

OVERTURE

Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere

“All my cousins live here fat off the land. I hear them lowing but I can’t understand. And in the line-up where their souls can be sold, they’ve never heard of this Canadian band. But the dinosaurs are dying each day. They’re going to wish I never got up to play.”

RHEOSTATICS, “RDA (ROCK DEATH AMERICA),” 1992

“If you read only the work of dead foreigners you will certainly reinforce the notion that literature can be written only by dead foreigners. . . . If, as has long been the case in this country, the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted idea of what he is really like.”

MARGARET ATWOOD, *SURVIVAL*, 1972

IN 1985, THE landscape of Canadian music was changing. The boomers were washed up. Punk had exploded and crashed. The remains were a messy morass of largely embarrassing cultural icons and an endless parade of “hoser rock.” Commercial viability seemed to mean Loverboy and nothing else. By 1985, it was time for tabula rasa: this generation would take classic rock, synth pop, country music and art-school approaches to crafting a new canon of creative, vital music that would create a new legacy



Treble Charger · PHOTO BY DAVID LEYES

from which future generations could extrapolate their own explorations. In 1985, it was clear that we were not going to be the same.

By 1995, this era was beginning to fade. Audiences were declining, indie labels were folding, and major labels were dropping quality acts and signing derivative ones sure to make a quick buck. Although there was no shortage of great music, it became harder to hear, and the polarized mainstream musical climate began to look a lot like 1985. So many things had regressed that we could only look back at the 10 years between '85 and '95 as a defining moment, and indeed, since then, we have not been the same. One only needs to look at the artistic and commercial triumphs of the years 2000–2010 — a time when those two poles no longer seemed mutually exclusive — to witness the lessons learned from the CanRock Renaissance.

This is not a book about the Juno Awards. This is not a book about record sales. This is not a book about major labels. This is not a book about rock radio. Those elements might come into play, but first and foremost this is a book about music and the glorious, intelligent, beautiful, ridiculous, talented and fucked-up people who make it. This is a book about a time and a place that deserves to be celebrated, even more so because the

music in question was created in a climate of cultural bulimia, in a country with a nasty habit of eating both its young and its old and leaving them for dead, a country that believes nothing of any great historical importance ever happens here.

There once was a great book written about the American underground in the '80s, which the post-boomer author began by stating, "I grew up thinking everything had already happened." If the author had been raised in Canada — "twice removed," to borrow Sloan's phrase, both generationally and geographically — surely she would have added, "I grew up thinking everything had already happened *somewhere else*." This was accepted wisdom for songwriters growing up in the '80s. John K. Samson of the Weakerthans recalls, "Growing up I thought that songs were written about somewhere else. Real life is always elsewhere; life here doesn't matter. Unless you're at the centre of the culture, there is no traction to what you do." After the people in this book hit the road and started to unleash classic albums, future generations wouldn't have to ponder such issues.

I WANNA GO TO NEW YORK CITY

THE YEAR IS 1985. Canadian music, as known to the general public, is right up there with Canadian television and Canadian film: the term "Canadian" is used as a derogative, or as a patronizing, medicinal adjective. Admitting you liked Canadian music was akin to declaring a strange affinity for turnips. Some would argue that the youth of the early '80s had no concept of their country's culture, but they most certainly did. They thought it sucked.

Impressions outside Canadian borders were no better, and as a result any interesting music that did come out of Canada tended to be dismissed as being guilty by association — or a freak of nature. Peter Rowan, an East Coast manager who helped launch the careers of Sloan and Eric's Trip, says, "Really, most music that comes out has been embarrassing Canadian music lovers for years and years, and has done nothing but have an ill effect on us trying to sell outside of Canada."

There's little question that the late '60s produced a series of artists who laid the template for CanRock as we know it today, although practically all of them had to find recognition in the U.S. first: Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, the Band, Gordon Lightfoot, Steppenwolf and others. But for a new generation of Canadian artists beginning to forge their own sounds and identities, Canada was perhaps the last place they would look to for inspiration. Discussing his band's formative influences, Gord Downie

of the Tragically Hip recalls, “There were certain Canadian groups that you sort of had to relegate to a different file; it was never considered on the same level as the other stuff you listened to, somehow not as exotic. Not as — or more — ambitious, hence making it less exotic.”

In 1985, the few heroes of Canadian rock were either extinct (the Band), in stages of irrelevance (Neil Young), in cultural exile (Stompin’ Tom), in a separate class of their own (Rush) or rather ridiculous in the first place (Loverboy). There were few young artists creating exciting new music that didn’t sound like it came from somewhere else. Even the Canadian punk pioneers were more or less aping records made in New York City, Los Angeles or London, England.

In London, Ontario, the Demics recorded a single called “(I Wanna Go To) New York City,” which in 1979 summed up the aspirations of most Canadian musicians prior to 1985. “I’m getting pretty tired / and I want to get out / I’m getting pretty angry, man / and it’s no good to shout.” Shouting was about all you could do to retain your sanity above the din of “Snowbird” and “Sometimes When We Touch,” both the epitome of proud cultural touchstones at the time.

Former *Maclean’s* editor Peter C. Newman reflected in 1995: “Back in 1985, Canadians . . . neither proclaimed themselves nor the potential of their country and were happy in their ignorance. They had long before given up asserting their identities or challenging the righteous claw of authority. They remained deferential and blindly obedient to the powers-that-be. They fantasized about being Clark Kent instead of Superman. Treading water became a national sport.”

“What’s Going On Around Here?” the Rheostatics would ask years later, and before 1985 the answer was negligible. As the Max Webster song goes, “You can only drive down Main Street so many times.” And even the main streets of Canada’s biggest cities weren’t wide enough to accommodate the ambition of a new wave of musicians.

Joe “Shithead” Keithley moved from Vancouver to Toronto with his band the Skulls, thinking he was moving to the big time. He soon realized that Toronto wasn’t big enough and moved the band to London, England, before returning to Vancouver within the space of the same year to start D.O.A., which quickly became renowned as one of the premier punk bands in North America. They did this by making connections along the West Coast down to the L.A. and San Francisco scenes, not by cowtowing to the Toronto industry. Similarly, 54·40 didn’t play their first Toronto show until after they signed to a major label.

