

Game-Changer

I held my breath for a second. As soon as I said those three words out loud, it would change things. I knew it.

It was April 1993, and for the past several weeks, I'd been tuning in to Countdown Canada every Sunday evening on FM-96.

It was not a casual thing. I was making a point to be near a radio at the right time, to make sure I wouldn't miss the interview excerpt that would introduce "I Would Die for You" as it climbed the chart.

I could hear the song anytime – it was getting tons of airplay.

It was time to face the facts; I was tuning in for the sound byte.

I knew nothing about her. She was from Calgary, apparently. Didn't know what she looked like. I'd never seen the video. The voice – so pure, so melodic. Almost reminiscent of... oh, never mind.

She was funny. Wicked.

So finally, I felt ready to say those three words. Because they seemed self-evident. Because they seemed unshakeable. Because the song and the voice and the wit had reached out over the airwaves and sucked me in like a magnetic force.

I pointed to the car radio as "I Would Die for You" started playing. And exhaled.

"I like her."

Nancy casually turned up the volume. "Yeah, I like that song too. We should get the album."

I shook my head. "No, you don't understand. I. Like. Her."

This Jann Arden... She was a game-changer. I could feel it.

I was 9 when I saw Grease. I felt it then.
I was 12 when I saw Chris Evert win Wimbledon. Felt it.

Surely, this could not happen to me anymore. Not as a grown-up. Not at 24.

I had two game-changers and that was quite enough. I tried to resist.

Discovering a new artist is like taking a chance on a blind date. You don't want to fall too hard, too fast for the wrong person.

Maybe she's a flash in the pan, I reasoned. Maybe she just happened to be funny the day she gave that interview.

Then I saw the video. Cute girl with an acoustic guitar and a good pair of boots. ...Shit.

Then I heard more interviews. Head on her shoulders. Funny as hell. ...Crap.

Then I bought the album. ...Damn it.

Discovering a new artist is like getting on a roller-coaster ride. Once you're strapped in, resistance is futile.

I started recording her interviews and performances on TV.

I pored over her lyrics and marvelled at how she could make even the most ordinary words sound poetic or profound. "I'm lining up the pieces of my heart on the kitchen floor".

Within a year, a second album came out. This one was going to be BIG.

By the time I went to see the show at the old Club Soda on November 22nd, 1994, I was a total goner. Hook, line, and sinker.

Discovering a new artist is like nurturing a child. As much as you love them in the moment, you also love them for everything you imagine they can become. Your pride and your reward are in every twist & turn of their ride if you choose to tag along.

By the time I became hopelessly devoted to Olivia Newton-John and Chris Evert, I was playing catch-up on the first 10 years of their career.

With Jann Arden, I didn't miss the bandwagon. I was on board. I *was* the bandwagon.

But it felt different. I didn't need another role model. It wasn't the same visceral childhood connection I had to Chrissie and Olivia.

Jann was only a few years older than me, and quintessentially Canadian. You could easily imagine hanging out with her, taking a stroll, or going to a movie. If we lived in the same city, we'd be friends, I reckoned. I suppose all her fans felt that way, because she seemed so relatable and down-to-earth, but I was especially sure of it when I found out she loved Olivia as much as I did. Twist of fate?

It was a scorcher, this 3rd of July 1998. I was rushing home, hoping to catch the end of Brazil's quarter-final game, grumpy that I'd already missed the Italy-France game before

that. As I walked by on Prince-Arthur Street, I did a double-take: who on earth would be wearing jeans and a jacket in these sweltering conditions? But I was amused to find that the person peering at the menu outside the Vietnamese restaurant was wearing a “Happy?” tour jacket.

I took a closer look: it was Jann herself. Twist of fate.

The odds in life of running into your favourite singer are not that good.

To this day, some friends of mine don’t believe that this was serendipity: I must have figured out which hotel she was staying at, they thought; I must have been staking out the place since her Canada Day concert in the Old Port.

The fact is: I was hurrying home after helping friends move. I was sweaty and dusty, and wearing my crappiest clothes. If I’d been following Jann, trust me, I would have been much better dressed.

“Jann?”

She turned around and looked at me quizzically. She probably didn’t get recognized that much in Montreal.

“...I’m Brigitte.”

She extended her hand just as a flash of recognition lit up in her eyes.

“Oh right, we met at the record store.”

I was astounded. We had in fact met the previous fall, at an in-store signing to promote her latest album. She had impressed me even then; the fact that she stood rather than sat at the table, the better to look people in the eye; the fact that she seemed in no hurry to get through the line-up, and actually engaged each person in conversation rather than just scribble an autograph. She happily hammed it up for me, posing for photos. And I’d made a point to mention Olivia and Karen Carpenter (her two game-changers) in my brief encounter. But she had met, conservatively, hundreds of people on that promo tour. I had no reason to think I’d made a lasting impression.

The odds in life of running into your favourite singer and taking a leisurely stroll with her on a lazy summer day are not great.

Jann and I took a stroll.

She was happy she’d had a couple of days off to spend in Montreal. We talked about the World Cup – she was rooting for the underdog Dutch team. As we crossed over to Square St-Louis, she asked about the ice storm that had ravaged those trees just six

months prior. The most surreal moment was some random guy walking by us with a pet snake around his neck.

When we reached the end of the Square, we parted ways. She invited me to visit her backstage the next time she came to town.

The odds in life of taking a leisurely stroll with your favourite singer and feeling like you casually re-connected with a long-lost friend are not in your favour.

Unless your favourite singer is Jann Arden. In which case, your odds just got better.

That's a game-changer, you might say.