

INDEPENDENT

Radar



02.11.2013

Nunn's National

The theatre's former boss on its 50 years of triumphs and trials

FILM Paul Giamatti 'I like playing spiky, weird people'

MUSIC Joni Mitchell The stars salute a music legend



THE INDISPENSABLE GUIDE TO ARTS & CULTURE



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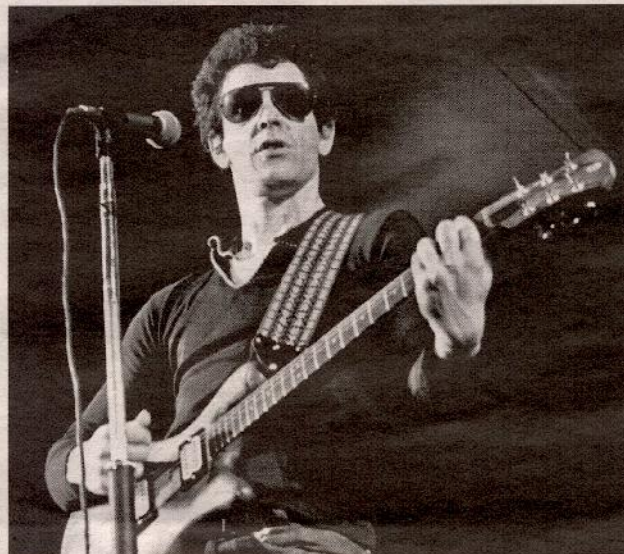
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THE WEEK IN ARTS

David Lister/Can we please lay the G-word to rest along with Lou?



Guitar hero: Lou Reed (above in 1977) was a talent whose greatness merits serious consideration; Louise Purnell (below)

The passing of Lou Reed was a sad moment for rock music. He was a unique talent and a pioneer in the fusion of rock (or pop as it then was) and art. But when I heard that he had died, I knew, just knew, that the G-word would inevitably be appearing.

Sure enough, the next morning in publications as geographically diverse as *USA Today*, the *South China Morning Post* and *The Times of India*, headlines about Lou Reed did not stint from using the G-word. Over here, *The Daily Telegraph's* esteemed rock critic didn't beat about the bush. No waiting until the 10th or 11th paragraph to draw his conclusion. In his opening words he proclaimed: "Lou Reed was a rock and roll genius."

It is a curious fact that cultural figures in death are rarely just unique talents, and never just talents, they are invariably geniuses. And if it's true of musicians, it is, for some reason, even truer of comedians. In life they may be comedians, in death they are always "a comic genius". But if comedy has the first claim on the state of genius, music does not lag far behind. Admittedly, acting geniuses are considerably rarer. Dance geniuses are almost unheard of. But tell some good jokes or write some terrific songs and one noun is assured in the coverage of your death.

I've never quite worked out why the arts claim a monopoly on the word. There don't seem to be any genius geographers, genius astronomers or, come to that, genius politicians. Even dead scientists seldom seem to merit the G-word, however high the praise of their achievements.

But the G-word is a dangerous one. It dulls any true appreciation of a particular talent, and ignores the various gradations in talent. Not everyone is a genius. In my view, you have to have a mighty strong case to extend the club beyond Shakespeare and Einstein.

It is also a little smug on the part of the arts and on the part of fans and critics to make the assumption that a high achiever in a field about which we are passionate is by definition a genius. One does a disservice to Lou Reed, all those other great dead musicians, and all those late comics, not to try to understand and appreciate their achievements and unique contribution, but instead to use a catch all label that in fact throws little light on greatness and the process by which an artist achieves greatness.

The G-word should be banned. Paradoxically, in being a substitute for genuine analysis and measured appreciation, it can belittle as much as praise.

