

Passionate and sensuous, sought-after Ottawa accompanist plays it cool

By **ALLAN WIGNEY**

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Marie-Josée Houle was raised in Edmonton and attended university in Halifax. Now, after nearly four years in Ottawa, the artist has mastered the local dialect enough to correctly mispronounce the name of her alma mater's founder.

"I immediately learned that Ottawans pronounce 'Dalhousie' differently than do Haligonians, or academics in general," Houle confirms. "Whether or not I learned to consistently pronounce it like an Ottawa depends on who you speak to. Perhaps that will be the indicator of whether or not I've become a true Ottawa. But I do have the switching from French to English and vice versa in mid-sentence thing down pat."

Minds her languages

That would be mid-sentence, as well as mid-album. Houle, a sought-after accompanist you may have seen at the side of Casey Comeau, Glenn Nuotio, Melissa Laveaux or Benoit Joanisse, demonstrates as much on her remarkable solo CD, *Our Lady of Broken Souls*, crooning tales of woe in both official languages.

Our Lady of Broken Souls showcases a third language in which Houle is proficient: The much-maligned accordion. The artist herself freely refers to her first instrument (she also plays that other singalong-staple, the bass guitar) as 'the most uncool instrument one can play.' Yet, in the context of Houle's twisted carnivalesque Tom Waits/Regina Spektor/Nick Cave musical world, the accordion sounds very cool indeed.

Noteworthy

"I must admit," Houle nonetheless says, "I hate most accordion music. Guitar players that can play 500 notes per minute don't impress me; I appreciate accordion players who play 500 notes per minute, even less. The accordion is much like the banjo -- another instrument I hate. They are loud instruments that cut through all the others in a band. They hurt the ears when they are poorly or over-played, which like the cheesy grandpa's wedding image gives the instrument a bad name."

She may not sing the praises of her instrument in conversation. But Houle, like Vancouver's Geoff Berner, has on disc and in performance taken great strides to improve the accordion's standing in the ears of the public. Accordions -- even banjos -- don't have to be uncool, she admits.

"The banjo and accordion are wonderful additions to bands when a lot of thought has been given to an arrangement," Houle observes. "I have a lot of appreciation for these instruments when they are used to add intonation and texture."

"I put down my accordion at the age of 18 and picked it up again when I moved to Ottawa because I needed something to do while looking for work. I had recently seen the accordion in a jazz band and realized the versatility of the instrument. I'm a very passionate and sensuous person, and after picking up the accordion again, all of this music suddenly came out of nowhere. For the first time, I made the accordion mine and was able to perform with it, without feeling like a spectacle."

Houle is not unfamiliar with spectacles. She has composed music for films, and recently performed on stage during the Chamber Theatre Co.'s production of *Forever Yours, Mary-Lou*.

'Personal growth'

Additionally, Houle creates visual art that ranges from glasswork to the caged-bird illustration that adorns the cover of her CD.

"It's all about personal growth," she explains. "I do it because to keep myself from doing it would be to keep myself from breathing. I put paint to canvas; I slosh ink onto paper; I build websites; I create posters; I put my hands in clay; I knit.

"I enjoy creating. It's not whether or not I leave anything tangible behind that counts. Perhaps that's why I can spend hours sculpting in the sand knowing that the next day, the tide will have washed away my art and that perhaps no one will have been able to see it but me."

And perhaps that's why Ottawa's own Marie-Josée Houle plays such an uncool instrument, so coolly.
