

**T**houghtful, witty, melancholy, introspective, bawdy, cranky, joyful, insecure: Jann Arden is all these things and more. She's also one of Canada's most beloved and talented musical performers.

Her success is beyond question. Since her 1983 debut album, *Time for Mercy*, Arden's been nominated for 19 Juno Awards and won eight, including Songwriter of the Year and Female Artist of the Year twice. She's had 17 top-10 singles (including "Insensitive," "Good Mother," and "Could I Be Your Girl?") and has a fan base that defines "loyal."

Yet even as she hits another career peak with a fast-selling new album (*Free*), Arden will tell you that she still searches for balance and love, still worries about her weight, still cleans up after her dog and cats. Her fans love her for it. They fill concert halls to be warmed by her expressive voice and deeply felt songs, cheered by her relentless wit.

"This woman is a genius," one fan wrote after Arden's Vancouver concert in November. "Her music," another wrote, "changes lives one song at a time." "Fans know her material inside out," the *Vancouver Sun* observed; "[they] wear their love for Arden on their sleeves...the whole affair [is] less like a concert than a big family reunion."

As the "big family reunion" begins its eastern swing on the national tour, we meet in the small coffee shop of a boutique hotel in downtown Toronto. It's early, but Arden is wide awake, trademark wit and self-deprecating humour ever-present. She talks thoughtfully about family and her Alberta roots, about mid-career renewal and how her success continues to astound her. She doesn't really care much for fame, she says. Besides, she argues, she's not that famous anyway:

"If we go through the Eaton Centre we might have, *might* have, two people who go [she whis-

pers], 'Hey, I think that's...I think that's her.' But they're not sure.

"You have to understand, I didn't get my record deal 'til I was 30. I was already a person. I already knew what was valuable. I'm not driven by recognition or fame. There's nothing more empty than fame. The music in and of itself is important. That's important to me. And I'm proud that people can hear it and enjoy it and that it can help them. But as for me wheeling around and getting a deal on a frickin' hybrid car, I'm not interested. I'm just not. My soul just doesn't want to do that."

## "I Loved Doing It"

Arden's spirit was nurtured under a prairie sky. She was born Jann Arden Anne Richards on March 27, 1962, and raised in a small com-

# "I Am the Songs"

Sensitive and therefore vulnerable, honest and therefore open, Jann Arden gives herself to her music—and to her fans

By Peter Feniak

munity called Springbank, now part of Calgary.

"Where I grew up has been swallowed," she says. "It's unrecognizable. There's a million people there now. My dad's still kind of depressed about it. It's just so weird. There are gas stations and Starbucks. I moved out farther. I found 14 acres [almost six hectares] quite west of the city, right on the Elbow River. And my parents built a house that's 50 feet [15 metres] from



my house. They call themselves ‘the gatekeepers.’ We have a panoramic view of the mountains, as far south and as far north as you can see. My mom is thrilled. We just love our property so much. I see my folks every day when I’m home. I’ll wander over there and borrow...basil.”

Family—she has an older and a younger brother—matters a lot to her (“I sure talk about them enough [on stage]. My mom and dad are hilarious without knowing it.”) So, beneath the wisecracking, does faith. (“I can’t



January 2010.  
Jann Arden live  
at Massey Hall in  
Toronto.

imagine living in a Godless universe.”) She claims much of her life is a hazy memory, but she does recall the first songs she heard and fell in love with as a little girl:

“Very vividly: ‘Mister Monday’ (by Calgary’s own Original Caste) and a song called ‘Windy’ by The Association. Amazing. But my parents had really weird records. We listened to Sammy Davis Jr. a lot. And Elvis records. And Roger Whittaker and Zamfir. My dad was a huge fan of folk, so there was Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen....”

Her mother, Joan, had a guitar and her paternal grandmother was “a huge four-foot-eleven lady who pounded out hymns on the

piano.” That inspired the dreamy daughter who felt confined in school.

“I wasn’t academic, let’s put it that way. I was the kid staring out the window. I wasn’t stupid, but I had no desire whatsoever to do homework or listen to what was being said.”

Halfway through her school years she found a path:

“I started writing and singing when I was about 11. I never told anybody ’til I was 18. And I’d probably written 150 songs by that point. Nobody knew.

“One of the records that my mom had was a Janis Ian record, *Society’s Child*, and Janis was probably 16 herself when that record came out, a prodigy. I remember reading the jacket—I was maybe 10—it said ‘Written by Janis Ian.’ *She made up these songs. She made these words up.* That changed the way I thought. And I never looked back.

“My mom says, ‘You spent eight hours a night in that basement.’ I’d race home from school and just listen to records. I’d try to play them, but I had to be very mindful, because it was my mom’s guitar and I didn’t want anybody to know what I was doing. Don’t ask me why. I never dreamed that someone like me could go into music anyway. It was just recreational and I loved doing it. I did sing at my high school grad—the first time I’d pretty much sung in front of anybody—a song I’d written for my grad class. And I have very vague recollections of later that year. I had saved money from working at a golf course and I recorded a little demo, like a 45, at a studio called Circa on Centre Street in Calgary. And it was the first time I’d heard my voice recorded. I never really thought much of it. I’d never really concentrated on it.” And still doesn’t: “I don’t do any warm-ups. Tea, honey...I don’t do any of that. I just sing.”

