

Reviews

La Bottine Souriante. *Appellation d'origine contrôlée.* BCD211. FCM 013D. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com

La Bottine Souriante est le groupe emblématique de la musique trad québécoise. Formée en 1976 dans la région de Lanaudière, au nord de Montréal, il est issu d'un coin du Québec où la musique traditionnelle est omniprésente. Cette région a donné la vie à plusieurs autres groupes et musiciens trad québécois. Bien qu'il ait vu jour suite à un désir de retour aux sources face à une mondialisation grimpanche, le succès du groupe n'a pas été constant. Très populaire à la fin des années 70, elle tomba dans les années 1980 pour reprendre à la fin de ces années. À cette époque, le groupe est plus populaire à l'international. Ce sera dans les années 1990, lorsqu'ils intégreront un groupe de cuivres aux rythmiques plus éclatées que le succès viendra tant au Québec, tout en s'accroissant à l'international. *Folk World*, en Allemagne, dira d'eux qu'ils sont « ... one of the best live acts of this universe », tel que le groupe se plaît à le souligner dans leur communiqué de presse.

Toutefois, en 2002, La Bottine Souriante perdra deux de ses têtes de proue : le chanteur et accordéoniste Yves Lambert ainsi que Michel Bordeleau, chanteur et multi-instrumentaliste. Par la suite, d'autres membres plieront bagage. Nombre de leur fans se demandaient ce qu'il adviendrait du groupe, allait-il disparaître ? Suite à ces départs, le groupe s'est reformé et a lancé un CD en 2003, mais avec un succès plutôt mitigé. Le groupe n'avait pas réussi à se dénichier des musiciens pouvant prendre la relève des membres perdus. Selon le journaliste Yves Bernard (*Le Devoir*, 2011), après neuf ans, le groupe est finalement remis sur pied avec plusieurs nouveaux musiciens dont trois chanteurs, et ainsi faire un retour en grand avec ce nouveau CD *Appellation d'origine contrôlée*. Cette nouvelle parution est de la trempe de ce qui a fait leur renommée, soit la fusion du trad québécois à des sonorités et des genres les plus divers, tout en demeurant fidèle à leurs racines.

Les arrangements sont plus pondérés, le côté swing y est atténué sans le faire totalement disparaître, tout en prenant d'autres avenues, en faisant appel, par exemple, à la basse *funk* (pièce 1), au piano électrique Rhodes (pièce 6), à l'orgue B3 (pièce 1), et même au marimba de l'Afrique australe (pièce 8) ainsi qu'au *xalaparta*, une percussion basque (pièces

5 et 8), invitant deux musiciens basques. Par ailleurs, grâce à ses trois chanteurs, les harmonies vocales sont plus travaillées. La deuxième chanson, par exemple, est particulièrement intéressante : on a l'impression d'entendre des chants de gorge d'Asie centrale en arrière plan, bien que ce n'en soit pas.

Malgré que la verve habituelle du groupe est encore au rendez-vous, sûrement que sa renommée joue sur mon commentaire qui précède, je ne peux m'empêcher une critique. La première pièce débute par un *funk* explosif. À la première écoute, on a l'impression que ce début éclatant donne le ton au CD. Ce n'est pas le cas, puisque cette basse particulière n'apparaît que dans cette pièce. Ou encore, le piano Rhodes n'apparaît qu'une seule fois à la sixième pièce et le marimba à la huitième pièce. Peut-être que du fait de leur nouveauté, cela fait ressortir ces instruments encore plus ; pourtant, les jeux de cuivre sont très équilibrés dans le mix. Mon point ici est que ces instruments sont très en avant plan par rapport aux autres instruments. Leur présence tranche avec l'ensemble des autres pièces plus trad, et même avec les cuivres. Malgré cela, La Bottine Souriante a su retrouver le souffle qui a fait sa renommée.

Bruno Deschênes, Montréal, Québec

The Hokum Steamers. *Doing the Cater Street Shimmy.* HRR CD-1. House-Rent Records, c/o Mike Ballantyne, 7345 Seabrook Rd., Central Saanich, B.C. V8M 1M9
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The name "Hokum Steamers" immediately brings up questions such as "What the heck is a hokum?" or "How come you'd want to steam a hokum anyway?". The term "hokum" has a few dozen definitions, interpretations and applications, most of which have to do with things such as pretentious nonsense, hocus-pocus and meaningless absurdity. In addition, "hokum" was once a term used to describe an early form of American blues music from the 1920s, which had partly derived from 19th-Century minstrelsy music and evolved into a form of musical expression that often used sexual innuendo and metaphorical allusion. It was mainly music of the honky-tonks, juke joints, saloons and bordellos of the time. It was also the kind of music made to make you feel good. That's pretty much what this CD is about.

