

Tourist attraction lost – Big Beaver general store suddenly closed

Small town Saskatchewan has lost one of the few general stores left in the province.

Aust's General Store in the hamlet of Big Beaver closed suddenly on Sept. 10 with a notice on Facebook announcing the closure "with heavy hearts."

The Facebook notice said a sale will be held at a later date and everything has to go.

The store has been in Big Beaver since 1928 when the railway came. The store has been owned by the Aust family for the last 64 years.

Elsie Anderson, age 96, of Moose Jaw, recalls the store when she grew up in the district.

"It will be missed," said the Moose Jaw resident who has family in Big Beaver. "They will probably have to get the mail at Coronach. The post office kept them going."

Aust's has a wood-burned sign above the front door that reads: "If we haven't got it you don't need it."

Like most general stores from the era when they were an integral part of every small town, Aust's sold a bit of everything — groceries, clothing, hardware, candy,

you name it.

Booths in the store were used for coffee and to play cards by local residents — a feature that was common in general stores.

The Facebook notice also asked everyone with outstanding accounts to pay

In the early years of settling, general stores also served as temporary banks, extending credit to customers until the harvest was done and farmers had some cash.

Aust's is listed on the Tourism Saskatchewan website as an attraction and has been a must stop on the Outlaw Caves tour of the Big Muddy offered by Coronach Tourism.

The store is one of the last businesses left in the hamlet with a population of 10.

In its heyday, Big Beaver was a bustling town serving 2,000 people in the area. Thousands of cattle were shipped by rail from the stockyards every fall.

The town had a concrete plant that manufactured concrete culverts.

Release of first album a 'validating experience' for local French musician

Jason G. Antonio - Moose Jaw Express

The past year has been "really insane" for a local Fransaskois musician, whose band recently released its first album and was also named one of the top 100 groups in CBC's Searchlight contest.

Bilingual singer-songwriter émi — pronounced Emmy and the stage name of Emi Lebel — was born here and grew to enjoy writing songs.

She became a professional musician about six years ago, and while she plays the guitar, ukelele and violin, she uses those instruments to help write songs. Being a singer-songwriter is great because she loves collecting words and creating imagery with sentences, such as describing how yellow might smell or sound.

The musician's biography says she has a rich and powerful voice with minimalist lyricism and an electro-folk tone. Her lyrics, though poetic and dark, contrast with her sense of humour.

That creative passion works well in her current electro-indie pop band, Beau Nectar, because her Franco-Ontarian bandmate, Marie-Clo, is good at producing melodies.

"... so me and her really work together because she'll bring in a melody and then I'll have collected little sentences over time, and then we can craft them together," the Moose Javian said. "And it's a really, really enjoyable experience."

A solo career

émi released her first extended play (EP) album, "Honey," in April 2020, just as the pandemic began. That was an interesting time because she gave many interviews since there was no other news. That unexpected attention was great because she didn't have a team or budget to promote her album.

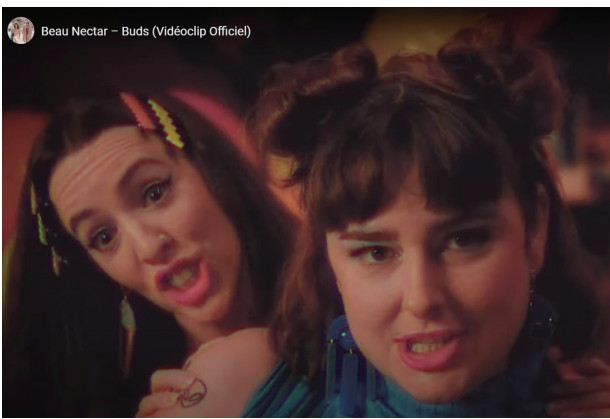
Not touring was hard because the singer-songwriter wanted to have a release show. However, she acknowledged that travelling can be difficult and financially stressful.

She was happy with not touring then — it was "weirdly good timing to release" her solo album during the pandemic — because she had a more rewarding time touring with Marie-Clo this past summer to promote their first album, "Two Lips."

"I don't think I would have been fully ready (in 2020). It's a very challenging thing to accomplish," émi said. "And I'm glad that I was more prepared this year."

Making friends

émi and Marie-Clo met in January 2017 while participating in a reality TV show in Quebec called Planète



A screenshot from the music video, "Buds" by French band Beau Nectar, which is composed of Franco-Ontario Marie-Clo and Moose Javian émi. Photo by Jason G. Antonio

BRBR, a singer-songwriter competition for Francophones living outside that province.

