

Q&A with Allan Wigney from the Ottawa Sun, and Marie-Josée Houle, who was in Oslo at the time.

Friday, March 9, 2007:

MJ: Good morning!

Alright! I've got coffee in my system, Tore has gone to work, the place is clean, I've got a load of laundry in the machine, the new Pierre Lapointe CD is playing in the background and I've got the apartment to myself. I look out the window where yesterday's spring fever is now covered with a light sprinkle of snow. I'm calm and I'm ready to answer your questions.

WIG: First, having gone to university in Halifax, how long did it take you to learn how we pronounce 'Dalhousie' in Ottawa?

MJ: (Giggle) I immediately learned that Ottawans pronounce 'Dalhousie' differently than Haligonians or academics in general, but whether or not I learned to consistently pronounce it like an Ottawan depends on who you speak to. Perhaps that will be the indicator of whether or not I've become a true Ottawan. (In May, it will be four years since I moved there.) For anyone who's seen me play a show at Rasputin's Folk Café, they know that I've got the switching from French to English and vice-versa in mid-sentence thing down pat!!!

WIG: Also, I should ask why you're in Norway. I take it you've been before.

MJ: This is my third visit to Norway. It's beautiful here! I feel very at home in Oslo. Of course, being with my love might have something to do with my biased opinion! It's a big world and I want to see most of it. But returning to Oslo is like a breath of fresh air! My Norwegian improves with each visit. I can understand a lot of what I read, however, for some reason, every time I open my mouth to speak it, Spanish comes out. I never took Spanish in my life!!! (Sesame Street indoctrination, I suppose. Or perhaps it's all that Latin music I enjoy, but don't own.)

My being here in Oslo ties in a lot with the album title, the image on the cover and conscious decisions I've made about my life. In January 2006, in conversation with someone, I coined the term 'Our Lady of Broken Souls.' In fact, I made it in reference to myself as I realized that I couldn't afford to be that person forever. I knew I was ready to be involved with someone after a very long hiatus, but the only way I was going to be in something healthy was to be WITH someone healthy. NO MORE BROKEN SOULS!

It's one thing to be there for your friends during times of difficulty but it's another to collect broken souls. Enough of falling in love with people's potential! I also came to the realization that constantly codling and commiserating with people does not help them, but rather paralyzes them. And in the process, I trap or limit myself. Hence the image on the cover of me in a bird cage with the door open. The butterflies are the broken souls. Everyone is there of their own volition.

On the back cover, the same image is repeated, but I'm no longer in the cage. Hence the last song on the CD 'Farewell to the Lady of Broken Souls,' which is very boppy. There are no lyrics - to write any in French or in English would have been too contrived. Instead, I scat. It's about me walking away and, well, no one dies. At the end of the song, I'm joined by other voices (Kosta MacKay has the best falsetto!), meaning that I'm not alone and the world won't come to an end - for anyone.

Shortly after making all of these conscious choices, finding a title for the album, starting to put money aside for it and doing what it will take to get this CD recorded, I met my love, a Norwegian who came to Ottawa on a 6-month post-doc. He was my fiddle player's roomie and things clicked the minute we were introduced. We've been in a long-distance relationship since July, which explains all of my visits to Oslo.

WIG: On your website you refer (more than once) to the accordion as the most uncool instrument one can play. Now, I have to tell you from the first time I saw the McGarrigles, I thought it was one of the coolest instruments. And what with Beirut and Geoff Berner and Lederhosen Lucile and such, it seems to have been working on its image in recent years. Comments?

MJ: This would be a matter of taste, really. There have been some amazingly talented people who use the accordion in a singer-songwriter context and make it cool. Geoff Burner and Wendy McNeill are great examples. (I often cover Wendy's 'Such a Common Bird' for live shows. Wendy and I are two of three performing accordion ladies from our age group that grew up in Edmonton. And there must be something about those Scandinavians and accordionnesses. Wendy is now married and living in Stockholm...)

Some people choose the accordion because it makes a good gimmick. 'Hey! It's so uncool, it's cool. Look at my trucker hat and my moustache!' (On the other hand, it's quite difficult to play - I'm so grateful it was my first instrument!!!)

