

branded

When singer/songwriter Carrie Horachek tells a story, it's the stuff of everyday life - love, relationships, ambition, good days and bad days. story by Beverly Fast



Canada has never been more flush with female vocal talent. From famous names Sarah McLachlan and Diana Krall, to a growing cadre of singer/songwriters the likes of Ember Swift, Serena Ryder, Sarah Harmer and Emm Gryner.

Carrie Horachek announced her arrival on the scene last summer with her debut album, *Out The Car Window*, produced by Brock Skywalker of Captain Tractor. In it, she lends a poet's perspective to the commonplace experiences that make up our daily lives.

In the November/ December 2003 issue of *Canadian Musician*, Ryan McLaughlin called the CD an "assemblage of tunes that illustrates the Saskatoon songstress' ability to weave folk-pop with her funky roots. ... With beautiful vocals and comfortably catchy tunes, there's little doubt this prairie pixie is on a road trip to stardom."

Prairie pixie? Well 'prairie' is bang on. Whether you're listening to the CD or watching a live show, Horachek's roots are evident in her easy, open manner. Just now, she's sharing her thoughts in a free-ranging interview that swings from the emotional catharsis of songwriting, to the practical business of making a living as a musician in Canada, to the politics of commercial radio.

"When I think of commercial radio, I think top 40. What they play is very narrowly defined. That's not a bad thing, they're fulfilling a niche. It's just that I'm more interested in songwriting than I am in selling to a market," Horachek says.

Though committed to the singer/songwriter model, she does admit her views on commercial radio have softened. "When you produce a CD, you

learn that you have to sell it. You need to connect with your audience, whether they're the radio-listening audience or not.

"I also started to listen more closely to what was being played. I realized that there are a lot of artists who I really enjoy that have hit mainstream popularity. Norah Jones is a great example of a very surprising songwriter who has gotten a lot of attention, and who's outside that rock-pop formula. Kathleen Edwards is another example."

The upshot, for Horachek, is that commercial radio play isn't an "expectation or a focus, but it's definitely something you want to keep in mind and be open to."

“I come home to find my guitar on my bed as if it made love to every word I left there.”

Commercial radio is certainly open to her. At her CD release party in Saskatoon last June, a full house turned out to hear her play. And not just family and friends, but fans and local media. Community, CBC and commercial radio all got behind the CD, playing tracks like *thumbed up a ride*, *think about it*, and *branded*.

"The support from local media was amazing," Horachek says. "There are a lot of audiences that are really open to the singer/songwriter in Canada right

now. Typically community radio and CBC have been more open to those things, so it was great to have support from local commercial radio too."

For the singer/songwriter, it all comes down to being heard. That's why Horachek does what she does. "When I'm writing songs, it's a self-absorbed activity. At times, you start writing and think, will real people like this? I don't want that to be the determining factor, but knowing that it's important in the bigger picture lends itself to songwriting," she says. "It's important to feel like I'm making a difference, because the music industry is a tough business. You're always being evaluated, judged. It's harsh.

"I was on my honeymoon in January, and my husband and I had a lot of conversations. I said, I just don't know why my music matters. Then I came back and started auditing a class at the U of S, and all of the sudden it clicked. This is part of our social vocabulary, our culture. Whether you listen to lyrics or not, the music still filters into our consciousness and ideas about who we are."

The insight reflects another side of Horachek's personality - the academic. She was a grad student at the University of Saskatchewan when she first took up the guitar and started playing in the folk/funk/rock band Leonard. The class she audited was Gender and Popular Music, in preparation for teaching it during spring-summer session. It got her thinking.

"People are resistant to trusting their own reactions to popular music, and to interpreting their reactions as a critical commentary. I think a lot of students want to be told the 'answer' - they think



there's a secret answer. So they'll react to music emotionally but not be able to articulate why. That's the missing link, that's what you hope to fill in, to get people used to listening all the way through a song, so they're able to understand their reaction to it."

Getting people to listen is at the core of what Horachek does. Lyrics are the heart and soul of her music. She believes in the songwriter as storyteller.

"You pull out everyday banal images that serve to set a scene that audiences can connect with. Vocals are upfront, you can hear the words and you use instrumentation to flavour the story. If you're a songwriter, you want your story, your vocals, your mood to come across."

Still, after swimming against the Top 40 current, Horachek says she has finally started to accept that "in some music, the lyrics simply aren't important - and they're not meant to be important. Feeling is more important than content."

"I'm shaking my tail with everybody who's trying to be different just like me. We're after the same brand of individuality."



That's quite a concession. Real life has a way of opening your eyes to more than your own opinion. Horachek has spent her fair share of time staring out the car window on long drives between gigs. She has played every kind of venue, from coffee houses where the audiences are enthused and attentive, to bars where the patrons are ... not.

"I remember, one time, I showed up to play a gig in Calgary and I was singing into a microphone duct-taped to a broomstick anchored in a milk crate. And

the mic cord ran across this table of six women, who were drinking and having a good time and not at all interested in me."

She played through. "You just have to tell yourself, okay, not a good night. It's humbling, but it's part of your growth."

One of Horachek's strengths is the ability to shrug off the not-so-good nights and focus forward. Right now, she's thinking about her next album. She's also staying involved behind the scenes. She's just finished serving two years on the board of the Saskatchewan Recording Industry Association (SRIA), including six months as president, and she's currently on the national advisory board for the Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent on Record (FACTOR). On her website, she's posted a call for support for FACTOR.

For Horachek, advocacy and support are vital to the survival of the Canadian music industry. "I know it's hard sometimes for some people to justify tax dollars going to things like art and music and culture, but I think the first thing that's forgotten is the huge economic impact of these industries. The kind of dollars we've brought into the province through federal grants that get spent in Saskatchewan - on recording studios, graphic arts, photography - it's all money that gets invested back into the community," she says.

With much of her energy going into teaching and industry advocacy, is Horachek afraid she'll lose her focus on the music? Not a bit. "I like the fact that there's something else contributing to my music. You can get too caught up in the criticism and image, because your living depends on it. But it's way more fun when you can just go out there and blow off steam.

"There is tremendous opportunity for solo artists in Canada right now. Now is the time, it really is. Audiences are getting overwhelmed with the flash and glitter of commercial music, they're looking for something more authentic."

Authentic. It's the calling card of a new generation of female singer/songwriters, and it's Carrie Horachek's brand. 🍷

