



DR. JONI  
Music icon  
honoured by  
McGill, D1

# The Gazette

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## A doctor's advice

After receiving her honorary Doctor of Music degree last night, Joni Mitchell urged McGill University music students not to ignore emotion in favour of intellect: 'Think about balance in art'

BERNARD PERUSSE  
THE GAZETTE

Finally, there's a good reason for Joni Mitchell's friends to shake their heads and say she's changed: she's Dr. Mitchell now.

Breaking from the solemnity of McGill University's convocation ceremony, where she was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree last night, the legendary singer-songwriter adopted a Bugs Bunny voice and said, "From here on in, everybody will have to say, 'Eh, what's up, doc?'" Turning serious, Mitchell spent most of her brief speech urging the graduates of the music faculty to "think about balance in art," and not to ignore music's emotional side in favour of its intellectual content. "The music I like is a balance of opposites," she said.

Earlier in the day, at a McGill symposium devoted to her art and music, Mitchell delighted fans by attending the event's closing round-table discussion at Redpath Hall. Meeting well-wishers and media before taking a seat in the front row, she addressed her reason for attending the ceremony: "It's recognition for my total work," she said. "That's why I'm here." Asked whether she likes to talk about her work, she said music is a

"To put it through the intellectual process does it a disservice, like translating from any language into another language. You lose something in the translation," she said.

During the round-table event, performance artist John Kelly, playing a tape of himself doing an impression of the singer, looked down at Mitchell and said, "This is so surreal," drawing hearty laughter from the honouree. She was also visibly delighted by Village Voice critic Greg Tate's reading of his humorous piece *How Black Is Joni Mitchell?*

At times, the singer offered comments from her seat, at one point reminiscing about the genesis of Mingus, her 1979 collaboration with jazz giant Charles Mingus, who died before the album was completed. "The first thing he said was, 'You that skinny-ass folk singer,'" Mitchell said. He then informed her that the strings on *Paprika Plains* were out of tune, she said, and a friendship was born.

While talking about a Starbucks compilation she recently put together, Mitchell threw in an impression of Bob Dylan singing *Positively 4th Street* — a track that didn't make her cut.

She also talked about her early days as a folksinger. "The music that I loved was very far away from what I was making,"

When I finally did get a band to play my music, it was a jazz band. Then I went into a minority camp, and eventually I lost my airplay. After working with Mingus, I never got played on the radio, but that was a necessary part of my education."

If there was a recurring theme at the symposium, it was the impossibility of pigeonholing Mitchell's catalogue, which includes folk, rock, jazz, big-band, worldbeat and orchestral music. There were plenty of minutiae: one 45-minute panel discussion focused exclusively on the 1971 song *The Last Time I Saw Richard*, with speaker Daniel Sonenberg noting that he had no time to address the song's piano intro.

But the academic approach worked for David Ryshpan, a third-year jazz piano performance student at McGill, who said he knew the hits through his parents, but truly discovered Mitchell when he embraced jazz. Ryshpan wrote a big-band arrangement of Mitchell's *A Case of You*, which was played at last night's ceremonies by the McGill Music Faculty Jazz Orchestra 1, among other tributes arranged by McGill students, with Mitchell listening. "To have my complete deconstruction of a Joni Mitchell tune played for Joni Mitchell is a tremendous honour," Ryshpan said.