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Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-*wah*??

By Christine Lavin

Tell Me Press (New Haven, CT), 2010

480 pages; USD \$21.95 / CAN \$27.95

ISBN: 978-0-9816453-6-0

[www.tellmepress.com](http://www.tellmepress.com)

One evening in the early 1990s, I was walking up Seventh Avenue in the '50s, right in the heart of the theater district. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted someone about to enter a taxi. My eyes grew wide and my heart started beating. I screamed out, "I love you, Ellie Greenwich!" She stopped half-way in and out of the cab, smiled at me, finished getting in, and was off into the night.

That's similar to the way I feel about Christine Lavin. No, I've never met her, though I did see her perform once at the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival in upstate New York, but what I am attracted to is her work. Her friends call her Chris, but until the day I do meet her and she says it's okay, I'll call her Christine.

Christine Lavin is like the great Den Mother every kid wishes they had, and for which every singer-songwriter hopes as a mentor. This is the autobiographical story covering the last 25 years, of how she rose from a struggling East Coast folkie to achieve the level where she is beloved by so many in the field. A true singer-songwriter's singer-songwriter.

My first memory of her, as I recall, was a song on a compilation, which contains her contribution, "Mysterious Woman." Using a seductive tone, she playfully posits a desire to be perceived as "mysterious," by having everyone wonder what she's thinking about: "Existentialism? Nihilism? Wrong...I am thinking about defrosting my refrigerator." This playful intelligence runs through so many of her songs, covering politics (with a great, strong left leaning), science (including microbiology and astronomy, I kid you not), as well as the softer ("Jack and Wanda"), frustrating ("Attainable Love"), amusing ("Good Thing He Can't Read My Mind"), and devastating ("The Kind of Love You Never Recover From") side of romance.

Why do I bring up all this before even discussing the book? Well, Christine tends to write her life into song, constantly updating, and this book is a song in its own right. There is often verbiage in a Lavin concert (check out her superb live DVD, *Girl, Uninterrupted*, and she writes as she talks, from the heart, with a little bit of candor, a helping of humor, and even some schmaltz.

There are two expressions that are common with Christine: when agitation and confusion comes from without, it's "*Wah?*" (hence the subtitle of the book), and when the angst and uncertainty comes from within, it's "What was I thinking,"

which is title of, not coincidentally, one of her better known songs. The title of this book, of course, is also a song title (though her “I Don’t Make This Stuff Up, I Just Make it Rhyme” would have worked as well).

This autobiography, her first, comes after 20 solo releases, 9 compilation collections, and a few books, such as a cookbook and one geared towards children about her song “Amoeba Hop” (thought I was kidding about the whole biology thing, huh?). But it is more than a standard autobio. Yes, she tells her life story of growing up near West Point and hanging out with the New York Jets (including Joe Namath) as a child, working as a waitress in a folk club in Saratoga, NY, moving to New York City, and getting a boost by being taught by the legendary Dave van Ronk (who also gave Bobby Zimmerman lessons on his way to Dylan-hood).

Christine’s songs are stories based in fact, told poetically and yet completely assessable, and that is how she writes this book. It is not only her life story, covering her music, career, and obsessions (such as knitting and Dame Edna, which she goes into great detail), but on some level it’s also a how-to for the folk music business. Always the abovementioned den mother, Christine doles out bon mot advice throughout the book (e.g., never promote an act you have to apologize for), always giving credit to whomever gave that advice to her.

There are moments in the book that tear at the reader, such as discussing the fallout of 9/11, including how it may have contributed to the death of van Ronk, and her describing in grim (and yet amusing) detail about a few times when she didn’t quite please the audience.

This can hardly call this autobiography a “tell-all,” if you’re into salacious readings, as she avoids detailing her love life, and in most cases when she does discuss someone who has had a negative effect on her life (such as a promoter), she usually leaves the person unnamed; although she gives quite a nice dig at ex-punkers/New Wavers, the Washington Squares, which I found particularly amusing because I’ve hung out with two of them, have been in the third’s apartment, and am a fan of their output. I was holding my sides laughing through those passages.

But in her modesty, she also doesn’t go into great detail about how admired she is by others. For example, she excludes the story of how a bunch of folkers got together and secretly recorded a 2-part tribute album of her material called *Big League Babe*, and then presented it to her for her birthday, on stage at the Bottom Line during one of her showcases.

Part of the reason she is so admired in the biz is because she goes out of her way to promote other musicians. She casually drops names in the book, not as in “look who I’ve worked with,” but more “you should check out...” including the likes of Richard Shindell (search out his “Are You Happy Now”), fellow Van Ronk

student David Massengill (whose releases I've reviewed), and so many others. Always on the search for new people, Christine is genuinely happy to get a community going, which she explains in the book how it is done so the reader can do the same.

Yes, I've never met Christine Lavin, but she makes me feel comfortable and comforted, with her easy manner on stage, and in both song and voice, sung and written. My partner read the book, and though she is less familiar with Christine's work, she thoroughly enjoyed the book as well, finding the cheerful and hopeful tone in the face of both luck and adversity, enjoyable and hopeful.

This autobiography is an easy and fun read, and it is easy to recommend it to anyone who loves stories of the beginning of one's career, road stories (including a large focus on Canada and Australia), a somewhat how-to, and as a source of new music worth listening to by other artists.