The Hokum Steamers, Vancouver Island's Mike Ballantyne and Rick Van Krugel, do a bee's knees job in continuing that tradition with their 2011 CD

Doing the Cater Street Shimmy, a bit of an historical journey into the world of early southern ragtime-blues and gospel. The aim seems to be authentic interpretation for the purpose of entertainment from a historical context, and in this it succeeds fabulously. This is a well-researched, sincere, respectful and genuine attempt to revive and present some obscure and some well-known songs from the 1920s and '30s New Orleans area, with an intent of staying as close as possible to the original spirit. At the same time, this is clearly a recording of our time and space, so it succeeds on a number of levels. The liner notes are informative and concise; the vocals are strong and well-articulated; the instrumentation and vocals are neither flashy nor overdone, but they do move along nicely. This is probably the way the songs were originally presented in those honky-tonks, especially since many of the songs are quite danceable.

The instrumentation here, Ballantyne on acoustic guitar and Van Krugel mainly on mandolins of different descriptions, is straightforward and uplifting, just as the songs were originally intended to be. Van Krugel's mandolin breaks and accompaniment are tastefully appropriate. Ballantyne's guitar provides a strong foundation. Originally some of the songs may have had some brass or piano instrumentation, as was common in New Orleans. However, this recording is not intended to copy and mimic, but rather to reinterpret the material. Back then people made do with what they had, and if two entertainers had walked into the brothel or a saloon and happened to have only a guitar and a mandolin, it may well have sounded a lot like this.

One of the commonalities of the hokum body of material is that much of the subject matter was down to earth, sometimes gritty, but usually reflective of the very real and often rough lives of working poor folks of the rural and urban south, particularly black people. At the same time, the music was presented in lighthearted and sometimes even comical ways, but always upbeat, entertaining and engaging. Understanding this material can help us to understand some of the roots of popular music from that time and up to the present. From today's perspective, this is roots material: earthy and fundamental. From the perspective of the 1920s, it was a relatively new approach to music that had naturally evolved from the minstrelsy traditions of the latter 19th Century. The Hokum Steamers' presentation demonstrates both their wealth of knowledge of all this and their skill in delivering an engaging interpretation, vocally and instrumentally.

Doing the Cater Street Shimmy is a CD of more than just early blues. It is really a combination of blues, ragtime, vaudeville, gospel and jugband music.

The Hokum Steamers are not the first to have dug deep into this territory for source material. For example, The Jim Kweskin Jug Band used some of this same source material in the 1960s, particularly "Sadie Green (The Vamp of New Orleans)" and "Jug Band Music". As well, The Even Dozen Jug Band, founded in 1963 by Stefan Grossman, recorded "It's All Worn Out", which was originally from a 1920s duo, The Hokum Boys (Alex Robinson and Alex Hill). Similarly, many of the other selections have been discovered and rediscovered by successive generations of players, from obscure to famous, over the past 80 or 90 years.

"Don't Think I'm Santa Claus" is actually a medley of songs from 1904 and 1905 from a Race recording of a 1930 recording of *Lil McClintock's Music of the Medicine Shows 1926-27*.

Track 3 is a very good version of "Hesitation Blues" (this reviewer's favourite track). Credit for the song has long been disputed (W.C Handy or the trio of Billy Smythe, Scott Middleton, and Art Gillham), but it seems agreed that the tune itself falls in the "traditional blues" category. The Hokum Steamers have gathered their very "hokum-ish" version from two or three source recordings.

"No Hiding Place Down Here", "In My Time of Dying" and "Shine on Me" are three gospel songs that each have had long enduring lives and influential effects on succeeding generations of singers. The latter of the three, "Shine on Me", is likely the most recognizable, since it has probably enjoyed most success since the folk revival of the '50s and '60s. The influence of "In My Time of Dying" is heard in Bob Gibson and Hamilton Camp's well known song "Well Well Well" during the folk scare of the '60s. Interesting how a catchy song about dying and getting buried can make you feel good.

The Hokum Steamers indicate that "No Hiding Place Down Here" was recorded by The Old South Quartette in 1928. However, apparently A.P. Carter of The Carter Family is sometimes credited as the writer. The Carter Family version that was done in 1934 has a lot of similarities to the version here. (A.P. Carter was known for "borrowing" lines, verses and choruses from a lot of sources and affixing his name to them. This is not judgmental; it was just a different time. This is also a long discussion in itself.) Echoes of this song are heard in other gospel songs as well, indicating that songs like this often travel and evolve according to time, place and the needs they serve.

