

Reviews

Recordings

Bob Bossin. *The Roses on Annie's Table*. Nick 11. 2455 Islandsview, Gabriola Island, B.C. V0R 1X0; <bob@bossin.com>; <www.bossin.com>

Bob Bossin's new disc continues his chronicling of contemporary Canadiana, focusing on various sorts of outsiders. Some songs present portraits of musical situations, from the influences of various figures, often Yanks, to the excitement of the crowds at BC's Commodore Ballroom in the sixties and seventies; others deal with the lives and situations of individuals, real, imaginary, and apparently sometimes autobiographical. (I especially dug the twist on the down-and-outer tale in "Nanaimo" – I'll say no more about it, because I don't want to wreck the surprise.)

This outing begins with a reprise/rewrite of "Steamboat Whistle Blues", in tribute to John Hartford (without whom, Bossin sings, "Daddy never would have been a ballplayer"). Lyrics and arrangement have been altered, but given that Vassar Clements (Hartford's fiddler) has also recently died, a line or two from the original quoted by Ben Mink is especially welcome.

There's no space here, nor do I have the energy this cold morning, to explore the paradox that a singer who continues to blazon his work "Thoroughly Canadian" apparently began and continues under the tutorial influence of an American songwriter. Surely the slogan itself was always ironic. On this disc, he's appended to it (some six inches down) "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances". It would be interesting to know which circumstances he had in mind.

Bossin's records always provide much to think about, and I doubt that he could ever make one I wouldn't enjoy listening to. (He plays similes as only a bright old head can do: "Love comes back like a tomatcat rubbing against your skin," from "Shirley Ann.")

The highlight of the record for me is actually not one of Bossin's, but Kim Barlow's "Gingerbread", sung by Bossin's daughter Madelyn (whose voice, I seem to remember, then just gurgles, also appeared on Daddy's last album), with some assistance from Bossin and younger brother Davy (who seems to take great delight in his one line: "I almost whacked you with an ax!"). Madelyn's now-nearly-teenaged

breathiness conveys the not-quite-convinced bravado of "We're not lost in these woods; we're exploring," and adds a humorous frisson to her explanation, "I was entranced by fairies; they feed me very well; the parties are wild." Bob Bossin's offspring presumably knows something about wild parties. Yes, the song is a revision of "Hansel and Gretel", but there's no real witch, only ignorant children confronting each other in a darkling forest: "There are no breadcrumbs here; we can't go back the way we came."

Someone during the sixties, probably in *Sing Out!*, reacted to Phil Ochs' song "There But For Fortune" ("Show me the country where the bombs had to fall / Show me the ruins of the buildings once so tall, / And I'll show you a young land with many reasons why / There but for fortune go you or I.") with the dry remark: "Glad it's in fortune's hands, not mine. I might have to do something about it." Like Ochs, Bossin is nothing if not a politically-focused songwriter, and that reviewer's caveat suggests a central paradox in this collection. God as trickster enters three of the Bossin-penned songs here. (Only seven of the thirteen items are Bossin's, so that's almost half of his contributions.) Typical is a line from "Lily": "Sometimes I think God walks around heaven, thinking up tricks to play." Curve balls appear to be in his mind because of the vagaries of his own life, but the personal is never far from the political. If God or Fortune is pitching curve balls, what are you and I responsible for?

The central, eponymous selection juxtaposes Bossin's musings on comments by David Suzuki about ecological catastrophe with the roses of the title. I'm not entirely sure what he's getting at – is he observing that we let the pleasures and concerns of daily life get in the way of the larger view? or that global fixes must occur within a local, physical and emotional context? Whatever he's saying, it seems to me that it was a mistake to climax with Matthew Arnold's final lines from "Dover Beach". Bossin's song is structured in Socratic fashion: the speaker attends a Suzuki lecture with his kid (that's no surprise on this CD), and Suzuki, who eventually looks Bossin in the eye, makes points to which Bossin reacts. Ultimately, when Suzuki raises the spectre of rising seas that could wipe out most of the major cities in the world, Bossin declares, "I say we are here...", but it's Arnold talking. What does Bossin himself actually say? It doesn't help that "Dover Beach" is such a hoary literary chestnut (one of my favorite poems, yes) that it's almost like an intellectual apple-pie/mom citation.

