

# CROSS CURRENT

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## *An artist talks about coming back and having a comeback*

HERE'S a story to tell about **Joni Mitchell** coming to Saskatoon last week to speak to the Canadian Conference of the Arts symposium on arts education. The moral's a little elusive, but it's about coming back and having a comeback.

Mitchell returned to her home town, and spoke, without notes, about her impression of how artists come to be. It was a pretty old-fashioned view: the artist is born, not made; the artist embraces the irrational and mystical, and is compelled to create, despite obstacles.

Most of the audience — which included a lot of arts administrators and bureaucrats — were young enough to be fans of the 47-year-old songwriter. A generation that grew up on **Joni Mitchell**, especially her work from the late sixties and early seventies — songs like *Both Sides Now*, *Woodstock*, *Big Yellow Taxi*, had spent high-school and college with such albums as *Court and Spark* and *Blue* and *For the Roses*. When her work became more experimental through the late seventies, she lost much of her audience.

Most of the crowd in Saskatoon basked in her celebrity, charmed by her openness and the rich detail in her stories of her childhood. She took questions from the floor until no one could think of anything more to ask.

"Of course this is home," she told them. "Like Neil Young said, it's the places where all my changes happened. The clouds scudding across the sky. The green in spring, which is the best green I know."

Others in the crowd, especially the visual artists (who were perhaps irritated by Mitchell's confidence that she's a serious painter as well as a musician), were not so impressed with the speech. Several of them left the room and slipped down to the hotel bar to discuss more important things. They did not need a rich pop star who left the country 20 years ago to rehash clichés about the Canadian inferiority complex.

You could see their point of view. There are deeper problems here: how can artists who stay in this country live, when the public, as represented by its government, treats them like freeloaders and dilettantes? They spent their day at seminars, asking why they were eternally begging and thanking the government, when the government should be thanking them for the work they do for this country. What does **Joni Mitchell** know about surviving as a Canadian artist today?

**B**UT Mitchell was, at least, a good guest. She wasn't playing the reclusive pop princess that night. Every journalist who just needed two minutes for a quote got a half-hour immersion in her stream-of-consciousness. Most of the people who just wanted to say hi seemed to end up exchanging life stories with her.

As evening wore on, she seemed even more animated, as if she were adrenaline surfing. At 11:30, she said goodnight to her mother. By 2 a.m., when the hotel staff was busy rolling up tablecloths and vacuuming the floors, she was one of the last stragglers at the tables, smoking, talking animatedly, exchanging information and ideas with conference delegates. One immediate result is that this year, Nightcap Theatre's Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan festival will do *As You Like It*, set in Saskatchewan in the hippie era, to the music of **Joni Mitchell**.

Maybe Mitchell is always like this, but there seemed to be some special circumstances. She was obviously excited to be home. And she was riding high with the recent reviews of her latest album, *Night Ride Home*, which was released about a month ago. *Night Ride Home* looks like her first big success in years.

Of course, some artists are born, not made, and will keep working, despite hardship and little recognition; but without the recognition of an audience, it's an exercise in frustration, like making love to a shadow.

By her openness in Saskatoon, more than her ideas, Mitchell was living proof of how deeply artists and audiences need each other.

At the Calgary airport, on the last day of the conference, a friend and I ran into a slightly bedraggled Mitchell waiting between planes, on her way back to her home in Los Angeles. She was still in a good mood, talking happily about her mother's birthday party. She talked about how the waiters in L.A. have started smiling at her again in restaurants, now that her record was getting airplay.

"I'm glad you're back," my friend said to her, referring to the new record's success.

She gave him a quick look, frowned and answered.

"But I never left. You did."