While they were the top two finalists, they also formed a friendship and gave each other advice. Since the show's finale was that May, they had time to co-write a song for the final challenge.

"We would share our ideas (and) we would share melodies we had in mind. It was quite a positive experience that could have easily gone sour under the lens of competition," she said.

"Imagine you share a melody and someone could have stolen it, for example. But instead, we just really, really bonded and really helped each other through it all."

A band is born

After the competition, the two women embarked on solo careers before Marie-Clo approached the Moose Javian in 2020 about collaborating on a song that later appeared on their album. Everything fell into place and their "slow-burn project" began blooming.

With their band, the two musicians deliver intimate, vibrant and surreal electronic pop with ecofeminist lyrics that spark empathy toward nature. émi noted that they love writing about plants and animals and "nerding out on learning new facts."

The duo wanted to call themselves "Nectar" but discovered that other bands had that name. While they thought about spelling it differently, they were concerned it would confuse people, so they combined that word with "Beau" and had their moniker.

Beau is an "androgynous" word that means handsome, while Beau Nectar sounds like someone's name, and while the phrase doesn't make sense, the musicians liked those words and kept them, the Moose Javian said.

An 'insane' year

The duo's fortunes took flight in 2022 — a "whirlwind" and "really insane" year — because that's when they officially announced they were Beau Nectar.

They participated in residencies in several places — grant funding and benefactors supported their trips — to hone their writing and music skills. Those residencies were at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, the Banff Arts Centre under Canadian hip-hop artist Shad and in France with Christian Bordarier.

The duo also showcased at the Breakout West Canadian Music Festival in Kelowna, B.C., the Crossroads Festival in Roubaix, France and the prestigious FME Festival in Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec.

"It has been a whirlwind experience. Showcases are particularly scary because you have to impress industry

TRADING THOUGHTS



By Ron Walter For Moose Jaw Express

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the position of this publication.

And it had a garage, cafe, hotel, grain elevator, several stores and a weekly newspaper.

Copies of the newspaper in the Big Beaver museum display an article quoting a University of Las Vegas history professor's research indicating notorious robbers Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid spent time in the nearby Big Muddy badlands. The Sundance Kid sent a post card from Big Beaver.

The Big Muddy is the northern extension of a string of badlands that range all the way to Mexico.

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professionals. But the tour has been a validating experience because we feel the show is finally at a place that is very tight and presentable ...," she continued.

"We feel very comfortable. We can finally focus on interpreting on stage and singing."

The first album

The group signed in January 2023 with Indica Records, which released their seven-track album in June.

"It's crazy because we've been working on this album since January 2021. That's when we first hung out ...," said émi, noting she spent five weeks at Marie-Clo's home in Ottawa that year working on songs.

While it's unbelievable that the album is now out, its reception has been great and people love it, she continued. They have received many interviews, while fans are interested in the music's ecofeminist aspects.

"It's just been an extremely validating experience and we feel really grateful for our fans and everyone supporting us," she added.



The cover for Beau Nectar's first album, "Two Lips." Photo courtesy Facebook

Love of nature

émi explained that ecofeminism is a movement that looks at how patriarchy and capitalism treat nature compared to women. There are positive aspects as well such as how nature is cyclical and usually referred to as a woman.

Beau Nectar found the term by accident because they were interested in personifying nature with their experiences and scientific facts they found.

While it doesn't appear on this album, the duo wrote a song called "Two Lips" about how past societies glorified the tulip flower and went to war over it, but now it's a basic garden plant. The duo associated it with how beauty standards have changed over time.

With a laugh, émi said they removed the song because they directed their budget toward higher-quality French songs; they hope to include it on their English album in 2024. Meanwhile, they kept the album name because they are women with two lips and liked its wordplay.

CBC's top 100 list

In August, CBC Music's Searchlight contest listed its top 100 artists and included Beau Nectar at No. 9 for its track "Buds." The national broadcaster later announced its top 10 finalists — Beau Nectar did not make the cut — with a Winnipeg artist taking the top spot.

émi thought making the list was great — it gave them further exposure — and an honour, considering she has seen her friends and other great bands appear there over the years.

Beau Nectar is opening for musician Daniel Bélanger in Toronto on Saturday, Sept. 30 and for Fanny Bloom on Friday, Nov. 10 in Montreal.

Visit www.beaunectar.ca for more information about the band and its upcoming shows.

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