

Sounds of the “Hill Country”: Emilie Clepper’s Québéco-Texan Roots¹

Jada Watson, Université Laval



Figure 1: Emilie Clepper. Photo credit: Tim Hussin. Reproduced with permission.

In a 2011 interview in *Le Devoir*, Québécois singer-songwriter Emilie Clepper spoke with Sylvain Cormier about the origins of her musical sound. Responding to his observation that her music does not reflect the folk stylings her native Montréal or even Canada, Clepper stated: “I am Québécois, I was born here, I grew up in Québec, I still live there, but my words and my melodies come from Texas. It’s my landscape, my imagination. It’s in my genes.”² Texan music culture has always been a part of Clepper’s life: her father, singer-songwriter Russell Clepper, born in Lubbock, TX and raised in Corpus Christi, sang her to sleep with songs by Texas troubadour Townes Van Zandt. When her father returned to Texas after his separation from her mother, Clepper began making regular trips to Austin and the Hill Country region, and was inspired by the city’s eclectic Americana and roots music scene (Côté 2011) and

the landscape of the Texas Hill Country region (Cormier 2011).

Place plays an integral role in the music and identity of many popular musicians. An artist’s relationship to place can manifest itself in many different ways: from songs about life in a particular place, or songs addressing social, political, or environmental issues that arise in a particular region, to songs questioning the confines or social structures that a place has imposed on them.³ Others, like Clepper, find inspiration in the landscapes, sounds, and people surrounding them, ultimately resulting a particular style or feel in their music. Clepper’s 2011 album, *What You See*, in particular reveals a strong influence of the roots music of her southern Texas home, all through her unique Québécois lens. Her album covers a range of themes and emotions (including relationships and love, friendship, solitude and freedom), and takes the listener into specific geographic regions

(Lake Geneva in Switzerland and the Hill Country in Texas), and draws on musical sounds and styles associated with Texas. This article will consider the role that place and its musical culture plays in Clepper's musical sound and style on *What You See*.

Emilie Clepper's Québéco-Texan Roots

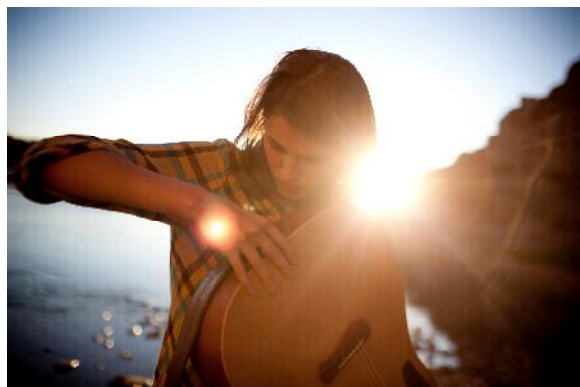


Figure 2: Emilie Clepper in the Rio Grande. Photo by Tim Hussin. Reproduced with permission.

Emilie Clepper grew up in Saint-Jean-Chrysostome (a borough of Lévis, across from Québec City) in a bilingual home, speaking French with her mother (a Francophone from Switzerland) and English with her father (an Anglophone from Texas). She does not consider herself to be just bilingual, but rather “double”: “two languages, two cultures, two ways of writing and one single Emilie.”⁴ And while both cultures have been a major influence on Clepper and her musical career, it seems that her Texan roots and attachment to musical culture and place have been much more significant for this young artist. In conversation with Clepper in October 2011, the singer-songwriter revealed to me that her Texan roots run deep, because the tradition and culture of her father's family has been an integral part of her upbringing, passed through the generations. An important part of this tradition and attachment to Texas is her grandmother's home in Rio Frio, a small town in the Texas Hill Country on the Frio River, which she considers to be “home.” Her grandmother has lived in the same house her whole life, one that is a constant fixture for her: “every time she breaths the air [in Rio Frio], it always feels like home” (Clepper 2011).

Music was an important part of Clepper's upbringing in Québec. A self-taught musician, she began playing the guitar at 11 years of age, and began writing songs the second she picked up the instrument. She recalls, “I never took guitar or voice lessons, but musical instruments were always around me.”⁵ Though she counts Paul Simon and Bob Dylan

as her favorite singer-songwriters, she admits that her main influences remain her father and her brother Zachary (who sings harmony on the final track of *What You See*). Clepper describes her father as a nomadic hippie who wound up in Québec City at the age of 26, with no gas in his Westfalia, no money, playing guitar in front of the Chateau Frontenac – where he eventually met her mother (Cormier 2011). When Clepper was a young child, her father was an Evangelical preacher, and she developed her musical talents and ability to harmonize by singing in church (Clepper 2011). She remembers singing gospel songs as a family and her father always singing around the house.

Clepper's parents separated when she was about 12 years old, and Russell moved back to his native Texas. Though she had been on several trips to Texas before her parents' divorce, it was after her father left that she began making regular trips on Greyhound buses from Québec to Texas to visit family. Like her father, Clepper also has nomadic tendencies and she developed a passion for the road at a young age. When she was just 16 years old, she hitchhiked through the U.S. with nothing but her backpack and guitar, sleeping in parks (Cormier 2011). Now 27, Clepper spends her time living in these two very different habitats: the extreme cold of her native northern province and the extreme heat and dry air in the southern state. These extremes, she reveals, are not just part of her identity, but are also an important element of her musical voice.