And why would they? Toronto musicians were fleeing to New York City, including Michael Timmins and Alan Anton of the art-rock band Hunger Project. Says Timmins, “We’d always take road trips down to New York to see a band or something, and it was just *the place*, like the Demics’ song. We were 19, and thought, ‘Let’s just go.’ We rented a place in the East Village at Avenue B and 12th, and all four of us lived there. We hung out, got illegal immigrant jobs to support ourselves. It was fun, an exciting time being in New York and playing in a band. We’d do a monthly gig at CBGB’s on a Wednesday night.”

“Playing CBGB’s seemed like the thing to do,” says Greg Keelor, who moved down there with his musical partner Jim Cuddy around the same time. “It seemed pretty evident that Toronto was going down. New York in the late ’70s was lawless and scary. Plus a lot of our heroes, everybody from Holden Caulfield to Dylan Thomas, walked those streets. It was very romantic and poetic, like all those Leonard Cohen songs.”

Tapping into punk’s DIY ethic, across the country, new original music was being performed — quite literally — underground. Kurt Swinghammer, an artist and musician who started his career in the Niagara region of Ontario, recalls, “We would play basement parties, because there was nowhere else to play. I played once in a club that would book Max Webster or whatever, and the owner of the club actually punched me after the set! He couldn’t deal with anything that wasn’t rock.” Producer Michael Phillip Wojewoda has fond memories of concerts held in suburban rec rooms: “It would be all word of mouth and set up in someone’s basement, and there would be 35–40 people, sitting cross-legged, up the sides of the wall and around the perimeter of the room. At that time it was all ska and mod.”

The club scene was devoted to cover bands — “which now seems like a ridiculous concept to everybody,” says Kevin Kane of the Grapes of Wrath. “Half of our [early] shows were in peeler bars, because they’re the only ones that would let a band who dared play original songs get up on stage. At the time [powerful West Coast booking agency] Feldman’s only had three original acts: Images in Vogue, 54·40 and Grapes of Wrath. Everything else was all Top 40 cover bands. Canadian bands were seen as being watered down versions of what was happening in England and the U.S.”

Gord Sinclair of the Tragically Hip recalls one club they would play in Sarnia, Ontario, where the club owner made each band write out their set list and the artists who originally performed the songs, to ensure no one played original material. Sinclair says, “Original music was Trooper and Prism — those were the groups that would come to town. That was your

perspective on what it was to be an original recording act, and the gap between what they were and what you were was so huge. You never thought you'd be a legitimate recording artist until you got the mega-light show and the tight pants and stuff like that. You never thought you'd get a kick at the can wearing work boots and blue jeans on stage."

MAYBE IT'S JUST NOT GOOD ENOUGH TO GO ON LIKE NOTHING'S CHANGED

MICHAEL TIMMINS EVENTUALLY returned to Toronto after forays in NYC and London, and formed the Cowboy Junkies in 1985. Although his band would go on to sell millions of records worldwide on major labels, in the beginning they had no illusions of success. "In the mid- to late '80s there was a lot of interesting music coming out of Canada, and there was no real industry here; it was very hard to make a living playing music," says Timmins. "People did it because they *had* to do it; it was a real labour of love. To think that anyone was going to be signed to a major label was just insane back then. It just didn't happen, outside of Loverboy world. It had been five to eight years since the punk explosion, which brought a lot of people into the music scene at a very young age. A lot of those people had matured, gained more musicianship and absorbed a lot more influences, and the music from those players was beginning to blossom."

The Cowboy Junkies recorded their first album in their garage, put it out and distributed it themselves, and hit the road all across North America—gaining one fan at a time, and often sleeping on that fan's floor after the gig. It was an attitude culled from years of working DIY in a scene where people were beginning to benefit from each other's accumulated wisdom. People in the underground scene "had been doing it by themselves for years, and they didn't need a major label or anyone else," says Timmins. "They knew how to run a studio, how to tour and how to promote their own records. There were enough independent distributors around, and enough independent record stores, that you could make your way across Canada by contacting enough of those people. Even campus radio, although it wasn't very powerful, was more cohesive than it is now. There was a weird patchwork of independent scenes going on across the country. There was never even a thought of trying to find someone else to help you beyond those in the community."

Much of this approach stemmed from the rise of hardcore punk, a genre of music that by definition was aware that there was zero chance of commercial compromise. Musician Ford Pier, who says seeing NoMeansNo as a teenager was a life-changing experience, and who would tour as a member

of D.O.A. in the '90s, recalls: "The first vintage of punk, everyone was looking for record contracts, even people with the best of political intentions like Gang of Four — they were absolutely interested in being on [television] and having promo shots done and having all of that baggage from the way it had been done since the 1920s. Hardcore represented a wholesale rejection of all of that. The only point was to play the gig that night."

Toronto scene veteran John Borra recalls, "It was truly alternative. It wasn't mainstream. The bands were all alternative in their own way, and the one thing they shared in common was that they didn't sound like Glass Tiger, which left it open; it didn't define it as one type of sound."

In Vancouver, unlike Toronto, there was a very distinct division in the industry, between corporate rock and the underground. Powerful Vancouver manager Bruce Allen — who with his business manager, booking agent Sam Feldman, brought *ВТО*, Trooper and Bryan Adams to stardom — was once quoted as saying, "I happen to know what the public wants, and I try to find artists who fill that need." As a result, the Vancouver punk scene created its own set of rules for people who didn't need Bruce Allen's roster.

"They found their own gigs, and they rented halls," says Vancouver journalist Tom Harrison. "It gave [Vancouver punk] a real sense of purpose and direction. The politics were two-pronged. One is the general 'Society is fucked,' and the other is 'We've got to show the Bruce Allens and Sam Feldmans that we mean business.' Everyone was helping each other because they were all in the same boat."

