

JONI:

A NEW VOICE



Fresh and green as her Saskatchewan home, a pregnant Mitchell stumbled trying to get a foothold in the Toronto folk scene, writer Jason Schneider recounts in Whispering Pines.



JONI MITCHELL: LIVED IN A HIPPIE FLOPHOUSE ON HURON ST. AND WORKED AS A SALES CLERK IN SIMPSON-SEARS TO EARN HER MUSICIANS UNION MEMBERSHIP FEE. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Whispering Pines (ECW Press, \$28.95) is Toronto music writer/critic Jason Schneider's vivid exploration of the little-known Canadian origins of some of the 20th century's most popular music. With The Band's Last Waltz as both a metaphorical and historical framework, Schneider takes us through 50 years of the development of a unique and distinctive Canadian narrative song form, from first-generation country singers Hank Snow and Wilf Carter to the great surge of Canadian songwriters who broke internationally in the 1970s and beyond.

In this excerpt, reprinted with the permission of ECW Press, Schneider reveals some fascinating details about Joni Mitchell's first tentative steps in the burgeoning Toronto folk music scene in the 1960s.

The task of studying art came easily, although Joni was unable to completely adjust to the college environment. As she explained, "I found out that I was an honour student at art school for the same reason that I was a bad student [in general] — because I had developed a lot of technical ability. As a result, in the free classes, where I was really uninspired, my marks remained the same, whereas people who were great in free class, who were original and loose [but] didn't have the chops in a technical class, would receive a mark that was pretty similar to their technical ability. The first year was like a time to decide whether you wanted to be a commercial artist or a fine artist, so I became pretty disillusioned with art college, even though I enjoyed being near the head of my class for the first time in my life."

Part of her disillusionment stemmed from the fact that soon after arriving in Calgary she heard of a new coffee house about to open called the Depression, allowing her a chance to build on her Louis Riel experience. Upon meeting Joni, one of the owners, Peter Elbling, was sufficiently charmed by her looks and personality that he insisted she appear at the club's opening night on September 13. Joni continued to regularly perform three nightly sets at the

Depression until the end of 1963, which led to gigs at Edmonton's coffee house, the Yardbird Suite, and at various ski lodges in northern Alberta. The following February 14, Joni hit the airwaves again as part of a University of Alberta-sponsored hootenanny broadcast by a local television station, and, on April 16, she was on the bill for a major hootenanny staged at Calgary's prestigious Jubilee Auditorium. This was followed in short order with a long trip to Winnipeg to play the Fourth Dimension club, a performance that was cut short because of a thunderstorm.

At Joni's side for all of these events was a fellow art student, Brad MacMath. Their relationship had blossomed faster than any she had experienced up to then, and even before the end of the school year they were making plans to travel east in search of better gigs for Joni, and also to attend the Mariposa Folk Festival that August. Yet, by the time they boarded the train, shortly after Joni performed two shows as part of a Calgary Stampede hootenanny on July 9, 1964, she knew something was physically wrong with her. Joni was pregnant, and, aside from MacMath, no one could know. Bearing a child out of wedlock in the early sixties, as Joni would later describe, "was

like you killed somebody."

The couple did manage to make it to Mariposa, although Joni's excitement about witnessing Buffy Sainte-Marie's debut was dampened by last-minute scheduling chaos that forced the festival to take place in Toronto at the behest of an Orillia town council that was besieged by protests from angry residents. Joni and Brad did not return to Calgary for the fall term; the pregnancy was too much to bear for both of them, with MacMath's response being to leave his girlfriend to cope as well as she could on her own.

Joni's situation grew even more dire when she discovered that the coffee house scene in Toronto was much more difficult to break into than those in the west. The majority of Yorkville clubs required performers to be members of the musicians' union, and Joni could not scrape up the \$160 needed to join. She took a job as a sales clerk in the women's fashion department of the Simpson-Sears department store, but her minimum-wage salary was barely enough to pay for lodging at the hippie flophouse she had found at 504 Huron Street. As her desperation grew, Joni managed to land some non-union gigs that autumn, mostly in YMCA clubs, and, specifically, a "scab club," the Half Beat on Avenue Road, where she appeared consistently throughout October and November. Now playing a standard acoustic guitar and writing her own songs — she came up with the first, "Day After Day," on the train to Toronto — Joni realized that her own voice was emerging. "I began as a [traditional] folk singer," she said. "Once I began to write, my vocal style changed. My Baez/Judy Collins influence disappeared." Still, the stress of the pregnancy increased in the first two months of 1965, as Joni came to term. Single and unable to work, she moved in with Vicky Taylor, a fellow singer she had befriended, who had a small apartment near Yorkville. Joni gave birth on February 19, to a daughter she named Kelly Dale Anderson.