### A Beautiful Balance

As a teenager, Arden began chronicling her emotions in countless journals. Onstage she expresses vulnerability, joy, heartbreak, and plenty of hard-won wisdom. She learned a lot in her 20s, on the road with a band that played “just horrible covers of songs by Foreigner and Sheena Easton in bars up in Yellowknife and

Whitehorse and Smithers—very rough, very smoky rooms with lots of draft beer and the odd bar-brawl. We drove in a white van with all our lights and all our speakers. Freezing? Oh my God, I can't even tell you. Sixty bucks a week if we were lucky. But I knew I'd get out of it. I didn't know how."

She had hoped to be a teacher. Instead she found her voice as a solo artist. Her career grew rapidly, but she never had dreams of mega-stardom.

"My music's very specific. It's for personal consumption. I don't even know if it's appropriate for group consumption. I think I'm really for people sitting in their car driving or sitting in their bedroom listening."

Her songs connect deeply and emotionally on-stage, but the entertainer in her always leavens the mood with laughter. "I think the humour has been such a beautiful balance for me," she says. "My job is to write songs that will make you feel better about your own personal lives," she joked to her audience in London, ON. "You're going to say, 'My life is not as bad as hers.'"

Her biggest international hit, "Insensitive," is about rejection. She named her "best of" CD *Greatest Hurts*. But Arden closes her show each night with an anthem of self-affirmation. "Good Mother" expresses her thankfulness for the success she never expected and the gifts that mean the most to her. She sings, to a beautiful melody by Robert Foster: "I've got money in my pocket/ I like the colour of my hair/ I've got a friend who loves me/ Got a house/ I've got a car/ I've got a good mother/ And her voice is what keeps me here...I've got a good father/ And his strength is what makes me cry...Feet on ground/ Heart in hand/ Facing forward/ Be yourself/ Just be yourself..."

Thousands of fans have written to tell her how much "Good Mother" has meant to them. It's joined that small list of songs played at both weddings and funerals.

"It's a personal relationship," Arden says of her connection with her fans. "I'm proud of that. It's a pretty unique place to hold in someone's life. I never, ever take it for granted."

## A Very Sensitive Person

*Free*, her latest album, is her first original work in nearly five years. “I’m very steadfast,” she says. “I’m not a fading lily. I do work hard at it. But four or five years ago, I’d become kind of disillusioned. The industry had changed a lot. It was getting to the point where I had no desire to keep doing it at all.” Instead, she shook up her life and career by cutting ties with longtime managers and musical partners.

“Sometimes you have to change in art—you can’t paint in blue all the time.”

“That was hard,” she says. “It has nothing to do with the people I was working with because they were brilliant, wonderful people. Sometimes you just get to a point where you have to change in art—you can’t paint in blue all the time.”

Her desire for change put her together with one of Canada’s most outspoken, abrasive, and successful artist managers, Vancouver’s Bruce Allen.

“He’s always championed me. Over the years, he’s phoned me up and given me hell. When I dissolved my management company, I didn’t know what I was going to do. Bruce took me to dinner and said, ‘I hear you’re unmanageable. But the girls in my office are excited about working with you. You’d just have to let me do my job.’ I said, ‘Absolutely.’ I mean, I’m not 21...I don’t want to be teetering around the stage when I’m 70. I just don’t. There are so many other things that I want to do that if I can really work hard and be creative and be excited about my work for another seven or eight years I’d be very happy.”

Allen and Arden muse about her doing talk programs on syndicated radio and TV shows. Artists such as Bette Midler ask her to send them songs. “I know Bruce is going to push me a little bit, which is good,” she says, “but he also says that I can say ‘no.’”

One firm commitment is an autobiography covering her early years. “It’s going to be very

funny. But I think surprising, too. People will be surprised by what a prairie girl can get up to in that short span of time.”

She remains fascinated by what lies ahead. Her current stage production, she says, “is just the best show I’ve ever done, really amazing for me. But I’m not going to miss it for a second when I don’t walk out there again. My dad always says, ‘You are not what you did, you are what you will do,’ and I want to make sure I live that way. I don’t want to live on old glory, on ‘oh, I used to be....’”

Change has invigorated Arden. But some of her former associates have struck back at her in Internet postings. She answered them with typical frankness on her MySpace page: “I always find it amazing how some of us can cling to pain, cling to hurt, cling to anger.... We all get hurt by other people.... Vengeance is a horrid thing. It serves no purpose.”

“I’m a very sensitive person,” she says in conversation. Beyond the pain of personal and professional breakups, she carries the heaviness of knowing her older brother, Duray, is in prison. Her father, Derrel Richards, has had to recover from a stroke, and she herself has had to deal with heart problems and admits to being “quite nervous” each time she takes the stage.

In the quiet coffee shop, this remarkable talent agrees that somewhere she must have “a steel core” to have come so far on a journey she never really planned. Yet her vulnerability is never far from the surface. She confronts it onstage with laughter. Then she sings her heart out. Her audience, largely female, responds intensely.

“It’s our human condition. Sometimes you have confidence, sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you have self-esteem, sometimes you don’t. I see people walking around looking so cocky, like nothing fazes them. I have no interest in knowing those people. If I write these songs about loss and sorrow and wondering about what I’m doing on the planet and then walk around acting like the world is my pearl, that’s not who I am. When people meet me they’re not surprised. I am the songs.”

And she affirms that each night onstage, her “Feet on ground/ Heart in hand/ Facing forward,” singing, “Be yourself/ Just be yourself....” ■