



Arthur Wood talks to recent visitor to London, Canadian singer/songwriter **LYNN MILES**

"I was probably about sixteen. I don't know how I got the nerve to do it. It was at a High School auditorium. I remember the incredible applause. I was a very shy person, so the applause was a real drug for me. It made me want to keep on performing. It was a way of overcoming my shyness. When I was about nineteen or twenty, I wanted to have a stronger voice, so I studied with an opera singer off and on for about two years."

Back in the opening hours of this year, had you asked my assessment of Lynn Miles, singer/songwriter, I would have replied with a mystified "Who?"

However, in February the Rounder/Philo label released Lynn's third album, *Slightly Haunted*, and it had me bewitched. A Canadian by birth, this songbird wields a double-edged sword. There's the voice, possessor of a plaintive and pleasing ache that would be hard to cure – and it's so aurally addictive, you wouldn't want to anyway.

Then there's the eleven Miles originals, a handful of which merit the accolade "classic".

Her story begins in Sweetsburg, Quebec where she was born in September, 1958. At the age of eight, Lynn vividly recalls watching an Ed Sullivan Show.

"I saw a woman with beautiful blonde hair, playing a guitar. I don't know who she was, but I wanted to be like her. We had given my father a guitar for Christmas and I ended up playing it. When I was growing up, my mother listened to opera and country music, while my father preferred jazz and played the harmonica. In public school, I studied violin and flute. When I was sixteen, I started taking piano lessons."

On her 13th Christmas, Lynn received a copy of Carole King's multi-million seller, *Tapestry*. She recently told Neil Fagan of The Performing Songwriter, "I learned all the flute parts and the finger picking stuff, all the harmonies. I was ready if she came to town. I used to fantasize that somebody would get sick and I'd have to go fill in for them."

On the phone from her Ottawa home, Lynn told me about her first ever public performance.

Initially, Lynn played in local bars and clubs with guitarist Mark Thibeault. In the late '70s, she teamed up with Terry Tufts.

"He's a great guitar player. We shared an interest in the music of Gram Parsons, the Eagles and Jackson Browne. Our gigs consisted solely of playing covers of their music. This was mostly in Ottawa, although occasionally we'd work out of town."

Concurrently, she began a degree course at Carlton University in Ottawa studying the theory and history of classical music though she didn't complete it. As she recalls, "In that field of music, even perfection is not good enough."

Although Lynn's catalogue of songs was extensive by this time, the fear of losing the financial security of club gigs at first prevented her exposing her own music to audiences. Eventually, however, the regimen of playing covers *ad nauseum* failed to provide her with any personal satisfaction and, in the early 80s, she decided to perform her own songs in public. And only her own music, whatever the economic consequences

In 1987, she made her first foray into the recording studio, cutting a self-titled cassette at Happyrock Studio in Ottawa. Two of her nine compositions on that release, *The Art Of Self Defense* and *White Knight*, hint at the intense musical magic that lay some years farther down the road.

To help balance her finances, Lynn became a voice teacher at the Ottawa Folklore Centre.

"Alanis Morissette was one of my pupils. This was when she was about thirteen or fourteen and about to make her first album."

As for Lynn's own public appearances, "I only played gigs I really wanted, where I knew there was a cover charge and I could perform my own songs. Things started to change from that point on. I worked with a band sometimes, sometimes solo. On the strength of my first tape, I started to work out of town. Eventually I got a manager and he started to put money together for my second recording."

Ottawa-based Snowy River Records was established in the mid-eighties by Alex Sinclair as a support mechanism for local acoustic musicians who wanted to issue independent recordings. The first album, *Lynn Miles*, was an early release on the label, and her second, *Chalk This One Up To The Moon*, was issued by Snowy River in 1991. Produced by Bill Stunt, the album featured

a dozen of Lynn's compositions and, where her debut set had hinted at a songwriter under development, *Chalk This One Up* provided ample proof that Lynn possessed an exceptional talent for marrying thoughtful lyrics to memorable melodies.

"I wrote *It's Hockey Night In Canada* from the perspective of a girl growing up in Canada where ice hockey takes over the airwaves and the minds of men from October till May. My father was a hockey coach. We used to have to go out and stand in minus thirty degree temperatures in Montreal on a Sunday morning and watch him coach little kids. The song is about the memories I have of walking home through the snow and seeing television sets glowing blue in living room windows, watching hockey.

"*All I Ever Wanted* is about being a tragic romantic. I wrote it after reading this great book called *The Enneagram*. That book sets out nine main character types. It's just about always choosing the wrong kind of person to be in love with, and all that melancholy stuff which happens when you're tragic.

"My favourite song that I've written is *Nobody's Angel*. When you break up in a relationship, you try to present a strong front. If you get hurt, you start to become cynical and tough and try to present yourself as being very strong. You end up not being human enough to maybe get into another relationship. Or vulnerable enough.

"*It'll be Here* is really about the truth, and that if you live a truthful life, the things that you need will come to you."