Caring for the child completely drained their already limited resources a month

CONT. ON PG. 16

WHISPERING PINES CONT. FROM PG. 14

later, so Taylor came up with the idea for them to perform as a duo called Day & Night, a highly appropriate name given that Taylor's long, straight black hair contrasted sharply with Joni's. "Vicky was the only one on the folk scene who was nice to me," Joni said. "Every time she went to an audition, Vicky would insist on dragging me along." The pair made the rounds of the usual Yorkville open stages, until Joni was able to land her own gig at the Penny Farthing, a new venue started by the Half Beat's founders, John and Marilyn McHugh, which reserved its downstairs room for unproven local acts. After a respectable opening, Joni appeared there on an almost nightly basis throughout most of April. During one of these nights, a visiting folk singer from Detroit named Chuck Mitchell, who was playing upstairs, caught some of Joni's set and was instantly smitten. Her emotional vulnerability left her with little defense against Mitchell's advances, but over the course of the next few days he professed his true love for her, newborn baby and all. Mitchell lived up to his words by proposing to Joni as he was about to return to Detroit, and she, undoubtedly seeing no better options,

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— JONI MITCHELL

accepted. The wedding took place on June 19, in Mitchell's hometown of Rochester, Michigan. At the reception afterward, the newlyweds marked the occasion by singing a few songs together. Three days later, they were on stage together at the Folk Cellar in Port Huron, and on July 20 they began an engagement at Chuck's regular haunt, the Chess Mate in Detroit.

Their shared musical ambition soon took precedence over family life, and it became evident that Chuck was not about to live up to his commitment to raise the baby. Joni had already considered giving her daughter up for adoption before she

met Chuck, but, as more travelling loomed on the horizon, she came to the painful conclusion that the child would be better off in a more traditional family.* As Joni recovered from the trauma of giving up her child, Estelle Klein, head of the Toronto Folk Guild, offered her a last-minute invitation to play the 1965 Mariposa Folk Festival. Now relocated to the Innis Lake campground, in the rural community of Caledon, northwest of Toronto, she was billed as Joni Anderson, and performed to her largest audience yet, alongside Gordon Lightfoot, Ian & Sylvia, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Phil Ochs, and blues legend Son House. In some ways, the weekend was Joni's first real test to see if she belonged in the same league as the established artists. And, at least in Klein's view, she failed. Afterward, Klein told Joni in plain terms that she was timid and unoriginal. ☐

*Kelly Anderson was adopted by a Toronto couple and renamed Kilauren Gibb. She would not learn her mother's identity until 1997, after initial inquiries about a "folk singer from Saskatchewan who has moved to the United States" eventually led to a much-publicized reunion.

Welcome New Members!

The S.A.C. welcomes the following new members who have joined since APRIL, 2009

Alberta

Kirk Baldwin
Matt Burgener
Oscar Coronado
Adrian Emond
William Fielder
Mike Gunn
Tara Harbaruk
Sean Harley
Anthony Hoffmann
Wendy Jensen
Adam Palmer
Verlin Rau
Karen

Romanchuk
Tanya Ryan
Lucie Sauvageau
Bryan Simms
Kelly Simon
Debbie Spence
Taryn Stauffer
Geoff Stupar
Will White
Sandra Young
Neil Bischoff
Jenny Breukelman
Wallie Burke
Patrick Chen
Jason Cohen
Bruce Coughlan
Nathaniel Epp

Eliane Hamel
British Columbia
Deanna Cartea
Hamilton
Paul Hyde
Tone Indbryn
Ita Yee Ping Jong
Stephen Lester-Smith
Gary Nichols
Katie Ormiston
Alan Robertson
Mark Stefanuk
Jay Thomson

Nova Scotia

Yassamine Abboud
Don Barkhouse
Daniel Bevin
Daniel Cormier
Caroline "CJ" Fraser
Norma MacDonald
Hector (Gerry) McDaniel
Arta Rexhepi
Marjorie Sleep

Ontario

Derek Altmann
Roderick Anson
Bryan Arndt
Sandra Bisson
Stephen Bowes
John Brimson
Derek Brin
Sarah Calvert
Mike Campbell
Alex Ciccone
Alex Cobbett
Anne Cobham
Neil Cotton
Matthew Diamante
Chattrisse
Dolabaille
Dennis Dolloff

Kevin Downs
Christophe Elie
Darryl Erickson
Karina Eskandary
Nicholas Fedor
Isaac Fraser
John Grace
Ashley Grafe
Laura-Beth Gray
Benjamin Green
Graham Greer
Donna Guerra
Vincent Halfhide
Kenneth Michael Harris
Lori Hirst
Nadia Hosko
Isabelle Ingles
Stacey Kaniuk
Sharron Katz
Shirley Anne Kennedy
Carol Klina
Svetlana
Kukushkina
Tim Kwiatkowski
Lise Larocque
Bernadette Lavoie
Gerald Lavoie
Patrick Lawton
Liam Ledgerwood

Quebec

Matthew Leverty
Jane Lewis
Raymond W Lodge
Kim Logue
Will Matthews
Betty May
Margo McLean
Brett McNaueal
John Medland
Luke Metzler
Isaac Mitchell
Josie Moncada
Joann Murr
Colin Neilson
Brian O'Connell
Anthony Panepinto
Maddy Rodriguez
Daniel Rosen
Paddy Savage
Stephanie Savage
Laska Sawade
JP Saxe
Carver Milton
Scobie
Devin Signer
Marissa Soragnese
Leslie Stahl
Susan Stevenson
Ryan Tay
Marijan Vranic
Ann Vriend

Saskatchewan

Arthur Wachnik
Gary Wiebe
Peter Andrew Williams
Randy Young
Leandra Zappacosta
Jennifer Zentner

Yukon

George Azzi
Marty Clarke
Francois Dufault
John Fuoco
Wendy-Marie
Lewis-Lappos
Roberto Marrone
Gabrielle Papillon
Strasfeld

USA

Bill Land
Trevor Ross
Max McVey
Eugene Ianham
Mindem
Steve Slade