

OBITUARIES

JOHN UREN ENTREPRENEUR, 81

Impresario put Joni Mitchell on stage

He gave the singer-songwriter her first paying gig, at his Calgary coffeehouse, The Depression

HARVEY SAWLER

One of the most serendipitous meetings in the annals of Canadian folk music occurred in the fall of 1963 when budding impresario John Uren and a young Fort MacLeod, Alta., art student, Joni Anderson, crossed paths in Calgary. Thanks to Mr. Uren and his enterprising ways, Ms. Anderson got her first paying gig, on the stage at his new coffeehouse, The Depression.

Later known as Joni Mitchell, Ms. Anderson shared top billing during The Depression's opening weeks with the British-born comedian and singer Peter Elbling. Both Ms. Mitchell and Mr. Elbling went on to international fame. Both credit Mr. Uren, who died last month, for igniting their entertainment careers. Ms. Mitchell posted a statement after he died, crediting him for contributing to her shift from visual art to music.

Similarly, Mr. Elbling said that Mr. Uren gave him his start in show business. "For my part," Mr. Elbling said in an interview, "I am forever grateful."

Mr. Uren was one of the last true Canadian impresarios, a carnival barker for the modern age, a take-no-prisoners huckster who could talk people into almost anything and who lived a multifarious life as entertainment marketer and producer and thoroughbred horse-racing groom and syndicate promoter. The racetrack was his counterbalance to the wild swings of the entertainment business. He referred to the racing culture as his "sanctuary, my refuge from reality." It was also his refuge from early tragedy.

John Warren Uren was born in Toronto on Oct. 17, 1935, to John Leslie Uren, a doctor, and his wife, Mildred Uren.

That he eventually stumbled into the folk music scene was purely accidental. Rather he grew up hearing classical music records playing constantly on a turntable in the waiting room of his father's downtown Toronto medical practice.

Mr. Uren's life was indelibly marked by three closely linked events, starting with the death of his younger brother, Bruce. The 15-year-old was hit by a car in 1953 on Mount Pleasant Road, within sight of the family home in affluent Rosedale. Having declined an invitation from Bruce to go play billiards, Mr. Uren harboured an enduring sense of guilt over his brother's death. Two months after the accident, his father died of what everyone believed was a broken heart. This triggered his mother's spiral into alcoholism.

Mr. Uren managed to finish his studies at nearby Jarvis Collegiate Institute, where he was captain of the junior and senior football and basketball teams, juvenile track champion and president of the boys' athletic association. He went on to play football at Hamilton's McMaster University with Canadian Football League legend Russ Jackson, followed by studies and more football at the University of Toronto's Trinity College.

Even as a youth, he was obsessive about work and constantly needed variety, working at different times as a delivery boy, camp counsellor, chauffeur, carpenter's assistant, Fuller Brush salesman, gas-station manager, thoroughbred hot walker and Eaton's high-school junior executive. After his Eaton's experience, he never lost his knack for turning out splendidly in a suit and tie or sports jacket.



John Uren and musician Joni Mitchell are seen in 2008. Ms. Mitchell credits Mr. Uren for contributing to her shift from visual art to music by giving her her first paying gig at The Depression coffeehouse in 1963. LES IRVIN

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John Uren
Entrepreneur

After marrying Michelle Patterson, a "beautiful, true flower child," the enterprising Mr. Uren wrote to Canadian horse-racing magnate and breeder E.P. Taylor, suggesting the creation of a new horse magazine. His first real job was as the advertising and sales manager for The Canadian Horse, sponsored by Mr. Taylor and the Ontario Jockey Club. When the publication was a success, Mr. Uren was asked to start a harness-racing magazine, called The Sulky.

He became so busy with work and his wife so preoccupied with the Toronto coffeehouse scene that the two drifted apart.

After working on the magazines, Mr. Uren drove a Toronto cab until he decided to leave the city. In July, 1963, he responded to an ad looking for people to drive two cars to Vancouver.

"We got paid nothing, but the idea was we would get to Vancouver for free."

When the small convoy arrived in Calgary, however, it was just before the Stampede and Mr. Uren spotted an opportunity. He rented an empty lot for \$5 a day and was soon raking in \$50 a day parking cars there.

Recalling the vibrant coffeehouse scene in Toronto, Mr. Uren set out to find a Calgary location for an establishment of his own, using his cash flow from the parking lot. The defunct Foggy Manor jazz club seemed like a good place, as it had an old espresso machine. But first he had to obtain a licence from city hall, so he presented a proposal to open a place he would call The Bitter End.

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Mr. Uren had met Eddie Cowan, manager of the folk duo Ian and Sylvia at the time, who gave him sage advice.

"John, give it a funny name, grow a beard and serve some exotic drink."

So Mr. Uren did all three, naming it The Depression, creating the Purple Depression cocktail and growing a beard.

The next challenge was to find talent, hence the unearthing of Ms. Mitchell and Mr. Elbling. Ms. Mitchell would go on to international stardom and become a folk icon. Mr. Elbling found fame as well, as half of the comic vaudeville-style musical act The Times Square Two, which performed on all the top TV shows, including *The Merv Griffin Show*, and on Broadway.

During the weekend in November, 1963, after U.S. president John F. Kennedy was shot, every establishment in Calgary was shut down – except The Depression.

"I stayed open and many of the black people in Calgary came to the club," Mr. Uren recalled. "They were wailing and moaning and getting up singing. It was an amazing evening."

The black performers were not interested in folk music, though. They were playing the blues. This gave Mr. Uren the idea to organize Alberta's first "negro Hootenannies," at a separate 500-seat venue. The shows were a huge hit.

