

## Reviews

### Books

**Bob Hallett.** *Writing Out the Notes: Life in Great Big Sea.* 2010; 171 pp.; ISBN 978-1-897415-33-7; Insomniac Press, 520 Princess Ave., London, Ont. N6B 2B8; [www.insomniacpress.com](http://www.insomniacpress.com)

In addition to being a member of the Newfoundland band Great Big Sea, Bob Hallett is a writer of textbooks, magazine pieces and even a radio documentary. In this slight volume he contributes 25 short pieces on numerous topics, including but not limited to traditional music, Newfoundland music and Great Big Sea itself. However, the subtitle "Life in Great Big Sea" is misleading: reading this book, you'll mostly learn about Bob Hallett himself, his background (including his musical roots) and his thoughts on life in general. Don't pick up this book looking for a detailed history of Great Big Sea; when that book is written, I'm sure *Writing Out the Notes* will be one of its sources—but a minor one.

That said, these are all well-crafted pieces, and well worth the reading. There is material on traditional music and Newfoundland music, valuably from the perspective of someone who came to those fields from a background in rock and punk music. Surprisingly, speaking as a person who stopped listening actively to commercial music around 1962, I learned a lot about Canadian rock bands who were just names to me previously. I might even dig out some old recordings and start brushing up on my Canadian pop music history! Of particular interest to our targeted readers will be pieces on the influence of Ryan's Fancy, the Barra MacNeils, anecdotes from touring in Ireland, the tune "The Maids of Mitchelstown", the song "Jerusalem", and early days with Great Big Sea, among others. Fans of Great Big Sea will of course want to own this book; fans of Canadian music should read it.

*John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta*

**Anne Murray with Michael Posner.** *All of Me.* 2009. 344 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-39844-4. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, a division of Random House of Canada Ltd., 2775 Matheson Blvd. E, Mississauga, Ont. L4W 4P7; [www.randomhouse.ca](http://www.randomhouse.ca)

Every time I read a showbiz autobiography, I thank my lucky stars that I didn't get into showbiz. (Janis Ian's *Society's Child* is a recent harrowing example.) However, Anne Murray's story almost breaks that mold. Either the wholesome girl-next-door image that she has projected over the years is a genuine one, or her co-author has been effective in sticking to the script in depicting her that way. I suspect it's a little of both. For example, the book tells of her extended first tour as a professional singer in a rueful tone, a naïve inexperienced chick singer fronting a band of druggies and boozers, many of whom had to be poured onto the stage every night. On a recent TV interview I heard Anne describe that tour as "the worst time of my life", but little of that comes through in the book.

Other crises in her life, such as her marriage breakdown, are handled in a similarly dispassionate fashion. A reader looking for muckraking won't find it here. A fan will find glimpses of the down-home girl, hobnobbing with stars on one page, catching up with old school chums in Nova Scotia on the next. Folk scene historians will be rewarded with lots of detail on the old Singalong Jubilee days, and tales of Gene MacLellan (author of "Snowbird", her first enduring hit recording). Stargazers will find revealing anecdotes with people like Burt Reynolds, Glen Campbell, Jerry Seinfeld, Doris Day, and countless others. These encounters don't come across as hero(ine) worship, but as genuine friendships (or otherwise) with fellow professionals. This is a bland, unemotional book – but it's still worth a read. Fans will love it, others will learn from it.

*John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta*

## Recordings

**After the Storm. *After the Storm*.** AT5001. Rod Walsh, 10220 Maplegrove Pl. SE, Calgary, Alta. T2J 1S6; [rodwalshmusic@hotmail.com](mailto:rodwalshmusic@hotmail.com) (no other addresses on packaging)

The sound of a recorded accordion with a little bit of reverb will always remind me of skating at the old Miners Forum in Glace Bay, Cape Breton. When I was a kid, we used to go skating as a family. The young people would cruise in and out of the older folks as they skated in pairs. Skating was couple dancing on ice. The accompanying music was often accordion waltzes. The sound warmed up the old wooden rink with its painted and rough wooden seating area that was always just a little too cold, and too rough, on the bottom. The Glace Bay rink was not memorable, and has long since been destroyed to make way for a much better rink. But the new rink just doesn't have the same family vibe that the old place had.

