



Odd jobs: Arden writes about her days singing on the street for spare change in Vancouver and about her eldest brother, in jail for murder

Jann Arden's down-and-out days

The multimedia pop diva's new memoir is a departure from her stand-up shtick

MEETING JANN ARDEN is like watching a one-woman show on speed. Sitting in a downtown Toronto hotel lobby, the 49-year-old talks about her newly released memoir and album with so many different voices for effect, you'd think Robin Williams or Nicki Minaj coached her.

As soon as the subject of the upcoming holidays comes up, the Alberta-born singer-songwriter launches into an old-timey, high-pitched tone to recall her Christmases past. "You know when you go to the Bay and spend 60 or so dollars on cosmetics?" she asks, before moving into her best Lucille Ball drawl. "Sometimes you get a free makeup thing, like a brush or a travel bag. I *always* got that gift-with-purchase thing at Christmas from my mom. Jeezus, I tell ya!"

These types of slap-on-the-knee anecdotes—which Arden has been liberally sprinkling into her live performances since she first hit the charts with *I Would Die for You* (from her 1993 debut disc, *Time for Mercy*)—have become more than just shtick or a nervous tic. In fact, Arden's homespun sense of humour has resulted in an unlikely title: Canada's only multimedia pop diva. Aside from a consistent schedule of concert dates, a CBC radio show of her own where she frequently interviews stars ("I thanked Stevie Nicks for the many hours of necking I did to Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*"), and TV spots (she cameos on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and is a regular on *Canada Sings*), Arden is a relentless twitterist, tweeting an average

of 15 times a day to her more than 30,000 fans. Her thoughts have also resulted in three books, two of them—*If I Knew, Don't You Think I'd Tell You?* and *I'll Tell You One Damn Thing, and That's All I Know!*—a hodgepodge of journal entries and notes.

Her latest writing effort, *Falling Backwards*, has Arden tackling memoir. Her jokes, playful turns of phrases and quirky Ardenisms, ever-present in the advice column she wrote for *Elle Canada* in 2009, are still present in *Falling Backwards*, but the book moves Arden into a much more focused narrative. Her new writing reads less like stand-up and more like a collated version of the warm chatter she doles out in person.

With many pages in *Falling Backwards* dedicated to her signature topic—the all-in-good-fun parental nitpicking she is applauded for onstage—Arden tackles the good (her mother's tenacity) and the bad (her father's drinking problem) without melodrama. She is at her best when she takes self-deprecating trips down her own teenage memory lane. "Luckily, there were no fires I had to put out," Arden says. "The only time I took drugs was when I was 18. I smoked pot and then ate a giant bag of Costco chips and wondered if anything happened to me."

What counters Arden's moments of unapologetic absurdity are the grim accounts of the

life she led before winning eight Juno awards. In *Falling Backwards*, she writes about her older brother, Duray Richards, currently serving a life sentence for the murder of a Creston, B.C., woman. The book also reveals Arden's down-and-out days singing on the streets for change in Vancouver, where she was robbed and assaulted, as well as her string of odd jobs—on a fishing boat, in country bars as a backup singer, and managing a video-store desk.

"Humour and tragedy are so intertwined," she says. "You can see it in my life and every project I take on, especially my new recordings, which I didn't even write." What Arden is referring to is her just-released album called *Uncover Me 2* (the first volume was

released in 2007). Covering a number of classic hits—from the Smiths' gloomy *Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me* to Doris Day's *Que Sera, Sera*, Arden feels her versions of these vintage tracks finally reflect

her diversity as both an artist and person.

Arden cites a young, new performer as current inspiration. "Thank you, thank you, thank you Jesus for Adele!" she claps. "You know what? Lady Gaga, Britney Spears or any of those girls must look at Adele and think, 'Wow, that's the real, honest to God thing.' When someone like her can capture the imagination of all ages, it's a good sign for all music out there." **ELIO IANNACCI**

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