Vancouver naturally had an "us vs. them" attitude with Toronto. So did most of the country, but Vancouver had enough talented bands to be deservedly snobbish about it. Tom Harrison says, "The universal feeling among the punk and new wave bands was that the Toronto industry was lame. They didn't like the Toronto bands by and large, and didn't trust or have any respect for the industry there. For them there was nothing to be gained by going to Toronto — that came later. So it made more sense to go down the coast."

Bill Baker of Vancouver's Mint Records says, "I found the Toronto music scene to be very industry-driven. The punk bands there all had this thing like, 'Hey, do you know who was at our show?' In Vancouver, I remember going to gigs where you wouldn't even see an *adult* at the show, let alone someone saying, 'Hey, is that the guy from *ВМГ*?' It just didn't happen."

Vancouver also had distinctive bands that had an influence beyond Canadian borders. D.O.A. is credited with establishing the term "hardcore" as it applies to punk; the band's sound can be heard in several generations

of California punk. NoMeansNo didn't and still doesn't sound like anyone else. In some cases, both in Vancouver and beyond, artists were pioneering sounds that would later become lucrative for everyone but themselves. In the mid-'80s, Toronto's Fifth Column was an all-female, political punk band, something unheard of until the Riot Grrrl movement in Olympia, Washington, in the '90s — a movement that would also acknowledge Jean Smith, of Vancouver's Mecca Normal, as a godmother. Edmonton's Jr. Gone Wild were combining hardcore country, punk rock and '60s paisley pop five years before Uncle Tupelo would be hailed in America as pioneers of the "alt-country" movement. In 1985, Vancouver's Slow — the band whose signature song provides this book's title — epitomized many of the elements that would comprise the "grunge" movement of the early '90s. Neil Osborne of 54·40 recalls, "I saw Jane's Addiction after Warner signed them [in 1987], and [a Warner rep] came up to me and said, 'What do you think?' I said, 'These guys aren't the real thing. There's a band in Vancouver called Slow: they're the real thing. This is just an act.' I actually became a really big fan of Jane's Addiction — but after seeing Slow, you couldn't convince me that Jane's Addiction was the real thing."

In 1980, Eric's Trip manager Peter Rowan moved from Fredericton, New Brunswick, to Alberta, where he was amazed at the quality of the local bands, in particular Edmonton's Modern Minds, an early project of the Pursuit of Happiness's Moe Berg. "There was a great music scene out there," says Rowan. "I remember seeing the Modern Minds and realizing that there was awesome Canadian punk rock happening, and thinking that these guys are just as good as the Damned or whatever the flavour was at the time. It made me realize that the music that was happening here independently was on a level with anywhere in the world."

"In the '80s some people emerged that really did have their own voice," says Kevin Kane of the Grapes of Wrath, who recalls buying the 1986 debut album by the Cowboy Junkies "practically the day it came out" on the recommendation of a friend working at Zulu Records in Vancouver. "I was really floored. I was so excited. They were Canadian, and it actually gave me pride. It was a special record, it was unique. [So was] Mary Margaret O'Hara. There were a number of people in the late '80s who had an identity. They had nothing to do with [the mentality of] 'Well, we're just going to sell in Canada.'"

And yet the impression that most Canadian bands were merely mimics still prevailed. Martin Tielli of the Rheostatics suggests that part of the problem is the perception that Canadian bands should be beating the

Americans or British at their own game, instead of being equally as good with a different aesthetic. “People are looking in the wrong place,” muses Tielli. “They’re looking for something that they don’t realize already exists here. There’s something that’s equally as intense as the Velvet Underground, except it’s not going to be that same thing. It’s going to have a completely different face and a completely different expression in almost every way.”

I CAN'T STOP WRITING PUNK ROCK COZ I'M STUCK IN A GHETTO OF FOLKIES

FOLLOWING THE FOLK-ROCK explosion of the '60s—which included pop crossovers like Bruce Cockburn, Ian & Sylvia and Gordon Lightfoot—Canada’s folk tradition retreated into its own insular world, interacting very little with the development of CanRock. Likewise, having an acoustic guitar on stage at a rock club would have you pegged as a hokey folkie. Kurt Swinghammer recalls playing Toronto gigs in the mid-'80s with an acoustic guitar. “People would say, ‘Oh, he’s a folk artist’—even if I had it running through my Big Muff [distortion pedal]. There was such a stigma about folk music at that time, it was so unfashionable. In Toronto, the perception was that you were doing music that was not relevant. It was short-sighted and frustrating.”

By the mid-'80s, maturing punks began to realize the similarities between the folk community and the idealistic side of punk, starting with the DIY and anti-elitist aesthetics inherent in both. Some, like D.O.A.'s Joe “Shithead” Keithley, would suggest a direct lineage between his own bluntly political songwriting and that of folk icons such as Woody Guthrie. “I became aware of Woody Guthrie when I was about 18,” says Keithley, “and I was a Bob Dylan fan in high school. One year Gary Cristal, who used to run the Vancouver Folk Festival, gave me a tape of some songs and said, ‘These songs would really suit you D.O.A. guys.’ This was around 1988, when we were doing an acoustic act called Drunks On Acoustic—ridiculous songs like ‘I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,’ just the worst tripe that we could torture people with. Gary said, why not do something serious? He gave me a tape with Wobblie [International Workers of the World] songs and Utah Phillips.” D.O.A. played punk rock at the Vancouver Folk Festival, and Keithley would later develop his acoustic tendencies in his solo career.

Folk music’s lack of pretension was refreshing after years of the belief that only abrasion could effectively subvert the glossy, bombastic mainstream music scene. It also lent a sense of history and context to the music.

Though rootsier sounds initially seemed out of vogue, some of those bands who embraced their folk heritage have lasted the longest. Jim Cuddy, whose band Blue Rodeo played its first gig in February 1985, muses, "I think we were smart when we started, in choosing a form of music that wasn't youth-oriented or specific. It wasn't about radio trends or subject matter; it was not about the thoughts and feelings of a young person. I don't feel alien from the kind of music I'm doing now, and I'm very different than I was when we started."

