

Joni Mitchell: Our sad-eyed lyricist of love

Review by

GALE GARNETT

TORONTO singer-songwriter David Sereda thinks so highly of Joni Mitchell's work that he stages entire evenings where various singers gather in a club to perform her songs. She has also received the ultimate conference of iconic status: A drag performer "does" her.

I was a teenage actor-songwriter when **Joni Mitchell** was offered up to my ears, heart and mind. She came, invisibly tethered, through the singing delivery system of Judy Collins, to another Canadian melodized poet, Leonard Cohen. She wrote Canada-California, which was where I lived: He wrote Montreal-Europe, which was who I was. Her songs painted, in layers of colour-laden images. He philosophized, meditated out loud, told stories. Her voice was too pan-octaval for my ears to hold; his was a butch, broken growl. I was already in love with Georges Brassens and Gilbert Beaud. My father was dead. I went with Leonard.

Now comes this beautifully made book, with more than 250 poems/lyrics. These days, there tends to be a CD-ROM with books about fishing tackle. This book, about songs, asks to stand alone, strongly rhythmic but tuneless; words unto themselves.

I suspect that David Sereda's "Mitchell-Night" people can provide the music for most, if not all, the lyrics. Along with most North Americans of my generation, I know the melodies for the megahit and/or anthemic ones: *Clouds*, *Woodstock*, *Big Yellow Taxi*. I know *Marcie* because it's a perfect small film, and *A Free Man in Paris* because it's Euro. Filmstuff and Eurostuff take up residence in my memory, make a place for themselves.

Otherwise, I do not know this

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JONI MITCHELL

The Complete Poems and Lyrics

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material. I am, therefore, able to receive these poems as any songless poetry would be received. And much of it, indeed *most* of it, works wonderfully, rolling its images like rocks, pebbles and shiny, multicoloured stones, down the mountains to be looked at, touched, studied and stacked.

Some of these images are richly Canadian, while also linking us to something Scandinavian — what John Ralston Saul calls our "Nordicity."

I awoke today and found the frost perched on the town.

It hovered in a frozen sky, then it gobbled summer down . . . Apply the fire with kindling now.

I'll pull the blankets up to my chin.

I'll lock the vagrant winter out.

And fold my wandering in . . ."

Urge For Going

The poems/lyrics, spanning the years 1968-1996, allow for a changing of shifts in language, culture and female life. Mitchell's recent reunion with the daughter whom she, as a too-young mother, gave up for adoption, gives added depth and poignancy to *Little Green*, which now reads as a protective talisman, tied to a child left on a safer doorstep; this is sisterly-familiar territory to any of us who are or were simultaneously intoxicated by eroticism and emancipation: "We love our livin', but not like we love our freedom" (*Help Me*).



Mitchell: rows and flows of lyrics and poems.

Some of the early songwords refer to lovers as "my old man," reminding us that Rolling Stone magazine once voted Mitchell Old Lady of the Year. As with all seemingly autobiographical material, the stories, poetically rendered, will probably lead to some speculation as to which lyric is about

which pop star. It's a snoopy nuisance, but we've been re-imprinted that way by our tabloided, Internetted world.

Much of Mitchell's writing is about lovers and love affairs. Virtually all of it is about beginnings or endings (that's probably true of most love

songs; in the "middle" of a relationship, lovers are too busy being and doing to take notes). I think these are her best work. When she tries for "bigger" themes or "social conscience," her heart's in the right place, but the images become uncharacteristically clichéd — "golden boys," "image makers," "Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief," "boob tube" (*Fiction*) — or calisthenic and incomprehensible (*Pirate of Penance*).

There are also some presentational problems. The reader is told these are poems and lyrics, but there is no way of knowing if all the poems are also songs, or when each one was written. Those who may want to look up a specific poem/lyric, or to compare the treatments of a similar theme, would benefit from an alphabetized index. There is a discography, but that cannot serve the same purpose, and only contains Mitchell's own recordings; it would be interesting to know the range of other artists who've sung her songs.

As well, it seems this handsome book could've made the space for a more complete biography. Nothing radical; a page, rather than a paragraph. There is some very powerful material here, and those of us who come in late want to know more about who it is we're meeting.

For the millions of North Americans who've been singing along with **Joni Mitchell** for years, this book will be a treasure. For the rest of us, even the carping desire for more information means we've suddenly been given a new and surprising gift.

Gale Garnett is an actor, writer and director; 75 of her 150 songs have been recorded and she's won one Grammy Award.