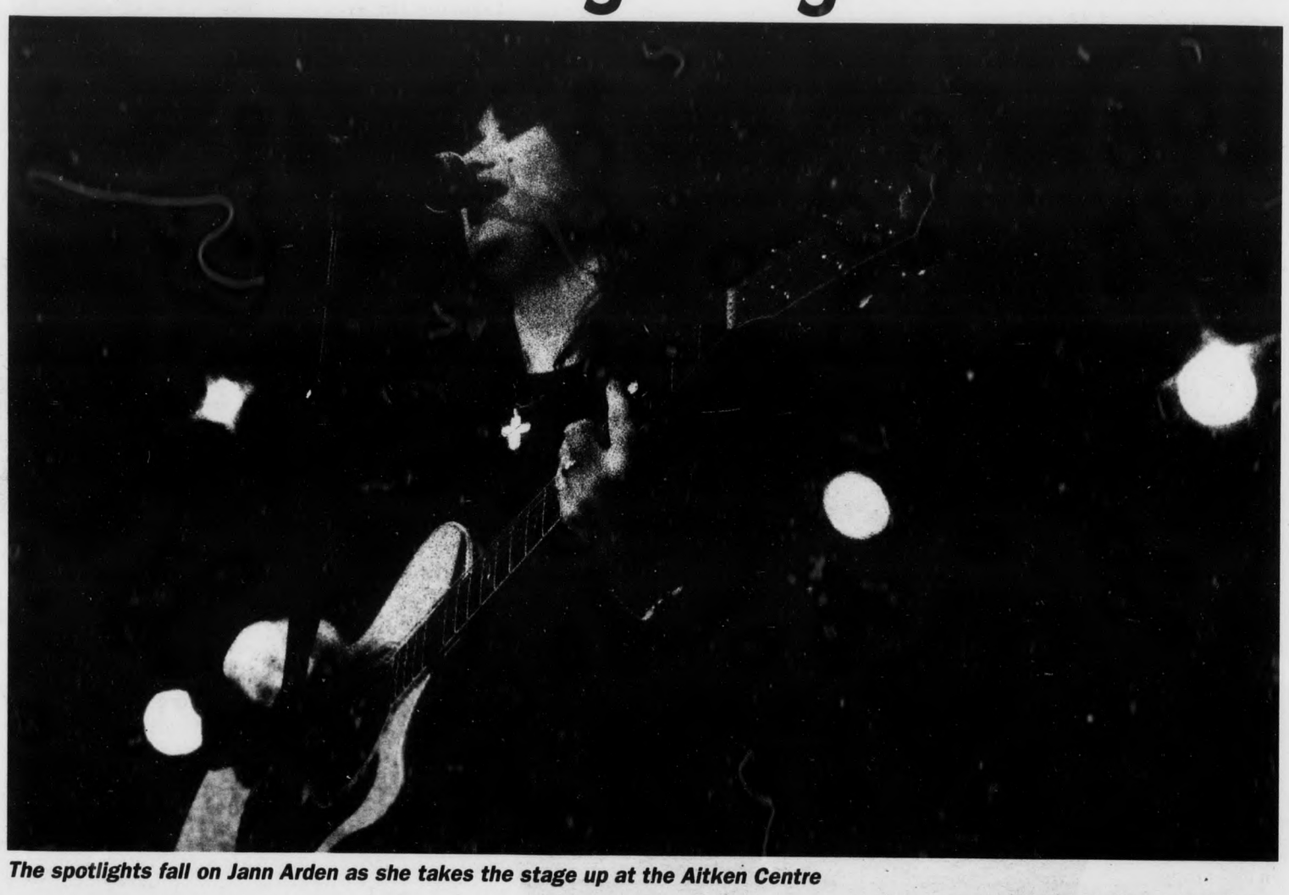
ENTERTAINMENT

Jann Arden, and the fight against fame

by Michael Edwards
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The spotlights fall on Jann Arden as she takes the stage up at the Aitken Centre

Photo by Warren Watson

It really wouldn't be hard for Jann Arden to blend into the background. She is a rather unassuming person who doesn't try too hard to win you over - it happens naturally. In case you didn't notice, she was in town last Friday for a concert at the Aitken Centre (and a rather good show it was too). She was more than a little busy, but she did manage to put aside a few minutes to talk to me, which really didn't seem like long enough. Fortunately, she loves to talk too, and that made the process of interviewing her an awful lot easier; all I had to do was ask a few questions, sit back and listen.

Your songs tend to be rather melancholy - are you sad?

No, I'm not sad. People might think that I'm sombre, but life is hard and I try to write about that in my songs.

Maybe sadness is a more interesting emotion than happiness.

Well, they do say that happiness is a form of psychosis, but no emotion is a mindless one.

What about some of your influences?

Well, just some wacky, stupid things - I love ABBA, and always did. And the Carpenters, Shirley Bassey, Petulia Clark, Lulu, James Taylor, Janis Ian, Carly Simon. I loved Blondie too, and Olivia Newton John, Gordon Lightfoot. I've just started in the last couple of years to get interested in Joni Mitchell and the Beatles - things I should have listened to when I was 16. I really like sappy pop music. I've just started a jazz collection and got a great Billie Holiday boxed set.

The Verve one? I have that one and treasure it.

I've listened to every disc about ten times now - I think it's the quintessential Billie Holiday collection. And I got some Rosie Clooney, and Mel Torme singing Sinatra hits.

