

# PENNY LANG: 1942-2016

*"one of Canada's undeniable treasures"* **Montreal Int'l Jazz Festival**

Penny Lang emerged on the North American music scene in the 1960s. Her powerful interpretations and originals in folk, blues, country and gospel have gained her a large and devoted following as *"a superb singer of sardonic folk material... hugely entertaining"* (**The Toronto Star**). She also remained true to the art of entertaining, keenly perceptive and able to read the mood of her audiences. No two shows were alike, as she was a master communicator. Her songs: emotionally powerful observations of the human condition, sometimes poignant, sometimes hilarious, always memorable.

Born in east-end Montréal to a musical family, Penny Lang learned the ropes in prisons, hospitals, churches, camps and dusty old theatres. During the 1960s she performed at major folk festivals (Philadelphia, Mariposa..), folk clubs and countless bars throughout North America. Her mentors were Dave vanRonk and Kate McGarrigle; she hung with Stevie Wonder and the Reverend Gary Davis; she adored Nina Simone and Pete Seeger. A near brush with fame occurred when she was asked to record Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne* for a US major label but it was not to be. Her darkest years lay ahead of her, and Penny left regular performing in 1970 after the birth of her son Jason.

In 1988, after some time living in rural Québec, Penny re-emerged a stronger woman and a more powerful force. With the help of friends she directed her energies into songwriting, and was welcomed back to an adoring public. She became the darling of *le tout* Montréal, virtually precipitating a folk/roots revival. Dobros and mandolins, harmonicas and accordions; singalongs, jump-ups, improv: these were the magic of Penny's shows, which could best be described as "happenings". Eventually the rest of Canada caught on, *"when she re-emerged in the late '80's...it was as if a folk music resurrection had taken place"* said **Alan Neister** of **The Globe & Mail**, who also crowned her *"a first lady of folk"*.

Since returning to the stage, Penny Lang once again took to the road. There were countless shows throughout North America, and she'd also toured to Australia, Italy, Denmark, France & the UK. Her admirers are everywhere. She also finally began to record: six critically acclaimed albums, **Yes** (1991), **Live at the Yellow Door** (1992), **Ain't Life Sweet** (1993), **Carry on Children** (1996), **Penny Lang & Friends Live**, (1998) and **Somebody Else** (1999), all on **She-Wolf/Festival** brought to the forefront Penny's thoughtful songwriting and soulful vocals. A new chapter of Penny's career began as she was signed to Canada's top folk music label, **Borealis**. A compilation titled **Gather Honey** garnered Penny her first **JUNO** nomination. It is a remarkable collection of bootleg tapes and archival recordings from 1963 through 1978, and represents a wonderful portrait of the folk era of the time.

Penny Lang's 8th recording "**Stone & Sand & Sea & Sky**" was released in 2006; it was produced by Grammy-nominated, New York-based Roma Baran and Vivian Stoll and has been receiving excellent press as well as steadily climbing the folk music charts since its release. **Pennyfest** was presented in 2009 and 2010 in Montreal, as away to welcome her home after her move to the Sunshine Coast, BC.

Penny received many awards: the **Prix Folqui** (Lifetime Achievement) award from FOLQUEBEC; and two **Canadian Folk Music Awards** in 2006 for Stone + Sand + Sea + Sky. She continued to perform in her adopted community of Madeira Park, BC, until she passed away in 2016.

*"I first heard Penny sing at the Montreal Folk Workshop....I heard passion, I heard vulnerability, and I heard complete candour about pretty much everything. She's a gospel voice, you might say, a gospel singer with the blues"*  
**Jesse Winchester**

*"The fresh, jazzy feel-good voice of Penny soft sells her message of peace and understanding amongst us all."* **Kate McGarrigle**

## Selected Concerts & Festivals: (1990-2005)

**Yukon:** Frostbite Festival; Guild Hall, Whitehorse

**Northwest Territories:** Folk on the Rocks Festival, Yellowknife

**British Columbia:** Winter Roots Festival, Vancouver Folk Festival, Smithers Midsummer Festival, Under the Volcano(Nelson), Cowichan Folk Festival, Comox Valley Festival, Queen Charlotte Islands, William Head Institution; Duncan Garage;

**Alberta:** Calgary Folk Festival, Edmonton Folk Festival, South Country Fair, Sidetrack Café, Lethbridge Folk Club, Grande Prairie Theatre, Rosebud Café, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Ed...

