

## Sproule's easy sound belies the soulfulness of her work

by Bob Keefer

For the past several months a much younger colleague, who follows pop music closely for the newspaper, has been trying to figure out whether she and I might have any musical common ground.

The result has been a steady flow of CDs back and forth between our desks, sometimes with yellow Sticky Notes noting a track number or two to try out.

Until recently, all we'd discovered is that I can't quite tell apart many of the alternative female singer-songwriters of which she is fond, and that she isn't as big a fan of Southern hillbilly music or of Edith Piaf as I am.

Then we found something to agree on - and her name is Devon Sproule.

Sproule, who plays at Sam Bond's on Wednesday, has certainly got the right demographics to appeal to both of us.

Born in Canada but reared and still living in Virginia, Sproule honors her bluegrass roots with everything from the slight twang in her voice to the straight-ahead rendition of "The Weeping Willow" that concludes her fourth album, "Keep Your Silver Shined."

On the other hand, Sproule is 25, definitely part of the My-Space generation. And she flavors that mild twanginess in her music with instruments as varied as clarinet and accordion.

On top of it all, she has a voice that no one deserves at such a tender age. It's a confident, understated alto that seems to be enjoying a quiet one-on-one conversation with you - except that the conversation happens to take place through carefully crafted lyrics.

That all-ages appeal hasn't escaped her notice.

"I just feel proud of the fact that I can play a concert for a mostly 40-plus audience and then go play a college, where these kids want to give me their CDs and they want to go out looking for booze after the show," she said in a phone interview from her home. "I really enjoy music made by all ages of people."

Life on a "hippie commune"

Sproule's childhood may have helped free her from artistic pigeonholes.

She grew up on what she usually refers to as a "465-acre hippie commune" in Virginia. It takes me a moment to realize that she must mean Twin Oaks, the utopian commune founded 40 years ago on the principles of "Walden Two," Harvard behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner's seminal book.

As it happens, I visited Twin Oaks once, some years before Sproule was born, and still have pleasant memories of working in the hammock shop there. Despite Skinner's undeserved reputation as an emotionally cold technician, the commune, which has drifted away from Skinner's ideas anyway, remains one of the longest-running secular communes in existence in the United States.

Sproule doesn't usually bring up Twin Oaks by name, because the place is so fascinating that it easily could derail an entire interview. This story is about her music, right?

She confesses, though, to slipping a couple of sly references to Twin Oaks into the song lyrics on her new CD, including "a veil and a bucket by a pair of oak trees" in "Old Virginia Block," and "All my thinking back has been/ Strung up between two tall trees" (OK, picture those hammocks) in "Does the Day Feel Long."

Sproule says she was very happy at Twin Oaks, where children like her had many more supportive adults in their lives than just their two parents.

"Which ties into being pretty comfortable being creative," she said. "There was nothing even remotely discouraging at Twin Oaks."

Sproule's lyrics, like her voice, are superficially easy but carry terrific authority. Without ever sounding hokey, she piles on crisp rural images with the easy grace of a 20-something Robert

Frost. "Keep Your Silver Shined," the title song on her CD, might be a 21st century "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

"We got the last of the apples/ Rosy just from the weather/ An orchard map spread out green and red ..." the song begins. But it deftly turns into a reflection on decisions forced on us by maturity,

"The season changed, the best of us changed/ The rest of us stuck behind to keep our silver shined," she sings first, with just a hitch of disapproval for those silver polishers.

But by song's end, it's the singer herself who wants "to wait and take my time/All my time, to keep my silver shined."

"I actually did come into a set of silver silverware," Sproule said. "That got me going on the idea. I was getting engaged right about the time I was polishing this silver up, and I - well, that was the song I was writing."

Sproule is indeed a fan of poetry, and she works as hard as any writer to polish her lyrics until they appear effortless. "For Devon, who labors over lines just like EB did," says the inscription in a book of Elizabeth Bishop poetry given to her by her sister-in-law.

"I really like the way words sound, a lot," Sproule said. "Where the hard work is, is finding a way to say it all that is poetic and fun."

"Strange, but in a good way"

My colleague, Serena Markstrom, and I are certainly not the only people to sit up and take notice of Sproule's vivid music.

"Perhaps the sweetest and most honest folk-pop album recorded this year," Rolling Stone said of her 2003 release, "Upstate Songs." In 2001, the New Yorker glommed on to Sproule's "noteworthy guitar chops and ... undeniably soulful vocal sensibility."

She's even attracted attention from public radio's "This American Life," which said her new album "rings with a sweet, heartbreaking majesty."

But my favorite blurb about her - I wish I had written it myself - might be this, from the Richmond Music News in 1999, the year she turned 17.

"Devon Sproule is strange, but in a good way," the reviewer said. "To see someone so deep and so young is scary."

Sproule married singer and guitar player Paul Curreri in 2005. She sings one of his songs, "Eloise & Alex," in a duet with him on the new album.

Theirs is a marriage of yin and yang. Curreri, she says, is a "dude" with wide musical tastes. He has been a strong influence on her own music. (He also put out an album, "Songs for Devon Sproule," in 2003. What girl wouldn't swoon?)

Sproule would like him to clean up his dudelike lifestyle - even wrote a humorous song "Don't Hurry for Heaven" to nudge him a bit - but she envies Curreri his "dudeness."

"It takes me a long time to write songs," she said. "And it takes me a long time to get better at things."

"I think that is because I lead a pretty balanced life. I am crazy about my house plants. I am crazy about my sister-in-law. I like to get exercise. I can't help but do that stuff."

"And he can't help but play guitar for three hours a day, or more. It's the whole dude thing. I just want to be more single-minded about music sometimes."