

Ballad of the rude Canadian

Jean Chrétien's recent travels may have confirmed Canada's genteel stereotype, but the first Canuck I ever met was a holy terror



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FUTURE TENSE

I've been waiting more than 30 years for an excuse to tell this story in print. But perhaps I'd better just get it told, because who knows whether I, or its protagonist, will wake up tomorrow?

Our Prime Minister's recent visits to China and the White House were marked, by all accounts, by excessive politeness. Members of his Team Canada party even applauded when Chinese officials carted off some Canadian students who used the occasion of the visit to protest against conditions in Tibet. "That's not the Canadian way," the visitors explained. For the zillionth time, we were reminded that most of the world knows Canada only as The Place Where They're All Polite. And this reminded me, as it always does, of the first Canadian I ever met, telling a crowd of admirers they were lower than weasel smegma.

I'm guessing it was 1968. In those days, there briefly existed on this planet a phenomenon I despair of explaining to the modern consumer, called "folk music." Before it all blew over, it offered sporadic employment to people such as Tom Rush, Tim Buckley, Phil Ochs, Fred Neil, Judy Collins, John Koerner, James Taylor and Bob Dylan, some of whom went on to become legitimate musicians.

One of the best songwriters in folk was Tim Hardin. He's not the above-mentioned first Canadian I ever met; he was American. His biggest commercial success was a song called *If I Were a Carpenter*, a hit for Bobby Darin. He wrote the folk classic *Reason to Believe*, and a haunting jazz ballad called *Misty Roses*. He was one of the best performers of his songs, with a smoky, fragile voice and guitar playing as crisp as breadsticks. He seemed poised to become one of those rare folksingers to earn a living. Then someone gave him some heroin.

By the time of which I speak, Mr. Hardin had already flamed out at least once — he'd actually fallen asleep onstage at the Royal Albert Hall. Now, chastened and fresh out of rehab, he was ready to try a career-reviving comeback. A tour was booked that brought him to my large state university. A humble, low-key folkie tour: just Mr. Hardin, and an unknown solo singer for a warmup act.

I may as well confess this like a man: I was a folksinger myself, in those days. I've been completely rehabilitated through a 12-step program — swear to God — but back then, I was one of the first on line for Tim Hardin tickets.

Then, before the concert actually happened, everything changed.

Not for Mr. Hardin, but for his warmup act. Lightning struck, and set her ablaze. A



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

To **Joni Mitchell** we were barbarians, pigs, reptile excrement; she profoundly regretted having performed for us.

shy folkie with the obligatory long blond hair, hailing from some place so nowhere it wasn't even in the United States, she unexpectedly became a pop star overnight. So when Tim Hardin's big evening finally arrived, the house was packed . . . but nearly everyone had come to hear this Joni Mitchell chick.

She was wonderful, of course, and held the huge crowd spellbound, in the palm of her hand, and when she was through, the standing ovation seemed to go on forever. Then Tim Hardin came out on stage, and Ms. Mitchell left . . . and so did a good quarter of the audience.

The doors of this dark gymnasium, enormous ones, were on either side of the stage, and the lobby outside was brightly lit. So the policy was to keep those doors shut while someone was performing onstage. Otherwise, you were shining a big light into the audience's face, wrecking the ambience. Those wishing to enter or leave were required by ushers to wait until the song-in-progress was over.

This is good policy when only a few people want to go through the doors. When many people try to leave at once, however, the result is large milling crowds on either side of the stage.

As far as they were concerned, the show was over. The star had already performed, and this blockage at the door was just some temporary screwup. They made no attempt to keep silent — didn't even bother keeping their voices down. Some shouted, the better to be heard over that guy onstage nattering on about carpenters and tinkers. Cigarettes were lit, some containing tobacco; raucous laughter rose above the general hubbub.

Tim soldiered on. He finished his first song, to a smattering of applause, watched the doors open and a flood of people *race* to escape his music. He began another song, watched *more* chattering crowds form at his left and right as he sang, and flee the moment they were allowed to. He started a third tune; same result.

He stopped in midsong, unslung his guitar, leaned closer to the mike, said, very softly, "How would you like it if somebody pissed in *your* canteen?" and left. Some folks didn't even notice.

But they sure noticed when an avenging angel swept down from the bleachers, trailing blond hair like fire. Ms. Mitchell *sprang* onstage, grabbed the mike, and for the next five minutes, she cursed that crowd. We were barbarians, pigs, reptile excrement;

she profoundly regretted having performed for us, and would tell every act she knew not to come here because we didn't deserve to hear music; she maligned us and our relatives and ancestors until she ran out of breath, and stormed offstage. Leaving behind hundreds of baffled people . . . and a handful like me, cheering even louder than we had for her songs.

Mr. Hardin cut that tour short and went back to heroin. His performance at Woodstock the following year was cut from the movie. It took him another 10 horrid years to die, at 39. At his final gig in 1979, they say he just played one song — Hoagy Carmichael's *Georgia* — over and over.

I've been waiting 33 years for a chance to thank the first Canadian I ever met for her magnificent rudeness — not to mention her astonishing command of invective — and now I've finally got it done. If there's ever anything I can do for you, Ms. Mitchell, I am yours to command.

Spider Robinson's CD Belaboring the Obvious, featuring original music and readings, is available at www.spiderrobinson.com; his story collection By Any Other Name has just been published by Baen Books.