

NEW WAVE

Jordana's Visions

"My job is to radiate pure emotion"

By Judy Steed

We don't wait to be told what's happening in the music scene," says Gary Cormier, the operator of the Edge, a Toronto club known for breaking new talent. "We make it happen." As he speaks, Michaela Jordana is happening on stage. The lead singer and soul of the Poles, a Canadian new wave band, Jordana performs like an electric storm. Amid flashing strobe lights, surrounded by four musicians, she saws at the air with a hand-held synthesizer stick.

"X-ray robot, you're my windup toy," she moans, shaking and whirling like Mick Jagger gone crazy. "Gonna create, but first we'll destroy / We'll build an empire for centuries / With war paint of ashes / There'll be victory / We'll build, we'll build up..."

People are up, dancing among tables and pushing through the crowd to be close to Jordana, raising their fists and shouting out the chorus: "X-ray robot, gonna make you my slave." It's like a scary scene from the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, and the kids are plugged right in. This is, after all, new wave, the good-time beat of basic rock 'n' roll combined with jazz, electronic sounds and cerebral lyrics that convey futuristic — and foreboding — dimensions.

Backstage in the green room, between shows, the fans line up to see her. They're all staring, wanting to touch: is she real? Is she for real? Tall and skinny, glittering

*X-Ray Robot. © All rights reserved 1978 Beluga Music

in silver and gold threads, hipbones poking through shiny black leatherette pants, fluorescent pink socks peeking out of black Beatle boots, almond eyes outlined in Kohl, dark hair chopped, frizzed, and speckled with pink and purple dyes, the punk rock-new wave queen holds court.

In the middle of all the adulation, Jordana turns to me. "The future is scary," she says. Vibrating with nervous energy, obsessed with her own vision, she's a new wave version of the late French chanteuse Edith Piaf. Jordana has the same passionate intensity, the same commitment to her art, but it's our un-Piaflike obsession with technology that is the biggest item in her repertoire. "Computers are taking over," she insists.

Her polar obsessions helped Jordana in her painting — and in the move to a singing career

raking me with her eyes like a new wave Aimee Semple McPherson. "The earth and the animals are being destroyed, and we're animals too. As an artist, my job is to radiate pure emotion. I'm expressing the primitive feelings, the rage and desire, the blind instinct for survival. The kids understand we've got to fight to survive."

With her first album hitting the stores at the end of the summer — on the heels of the band's underground hit single *CN Tower* — Jordana's own struggles are likely to be realized. Titled *Boys* ("because I love cute boys"), the album was



As Michaela Berman, Jordana painted the 8' x 16' *I Cry Tears of Blood for the Power Man Wields on Thy Hierarchy of Being*. It hangs in the National Gallery



Jordana at Soundstage Studio where she recorded her first album, to be released late in the summer

recorded with the assistance of Bob Ezrin at Toronto's Soundstage, a subsidiary of Nimbus 9 studio. Ezrin's name rings bells — and cash registers — in the music business. Formerly a partner in Nimbus, he is the creative genius behind Pink Floyd's latest multimillion-selling album, *The Wall*. His list of producing credits includes Alice Cooper, Peter Gabriel, Poco and Lou Reed.

Jordana — is not intimidated by such a roll call. "I guess my confidence comes from being born in Winnipeg," she grins. And why not?

Why shouldn't the town that gave us a governor general and a Larry Zoff also produce "a dervish Snow Queen of the North," "a lioness on the prowl," "a compelling woman of the 1980s"? Those labels are from critics who've seen her perform in Canada and in New York, where the Poles headlined at CBCG's, the launching pad for new wave artists such as Patti Smith and the Ramones.

But what ever happened to the proper, young Winnipeg girl named Michaela Berman? Dressed as always in her favorite colors, pink and black, curled up on a Victorian sofa in the cosy Toronto home she shares with Doug Pringle, the band's synthesizer wizard, composer and business brain, Jordana says she had a genteel upbringing as the daughter of a travelling salesman, with 10 years of piano lessons and studies at art college in Winnipeg. She arrived in Toronto in the early 1970s and survived as a waitress and a window dresser, spending most of her free time alone, drawing. Then she met Pringle ("he's an artist, he paints with sound"), who was performing with Syrnix, a highly regarded synthesizer group.

Pringle plugged the asocial Michaela Berman into society and introduced her to Joyce Wieland, an artist and filmmaker who had been a heroine of hers since art school days. It was a turning point. "Joyce just blew my mind," Jordana enthuses. "I love her work. She's a woman who's an artist who makes a statement, and she's kept her femininity. She is what I wanted to become — in my way."

Jordana still had to discover her own artistic focus. She found it during long, wandering expeditions with Pringle in the Arctic. She says she fell in love with whales and the primeval wilderness while hunting with an Inuit shaman near the North Pole. "It's definitely another planet," she sighs. "Messages from space bombard your being. It's so beautiful and so cold. We were drifting on Arctic ice floes. We were starving, and we ate raw whale meat. I had visions."

Returning to Toronto, a city short of visions of its own, Jordana locked herself in her studio for a year and painted huge, glowing, realistic canvases of whales and water, ice and Inuit. In 1976 she had a solo show at Toronto's Isaacs Gallery and sold two major paintings to the National Gallery of Canada and the Canada Council's permanent collection. But this wasn't the end of her polar obsessions.

In 1977 Pringle and the newly named Jordana (name borrowed, prosaically

enough, from the name of a friend's business), collaborated on *The Rites of Nulijuk*, a performance work dedicated to the Inuit spirit of the waters. It played at four Ontario art galleries, and audiences were astounded by Pringle's eerie music rising above the clouds of smoke clinging to the figure of a waiting, fur-clad shaman. "I was so terrified. I didn't eat or sleep for 10 days before the show," Jordana recalls with a shiver. "I



was supposed to go into a trance — the trance of the hunt on the ice — and I didn't know if I could do it." But, she says, it happened. "Performing seemed to awaken an ancient memory in me."

Shortly thereafter she metamorphosed into a snaky rocker, writing songs about cannibals. Still, she hasn't abandoned art: a new show of portraits — like her album, it's called *Boys* — opens in Toronto this fall.

It's hardly a predictable scenario — from Winnipeg art school to Arctic ice floes to new wave figurehead — and the contradictions between Inuit visions and x-ray robots seem almost schizophrenic. Jordana, however, prefers it that way. "I'm influenced by Doris Lessing, Patti Smith, Blondie, classical composers, great painters, David Bowie, Greta Garbo, human passion, technology, being Canadian, ghosts..." She pauses, doubtless thinking of other things to be influenced by.

"You have to focus if you want to be a star." Another pause, as her eyes switch onto high beam. "And I am a star." ■

Whirling out her message on stage, she has been called "a dervish Snow Queen"



"Performing seemed to awaken an ancient memory in me." But Jordana hasn't entirely abandoned painting for new wave: a show of her portraits opens in the fall