What are you listening to these days?

The Innocence Mission, Joan Osborne, Shawn Colvin, Alanis Morisette, Oasis and Ashley McIsaac - I stole that one a few months ago from the record company. I like quite a bit of French music too - Celine makes beautiful French albums. Whatever strikes my fancy really. I'm one of those weirdos that go into the record company and steal stuff all the time. I've even got things at home that I haven't even opened.

I hear that you're pretty big in Italy and Australia, and you also sell quite a few albums here in Canada - how is life as a superstar?

I'm not a superstar - do you think I'm a superstar?

Well, you are probably one of the biggest selling musicians in Canada at the moment.

But nobody even really recognises me - I could walk up and down the streets in Winnipeg naked and nobody would notice. I mean, I've sold 600,000 copies of the record in Canada and that makes me happy, but it is frightening and scary. When they do come up and talk to me, they always tell me that I am shorter than they expected. But if people kept coming up to me all the time I would keep thinking that my fly was down. If you want fame then you can have just that, but you end up becoming a caricature - I've seen that with some other Canadian artists.

So you don't feel famous?

Maybe it's just a state of mind, but not that much has changed for me at all. I am thrilled with all that has happened, but having said that it has been an incredible amount of work. I've been at it for about 18 years now - it didn't happen overnight; it's been a very gradual process. My management have worked hard, the record company have worked hard at breaking a new artist - it's a product of so many things. I may be the face that everybody sees, but it's really the music that everybody likes. They don't really know anything about me - I'm pretty mundane.

What <u>should</u> we know about you?

I like to read books, go to the movies. I've had the same friends for about 25 years now, and my folks are very normal. They've taught me to keep my feet on the ground. I'm too old - if I was 21, I'd probably feel different. But I know that I'll drop dead some day, and I also know that this is a fleeting thing. A moment in my life and it could all go to hell at any minute.

Do you like having a more private aspect to your life?

It really doesn't bother me as I don't usually talk about things that I'm not prepared to discuss. And I love talking. I mean, my friends and I sit around talking and playing cards. But I really haven't done anything all that extraordinary - I'm sure that everyone has some great stories. My friends have some great stories. My mother has some funny stories about being chased around her childhood home by a large brown bear and it running through the kitchen. But I really haven't done anything that other people my age haven't done. My twenties were kinda pathetic - I had bad relationships, low self-esteem, I made mistakes, I drank too much and I was just sappy. I made bad decisions for myself - I wasn't serious about anything, I didn't get anywhere so I just didn't care. I got out of shape mentally.

You're a walking example of how you can pull your life together in your thirties...

It's never too late. Age is irrelevant in a lot of ways. The one good thing about time is that it's the only way that you can acquire wisdom. You can acquire intelligence by going to university and paying your $10,000 tuition and be smart. But how you apply that in a practical sense takes wisdom and integrity. I'm from the school of hard knocks, and I've learned finally that I have to be gentle with myself, and to be proud of myself, and to nurture my friendships and really simple things like that.

How old were you when the first album came out?

I had just turned 30.

So you were older coming into the music business than most people.

I suppose I was.

And do you think that it was an advantage?

I think it was reassuring for A&M that I wasn't a kid, that I was kind of all there in my head and I was prepared to do the work. It's always a risk signing any new artist, but I think that the label knew me well enough. And I'm very young at heart - I look 21 *(laughter)*. All those things were helpful in the way I dealt with people and media and for doing interviews. By the time I got to the labels, I had already done 500 interviews.

But you are only getting national recognition now.

Yes, but it even depends on what part of Canada you are in. My career varies with some real hot spots and some places that I am really unknown. Basically my career in light of what people have seen spans three years, and I always have to remember that, that they don't know what I did before. I didn't come out of nowhere, but it does add a bit of mystery to things.

What about those big sales overseas?

They just picked up on that one song. Radio is such a fickle medium where they take one song, play it to death and then they just forget about you. It's that song that is famous not me. You begin to become detached from a song once it's been recorded - it's gone from your hands after that and there is nothing you can do.

Your reviews have been good though.

Reviews are a funny thing - it's such a personal thing. It's kind of like comparing Picasso and Rembrandt. Someone might like Picasso the most, and someone else Rembrandt, but to try and compare the two is impossible - they are both wonderful in different ways. Music is in the eye of the beholder. I just write the songs that I want to write - I've never been trendy in my life, and I'm not going to start now. People have been good to me though, and they seem to like what I am doing - they might think that the next album is shit.

What about the show tonight? What sort of audience do you expect?

There will be everything from 10 year old kids to 65 year olds. There isn't really large clumps of anything - a very equal cross section of people.

Are you happy about that?

It means that you have the kids who grow up with you and continue to support you and buy your records. Then people my age understand where I'm coming from. And slightly older people can listen and reflect back on relationships they've gone through.

And we're out of time. Anything we need to know? How about some good dirt on Jann Arden?

I'm 5' 10", and I've just slept with Celine Dion and her husband - I really enjoyed both of them too. I made her a couple of sandwiches too as she looked like she needed to eat something.

And that's where I left Jann as she babbled on about having barbecues with Rod Stewart, meeting up with Gordon Lightfoot and going bowling with Richard Carpenter down in Saint John. The sense of humour which becomes so obvious when she appears on stage is even more obvious talking to her is person. And she was shorter than I expected too.