Divisions between the folk and rock worlds started collapsing on the folk festival scene, which became much more open-minded during the '80s. Folk's egalitarian nature aligned it with punk idealism, setting both camps apart from the competitive spirit of commercial music. Neo-traditionalists like Spirit of the West and Andrew Cash were demonstrating that acoustic music was no longer singularly dismissed by rock audiences. Folk festivals in Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver began establishing themselves as the pre-eminent festivals in North America, known for juggling musical genres and attracting large audiences of all ages. "There are lots of festivals in the States," says veteran folk promoter Richard Flohil, "but the kind of festivals you have here cross genres happily, and they know that the audience is not that old folkie stereotype. It's not a baby boomer, yuppie thing. There are tons of kids and teenagers, and they go because it's an event."

At a folk festival workshop in 1985 you were most likely to find folkie Willie P. Bennett jamming with other harmonica players. By 1995, you would be just as likely to find Bennett performing after a punk band, or Change of Heart in an ambient dub workshop, or Bob Snider crowd-surfing. At the 25th anniversary of Toronto's Mariposa Folk Festival in 1988, the backstage area was abuzz with the after-hours jam session with Stompin' Tom Connors, the Violent Femmes and the Hard Rock Miners.

YOU CAN COME FROM HERE

ONE OF THE most revolutionary changes wrought by the CanRock renaissance also stems from folk, something so obvious that it seems incredulous that it should even be an issue. But before 1985, Canadian rock acts rarely ever sang specifically about their own country, avoiding place names or other signifiers like a plague.

There are plenty of theories as to why this was. Perhaps bands didn't want to appear "far too Canadian," to borrow a phrase from Spirit of the West, because Canadianisms were the epitome of uncool in a scene that

still pined to be anywhere else but here. For more commercially minded bands, perhaps they made a decision, conscious or not, to make their songs more “universal” and not limit them to Canada. When the Tragically Hip became superstars in Canada and nowhere else, some crippling culture commentators on both sides of the border suggested that the band’s fate was doomed to their own country because of Gord Downie’s choice of subject matter. For a songwriter like John K. Samson, however, “Gord Downie has such a remarkable and original voice, both on the page and in the air. He certainly made a great contribution to songwriters in this land. The Hip made all the difference. There was suddenly less striving, less grasping. People were more comfortable with who they are and where they’re from.”

Of all the prominent Canadian rock musicians to come of age in the ‘60s — if you relegate Gordon Lightfoot, Ian & Sylvia and Leonard Cohen to the folk world — only the Guess Who made a point of “Runnin’ Back to Saskatoon,” although their biggest hit, “American Woman,” was Canadian only as reflected through a negative, by defining Americans as an “other.” Otherwise, Joni Mitchell and Neil Young only slipped into Canadian specifics when they were homesick (as in “River” and “Helpless,” respectively); Robbie Robertson was too wrapped up in American mythology to bother with his native land. British writer Barney Hoskyns, author of a biography of the Band, notes that the first lyrical manifestation of Robertson’s roots was “Acadian Driftwood,” written at the Band’s twilight. “It took Robbie Robertson almost a decade of living in America to write a song about Canada,” Hoskyns writes in *Across the Great Divide*. “Sitting in his Malibu beach house in the summer of 1975, he was writing about his homeland with the same empathy and compassion that had infused ‘The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.’ Canada had finally become as distant and romantic to Robertson as the American South had seemed to him back in 1960.” With this evidence forming Canada’s musical canon, it’s no wonder that it took years to overcome this cultural insecurity in song.

“In Canadian music,” says Kurt Swinghammer, “there was always a sense that if you wanted to be successful, you had to hide the fact that you’re from Canada, which is so stupid. It’s way more accepted now. Maybe that’s just part of the evolution of a culture that’s still young and growing and shaking off some insecurities about where it’s from.”

“I’ve always loved peculiarities and regionalism in stories,” says Joel Plaskett, who was a budding teenage songwriter when he saw Sloan’s second show. There, the band played a song called “Underwhelmed,” which referenced a

girl who tells the narrator to loosen up on his way to the L.C.—a reference to the liquor commission of the province. “You don’t call the liquor store the ‘liquor commission’ in the States or in any other province except Nova Scotia, and I thought that was the coolest thing I’d ever heard. I thought it was beautifully insular, and it totally spoke to me.”

John K. Samson grew up admiring the Prairie pop band the Northern Pikes, both for their early independent success and the way they “crafted really remarkable songs and wrote about small towns and cities in an unpatronizing way.” But it was hearing two artists from Toronto—a city which, Samson admits as a Westerner, he was raised to despise—changed the way he thought about writing locally. “The Rheostatics were a big deal to me,” he says. “They sang about things that I didn’t think people could sing about, while making this beautiful and unique music. They could have been from Austin, Texas, as far as I’m concerned: Toronto was so far away for me; it was a foreign land. And hearing Ron Hawkins of Lowest of the Low sing about the Carlaw Bridge [in Toronto] or places that I’d never been to certainly reinforced the idea that I could write about the places that I was from, that it wasn’t unrealistic or a stupid idea. There were writers here [in Winnipeg] at the time who were enforcing the same thing, but mostly they were poets and fiction writers. Those Toronto people reinforced that it could be done in a musical way.”

Tom Wilson of Junkhouse and Blackie & the Rodeo Kings welcomed the change. “People like Blue Rodeo and Gord Downie have been embraced in such a huge way,” says Wilson, “that suddenly you didn’t have to be singing about the Mississippi River or have a poncey British accent to get your point across. You could sing about Lake Ontario or wheat kings or do what the Rheostatics do so fabulously well. That became really important to a generation of listeners. In the early ‘90s, it was a rediscovery. It’s all there: we should stop being so British and asking what our identity is, stop worrying about how many books or records or movies we sell in the States, and be happy with who we are.”

John Critchley of 13 Engines says, “We were proud to be from Canada and we definitely had Canadian influences in our music, as well as others from around the world. I’m proud of where I’m from and I’ve written songs about where I’m from. But I don’t think music and politics should be confused. You should be proud of where you’re from and write about what you know.” But, he adds, sometimes doing so runs the risk of jingoism.