A line from "Shirley Ann" might be said to sum up Bossin's feelings about catastrophe, personal and

global: "Maybe there can be no true love, but maybe there can." Does that leave things in the hands of Fortune (or "God," as the proverb originally ran)? Perhaps, but consider the singer's admission from "Bob's Carol", in which he says he'd like to write a Christmas song that everyone would sing: "I'd probably fuck it up somehow." It sounds to me as if Bossin has reached a fairly existentialist response – the contingencies of life (including our own ineptitudes) do not make individual responsibility less necessary. If we have fucked up, that's not God, that's us.

Would Bossin agree with that summary? I don't know, and perhaps it doesn't matter. Bossin's records usually make me laugh, tap my foot, and think. What else is music for?

George Lyon, Calgary, Alberta

Steve Coffey and The Lokels. *East of East Coulee*. SCOF20651. ***32 Below Sessions*.** SCOF 20988. P.O. Box 23180, Connaught P.O., 1708 4th St. SW, Calgary, AB. T2S 3B1; <coffeyb@telusplanet.net>; <www.steve-coffey.com>

I first came across Steve Coffey a few years ago at the Calgary folk festival. I heard old-timey music coming from a distant stage, raced over to it, and sat entranced for the next hour. The band, presumably The Lokels, was cooking, and the music was a mix of country rock and an older style that sounded like a cross between Bob Wills and Clarence Ashley. There is a similar mixture of styles on these two CDs. The earlier one, *East of East Coulee*, was apparently recorded in 2002 in an old house outside the village of East Coulee, near Drumheller in southern Alberta, while *32 Below Sessions*, which dates from 2004 and may constitute a record of the band's return to the same rural location, also was recorded live to tape. These details are relevant, because this music has a liveliness and spontaneity that is often absent from more carefully crafted studio performances, and because what Steve Coffey does best is to capture in his songs the sights, sounds and feel of southern Alberta. Not Calgary, where he lives now, but the rural Alberta where he grew up.

I was enchanted by some tracks on these CDs but rather disappointed by others. They do vary stylistically, and some might best be described as older-style commercial country & western, with a fairly heavy dosage of steel guitar. Some hail back stylistically to the thirties, especially when the electric guitars are replaced by acoustic ones. A few, using banjo and harmonica, have a folkier feel.

So what are the highlights of these recordings? On *East of East Coulee* I'd single out two tracks, both of which have pretty tunes and evocative lyrics: "Romance River" and "Valley of Wildflower". Steve Coffey is a painter as well as a writer/musician, and these songs capture in words his love for the southern Alberta landscape. I don't know the exact location of the places evoked in these songs, but they sure make me want to go and find them. Also of special interest on this CD is the last cut, the only one not performed by Steve and his band. "Face in the Steel" is an amateur recording of a song written by Steve's mother Lorraine, as performed by Steve's father, the late Bill Coffey (on steel guitar), and vocalist Tommy Jones, while touring in Germany in 1962 as members of the K-Z Rhythm Wranglers. It reveals a lot about the roots of Steve's own music. He is definitely in the Bob Wills tradition.

32 Below Sessions uses percussion more prominently and my favourite track is a country rocker called "Raising Grace", a song that is all about returning to one's roots and learning from the women in the family the things one spurned as a youth. "Cottonwood Road" is another good one, a portrait in words of a place obviously dear to Steve's heart. On the other hand, there were some songs here that just didn't connect with me, in a country music style that is not my favourite. So I had a mixed reaction to this CD, but don't be put off – Steve Coffey's music is well worth exploring and there is much to enjoy in these two recordings.

I don't know if Steve and the band have stayed together or whether they have recorded a third CD, but I look forward to hearing more from them. At their best they have something unique to offer. And, by the way, Steve's landscape paintings are very good too: the reproduction of one of them on the cover of *East of East Coulee* reminds me of Lawren Harris's work in the 1920s, when he visited western Canada and before he turned to abstract compositions.

