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Christine Lavin, with new album and book, returns to Capital Region

By **MICHAEL ECK**, Special to the Times Union

First published in print: Sunday, May 9, 2010 “Cold Pizza for Breakfast.”

It's Christine Lavin's favorite meal. It's also the name of her 20th album; and it's the name of her new book, subtitled “A Mem-wha??” (Tell Me Press, 408 pages, \$21.95).

The album dropped in November, and the book will be released June 1, but Lavin will have copies of both “Cold Pizzas” with her when she appears at The Eighth Step with Don White on Friday.

In addition to singing her famously funny songs, Lavin will be reading selections from the book, which spans her career and, as one editor remarked, “mentions every musician she ever met in her entire life.”

“That is so not true,” Lavin says, her trademark chuckle following quickly behind. “I only listed the good ones. If I listed the bad ones, the list would have been a lot longer, but I didn't want to waste ink on bad stuff.”

Lavin has always been a champion of fellow folksingers, extolling their virtues in interviews; on radio shows; and at her own concerts.

One tale in “Cold Pizza,” which she's considering as a candidate for the Eighth Step, concerns her first meeting with longtime friend and fellow songwriter Cheryl Wheeler (who actually shared Lavin's last Eighth Step date with her).

“I sent Cheryl a book,” Lavin says, “with a note that said, ‘Do you realize there's only one complete lyric in the entire book — and it's yours!’”

“I guess I like to write about other people more than myself,” the author says.

Lavin also rhapsodizes about White, who has essentially adapted his stand-up comedy routine into a music gig.

“He's a blue-collar intellectual,” she raves. “He's going to be a real discovery for people.”

In 2006, White wrote his own book, called “Memoirs of a C Student.”

Lavin says she read the first two pages and was prompted to start her book, which eventually morphed into “Cold Pizza.”

“I still haven’t read any more than just the two pages of Don’s book!” Lavin cackles. “Now that mine is finally done, I can go finish his book.”

Lavin grew up in a large family — “I have eight brothers and sisters,” she says — and her early days were spent in the Hudson Valley, where her father moved between a variety of teaching posts (including one at Peekskill Military Academy, which, as a training location for the New York Jets, allowed her the opportunity to meet Joe Namath in 1967).

Rather than being a linear tale, Lavin breaks life into chunks throughout “Cold Pizza,” often stepping out of the narrative to relate interesting tidbits, bon mots and guitar tips.

She’s careful not to make the book into an insider’s game, and when she speaks, for example, of folksinging friend Dave Van Ronk (who also served as her guitar teacher), she makes sure to place him in context that a layman could understand.

Van Ronk drank a little more than Lavin could match, and while “Cold Pizza” is often a portrait of a musician on the road, it is not a catalog of debaucheries. That fact alone — for its uniqueness — would make the book interesting, but Lavin writes with the same precision and wit she brings to her songs.

“It’s much harder to write about life than to live it,” Lavin says. “What do you leave in, what do you take out? Of course, I haven’t been taking notes my whole life, so there’s a lot of stuff I’ve forgotten, too.”

An important chapter in the book highlights her time spent at Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs.

Lavin actually landed at the Caffè before she was a pro. Founder Lena Spencer hired her to help take care of an ailing friend, but by the time she arrived in the Spa City, the gent was in the hospital. Instead, she stayed on to help Spencer bake cookies and keep the Caffè clean. She lived in Spencer’s Broadway apartment by day and waited tables at the Caffè at night, until Spencer finally let her start singing between other acts.

It was Van Ronk who finally spurred her to move to New York City, with his promise of guitar lessons.

Other notables in “Cold Pizza” include Dame Edna, Tin Pan Alley songwriter Ervin Drake and Queensbury singer Camille West, who replaced Lavin in the Four Bitchin’ Babes lineup in 1997.

Most folk fans in the area are already familiar with Lavin. If they didn't catch her in her Saratoga salad days, she's been a regular ever since on local stages, including Lena, the Step and The Egg.

As noted, she is very jazzed about appearing with White, who she has made a habit of sharing shows with in recent months.

"We're having so much fun, and audiences are having such a ball. They're just going crazy for the show."

Lavin will play first, followed by White, and then the two will perform as a duo.

"It makes more sense dynamically," Lavin says. "My stomach hurts at the end of the night, just from laughing."

Michael Eck is a freelance writer from Albany and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

Christine Lavin/Don White

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: The Eighth Step @ Proctors, 432 State St., Schenectady

Tickets: \$26

Info: 434-1703; <http://www.eighthstep.org>