

Reviews

Books

Ian Tyson with Jeremy Klaszus. *The Long Trail: My Life in the West*. 2010. 197 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-35935-3. Random House of Canada Ltd., 2775 Matheson Blvd. E, Mississauga, Ont. L4W 4P7; www.randomhouse.ca

I had heard that Ian Tyson is disgruntled concerning his “folk years”, and especially the Toronto folk music scene of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, where Ian & Sylvia got their start. This autobiography certainly bears this out! Ian devotes a scant two pages to his time in Toronto, with almost no specifics, and some uncomplimentary comments (“if you could hold a guitar and pretend you were playing it, you had a gig”). For that matter, the entire career of Ian & Sylvia post-Toronto takes up a mere 20 pages. Folk music historians won’t find a lot of grist for their mill here, and those of us who were around the Toronto folk scene at the time won’t have many memories reinforced.

Never mind – this book amply deserves its recent place on the best-seller lists. For once, the subtitle isn’t misleading; this is mostly about Ian’s “life in the west”, both musically and culturally. Tyson reinvented himself, both as a rancher and as a musical historian and recorder of the Western lifestyle, and he tells us about it flavourfully and with lots of insight. I learned much about many things I knew only a little about previously, among them cutting horses, cowboy poetry festivals, ecology, and the cowboy life in general.

I have not met Ian Tyson (although we have mutual acquaintances), but another characteristic that I had heard about is borne out by the book. He is known for being “irascible” (a quote he doesn’t deny), cantankerous, curmudgeonly, and it comes across. His criticisms don’t spare friends, family, even himself. He is forthright about times when he feels he made mistakes, and about his mishaps with women and alcohol (other drugs don’t seem to have played a large part in his life). And often, when he complains about people or things, you end up thinking he may be right.

In any event, this book is fascinating reading.

John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta

Recordings

Chuck & Albert. *Énergie*. CA-010-09. Chuck Arsenault, P.O. Box 723, Charlottetown, P.E.I. C1A 7L3; chuck@chuckandalbert.com; www.chuckandalbert.com; www.chucketalbert.com

Énergie is the first album from Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.)’s musical and comedic duo *Chuck & Albert*. Chuck and Albert Arsenault (no relation) are two of P.E.I.’s preeminent entertainers, most recently nominated in 2011 for three Music P.E.I. Awards and three East Coast Music Awards, among other honours. Listeners may recognize Chuck and Albert from their previous performances as members of the award-winning P.E.I. Acadian group Barachois (1995-2003).¹

Multi-instrumentalist Albert is from St-Chrysostome, in the *Région Évangéline* (the Evangeline Region) of western P.E.I. He’s the son of well known fiddler Eddy Arsenault, who is widely considered the “grandfather” of Island Acadian fiddling. Growing up in one of the region’s largest musical households, it’s no surprise that Albert began fiddling at age 12, and soon after began picking up other instruments. Chuck, who hails from Montague (Kings County, P.E.I.), rediscovered his Francophone Acadian heritage in his early 20s. He is a true comedian who contributes a wide range of musical talents to the duo. A former teacher, actor and member of the P.E.I. Symphony, he also plays French horn and tuba (not heard on the album, so you’ll have to see their live show). This first album, *Énergie*, captures the energy of the duo’s live performances and features an incredible array of instruments: guitar, fiddle, vocals, foot percussion, harmonica, spoons, bass, jaw harp, popcorn shaker, rhythm bones, and a homemade drum kit comprising a *batterie-valise* (suitcase drum), a triangle, a pie plate, a “boîte Huggies” (Huggies diaper-wipe box) and a cowbell.

The 13 tracks provide a glimpse into P.E.I.’s Francophone Acadian musical heritage, drawing on “centuries of Acadian laughter and tears, ...

