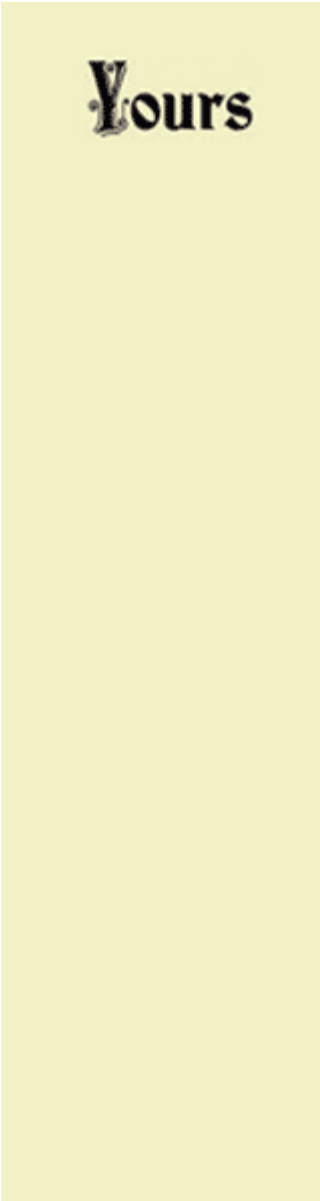




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Jann Arden

A Work in Progress [DVD]

US release date: 15 November 2006

by **Nikki Tranter**

PopMatters Books Editor

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Life on the Verge

"Nobody knows me, no one will ever see. The distance between what is and what will never be. A bird will break his wings like a heart will cut her strings, and there isn't anything to comfort me."
—Jann Arden, "Gasoline" (1994)

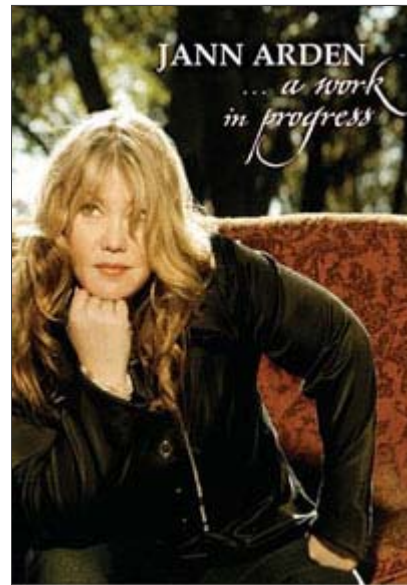
"All of this, was wonderful and worth the heartache. All of this, was beautiful and full of light. All of this, was everything I ever hoped for. All of this, was life."
—Jann Arden, "All of This" (2005)

It's an unexpectedly rare moment in *A Work in Progress* when Jann Arden, superstar Canadian singer-songwriter barely known anywhere else in the universe, lets her guard down. Responding to her repeated failure at "cracking" the American pop market, Jann says:

I'm so happy to be kind of on the verge all the time. I think I always will be. But am I in an industry that doesn't allow someone like me to get to that point, or is it just me that doesn't?

It's one of the few times in the documentary that the Arden from visceral, crushing, is-it-me songs like "Gasoline" and "Hangin' By a Thread" shows up, the Arden who composes her music as though she's scratching at it from the inside of her skin with a chipped fingernail. Without this moment, the onscreen Arden comes across as carefree and full of life, she appears happy—the kind of happy that doesn't require a question mark. It's a good image of the singer, and while at first appears unattached to the songwriter Arden, eventually the connection arrives. After all, the kind of woman who writes "Leave Me Now", "Unloved", and "Never Give Up on Me" without a sense of humor to buoy her would be sad and scary.

A Work in Progress is an open door to Arden's history. Part of the Canadian biography series, *Life and Times*, the hour-long show is Arden's opportunity to reflect. She talks about her strict father, her imprisoned brother, her struggles with self-image, and the years of alcohol abuse and one-night stands that almost ruined her—and that was all pre-fame. Her scathing sense of humor remains throughout much of these discussions, with Arden hinting at seriousness and revelation briefly before softening any big emotional blows with a gag. She appears to dismiss the more awful parts of her life with this humor, which isn't to say her bad times are meaningless, but that they don't make up the woman entirely. She doesn't apologize for her



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past, she simply lets us know she's come to terms with it, and if she can't laugh, well, what other options are there?

An example of her willingness to poke fun at herself comes after Arden comments on her apparent resemblance to Monica Lewinsky:

I would have slept with the president. I would have done that, too. Are you kidding? I slept with a guy called Rocky in the Yukon for some onion rings.

There's always the joke. Arden lampoons her weight ("I got a boob caught in the blender, I thought it was heartburn"), her Canada-centric career ("I might have a hit in Canada ... or Afghanistan"), even her single status by openly and self-deprecatingly flirting with a fellow golfer at a celebrity pro-am, and while this creates a sense of fun about Arden, it becomes a real insight into the woman behind the music. There's a genuine shyness on display, and while Arden admits she's the first to announce her arrival in any room to "let everybody know you're there, and get it over with", she would appear, too, to be the first to willingly mock herself—just in case you thought of doing it before her.

There arrives, then, this complex, captivating woman, who went from announcing herself in bars, clubs, and strange hotel rooms, to doing so at the Juno Awards, the Geminis, and on stage performing in *The Vagina Monologues*. Fame, though, appears to . . . if not come naturally . . . then at least it doesn't particularly faze Arden, who only encountered it after age 30. We get a great sense of the down-to-earth about Arden, particularly when we meet her family; dad makes trinkets in his shed, mum cooks cabbage rolls in the kitchen, and the family dogs spend afternoons chasing golf balls around a forest-like yard complete with pet cemetery and old-timey bicycles. Arden herself comments on the scene's grounding effect: "[What I do] seems really trite and insignificant when I come back here."

She completes that thought at the documentary's close when she notes: "I don't want to be remembered as a good singer, or a good songwriter. I want to be remembered by my family as a good person." *A Work in Progress* reveals that good person.

Tragically, though, the DVD would appear to want the very same. Fascinating a portrait as this is of Jann Arden the woman, the performer/songwriter bit is available to us only in fits and starts. The show features too-short dribs and drabs of Arden's songs, with only "Good Mother" getting any kind of stand out, as it serves perfectly as backdrop to the Arden family photo album flashed across the screen. Otherwise, we're given the tiniest of tastes of perhaps the classiest, sexiest, smartest voice in music. Even the DVD holds back on presenting Arden the artist with zilch in the way of extras. No videos, no live performances, no outtakes or further scenes from the *Life and Times* show: a tremendous disappointment.

A few extras might have added much-needed relevance to the release, as the show is eight years old, and the Jann Arden who describes her weight as "every pound earned, bought and paid for" is, in 2007, a brand new woman at 60-pounds lighter. Essentially, then, this is a reminder of the Arden of yore. The new Arden, with the hot body (displayed in December's *Chatelaine* magazine), and a covers album just out (featuring a magical version of Janis Ian's "At Seventeen") could very well be the work in progress nearing completion.

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The album cover for 'ONO YES, I'M A WITCH'. It features a black and white portrait of Yoko Ono wearing sunglasses. The text 'ONO' is in large white letters, and 'YES, I'M A WITCH' is in large white letters below it. To the right, it says 'The voice and songs of Yoko Ono with collaborations from:' followed by a list of artists: 'Cat Power, The Flaming Lips, Le Tigre, The Polyphonic Spree, Peaches, Antony of Antony and the Johnsons & Hahn Rowe, Jason Pierce of Spiritualized + more'. At the bottom right, it says 'In stores now' with a small icon.

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