

Family Values: The Box Car Boys Meet Combo Royale

Paul Swoger-Ruston (Ryerson University)

During the springtime of this year I invited members from two new Toronto-based bands to my home for a barbecue, drinks, discussion and music making. Both bands formed about a year ago and have quickly become regulars in Toronto's vibrant and rapidly growing urban/traditional music movement. Both Combo Royale and The Box Car Boys, the brain-children of Ralph Pastore and John David Williams respectively, combine various folk and popular styles into an infectious and danceable mixed set of originals and covers.

I ended up with much more material than I can use for one article, so given The Box Car Boys' recent debut CD release, *Don't Be Blue*, this piece focuses on the stories of two of their members: founder John Williams and fiddler Laura Bates. I hope to follow up later this year with an article on Combo Royale, who will begin recording their first album in August.

While the three other members of The Box Car Boys are not represented here, their roles in the band are equally unique and important. Although much of the material is composed and arranged by Williams, the improvisational skills of the band are paramount to the success and excitement of the Box Car set. These members include Juno-nominated sousaphone player Rob Teehan, master jazz trombonist Karl Silveira, and soulful accordionist Ronen Segall. While each member of the band is a virtuoso in his or her own right, it is the groove, dedication to the tunes, group synergy, and a keen sense of humour that sets them apart from many other bands.

The Box Car Boys was started by composer and clarinetist John David Williams, who writes the bulk of the band's songs. While many of the songs and arrangements are new, we could be forgiven for thinking them traditional; the veneer has a timeless feel but the arrangements and improvisation are fresh and contemporary. Suitable to their old-time street band instrumentation, the band began by busking and parading on the Toronto Islands, during early mornings at St. Lawrence Market and Wychwood Barns, and have since begun gigging at both jazz and folk venues and festivals.

While The Box Car Boys are described on their MySpace page as "a veritable gumbo of wild gypsy, old-jazz, klezmer, and folk music...performed with a good-time New Orleans [feel]", the following interview focuses on the stories of how Laura and John first got into music and the musical paths that have brought them together. I asked only one thing:

"How and why did you get started in music?" Inevitably, this question led to the role of family, style, and training in shaping their musical experience.

PAUL: As a relative outsider stepping into the Toronto traditional scene, it's struck me what a different world it is. It's vast. All these parallel universes that occur in any city based on scenes. Part of my interest in the scene you're involved in is the tension between *tradition* and *the new*. And for me as an outsider looking in, we have a few people who have done formal schooling and others who haven't. My sense is that that is still a point of tension in the scene, whether you're a schooled musician or not. I'm interested in who has access to play, and more so, what leads musicians into different styles of music.

The first thing I'd like to do is for each of you to talk about the first instrument you played and why you ended up playing it, and then take us to where you are now.

John's Story

I started playing clarinet when I was 8. I'm not sure exactly why I started playing the clarinet. I think most people have memories from that age; that's the point where you start to remember things, but not me. I have a mosaic of fragments of memories. I remember that I played recorder, I picked it up wanting to play a wind instrument on a whim. I remember my parents having an encyclopaedia of orchestral instruments. I remember seeing clarinet players in a parade. And I remember asking to play the clarinet and my parents finding me a teacher. And that's how I started playing clarinet, but I don't remember much more than that.

I do, actually, remember a particular piece of music that triggered my interest. My parents had a classical recording of James Campbell – who, by complete coincidence, is our friend, guitarist Graham Campbell's dad – but, yes, James Campbell playing the Mozart clarinet concertos really got my attention. My studies on the clarinet were pretty intensely classical until about three years ago, though during high school I began to realize that I didn't want to play classical music and started experimenting with other musics. In high school I was obsessed with John Zorn, partly because I bought one of his CDs, *The Big Gundown*, and it completely changed my perspective on how I was to listen to music. That CD changed a lot for me.

I then went to the University of Toronto to study classical music, and formed a sort of circus-rock band with a few other U of T students. It was a rock band but with a clarinet in it, and so it sounded like circus-rock to me. That was fun. And after I graduated I started exploring klezmer music and jazz music.

