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Singer livens up Joni Mitchell conference

Scholars at McGill dissect work of songwriter

BY GRAEME HAMILTON

MONTREAL • It was a day devoted to serious scholarly analysis of Joni Mitchell's music. Her work is "a sonic document of feminism," one professor argued. A composer from Maine spent half an hour dissecting the structure of a single song.

Then, late in the afternoon, Ms. Mitchell walked into the McGill University conference hall, cameras flashed and the scholars suddenly went weak at the knees.

"It's striking," said Daniel Sonnenberg of the University of Southern Maine, who did his doctoral dissertation on Ms. Mitchell's music but has never met her. He wondered whether he would have been able to present his paper analyzing the 1971 song, *The Last Time I Saw Richard* had the song's author been in the room. "It's nerve-

wacking," admitted fellow Mitchell scholar Ann Powers, who had yet to present her paper.

Ms. Mitchell, 60, was in Montreal to receive an honorary degree from McGill last night, which the university said is the first such degree bestowed on her in Canada. The symposium leading up to the convocation ceremony drew about 100 people, most of them seemingly diehard fans. One young woman wore a Mitchell-esque beret and strummed a guitar during a coffee break.

Rick Malo, a Montreal jazz musician, bemoaned the fact that Ms. Mitchell — "a genius" — is not in the running for the CBC's Greatest Canadian contest. "She should be by herself," he said. "It's like the Italians ignoring Da Vinci."

Even before she arrived, the proceedings were not far removed from a love-in, with the academics stumbling over one another to sing Ms. Mitchell's praises. More often than not, they referred to her simply as Joni. "Even if Joni is ambivalent about her musical legacy, we're not," said Ms. Powers, senior cu-

rator of Seattle's Experience Music Project.

Ms. Mitchell, who was born in Alberta and raised in Saskatchewan, seemed touched by all the attention. However, speaking to reporters she made it clear that she does not have a lot of time for the kind of talk that occupied most of the day.

"You can't really talk about music," she said. "You can kind of skirt around it and hope that the language kind of lands close to what you mean, but it's an abstract art form. It's a way of conveying emotion directly, and to talk about it, to pull it through the intellectual process kind of does it a disservice, like translating from any language into another language, you lose something in the translation."

Organizers succeeded in breaking the somewhat heavy tone of the proceedings once Ms. Mitchell arrived. American performance artist John Kelly played a recording of himself singing Ms. Mitchell's *Woodstock*. (He opted not to show the video of his show, in which he dresses up as his idol, including a blond wig.)

Greg Tate, a black cultural critic who writes for the *Village Voice*, addressed the topic, "How Black is Joni Mitchell?" His conclusions seemed to delight the guest of honour.

"So black that black folk hear her as an inventor and not a vulture," Mr. Tate said. "So black that she's finally getting an honorary degree in her motherland after, what, four decades?"

Ms. Mitchell is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a companion of the Order of Canada.

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