

Ambitious girl next door

Maritime songstress Jenn Grant can't wait to bring her homemade, sophisticated, 'this really, really strong drive to tour constantly,' she tells Robert Everett



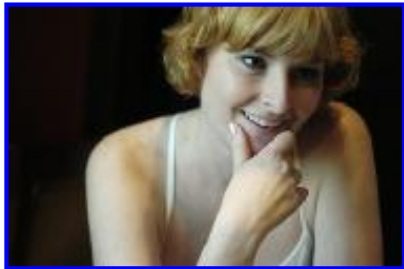
ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN
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Memory is a house with many doors, some of which swing freely while others remain mysteriously shut. Jenn Grant can remember exactly what she was wearing when she had to give up her dog on television 16 years ago, but what happened when she wrote her latest songs is a bit of a blur. Or maybe that information stands behind a door she'd rather not pry open in front of a stranger with a tape recorder.

"I don't even know what I'm doing," she said, smiling sweetly over tea at a hotel restaurant in Toronto. "I just do it, and then it's over."

Spend an hour listening to Grant's terrific debut album, and you get an idea of how big an overstatement that must be. She may not like to talk about her writing process, but nobody whose simple-sounding songs contain so much depth of form and musical thought couldn't know, at some level, what she's doing. The disc is called *Orchestra for the Moon*, and its appearance last month on the small Halifax label, Paris 1919 Sound Recordings signalled the arrival of an important new talent. Her path to that arrival was as direct, and also as wayward, as her homemade, sophisticated songs.

At 26, Grant in person seems at one with the cozy yet restless persona that comes across in her clear-voiced recorded performances. You can imagine her throwing a good kitchen party, with lots of food and maybe some whimsical little cards or favours for each guest. "To everyone who sang or played on this record," she writes in her CD acknowledgments, "please come over for supper soon."



[Enlarge Image](#)

Jenn Grant: 'I don't care about a lot of money, but I would like to be able to help out my mom, and to buy avocados, and a washing machine.' (Charla Jones/The Globe and Mail)



But she's also in a hurry, to get these songs out into the world and move on quickly to the next level, both as a writer and as a musician people know and care about. This girl next door has a lot of ambition.

“I have this really, really strong drive to tour constantly by myself,” she said, “and to come back to see my mom when she's not feeling well.” (Her mother has been under treatment for breast cancer.) “I don't care about a lot of money, but I would like to be able to help out my mom, and to buy avocados, and a washing machine.”

She's a hands-on, direct-action kind of person, who doesn't like things that involve some semi-unpredictable mediating process. At the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, from which she graduated last year, she loved to take photographs, but hated darkroom work. She liked throwing pots, but had no patience for loading a kiln. Best of all were drawing and painting, because there was nothing in between the doing and the final result.

You have to wonder how she could settle down to the finicky, knob-tweaking work of converting performed music into a studio recording. For years it was a torment for her to perform at all, because there's no process more unpredictable than putting your own music in front of people and waiting for their response.

“I had stage fright for 10 years. I'm so glad it's over. It was a long, gruelling thing that I was thinking about, like, every day. ... It was one of those things, when you know that you want to do something so much, you want it so badly, you become really afraid of it.”

She realized how much she wanted it when she heard a friend's band at Salvation, a Halifax club, years ago, and realized nothing but fear was stopping her from putting her work on that same stage. She booked the club a month in advance, and told her guitar-playing cousins Robert and Andrew MacIsaac, with whom she'd been playing as a trio, that they would have to back her up.

In turn, the MacIsaacs, who she and her brother Daniel chummed around with as kids, gave her tacit permission to be a public performer, while taking some of the responsibility for her music on themselves. She would present them with her songs, and they would work them over and arrange them.

“Andrew would say that my songs were like seeds, and he would take those seeds and turn them into something,” she said. They played for a year under a couple of band names, performing about 50 shows in the Halifax area, till one of the cousins moved to Ontario to live with his girlfriend.

“As soon as that happened, I got a band together in like a month, and went full-force ahead,” she said. “Nothing could stop me, I was steamrolling through, it was great. I guess I needed that year to let myself be ready.”

The material for the songs, of course, had been gestating in its own way. Grant's recollections of her childhood include memories of idyllic romps and games in the woods near her first, luxurious home in Charlottetown, but also episodes of painful separation and loss. Her parents split up when she was 10, and she moved with her mother and brother to much humbler quarters near Halifax. When their dog fell sick, they couldn't afford to treat it, so she and Daniel went on a local TV show called *Adopt a Dog*.

“We had to talk about the qualities of our dog that we loved, to give him up for adoption,” she said. “We were crying ... and at the end of the show they played, *How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?*” She sang that song for a long time after, no doubt weighing its surface cheeriness against the heartbreak it represented.

Other, warmer memories arise whenever she sits near someone while they play the piano, as she did during a charmed encounter with Ron Sexsmith (who sings a duet with her on her album). When she was little she used to sit on the piano bench next to her surgeon father while he played, and that cozy feeling is always waiting to be relived.

Right now, however, Grant is focusing hard on the present moment, and on what needs to be done to realize the dream. She comes from the indie music scene, but she doesn't have a typical scenester mentality, which tends only to see success in the esteem of like-minded friends and neighbours.

She also has other imperatives to think about, above all how to help her mother get through a course of chemotherapy. After her CD launch in Toronto, Grant will head back to Halifax to help her mom move to a more affordable one-room apartment, down the street from the home of her friend Jill Barber, who also sings on *Orchestra for the Moon*.

“I have this feeling that things are going to unfold as they're going to unfold by August,” she said. The clock is running, and so is Jenn Grant.

Jenn Grant plays Toronto's Horseshoe Tavern Friday, Barn Party in Ottawa on June 16, the Black Sheep Inn in Wakefield, Que., on June 17 and Joe's Pub in New York on Aug. 8.

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