

Spotlight

SPOTLIGHT ON... MARIE-JOSÉE HOULE

By Ren Tomovcik



If the winter blues have got you down, there's nothing like some great music to warm your spirits and inspire your imagination. And if inspiration is what you're longing for, then you need not look (or listen!) any further than the sassy melodies of Ottawa-based songstress Marie-Josée Houle.

Marie-Josée Houle This former punk-rocker turned vintage-inspired accordionist has got imagination in spades, a smile that can charm a room, and a sound that will make your ears perk up!

Classically trained with some serious punk-rock roots, Marie-Josée draws from a mixed bag of musical influences. She first picked up an accordion at the tender age of five, and experimented with a myriad of other instruments from the alto sax to the electric bass.

While spending time playing in experimental bands and rocking out on the punk scene, Marie-Josée learned to reject labels and embrace her individuality, but little did she know where her musical journey would take her. When she first moved to Ottawa, she'd hoped to link up with a heavy metal band, yet Marie-Josée's destiny had other things in store for her - and one special instrument.

She returned to her roots in more ways than one, and rediscovered her love for the accordion. But this isn't your grandpa's accordion - no, when she takes the stage, it doesn't take Marie-Josée very long to prove that the instrument can not only be cool, but sexy as well!



Marie-Josée happy behind the keys - Photos by Darren Holmes

Describing her current sound as "French café, folksy gypsy jazz," Marie-Josée has a hard time committing to one particular genre. She writes in both English and French, and her powerful vocals and passionate lyrics have earned her well-deserved comparisons to French icon Édith Piaf. But while her songs are certainly folksy and thoroughly infused with an oldschool European vibe, there is no doubt that Marie-Josée makes each note her own.

Drawing inspiration from her indie-rock background and her life lessons and experiences, her music is heavily autobiographical. The stories she tells flow easily between melancholic ballads and upbeat, get-up-and-dance tracks, making each song feel like a personal conversation.

Marie-Josée released her first solo album, *Our Lady of Broken Souls*, in spring of 2007. The album met with great critical acclaim, and she followed it up in 2008 with her sophomore disc, *Monsters*, which received a nomination for Best Folk Album of the Year from the Ottawa Xpress.

2008 was a whirlwind year for Marie-Josée: not only did she release a new album, she undertook a two-week Canadian tour during the summer, played some shows in Norway, and sat on the Ontario Arts Council Popular Music Grant Jury.

What's next for the red-haired *chanteuse*? In March, she'll travel to Vienna to perform at the 10th Annual Vienna Accordion Festival alongside other artists from all over the world. And when she returns to the capital, she'll be taking the stage with the Ottawa Chamber Theatre Company in *The Mechanicsville Monologues*.

The adventure's just beginning for this intrepid songstress - from coast to coast and across the sea, Marie-Josée's on a musical journey that will surely see her star shine brighter than ever in 2009.