**Saskatchewan:** Regina Guild of Folk Arts

**Manitoba:** Winnipeg Folk Festival, West End Cultural Centre

**Ontario:** Hugh's Room, TBS Women's Blues Revue, Soul & Blues Fest, Borealis 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (Harbourfront), Water's Edge Cafe, Free Times Cafe, Ultrasound, C'est What, Silver Dollar, NXNE, Mariposa Festival, Bloor St. United Church, Toronto; Rasputin's, Ottawa Folk Festival, GCTC's Siren Series, National Gallery, National Arts Centre 4<sup>th</sup> stage, Ottawa; Northern Lights Festival, Sudbury; Festival of Friends, Hamilton; Summerfolk, Owen Sound; Home Country Folk Festival, London; Three Fires Native Festival, Wikwemikong; Blue Skies Festival, Hillside Festival, Guelph; Ottawa Folk Festival, Woods Music and Dance Camp, Muskoka

**Quebec:** Sala Rossa, Spectrum, Acoustic blues series @ Montreal International Jazz Festival (several times), 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Montréal, Club Soda, Cabaret, Corona, Yellow Door, Cafe Campus, Place des Arts, Isart, Casa del Popolo, Montréal; Blues au Palais Montcalm, Festival des Nuits Black, Quebec; Black Sheep Inn, Wakefield; Bishop's University, Lennoxville; Carleton BluesFest, Gaspé, Festival Blues de Mt-Tremblant, Penny Lang House Festival; Quebec Artists in the Schools program

**Nova Scotia:** Lunenburg Folk Festival, Natal Day Festival, Stan Rogers Festival, Bras d'Or Festival

**PEI:** Milton Acorn Festival, Charlottetown **New Brunswick:** Victoria Festival, Moncton

**Newfoundland:** Junos Rootsfest: Greensleaves, Coffeehouse at the Studio, St-John's

**Vermont:** First Night Burlington, Burlington CoffeeHouse **Maine:** Left Bank Cafe, Blue Hill; **New Hampshire:** The Folkway, Peterborough; Great Waters Music Festival, Wolfeboro **Massachusetts:** Club Passim, Johnny D's, Joyful Noise Coffeehouse, Boston; Falconridge Folk Festival Showcase

**New York:** Café Sin-E, The Bitter End, CB's Gallery, NYC; Caffè Lena, Parting Glass, Saratoga Springs; Mother Earth Cafe, Eighth Step, Albany; Horizontal Boogie Bar, Rochester

**Pennsylvania:** Bothy Folk Club, Rocks Café, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh; Café Classics, Doylestown

**Michigan:** The Ark, Ann Arbor; Paint Creek Folklore Society, Rochester Hills

**Illinois:** Heartland Café, Uncommon Ground, Chicago

**Washington, DC:** Canadian Embassy, North American Folk Alliance concert

**Texas:** Chicago House, Austin (SXSW) **Tennessee:** (B.B.) King's Palace, Beale St, Memphis

**California:** Strawberry Festival, Sonora; Freight & Salvage **Florida:** South Florida Festival

**Australia:** National Folk Festival, Canberra; Port Fairy Folk Festival, Apollo Bay Festival, Sutherland, Illawara, Newcastle, Bathurst, Bowen, Toowoomba, Mena Creek, Melbourne, Yandina, Airlie Beach folk clubs...(tours in 95 & 96)

**Italy:** Folk House, Udine; Donato's Castle, Pesina; Teatro Acquario, Cosenza; Villa Boselli, Arma di Taggia; Armadillo Club, Sarzana; Folk Club, Cesena; (97)

**Denmark:** Tonder Folk Festival (98)

**UK:** Edinburgh Blues Festival; Folk on the Farm, Chichester; Pontardawe Festival (Wales); Edinburgh Fringe Festival; One Big World Fest, Ramshorn Theatre, Glasgow (Scotland); Hi There Festival, Hayling Island; Artesium, Luton; Birdsedge, Huddersfield; International Festival, Crawley; Coco Bay Hotel, Guernsey, Canada House, London (98, 99)

**France:** La Peniche Spectacles, Rennes; Chapelle la Trinité, Concarneau; Le Bataclan, Brest; La Tisanerie, St-Nazaire; Les chantiers de l'Atlantique, St-Nazaire; Pince Oreille, Poitiers (98)

## **Discography:** (partial)

λ **Michael Jerome Browne** The Twin Rivers String Band, May 2004 Borealis Recs. 1 cut

λ **Ballin' the Jack** OCHO/Union Square Music UK/IR 2002 (1cut); re-defining the blues

*"an intriguing collection...it includes...a lot of people I've never heard of before including Penny Lang..."*  
**Charlie Gillett, BBC London, UK** (world music DJ)