In November, 1964, Mr. Uren sold The Depression and took a

job as a publicity assistant at the Stratford Festival, where he met his mentor, the renowned publicist Mary Jolliffe. He also couldn't resist another entrepreneurial move: opening a gallery to exhibit artwork produced by members of the festival's theatre company.

Mr. Uren then followed Ms. Jolliffe to Expo 67 in Montreal, where he was director of advertising and promotion for the World Festival of Entertainment, which put on more than 100 world-class productions.

After that, Mr. Uren ran Carleton Cowan PR, MacLaren Advertising's Montreal-based public relations wing. He eventually returned to Toronto to co-produce the 1970 production of the satirical musical *Spring Thaw*.

From there, he flitted from being the promotion manager at the O'Keefe Centre to working for various Toronto theatres, and eventually moving on to the 1977 Charlottetown Festival.

All the while, Mr. Uren wintered in Aiken, S.C., where he worked as a groom at Stafford Farms and other nearby stables.

He was working as a foreman for the Stronach Racing Stables in 1981 when he received a telegram from Ms. Jolliffe saying she had found him his "kind of gig," as Stratford's marketing consultant. He took the job and stayed on for five years.

Mr. Uren made a career shift in the spring of 1986, when his friend Clare Copeland, the president of Granada TV Canada, showed him a warehouse full of 4,700 used televisions from the company's rental pool.

They were going to be put through a crusher at a cost of \$4 each. Mr. Copeland suggested that Mr. Uren do something with the TVs instead, outside Toronto, so as not to dilute the city's rental pool.

So he drove to Muskoka and, with a few friends and a \$60,000 line of credit from Granada, he opened store called Cottage TV. The business grew to 10 stores and grossed \$10-million a year.

Although he was Torontonion to the core, he grew infatuated with British Columbia and the idea of retiring in Prince Rupert. It was late October of 1992. Mr. Uren had just turned 57.

On his way, deciding to lay-over for a night in Steveston, B.C., Mr. Uren woke up the next morning, walked down the street and saw an old building for rent. He immediately decided to open a new store there, selling birding supplies and offering bird-watching excursions. He also bought and operated the River Queen, a canopied tour boat, and gave tours of Steveston Harbour.

He eventually ended up living in Powell River, where he spent his time cycling and reminiscing over photos. Mr. Uren died of natural causes in his apartment there on April 18 or 19. He was 81.

Mr. Uren leaves his sister, Mary Dane, and her son, Leslie Dane.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Harvey Sawler, a PEI-based author, is currently completing John Uren's authorized biography, *Pluck and Luck – the Story of a Free Man*.

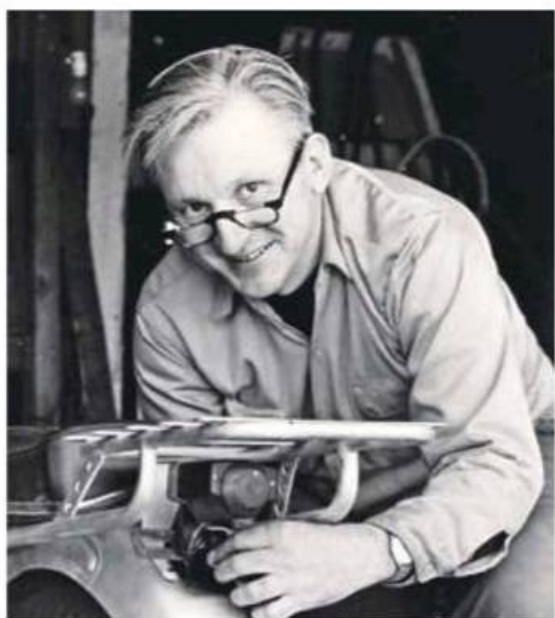
To submit an I Remember: obit@globeandmail.com

Send us a memory of someone we have recently profiled on the Obituaries page. Please include I Remember in the subject field.

I REMEMBER

Robert Pirsig

I never met Robert Pirsig, but as an adult-services librarian in the Yakima Valley of Washington State in 1974, I fought for his book to go on library shelves. My colleagues were convinced it was some "airy-fairy hippie thing" or something that would draw down on us calls for it to be banned, largely, I suspect, because we had no requests after the reviews began to appear. Arguing it was a "sleepier" eventually got me the purchase. It was one time in my life when I felt



Robert Pirsig

vindicated! Arguing about it, reading the book and recommending it to many library patrons has left me, after all these years, feeling that I know Robert Pirsig. It is a profoundly insightful and moving story, and a copy continues to sit on my shelf. If there are any Globe and Mail readers out there who have not read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, they should do so now!

– Barb Heather, Edmonton

When I was a young undergradu-

ate in the materialistic 1980s, struggling over whether to embark on a path in the arts or sciences, it was Robert Pirsig's novel *Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that made all the difference.

Mr. Pirsig's ability to make philosophy accessible to the non-expert was his genius. His famous "roadie" novel's characters in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* were cast in a kind of Socratic dialogue that focused on the quest for quality and Truth – with a capital T. Twisting, turning and analyzing concepts and ideas

through this playful dialogue awakened analytical abilities and challenged the readers' previously held assumptions.

As we leap into yet another technological warp with artificial intelligence, robotics and the like, we would all do well to find our own Pirsig-type inspirational novels – or even dust off his pink paperback novel – that celebrate critical thinking in an age when taking time to reflect is increasingly rare. Robert Pirsig: America's modern Socrates.

– Paul Moen, applied philosopher (also known as a lawyer), Ottawa