A lot of accordion music recorded in the 70's and 80's is just terrible! There's a quality of the instrument which sounds a bit like an organ, there are too many notes and it's all accompanied by a horrible drum track! This was not something I could associate with while I was sporting a purple mohawk in my teens and classically trained on the instrument. Of course, if I would have taken a second to listen, I would have realized that some of my heroes, such as the Pogues, used an accordion, but it didn't at all sound like the accordion pieces that I was made to learn.

I must admit that I hate most accordion music. I was never into wanker guitar players. People that can play five hundred notes per minute don't impress me. I appreciate accordion players who play five hundred notes per minute even less. The accordion is much like the banjo (another instrument which I hate, by the way). They are loud instruments that cut through all the other instruments in a band. They hurt the ears when they are poorly or over-played, which besides the cheesy-grandpa's-wedding image, in the case of the accordion, give the instruments a bad name. The banjo and accordion are wonderful additions

to bands when a lot of thought has been given to arrangement. I have a lot of appreciation for these instruments when they are used to add intonation and texture.

The accordion works for people like Geoff Burner and Wendy McNeill because the flying fingers across the keys are not the star of the show. Geoff and Wendy are the stars. The accordion is there to support. There is no wanking and the notes that are played are there with intent.

I put down my accordion at the age of 18 and picked it up again when I moved to Ottawa almost four years ago because I needed something to do while looking for work. At the time, my main instrument was the electric bass and I was hoping to form a heavy metal band. 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.

When I recorded 'Our Lady of Broken Souls,' I knew that I wanted my voice and the accordion to be the focus of the album. My goal was to create a project where I could play with a full band and still be able to play on my own.

I have played in several bands (and still do!), but I wanted my musical project to be independent of other people's financial and social priorities which may not align with mine. I always knew I wanted to be a professional recording and touring musician. I just had to find a project that could allow me to do it while remaining semi-independent. The reality is that sometimes, life gets in the way. (I still have two day jobs that pay the bills.) Talented musicians often have great careers and/or families. It's unfair to expect anyone to drop everything because I got a festival slot out West. So I wanted something that I could perform on my own if need be. Of course, it always sounds better when accompanied!

Aalya Ahmad, (who plays fiddle on the album and accompanies me for most live shows) and I worked very hard on arrangements on the album. We also play together in *Casey Comeau and the Centretown Wilderness Club*. It shows that we've been playing together for some time. We're increasingly sensitive to working together and harmonize rather than to step on each other's lines. (And surprise! The songs get better and better! To quote Casey, on my album, the fiddle and accordion dance together.) The goal is to improve the songs and not create a wall of noise as everyone wanks on their instruments fighting for their bit of the spotlight. Spending more time on arrangement is a clear sign of a band that's learning to play together. Casey is taking us into studio on March 17, and quite certain the result will be something beautiful!

I'm so grateful to be playing with Aalya! She's a fabulous musician and a close friend.

I've been very fortunate with all the players on this album! Rob Skitmore from the *Department of Foreign Affairs* plays guitar and mando and Derek Loewen plays drums and percussion. What pros!

For live shows, I don't have a drummer, but I met Neil Gerster last summer, who accompanies me regularly on guitar and on other toys. He's a great player, dedicated, enthusiastic, reliable and open to almost anything. What more could I want?

WIG: You're doing a second CD-release in Hull. I'm assuming you expect to see a different audience there than you'll find at **Rasputin's**. Do you intend to promote your album separately to Francophone and Anglophone audiences?

MJ: I chose the two venues for my CD releases in Ottawa and Hull for two reasons. I love both venues because of the atmosphere and the sound quality. (The owners are also great people and are easy to work with.) If the sound is terrible, you will never win over your audience no matter how well you play - unless of course you are playing to a room full of musicians who can immediately pinpoint the problem. And it's very hard to play well or sing on key when you can't hear yourself on stage! I wanted to play on stages that were set up for acoustic instruments.

Rasputin's is a listening room. It attracts an audience that wants to pay attention and absorb the music. People enjoy a glass of wine and a great meal as they listen to music.