From the Neil/Joni generation, however, there was one artist who saw the state of Canadian song to be in such dire straits that an accusation of

jingoism would never have occurred to him in his quest to mythologize his native land in the most obvious fashion possible. He's also a role model for travelling bands and independent recording artists across the land, yet he is usually deemed too hokey and uncool to be written into histories of Canadian music. He is Stompin' Tom Connors.

THE SINGER IS THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

BY 1978, STOMPIN' Tom Connors had been recording for over 10 years, and performing for about 20. He had sold thousands of his records off the stage and through stores, released on his own Boot Records label. He had played practically every hamlet in Canada and filled arenas coast to coast. He had won six Juno awards and was celebrated as a national treasure by the CBC and print media. But he couldn't seem to win any respect from the music industry, and country radio in particular. Frustrated by what he saw as a bleak situation for himself—and by extension any Canadian artist who chose to remain in Canada and openly challenge the industry's dismissive attitude toward homegrown acts—Stompin' Tom packed his Junos in a box, sent them back and retired from the industry.

"Tom is despised by the country industry, and he despises them; it's quite mutual," says Richard Flohil. "I wish it didn't happen, but it does. Tom started in the very late '60s, and his impact was incredible. He was doing something that was relatively rare, but radio wouldn't touch it. Especially now, a Stompin' Tom song sticks out of a music mix like a chainsaw on a manicured lawn."

Connors' recordings are indeed lo-fi and primitive, and his voice descends from Hank Williams' nasal twang. These traits, combined with a blunt earnestness that isn't necessarily an asset in the music industry, distanced Connors from the country establishment. During Connors' prime period, country was shifting away from its rural roots and into "countrypolitan" (string-drenched country-pop) and later the "urban cowboy" trend. Stompin' Tom reminded the new-school country folk what the music used to be like, and they didn't want to hear it. For Canadians who wanted to be seen as hip and worldly, he reminded them of what Canada was, rather than what they hoped it to be.

But although rooted in the past, Stompin' Tom did have a vision for Canada's future. He was mystified by this country's cultural denial of its own heritage, and dreamed of a day when Canadian artists were warmly embraced by their own people and their domestic music industry. He also felt it was imperative that Canadians have songs they could call their own, songs that

celebrated the people, places and legends he had encountered while touring the country extensively. That's why his first album, 1967's *The Northland's Own*, includes the titles "Sudbury Saturday Night," "The Flying C.P.R." and "Streets of Toronto," and why every album he's ever released is dominated by songs about Canada. For the most part, Connors writes whimsical and comical portraits of characters like "Bud the Spud," "Big Joe Mufferaw" and the rag-tag crew of Maritimers in "To It and At It." He's also been guilty of writing ridiculously simple songs like "CA-NA-DA" and "Name the Capitals," which function much more effectively as children's music than they do as country songs. But at the core of all his work is the heart of a historian who wants to put Canadians in touch with their past and with each other, and on songs like "No Canadian Dream" and "The Singer (The Voice of the People)" he articulates his mission with an eloquence worthy of any poet laureate.

The ballad of Stompin' Tom Connors is a fascinating one, not to mention a long one — his autobiography spans two volumes and over 1,100 pages. In it, he cites an essay he submitted to newspaper editorial boards across the country on the occasion of his 1978 retirement: "What an impossible situation we leave our young Canadian talent to face. We ask him to be proud of his country and give him no reason to be. When he writes or sings songs about Canada he's considered 'hokey' and laughed at. When he sings songs like the Americans do, he's considered a copycat. And who wants to buy or hear songs that are sung by a copycat when the real thing can be obtained directly from the Americans themselves? That's why our talent goes nowhere — except maybe south."

In 1985, the young Etobicoke, Ontario, student rock journalist Dave Bidini, who in his spare time played with his high school friends in the Rheostatics, travelled to Ireland to study literature at Trinity College in Dublin. Shortly before his trip, he had stumbled across an old Stompin' Tom album on vinyl, and put it on a tape with excerpts from Bob Dylan and the Band's *The Basement Tapes*. "I remember listening to it like crazy while I was abroad," recalls Bidini, "because I didn't know how to articulate and understand the place I came from to others, but I understood that by listening to his music. I learned that the people in Ireland loved Irish music. And not only did they love it, but they would tell anyone who would listen that it was the best fucking music in the world — which was not the case here, because people in Canada didn't like Canadian music, particularly. When I was over there and people would ask me about Canada, I didn't really know stuff so I played them Stompin' Tom."



Stompin' Tom Connors · PHOTO COURTESY EMI AND CHARTATTACK.COM

In his memoir *On a Cold Road*, Bidini writes, “Tom’s voice drew me back across the ocean, and the songs about bobcats and Wilf Carter that I’d once been embarrassed to listen to anchored my identity in a culture where nationhood was everything. They taught me who I was and where I came from. . . . *My Stompin’ Grounds* had conjured up a panoramic winterland of railways and folk music and taverns and hockey rinks that was as unlike suburban Etobicoke as Europe had been.”

When he returned, Bidini embarked on a search to find Stompin’ Tom. Boot Records was still functioning, and the receptionist fielded several calls a day from people asking where Tom was and if they could book him into their community hall or arena. Bidini wasn’t the only one on the hunt for Stompin’ Tom. Peter Gzowski, host of the immensely popular CBC radio show *Morningside*, had been broadcasting annual pleas to bring Tom out of hiding. But Bidini made a point of being persistent, and one day in 1986 the receptionist let it slip that Tom was celebrating his 50th birthday party in Ballinafad, a town between Guelph and Toronto where he resided. Bidini

and his Rheostatic bandmate Tim Vesely went out to crash the party and present a petition begging him to return.

