



Debra Buyver photo

Andrea Smith

Song-Smith Extraordinaire!

BY DAVID MORRISON

Perhaps you might think that as I earn my crust from words there's a chance I might be able to write song lyrics? If so, you'd be very wrong. But I have tried. When my ex-roommate Tam Johnstone (son of Davey, Elton John's lead guitarist) was recording his first solo album at our home, he asked if I'd like to try revamping some lyrics he wasn't certain worked. Bad move. I took a perfectly good set of lyrics about acute aviophobia and mashed them into unsingable, circumlocutory nonsense. Tam politely declined my sorry effort and rightfully retained the original lyrics – but out of gratitude he did graciously give me a songwriter's credit on the CD. (So, where are my royalties, dude?)

My problem, you see, is an unstoppable tendency for verbosity, using 70 words where 7 will do. (Get on with it! – Editor.) When it comes to songwriting, such an approach is no good at all. Whatever the message, the lyrics should be as direct as possible to achieve maximum impact on the listener. It is obviously the songs written in this way that we connect most strongly with.

The inspiration for lyrics can and do come from just about anything or anywhere, of course, but it goes without saying that by far the most common concern universal human experiences and emotions. Most popularly known as rock legends Deep Purple's bassist (1973-76), Glenn Hughes is one who coined this succinctly when saying: "I love the art form of songwriting. I get to carry a lot of vibes to a lot of people. My songs are all about the human condition, and people will be able to find themselves in my songs."

One excellent local singer, songwriter and musician who plugs into this sentiment is the lovely Andrea Smith. A velvet-voiced blues, roots, rock and jazz singer falling somewhere between Bonnie Raitt and Kathleen Edwards with hints of Eva Cassidy, she certainly possesses the knack of capturing a big emotion or life event in straightforward language that hits home.

"Yes, I'm influenced by the experiences I was having when I wrote the songs," she tells me. "Emotionally, geographically... songs have come to me in a number of different ways, so I can't say I have any one recipe for songwriting."

The Nanaimo-based Smith is currently prepping her long-awaited third release, the songs for which are all written and inching towards readiness to be recorded.

"We are in pre-production, writing out the charts and organizing the tunes," she confirms. "My hope is to go into the studio in the summer and do it all."

We will hear what will undoubtedly be a stunning set of new songs performed with the customary sass and power by Smith and her band when the next CD drops, but as we wait I thought it worthwhile in the interest of understanding her songwriting process a little better to take a peek behind the scenes of fan favourites currently available on her *First Tracks EP* (2000) and *Sweet Embrace* (2006) CDs.

My favourite of the Smith catalogue thus far is the lush, gospel-tinged blues, *Weary*, from the current release. A moving heartbreaker examining the emotional aftermath of a break-up, it originates from a conversation in a very specific location.

"What I try to do is tell the truth for me and have it apply in a universal sense," she begins. "That song brings me to a certain place, which is the Husky Restaurant in Blue River. I was having relationship issues and having coffee and pie with my friend, Sarah, and because she was having her own issues, she said: 'I'm just weary from the pain.' And I thought, 'Ooh, there's a line.' I went home and thought there's only one genre that fits the emotion of that, and it's the blues. So it comes from a personal place, but the goal is to have it transcend it and become something everyone can relate to."

Failed relationships are certainly something all but the freakishly lucky can relate to, a fact of life captured in the lyrics to several Smith songs: 'I gave him my heart / He broke it in two' (*Thrift Store Coat*); 'I've been shattered by his vicious games' (*Weary*). The most vitriolic of all, however, is *Bad Ass*, a song that bears what could be termed tragi-comic lyrics after the event, but words borne of a tough time in Smith's love life.

"I had come out of massage therapy school and just graduated, but was working at a gas station in Kamloops," she recalls. "One day this old nightmare boyfriend drove up in his truck, and my heart just stopped as I'd had so many bad times with this fellow. Later I was walking around the house and all these lyrics were coming out of me: 'You've got bad ass blood in your bad ass veins...'"

But it's not been heartache all the way for this fine songwriter. Mercifully she's had

some great times in relationships, prompting her to pen lines such as, 'I'm writing love songs instead of somebody done me oh so wrong' (*Cooler Guy*) and 'You take my hand but I still feel free,' from the finger-popping jazz number, *Earl*. As much as I enjoy the melancholy hurtin' songs, I'm greatly relieved to learn via these songs that not all the men Smith has encountered in her life have treated her as poorly as Mr. Bad Ass.

As she says, songs can be inspired by and arrive from many different sources, including unexpected ones. A good example of this would be her *Survivor*, in which the everyman/woman lyric emanated from a stressful situation in her education.

"That was actually from when I wrote my BC Massage Therapy Board exams, and we had an unusually high failure rate," she explains. "They ended up bringing an ombudsman in who reckoned even medical doctors would fail this exam! The ombudsman asked the writers to revise the exam, but I wrote that song after getting the phone call to say I had failed three of the six exams."

Occasionally, lyrical ideas or themes will collide, such as in *Sweet Embrace's* closing song, a haunting piano ballad entitled *God Said*. Here, Smith set out to write a song triggered by a literary work, only to find real life intervening to finish it for her in a way not originally intended. All things considered, the result is extremely poignant.

"I'd been reading Anne Rice's *The Tale of the Body Thief* and there was a part where this character in the book went to have a conversation with God, so that's where it all started. Then the lyrics transformed because a friend of mine's father died, so there was some of that added into it."

So until the third CD is with us, perhaps this brief dissection of Smith's songwriting craft will lend a fresh appreciation of her music in the interim. Writing songs is, after all, far from easy, so we should applaud those that do it so well – those who can deliver in 7 words, when some of us can't do it with 70.

Andrea Smith will be performing with her full band at Arlington Hotel, Port Alberni, on Friday April 23 and The Harewood Arms, Nanaimo, on Saturday May 15. For further information please visit www.andreamsmith.ca or www.myspace.com/andreamsmithmusic.

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