

Airy flat hits right chord with country songstress

July 15, 2010

David Hayes

Special to the Star

I'll just keep on falling in love

'Til I get it right

Right now I'm like a wounded bird

Hungry for the sky

But if I try my wings and try long enough

I'm bound to learn to fly

So I'll just keep on falling in love

'Til I get it right

On a warm, late spring morning, the sweet, sad sound of Cindy Church's voice and the ring of her J-185 flattop Gibson fills her "little tree house." *'Til I Get It Right* is by the queen of country music, Tammy Wynette. Her long-time producer Billy Sherrill once said there's a tear in every word, which suits Church, a lover of traditional country music who's in the process of recording her fourth solo CD, called *Sad Songs Make Me Happy*, so the weepier the better.

Church lives in a small, but airy, third-floor flat on a tree-lined street in north Riverdale. It's a few hundred square feet of hardwood floors, gables that create angled walls and a cross-draft that makes air conditioning unnecessary most of the time. She's a critically respected singer and songwriter who has won Best Female Artist at the Alberta Country Music Awards and been nominated twice for top country vocalist honours at both the Canadian Country Music Awards and the Junos.

Along with Sylvia Tyson, Caitlin Hanford and Gwen Swick, she's a member of Quartette, which has won Best Vocal Collaboration at the Canadian Country Music Awards and twice been nominated as Best Country Group or Duo at the Junos. She's also part of Lunch At Allen's, a collaboration with fellow Canadian



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

Cindy Church in her quirky "treetop" flat.

legends Murray McLauchlan, Marc Jordan and Ian Thomas.

Raised in Bible Hill, Nova Scotia to a musical family, she played bassoon (“not very well,” she notes wryly) in her school band and, at home, played a guitar her dad bought her. (Hanging on a wall of her apartment are the first instruments she and her younger brother ever owned: a pair of ukuleles.) After finishing high school in 1977, like so many small-town Maritimers, she moved west — first to Edmonton, then Vancouver Island, where she worked as a waitress and bartender in clubs that featured live entertainment.

A lovely singer, she was coaxed onstage with the bands until finally she decided she could make a go of music as a career. By the '80s she was living with Nathan Tinkham, a west coast singer-songwriter. Together they performed in country legend Ian Tyson's band and later formed their own group, Great Western Orchestra. In 1988, they bought a house in Turner Valley, a town in the foothills of the Rockies southwest of Calgary, for \$60,000, and later traded up to an \$80,000 house. (“A down payment on a house in Toronto,” jokes Church.)

When the relationship ended in 1998, Church moved to Toronto, where musical opportunities looked promising. Since that time, in addition to three solo CDs, she has recorded six albums with Quartette, two with Lunch at Allen's and performed in a musical revue devoted to the music of Hoagy Carmichael with pianist Joe Sealy and bassist George Koller. Most recently, she's been part of Rankin, Church and Crowe, a collaboration with Raylene Rankin (of the dynastic east coast Rankin Family) and Halifax singer-songwriter Susan Crowe.

And she became a lifelong renter. Today, she admits that among her peers in their late 40s and early 50s, she's one of relatively few who don't own property.

“Toronto is not the same housing market as Turner Valley,” she says, laughing. “But with my lifestyle as a working musician, travelling a lot, I like being able to pick up and go whenever I want. One of the great things about this business is that I might end up living on Vancouver Island, again, or moving to Ireland. With a house, you're responsible for maintenance and keeping up the property and anyone who owns a place will tell you it never ends. A lot of artists are not in that position, or choose not to be.”

She's had a funky one-bedroom at Yonge and Summerhill (“Rosedale Mansions,” she says, “although it wasn't a mansion by any stretch”), lived in a house with a boyfriend in south Riverdale and, when they broke up, moved to a basement apartment at Coxwell and O'Connor. Finally, she found her current cozy one-bedroom with its hardwood floors and treetop view and is so gloriously happy that she can work on her new CD of sad, sad songs.

David Hayes is an author and award-winning feature writer who has been a renter most of his life. If you have stories or information to share about renting, he can be reached at lifelong_renter@sympatico.ca.