

## Communal background forged folk singer's sound

by Steve Penhollow

It has become a cliché to describe a person like Devon Sproule as an old soul. When kindergarten-age actors who are able to commit sitcom scripts to memory are described as old souls, it's hard to know what that phrase even means anymore. In folk singer Sproule's case, it means a person who had an unusual upbringing, who has grown into an atypically perceptive and intelligent 25-year-old, and whose sound is a mix of old-time country and Parisian jazz that is as magical as it is improbable.

Sproule grew up in a rural Virginian commune called the Twin Oaks Intentional Community. "It's non-religious," she says via phone. "It's very idealistic. It's about trying to give people another way of living that is not very money-centered. All decisions are consensus based."

Sproule's father was an amateur musician and she started harmonizing with him and strumming along on a three-quarter-sized acoustic guitar at a young age. She still has a tape her dad made when she was 5. "I listened to it not too long ago and I thought, 'Hey that's pretty good for a 5-year-old.' You can hear my dad ask me if we should do another song and me saying, 'No let's listen to (the tape).' My husband teases me whenever I say that in the studio."

Asked when she decided to make music her career, Sproule says the question really makes no sense in a commune context. "Twin Oaks is just not very career-centered," she says. "It didn't really come up. It wasn't like there was anyone around hounding it into me day after day. The people who came to Twin Oaks were there because they wanted to do something they like. It was more about doing what you liked."

When Sproule turned 12, she was granted access to a small amount of money, the same amount her parents had access to. Sproule recorded her first album when she was 16, toured briefly with Dave Matthews, and made her way back to her adopted home of Charlottesville, VA.

Sproule says it was hard at first to adjust to life outside a commune. "I felt comfortable sharing things with people to a fault," she says. "I'd borrow girlfriends' clothes and trash them. I did not fully appreciate other people's material items because I hadn't had much and nothing really nice."

It was in Charlottesville, during a performance, that she had an unusual first meeting with her future husband, musician Paul Curreri. "The last song I did was this Johnny Cash song, 'I Still Miss Someone'," she recalls. "A verse into it, this dude climbs on stage. He's wearing a moustache, and he's a little drunk. He said, 'I know this

song and I'm going to sing it with you.' I was like, 'Oh God.' But I let him sing on the choruses, and it went OK."

The two became friends but did not date right away. Part of the impediment was a little professional jealousy, Sproule admits. "He was way more in touch his own musicality than I was," she says. "He was a better writer than I was. He had a better relationship with his creativity." "I told him he was not my type, but what I should have said was, 'I am intimidated by you. You are more confident than I am. I need to do some growing up before I'm wife material.'"

Sproule moved to Woodstock, N.Y., and made her album, *Upstate Songs*. "That year and a half I was in Woodstock, all the letters we exchanged always said, 'I love you at the end,'" she says. "We were both seeing other people, but it wasn't like we tried to hide anything from them." Curreri came up to visit during the recording of *Upstate Songs*. The pair subsequently moved back to Charlottesville and got married. Now they tour separately and the absences work well for them. "It's mostly good for the relationship," she says. "The forced time apart keeps things really, really fresh."

Sproule's unique sound has developed over a course of years and is pretty near indescribable. But Curreri's musician brother Matt, who fronts a San Diego band called Matt Curreri and the Ex-Friends, has dubbed it hot wifey back porch jazz.

Sproule's upbringing makes it unusually easy for her to survive on a musician's meager salary. But she doesn't want to be known as thrifty, necessarily. "I had this conversation with my sister-in-law the other day. She's a very 'live lightly on the land' lady, and so am I. I eat tofu. I don't flush the toilet every time," she says, laughing. "But I also just spent \$60 on natural makeup my girlfriend sold me. It's so natural, you can sleep with it on! And it doesn't look like anything."

"I tend to be pretty thrifty," Sproule says. "But instead of being known for not spending, I'd rather be known as a person who's good at striking balances." Sproule's whole life these days seems to be an impeccably performed balancing act. "My career is small enough that it's easy to get really excited about everything," she says. "But part of it is that I'm married, so I feel good about my life as well as my music."

Says Sproule: "I'm not putting all my eggs in one basket."