

## riffing joni

“ I was in a café smoking,  
somewhere, and a girl  
came up to me and said,  
‘I’m a manic depressive.  
I love your music, but I hate  
pictures of you. Every time  
I see you, you’re smiling  
and it makes me mad! ”

-joni mitchell, 1997



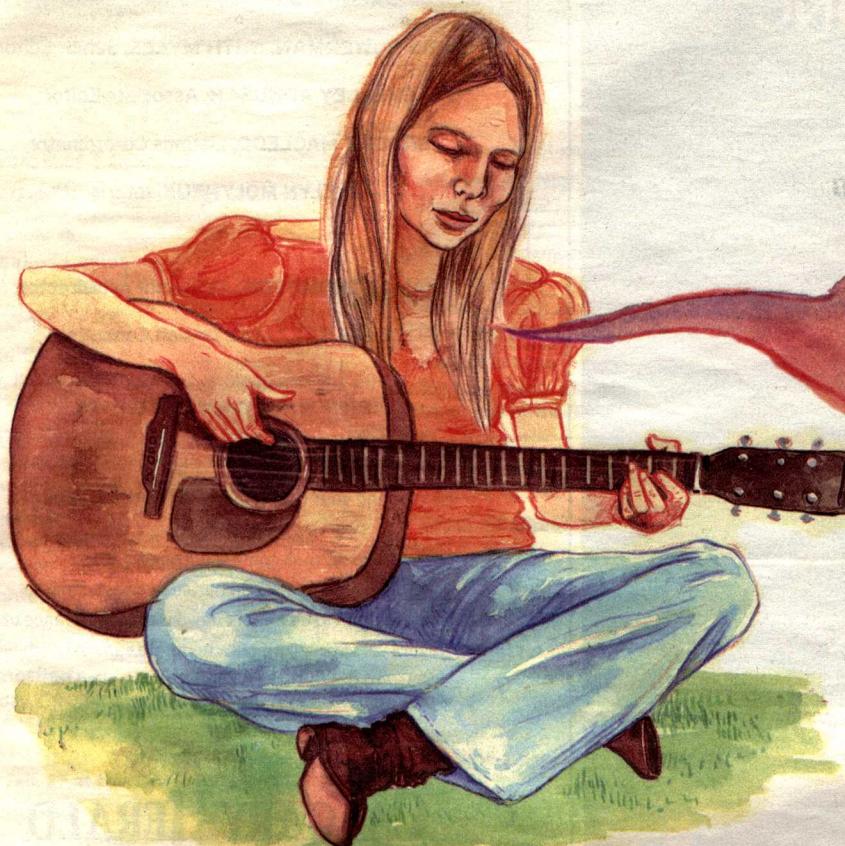
JONI MITCHELL'S ARTISTIC HOMECOMING : Her New Ballet + Her Quirks + Her Musical Babies + Her Roots

Exclusively in the  
calgary herald

# swerve

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"The fragile scarecrow image of her that comes through on TV in no way prepares one for the mature, sexy realities of Miss Mitchell in the flesh"



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Joni Mitchell is here, there and everywhere right now—which makes this the perfect time to submerge ourselves in our prairie muse.

BY SHELLEY YOUNGBLUT, SHELLEY ARNUSCH AND JACQUIE MOORE

COVER BY JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (TAKEN NOV. 28, 1968 FOR VOGUE)

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# joni's babies



She's a bit like the biblical Abraham,  
who was told that his descendants would  
be counted like the stars in the sky.

by shelley arnusch

**t**here was a time when I thought my best friend was Joni Mitchell's long lost daughter. It was back in 1994, the year the Canadian folk icon first spoke publicly about the baby she had conceived while an art student in Calgary, before moving to Toronto, where the young songwriter carried the pregnancy to term and gave the child up for adoption.

Natasha, my road-trip partner in an early '70s model Pontiac Valiant with a defective windshield defrost and a supply of carefully constructed mix-tapes, was adopted. And while she wasn't a musician, she *was* an artist; she painted beautifully and could cross-hatch in black ink like Edward Gorey. There was even a like-mother-like-daughter hippie sensibility shared by Joni and her—at least I imagined the down-to-earth woman with the razorblade cheekbones and the long skirts to be much like the epic-novel-reading, twenty-something nature girl in a chunky-knit cardigan, hiking boots and a favourite white T-shirt screen-printed with a black-and-white image of Einstein.