Exit stage left, pursued by anonymity

Film and TV actors and actresses are easily remembered. The record of their work is there on the screen. But stage performers, especially those who do little screen work, tend to be forgotten. This is certainly true in the case of one of the National Theatre's early stars. Louise Purnell was a leading light in Laurence Olivier's Sixties company, transfixing audiences in a number of roles, not least as Abigail in *The Crucible*. But in all the words that I have read about the National's 50th birthday, I have not seen one single mention of her, and few now know who she is. However talented you are, and whatever impact you make on stage, if you leave the profession early and haven't diversified into film, you are likely to be forgotten 50 years hence. It's a slightly depressing but salutary lesson.

Concert audiences are bored? Ahem! I beg to differ

Delivering the Royal Philharmonic Society annual lecture on the future of classical music, Roger Wright, the controller of Radio 3 and director of the Proms, digressed to address the matter of coughing at concerts. He concluded: "Audiences only cough when they are uncomfortable or bored." Wrong, Roger. The cough at a classical music concert is a status symbol, an art form in itself. It is almost a mating ritual, a sign from one classical music regular to another that he or she knows exactly when to cough. He or she will, of course, only cough between movements when there is a symphony being performed. The cough proclaims that the cougher knows his music. Indeed, it is an expression of disdain for those who resist throat clearing between movements, for those non-coughers clearly do not know their music. Far from showing that an audience member is uncomfortable or bored, the cough, expertly delivered and judiciously timed, portrays an audience happy in its comfort zone, and showing its appreciation in the manner to which it has long been accustomed.

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'WE ARE GENERATION JONI'

A remarkable number of today's singer-songwriters and pop stars cite Joni Mitchell as an influence. As she prepares to celebrate her 70th birthday, they pay tribute to a singular talent

Few musicians are name-checked as an influence as often as Joni Mitchell. Long considered a legend, the Canadian singer-songwriter will be celebrating her 70th birthday this Thursday.

Legions of musicians from the generations that have followed her, including Ellie Goulding and Corinne Bailey Rae, have cited her influence. Other young talents, such as Laura Marling, brought up by parents with a deep love of Mitchell, Bob Dylan and Neil Young, have drawn comparisons to the star – a benchmark of melody, lyricism and vocal prowess in folk-pop since the mid-Sixties.

Joni Mitchell's lilting, melismatic vocals soar softly over piano or the gentle strumming of acoustic guitar. Her deft lyrical skill saw her intimately examine personal relationships on her most famous album, *Blue* (1971), in songs such as the evocative "The Last Time I Saw Richard"; she could achieve a rare complex shifting of emotions in a single song.

Here we speak to some of those musicians who continue to take her inspiration into their own music, be it electro-pop, folk, jazz-inflected folk, or the soft, soulful vocals that merge with experimental glitchy electronica. **ELISABRAY**



my music and it's hard to ignore her incredible musicianship. She's been one of the leading female musicians of the past 50 years and she's still so fresh. She has a unique sound and in that way she is really brave, she's not afraid to push boundaries. That's something we are seeing more of now; musicians who aren't afraid of change. Her albums influence me in different ways. I love *Ladies of the Canyon*. It sounds really naive and fresh. I also love *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* because it's really jazzy – almost Latin-American – and so different. Obviously *Blue* is incredible: so raw and heartfelt, and that strikes me as something I'd love to convey through my own music.



Gabrielle Aplin

Along with Leonard Cohen, Joni is one of the first artists I really listened to and took

inspiration from. What I love about her is that she takes all the things I love – poetry, art, music – and she combines them as a means of conveying her message. Her use of other media is really original and it's something that I aim to do myself. I think her diverse use of media is echoed in her lyrics, and what's important about her is that, rising to fame during the Sixties folk revival, she didn't simply focus her music on herself or on the boy she fancied – she made her music universally relevant, which makes it very real, timeless and inherently honest. That's something I try to put into my music. She is also very experimental; she puts her own stamp on her music, like in the organic sounds of *Ladies of the Canyon*. But I also think she is very careful with her music – it sounds incredibly thought out. For example, in "A Case of You", my favourite song of all time, she makes something incredibly beautiful out of something sad, just through the way she chooses to tune her guitar. I feel like she wants it to be perfect and it is perfect.