I'm often told that my music makes people feel like they're in Paris. In English Canada, I feel that my music will appeal to people on a multi-cultural level. It will never make the mainstream, and will most likely not attract people to rock bars on a Friday night when they are tired and just want to watch a DVD with their kids. I highly suspect that my audience in English Canada goes to music festivals, travel, watches foreign films, enjoys folk and jazz or just wants something different.

At **Le petit Chicago** in Hull, the atmosphere is completely different from **Rasputin's**. I believe my music truly strikes a chord in Quebecois people. Despite having grown up in Alberta, I consider myself Quebecoise and I connect with people on a cultural level. **Le petit Chicago** is a venue where people drop in to check out new music. They are there for a good time. It's located near a bunch of restaurants and is often filled with chefs or wait staff that are looking to unwind with a drink after work. The shows there have a late start, even on a week night, but by the end of my set, people stomp their feet, clap their hands and hoot and holler. What a great feeling! As a performer, feeding off that kind of energy is such a treat!

Some people come to shows regardless of which side of the river they take place. And they get a very different experience.

As for promoting my music, in general, it will be sold under the folk-jazz genre. I sing in both French and in English on the album and I cover a lot of styles, but I like to think that the product is still remains a nice, tightly tied-together project.

I see my music perhaps getting mainstream attention in Quebec. The Quebecois music industry seems more open to making multi-cultural music more mainstream. As a result, there's potential of getting attention in other Franco-Canadian communities all across the country, which is always great!

WIG: Could you please elaborate on the film and theatre projects you have in the works? (How, for instance, did this filmmaker find you and your music?)

MJ: I'm the type of person who can't sit still. I'm so afraid of being bored or of stagnating. As I mentioned before, I play in a lot musical projects (Casey Comeau's alt-country bluegrass ensemble, Glenn Nuotio's piano gay-emo bratty cabaret and sometimes accompany blues guitarist Benoit Joannisse, and sensuous world beat Creole jazz sensation Melissa Laveaux. I've sat in on a few recordings with people I know and people I didn't know at the time but who have become friends, such as Cindy Doire who is opening for me on April 4 at **Le petit Chicago**).

That's also why I also play music for theatre and film. I've done some soundtrack work for local short filmmaker Edmond Michaud, a close friend who I met at the Maberly Meltdown years ago. Due to exposure on MySpace and on CBC Radio, I've been approached by other film and theatre directors. One of my songs will be used in US independent filmmaker Nathan Michael's short 'My Lucky Charm' set for release this summer. He's planning on submitting the film to various film festivals.

My recent theatre experience is with the Chamber Theatre Co.'s three-night run of Michel Tremblay's 'Forever Yours, Mary-Lou.' I sat on the stage playing music as people walked in, sipped wine and looked at the art on the walls. I was a living part of the set. When the audience finally settled in their seats, I played one last song as the actors walked onto the stage and got into character. My music was meant to just set the tone of the play. It was really fun!

I'm very excited to get involved with more theatre. I love the production of it all: make-up, lights, and costumes! It's my dream to work with *Cirque du soleil* and have people perform to my music.

Of course, branching out also means getting in front of various types of audiences, which is always a great advantage as an independent musician!

WIG: Which is more lucrative: art or music? Which came first?

MJ: (Giggling again) Urg! Hard question! Which came first? When did crying turn into singing? When did I pick up that first crayon? My first memories are when I was in a car accident at the age of 18 months, but I think I was singing and colouring long before then... I did have a plastic red accordion as a baby that made two separate sounds when I pulled out the bellows and pushed them in. My poor parents...

My main medium as an artist is glass. It's great when I sell a piece because it involves a large sum of money. Working with glass is time-consuming and expensive. I now only make pieces on commission because my life is about juggling my time and my finances. Glass is heavy and

fragile and I can't afford to have an inventory on hand sitting in a dusty attic until someone falls in love with a piece and takes it off my hands.

