

Here Be Monsters – by Alan Wigney, Ottawa Sun, October 15, 2008

Accordionist Marie-Josée Houle sings of wanton desire and dangerous love on her sophomore CD

Seated at a New Edinburgh café, Marie-Josée Houle quickly scans the tables around her, takes a sip of java and issues a disclaimer.

"I hate the sound of most accordions," she says with a smile. "But I love my accordion."

She is not alone. Houle and her trusty accordion have in recent weeks been called on to bring love to disparate local CD-releasers Evil Farm Children and Rozalind MacPhail, in addition to standing on-call for Stefani Guzman's Eastborough project.

In the coming weeks, that same accordion will embellish the Ottawa Chamber Theatre Company's production of *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*. And, Houle reports, there are plans afoot for a collaboration with Toronto-based soul singer Zaki Ibrahim.

Houle's, in other words, is not like most accordions. And the singer-songwriter who proudly stands behind it, is not most accordionists.

"I do love the accordion, really," Houle insists. "And I do think it has for too long gone unappreciated. It's such a versatile instrument but for such a long time it was thought of as just something that is played in polka music. Zydeco allowed people to forgive the accordion a little, but it took The Arcade Fire to show people a bit of its range."

Houle, a native of Val d'Or who arrived in Ottawa five years ago following stints in Edmonton and Halifax, did likewise last year on her debut release *Our Lady of Broken Souls*.

A moody emotional journey that set Houle's accordion and emotive vocals in a decidedly non-polka context, the album defied easy categorization. And immediately won favour with those in search of challenging independent sounds outside the world of post-rock collectives and stoner-rock bands.

Monsters, the followup to that promising debut, ups the ante. Accordion in hand, Houle runs through dark narratives of demons internal and external, as her merry band of Canadians and Norwegians delves into vaguely European waltz, klezmer, rock and, yes, polka territory. Throughout, Houle sings of wanton desire and the perils thereof, throwing in a well-placed Jolie Holland cover along the way.

"The album," Houle says, "is very dark. Very raw. I like to call it French Cafe after the absinthe."

Or perhaps after the hemlock. Ghosts of such dark masterpieces as Nick Cave's Murder Ballads and Neil Young's Tonight's the Night abound. Even when Houle considers the reality of that elusive love, on the chilling I Am Not the World -- a song whose sparse piano-and-cello arrangement brings to mind Big Star's Holocaust -- the jaded heroine asks: "I am not the world / So why would anybody else make me theirs?"

"That's probably the riskiest thing I've ever written," Houle confesses. "If I think about these things too much, I might retract them.

"I've never written a love song, though -- not a happy love song. I've been thinking that one day I should. But are we allowed to be happy? Are we allowed to brag? If we love somebody too much, will we lose them?"

Of such musical questions is Monsters -- are monsters -- made. This ain't no polka.