λ **Gather Honey** Borealis Records/Festival Nov. 2001 retrospective album 1963-1978 ;liner notes by folk historian Gary Cristall; **JUNO** nomination; many originals by Penny's contemporaries of the day

**All Music Guide** has called Penny *"a cult legend of the Canadian folk scene"*

*"Lady Penny: et dire que si Penny Lang vivait aux "Z'états" ou en Europe, elle aurait droit à un culte en tant que grande chanteuse folk-blues-country depuis près de 40 ans...et une voix toujours lumineuse!...un des trésors cachés de Montréal."* **Marie-Christine Blais, La Presse**

*"A voice to die for. But it's the voice that transcends the years – pure, honest, uncompromising, true – whether alone with guitar or in the company of other musicians".* **Robert Reid, The Record, Kitchener-Waterloo**

*"a gutsy, authoritative interpreter of all kinds of folk music with a special love for the blues. A major talent...As a historical document, this CD and its package materials are utterly fabulous. This set will leave lovers of folk music hungering for Lang's all-too-few other recordings. A voice you will want to live with constantly for quite some time."*  
**Victory Music Review US**

*" There are no misguided attempts to cure the world's ills through songs lifted from someone else's misunderstanding folk culture; Penny Lang takes contemporary urban folk and blues songs and delivers them in a voice both powerful and unaffected."* **Rick Anderson, All Music Guide US**

*"One of the joys of working in "folk music" is that it has a history and the elders are revered. Pete Seeger in America, Ewan McColl in Britan, and in Canada, among those who have lived their lives nobly in folk music is Penny Lang from Montreal....Gather Honey is a very high, high up for Penny Lang"* **Les Simeniuk, Penguin Eggs, Canada**

*"here are her back pages recorded live, with no overdubs, no vocal histrionics, no marketing budget and "straight from the heart feel"- I'd almost forgotten how unpretentiousness sounds but here it is."* **Living Tradition, UK**

*"Rather than trotting out juvenilia or half-conceived out-takes...Gather Honey displays a talented and soulful woman already coming into her own at an early age..."* **Lindsay Cobb, Acousticmusic.com**

λ **The Legacy of Reverend Gary Davis** Inside Sounds, Memphis; 2002 (1cut)

λ **Somebody Else** She-Wolf/Festival Distribution, Oct. 99 Produced by David Baxter, with Jason Lang, Michelle Josef, Bazil Donovan, David Baxter, Lori Yates, Linda Feijo mostly Penny Lang originals, some co-writes, and a Bob Snider song

*“Powerful, soulful voice and rootsy music with apparent traces of Memphis (and occasionally Detroit) soul, Louisiana gumbo music. Bo Diddley unplugged, middle period Dylan, and a host of other influences ...a very listenable album...”* **Folk on Tap-UK**

*“A take on Dylan’s love Minus Zero No Limit’ doesn’t stand out in any way in a collection of self-penned songs, which says it all”.* **Record Buyer, UK**

*“..and secondly the quite brilliant Penny Lang. Part folk-keen, part blues-growl, her voice is an extraordinarily charismatic instrument- album of the month by a country mile.”* **Joe Cushley, MOJO Filter, UK**

**λ Penny & Friends Live** She Wolf/Festival Distribution, Nov. 98. Producers: Heidi Fleming, Simon Pressey and Penny Lang. With: Jason Lang, Michael Browne, Bill Gossage, Bob Stagg, Ken & Chris Whiteley, Jody Golick, Martin Boodman, Linda Morrison, Kim Richardson; mainly traditional songs

*“she draws strength and power from the songs, the musicians, and the audience to turn in inspired, and often inspiring performances...soaring...”* **Sing Out Magazine**

*“...Penny Lang is not only a great singer-songwriter but also a superb performer...a CD to enjoy over and over again”.* **Int’l Dr. Nina Simone Society, Antwerp, Belgium**

**λ Carry On Children** She-Wolf Records/Festival Distribution, May 96. Producer: Ken Whiteley. With special guests: Moxy Frúvous, Colin Linden, Quartette, Ken & Chris Whiteley, Cathy Fink & Marcy Marxer, Garnet Rogers, & others. Half of the songs self-penned...half original Canadian

*“Emotional Power Rarely Equalled...(headline) she is able to generate more emotion with her voice than probably 90 per cent of practising musicians...Carry On Children... enhances one’s respect of her musical and songwriting skill.”* **Lynn Saxberg, Ottawa Citizen**

*“Lang is a wonderful blues performer...a stellar cast of Canada’s finest bring out a casual elegance in her work.”* **Paul Emil Comeau, Dirty Linen**

*“an intimate but powerful sound...stories veiled in the ironic sweetness of her...path to success...highly recommended.”* **Mauro Eufrosini, Soul’n Jazz Plus, Italy** (translation)

*“(she) possesses a greatness of spirit, which...(while she is) so clearly identified with the ‘60’s, her music is well anchored in the present...”* **Claude Côté, Paroles & Musique, SOCAN** (translation)

### **λ Here & Now**

One cut on United Nations 50th Anniversary recording  
Produced by the Canada Council & Sony Music Special Projects 1995.