"Mama Don't Want It" comes from an obscure 1931 recording of the powerful voice of Lillie Mae. In the hokum tradition, the lyrics are somewhat open to interpretation or double entendre.

“Nehi Blues” is originally from a 1928 recording by Frank Stokes, and is an interesting song concerning a guy confused and distressed about a new fashion of raising hemlines for women’s dresses above the knee. It was also a time when a certain soft drink company ad campaign signage for their beverage “The Genuine Nehi” (later known as “RC Cola”) pictured a shapely pair of female legs beside their bottle. Apparently the guy was having a hard time staying depressed with so much stimulating vitality readily visible. Did I mention the guy was confused?

“Cocaine Blues”, sometimes known as “Simply Wild About My Good Cocaine”, comes from the 1927 recording of Luke Jordan, a black singer from Lynchburg, Virginia. It seems that some of the origins of part of this song go back at least a decade or two before that (in the days when things really did go better with Coke). Cocaine was in common everyday use until it was made illegal in the U.S. in 1914, but that didn’t stop people from singing about it (or using it).

“Titanic Man Blues”, originally co-written and sung by Ma Rainey (Mother of the Blues) in 1926, is not about the famous sunken ship at all, but instead uses the nautical disaster as a metaphor for a failed relationship. This song is also significant as it formed the basis for Huddie Ledbetter’s (a.k.a. Leadbelly) better known “Titanic” song many years later, although Leadbelly’s lyrics held close to the details of the actual ship disaster.

The Jelly Roll Morton “Wining Boy Blues” recording from 1938 was the source of the Hokum Steamers interpretation. It has been performed and recorded by many players over the years, from The Grateful Dead to Canada’s Ken Hamm. Jelly Roll Morton was famous not only for his fabulous piano playing but also for his self-praise. Couched in metaphor, this song is mainly about proclaiming his sexual prowess. It seems “wining” is mostly interpreted as ability to perform certain sexual maneuvers in amorous /intimate encounters.

“Shout You Cats” was written and recorded by Hezekiah Jenkins in 1931. This is essentially a lively little story about a wild dance party. Hard to go wrong with that.

Doing the Cater Street Shimmy is a ducky CD that hits on all sixes by: 1) selecting and presenting a small but swell sampling of the hokum body of music; 2) paying homage to some of the nifty early recording artists that provided the inspiration for carrying the torch forward; and 3) showcasing both Mike Ballantyne’s and Rick Van Krugel’s hotsy-totsy knowledge and abilities in this field of the music, which they have spent the better part of their lives learning and learning about. Unlike many recordings, this one not only bears repeated listening, but provides a valuable

resource to reach for when longing for echoes of another time. Seems to be the cat’s pajamas all round. With regard to the recording quality, the only thing missing is some snap, crackle, pop and hiss that really takes us back. Therefore we anxiously await the 78-rpm album release version.

Norm Walker, Regina, Saskatchewan

Lewis & Royal. *Live from Saskatoon: Lock Up Your Gopher Tour.* Kelli Novak, 5855 Dalcastle Dr. NW, Calgary, Alta. T3A 1Z2; knovak@shaw.ca; www.lewisandroyal.com (no addresses on packaging)

Lewis & Royal come billed as “Comedy Music for All Ages”, and I am pleased to report that they fit this label the best way. Their comedy is accessible, clean fun, and can be enjoyed by everyone without coming off as neutered or condescending, the way some “family acts” do. This album is a good advertisement for their live act (which I have not seen) but is less satisfying as an album – this is a common hazard of live albums in general, and live comedy albums in particular.