It is just this vibe that the Calgary Folk Club's new house band, *After the Storm*, captures on their new self-titled disc. The group picks up where the long-established folk club house band *The Colonials* left off. This album is steeped in Canadian folk music traditions. From the first track ("Wild Rover") to the last ("The Nellie J. Banks"), the group blends, in a sophisticated weave, a variety of rich threads. English, Irish, Scottish, French and East Coast songs and melodies are woven with a distinctly Western Canadian flair. The harmonies and instrumental doublings are arranged and performed lightly. All of the arrangements are sophisticated without being overbearing or forced. This is not the soundtrack of a nostalgic stage show, even if the unaccredited and unexplained black and white cover art suggests it. It is a respectful and professional performance of folk songs, old and new, played by skilled musicians who know each other and seem to know their audience.

I was particularly moved by two moments on the album. The opening track, "Wild Rover", inspired the opening of this review, and it's something I want to get back to. I'm not a Calgary Folk Club regular. In fact, I've never been there. But listening to this opening track, I have the feeling that I'm missing something. I feel like you may have when reading my opening. I was left feeling that there is an audience participating in this performance, but an audience that wasn't

recorded. Perhaps it is the audience that will bring this disc home as a remembrance of the times they had at the club. And this is an important aspect of folk music. It is the remembrance of the family event that gives folk music its core meaning. Folk music is the very real feeling of being "in" community.

This is suggested musically. The solo section on this version of "Wild Rover" recalls the fabulous tune "Star of the County Down", with all of its wistful nostalgia. I was once again whisked to the ice of the Glace Bay forum. So you see, even for someone who doesn't know the Calgary Folk Club, I suspect that this recording somehow captures some of that energy.

The second moment that I must comment on is the recording and harmonies on "Shoals of Herring". There is something rough and truthful about this recording that stands out. The arrangement recalls the Ottawa-based *Finest Kind*, while at the same time it suggests a *Ryan's-Fancy-on-the-Prairies*. At 3:12, when the group cuts out and it's just voices and accordion for a few bars, the album reaches its emotional climax. The melodic counterpoint between fiddle-accordion with flute on the tune "Rêve de Quéteux Tremblay", on the second half of the arrangement, brings to the surface the great and sophisticated beauty of contemporary Canadian folk music. It isn't just music that once existed and is now occasionally brought out by museum workers and dusted off. It is a living, breathing and changing music. It moves and shifts. It lives in quiet shallows and raging rapids and, much like the Bow River, flows straight through the heart of Calgary.

*Michael B. MacDonald, Edmonton, Alberta*

**Bob Evans. *The Voice in the Grain*.** ATCD002. Acoustic Tonic Music, 129 Douglas Ave. E, Regina, Sask. S4N 1H2; [bob@bobevansguitar.com](mailto:bob@bobevansguitar.com); [www.BobEvansGuitar.com](http://www.BobEvansGuitar.com)

**Dave Clarke. *Guitar Songs*.** CD 1003. 1508 Gladstone Ave., Victoria, B.C. V8R 1S5 (no postal address on packaging); [daveclarke@steelrail.ca](mailto:daveclarke@steelrail.ca); [www.daveclarke.ca](http://www.daveclarke.ca)

**Dave Clarke. *Reunion*.** CROCD1005 (addresses above)

The voice was probably the original musical instrument. That's why we measure instrumentalists by how well they can make their axes sing. I'll use this as the theme for my review of

three CDs by two of Canada's most adept acoustic guitarists. Bob Evans, as his title suggests, wants to find "the voice in the grain", and that's a great metaphor for how the sound of a guitar, and style of the guitarist who plays it, are as unique as the grain in the wood itself. Dave Clarke's title, *Guitar Songs*, implies that his dozen instrumentals aren't tunes or pieces, but belong to the song genre, and I agree. Clarke's follow-up CD, *Reunion*, builds on this by adding vocals to many of the tracks, yet somehow the guitar remains the dominant voice.

*The Voice in the Grain* is Bob Evans's second CD, and it is an eclectic mix. Bluegrass, jazz, rock, blues, ragtime, country, and even film music have a place in Evans's style. Six tracks were composed by Evans, the others come from various sources. The opener, "The Slippery Slope", sets a fast pace and takes us through well-ornamented bluegrass licks, stride accompaniment and a very challenging-sounding, chromatic middle section. Building on this is "Khamenkule", a tune with bluesy bends and some jazzy turns. Evans's rock side comes out in his two Beatles covers, "Yesterday" and "Got to Get You Into My Life", the latter deserving mention because I could hardly have thought of a less likely Beatles song choice for a solo guitar instrumental!

