

Accordion to her

E-ville expat Marie-Josée Houle returns to the fold(s)

MARIE-JOSÉE HOULE

Fri, July 27 (8:30pm). Blue Chair Café (9624-76 Ave).

By her own account, Marie-Josée Houle has become something of a "go-to" gal in her adopted home of Ottawa, at least when it comes to accordion-playing. She's played everything from art openings to weddings to (in one instance, anyway) a barbecue for Supreme Court judges.

Also by her own account, she never planned it this way. When the Edmonton expat—an alumna of local groups The Elevators and Pangina—moved to the nation's capital five years ago, following a stopover in Halifax to attend Dalhousie University, she figured she'd continue her musical pursuits much as she had before she left town: as a bassist.

But after a period of unemployment during her first year in Ottawa, and after seeing the accordion atmospherically employed by a jazz band, Houle returned to the instrument she had been formally trained on from the age of five until she abandoned it in high school. "The accordion was something I did in school and was good at it, but I didn't love it and I didn't think of using it for anything," recalls Houle from a tour stop in Vancouver. "When I was a teenager in the '80s, it wasn't something I really considered. It was not cool—I wanted a guitar."

Times certainly have changed—there's been a veritable accordion explosion in indie-alternative circles lately—the once-maligned squeezebox, instrument of choice for geeks everywhere, is now featured prominently in the music of groups like Gogol Bordello, Devotchka, The Decemberists and Arcade Fire, to name just a few, as well as in tunes by Edmonton acts like Hot Panda and The Secretaries. Houle, who also teaches music, chuckles that she's seen an increased demand for lessons from prospective pupils as a result.

"It's beyond the 'Look at me and my ironic trucker hat and mustache,'" she says. "It's not necessarily a spectacle anymore—it's exotic. I've been very careful not to market it as a joke."

Houle credits folks like Geoff Berner and fellow former-Edmontonian Wendy McNeill for having paved a respectable path for the instrument in indie singer/songwriter circles. Still, returning to the fold, so to speak, was a painful experience. "It's when I started writing music that it completely changed my relationship [to the instrument]," she says. "All this stuff just came pouring out. I don't know where it came from. My mother says it's because she listened to Édith Piaf when she was pregnant."

The ghost of Paris' Little Sparrow certainly can be heard in Houle's modern-day take on gypsy jazz and French cafe music. As such, Houle says she's been able to free herself not only from the logistical confines of being in a touring band (she's being accompanied in this, her first cross-country tour, with just a bassist, native Norwegian Arthur Holoien), but from some of the aesthetic limitations as well.

"I downplay the instrument a lot," she explains. "I leave a whole lot of room for my voice. I've played in bands with big walls of noise, and I'm tired of it. I want to leave room for singing and passion. My criteria for musicians to play with now is that I don't care how many notes per second they can play—I want them to know when *not* to play."