

Some Thoughts on the 2011 Calgary Folk Music Festival

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In the summer of 2011, I wrote reviews of the Calgary Folk Music Festival for the roots music website, *No Depression*. Here are two of those entries, one on local country singer Matt Masters, and the other on Calgary favourite kd lang, who returned to her home territory for a spectacular show. Although I was set to

write a review of lang's performance, I found that it became quite difficult when I was so emotionally affected by her performance. The review ended up becoming a rumination on how we respond to those rare, but great moments in live performance.



Figure 1: Matt Masters

Matt Masters and the New Generation of Calgary Country Singers

Ever since John Lomax started collecting them in the early 1900s, cowboy songs have contributed as much, if not more, to the North American fascination with

the cowboy as dime novels and western films. The tunes that described a mysterious profession and a daunting landscape provided a window into the lives of men who seemingly lived a life free of emotional attachments and the burden of responsibility, ideals

that urban dwellers could only fantasize about in the middle of their daily grind.

So what happens when the narratives of those songs collide with the realities of 21st century city life in the mind of a young man? Matt Masters is what happens. Growing up amidst the usual prairie soundscape of classic rock radio stations, Masters played in rock bands throughout high school. But the other sounds of the prairies, the country music that drifted into his hometown of Calgary through its past and its rural neighbours, gradually crept into Masters' consciousness.

So he started writing hip songs that documented contemporary life in Alberta, songs that had a reverence for the ballads and stories of the cowboy tradition, and eschewed the ironic distance so characteristic of much contemporary Americana and indie music. Gathering up a band that eventually became his Gentlemen of the Rodeo, Masters fashioned himself as a modern cowboy troubadour, spinning tales about the people and places that surrounded his hometown. He was determined to make it work: while fellow musicians toiled away at day jobs and scored the occasional bar gig, he agreed to play just about any imaginable concert, once culminating in a month of daily gigs in obscure places. It paid off: he has worked full-time as a musician since the early 2000s.

In this time, Masters has written a successful cabaret show, *Don Coyote*, that ran at Theatre Calgary in 2008 and was featured at Toronto's *Nuit Blanche*, he has emceed the Calgary Folk Music Festival, toured through North America, and he has founded a country music festival. Not to mention his debut CD from 2005, *Centennial Swell*, which has now been followed by his second full-length recording, *All Western Winners*. With so much recent success, a new marriage, and a baby on the way, Masters has more to talk about than ever, and rather than focusing on folk tales and local history, Masters has gotten personal on *Winners*. Singing about his family and recent life changes, songs like "The Recovery" pay tribute to his grandmother in a solid country-rock style, while "Two Girls" and "Candle Flame" move into the realm of romance.

And he has revisited his rock roots. For this album, Masters decided that his brand of country needed to revisit a darker place, so he decorated his songs with rough timbres, distorted guitars, and dense arrangements, inspiring critics to associate him with acts like Jason and the Scorchers. While recording in Vancouver, Masters discovered a new sound that he didn't think would work for country, but realized the rougher edges suited his lyrics and voice. His DIY approach and new sound appealed to Sloth Records, a local (and very successful) punk record store that has

long supported Masters. "What do you want out of a record deal these days?" he says. "Sloth Records gives me a retail outlet that has my record on the front row...Sloth Records gives me a store."

The ultimate indie entrepreneur, Masters has realized that regional success, while perhaps not his original aim, has kept him far busier than he could have imagined. He is well-known and receiving good press throughout Alberta, and travels regularly to BC, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba for regular gigs. He's even gone as far as Qatar, Turkey, and Mexico, the latter inspiring a bit of an image shift. Dressed in a fine mariachi suit during our interview at the Calgary Folk Festival where he played in 2011, Masters seemed impervious to the warm sun and to rushing through a day of interviews and concerts, looking cool and unruffled.

Masters recently showed his political side, writing blogs during the Alberta election for the Calgary Herald, a tough job considering the turmoil that characterized its last few weeks and the somewhat surprising outcome. Masters handled the task with grace, working hard to examine the polarity between residents in a province whose government hasn't changed in over 40 years.