¹ Barachois won four East Coast Music Awards, including “Top Roots/Traditional Group” in 2000 and 2003, as well as several P.E.I. music awards.

silliness and biting wit that still resound today at kitchen parties and on old field recordings.”² The songs and tunes featured on the album bring together older styles and repertoire with contemporary tunes, all interpreted in the duo’s idiosyncratic style. Most of the repertoire is culled from the collection of thousands of jokes, stories, tunes and songs recorded by P.E.I. Acadian folklorist and historian Georges Arsenault in the 1970s. For folksong enthusiasts, a highlight of the album is certainly the regional versions of familiar songs, such as “C’était un petit bonhomme” (“There Once Was a Little Man”), a song that is well known in France and French-speaking Canada, and several locally-composed Acadian songs. There is a lively version of the well known song “À la claire fontaine” (“By the Clear Fountain”) that is known throughout Acadia, paired with “The Herring Reel”, a tune composed by Albert’s father. Another track features a western P.E.I. version of the old French song “Il était une bergère” (“There Was Once a Shepherdess”), paired with a great reel “Reel à Marsouin”, composed by *Madelinor*³ fiddler Félix LeBlanc (of the Acadian group Suroît), that fiddlers will be eager to learn; this set ends with the surprise inclusion of the old favourite “Turkey in the Straw.”

The album features other traditional and newly-composed fiddle tunes, several of which are composed by Albert or members of his family. Albert’s fiddle style gives the instrumental sets a distinct regional flavour. His rhythmic playing is lively, unpolished and reminiscent of the older Acadian “shuffle” style, with its syncopated feel created by not fully sounding some notes. Track 4, “Set à mon père” (“My Father’s Set”), features the well-known and regional favourites “Soldier’s Joy”, “Le bonhomme et la bonne femme” (“The Old Man and The Old Woman”), “Reel du poulet” (“Chicken Reel”) (complete with the sound of clucking chickens, which I’ve often heard Albert’s Uncle Amand add at musical parties), and the Cape Breton standard “Malcolm Finley’s Reel”.

The duo draws upon the tradition of “tounage”, Acadian mouth music (also known as *turlutte* or *djigger*), putting new (and often silly) words and vocables to traditional and contemporary instrumental tunes. These and other songs

are accompanied by *podorhythmie* (seated foot-tapping), and sometimes “la trompe” (“the mistake”), which we learn from the liner notes is a local nickname for the jaw harp. The foot-tapping is present on all the tracks, providing a rhythmic backdrop that is characteristic of traditional P.E.I. Acadian music (it’s similar to the foot-tapping practices found in other French-Canadian traditions, such as parts of New Brunswick, Québec, Newfoundland and, in particular, Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine): *tic-a-tac, tic-a-tac, tic-a-tac...* Chuck told me that the album was recorded in a century-old house in Malpeque, P.E.I., that has been converted into a recording studio. The most challenging aspect of the recording was capturing the sound of the feet so that it sounded as “authentic” as possible. After testing out the acoustics in various rooms in the house – including the bathroom – and trying different pairs of shoes to get just the right sound, they eventually recorded the “feet” while sitting on the staircase!

The up-beat and comedic aspects of the album are balanced nicely with more “serious” songs, which were highlights of the album for me. These are *complaintes* (laments), an Acadian song genre filled with grief and compassion that tell of tragedies befalling the Acadian community; according to Georges Arsenault, *complaintes* comprise the majority of songs collected throughout Acadia, and were still sung in the Island Acadian communities in the 1970s.⁴ Like the majority of other songs and tunes featured on the album, Chuck and Albert learned these *complaintes* in their original *a cappella* form, accompanied by the percussive foot-tapping, from the archived recordings and created original arrangements with instrumental accompaniment. Among these *complaintes* is the song “Dans la ville d’Egmont-Baie” (“In the Town of Egmont Bay”), composed around 1890 in Egmont Bay, P.E.I., about the working conditions for fishermen at a new fish factory; this song is paired with a lovely version of one of P.E.I.’s popular reels, “La reel du Brae” (“The Brae Reel”), played on the harmonica. “La fièvre” (“The Fever”) is a stirring lament about a young lumberjack who died of fever in a lumber camp on Christmas Day; this song is paired with

² From the album’s official press release, www.chucketalbert.com.

³ A person from Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Québec.