Evans gets really jazzy on his cover of "Christmas Time is Here" by Vince Guaraldi, made famous in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, a gorgeous slow-tempo number. "Dickie's Blues #2" stood out for me with its sharp and spicy chording, and its mix of old-time jazz, ragtime and blues. Another standout is his cover of Mike Nelson's "Cat's Meow", with its bent-note imitation of the feline's voice and the slinky, descending bass that I'm sure is meant to be reminiscent of "Stray Cat Strut". Clever, amusing, and nicely played.

All things considered, Evans teases out several "voices in the grain", namely, the different styles that have left their mark on the guitar. Aside from the styles mentioned, Evans even gives us a bit of flamenco technique on his cover of "Peter Gunn", where rasgueados (extremely fast up-and-down strums) stand in for the original's blaring brass section. Evans's technique is impeccable, with the songs sounding clean and clear, and always imaginatively arranged.

Dave Clarke's *Guitar Songs* also features a dozen solo guitar pieces. While Evans has no qualms about getting jazzy or bluesy, Clarke clearly draws inspiration from the folksong and

its flowing and lilting melodies. The opener, "October Song", has a beautiful, singable melody and a sense of verse and refrain. "Stone House" is one of the more uptempo numbers, not because the melody is fast, but because the accompanying arpeggios give it such movement.

Clarke draws on Celtic folksong on a number of tunes. "Monkstown Road (Waiting for Maria)" has a slow, pentatonic melody with Scotch snaps that is reminiscent of classic Scottish balladry, and "The Parting", described as "a bit of Celtic melancholy", recalls Irish ballads of heartbreak. "The Road Home" starts with an air and ends with a reel. "Flow Like a River", inspired by the St. Lawrence River near his Montreal home, evokes the landscape as eloquently as any song with lyrics.

A few tunes contrast this song-like approach. "Paper Girl" and "Fraser's Falls" are rollicking bluegrass guitar workouts, and "Deep Blue Dreams" features some jazzier chords and licks. One of my favourites, "The Quest", is a nice minor-key mood setter, with some bass/treble counterpoint that exploits the guitar's natural idioms. But the ending tune, "Close Your Eyes", is a lullaby that brings the listener back to the theme of song.

Dave Clarke's *Reunion* CD is about the renewal of friendships, and one or more guest artists are featured on nearly every track. His spouse, Lucinda Chodan, provided lyrics for many of the songs, and artists who toured or collaborated with Clarke in the past lend their voices and instruments to Clarke's performances.

Clarke himself provides the lead vocals on this album. He has a fairly plain, unadorned vocal style, an "everyman" sound that contrasts with his accomplished and expressive guitar playing. But mostly it suits the folk-based storytelling on which many of the songs are based. Moreover, the guitar, for me, is still the "voice" singing most prominently on the tracks.

The first track, "Waiting for a Train", is about homecoming, and sets the "reunion" theme right away. Vocal harmonies are provided by Tammy Fassaert, who Clarke performed with during his Montreal days, and with whom he reconnected when both moved to British Columbia. The song also features some great back-to-back instrumental solos by mandolin player James Whittall and Clarke.

The theme of memory surfaces in several songs, especially remembrances of places and people. "Bay of Bengal" recalls the beaches and vistas which Clarke visited in India, beautifully

rendered in the style of a Scottish ballad (so many of which were composed in praise of a place). “Sorrento”, a fast and flashy instrumental featuring a guitar and mandolin duel between Clarke and Whittall, was inspired by memories of a bluegrass camp in Sorrento, B.C., where Clarke met his future Shearwater band mates. “Snows of December” is a fond remembering of Clarke’s grandmother, whose enthusiasm for music rubbed off on him. Backup vocals by his former Steel Rail comrades Tod Gorr and Ellen Shizgal add lustre to the track.