The liner notes contain generous and eloquent appraisals of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan audiences from the two Alberta musicians, and that much does come across on the album: the audiences seem engaged, laughing and cheering at every appropriate moment and overall boosting the “fun quotient” of the album. Lewis & Royal come off as a comfortable, polished and relaxed duo; of comic musical duos, their dynamic perhaps most resembles the Smothers Brothers. They make some old novelty chestnuts new again, delivering “I’m My Own Grandpa” with a surprising amount of straightforwardness and sincerity, and even dusting off that travesty of “Streets of Laredo” – the one with “If you get an outfit, you’ll be a cowboy too” – in a refreshingly mugging-free fashion. The set list includes spirited a capella renditions of humorous Irish numbers like “The Big McNeil” and “Bricklayer Song”, as well as renditions of tongue-in-cheek country songs like Larry Norman’s “Moses in the Wilderness” and Michael Martin Murphy’s “Where Do Cowboys Go When The Die?”. Much novelty value is to be had from “Elvis Under Water”, featuring a sensitive countrified rendering of the first verse of “Love Me Tender” followed by a bubbly version that sells the premise and does not overstay its welcome. There is also as a nose flute rendition of “Edelweiss” (which is actually quite effective, but probably doesn’t quite have the same comic value it would have in a live act – the playing of the nose flute, after all, is funnier to see than hear). I appreciate the sheer volume of cover material on the

album; it's nice to see an act unafraid to stick with the tried-and-true, which are probably new to the younger members of the audience, anyway.

Like the best musical comic acts, obvious talent is on display with Lewis & Royal, both in terms of instrumental prowess and vocals. Their faux-serious mode sounds serious, and indeed they work in both the Irish and country vernacular capably enough that the punchlines (as in "Streets of Laredo", where a tragic song suddenly turns silly) work beautifully, and the album is free of the treacherous corridors of family entertainment. There's much to admire here, but it still leaves me unsatisfied as an album. I assume this album will probably reach most people as a keepsake picked up at a live show, and is probably most satisfying in that context. A certain amount of patter is aimed at the age difference between the two singers; such jokes simply do not work on CD. Likewise, certain of its comedy numbers, especially those structured around animal noises, scream "had to be there". There are moments when the audience seems beside itself in laughter, and I'm left wondering "What am I not seeing?"

Murray Leeder, Ottawa, Ontario

Le Vent du Nord. *La part du feu*. BCD199. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M5A 1W7; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com

Le trad québécois est de plus en plus présente dans les circuits internationaux des musiques du monde. La plupart des groupes québécois se produisent beaucoup plus à l'extérieur du Québec qu'au Québec même. Même, la musique trad, au Québec, n'est pas considérée comme faisant partie des musiques du monde, alors qu'elle l'est partout ailleurs. Les groupes québécois se distinguent en bonne partie par le fait qu'ils écrivent des compositions originales, subissent les influences de musiques les plus diverses, que ce soit le jazz ou la musique tzigane, intégrant des instruments aux sonorités inhabituelles, par exemples, tout en demeurant fidèle à leurs racines québécoises, françaises et celtiques.

Le groupe Le Vent du Nord, fondé en 2002, est rapidement devenu l'un des groupes les plus représentatifs du trad québécois, donnant plus de 100 concerts par année, tant en Amérique du Nord qu'en Europe. Certains diront même qu'il est un des groupes-phares de la renaissance de la musique traditionnelle québécoise. Le groupe a lancé, par exemple, un CD avec l'Orchestre symphonique de Québec en 2010. Leur CD *La part du feu*, lancé en 2011, se démarque de leurs parutions précédentes en affichant plus clairement leurs racines francophones. Les membres du groupe diront même qu'ils désirent donner un nouveau souffle à leur musique avec des pièces originales qui présentent des arrangements et une instrumentation plus riches et plus colorés, des harmonies vocales plus raffinées. Ces pièces abordent des thèmes typiques de la chanson traditionnelle française et du terroir, dont, entre autres, ceux de la quête et de l'attente, par exemple, l'amant qui cherche l'amour, le père qui attend sa fille, etc.

Les quatre musiciens ne peuvent s'empêcher de pousser les limites du trad, même si ce n'est que subtilement. Dans *La part du feu*, ils nous offrent ainsi une seule chanson aux rythmes tziganes accompagnée d'une fanfare de cuivres aux sonorités des Balkans, alors que l'ensemble des autres pièces et des chants sont typiquement dans l'esprit traditionnel. Ce qui frappe à l'écoute de ce CD est le caractère intimiste de la voix soliste, qui n'est absolument pas englouti sous une masse instrumentale. La balance sonore entre le soliste et les voix et instruments accompagnateurs donnent une force aux chants. Nous pouvons ainsi nous imaginer être dans une soirée traditionnelle, un soir d'hiver, où les convives accompagnent le soliste dans une chanson à répondre, lui laissant la place de soliste qui lui revient.

Parmi les invités, mentionnons entre autres Michel Bordeleau au violon et à la mandoline, Jean-François Branchaud et André Brunet au violon, le groupe Grûv'n Brass aux cuivres et Patrick Graham à la percussion.

Bruno Deschênes, Montréal, Québec