

# National Post

## Jann Arden: just your atypical rock 'n' roll babe: At home with the cats: With a new album out next week, the singer muses about success

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Illustrations: Color Photo: David Moll, National Post / Arden has found fame and a modest fortune, which is fine by her.

CALGARY - Jann Arden is pacing back and forth between the kitchen sink and the back door of her luxury townhouse near Lindsay Park in Calgary. "There she is, my Sweet Pea," she says in a cartoon voice, opening the french doors to her cat, who wants in from the park that lies beyond Arden's backyard. But Sweet Pea, one of Arden's three cats, doesn't want to come in. "It's a false in," she says, exasperated. "It happens all the time."

Arden comes back and leans over the marble countertop, chewing on a protein bar, a hard and rubbery substance that she says helped her through a recent depression. She lost some 35 pounds in the process and she looks as sultry and seasoned as ever, in deep burgundy lipstick, the mole on her cheek highlighted with black pencil.

As she talks about her latest album, Blood Red Cherry, which will be released next Tuesday, she puts on heavy makeup, and her friend and hair stylist trims her straight, streaked hair. "I really have blond hair, sweetie," she says when I struggle to pick her out of the high school graduation photo sitting near the fireplace. "I dye it every few weeks."

That Arden is so caught up with her hair

and her appearance seems a bit odd given that she has defined herself over the years as the prairie girl who rose from drunken bar singer to award-winning star without so much as a nod to the image-conscious world of pop music. On all her CD covers, she appears with her hair swathed across her face, her body hidden by baggy clothes or, in the case of her new release, in a big blanket rolling around in a yellowing field. She is not your typical sleek and sexy rock babe.

For many of her fans, especially female ones, that is what has made her real, likeable and different from the other Canadian divas -- and not quite as successful. When her last album, Happy?, came out two years ago, it was selling 9,000 copies a week, which was good, she noted at the time, but nothing compared with the 90,000 a week Celine Dion was selling.

Still, her musical history is impressive. Blood Red Cherry is Arden's fourth album; her previous albums had combined sales of close to \$1.5-million. Her best known single, Insensitive, from her 1994 album, Living Under June, hit the top 10 in Canada, the U.S. and Europe. In 1995, she won Juno Awards for best single, best songwriter and best female vocalist of the

year.

Blood Red Cherry is another solid and soulful album, continuing her legacy of anguished ballads that speak about heartache and regret. "The fans who buy my records know what they're getting," she says.

And she doesn't measure success in the way some other stars do. "I've never wanted to move up the rungs of success," she says. "Bigger doesn't mean better. Selling more records doesn't mean your music is better. It doesn't mean anything at all. The record has to speak for itself."

In that way, she says, she belongs to the Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young school of music. Not to the current crop of teen pop stars.

"Music never used to be about a 17-year-old getting a breast augmentation," says Arden, who's 37. "Or a 15-year-old singing about the deep concept of love. If you don't have a life to inform the palette from which you express yourself, your music takes that on."

Arden writes what she knows, which includes more than a fair share of disaster and chaos. "Nothing ever came easy," she says. "I didn't get a deal because I was slim, tall or sexy. I did it on my own merit and that's very satisfying."

Arden began her singing career with seven years spent in the streets and seedy taverns of North Vancouver. She would often drink more than she made and end up in bed with the wrong men. "I look back now and I almost cry for that person," she says.

Arden has moved well beyond her past, the

alcoholism and the low self-esteem, but it continues to haunt her lyrics and her life. The most poignant example of that was at a CD signing in 1997, when she saw a man she had once slept with. Her heart pounding, she was thinking about how awful her experience with him had been, when he came up to her and said, "I love your music." He didn't recognize her at all.

Now, with fame and a small fortune, Arden is recognized all the time. The kids in her neighbourhood are always putting things through her mail slot. A stranger came by recently looking for her while she was out drinking wine on the front porch with a friend in her bathrobe.

It's time to move back to the country, she says, to Springbank, a rural community in the foothills of the Rockies where she grew up and where her parents still live. She hopes to be able to live quietly and anonymously in her place an hour away from Calgary. But she'll be sad to leave this house, with its dark wood floors, marble fireplaces and huge, reclining, brocade chairs. The walls are covered with photos and paintings of naked women. There's a mini-guitar propped up against one of the chairs and instrumental music playing on the stereo. It feels like a spa.

But there's too many people in the house today for it to be as relaxing. There are two women from her management office, a rep from Universal, a photographer, a reporter and three cats. It's chaotic, but Arden tries to maintain a sense of fastidiousness, asking one of the women to straighten out the curtains and another to vacuum the cat hair off the kitchen floor.

When asked about echoes of Sarah McLachlan in her new songs, she says:

"There's only so many ways to approach rhythms. I hear so many other influences in there. Comparisons are a necessary evil, I guess. But it's more like Sarah McLachlan sounding like me."

It's clear she'd rather talk about cats and where she's going tonight with her girlfriends. "Music is such a small part of my life," she says. "I read, I go to movies, I do dinners with my friends. I hang out with my parents and visit my brother once a month in jail. And I probably spend lots of time in the bathroom trying to find the perfect feminine protection." She attends to her cafe, The Arden, that she runs with her other brother, and she has hired an agent to help her pursue acting roles.

"There's lots of things I like to do," she says. "Music is sort of like my hobby, like people who macrame. I don't consider myself a musician. I just like the craft of songwriting."

Perhaps her tenacious hold on having a normal life stems from the pacemaker she wore for 17 years, and just had removed in January when her slow-heartbeat problem was deemed to be under control. "I never told anyone about it," she says. "I never wanted it to be an issue. But it was very humbling to think that a tiny spark was the difference between being here and not being here."

The crowd in Arden's house gathers on the green leather sofa to watch the first video from her latest album. In it, wearing rolled-up jeans, she busks outside a rundown hotel and sings: "Four billion people surround us. So many souls lose their way. All that we have is each other. And that's all I've ever wanted."

The images are blurry and there are words and drawings scratched onto the film giving it a distinct artsy flare. The scratchings, which Arden has done herself, seem as playful and bold as her paintings that hang in her cafe.

Arden and her clan seem pleased with the video. And as everyone is getting up, she notices Sweat Pea scratching at the leather couch. "Hey," she yells, "Stop that." Then she looks up, pretending to be furious: "OK. Where's the barbeque?"

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