

Marie-Josée Houle Plays Accordion To The Broken Souls

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OTTAWA — Let's clear up the usual misconceptions right away: Yes, **Marie-Josée Houle** plays the accordion. Yes, the instrument is more known for perky polkas than for well-crafted pop songs. But no, Houle's music isn't corny in the least. As she says on her MySpace page, "Accordion music can be sexy!"

But Houle herself had reservations about the instrument, right back to when her parents plunked one in front of her at the age of five.



Marie-Josée Houle

"The novelty of playing an instrument wore off," Houle says, "and after a while, I wasn't too keen on practicing."

Houle moved on to the bass and the saxophone, playing in a few bands before moving from Edmonton to Ottawa three years ago. She picked up the accordion again while in between jobs, wrote a lovely waltz called "Cale Ton Verre," and received encouragement from her bandmate at the time, **Marc Beland**.

"About the same time," Houle explains, "one friend had been visiting one of my roomies while I was locked in my room practicing the accordion, and asked me if I would play at her Thanksgiving party. I was taken aback. If this particular friend thought the accordion was cool, then it must be OK to play it in public! It helped me get over the fear of receiving groans from people when I told them that I played the accordion."

More songs followed, and now Houle has a whole CD, *Our Lady Of Broken Souls*. It's an album of alternately pretty and dark tunes, sung in both French and English (Houle was born in Val D'Or, Quebec). And while it's definitely seeped in traditional French stylings, the record sounds completely her own.

"I'm often told that my music makes people feel like they're in Paris," Houle says. "I'm sure I absorbed a lot of the music that influenced the creation of my album by general exposure. When listening to some of the tracks on the album, there is no denying my cultural heritage. My mother takes credit for the Edith Piaf influence. She tells me that she listened to Edith Piaf when she was pregnant with me."

Appropriately, Houle will be having two CD release parties — one in Ottawa at Rasputins on March 16 (with **Amer Diab**), and one in Gatineau at Le Petit Chicago on April 4 (with **Cindy Doire**). Houle says her Anglophone and Francophone audiences are quite different.

"In English Canada, I feel that my music will appeal to people on a multi-cultural level... people who go to music festivals, travel, watch foreign films, enjoy folk and jazz or just want something different.

"Despite having grown up in Alberta, I consider myself a Quebecoise and I connect with people on a cultural level. Le Petit Chicago is a venue where people drop in to check out new music... By the end of the set, people stomp their feet, clap their hands and hoot and holler. What a great feeling! As a performer, feeding off that kind of energy is such a treat."