Connors recalls in his autobiography: “At one point in the evening, someone came up to me with a message saying that there was some kind of newspaper reporter outside who wanted to see me. As I went outside with the intention of telling him to get lost, I found that he was very cordial and down to earth, so I told him that he and a couple of his friends were welcome to come in and have a couple of beers, as long as he left his camera in the car. Once I saw they had taken a seat and weren’t bothering anybody, I went over and sat down and gave the guy an interview. He asked a lot of the kinds of questions that told me he was not just trying to get a story, but was also somewhat of a fan. He had also been trying to contact me for some time. I’m not sure how long he stayed or when he left the party, but I later became a fan of his and took [my wife] Lena to see his band a couple of times in future years. This was Dave Bidini, leader of the great band called the Rheostatics.”

Bidini penned a full-page article in the Toronto monthly underground music magazine *Nerve*, discussing Tom’s rebellious history, Bidini’s search for the lost legend, and why Canadians will be listening to Stompin’ Tom for much longer than Cats Can Fly. The whole adventure inspired Bidini’s band to be more consciously Canadian in their songwriting and presentation; this put the Rheostatics at the vanguard of many of the profound changes of the CanRock Renaissance. “Obviously that experience had a huge, profound impact on us playing the kind of music that we played,” says Bidini. “That imbued the nationalism, had a huge impact on us being a Canadian band, and made us want to carry the torch.”

Shortly after the *Nerve* article ran, Bidini received a call from Deane Cameron, who worked at Capitol-EMI, asking Bidini where he could find Connors. Bidini declined to tell him. Cameron responded, “Well, I respect that, but if I ever find Tom I’m going to sign him to Capitol Records.” A few years later, he did. In 1988, Connors emerged to record his first new album in 12 years, *Fiddle and Song*, and was convinced to sign to EMI Canada by Cameron, who by this point was president of the company. A compilation of Connors’ greatest hits, *A Proud Canadian*, was released in 1990 and went gold that November and platinum four years later, proving that Connors wasn’t an irrelevant relic.

“But I still didn’t know if Tom ever read my article or knew who I was, necessarily,” says Bidini. “Tim [Vesely] and I went to see him at Massey Hall on his comeback tour, and there was a party at the [ritzy jazz club] Top of the Senator later. Tom was there, and all these record industry-type people,

and I thought, 'It's gone all wrong, it wasn't supposed to be this way.' We were at one end of the bar, and then everybody cleared out except Tim and I, really drunk, and Tom and his entourage. And then as we were leaving, I went to Tom just to say thanks for the party, or whatever. He looked me straight in the eye and he said"—Bidini adopts a gruff Maritime accent for emphasis—"Bidini! I've had to take a lot of shit from you over the years! Then he got up and called me a true blue Canadian patriot and gave me a big hug, and it was a really beautiful thing. As it turns out, Deane had shown him the article and said that's what made [Deane] want to go and get [Tom] back in the music business. Tom read it and was deeply moved, and thought, 'You know, if the kids are okay, there's somebody out there for me to play to.'"

By the time Stompin' Tom performed his comeback tour, the Rheostatics had made *Melville*, an album rife with references to Saskatchewan, Alberta, northern wishes, Canadian winters and the Guess Who, and includes a cover of Gordon Lightfoot's "Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." And the poet laureate of the next generation, the Tragically Hip's Gord Downie, had begun to sing songs about Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson and namecheck Canadian places and politics.

Downie admits, however, that he did so tentatively. "That feeling was in the infancy of its articulation," he says. "I didn't think I had total permission yet. I started realizing you *could* sing about Canada and about where you're from. I'd always wanted to do it, but never could figure out how. It's really weird, because it seems like it should be so easy. But back then it wasn't for me. And it was the Rheostatics that made me think I could, specifically the song 'Saskatchewan,' which is pretty darn beautiful."

Just as the Rheostatics took Stompin' Tom as inspiration and not a direct model, many writers began incorporating Canada into their writing in their own unique way, whether it was Bob Wiseman's political songs ("Gabriel Dumont Blues"), Daniel Lanois celebrating Wasaga Beach on the first of July ("Lotta Love to Give") or Change of Heart singing about "what the last Sloan record meant to me" ("Halifax Facial"). Canadian visuals were also embraced, whether it was Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet using a postcard of Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square on their debut album cover, or Circle C re-interpreting the Canadian flag as their logo. In most cases, the artist wasn't consciously tackling Canadian subjects or trying to write a nationalist song, but simply doing what came naturally and with a new sense of confidence—like Canada's first hip-hop star, Maestro Fresh Wes, who, among other regional references, once rapped: "Because I'm from Canada / Don't think I'm an amateur."

BEHIND THE GARAGE

BEFORE 1985, CANADA didn't boast many young superstars, let alone sexy ones. Charismatic figures like Carole Pope may have been overtly sexual, but she wasn't a pin-up idol — and nor, for that matter, were multi-platinum artists like Loverboy and April Wine. "Canada used to have a stigma over producing a lot of really ugly bands," says Moe Berg of the Pursuit of Happiness. "There weren't a lot of Canadian heartthobs until probably Corey Hart and that was pretty late in the game. [In the late '90s] we've got people like Moist and Our Lady Peace and Edwin who have very attractive images, and a lot of the female artists in Canada are very attractive. That wasn't the case back in the days of BTO."

That all changed when Bryan Adams and Corey Hart became teen sensations in 1984; within a year, Adams' *Reckless* album would become the first Canadian album to be certified diamond (1,000,000 copies), with Hart's *Boy in the Box* close behind. Ten years later, Alanis Morissette would be the first Canadian to go double diamond. While Adams and Hart didn't leave any worthy musical legacy beyond a couple of enduring singles, they had a definite impact on the cult of Canadian celebrity — previously a bit of an oxymoron — and created a genuine excitement for Canadian music. After that, for every Platinum Blonde or Mitsou, there were also teenage screams for the Grapes of Wrath or Sloan. Youth no longer felt like they were watching a Heritage Minute when they went to Sam the Record Man and bought an album by a Canadian artist.

