



THE UNIVERSE OF JONI

By Jörn Weisbrodt

"Naturally, like most humans, I love Joni," Chrissie Hynde wrote to me when I asked her to be in these shows. In my head, her reply turned into, "If you are human, you love Joni Mitchell." Therefore, "barbarians" would not love Joni. Loving Joni Mitchell is a sign of being human, a sign for humanity. Her songs probe into the deepest and soar to the highest points of our existence.

There is an unprecedented marriage of intimacy and universality that permeates all her work. Her art compares with no other, but it relates to all of us. Joni Mitchell is a wanderer and explorer in a Nietzschean sense (the German philosopher is one of her favorite writers), a cartographer of the heart and mind. The uncharted territory is her home, yet she reveals it as familiar to us. I believe I speak for more than myself in saying these shows are a homecoming for all of us. Her music makes us feel human, complete and at home, despite the fact that her "default setting" is that of the traveler. She longs for distance, for eternity as expressed in many of her lyrics: "clouds at icy altitudes," "skate away," "wanderlust," "porous with travel fever." That desire for and ability to think about infinity is what differentiates us from all living creatures. There is no one that nails infinity better than Joni Mitchell. And only the British painter J.M.W. Turner could be called her equal with clouds. "God is alive in Joni Mitchell" someone scrawled across a poster for shows she performed in March 1968 at Canterbury House. Leonard Cohen described her as "Queen Undisputed of Mind Beauty."

And, at the same time, there is no one who is more down to earth than Joni. The homes she creates, the gardens, her paintings, are far from being "ice cream castles in the air;"

they show a deep commitment to nature, friendship, simplicity and harmony. There is no person with a greater smile on her face when you arrive for a visit.

Chrissie unfortunately couldn't be in the show. But many others are here. These shows were a year-and-a-half in the making. I asked Joni whether she would give me her blessing to let The Music Center put on these shows celebrating her 75th birthday. She did. Then, it was obvious to me that Brian Blade had to be my first call, to ask him to be the music director and put the band together. In pop music, people generally feel that as long as you stick more or less to the melody and the lyrics of a song, you are properly interpreting that song. Not with Joni's music. Harmonies, chord voicings and arrangements are absolutely integral to what constitutes the song. Nobody would dream of changing the piano parts for Schubert's "Winterreise" and still claim they are singing his compositions. Brian knows this.

In January, my husband, our daughter and I visited Joni who loved playing pool with our then 6-year-old child. Over the clicking sounds of the colorful balls hitting each other, I asked Joni if there were any singers she would enjoy hearing perform her songs. Many of those names she gave me are in the cast today. Music producer Danny Kapilian—whom I also worked with on a similar show in 2013 for Joni's 70th birthday at Massey Hall, as part of Toronto's Luminato Festival—then joined the team. Many others followed to help, advise and support, all fans or long-time friends of her music, culminating in the gatherings and celebrations today. When you enter into Joni's world, you enter into a giant network of friends, so you cannot help but feel intimately connected to her. We are all here tonight as her friends.

Joni herself performed twice at The Music Center's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. In 1972, after the release of *For the Roses*, the *Los Angeles Times* headline read, "Joni Mitchell in a Giant Living Room," and, two years later, after *Court and Spark*, the headline read, "New Joni sparks Dancing in the Aisles." The contemplative and the ecstatic, the intimate and the extrovert, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, "thaw out or freeze" as she says in "Hejira," probably my favorite song. These are the poles of our existence, even though we often try to whittle those extremes down for our own comfort, sanity and survival. But not so her. She is the kite that flies high among lightning and thunder between the sky and the earth, and we receive and cherish the light and energy she sends down to earth.

"You are my favorite actor in the world," I told the great Austrian actor Walter Schmidinger years ago. He replied with a sarcastic smile, "Why not the universe?" Continuing my journey of faux-pas, on the day of the first show in Toronto, overcome with emotion, I told Joni in her hotel room, "You are my favorite female artist." Her reply was, "Why female?" And she is right, why female. The greatest art is neither male nor female; it is human, and it is otherworldly. Joni, tonight I think we are all here to say, you are our favorite artist. (To which she might say, "Why artist?") Happy birthday!

Jörn Weisbrodt is the artistic producer to The Music Center and creator of these shows. He is also the artistic director of ALL ARTS, a streaming platform and broadcast channel dedicated to Arts and Culture by WNET and former artistic director of the Luminato Festival in Toronto.