

# Old Ottawa South musician scores sweet gigs with ‘uncool’ instrument

Laura Byrne Paquet's Downtown Profiles  
By Laura Byrne Paquet



**Her self-described French café and gypsy jazz musical style have helped Marie-Josée Houle land some sweet gigs around town, including playing at Casey Comeau’s backing band The Centretown Wilderness Club recently.**

**Marie-Josée Houle moved to Ottawa “on instinct” in 2003. After stints in Halifax and Edmonton, she was looking for a change. And with degrees in environmental science and sociology, she hoped to find a government job.**

The public service plan didn’t pan out, but she found another niche instead: music. She took a bookkeeping job with the Ottawa Folklore Centre in Old Ottawa South and volunteered to host a CKCU-FM radio show focusing on indie artists.

Both jobs put her in touch with a wide range of musicians. “I was very lucky, and I met the right people immediately,” says Houle, now 35.

As a result, she started playing the accordion again—something she hadn’t done in 15 years.

Why such a long break?

“It’s the world’s most uncool instrument!” she says with a laugh. And indeed, with her brightly tinted hair and funky clothes, she doesn’t exactly look like Lawrence Welk.

But her distinctive style, which she describes as French café and gypsy jazz, caught the attention of other musicians. Soon, she was playing gigs with a variety of local artists, while working a day job as a cooperative housing consultant. In her “spare” time, she also does a bit of writing and creates artworks in a variety of media, including photography, glass, ink, watercolours and tile.

“Spreading myself too thin is something I’m quite guilty of,” Houle cheerfully admits. “I have trouble sitting still.”

That hasn’t hurt her musical career. In fact, a growing number of out-of-town gigs led her to very regretfully give up her radio show in the fall of 2006. She hasn’t even had time lately to knit any “ugly socks” — brilliantly striped footwear that was once her trademark gift to family and friends.

She’s about to get even busier: her first solo CD, *Our Lady of Broken Souls*, is set for release this spring, with launch parties at Rasputin’s on Bronson Avenue and Le Petit Chicago in Gatineau. Houle’s a huge fan of both venues, for both their excellent sound and their attentive audiences.

The dual launch on both sides of the river reflects something she has come to treasure in her three years in the capital: its two cultures. “It’s giving me the confidence to be bilingual,” says Houle, who was born in Val d’Or, Quebec. When she was small, her family moved to Edmonton, and she grew up speaking French at home and English at school.

She’s delighted to be living somewhere where she can easily move back and forth between the two tongues. “Language here is very special,” she says. “I’ve been able to get in touch with my Québécois roots.”

Houle writes and sings in both English and French. Catch her this month performing with Sacha Gabriel at the Avant Garde Bar (January 19) and with Glenn Nuotio as one of the opening acts for Camera Obscura at Barrymore’s (January 30).