My interest in klezmer actually started at school, where I took a klezmer course, though I'd kind of already been playing klezmer music. I think I've taken klezmer in incidentally, because as a clarinet player you end up sounding like a klezmer musician if you're not trying to sound like a jazz musician or a classical musician. I mean, I'm *not* really a klezmer musician, but if you're playing anything remotely minor, or even major with a lot of bends and twists, people think you're a klezmer musician. By now my sound has become very klezmer-ish and I think that's partly because I've been able to make money by sounding like a klezmer musician (laughs).

After university, so not very long ago, some of us from class formed a klezmer band and played weddings and such things. It's amazing. It's a great culture of music where everyone dances and sings along – lots of fun. I felt at home from my first klezmer wedding and people didn't boo me off the stage shouting "*gentile!*" (laughter)

Laura's Story

I grew up in Stratford, Ontario. My father was, and still is, a really awesome dairy nutritionist specialist who went to University of Guelph. He has always had great enthusiasm for folk music; I have this vision in my head of him learning Gordon Lightfoot chords in a residence room.

My first memory is from when I was 3 years old sitting in a stroller at Home County Folk Festival in London, Ontario, which is still going strong, and I saw this band called Tips Pointer, in the rain, in my stroller, with my dad...and I started telling my parents, "I wanna play violin, I wanna play the violin!"

My parents found me a violin teacher. I've always had terrible math skills. I think my mother read something, and don't quote me on this, because she'd hate it, but she probably read something in *Readers Digest* how if you put music skills in a young child's life it will develop greater skills in the math department. Little did she know! She's now got a full-time freelance fiddler for a daughter, who she's now quite supportive of, which is wonderful.

So, my parents found a violin teacher for me. Her name is Andrea Barstad; she still teaches in Stratford, Ontario. And she had a profound impact on my life, being someone I spent time with every week for the better part of two decades.

When my mother came along to my lessons, I learned the Suzuki Classical Method, and I'd learn Celtic tunes when my dad was sitting by the lesson. And when neither of my parents were there, Andrea had the sense that, because my mom was overprotective, "This kid needs to learn how to climb trees." She'd say, "Your mom won't be here for 10 minutes, go climb a tree." So I'd run out, climb a tree, and run back. Later, by the time I was 10 or 11 years old, I'd show up for lessons and say, "I don't feel like playing violin", and we would do, for instance, a world religion lesson. So I learned what Buddhism was in my violin lessons.

When I met Andrea, she had one child, and by the time I ended my lessons she had four children, nine cats, one dog, several goldfish, a bunny rabbit named Pearl, all in a very small house. So I'd go into this chaos every week and learn beautiful things, playing violin among piles of dusty books and a dusty hammered dulcimer, a dusty cello, a dusty banjo – just complete disorganization. And then she'd say, "Okay, you have to stand up straight, relax your shoulders, and hold yourself like a marionette. We need proper posture, because we're going to invite the spirit of Mr. Bach to our living room to listen to you." So she'd put the stool out and Mr. Bach would sit there...she was incredibly zany, and I love her for the impact she had on my personality.

When I was young I would go with my father to pick up a bottle of wine for dinner, and we always gave money to the buskers along Stratford riverside and outside the LCBO. So I decided to take up busking. My mother never quite approved of the busking thing, so I think it was a bit of conspiracy on my dad's part to get me out there. I probably tried it first around age 11 or 12, and it ended up being incredibly lucrative.

So I took busking on as a full-time job from ages 13 until 16, playing in front of the theatres in Stratford. I would look in the programme book to figure out where I could go and to learn the songs from the shows. There were a couple crazy buskers in Stratford: a gentleman, who is still there, who believes he's the second coming of Christ and he tried to beat another busker with a crowbar. That second busker's name is Bill Romaine [and he] goes by Tip the Clown, who has a magical flea he pulls out of his ear to play the trumpet...Stratford was this strange busking, older men crew. But my dad's always supported street music, so I became a street musician.

