

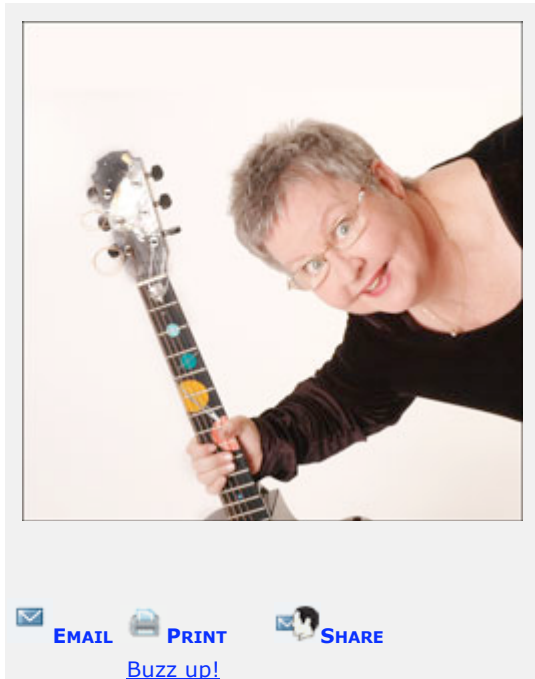
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Entertainment :: Music

Christine Lavin, 25 show biz years and counting

by Kevin Scott Hall
EDGE Contributor
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The girl who grew up the fourth of nine children in the shadow of the Peekskill Military Academy is now celebrating 25 years in showbiz with the release of her 20th solo CD, **Cold Pizza for Breakfast** (Yellow Tail Records) and a forthcoming memoir, **Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??**

"We didn't know we were poor," **Christine Lavin**, now 57, told EDGE recently, while cooking and serving up orange ricotta pancakes in her highrise apartment on the Upper West Side. "My parents tried to find one thing special for each of us to do and I took naturally to music."

The problem, Lavin went on to explain, was that she had a piano teacher who hit her hands with a ruler every time she made a mistake. She decided to take up guitar, learning from Laura Weber's PBS television show. "She couldn't hit my hands," Lavin deadpanned.



Floundered in college

Lavin was a serious student and graduated high school a year early. "But then I floundered in college, changing my major at least seven times," she said. One potential major was theater but, she said, "I never got cast in anything."

Eventually, she graduated from SUNY Brockport as an English major.

After graduation, Lavin found herself waitressing and baking bread at the legendary Caffe Lena in Saratoga Springs, New York, under the wing of owner Lena Spencer. "I wanted to be around musicians and thought I'd be really good at running a coffeehouse myself someday."

However, Lavin was eventually given more opportunities to sing at the club. One night, Don McLean's manager and '60s folk singer/guitarist Dave Van Ronk came in separately and both urged Lavin to move to New York.

"I told Dave Van Ronk that I needed to learn to play guitar better and he said, 'I'm a teacher,'" Lavin recalled. "I don't believe in coincidence, so I thought 'I guess I'm not meant to be in Saratoga.'"



Wandering minstrel

Lavin moved to New York in February 1976 and has stayed ever since.

"I was very pragmatic," she said. "I spent eight years temping full-time by day and doing music at night."

She recalled a gig she had for six months as a wandering minstrel in a Mexican restaurant on Columbus Avenue. "Some of them loved me and some of them hated me," she said. "But if I sang a song called "Sometimes" [written by Malcolm McKinney and on the latest disc], Carlos the cook would give me whatever I wanted in a plastic container at the end of the night."

"I was fired because the weather got cold - that's what she told me," Lavin said with a laugh. "I nearly had a breakdown!"

She bounced back as part of the Village's Fast Folk Musical Magazine scene in the early '80s. "It was a very fertile time," is how she described it, listing some of her contemporaries, including Suzanne Vega, Shawn Colvin, Julie Gold, John Gorka and Tracy Chapman. "As we started to make solo records and get some airplay, we started to grow out of the group. So the group was kind of ruined by success, in a way."

Lavin released her first studio recording, "Future Fossils," in 1984, which contained the song "Cold Pizza for Breakfast." Recently, she was contacted by a group of high schoolers who wanted to do the song, but Lavin felt she needed to update the monologue part of the song-hence, the new recording with new words about Oprah.

Lavin went on to create the band Four Bitchin' Babes, became a frequent guest deejay on shows like WFUV's Sunday Breakfast Show, and participated on several compilation CDs. She also gained invaluable experience in her early years, opening for acts like Kenny Rankin, Henny Youngman, Livingston Taylor and Don McLean.

Her songs have been performed and recorded by the likes of Betty Buckley, David Burnham, Andrea Marcovicci and Sutton Foster.

"One of my goals is to try to connect up folk songwriters with theater singers because the thing about folk songs is they tell stories and that's what theater is all about," she said.



A theater connection

Lavin told of the time several years back when the New York Times' Stephen Holden called her, saying that Bette Midler's producer was looking for one more song for her album that would be a natural follow-up to 'Wind Beneath My Wings.' Lavin told him about Julie Gold's "From a Distance" and the rest is history.

"I'm more excited when somebody sings a song that I sent them that somebody else wrote—there's such a thrill being that connection between people!" Lavin exclaimed, long a champion of great but lesser known singers and songwriters.

As for the theater connection, Lavin said, with complete sincerity, that her entire trajectory as a performer changed when she saw Dame Edna on Broadway. "Dame Edna is the gold standard of solo performing. I saw that first show 28 times." She sent Barry Humphries a postcard and they became friends.

Lavin spoke enthusiastically about Jim Caruso's Monday night Cast Party at Birdland, where she has met many musicians, famous singers and talented up-and-comers. "If you have a regular thing that creative people can go to at least once a month, there's no limit to where it can go," Lavin said. "And if you keep doing this long enough, you end up meeting all the people you are supposed to meet."

Two of Lavin's best-known songs have been re-recorded for the new CD: "The Kind of Love You Never Recover From," which she says has caused people to track down old sweethearts (now with Robin Batteau on violin); and "Good Thing He Can't Read My Mind," which has now been replaced with 'SHE' for a dude's-eye view.

The song was originally written as a woman's inner monologue about the unpleasant things she would put up with because of her love for her man.

"Rene Ruiz of 'Toxic Audio' challenged me to rewrite the song from a guy's point of view," she said. "It took someone with fresh ears to give me that suggestion, and it gets bigger laughs now!" The result is included as a bonus on the CD, recorded live at The Ark in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Describing her songwriting, Lavin said, "I'm only interested in writing a song that expresses something new emotionally or if it's going to teach you something you didn't know."

Of the current music scene, she reflected, "My uncle calls television 'chewing gum for the eyeballs' and a lot of pop music is just chewing gum for the ears - it's just a beat and it doesn't really say anything."

Lavin will also have a lot to say in her memoir, which will be out soon. "I hope the book turns people on to a lot of singers and songwriters that they didn't know about," she said. She plans to put part of it on her website so that online readers can have links to the artists.

Lavin also plans to move in February to take care of her elderly mother. "I'll still be doing

shows, but from a different setting," she promised, although she is sad about leaving all New York has to offer.

On December 9th, Lavin will receive the ASCAP Foundation Jamie DeRoy & Friends Award for outstanding songwriter at Lincoln Center.

After twenty CDs and countless other projects, it appears that Christine Lavin is busier than ever.

Cold Pizza for Breakfast (www.yellowtailrecords.com) is available at iTunes and other retailers on November 17. Her book is forthcoming soon. Go to [her website](#) for the latest tour dates and news updates. And for more information on her book, visit [this website](#).

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