I have no formal artistic training. I just do it because to keep myself from doing it would be to keep me from breathing. I simply put paint to canvas; slosh ink into paper; build websites; create posters; put my hands in clay; knit. None of it is lucrative, nor do I ever expect to be recognized for being innovative or spectacularly talented with any of these mediums (perhaps with the exception of my stained glass windows for which I tend to design images that are quite out of the ordinary - my last piece is of an open can of sardines which is safely hanging in my mother's kitchen in Edmonton - she is so possessive of that piece that I will never have a chance to show it, nevermind sell it!). I do have an inventory of cards and little gifts I can give to friends and family, however. And ugly canvases can be painted over. (giggle) The fun part is that I'm never afraid of experimenting. It's all about personal growth. Some things work, and some things don't. But the discovery is always exciting!

The reality of being an independent musician is that to make ends meet, you have to work hard, not be afraid to invest in your career and be at the right place at the right time. Grants also help, which is the next step for me. In the interim, I have two day jobs which help me stay afloat. Of course, I have a very supportive family. It's a luxury to have the unconditional moral and financial support of your family when you decide to pursue an academic (one day, I will get that PhD!!!) and artistic / musical career.

The important thing is that my versatility helps. I designed my own CD cover. I built my own website. I write my promotional material. I don't have to pay people to do those things. I will be selling bits of art at my shows. My broadcasting experience helps me tailor web content and promote shows. It also helps with interviews. Doing multiple things also helps make business connections with a variety of people.

WIG: Were all the songs on the album composed in the language in which they are sung? Do lyrics come to you more easily in one language or the other?

MJ: I have no recipe for writing songs. I've written songs for weddings and they all prove that I work well under pressure. I finished up the song for my brother's wedding in the basement of the church 30 minutes before the start of the ceremony. It's certainly my favorite song! (It will be on my next album.) Other songs happen when I noodle around on my instrument and I find an interesting riff. Granted, a few of those remain instrumentals.

Sometimes, a lyric and melody just spill out of nowhere. Usually either the melody or the theme of the song determine which language I will use to write lyrics for that song.

Admittedly, I don't pay attention to lyrics very much when I listen to music. I'm more focused on how chosen words suit the music with regard to their tambour and tone, and how they affect the singer's intonation and rhythm. The voice is another instrument. For me, only certain

lyrical phrases stand out. That's perhaps why I have so much trouble remembering lyrics when I perform other people's songs!

WIG: It's not hard to hear the Ukrainian influence in your writing, but there's also a Quebecois flavour to the album, especially in the instrumentals. Are there particular songs or sounds that inspired you to write?

MJ: Ukrainian? Interesting! I never thought of that! In my opinion, the only thing Ukrainian about my music is that my accordion was bought second-hand from an old Ukrainian man when I was five years old. On the other hand, there are some of my songs are coloured by Eastern European or gypsy jazz styles. Some of my instrumentals, however, could be soundtracks to Quebecois films set in the 1800's. There is no denying my cultural heritage!

I like to surround myself with a variety of sounds. I can't say that I'm heavily influenced by anything in particular. Things come out of me - constantly! Whether or not a song is created is highly dependent on whether or not it's the right place or time to capture the lyric or riff and make something of it. Otherwise, it may forever be lost. But I'm not bothered by such things. 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 be able to see it but me...

WIG: Have you worked out yet how to balance your solo performances with backing other musicians? Do you intend to play a lot of shows in the wake of this album's release?

MJ: Two things are clear. At this point, I have to take the time to write my next album and be ready to record within the next three months, and I have to promote this album out of Ottawa. I love to play shows. Most of the musical projects with which I'm involved are well-rehearsed and are ready to hit the stage whenever the opportunity arises. The versatility of musical style these projects provide keeps me sane. Band practices are also the hub of my social life. So there's no need to turn down shows. (However, there was one night in December when I played a show backing Casey while she opened for the *Kruger Brothers* at Maverick's and immediately ran to Zaphod's for a line check before hitting the stage to accompany Melissa Laveaux who opened for *Malejube*. That was a little insane!) All of these projects, however, are all being regularly solicited for shows in Ottawa and need to start touring, hence the potential for conflict. I guess I'll deal with that when the time comes!