

JoniMitchell.com/JMDL Library:

Grace Still Jonesing for Joni

Alexander Varty [Vancouver Free Press]

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It is a lovely day to be having tea and cheesecake with Christie Grace: we're sitting on the patio of a Bowen Island bakery-café as ravens call overhead and a soft breeze rustles the new foliage on the big-leaf maple trees behind us. But things were not always so sunny for the Bowen-based singer and jewellery maker. Like many of us, she had a strange and unsettling adolescence, although in one regard she was lucky: she had Joni Mitchell to see her through.

Oh, it's not that she knew the famously reclusive singer-songwriter. Apart from one Joni sighting at Toronto's Mariposa festival, Grace's contact with Mitchell came almost exclusively through records like *Clouds*, *Blue*, *Ladies of the Canyon*, and *For the Roses*; records that outlined a young woman's growth and development in a way that until then had been confined to film or fiction; records that still ring true in their meticulous unveiling of the heart. And records that served as both comfort and goad to the teenage Grace, who was so moved by Mitchell's artistry that she, too, picked up an acoustic guitar and began to perform at folk clubs and coffeehouses.

"Joni Mitchell was absolutely my lifesaver," Grace says today. "But on another level, musically speaking, I was just discovering my own poet, and it was amazing to me that a Canadian woman who was that much older--she was kind of like a big-sister figure--was really doing things on her own terms. It was just a huge inspiration to me."

Time passed and Grace grew up, got married, had a daughter, learned the jeweller's craft, opened a store, and moved away from folk music in favour of jazz. But Mitchell's songs remained a constant in her life, and a few years ago--well before Diana Krall recorded "Black Crow" and Kate Hammett-Vaughan tackled "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire"--Grace decided there was no reason why her formative influence and her latter-day passion couldn't meet. She worked up an evening of jazzy Mitchell covers and presented them at the Cellar nightclub last year. The response was positive enough that she's returning to the same venue with an expanded program and an exceptional band--guitarist Darryl Jahnke, pianist Tilden Webb, bassist Jodi Proznick, and percussionist Pepe Danza--on Sunday (May 9).

"I decided that if I was going to come back with it, then I'm going to refine it," she explains. "It's becoming more like a show. Instead of just playing a bunch of songs, I give the historical background of each song: where she was at the time, what was happening in her life, what happened around that song, and the cast of characters involved. That's what I got really positive feedback about the first time I did this. For people who didn't really know that much about Joni Mitchell, it gave them a broader, deeper sense of who this woman is. That's really my intention: to provide a sense of all the colours of Joni, and to point out that she really was a pioneer at that time when she made her biggest impact on the music scene, and on me."

In reinventing Mitchell's music for jazz quintet, Grace says that she has found renewed

solace, and renewed inspiration. "At first, I was like, 'Why am I doing this?' All I knew was that for years I'd been thinking I would love to do a Joni Mitchell project, and now I realize that it's very healing for me to go back and revisit these songs that so nourished me, both emotionally and musically. She opened my whole head up: she's the master of talking about her heart and all the complexities therein." And she wouldn't mind if revisiting Mitchell's back catalogue stimulates her own creative expression.

"I'm hoping--I'm really, really hoping--that it will rub off," she says, adding that she'll probably perform two of her own songs during her Cellar appearance. "And it's already changing me, in that I'm looking back on all this work that I was getting ready to put into an album and I'm going, 'That's not good enough.' Joni is a very literate writer, and she's given me the courage to really look at what I'm doing and say, head on, 'This is what I'm feeling, these are the people who are involved, and this is how it all relates.' I don't consider myself at her level; I know I'm no Joni Mitchell. However, I am Christie Grace. I have my own quirky little style and it may or may not move you, but it's mine."

Only one question remains: what will Grace do if, by some strange circumstance, Mitchell walks into the Cellar Sunday night?

"If that happened to me several years ago, I probably would have been tongue-tied," she admits. "But now, I just think I'd want to give her a hug--and I'd probably try to sell her a piece of jewellery."

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