young revolutionary in *Nothing Sacred* at Winter Garden Theatre.

Joni's themes bleak

Continued from B1

derline," and its lines "You snipe so steady/You snub so snide . . ." could well describe her annoyance at being questioned about her allegiance to Canada.

"Pride has a bitterness to it, a downside," she says. "I mean, I don't know how many Canadians have come up to me and said, 'I like such-and-such a song — what side of the border did you write it on?'"

"And I say, 'What difference does it make?' . . . I think Canadians carry their patriotism to the ridiculous. Supposing that the Dutch were to look at Van Gogh's paintings and say, 'You know, we can't have this painting hanging here, he painted this in Arles (France).'"

Tough words. But anyone who labors to put a joke prize inside her CDs can't be all that hard-hearted, and Mitchell isn't.

She was thrilled by the ecstatic audience response she received in August when she headlined the Edmonton Folk Festival, making a rare appearance on stage. And the day after this interview, she performed solo on MuchMusic's live *Intimate & Interactive* show, clearly enjoying the love being sent to her via telephone and electronic messages from Montreal and Moose Jaw, and in person from fans who squeezed into the

Queen St. W. TV studio.

On MuchMusic, she promised her fans she will come back for more shows. But the reasons behind her disappearance from the public eye suggest it won't be easy putting a tour together.

Although she looks wonderful and says she feels great — she does a dozen yoga exercises daily — Mitchell describes herself as a "fragile traveller," because she's deathly allergic to airplane air conditioning.

She's recently had to contend with post-polio syndrome, a milder recurrence of the polio that nearly killed her at age 9.

But she's successfully fought the disease again, and laughs at how she was told in an American post-polio clinic to stop doing her yoga exercises — which she immediately started doing more of, just to prove them wrong.

"I've had a lot of brushes with death," she says. "I've had four brushes with death in my lifetime. And these things prepare you for certain things . . . I feel great. I'm a tough cookie."

Not so tough, though, that she would ever turn her back on Canada, her hurt feelings and "ironic" comments notwithstanding.

And not self-important, either, despite the fact she's the single most influential female pop artist.

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