



Annie Lou Genest • submitted photo

ANNIE LOU: THE NEW STAR OF OLD-TIMEY

by David Morrison

Long gone she may be, but the spirit of one of my grandmothers still helps steer me through this life. As a child I spent a lot of time with my mom's mom, so her words of wisdom and numerous proverbial sayings remain indelibly scorched in my mind. Although on several unfortunate occasions I have done my utmost to discredit this particular nugget of advice, one such saying was 'Never mix the hop and the grape.' So it was with a smile that I first heard the title track to the 'old-timey' country-folk artist Annie Lou's latest CD, "Grandma's Rules for Drinking." Recalling her own grandmother's prudent guidance in respect of alcohol consumption, including a warning of gin's effect on the complexion, it is one of eleven utterly delightful songs on the Parkville-based songwriter's acclaimed new release.

Whether country, bluegrass or folk, any fan of rustic roots sounds not yet acquainted with the music of former baker Annie Lou is in for a joyous experience. A relaxed vocal delivery; dazzling playing from a stellar band; an uncanny knack for wistful and jaunty melodies; lyrical ingenuity, and a true grasp of string band traditions, all combine

to gorgeous effect. As a former concert promoter and radio programmer of roots music I've heard a great deal in this realm, but take it from me that Annie Lou's music is up there with the very best. A key as to why is her acute understanding of the emotional properties of old-timey-style country songs: "This music has a profound edge to it," she says.

Annie Lou is the professional name of Anne Louise Genest, yet on the evidence of the two accomplished CDs she has released under that moniker it comes as something of a surprise that Genest does not boast a particularly rich musical background or upbringing.

"I didn't play music at all as a kid," she begins. "I came to it quite late, starting out in kitchen jams in the Yukon. When I started writing songs and got serious about a musical career, I did release two solo singer-songwriter albums as Anne Louise

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Genest (now available on iTunes). When you look back at those albums you can see the seeds of the kind of writing I was aiming towards, as I was drawn towards a more old-timey scene. Just as I was making the second album I got into bluegrass and old-timey music, which had a big influence on my musical direction.”

Interestingly, Genest feels her route to that music was likely subliminally via a band that, other than by their rabid fans, would not immediately be associated with ‘mountain music,’ yet their legendary leader’s love of the genre is somewhat more than well documented. In actual fact, as a member of the bluegrass ‘supergroup’ Old and in the Way, with their debut release this particular musician co-crafted one of the best-selling bluegrass albums ever released.

“I’m the youngest of five and all my siblings were Grateful Dead fans, so I grew up listening to that,” Genest reveals. “But what’s interesting is that Jerry Garcia in particular was a huge bluegrass fan. He started out as a banjo player and actually drove all the way to the Grand Ole Opry to meet Bill Monroe, but he chickened out and drove all the way back to California! I would have to call that the early influence, because a lot of the Grateful Dead’s music is somewhat rooted in Jerry’s affinity for bluegrass. I don’t really listen to much of them anymore, but when I do and listen to some of the live albums, they played a lot of that material.”

In noting some of the many qualities that make Annie Lou’s music so entrancing, I mentioned “dazzling playing from a stellar band.” Indeed, like Garcia’s Old and in the Way, which included bluegrass giants David Grisman, Peter Rowan and Vassar

Clements, Genest has assembled a powerhouse outfit of household names in Canadian roots music circles. Alongside Genest onstage are the acclaimed, Whitehorse-based singer-songwriter Kim Barlow (banjo/vocals), plus mandolin maestro Andrew Collins and upright bass player, Max Heineman, both of Toronto’s incredible Foggy Hogtown Boys. Genest knew Barlow from the Yukon, but as with many great things the collaboration with the latter two came about as the result of a chance meeting.

“I met Andrew first, through a mutual friend” Genest explains. “I had just got my first mandolin, and he said you should have a lesson with Andrew, but we all ended up teaching at the British Columbia bluegrass workshop. I was going to Toronto frequently because my family is still there, and just connected with those guys. In the last couple of years my musical relationship, especially with Max and Andrew, really deepened, and there’s a good friendship there too. So it’s been ongoing, but really solidified with the making of the last record.”

Genest relocated to Parksville a year ago after two decades living in the Yukon woods. “I came to Vancouver Island by a bit of a circuitous route,” she continues. “My husband said he couldn’t stand anymore of the long, cold winters up there and he was really itching for a change. I was touring quite a bit and felt that was a fair compromise if I wasn’t going to be there very much, so we should find someplace that he really wanted to be. We actually settled on Haida Gwaii; he spent a year there and I went back and forth, so that’s where we were going to move to. We had just arrived in Whitehorse to get the rest of our stuff when his mom got sick, and she was in Parksville. So we left our vehicles

packed to the nines with our stuff and flew down here to be with her. We stayed with her, and when she passed away she left us the house. We decided to stay for a bit to see what happened; now we’re loving it, and are settled here. We have running water, which is really exciting, as we didn’t have that for twenty years! The area has really grown on us; it’s a really friendly community, and it’s close to everything – the north end, the south end, Tofino, Vancouver – so for me from a musical perspective I have quite a bit more access to resources and colleagues than I did in Whitehorse. And although I really appreciated the wilderness of the Yukon, there is plenty here.”

Delivering beautifully crafted songs of humour and poignancy, Annie Lou is a fast-rising star in the world of Canadian roots music. Regardless of her relatively late start, Annie Lou has arrived fully formed and the real deal. Natural talent is natural talent, and I for one love the Annie Lou sound. It is a treat to have her join the rich music community of Vancouver Island, and my pleasure to extend a belated welcome. In closing, I couldn’t help but wonder, though – does Genest adhere to her grandma’s rules for drinking? “Well, I’m kind of fond of a good gin and tonic!” she laughs. “But I think she was talking about bathtub gin, prohibition era gin; they didn’t have Bombay Sapphire® back then!” ~

For more information on Annie Lou, including forthcoming concerts and how to purchase CDs or downloads of “Grandma’s Rules for Drinking” and her Juno-nominated, eponymous 2010 debut release, please head to www.annielou.ca or email [Anne Louise Genest at annieloumusic@gmail.com](mailto:Anne Louise Genest@annieloumusic@gmail.com).