Dave Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

High Noon. *The Way It All Began*. Canyon Records CR-6374. 3131 West Clarendon Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona 85017; <www.canyonrecords.com>

If there is a gap in your record collection that you want to fill with some authentic traditional native Canadian pow-wow music, this is the CD for you. High Noon is a group of drummers and singers based on the Thunderchild Reserve in Saskatchewan, and they have won six World Championship titles for their singing and drumming in the original Plains Cree style. Although mainly Cree, the group now includes a few Blackfoot and Tiwa members, and

they sometimes draw upon these other First Nations' musical heritages in addition to their own traditional song, dance and ceremonial music. As a result, many of their performances are classified as "Intertribal", and that is the case with eight of the eleven items on this CD. The others, two pieces titled "Contest Song" and one "Grass Dance", are from Cree tradition. Or so I presume, although I cannot be certain because the sleeve notes on this CD are not very informative.

These performances were recorded live at the 27th Annual Napi Pow-Wow, held at Brocket, Alberta, in January 2004. Unfortunately none of the eleven tracks is given a title (as opposed to a generic descriptor) either in English or in Cree, and no words are provided, so one doesn't know what the songs are about unless one happens to speak Cree. The sound – energetic group vocals that are halfway between singing and shouting, accompanied by insistent drumming – is powerful, very powerful. Indeed, I wouldn't recommend listening to this music with a hangover!

To my (no doubt culturally insensitive) ears, there is a lack of variety in the performances, but that response probably derives from not understanding the subject matter of the songs and from my previous lack of familiarity with this performance style. I used to think all Vivaldi sounds the same, but now I know his music better I realise that that is not true at all. It is probably the same with pow-wow music. Anyway, this CD provides an interesting sample of a traditional native Canadian musical style that I would like to know more about and I anticipate exploring it further in the future. It is regrettable that Canyon Records did not see fit to provide more elaborate sleeve notes, and at 36' 30" the CD provides rather short measure in terms of quantity. Anyone contemplating buying the CD will have to weigh these negatives against the undoubted quality and authenticity of the performances.

Dave Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

Lewis & Royal. *Ampersand*. Rosebud Creek Records LFRS 01. Box 630, Rosebud, AB, T0J 2T0

One of the best things about folk festivals is that out of the blue you discover new artists and new songs that you might otherwise never have come across. Much the same is true of reviewing folk music CDs. I had never heard of Lewis & Royal before John Leeder allocated this one to me, but I'm sure glad he did. Not that I enjoyed everything about this record. Let's start with the negatives. There is one song, "Dear Mother", that I can only describe as pro-life propaganda, and the concluding track, Larry Norman's "The Outlaw", wears its fundamentalist

version of Christianity too much on its sleeve for my liking. The three covers – of "Danny Boy", Christie Moore's "The Voyage" and Eric Bogle's "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda" – are competent but not exceptional. The comic songs ("Putting on the Dog" and "Where Do Cowboys Go When They Die/Reincarnation") are mildly humorous, but I'm likely to skip them next time I play the disc. And some other tracks have thoughtful lyrics, adequate vocals and eminently musical accompaniments, and yet they didn't especially stand out from the crowd. Pleasant enough, but not earth-shattering.

So why am I so happy that serendipity brought this CD to me? Among the eighteen items there are three songs that I really love: "The Drought Song", "Listen to the Sound" and "The River of Many Roses". The music to all three was composed by Royal Sproule and for the first two of them he also wrote the words. The lyric of "The River of Many Roses" is by poet Lucia Frangione, a onetime resident of Rosebud, Alberta. All three songs are rooted in the prairie landscape of eastern Alberta: they evoke the badlands south of Drumheller and the Rosebud river valley that cuts through them. Curiously, Rosebud is quite close to East Coulee, so Sproule's songs are inspired by the same country that Steve Coffey references in his best songs (see the review of *East of East Coulee* and *32 Below Sessions* above). Try to give this CD a listen, especially the first track ("The Drought Song") and "The River of Many Roses". I think you'll agree that this is Albertan contemporary folk music at its best, and that in Royal Sproule we have a major new talent.

