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Musical influences worth writing home about

Music: Danielle French releases fifth CD

Wednesday, May 24, 2017 06:00 am **By: Tammy Rollie**

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Calgary singer/songwriter Danielle French, formerly of Okotoks, will perform in Lyx Studio's Live 306 Sessions concert series May 26 at 7:30 p.m. in Black Diamond.

Photo Submitted

With inspiration from some impressive musicians, a Calgary singer/songwriter with Okotoks roots is ecstatic with her latest album.

Danielle French is celebrating the achievements of her 2016 album Danielle French Presents: Miss Scarlett & the Madmen – Dark Love Songs with a performance in Black Diamond.

She will perform at the Live 306 Sessions concert series May 26 at 7:30 p.m. at Lyx Studio in Black Diamond alongside Calgary bassist Rodney Brent.

CBC Radio's Key of A placed the album on its top 10 list last year.

The tracks are the result of writing, recording and performing with musicians like Burton Cummings, members of Spirit of the West and Sarah McLachlan's band during a series of songwriting intensives in Wisconsin, organized by Pat Macdonald formerly of the band Timbuk3, over the past five years.

"It was totally transformative," French said of the experience.

"Learning from the other artists and how other people approach writing and writing with Grammy-nominated artists has really improved my writing."

The former Okotokian has been writing, recording and performing music for 20 years, releasing five albums.



French played the drums in the Foothills Composite High School band, graduated in 1989 and moved to Vancouver, where she was the drummer in various rock and pop bands.

Music came naturally and she soon found herself taking her musical abilities to the next level.

"I started getting some song ideas," she said. "I sang them to the guitar player and we ended up writing songs together."

After winning a Toronto songwriting contest in the early '90s, French realized her potential as an independent artist and branched out on her own. Successful Canadian performers like Sarah McLachlan and Jan Arden were heavy influences at the time.

After a few years, French began drawing on opposing influences like unconventional American singer/songwriter Tom Waits and eclectic English singer/songwriter Kate Bush.

"I found that as the industry became almost contrived, to the point where you have artists out there who can't really sing, it was less about the artist and more about the image," she said. "To me that's just not real."

French found Waits to be the opposite of what the industry was focusing on.

"He exposes the cracks and has got this gravelly voice you wouldn't call pretty at all," she said. "He's writing about the dark stuff and it was more real to me. I was drawn to the opposite of what was happening in the industry."

This resulted in French's transformation to dark folk music.

"I'm often writing about darker subjects in opposition to that 'everything is pretty and fine' mentality," she said. "I'm trying to expose what's underneath all of that."

French made a living touring the road and playing gigs, but it wasn't glamorous.

"I was living out of my van, playing several times a week all over North America," she said. "When I was in music full time I was broke."

As the years progressed, the evolution in the music industry presented its challenges for French.

"Making records is way easier which is, in a way, good for me because I can easily release material, but because there is so much competition out there now it's oversaturated," she said.

"Literally anybody can record an album and almost everybody has. Now there is so much competition for those gigs that they don't pay anything. I've seen many great musicians give up."

French moved on to the filmmaking industry as her main source of income two years ago, but refuses to give up on music.

"When I get hired on film I don't have much time for much else for three or six months," she said.

"Then I have several months off and I'm able to pick up the loose ends on my music and put some project forward."

French sometimes combines both film and music. Her songs have appeared in the television series Falcon Beach and the 2014 film Ally Was Screaming, among others.

More recently, French received a grant from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts to produce and direct a short film to the instrumental version of the opening track Last Goodbye of her most recent album.

"I've always been really serious about music because I'm really passionate about it," she said.

"It's what I do and what I am. It's my first love. I'm an artist. I'm always going to be an artist no matter what I do. The primary thing is to make your art and express yourself."

Tickets to see Danielle French perform cost \$20 and can be purchased by calling 403-601-9723.

To learn more about the Calgary singer/songwriter go to www.daniellefrench.com