Some songs wade into social or political commentary, including “Only Love” – a song about 9/11 and America’s Middle Eastern wars – and “In My Hometown”, about homelessness in Montreal, where the streets and the weather can be cruel. There are three instrumentals aside from “Sorrento” on the CD, all of them attractively rendered. “Over the Malahat” is a fast and joyful romp with lots of pedal-point, “Garry Oak” (in praise of a tree) rolls smoothly through its triplet arpeggio passages, and the closing track, “Reunion”, is a lullaby-like track with nice rolled chords and a sweet coda played in harmonics.

On all three CDs, the steel-string acoustic guitar’s voice shines in a variety of shades and tones, and I think guitar enthusiasts will find much appeal on each of them. While I’m more partial to the instrumental material than the vocal, I do think that the vocal songs on Clarke’s *Reunion* have the advantage of getting people to listen to guitar-focused music who otherwise wouldn’t. Established guitar fans, though, will probably groove on the instrumentals.

*Chris McDonald, Sydney, Nova Scotia*

**Jason & Pharis Romero and Friends. Back Up and Push.** LULA1001. Box 124, Horsefly, B.C. VOL 1L0; [pharisromero@gmail.com](mailto:pharisromero@gmail.com); [www.jasonandpharis.com](http://www.jasonandpharis.com)

Jason Romero builds banjos in the B.C. interior, where he took up residence with his Canadian wife, Pharis. In this unusual album, he plays the banjo with 19 different fiddlers from up and down the West Coast, from California to Canada. The flavour of the tunes is mostly American old-time music—“Appalachian”, if you like—with a few edging into bluegrass or ragtime. It’s nice to have this kind of music on a Canadian recording; few Canadian fiddlers work in this tradition. Maybe this CD will inspire others to take it up,

as well as selling some banjos for Jason (which I assume is one of his not-so-hidden agendas).

None of the tunes are recent compositions of the fiddlers; all are learned from the playing of old-timers, and the sources are impeccably documented, as well as the tunings used for the fiddle and banjo. However, I would have liked to know more about the tunes, and about the modern fiddlers playing them. I guess space considerations, with 19 different tunes and fiddlers, would have been prohibitive. Perhaps the Romeros would consider putting that information on their website. At the very least, I’d like to know more about the name of the tune “Walk Chalk Chicken with a Necktie On” (which also intriguingly happens to be a crooked tune, with extra beats thrown in here and there).

Most of the tunes were new to me; a few I heard before, such as “Dry and Dusty” and “Sally Ann”; also the second part of “Shipping Port” is identical to that of a tune I know as “The Green Fields of America” (the first part is totally different). It’s hard to pick favourites. But with 19 fiddlers each playing his or her chosen tune, there are unlikely to be weak links. The fiddling on each track is impeccable, although a few people achieve the wild ragged flavour of old-time music by flirting with tonality in ways that might disturb more staid violinists. I tend to like the grwly pieces like “Halifax”, “Old Ganny Blair” and “Old Judge Parker”. However, whichever track I had to stop listening on, the tune stayed in my head until the next time I got back to the CD.

Pharis’s backup guitar lays down a solid rhythm without trying to grab the spotlight, which is what you want in a supporting instrument. My one negative comment is that on some tracks the banjo is rather low in the mix, sometimes almost inaudible. This seems an odd choice by a banjo-maker, but many listeners might disagree with me (insert favourite banjo/accordion/bagpipe/bodhran joke here), or at least might not find it a factor in their enjoyment. However, I was most interested in hearing what the banjo was doing on the different tunes, and sometimes I was disappointed. Nevertheless, I found this a highly enjoyable CD.

*John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta*

**Variou. Festival mémoire et racines, Collection souvenir, vol. 5: Lanaudière : Mémoire et racines.** 200, rue de Salaberry, bur. 123, Joliette (Québec) J6E 4G1; [festival@memoireracines.qc.ca](mailto:festival@memoireracines.qc.ca); [www.memoiresracines.qc.ca](http://www.memoiresracines.qc.ca)

I have never, until now, listened repeatedly to one specific track as I have for this CD. In fact, just for “City on a Hill” by The Bluegrass Gospel Project, 2006, this CD’s worth a play or two... or three. I have been seduced by The Bluegrass Gospel Project’s contribution ([www.bluegrassgospelproject.com](http://www.bluegrassgospelproject.com)). But this is not the only contribution worth listening to.