Dave Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

No Guff. *They're Red Hot*. HDR20609. John Rutherford, P.O. Box 2031, Sta. M, Calgary, AB. T2P 2M2; <johnnynoguff@yahoo.com>; <www.noguff.ca>

"They're Red Hot", and that's the truth about No Guff, a duo from the Calgary area that blends just about everything to give themselves a strong bluesy, jazzy and old-timey sound.

John Rutherford (vocals, guitar, banjo-ukulele) and Dan Tapanila (guitar, slide guitar) are No Guff. They are a roots duo that not only employs that sound of old-timey/blues/jazz but also has older instruments helping to create the sound. John's vocals are strong, and he can bellow like a true blues man, with Dan backing him up with some of the best guitar riffs that I haven't heard in years. The man can play a slide guitar that will give you goose bumps.

This CD was recorded in Calgary in the spring of 2002. Guests who appear on the project are Craig Korth (banjo), John Hyde (bass) and Derek Stoll (tuba). The CD was mixed by none other than Lester Quitzau, a superb guitarist himself. It consists of twelve songs, nine written by John Rutherford. The remaining three are written by Bob Snider ("Sittin' in the Kitchen"), Robert Johnson ("They're Red Hot") and Willie Dixon ("Spoonful").

This is truly a fine roots project. I wish there was a lot more of this kind of stuff coming out. It is timeless, as most blues/jazz and old-time music is. I am not sure how long it took to prepare the project, but I do know this: they know exactly what they are doing. They have honed a sound that they can call their own... They're Red Hot...No Guff!!!

Terry St. James, Montreal, Quebec

Nothin' But Trouble. *Just a Taste.* #123, 2137 33rd Ave. SW, Calgary, Alta. T2T 1Z7;
<howl_at_the_moon@canada.com>;
<www.nothinbuttrouble.com> (new website address, different from packaging)

It's only a sampler; unfortunately, that's the problem. Once you start listening to this six-track CD, it leaves you wanting more. You are left with no choice but to play it again and again. This foursome really click together, and that is heard quite well. Being a sampler, the CD jacket gives very little information on what you are listening to. Who wrote these songs? Who is playing what and when? It might be somewhat trivial to some, but I kind of like knowing that.

All right, maybe I am dwelling on this too much, so I'll sink my teeth into the music...and it's great! I have no complaints whatsoever on that aspect. Corry Schmelter, Trina Nestibo, Kristen Melvor and Dale Ulan are Nothin' But Trouble. The voices are blended together so beautifully one wishes the wonderful sound would be never-ending. "Howl at The Moon" opens the sampler, with harmonies that bring one to remember groups of the forties like the Andrew Sisters. It's followed by a bluesy song called "Pick Up Truck" that has some awesome saxophone happening. A song about dating...you guessed it: trading a guy in for a pick-up truck. "Pretty Girls" is the third song, a shot at women – at some women, anyway – by a woman. It's more acceptable that way. The song that follows sounds so familiar, or is it just the style? I'm not quite sure. "Baby, It's Late" is a seductive song, sung by a voice just as seductive. What I would do to have that song whispered in my ear! If it doesn't work out, well, I'm sure you might get a half-decent pick-up truck as a trade-in. I really wish I could credit

the writers of these songs, to give credit where credit is due.

"All I Need Is You" is a swing tune, more romantic, a happy song looking for the right guy. The sixth and final song on this sampler is a bit of a cheap shot to the guys. Ah, but we're getting used to it. It's called "I Faked It", and it's all about...well...oops...I'm done. Was it good for you?

I hope this group is still out there bringing smiles to the crowds. This CD is something to have in your collection. So despite the lack of information, I think I faked it quite well...Ha, now we're even!