Additionally, in the fall of 2011, Masters was helping out the Cantos National Music Centre by offering classes to grade 4 students on Alberta history and song. He also runs the annual Spaghetti Western Festival, a free day-long show of local country and folk acts at Olympic Plaza every August. The 2011 festival featured some of the best Canadian roots music available, including: The Swifty's, The Ramblin' Ambassadors, JR Shore, Jonathan Byrd, Gordie Tentrees, Donna Durand, Lucky Sonne, Eve Hell, and Peter Bilt Pete Christian.

k d lang at the Calgary Folk Festival, or, What Makes a Great Performance?

I was all ready to review k d lang's set at the Calgary Folk Fest when she closed the Saturday night show two weeks ago. I figured if nothing else, I should review it, as a fellow (now transplanted) Albertan (one who also found way better vegetarian menus beyond the province's borders), and as somebody who regularly writes about her brand of cowpunk informed country music. The more obvious reason to write about her is that I like her a lot, and have always returned to some of my favourite recordings of hers for her big, open voice and arrangements that so quickly bring the Prairies to mind.

But I realized, as she swayed about the stage, lost in a reverie that was probably part returning to performing live and returning to that pinnacle of audi-

ences, one's hometown, that I could not write a review. Lang loosely interpreted her classic recordings for an hour and a half, displaying the virtuosic acrobatics of her voice with ease, moving through difficult and unanticipated melodic twists that only someone with a great ear can achieve.

Those two sentences there are about all I can muster for a review, because, halfway through her set, lang launched into her rendition of "Hallelujah".

(Before I go further, I am fully aware of, and take part in, the backlash against everybody and their cat thinking they can do a rendition of Leonard Cohen's classic. I do think lang's version sits among the best of these though.)

Anyone who had been remotely disengaged seemed to be swept into lang's performance at that moment. Aside from the whistles that punctuated the ends of her verses, the crowd in front of the stage was quiet. I was backstage at the time, gathered with a few others to watch her from the side and on the screen in the green room. All talk stopped. The women beside me who had eagerly been singing along moments ago stood still in silence. We drew in a collective breath as she reached the climactic points in the song and exhaled upon their release. Not surprisingly, there were some tears.

I'm a relatively jaded concert attendee. I've sat through a lot of dull concerts, many decent shows, and some spectacular ones. I've suffered through the bad stage banter, the absent stage banter, the forgotten lyrics, messy endings, and boring solos. I've stood for hours in hot crowds waiting for a band to finally emerge and finally start playing; I've been scrunched onto uncomfortable benches and sat through rain to hear just a few songs of someone I like. My point is, I've seen a lot of live shows, but these ones that have such an effect on your psyche that the failings of the English language become readily apparent in trying to describe them are so few and far between. Why?

What is it about a performance that draws a crowd of 100 or 10,000 or 60,000 to feel as though they are one? Is it something musical, something performative, something atmospheric? This feeling is presumably why we like music, why we continue to spend great percentages of our disposable income on concert tickets. Are we after a social and musical high that is near impossible to find, but when we do, makes all the other attempts worth it?

I have had the occasional experience like this. The one that I always remember is the Dixie Chicks show at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto after *Taking the Long Way* came out. Remember the scene in *Shut Up and Sing* where the Toronto show sells out in a matter of minutes? I was one of those ticket buyers. Sand-

wiched between two families with small girls in a cramped seat at the back of the arena, I and 20,000 others were swept into the frenzy of "Not Ready to Make Nice", after the girls had expressed their gratitude for Toronto's loyalty. I had never expected a concert that big to have that kind of effect on me.

What conditions have to be present for one to get goosebumps during a performance? Is it possible if you aren't particularly interested in the artist onstage? Do you have to be with people you know, or people who love the artist? Can the artist be in a bad mood and still convey great emotional depth, conviction in their delivery? Do all the technical aspects of the performance have to be perfect, or can a moment like this occur with the lights out or an improperly balanced sound? Do some people feel these moments more frequently or more acutely than others, and if so, why?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I'm happy when those rare moments happen.

The image shows the cover of Penguin Eggs magazine. At the top, the title "penguin eggs" is written in a stylized, lowercase font. Below the title, it says "Canada's Folk, Roots and World Music Magazine". In the center is a large, stylized black and white illustration of a penguin, where its body and wings are integrated with musical notes and a treble clef. Below the illustration, the text "Subscribe Now!" is followed by a table of subscription rates:

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At the bottom, it provides contact information: "Penguin Eggs, 1034-280 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T6G 0R1", "Telephone: 780.433.8287", "email: penguineggs@hotmail.com", and "Subscribe online: www.penguineggs.ab.ca".