As part of an annual summer festival that takes place in the Lanaudière region of Québec, fine artists from around the world meet to share music, dance, song and traditional storytelling. The festival’s inception in 1995 has since attracted quite a selection of participants, from La Bottine Souriante to Alanis Obamsawin. The compilation succeeds in marketing the venue as a must-experience destination. It showcases music from traditional to world beat and has a worldwide scope in invited guests. For example, the group Kleztory’s “Dem Rebin’s Nigun, Oy Tate!” is a wonderful piece that briefly gives a taste of the beauty in mixing Russian and French-Canadian klezmer beats. Additionally, singer and storyteller Robert Seven Crows’ “Chant d’honneur Mi’kmaq” is a treat as he sings in the Mi’maq language and contributes to what he calls “swamp folk”, a mixture of folk, Métis, Aboriginal, country and southern R&B ([robert seven-crows.com](http://robertseven-crows.com)).

For more traditional beats in keeping with the French-Canadian music tapestry, Yann Falquet’s jew’s harp “Ayoye Bosco”, in 1 minute and 6 seconds, is a testimony to this instrument’s place in French-Canadian “trad” music, and is followed up perfectly by Abitibi Pure Laine’s “Marie Mitaine” ([www.abitibipurelaine.com](http://www.abitibipurelaine.com)). “Je vous le dis, j’ai voyagé” by Jean-Paul Guimond made me laugh: the “chanson-à-répondre” truly captures the political rhyming which this traditional form of singing satire is supposed to evoke – “Je vous l’ai dis, j’ai voyagé dans tous les pays étrangers...c’est sur le bord de l’Ouriert, y avait des rats, c’est effrayant...y en a des rats, y en a des rats, y en a même à Ottawa...”.

For those interested in medieval and “gual-larde” songs, Serre L’Écoute’s a capella “Roulons-la” is haunting, due mainly to Gabrielle Bouthillier’s voice. It is no surprise that she, along with Liette Remon, are a part of Productions Strada, the world music production group that also produced the medieval album *À la Via* in 1995 – a hit considering the period’s trend was hitting Québec City with the “Médiévales du Québec” celebrations. In a similar yet more traditional “chanson à répondre” from Québec with

colloquial quips, “Le petit mari”, by Galant tu perds ton temps, is a joy to listen to ([www.galanttuperdstontemps.ca](http://www.galanttuperdstontemps.ca)). If not able to listen to this album, I encourage music lovers to attend this festival – I hope to in the new year.

*Julie M.-A. LeBlanc, St. John’s, Newfoundland*

### **Le Vent du Nord. *Mesdames et messieurs!***

BCD194. Borealis Recording Co., 225 Sterling Rd., Unit 19, Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; [info@borealisrecords.com](mailto:info@borealisrecords.com); [www.borealisrecords.com](http://www.borealisrecords.com)

Le Vent du Nord’s fourth release, titled *Mesdames et messieurs!*, is sure to please both long-time and new fans. Recorded live at the Mémoire et Racines festival, the album features eight guest artists (all well-known among enthusiasts of traditional Québécois music), adding to the band’s already stellar lineup of Simon Beaudry (voice and guitar), Nicolas Boulerice (voice, hurdy-gurdy, piano, and accordion), Rejean Brunet (voice, bass, accordion and piano) and Olivier Demers (violin, foot-tapping, and voice). The most successful aspect of this album is the overall flow, perhaps a result of being a live performance.

There is variety between tracks – enough to maintain interest from start to finish – without abrupt changes that shatter a cohesive atmosphere. The foot-tapping provides a groove throughout without overwhelming the melodies, creating an energy that is sure to get you off your feet. The melodies in the voice and instruments are clear and balanced, with perfectly intertwined melody and harmony lines. The instrumental solos — performed on fiddle, accordion, hurdy gurdy, flute, and harmonica – vary the timbre and add to the overall interest of the album. Although the tunes have a “traditional” sound, they are far from typical (see, e.g., the fiddle solo in “Les amants de Saint-Laurent”). If I have one complaint, it is that there are no new tunes (to the band) on this album – perhaps not surprising, since it is a live album. While it might therefore be of less interest to people who own Le Vent du Nord’s previous albums, the guest musicians and live sound keep the tunes fresh. Although the lyrics are in French, this should not deter anglophones from listening to this album. It has more than enough to offer to keep everyone interested.

*Monique Giroux, Toronto, Ontario*