The dismal status of Canadian celebrity circa 1985 was clearly evident for the supergroup known as Northern Lights. When Ethiopian famine captured the world's attention in 1984, British rock singer Bob Geldof rallied his country's leading musical lights to record "Do They Know It's Christmas?," a benefit single for famine relief. In Canada, manager Bruce Allen helped co-ordinate the Canadian equivalent, which became a bestselling single. "Tears Are Not Enough" featured much of the old guard like Neil Young, Bruce Cockburn and Gordon Lightfoot, as well as newer pop stars the Spoons, Platinum Blonde and Luba. There were a few glimpses of the future, like Jane Siberry, who got a chance to meet one of her idols, Joni Mitchell. But to pad the celebrity quotient, the all-star choir also featured musicians not noted for their singing ability, like Liona Boyd and Paul Shaffer. Even worse, representatives were added from Canada's primary cultural export — comedy — such as John Candy, Alan Thicke and Robin Duke. One can't argue with the earnest song, the spirit of intergenerational and cross-Canadian camaraderie

and charity. But artistically, was this song really what Canadian music was all about?

The Northern Lights single was produced by David Foster, a Vancouver keyboardist who cut his teeth playing barrooms with Ronnie Hawkins, but who came to epitomize glossy yuppie easy-listening schlock in the '80s via his work with Chicago and Céline Dion. There is an infamous scene in the CBC documentary of the Northern Lights session, where Foster, the perfectionist, tries to tell Neil Young that his performance was good but that his voice was a bit flat. "That's my style, man," counters a sardonic Young.

Foster's production work, like that of fellow Vancouverites Bruce Fairbairn (Trooper, Aerosmith) and the later work of Bob Rock (Mötley Crüe, Metallica), was tailor-made for the digital era of the '80s, glossing over any imperfections that might exist in a natural performance. While Foster became a radio darling by following in the footsteps of polite Canadian easy-listening icons like Frank Mills and Hagood Hardy, the Neil Young production ethic was becoming prevalent in the underground. The thriving garage rock scene, led by Montreal's Og Records, helped lower any hi-fidelity expectations for new fans of underground music. By the early '90s, bands like Eric's Trip and the Inbreds were recording classic works in their basements (*Love Tara* and *Hilario*, respectively). With their single "Wake Me" and subsequent album *Fluke*, the Toronto band Rusty made a major breakthrough on rock radio with a demo recording so far removed from standard sonic quality that it would give David Foster nightmares.

For those who wanted to record a step up from the basement, higher fidelity technology also became much more accessible—read: cheaper—for independent artists to make quality recordings on par with major-label fare. This is a key reason why many more Canadian bands were able to break through in the always-competitive music industry during this particular time period. It will never be known how many earlier mindblowing, unrecorded Canadian bands could have instigated the events detailed in this book if they had cheaper access to recording technology.

"There was always a lot of great music going on," says musician and producer Lewis Melville, "but there wasn't the means to capture it or make it affordable. So people who didn't have money or the record industry [behind them] couldn't afford to take a chance on it because it wasn't popular, so it didn't achieve an audience." Melville argues that many of the perceived shifts that took place during the CanRock Renaissance happened merely because technology was there to capture them. "The music was always there, but this [renaissance] emerged from that period in

technology, more so than from any changes in Canadian music," says Melville. "There's the recorded music of a lot of bands that you heard through the '60s and '70s, and then there was what they did at their live shows. What you put on your record is a sample of what you do live: a lot of bands would contrive a little pop song for their record, and their live shows were completely over the top. There was always a lot of music that was experimental and Canadian that was going on, but it didn't make it onto radio. The only place you ever heard it was live. Nobody was there with a tape recorder. You had to be there."

One of the most important Canadian exports from this time was Hamilton producer Daniel Lanois, whose approach to recording not only influenced his major international clients like U2 and Bob Dylan, but trickled down to upcoming Canadian artists like the Tragically Hip and Blue Rodeo, who would work with his protégés. Blue Rodeo's Greg Keelor recalls meeting Lanois on a drive back to Toronto from Hamilton, where Keelor's side project Crash Vegas was working with Lanois understudy Malcolm Burn. Keelor had just finished recording Blue Rodeo's first album with Rush's producer, and Lanois opened his eyes to alternative methods of recording; Keelor would take his advice to create Blue Rodeo's most beloved albums, *Diamond Mine* and *Five Days in July*.

"It was a very enlightening conversation, just asking him about his philosophy on making records," says Keelor. "He very coherently and succinctly debunked the whole record company/studio thing. He said, 'You could put a studio in your living room!' I was pretty naïve about recording and didn't know the first thing about engineering. I always accepted whatever the engineer said in any studio I was in, and especially producers. They were the principals and the teachers. When I first started working at [Burn's studio], I thought, 'This is a joke! What, this little board and that little machine? Where's all the stuff?' Dan said, 'You don't need any of that stuff.'"

Some bands required even less. Vancouver's "cuddle-core" band Cub became an indie success story, selling 50,000 copies of their three albums through the then-fledgling Mint Records. Their 1993 lo-fi debut album *Betti-Cola* was recorded shortly after the three women in the band learned their instruments. "*Betti-Cola* was done in several different shifts," explains Mint's Bill Baker. "Most of it was recorded in a guy's basement, with a DAT machine and a couple of microphones. Some stuff was done in Olympia [Washington] for free, and some stuff was done for the CBC. The entire first album, technically, cost us \$75 to record. But it's not like you listen to it and say, 'I can't believe it!' Instead, you listen and say, 'Oh yeah,

I can believe it.” The album’s artwork, designed by original *Archie* comic artist Don DeCarlo, cost \$500 — over six times as much as the recording.

What Cub lacked in high fidelity and instrumental skill, they made up for with charm and an affinity for catchy bubblegum melodies. Their endearingly primitive approach gained them legions of loyal fans, including Jello Biafra and Kurt Cobain. It also rubbed classic rock audiences the wrong way. Baker remembers a vocal backlash against Cub from a fringe contingent of frustrated musicians.

“We’d get letters from people who had spent 10 years learning to play awesome guitar and never got a break, because they didn’t have that intangible x-factor that makes you talented, rather than just skilled,” says Baker. “Then when you get people like Cub with talent but no skill making it, these guys would be saying, ‘This is fucking shit. This shouldn’t be on the radio.’ They were very resentful, and it was probably salt in their wounds when our press release would read: ‘And they just picked up their instruments!’