Terry St. James, Montreal, Quebec

Shelley Posen. *Manna.* WDM02. Well Done Music, 295 First Ave., Ottawa, Ont. K1S 2G7;
<shelley@shelleyposen.com>;
<www.shelleyposen.com>

Nine 'food' songs and five others written by Shelley between 1996 and 2002 comprise the contents of this well-produced album. Shelley takes us into the Yiddish love affair of foods associated with various Jewish holidays. Some of the song titles are indeed mouth-watering, e.g., "The La La Latke Song" (potato pancakes) and "Rogelach" (sweet sour cream pastries). With all the songs written in English, he goes the extra mile and provides a glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms, helping us to further enjoy and savor the music.

And there is lots of music to enjoy – a veritable feast, with masterful playing on thirteen different instruments by his troupe of musicians, each musical grouping reflective of a particular style, be it klezmer, gospel, western or rap. Shelley, a well-respected North American musician, has just the right amount of joy, whimsy, melancholy, etc., needed to add to this soup mix of tunes.

The lyrics for the most part are clean, sharp and mostly clever, set to melodies reminiscent of musical genres. Not all of his songs have a universal age appeal, but various ones would attract listeners in the kids or youth or adult category. Selected lyrics of a few songs were a bit off-putting to me, for example track 3, "Es Gesunt" (the references to Shiva (death) and Kaker (old fart)), and track 10 (the urine reference may work for the author but not for me – the blatancy diminishes the feeling of the song).

A couple of tunes would be ideal to teach to young children, with their Sesame Street exaggerated rhythm and delightful choruses. In particular, track 4, "Light One Candle" (isn't this a Peter, Paul and Mary title?), would lend itself to immediate kids' participation, as well as track 11, "Put the Latkes on to Fry". Track 16, "Ram in the Thicket", with a

gospel music feel, has super lyrics, on the biblical Akeida or sacrifice story, and could have great appeal for teens. The final tune, track 14, "So How Come You don't Have Tongue?", is a delight, with appeal to the over-60 crowd who may have tasted this delicacy in their youth.

I found the glossary awkward to use, being printed alphabetically 'back to front'. However, this is a smart album with a few songs especially useful for Jewish teachers with young students. Some adults and seniors might also really enjoy it.

Rebecca Levant, Calgary, Alberta

Tim Radford. *Home From Home*. FAM08. Fallen Angle Music, 285 Spencer St., Ottawa, Ont. K1Y 2R1; <homefromhome@timradford.com>; <www.timradford.com>

Tim Radford may not be a household name among the majority of North American folkies who appreciate traditional English song and balladry, but give a listen or three to this, his first recording, and that might change in one big hurry. I first met Radford in the summer of 2004 at Folk Music Week at CDSS Pinewoods Camp near Plymouth, Massachusetts, and it did not take long to realize that here was a fellow who knew what to do with a traditional song, and who had a deep and abiding love and respect for the entire panorama of English traditional folk arts, including ritual drama and morris dance traditions, with both of which he has been quite involved for many years.

Originally a native of Hampshire, U.K., Radford came to the U.S. in 1996, and has been a resident of Woods Hole, Mass., ever since. Since the mid-1970s he has taken a particular delight and interest in the traditional songs of his native Hampshire as well as those of Dorset. Or to put it another way, as the CD liner notes so aptly put it, what better for a son of Hampshire from a Hampshire father to take an interest in the songs and ballads found within the heritage and traditions of Hampshire? This is exactly what Radford sets out to do.

Seventeen selections make up this more than creditable recording, and with one or two exceptions, all the songs are traditional and come from either Hampshire or Dorset. Devotees of Child ballads will find three fine examples here: the mysterious and ancient "Three Ravens" (Child 26), the otherworldly "Rolling of the Stones", a version of "The Two Brothers" (Child 49), and the tragic love story "George Collins", a variant of "Lady Alice" (Child 85). In every sense of what it means to be one, Radford is a fine storyteller, for as he has often said, he truly loves the old story-songs and their grand