Aided by her manager and that second album, Lynn was able to gig in new markets. She toured the New England area of the States, particularly the folk venues around Boston. There were a couple of trips to Alaska as well as the opportunity to perform at a swathe of Canadian open air music festivals each summer.

Numerous multi-date tours were also undertaken across the length and breadth of her homeland. While appearing at the June 1992 Mariposa Folk Festival in Ontario, Lynn ran into Guy Clark.

"I started talking to him this night and he introduced me to his producer, Miles Wilkinson. Miles asked for a tape of my second album. He called me the next day and said that he would get me a publishing deal. Some time later Bo Goldsen from Criterion Music phoned me and said, 'I want to be your publisher.' That was really on the strength of *It's Hockey Night In Canada*."

The January 1993 issue of *Fast Folk Music Magazine* contained a double CD titled *Lost In The Works* containing recordings made in 1990 at CIUT-FM, a Toronto radio station. Lynn's self-penned contribution was *November* – the lyric contains a reference to "loons" as does the song, *Loneliness*, on her latest album. Lynn told me:

"Loons are symbolic to me. They're beautiful black and white birds and live on lakes. They mate for life. It's a very Canadian experience to sit in a cabin in the woods, beside a lake, and watch the sun go down and listen to the cry of loons – it's also a very lonely and very beautiful experience."

Spreading her own wings further afield, Lynn appeared in concert at the Expo Exhibition in Seville, Spain a couple of years ago. While in Europe, she also performed in Portugal, France and Germany.

Back in the States, Lynn had a showcase at the now defunct Chicago House Upstairs during the March 1995 edition of Austin's South By Southwest Festival. In the words of the *Austin Chronicle*, "her pure voice and northern perspective is a winning combination." A couple of months later she appeared at the annual Kerrville Folk Festival in the West Texas Hill Country: "I thought it was a very magical little festival. It was really cool. A very beautiful, enchanting place."

To coincide with the 25th anniversary of the festival, Lynn was scheduled to appear on a compilation album called *The Women Of*

Kerrville to be released by the Silverwolf label during late May.

Miles' latest album, *Slightly Haunted*, was cut at Lakeside Studio in Clayton, Ontario during October, 1994. It was produced by Jeffrey Lesser, already known for his work with Lou Reed and Loudon Wainwright.

Lynn says, "I didn't want to put it out as an independent album. I wanted to have a deal. We started playing showcases in, for instance, L.A. My manager, publisher and producer began contacting people, asking them to come out and see us and to listen to the record. We also played in New York and Nashville. Ken Irwin of Rounder Records finally offered us a deal, which I signed at the end of September. He said he didn't want the album out before Christmas '95 because I was considered a new artist."

Lynn concedes that the past year has been frustrating. "I learned why I make music, which is something that I'd started to lose sight of. I didn't have this album out and I was going crazy sitting in my apartment and being very frustrated, and then I thought, 'Well, I'm just going to play music.' I didn't play much last year and I decided that every gig I did from that point onward, I was going to love it as much as I possibly could. And I was going to remember why I played music in the first place."

As you may have gathered, Lynn Miles is a self-sufficient individual. Her music is an amalgam of pop, folk and country though, stylistically, she probably leans more towards the last-mentioned category. Then again, it's the quality of the music created by the artist that should count. And *Slightly Haunted* most surely counts, containing 11 self-composed, flawless gems. There's also a fluency about Ian Lefevre's lead guitar work that complements Miles' voice perfectly.

You only have to start humming a melody, followed by the thought, "Who wrote that tune?" – and you know you're hooked. *I Loved A Cowboy*, for example, screams commercial hit. The female narrator knows her relationship with this will o' the wisp is going nowhere and, being her own woman, knows that it's time to "just up and ride away."

What's more, *The Ghost Of Deadlock, This Heart That Lives In Winter*, plus the strategically placed and affirmative closing selection, *I'm Still Here*, aren't that far behind in the hit potential stakes.

On her current approach to writing songs, Lynn confesses, "I really have to be sitting down in a room with no distractions to write effectively. I used to be a prolific writer, but not anymore. It's harder for me to write now. I think my standards are higher and I'm editing more, so it's a slower process. Songs tend to come in clumps. I'll write three or four over a couple of days and then I won't complete any for a while.

"The best ones are the ones that are in my subconscious, and I don't even know that I'm thinking about them, or that they're there. They just come out of their own accord. I'm very devoted to writing and I spend my life watching things and asking people questions, trying to find an angle that I can write from – about whatever it is that I'm thinking about.

"I do spend a lot of my time looking at things. Trying to figure out things. George Ducas had a hold on my song, *Now I Understand*. Unfortunately, I didn't get the cut. They've sent some of my stuff to Kathy Mattea and Trisha Yearwood, but I don't know if anything will come through."

Finally ... consider what Alison Krauss and Rounder have done for each other in terms of exposure, sales and awards. Surely, Lynn Miles will follow the same route within the next twelve months even if, like Iris DeMent, it'll require a transfer to a major label roster. Quite simply, she is a musical treasure who's remained hidden far, far too long ... n