Elizabeth McGovern

It's no wonder Joni Mitchell found herself on "a lonely road, travelling, travelling, travelling". As a songwriter, she has always been in a league of her own. There is no one else. To say I reference her unconsciously in every song I write is to flatter myself dangerously. But she's in every pore of my being. *Blue*, *Court and Spark*, and *Miles of Aisles*, were only a few of the LPs I wore smooth from constant playing. To think of her again is to go back to a great era in music, when people looked to find words of interest in songs; words that meant something; that they had to think about. People now accept so much in their music that is, by comparison, either repetitive cliché, or totally meaningless claptrap.



Corinne Bailey Rae

I was introduced to *Blue* by [the songwriter] Rod Bowett after he had heard a demo of my song "Like a Star". "You will love this," he said. Immediately I was enfolded into a world of subtle longings, of "travelling, travelling, travelling", of confessional intimacy and feminine energy. I was struck by the conversational melodies, the death-defying leaps into high registers which shook the soul and sounded like birds. I couldn't believe the titles of her songs, so evocative of memories, especially "The Last Time I Saw Richard". These titles felt like permission to write about anything and anyone. Nothing was too romantic or too prosaic. Her songs have also defined particular places for me. In fact Laurel Canyon, where I am currently living while recording my new album has, through "California", become a metaphor for shaking the dust off your feet and trying something new; for not being afraid to fail, and believing one can take flight.



Rufus Wainwright

Be it her music, her lyrics or her stunning personality... the experience I had last June at Toronto's Luminato Festival of encountering all three of these elements together at the same time, live and in person, changed my life and the lives of everyone around me. She is a legend, and as with all legendary treasures – books, paintings, performers

and so on – one is willingly transformed and brought to a better place when placed in their creative path.



James Blake

Until writing my first album I'd only listened to *Blue*, and after the album was made I progressed in a reverse chronology to *Clouds* and *Song to a Seagull*. As embarrassing as it is to admit how little of her discography I actually have, I like the idea that I'll enjoy Joni's work over my lifetime, as though slowly peeling back the drape to uncover the larger picture. Meeting her assured me that the process will never be dull. She has a biting irony and we spent a lot of the evening laughing. Experiencing this side of her made me rethink some lyrics from *Clouds* and *Blue*. With her advice still fresh in my mind, on the plane home I wrote my second album, *Overgrown*.

Joni's music always reminds me that melody is flexible, and that if you want to reinvent yourself as she continually has, you should command it to bend and ebb and flow, and treat it as king. She is a great remedy to melodic block.



Katie Melua

The first song by Joni Mitchell that I heard was "Marcie". I remember being struck by how she had used the colours, and how she was able to tell a story and convey so much in just a few minutes. As an artist, she is intoxicating. Lyrically, she is dynamite.

I witnessed a friend going through a tumultuous love affair. He would listen to "A Case of You" (the orchestral version) and I saw how that song saved him. As a songwriter, that is something to aspire to – to be able to tell a story that might seem so personal to the writer yet can be shared by, and so deeply affect, the listener.



Jonathan Wilson

I'd say that what has consistently inspired me most about Joni is her relationship with jazz. I'm a massive jazz fan myself so it makes me so happy that despite the impending critical peril, she "went there". The records she made with Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter are just stunning to me, such a forward-thinking musical twist and a satisfying musical development in her career. These may be my favourite of all of her albums.

Where I obviously still love the chanteuse-with-acoustic-guitar, that side of Joni being perhaps the most instantly jaw-dropping, her voice mixed with Jaco's bass work, for example, is something I just love listening to. Her melodic and rhythmic prowess has always been essentially jazz to my ears, so adventurous and free.



Marika Hackman

I grew up with her music – my Mum was a massive fan so it will always have an effect on me. I don't know exactly what it is, but she'll always come through in