tales. Many modes and images come to the fore in Radford's songs, from the tragic tale of love, abandonment and death "The Month of January" to renderings of two playfully erotic songs, "The Spotted Cow" and "The Bird in the Bush", to a song detailing the vagaries of fortune that cruel fate may deal to an individual, in "The Broken Down Gentleman". From the amatory fantasy "Maid of Australia" to several pieces of local colour and characterization, "Washing Day" and "Lyminster Round and Round", Radford lets each song tell its own story and paint its own special verbal portrait. Seasons and the eternal turning of life's wheel are portrayed in several selections, including Chris Leslie's beautiful "Winter Man", as well as an evocation of new beginnings in a song entitled "New Year". Two songs which more than coincidentally begin and end the recording, giving what might be called musical symmetry, provide a window into Radford's thoughts and feelings concerning the importance of music and all that it entails. "Come, Come, My Friends" and "Here is My Home" tell us much about the joys of music, good hearts, unity of life and the sorrows of parting, leaving friends behind, and the loss of good and trusted companions.

If Radford is the main catalyst to the success of this recording, the able and talented crew of musicians backing him up only add to the CD's enjoyment. One very special addition is what many consider Canada's finest acoustic trio, Finest Kind, aka Ian Robb, Ann Downey and Shelley Posen. Their excellent harmonies can be heard on "Come, Come, My Friends" and "Here is My Home". We are also treated to many other able back-up musicians, including John Roberts, Chris Leslie, James Stevens, Jeff McClintock and Brian Sanderson, on a variety of instruments, including English and Anglo concertina, fiddle, mandolin, piano and Sousaphone, just to mention a few. Even a familiar piece like "John Barleycorn" is given a fresh treatment, a rollicking rendition sounding much like an English pub version of a German old-time oompah band in a musical eulogy to the wonderful art of drinking and the eternal spirit of good old-fashioned beer. I more than suspect, on the strength of this recording, that Tim Radford is a singer who will be heard from for a very long time to come. If you like English traditional songs sung by someone who knows how to render a fine musical offering, *Home From Home* will remain on your CD player for a very long time. This is one of my favourites of 2005, and will remain so for quite a while.

Robert Rodriguez, New York City

Garnet Rogers. *Shining Thing*. Snow Goose
SGSCD 1131. Valerie Enterprises, Woodburn Road,
R.R.#1,Hannon, Ont. L0R 1P0;
<www.garnetrogers.com>

Dave Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

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Garnet Rogers is well on his way to becoming as much a Canadian icon as his brother Stan, and a few paragraphs are quite insufficient to do justice to the latest work of art from this amazing poet-musician. Obviously anyone who has been collecting Garnet's many CDs will want this one too, and if you happen not to know his work, then this is as good an opportunity as any to sample it.

Suffice it to say that *Shining Thing* is a work of beauty, a lovingly crafted album that has been conceived as a whole and in which certain themes recur in the poems/songs. Garnet is using his writing as a means to come to terms with aging, loss, and mortality, and in the face of these realities of the human condition his message is one of cherishing love, fellowship and beauty while we still have the opportunity of doing so.

This is a mellow, reflective, melodious album, and it is easy to allow the carefully textured sound to wash over you. The guitar playing is excellent, and the arrangements sometimes reminded me of Baroque chamber music or the collaborations of Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer and Mark O'Connor. But if you focus on Garnet's baritone voice, which is closely miked and up-front most of the time, you will hear some very interesting lyrics. Not all of them are endowed with memorable melodies, but they all have something to say, sometimes about love and personal relationships, sometimes about injustice and cruelty in the world, and sometimes about the difficulty of coming to terms with fatality and fate. Not all of them appealed to me on first listening as much as "Twisting in the Wind", "The Waiting" or "Grace", three of the best songs Garnet has ever composed, but I look forward to exploring them all further down the road. Other interesting ones include "So Happy" (about the renewal of a broken friendship with Scottish singer Archie Fisher) and "More Hallowed" (depicting the experience of a World War II veteran who was refused permission to lay a wreath for his fallen comrades at the opening of the Canadian/ French Juno Beach memorial). I also know that I will be replaying with pleasure "Three Small Coats", the one instrumental piece on the album.

Garnet is now a singer-songwriter of international stature, and listening to his most recent work made me want to go back and explore again all his earlier releases. *Shining Thing* is an album to live with, not one to pass judgment on in a few paragraphs and then file away to gather dust.