

Folk Roots/Folk Branches with Mike Regenstreif

Folk-rooted and folk-branched reviews, commentaries, radio playlists and suggestions from veteran music journalist and broadcaster Mike Regenstreif.



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Christine Lavin -- Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??

Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??

By Christine Lavin

Tell Me Press

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christinelavin.com

Back in the 1970s, I used to pass through Saratoga Springs a lot. It's about half way between Montreal and New York City so sometimes I'd stop on my way to or from New York. As the locale of the **Caffé Lena**, then, as now, the longest continually-running folk music coffee house on the planet, it was a place I was drawn to as a destination in its own right. It was a great place for a young folkie to hang out and, as a college folk concert presenter and then coffee house director in Montreal, I occasionally did circuit deals with **Lena Spencer** – for whom the Caffé Lena was named – to present the same artists in Montreal just before or after they were in Saratoga.

Sometime in the mid-'70s, Lena pointed out a young woman waitressing at the Caffé to me.

“Her name is **Christine Lavin**,” said Lena. “Remember her name. She’s a songwriter and she’s very good.”

Lena, of course, was right. Within a few years, Christine was living in New York City and establishing herself as a major league singer-songwriter and gifted performing and recording artist. Her albums were a staple of Folk Roots/Folk Branches for the entire run of almost 14 years that I did the radio show.

Anyone who’s been to a Christine Lavin concert over the years will also tell you that she’s an outstanding – and, often, brilliantly funny – storyteller. She puts those talents to fine use in her autobiography, *Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??* (Is it a sign that you’re getting old when people around your age are publishing autobiographies?)

With great skill, Christine tells the major story of her life – from growing up as one of many Lavin siblings, to her leaving home and finding her way to the career she loves (as do we), and to the ups and downs of her life in New York and on tour – while frequently inserting various anecdotes and occasionally floating off on interesting tangents. And she doesn’t whitewash anything for P.R. purposes. There are tales of bad relationships and bad business dealings – and even some bad gigs, like the time she opened for **Joan Rivers** before a hostile audience of old folks in Florida.

Some of my favourite stories in the book are about her encounters with influential artists including a great one about briefly hopping on to **Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue** caravan with Lena. Christine actually taught Dylan a new verse to **Woody Guthrie’s** “This Land is Your Land” that she’d heard **Pete Seeger** sing.

A story that brought back memories for me was about a January 1976 **Utah Phillips** and **Rosalie Sorrels** concert in Saratoga and about the landmark church fire in Saratoga that happened in the middle of the night after the concert. I was there that night having driven Utah and Rosalie around on that short tour which, by the way, culminated with a concert that

I produced in Montreal. (This was the tour that Utah announced he was running for president of the United States on the Sloth & Indolence ticket.)

There are also some stories about our mutual friend, **Dave Van Ronk**.

Christine, like so many others, was mentored by Dave and tells of how she actually first moved to New York City because Dave offered to give her guitar lessons.

And there are great, often hilarious, sections about Christine's severe addiction to **Dame Edna**, how she became the first (and only) folksinger to integrate baton twirling into her stage act, and about starting up knitting circles with audience members as a pre-concert ritual.

Virtually from the time she first had any success in the music business, Christine has been one of the most generous of artists in terms of other performers. There are legions of performers who've benefitted from Christine's singing their praises over the years – from peers like various members of the **Four Bitchin' Babes** to legendary songwriters like **Ervin Drake** – and many of them get further exposure in Christine's mem-wha.

Christine's natural gift as a storyteller kept me in my seat turning the pages until, too quickly it seems, I'd read the last page.

--Mike Regenstreif

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