Cub (l-r) Robynn Iwata, Lisa Marr, Lisa G. · PHOTO COURTESY MINT RECORDS AND CHARTATTACK.COM

They don't even know how to play!' Cub were the very essence of what punk was, which was people who can't really play just doing it, and not doing it the same way other people do it. Cub didn't sound like Rancid, but in terms of the ideas behind it and the way it happened, it was very punk."

Some would argue that, for a certain generation, working within limited means was as Canadian as your favourite CBC-TV show. "We all grew up with *Don Messer's Jubilee* and *The Tommy Hunter Show* and Wayne and Shuster," says Don Pyle of Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet, "things that were so distinctly Canadian and felt so corny but also normal. Our sensibility was informed by this discount presentation of what our culture was. If there's something that's distinctly Canadian, it's that it's low budget."

UP AND RUNNING

THE MATURATION OF the Canadian music industry was in full swing by the mid-'80s. The first generation of Canadian stars had to leave the country because there were literally no recording studios in Canada; the second generation benefited from the introduction of Canadian content regulations, or CanCon, imposed on Canadian radio by the CRTC (Canadian Radio and Television Commission); by the '80s, the children of CanCon had finally taken flight.

On January 18, 1971, federal legislation was passed that mandated that all radio stations must play a minimum of 30 per cent Canadian content. To foreigners, particularly Americans, this still seems like a ludicrous notion — and even more so today as the CRTC finds it impossible to apply the same concept to the Internet. Yet one must understand the level of cultural denial that existed in Canada at the time and, albeit to a lesser degree, still does today. The legislation was lampooned by the business community, which saw Canadian culture as shabby, sloppy crap that could only survive with such "extreme" measures of support.

Radio executives thought that allowing more Canadian music on the air would crush the commercial aspirations of broadcasters across the nation. Testifying before the CRTC hearings on the matter in 1970, one executive had this to say: "It is our belief that the implementation of the new proposals will raise the cost of broadcasting to the advertiser, lower the attractiveness of the stations to the listeners and thereby, for both these reasons, raise the cost per listener to the point where many stations will cease to be competitive in the advertising market and their incomes will drop significantly."

At the same hearings, Toronto rock critic Ritchie Yorke took the stand in defense of the cultural nationalists. "Any broadcaster who played

'Yummy Yummy Yummy (I've Got Love in My Tummy),' that memorable hit by [American band] the Ohio Express, should never get himself involved in a discussion on quality," Yorke fumed. "Radio management is just too damn lazy to audition new records. It is easier just to play the Top 40 off the lists sent out by the American music magazines. Create the demand and the supply will be there."

When the legislation became law, CRTC chair Pierre Juneau — whom the Junos are named after — made a prophetic statement that sums up many of the events encapsulated in this book: "The prophets of doom, the messengers of mediocrity will be overwhelmed by the new generation of competent, creative, confident artisans and by all those of the preceding generations who have already demonstrated their freshness of mind, their talent and their capacity for inspired leadership."

"I'm so into CanCon," says Mint Records' Bill Baker. "There's different ways it works. There's lots of stuff that maybe gets elevated to levels it doesn't deserve to be at. But if it wasn't happening, it would just be the same stuff coming in from outside. People say, 'Oh, of course you love CanCon, because how else would that shit that you put out get played?' I've had that comment more than once. But we do live next door to an incredibly powerful country that controls every kind of media there is. Some people think we can take CanCon regulations away because we're up to speed, but I don't think so."

Corporate rocker Bryan Adams thought differently, and came out swinging in a 1994 interview. "I think it's a hugely mediocre system and should be abolished. Taxpayers should wake up and realize how much money they're wasting," raged Adams, not aware that it doesn't actually cost taxpayers anything. "It's up to artists and songwriters and producers to come up with the best they can. I don't think they should be under the wing of any government protection agency. You either have good product or you don't, and you should be in the open market like everybody else. I think it's good that Quebec has some sort of regulations so they can protect their culture, but I don't see why the rest of Canada needs it. People should be on their own. No one has ever played me just because I was Canadian."

"A lot of people hate CanCon, but it certainly helped," says 13 Engines' John Critchley. "The weirdest misconception people have of CanCon is they always think a radio station has to play a minimum [30 per cent] of Canadian music. What they don't realize is that even [now], that's a maximum: [the programmers] fill that and then they shut the door. They've done their duty, and even if there's 10 more great Canadian records, they

won't play them until they turf one of the ones they have in their CanCon folder. It's important for people to understand that, because if that went away, radio stations just wouldn't play Canadian music, unless it came from America or England."

"You can be hugely successful in Canada, but people still want to know what's going on in America," says Kim Deschamps, a multi-instrumentalist who travelled the world with the Cowboy Junkies and travelled Canada with Blue Rodeo. "Historically, in the era of Neil and Joni, there was no industry here. There was no possibility of making a living, and they all followed the Lightfoot example: release in the U.S., become a force down there, and then the Canadian public will take you seriously. That's less the case now, but it's still a factor. For some reason, Canadian listeners — and especially the industry people — want that validation, that approval from abroad, and especially from the south. Younger people I talk to in audiences and kids who are starting bands are less concerned about that. They're really encouraged by the fact that bands like Blue Rodeo can have a career in Canada and don't need an American career to make a living, to produce work that they're happy with, and to keep going year after year. That is a really big deal to a lot of young players."

By 1995, the Canadian music industry had matured to the point that interesting, innovative works were constantly being released by emerging artists from every region of the country. Some even got played on mainstream radio. And whereas 10 years prior a major label deal would have been the only way for them to be heard, there was now a variety of outlets to help an artist find an audience. Dozens of Canadian albums were certified platinum or better every year, and not all of them fit into the hegemony of what global rock music was supposed to sound like. Uniquely Canadian songwriting was not subject to mockery or ghettoized to the folk scene. No longer did all-Canadian festival line-ups appear to be patronizing nationalist boosterism. While all these things may be taken for granted now, that's just proof that compared to the dire straits of the Canadian music industry before 1985, since the CanRock Renaissance began to blossom we have not been the same.