**λ Ain’t Life Sweet** aut. 1993, She-Wolf Records/Festival Distribution. Prod. by  
With Jason & Scot Lang, Ray Bonneville, Rick Haworth, Danielle Martineau, Michel Donato, Linda Morrison, & many more. All Penny Lang originals save 1.

*“dynamite album...There are lots of blues numbers mixed beautifully with country-edged folk and folk-edged country. This east-end Montrealler has an exceptional vocal gift that shouldn’t fall through the cracks...Penny Lang was superb...”* **Walt Grealis RPM, Toronto**

*“dans le folk, Madame Lang excelle”* **Laurent Saulnier, VOIR, Montreal**

λ Penny Lang Live at the Yellow Door 1992/97 She-Wolf Records/Festival Distribution.

Solo, live at the Yellow Door's 25th anniversary. Produced by Simon Pressey, Penny Lang & Heidi Fleming '60's era classics, new and old

*"...a unique performer of special calibre and impeccable credentials...a cultural treasure, representing a long and deep tradition of troubadours who uplift through their musical art..."* **Craig Morrison, ethnomusicologist, author: Go Cat Go**

λ Yes 1991/97 She-Wolf Records/Festival Distribution.

With Jason Lang, Scot Lang, Ken Pearson, Linda Morrison, Pat Donaldson, Michel Donato, Miche Pouliot, Jody Golick, Prod. Scot Lang/Jody Golick; Penny's first originals and songs by close friends

## **Live concert reviews & testimonials**

*"Penny is especially Great!!! She was a favourite to many. The Chapel with her and David Essig and Valdy was superb I hear!"* **Brent Hutchinson, Concerts at Islands Folk Festival, Victoria, BC 2004**

*"My favorite comment was that of an 8 year old boy. His dad asked him how he enjoyed the concert and he replied that it wasn't really a concert. More like a "visit". Got to love kids."* **Elizabeth Inkster, Concerts at the Edge of the World, Queen Charlotte Islands, BC 2004**

*"The only disappointment I found was that the evening only lasted about 5 hours; it could have gone on forever."* **Christine, HYPERLINK "<http://www.Orcasound.com>" [www.Orcasound.com](http://www.Orcasound.com) May 2003-Penny Lang Tribute Concert review**

*"Everything I would have hoped for from a musical icon.- the highlights were the drumming and gospel (Penny's workshops)"* **Paul Lowenberg, Northern Lights Festival Boreale, July 2002 Sudbury**

*"I've seen her really lift people up with her music and I've seen her express sadness, the blues – but I think it's her ability to connect with people...it's what I strive for in my music"* **Eve Goldberg**

*"I love what she does and who she is...I go from one end of this country to another and I meet people who are singing her songs or songs they learned from her"* **Ken Whiteley**

*"You know you've got a friend there, allowing you to relax and feel better and cry or whatever...Penny's certainly someone to celebrate"* **Annabelle Chvostek**

*"a strong woman with a bluesy angle to her music and a political bent to her lyrics. And she's a lot of fun."* **WVBR Bound for Glory, Ithaca, NY 2002**

*"It may sound cliché but Penny Lang is a national treasure. The talented, soulful Lang invests every show she performs with an unbelievable sense of joy and she ensures she connects with every person in the audience. Whether she's playing for 5 people or 5,000 her enthusiasm for the music is infectious and her charm is undeniable."* **Joe Riley, Acoustic Waves, GCTC, Ottawa, 2002**

*"une fréquentation remarquable, pour une artiste, il est vrai, exceptionnelle...elle a emballé le public",* **France, Ouest France Télégramme 1998**

*"Penny Lang opened the concert and only two seconds later had the crowd completely in her hand"* **(tr) Jyllandsposten, Denmark 1998**

*"Penny était superbe".* **Claude Larrivée, Café Campus, Montréal**

*"Ses folksongs étaient imbibés de gospel, de blues, de ragtime, de country, de swing, et racontaient de*

*sympathiques leçons de la vie pas pontifiantes pour deux sous..., J'étais tout aussi fasciné par le personnage qu'envoûté par sa voix...avec des notes pleines de douleur qui lacéraient la surface des choses...*” **Sylvain Cormier, Le Devoir**

