

MacPherson: We've seen Joni Mitchell from both sides now

BY LES MACPHERSON, THE STARPHOENIX JULY 27, 2013



Jan. 2000 - Singer songwriter Joni Mitchell laughs as she talks about her new album, which features her singing some pop standards, not her songs.

Photograph by: Kirk McKoy, LA Times

If the worst Saskatoon has to deal with is Joni Mitchell calling us extremely bigoted, we are pretty well off.

Before we get all defensive, we must consider the source. This is the same woman who famously lamented the paving of paradise and then moved to Los Angeles, pavement capital of the world. Maybe that's why she always laughs at the end of that song.

The weight of Mitchell's unkind and gratuitous pronouncements on Saskatoon are further diminished by time and distance. She hasn't lived here in 50 years.

Even if Saskatoon is extremely bigoted, she would not be someone you would expect to know anything about it. You might as well ask Gordie Howe about the city's music scene.

We should not take too seriously Mitchell's unkind remarks. She is a great artist, and great artists are not like normal people. Artists sometimes say and do things for effect, as they might turn a phrase in a song lyric or apply a dab of paint to a canvas. What they sometimes fail to appreciate is that they cannot take back a careless remark as easily as they can edit an awkward lyric or paint over an

unfortunate smear.

There also is ambiguity around Mitchell's characterization of Saskatoon as not just bigoted, but "extremely bigoted." Compared to what, she did not say. Is Saskatoon so much more bigoted than other cities, such as Los Angeles, where Mitchell chooses to live? I don't think so. I wonder what other cities Mitchell would identify as less bigoted than this one, and what they're doing that we're not doing.

(This is by the way, but I came across in my research a funny nomination for a town in Oklahoma as the most bigoted of communities: "They don't even like white people there.")

I'm not sure, anyway, how you would measure and compare levels of bigotry in different urban centres, or even if it is possible. No one has even tried, apparently. If it can't be blamed on global warming, research grants are not available.

Mitchell invokes the charge of bigotry, I think, to distance herself from Saskatoon. The city has not seen fit to monumentally honour her, so she casually discredits it to show how little she cares. But we already have seen how little she cares. Her profile in Saskatoon since she moved away in 1965 has been so low as to be almost invisible. She doesn't make appearances. She doesn't do concerts here, ever. We've seen more here of Gene Simmons than of Joni Mitchell, and he's not even from Saskatoon.

That's fine. Mitchell owes this city nothing. She would have been just as successful if she had grown up in Regina or Winnipeg. If she wants to stay out of the limelight, good for her. I can think of one or two other artists who would not be remiss in following her lead.

By keeping her distance, however, Mitchell has built no constituency here to lead any kind of a move to honour her. Efforts to date have thus been missing the sustained push required to get anything done.

A big push needs people behind it. It was friends of Denny Carr, for instance, who arranged and paid for a statue of the late broadcaster jogging on the riverbank. It was friends and supporters of Ray Hnatyshyn who arranged and paid for the statue of the late Governor General. It's not our fault that Joni Mitchell has not cultivated enough friends and supporters here to do likewise. She describes as "laughable" the failed initiatives on her behalf, and she's right, but the laughter reflects more on her than on the city.

Mitchell says Saskatoon is "isolated and very unworldly and doesn't grasp the idea of honour." Ouch, ouch and ouch. That's a remarkable three shots in one breath, just one short of the record set by Don Rickles at a Dean Martin roast in 1984. Who would have imagined that Joni Mitchell one day would challenge Don Rickles?

Let's honour her, for heaven's sake, if only so she will quit badmouthing us.

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