

JONI — A TRIBUTE

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By Dr. Daniel J. Levitin

For two nights, we celebrate Joni's 75th birthday with a tribute to her and her music, the kind of thing she has rarely participated in up to this point. But 75 is a special occasion that commands special attention. At 75, Joni is still young of mind and spirit, full of wit and humor. And, charmingly, she still enjoys watching cartoons (we share a special affection for *Looney Tunes* and *Puss in Boots*).

Writers have difficulty capturing what is special about Joni's music because they tend, myopically, to focus on just one element—the lyrics, the exotic chords, the tunings, the melodies, her role as cultural or generational spokesperson, that smile. It is all of these together, and it is more. What's missing from most accounts is the way her music makes us feel: we're listening, but in the way those songs stay with us, sometimes for a lifetime.

Joni's music uniquely shows the power of music to teach us about ourselves. Prior to her, we had Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, pop-songs that told a story, but one that was about people who were clearly over-the-top characters in a story (think "Mack the Knife" or "Oklahoma!"). Joni's songs, whether they were actually about her or not (she says they weren't, but perhaps she is being wryly coy) revealed the inner workings of a keenly analytical mind turned inward, plumbing the depths of what it means to think and what it means to feel... what it means to be human, with our flaws, our frustrated desires and our disappointments. We've learned to better understand our own emotions by listening to her write and sing about hers. I think you'd have to go back 2500 years to King David (the Psalms of the Old Testament) to find music that explored emotion as well as Joni does. I intentionally didn't say her music conveys emotion, which opera and so many popular songs do. Joni introduced something deeper, the exploration of emotion through four different lenses. She applies an analysis of the intellectual, spiritual, physical and visceral sides of a story. Anyone else with her gift of words might have let the music play second fiddle. The astonishing thing is that Joni's chords, melodies and the vocal performance are all equal partners with the words, reinforcing them and adding to them.

in multidimensional ways. Any single one of those elements of her music could stand on its own and still be better than anything else out there. But she pulls them all together, organically, into a unified whole. The result is breathtaking. I fell in love with Joni through her music in the late 1960s, and she never stopped surprising me, album by album. To talk of genres with Joni is to miss the point. It is 10 genres, and it is its own genre. *Mingus*, an ambitious collaboration with the great jazz bassist, was seen as a departure by many, but, in fact, she had sown the seeds of jazz already through collaborations with Tom Scott, Larry Carlton, Jaco Pastorius and others in earlier albums. And, if one listens closely, her music brought together the chordal play of Miles Davis and Bartók. Her vocal phrasing has the fluidity of Billie Holiday, the wit of Annie Ross, the romanticism of Edith Piaf. There's rock, African drumming, folk, ambient and art music, classical strains and rock across the catalog. I met her 25 years ago, and we became friends. After falling in love with her music, I fell in love with her. And who wouldn't? I have never met anyone like her. She perfectly balances the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual, hovering over each sector, never staying too long in any one of them, maintaining an astonishing sense of balance and harmony. Talking to her leads to the most stimulating conversations imaginable. And so charismatic! I didn't know people could be that way. And perhaps they can't: I've never met anyone else like her, and I've never heard of anyone who has.

In 200 years, I think we will still be singing some of the music we love today: the Psalms, Lennon & McCartney, Cole Porter, Mozart and Mitchell. And I think our descendants will still reserve a special place in their hearts for Joni. They will be happy to let her take them to wherever she wants to go because they know it will be a fantastic ride, that they'll be entertained, and they'll come back to their lives with some insight, warm-heartedness and hope they didn't have before. As two fans once told Joni, "before there was Prozac, there was you." As a psychologist, I would say the best cure for depression may be to take two Joni Mitchells and call me in the morning.