*“anytime Penny wants to come back to my festival, she’s more than welcome”* **Charlie Cran, artistic director, Strawberry Festival, Sonora, CA** (where she headlined with La Bottine Souriante)

*“Enoch Kent, I'm A Workin' Chap*

*... In his sixties, his voice is like crystallized honey, still sweet but with grit in it. It would be interesting to think of him in duet with Penny Lang.” ...* **HYPERLINK "http://www.greenmanreview.com" www.greenmanreview.com**  
**(Judith Gennett)**

*“a superb solo performer”* **North Country Fair, Alberta**

### **Television and radio:** (selected)

Bound for Glory, WVBR Ithaca, NY (live concert)  
Live with Gene Shay on WXPB, Philadelphia, PA  
The Yellow Door Forever, Amerimage-Spectra/Global TV  
TVOntario, Studio Two (Toronto)  
Live concerts on WERS, Boston  
Live with Dick Pleasants on WUMB, Boston  
Dick Sherman feature, WQXR, “Woody’s Children” NYC  
Entertainment Desk, Global TV, Eye on Toronto, CFTO TV  
Petrie in Prime, CBC Newsworld  
Choix de Sophie, Télé Québec, Montréal  
The Entertainers, Musical Friends, Simply Folk, Morningside, (CBC Radio)  
L’Heure G, Les Trois Moustiquaires (Radio-Canada TV)  
The World’s Longest Day, AIDS Telethon, Concordia University TV  
Radio McGill (CKUT), University de Montreal (CISM)  
Rogers Cable Community Station (Ottawa)  
KFAI St-Paul/Minneapolis  
CKUA Alberta/CJSW Calgary  
Ryerson University (CKLN); University of Toronto (CIUT) (Toronto)  
On the Road Again, City Beat (CBC TV)  
Teddy Bear’s Picnic, CJAD Radio, Montreal  
Late Night with Dennis Trudeau, CBC TV, Montreal  
CIBL Radio Communautaire, Montreal, L’Inspecteur Epingle.

### **Films/Video:**

**Ain't Life Sweet** is on the soundtrack of **Cloudburst**; **Spanish Moss** is on **Strongman**. Penny is the subject of a documentary video about her by Montrealler Jocelyne Clarke entitled: **Stand Up: On High Ground with Penny Lang**, which aired on CFCF TV in Jan. and Aug. 99 and which premiered at the Silver Images Film Festival in Chicago; also a short for CBC-TV’s **On the Road Again**, seen nationally in the ‘90’s. She has written music for two films: Oscar-winner Terre Nash’s 1995 NFB documentary on economics from women’s perspective entitled **“Who’s Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics”**, and a 1995 documentary **“Speakeasy: Women Talkin’ Mostly ‘Bout Men”** made at Emerson College, Boston, directed by Bridget A. Murnane, exploring women’s relationships. She has made 2 videoclips: **Ain’t Life Sweet**, and **Somebody Else...** here is Ain't Life Sweet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1N7kWjCr5q0>

### **Awards:**

A compilation titled **Gather Honey (Borealis)** garnered Penny her first **JUNO** nomination in 2003. She also received 2 **Canadian Folk Music Awards** for Contemporary Album and Solo Artist of the year in 2006 for **Stone & Sand & Sea & Sky**. The Ottawa Folk Festival awarded her the Helen Verger Award in

2007. Penny has received numerous awards and bursaries, including from: the **Canada Council for the Arts**; **FACTOR**; le **Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec**; **SOCAN**; the 1996 **Porcupine** Award for Perseverance “Harry Hibbs” (Toronto); the first **FOLQUI** award (Folkebec) 2003

### **Tribute concert:**

Held at la Sala Rossa in Montreal (May 2003) artists who participated were: Eve Goldberg, Beverley McGuire, The Echo Hunters, Ivy, Ken Whiteley, Chris Rawlings, Connie Kaldor, Annabelle Chvostek, Evalyn Parry, Linda Morrison, Kirk McGeachie, Stephen Barry, Les Ours, Cheryl Neill, Maria Dunn, Steel Rail and Bill Garrett/Sue Lothrop in an event best described as a love-in: artists performed a song of Penny’s and one of their own; Penny closed the evening herself with a jam session. The event was captured on various media....

**HYPERLINK "http://www.borealisrecords.com" [www.borealisrecords.com](http://www.borealisrecords.com)  
<http://famgroup.ca/artist/penny-lang/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/Penny-Lang-Official-Fan-Page-113201075372182/?fref=ts>**