

MUSIC

Ruby slippers

For gypsy-torch-punk-chanteuse Myshkin, there's no place like home

BY JODI DARBY

The *Village Voice* calls her "smart, sad and weird." *Folk Roots Magazine* UK says she is "one of the best songwriters around," and *Sing Out* magazine describes her music as "darkly joyous, endlessly restless and spellbinding...a blend of Celtic, cabaret, gypsy and punk influences featuring her masterfully mercurial, seductive voice, hard-driving guitar and fine lyrics."

Portland's self-proclaimed gypsy-torch-punk-chanteuse Myshkin is well known for her rich alto, odd melodies and vividly storied lyrics. Eschewing genre, she has spent years developing a style that draws on a world of influences. Pairing a jazz singer's phrasing and impeccable sense of timing with the wry observations and world-weary ponderings of a well-traveled beat poet, Myshkin never sacrifices musicality in the service of words. Her melodies stand on their own, inviting the listener more deeply into the vivid world she paints with her lyrics.

Myshkin's music stands up well to repeated listening, an effect she clearly relishes: "I want my music to get under people's skin. I want listeners to get something new out of it every time they hear it. Music works on different levels—it affects people differently over time, whether it's an in-your-face political song or something that is more subtle and takes a little longer to sink in."

Her writing is literary and evocative, digging at thorny truths with a subtle wit; she tackles themes of work and love, war and justice, prison and escape. Every song unfolds like a small drama filled with enigmatic character sketches, references to the sea and the sky, the imagery of motion.

It's not surprising that a songwriter with such a literary bent took her name from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. In the book, Prince Myshkin struggles with living in a corrupt and greedy world.

"I took the name because it resonated with me," the singer says. "Mostly it's about honesty,



From left, Myshkin's voice dips and soars, gliding over complex melodies created by Sailor Banks and Leila Chieko, aka the Ruby Warblers.

remaining honest."

Myshkin describes her songwriting process as starting with words. A voracious reader, she enjoys playing with language in her songs: "When I listen to music, I hear the words first. This can be difficult sometimes, especially when I really like a song but find the words difficult. I've found myself listening to a lot of foreign music in languages that I don't speak."

An inveterate road dog, Myshkin has logged thousands of miles of travel in pursuit of her growing audience. In the two years since relocating to Portland from her previous home in New Orleans, she has embarked on two U.S. tours and three European tours while finding the time to record *Corvidae*, a well-crafted and unconventional album featuring fine instrumental backup by her band, the Ruby Warblers. The album is a literary collection of 11 story songs originally envisioned as an anti-war album.

"Writing *Corvidae* felt like a major transition," Myshkin says. "The music was influenced a lot by my life on the West Coast."

Interwoven among the many themes that appear on *Corvidae* is a strong but understated anti-war sentiment. The message of the record is one of hopeful realism, of obstacles faced and bravely considered: "Like looking at a wall and all you see is wall/Not the footholds in it/chinks to make it break and fall."

Myshkin claims: "I wanted *Corvidae* to be more subtle. I'm working on another record cur-

rently that's more pared down and blatantly political. They're songs that I've been working with for a long time."

Many of the songs on *Corvidae* grapple with the conflict between putting down roots and pulling them up. For every turn of a phrase like "I'm gonna sit on this here egg/I'm gonna hatch a little paradise" (from "Caledonia"), Myshkin explores an opposing sentiment like "A solid house on solid rock/A solid church and school and shop/But they preferred the fleeting notes/Tune drunk and chasing dreams" (from "Drunk").

The overall impression is one of a skilled writer deeply involved with her surroundings, distilling meaning from small gestures and human frailties, unafraid to edit her stories down to their essential narrative core.

Originally from Indiana, Myshkin says her family was "music obsessed," although the singer points out that she was the only one who embarked on a career in music. Self-taught on guitar, she spent years traveling and working in the United States and Europe, making ends meet with stints as a taxi driver, painter, roofer, baker and parade float maker before landing in Louisiana. She had played guitar and piano and written songs her whole life but only began playing in front of audiences when she moved to New Orleans at the age of 27.

During a decade in New Orleans, Myshkin gathered chops and inspiration, performing an average of 300 nights a year. She played major music festivals from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Melbourne, Australia; toured Europe annually; released five records of her own material and three collaborative records; and was a founding force behind a resurgent acoustic scene in the Crescent City.

She formed Myshkin's Ruby Warblers in 2001, and the band members left the South for the West Coast in 2003. In Portland they are finding fertile ground for their continuing musical evolution.

The band performs as a duo—Myshkin on guitar and tenor guitar, Sailor Banks on fretless bass—or a trio, adding either Scott Magee or Leila Chieko on drums. Myshkin and Magee

Her city was gone

Myshkin, who lived in New Orleans for nine years, is mourning the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina along with the rest of the world.

"I have a huge community there that have all been devastated, but so far I think everyone I am close to is out and safe," she told *Just Out*. "I'm still in shock as much as anyone—lots of heartache and anger at the criminal negligence of the government."

Still, Myshkin is optimistic about the future of her former hometown, which she hopes will be rebuilt more consciously than before. She also expressed "a hope that America is having a cathartic experience, that it's all now too obvious for anyone to ignore all the issues that this nightmare has laid bare: racism, classism, pollution, a murderously inept administration."

Myshkin suggests donors help New Orleans musicians by giving to the Tipitina's Foundation (tipitinas.com) or the Recording Academy (grammy.com/musicares).

—Jim Radosta

have been working together since 1998, and his approach is precise, melodic and experimental. Chieko, a fixture on the Portland music scene, has just begun working with the Warblers, bringing her own lyrical drumming style to the band. Banks, who came on board last year, adds an elegant sensibility to *Corvidae*, rounding out the largely acoustic album with her tasteful and interesting electronic flourishes. In addition to engineering and co-producing Myshkin's record, Banks performs on her own as Sugar Short Wave, pioneering a fusion of electronic and acoustic music she calls "elecoustica."

Myshkin hopes people hear the positivity expressed in her small, dark stories.

"Some people think that I write depressing music. I'd like to think that there's hope in there as well." **JM**

MYSHKIN performs solo 6 p.m. Sept. 23 at Mississippi Pizza Pub, 3552 N. Mississippi Ave., and with the Ruby Warblers 9 p.m. Sept. 30 at White Eagle Saloon, 836 N. Russell St., for \$6. *Corvidae* is available from www.myshkinsrubywarblers.com.

JODI DARBY is a Portland writer, activist and radio producer.

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