



NANCY WHITE

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BY ELIZABETH DONOVAN

NANCY WHITE, CANADIAN POLITICAL songwriter and singer, is a woman living on the fringe. Singing and writing about Central American, feminist and environmental issues, she is considered too political by conservative audiences and yet too established by many in the progressive community.

Sitting in Halifax's Khyber Cafe, White is relaxing after a morning autographing albums and cassettes at the Red Herring co-op bookstore. White was in Halifax to perform for the Nova Scotia Barrister's Society Jan 18 — an unusual audience for her.

"All those three-piece suits, and all those Tories," she wails, conceding later that "it wasn't too bad."

White says she doesn't align herself with one particular ideology. Her decision not to write mainstream material is a personal one.

"I'm not set anywhere on the

political spectrum. I just think the left has the best music and the nicest people, except of course for Stalin."

She admits working outside the commercial music industry means less exposure and fewer contracts. The majority of her bookings are doing numerous benefits and rallies.

"My profile is much higher in Whitehorse and Ramea, Newfoundland than in Toronto."

White has started her own record company called Mouton Records, because of the difficulties getting recording contracts.

"It's taken a lot of energy to get this bleating little company off the ground."

Canadian content is a strong element in many of her songs. She is intrigued as to why Canadians do not like themselves or anything Canadian. She has a theory and she likes to test it out when she gets a chance.

"Because Canadians lack a national identity they can just pick one since there are so many different cultures in Canada. In fact, I went through a phase where I wanted to be a French Canadian, and later I went to Central America, I took Spanish courses and wanted to become a Central American."

Her down-to-earth manner and familiarity with Halifax betray her Maritime roots. This Toronto resident still regards the Maritimes as her home.

A native of Prince Edward Island, and graduate of Dalhousie, she speaks fondly of Halifax, Shirreff Hall and the changes on campus.

"I did my time in Shirreff Hall — three years. I really liked it though, because there was more freedom, no cooking and cleaning. When I went to university, the Arts building and student union building were not built yet."

After performing in several Dalhousie musicals and a short stint in Montreal, she returned to Nova Scotia and worked for the *Dartmouth Free Press* as a reporter. In 1970 White moved to Toronto, singing in coffee houses and acting in a series of comic reviews.

White started writing topical songs for *Sunday Morning* in 1976. After two and a half years she took a three year break because the constant pressure left her "burn't out."

White continued producing songs and she returned to *Sunday*

Morning in 1983. She now works for CBC every two weeks.

White says she disagrees with those people who think "she lives in the basement of the CBC." She is a prolific writer producing several albums and other commissioned works. Her latest releases, *What Should I Wear To The Revolution?*, *Sunday Morning Tapes*, and *Nancy White — Unexpected* have proved she is more versatile than her critics give her credit for.

Many of White's lyrics and melodies are influenced by South Central American politics and music.

While many artists were just discovering Central America in the early '80s, she had been doing benefits for and actively promoting the cause of the victims from those countries since the early '70s.

She represented Canada at the Festival of Popular Song in Managua, Nicaragua and visited Guatemalan refugee camps in Mexico on behalf of Oxfam in February 1983.

She writes her lyrics using newspapers as her source for material. White claims she is no great "political visionary" and is surprised when people consider her so.

"I just got a call from the sociology department at York University. They want me to speak to their students about how I write my songs. They think I have some great vision. Sociology of Music they want to call it. But for \$500 bucks I'll cook something up."

White says her producer just calls her and asks if she feels like doing a song that week.

"My producer and I are politically on the same wavelength, so we knock our heads together and come up with a song."

She typically down-plays her

innate ability to take topical news events and find humorous political ironies. Finding contradictions is a daily fascination.

"There is this shopping place called Honest Ed's. It is the refinement of capitalism. I saw some really nice blue towels there, they were made in Marin, Cuba. Wow! I thought what a blend of the right, middle and left."

No one seems to escape White's satirical musical commentary. Old Liberals, new Tories, Princess Anne and the Pope have been treated to her biting sarcasm.

In her song about Trudeau's decision/indecision to resign as prime-minister, (*Maybe, Maybe not Waltz*) the country is playing the role of a "burned lover."

A song that has received attention from both England and the U.S. is the song about Princess Anne and how tough it is to keep losing her place in line of the succession to the throne — *Thirty Years a Princess and Never a Queen*.

She claims I'm not the political animal I know people think I am."

White is often able to laugh at herself as well as the political caricatures she describes in her songs. She refers to herself as "all around bitch of the North" and "voice of liberal guilt."

In a self revealing song (*When the Wino comes my way*) she speaks of the contradiction in picketing for a cause and hoping to avoid the wino.

*I'm a knee jerk liberal
I vote for the NDP
And I love to stand and picket in front of the U.S. embassy:
And I get called progressive?
But that's not what they would say
If they could read my mind
When the wino comes my way*