

What makes Joni so unique? It's not simply academic

McGill confers honorary doctorate on singer, while musicologists dissect her work

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THE GAZETTE

Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till they decide to give you an honorary degree.

Singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, who cursed the paving of paradise in *Big Yellow Taxi* and penned an anthem for the hippie generation when she didn't get to Woodstock, is the toast of the town this week.

Tonight, she'll receive an honorary doctorate from McGill University and deliver the fall convocation address to the music faculty at Strathcona Hall — but not before scholars gather to dissect her artistic and cultural legacy at an academic symposium.

Seminars exploring "Joni Mitchell's Work as a Sonic Document of Feminism" and "How Black is Joni Mitchell?" sound alarmingly arcane to the fan who just likes Mitchell's poetic lyrics and unpredictable riffs. But peel back the jargon and experts are just trying to figure out what it is that sets Mitchell apart from rank-and-file folkies, pop stars and jazz singers.

For Lloyd Whitesell, a McGill music professor who is among the first academics to analyze Mitchell's work, one clue lies in the breadth of her talent — as a singer-songwriter, musician and ingenious, sophisticated composer. "She's always firing on all cylinders," said Whitesell, who is writing a book that looks at harmonic innovation in Mitchell's songs.

Throughout her career, Whitesell said, Mitchell has defied labels and musical categorés. From coffee-house beginnings in the 1960s to best-selling pop singer in the '70s to the mellow jazz and moody fusion of her later career, Mitchell has tuned her guitar in ways that make her sound extremely difficult to imitate. Yet dozens of performers, as distinct from one another as Sting and John Mellencamp, Sarah McLachlan and Prince, Elvin Costello and Kate Bush, Wynonna and Tori Amos, cite her as an influence and inspiration.

A multi-Grammy winner whose career has been enjoying a renaissance, Mitchell's work has been recorded by Judy Collins

and k.d. lang, Janet Jackson and Frank Sinatra.

"Joni Mitchell is not a joiner. She resisted boundaries," Whitesell said. "She rejects being described as a feminist singer; but hers is a strong, independent woman's voice."

He suspects she also bristles at being described as a Canadian nationalist — although many of her songs evoke memories of winter landscapes and growing up on the Prairies.

David Brackett, another conference organizer and a McGill professor who focuses on pop music, said Mitchell is important for her distinctive musical

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style, complex harmonies and accomplished guitar playing.

Just as important, he said, she was the first female artist to incorporate autobiographical songwriting innovations that had been made popular by Bob Dylan in the early 1960s.

As early as her first album, Brackett said, Mitchell wrote about disillusionment with marriage with what was clearly a woman's point of view. "She was singing these songs about relationships with psychological acuity and depth, offering insights into the nuances of relationships."

At another convocation ceremony tomorrow, McGill will award an honorary degree to John E. Cleghorn, a McGill graduate who was chief executive officer of the Royal Bank of Canada before his retirement in 2001.

A officer of the Order of Canada, Cleghorn sits on several corporate boards and is noted for his fundraising efforts and philanthropy, with major gifts to McGill, Wilfrid Laurier University and medical research.

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Online Extra: To read five interesting facts about Joni Mitchell, go to our Web site: www.montrealgazette.com