

# Of Accordions and Cleavage

## Musician has turned to the wheezebox with affinity



Marie-Josée Houle took up the accordion, with which she has a love-hate relationship, because her parents couldn't afford a piano. Today, she loves writing sultry, melodramatic music for accordion.

Photograph by : Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

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The ukulele was bestowed some cool cred thanks to artists such as James Hill and Brooklyn's Beirut, who turned the loser lute into a popular instrument -- and not in that nudge-nudge, look-at-my-

trucker-hat ironic way.

Marie-Josée Houle is seeing some serious parallels these days. She plays the accordion and sings music she calls "French cafe and gypsy jazz." Hokey polka be damned.

Though she's no loser, Houle, 35, is a bit grannyish, judging by her knitting project called Ugly Socks, which is precisely what she makes. She drops the needles when she picks up the instrument she received as a five-year-old -- a shiny number with fake mother-of-pearl keys. Houle is often seen on stage next to Casey Comeau, with whom she plays as part of the backing band the Centretown Wilderness Club.

"I've had a love-hate relationship with my accordion," Houle says one evening, sipping some sort of lychee-margarita concoction. "My parents said, 'It's time for you to learn an instrument.' And we couldn't afford a piano."

She took to it dutifully, practicing regularly out of obligation, rather than enthusiasm. When Houle came to Ottawa three years ago from Halifax (where she hid her accordion for fear of being roped into a Celtic band), she turned to the wheezebox with affinity.

"I started writing music with the accordion. That's when I really made it mine." But she had to get over the childhood baggage. "Performing with that instrument, I felt like such a spectacle," she laughs. "It was so uncool and yet so exotic in some ways. I felt like my mother's capuchin monkey -- here, perform for the family!"

"Today, I think it's the greatest thing, because the accordion can be so many different things."

She explores the range of the instrument, from simple compositions to a cabaret style, rounded out by the guitar (Neil Gerster) and the bass clarinet (Adam Saikaley of Amatheia and As the Poets Affirm). Her music is grounded by a deep-seated love of Edith Piaf, heard *in utero* and ever since. "The songs are not dependent on being carried by a guitar," Houle says. "I can have a 10-piece band backing me or it can be completely stripped away." She freely admits the melodramatic, flamboyant, sultry music is bolstered by her fiery red hair -- "and the cleavage," she laughs. "It's actually hidden by the instrument," noting the accordion's fringe benefit. Marie-Josée Houle plays the Manx Pub, 370 Elgin St., with Neil Gerster Sunday, 9 p.m. No cover.