It turned out Natasha's birthday was off by a few years. The dates weren't even close. And yet, the connection I had forged in my mind between her and the legendary Canadian songstress was unrelenting. To this day I still think of Natasha as a descendant of Joni Mitchell. Some of it has to do with my lingering mental picture of my friend with long hair, parted in the middle, framing icy-blue eyes and an easy smile—a look Mitchell pretty much defined in the first decades of her career. But mostly, it was Natasha's unique artistic/creative side and an

inherent defiance of convention, traits that would inevitably lead her into the heart of the Kootenays and out of my life, much the way I imagine Mitchell took leave of Calgary in 1964, setting out first for Toronto, but with California on her distant horizon.

The real adopted daughter was eventually revealed to be an Ontario-raised model named Kilauren Gibb. But blood tests and DNA sampling can't account for spiritual lineage, and in that regard Joni Mitchell is a bit like the biblical Abraham, who was told that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It's been decades since the singer last made her home on Canadian soil, but the ground she broke has been fertile for a new generation of Canadian singer-songwriters—her daughters, who, whether intentionally or not, have grown up in her image. Take Leslie Feist, for starters: another prairie girl who has gone on to have the world on her guitar string, embracing lounge grooves the same way Mitchell ran wild with jazz riffs. On stage, as comfortable performing all alone with a guitar as she is playing with the boys in her Broken Social Scene crew, Feist recalls the way Mitchell was always able to hold court solo, or be the diamond in the scruff, playing alongside The Band without ever being “with the band” in the Pamela Des Barres sense of the phrase.

Joni's gender-busting musicianship earned her accolades as a guitar hero, known for intricate tunings that often changed with every new song. And she continues to inspire those who have come after her. “She was always in the boys club and it was never a barrier,” says Calgary singer-songwriter Dolly Sillito, a self-professed Joni fan and disciple since the age of 17. “She was always respected wherever she went, even when she was very young. She must have been very sensitive, you can tell by her writing, but she commands so much respect in her voice. Not just her literal voice but her inner voice, as an artist. “If you look at her play, she's so frickin' confident you just know that's why she's on earth.”

You might get the same feeling from Emily Haines, the bewitching frontwoman for the band Metric, who, with the release of her debut solo album last year, is also proving to be an enigmatic solo performer. Blond bangs fall in her eyes as she bends over her piano and deconstructs contemporary kept women with plaintive poetry, the way

Mitchell, a curtain of blond brushing her face, once mused about a woman who was too busy being free to worry about getting engaged. Hot enough to troll the streets of Sundance with the Hollywood set, Haines instead is nowhere the photographers are, more interested in holing up somewhere and making music than making herself a star. The same could be said for Mitchell who has a reputation for being a recluse, because of what appears to be a general disdain for the fame game. You can picture a future Haines blossoming into a similar Lady of the Canyon, preferring her pool and private Guy Maddin screenings to the red carpet, emerging only for worthy collaborations or to celebrate a new recording.

“It's been decades since the singer last made her home on Canadian soil. But the ground she broke has been fertile for a new generation of Canadian singer-songwriters—her daughters, who, whether intentionally or not, have grown up in her image. Take Leslie Feist, for starters.”

There are more of Joni's babies out there, travelling the road once travelled by the woman who wrote the definitive song about the journey. “She's always been a musician for the right reasons,” says Toronto singer Serena Ryder, speaking from her touring van on the lonely highway that spans the abyss between Winnipeg and Regina. “She does it not because she wants to be famous but because she needs to perform and she needs her art. And I can relate to that 100 percent because that's the exact reason why I'm doing it.” As the 24-year-old describes her current fascination with Mitchell's earlier works, Ryder's soulful alto flows seamlessly into “I am on the lonely road and I am traveling, traveling,” then reverts back to her speaking voice without skipping a beat. “In terms of native spirituality, I would definitely see her as an elder,” says the Toronto chanteuse, “but I think she's had that in her since she was young. So it has nothing to do with her age, the magic and the wisdom that I associate her with.”

Thanks to how easy it has become to dig up old concert footage on YouTube, Joni Mitchell has, in a way, become ageless. Images from her days as a dulcimer-playing ingenue in a baby-pink frock blend with those of the 63-year-old folk eminence, recently inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame. You don't need to be a musician to understand that her independence, ingenuity, and innate sense of how to create something that people will remember, cry over, and hold inside them have made her an icon. I'm no musician, nor am I adopted, for that matter, but one day I hope they'll all think that I'm Joni Mitchell's baby girl.