⁴ Georges Arsenault, *Contes, legends et chansons de l’Île-du-Prince-Édouard* (Moncton: Les Éditions de l’Acadie, 1998.) See also Georges Arsenault, *Par un dimanche au soir: Léah Maddix, chanteuse et conteuse acadienne* (Moncton: Les Éditions de l’Acadie, 1993.)

a jig composed by Albert in honour of his father's side of the family who were known by the nickname Mocaque, after Albert's great-great-grandfather, Jean "Mocaque" Arseneault. Finally, "Le retour de l'amant" ("The Lover's Return") is a heartfelt folk song that was popular in Acadian communities throughout the Maritimes and the Gaspé peninsula; this particular version is from local Acadian singer and composer Léah Maddix, of Egmont Bay.

The bilingual liner notes, compiled with the assistance of Georges Arseneault, contain short anecdotes and interesting facts about the social and musical histories behind each track. This album will appeal to musicians, scholars and folk song enthusiasts interested in hearing some local P.E.I. Acadian variations of well-known folk songs and tunes. Chuck and Albert have culled some true gems from the archived recordings, and the album as a whole is an important contribution to the preservation of francophone Acadian culture on P.E.I. In addition to highlighting older aspects of Acadian song and instrumental traditions, the duo has included some great original fiddle tunes, drawing attention to the vibrancy of this fascinating culture and a recent resurgence of tune composition in the region.

Don't be surprised if, after listening to this CD, you feel the urge to greet people with the old Acadian salutation "Comment ça flippe?" (to which the correct response would be: "Ça flippe pretty good!")

Meghan C. Forsyth, Toronto, Ontario

Cowboy Celtic. *Other People's Cattle*. CFA012. Centerfire Music, Box 868, Turner Valley, Alta. T0L 2A0; centerfi@telus.net; www.cowboyceltic.com

I have to admit that when I picked up my first Cowboy Celtic CD in 1995, I had images of a dust-biting, hard-riding, trailworn cowpoke guzzling down some raw Irish moonshine that was better left in the bottle. Those of you readers who are familiar with the work of this band, led by the legendary David Wilkie, will know that that stereotype gets quickly thrown out the window. Once you take a listen, the Celtic cowboy that comes to mind has had a good shave and is spruced up for an evening of sipping something fine and well-aged.

Other People's Cattle, like other Cowboy Celtic offerings, combines the smooth vocals of Denise Withnell (keep an eye out for her new solo album) and the beautiful harp playing of

Kerri Lynn Zwicker with the outstanding fiddling of Joe Hertz and driving beat of Nathan McCavana's bodhran. Of course the glue sticking it all together is Cowboy Celtic's founder, David Wilkie, who has been the lead hand since the band started in 1995, playing not only mandolin but various guitars, mandocello and bass. McCavana and Wilkie also share some of the vocals.

This CD offers 14 cuts in total, with a nice combination of songs and tunes. Let's talk about the six songs on the CD first. What impresses me most about these songs is not the solid vocal performances, but the fantastic arrangements, filled with instrumental harmonies that take nothing away from the lyrics but add a tapestry background, engaging the listener and enhancing the voices. The opening track is a standard old cowboy song, "The Brazos", a great old Texas love song. There are also two traditional pieces with Celtic - Cowboy connections. "The Water is Wide", a great standard, is arranged about as prettily as I've ever heard, featuring beautiful fiddle, cello and mandolin harmonies. "When the Work's All Done this Fall" features Nathan and Denise exchanging vocals, and includes a great reel composed by legendary Quebec fiddler André Alain. The title track, a tale of the life of a working cowboy, was penned by great Southern Alberta musician, singer and songwriter Sid Marty. Two songs were written by David Wilkie. "Lady Margaret Hamilton", written in the style of a Child ballad and sung by Keri Lynn Zwicker, is a tragic love tale of Lady Margaret and her lover, Lord Maxwell. My overall favourite cut on the album is the hauntingly beautiful love song of a cowboy outlaw in exile, "The Hole in the Wall". Wilkie's voice on this number is full of emotion, and with the additional harmonies from Denise Withnell and an outstanding arrangement, it's hard not to press the repeat button on the old iPod.

The songs are intermingled with well-chosen medleys of jigs, reels and waltzes, a lament and an O'Carolan tune. I thoroughly enjoyed the selections and liner notes that set the stage for each song with information and humour. All in all, this CD is another great one to add to most anybody's collection.

Blaine Hrabi, Calgary, Alberta