I met Justin Bieber several times when I was busking. Justin Bieber would skateboard up to people and say, "I'll give you a toonie if I can sing a Michael Jackson song." My dad drove up once to pick me up and said, "You'd better watch out, because that kid's a little entrepreneur, he's going to put you out of

business!” I guess he kind of did. Last year I was on the train going cross-country playing with my duo, Festival Express, on the way to a friend’s wedding. (You can do this VIA Rail onboard musician deal where you take a really long time to get somewhere for free and get free food.) And I remember opening up this Oprah magazine with Oprah saying that Justin Bieber was the first busker to play in front of the Stratford Festival, [but that] was *so* me! (laughs)

And then in high school I ended up playing in rock bands in Stratford, Ontario. Before I heard Zeppelin, and all those typical rock things that are a part of many peoples’ childhoods, I heard post-rock bands like God Speed, You Black Emperor and Do, Make, Say, Think (and now I play with Jimmy P. Lightning from that band, and now I’m “ooh, I play with someone from Do, Make!”) . I would drive to Guelph and London and Hamilton to hear them. I loved their idea of really simple music built in layers climbing up this beautiful musical mountain as the main musical concept – making music that is really simple and exhilarating. So I was in this band modeled after Do Make and God Speed and we entered this big competition that included Sum 41 and Simple Plan and we won a recording deal to make a professional studio album (that was never released).

From there I decided to go to jazz school as a way to get out of my small town. I wanted to travel the world, but my parents said I should go to school first. I went to Humber College as the first violinist to enrol in their music program. I did not really know what jazz was – I think my parents owned Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* – but I showed up and I was one violin in a class full of saxophones for improvisation class, and I was in a guitar master class because there was no violin master class or instructor at the time. You know, I went to school thinking I knew a thing or two, but I’d never encountered a flat key before as a string player. I remember my first day of Improv class playing *Impressions* by John Coltrane, and it was a nightmare. I took a few blows to my self-esteem. So I got overwhelmed and dropped out for a year to study classical technique, worked a day job as a fitness receptionist. Then I went back, and I’ve now just finished my jazz degree. And I’m *not* a jazz musician, I can tell you that!

Humber now has Drew Jurecka teaching violin, who is one of Toronto’s best kept secrets. (Go to the Victory Cafe on a Wednesday night, listen to any Jill Barber record, or check out The Hogtown Syncopators.) Drew was the next big role model as a teacher figure in my life. He often makes me think, “Wow, you can do that on a violin?”

Stylistically, going into jazz school, I owned a Fender Deville amplified (which I sold three years

later for rent) because I played in a rock band and had to be really darnn loud. At Humber, I thought, “I’m a jazz violinist, what am I doing with this huge thing I can’t even carry and I can’t afford taxicabs?” And I had for shows this huge ring of effects pedals around me. And that was my thing – loud and dirty and inspired by those post-rock bands; the poet and musician to whom I still aspire and love, Patti Smith – I just love what she did for music; and I really love early Sonic Youth, just that grungy sound.

So, how I got into Box Car Boys is that I stumbled into a house of musicians with whom I [then] lived with for three years, one of whom is the sousaphone player Rob Tehan, who met John at the Tranzac Club. Around this time last year John Williams started showing up in my living room and a year later I learned why “Jägerbomb Blues” is called “Jägerbomb Blues”.

I guess I’d played a few Jewish weddings but I’d never... It’s interesting, for the most part, to pick up the violin after going – not that you can’t play Charlie Parker on the violin, but I certainly can’t – through a world where I felt like the violin was inadequate compared to certain other instruments, and then picking up the violin in this pseudo-traditional, New Orleans, klezmer sort of thing that the violin works so brilliantly in was a really, really wonderful thing. I feel as though John, through putting together Box Car Boys, kept my love of music together, which was incredibly important in my little life of trying to finish my degree. Music is still this exciting thing like it was for me back in high school playing in rock bands. And I’m so grateful to have John and to have this band that kept me playing even when I was busy writing essays.

And now we’re releasing The Box Car Boys CD (into a ballyhoo twang) on June 18th on a boat, the Harbour Star.

The Boxcar Boys album *Don't Be Blue* will be available on iTunes on Monday, June 27th, 2011.