What You See

Composition has always been a solitary activity for Clepper, and she freely admits that she is not able to write with other people.⁶ Instead, she finds inspiration in the musicians surrounding her. While she has only purchased two CDs in her life, she listens to and finds inspiration in the music of people that she meets.⁷ One of those inspiring individuals was producer and multi-instrumentalist Joe Grass, whom she met at a music festival in Switzerland in 2010. “There was a jam by the edge of a lake, and a great musical bond formed there. Joe Grass has the same influences as my father.”⁸ Clepper then asked Grass to produce her next album, *What You See*. Together, Clepper and Grass embarked on a unique recording experience to capture the sonorities of the landscape in her imagination.

What You See was released on 8 February 2011 on La Tribu, an independent record label in Québec. Produced by Joe Grass (who also played lap steel on the album), *What You See* was recorded live with all musicians performing in the same room.⁹ Grass and Clepper listened to albums recorded in this manner,

and he convinced the singer-songwriter that it would be the best way to record her next album. The process allowed Grass to capture “the essence of the songs and [bring] out sonorities” (Guimond 2011).¹⁰ By this, Clepper seems to suggest that the recording strategies and environment captured a natural, organic sound that remains true to the sonic qualities of each instrument in the (mainly) acoustic settings. This way of recording can be incredibly challenging, as balance between instruments and vocals can be difficult to maintain. Though she was initially intimidated by the idea, she realized that it would capture the natural flow of her songs and feel more like a conversation between musicians. By using an old analog recorder, they were able to capture richer, rounder textures of the instruments and vocals. The recording style captures a sense of intimacy between the listener and Clepper, as it reproduces sounds we might hear in a live venue, including non-intentional mouth and instrument noises. These noises include the sounds produced by Clepper’s fingers moving across the guitar strings or by her mouth, which are typically removed on studio albums. In addition, there are no sharp attacks in articulation, creating a softer, darker, rounded sound.

The production strategies also evoke a sense of space within the recording, capturing the feel of a small intimate club or café setting. Short reverb is used on the album tracks, not as an effect, but as a method of enhancing both the intimacy of the small space and the distance between the instruments inside this space (Doyle 2004, 42). Clepper’s voice emerges at the front and center of the recorded mix, seemingly closer to our ear and louder than all other instruments. The instruments sound as though they envelop the singer – just as a backup band supports its singer on stage. The upright bass and percussion tend to recede behind Clepper in the center of the mix, while the lap steel, acoustic and electric guitars, and piano are distributed to her left or right. These instruments are not distributed to the same side throughout all of the album’s tracks. For example, on “Come to Me”, the acoustic guitar is left and the lap steel is right. On “Wearing You”, the acoustic is left and the electric guitar and piano are right. On “Hill Country Night”, the acoustic and electric guitar is slightly to the right of Clepper, while the lap steel is left. In this way, the engineer was able to capture different aspects of the recorded conversation between the musicians.

Musical Style

Emilie Clepper’s musical style is characterized by modified forms and a flexible sense of melodic phrasing and harmonic rhythm. While Clepper’s songs maintain a fairly traditional verse-chorus-

instrumental bridge formal structure, she takes certain liberties in repeating or altering sections to further develop lyrical narratives to help tell her stories. Several of the songs on this album have a flexible and unpredictable sense of phrasing. The melodic contours often interrupt the lyrical phrase, revealing a tendency to insert accented words in unexpected places, seemingly anticipating the beat. These anticipatory gestures contribute to the expressive character of the song melodies, which is enhanced by both the harmony and vocal performance.

In addition to her elastic sense of phrasing, Clepper’s performance on this album captures a range of qualities (paralinguistic qualifiers) that reveals subtle nuances and flexible vocal abilities. In general, Clepper has a slightly *husky voice* type that is characterized as dry and whispery (Poyatos 1993, 215). She also uses additional paralinguistic qualifiers that affect her vocal timbre in a way that conveys a variety of emotions on the album’s track. The paralinguistic qualifiers of interest here are breathy and palatalized voice, cry breaks, and murmuring.

A *breathy voice* can connote a range of emotions depending on the context (Poyatos 1993, 207); Clepper’s dark, soft, breathy voice tends to be an expression of weariness, confusion, admiration, intimacy, and even seduction or flirtation. This voice type emerges on many of the album’s tracks, but is most prominent on “You You”, the introduction to “Sara and Isaac”, “Lake Geneva”, “My Wonder”, and “Hill Country Night”.

The *palatalized voice* is a result of lingual control in which the tongue remains close to the palate, producing a babyish sound (Poyatos 1993, 227).¹¹ This quality emerges mainly in the songs with flexible melodic structures, and conveys emotions such as vulnerability, fragility and uncertainty when feeling lost. The adoption of palatalized voice seems to represent the song character pulling inward, or revealing personal weakness. This vocal quality is especially obvious in songs that have a more indie-rock style, including “Wearing You”, “Come to Me”, “You You”, and “Don’t Break the Spell”.

Clepper’s performance also contains subtle vocal nuances that enhance the emotion of a lyrical message. *Cry breaks* (or yodel breaks) are a result of a sudden microtonal shift from a “normal” register to falsetto. A popular vocal ornamentation in country music, yodel breaks create a “crying” effect and are often employed in sad songs where they are coordinated with important lyrical moments or with verbs suggesting crying (Fox 2004, 280). They are used to great effect to capture the vulnerability in the song narrative of “Wearing You” and nostalgia in the country tune, “Freight Train”. Clepper also has a tendency to *murmur*, a voice type that, “is neither a

whisper nor full voice, but is uttered in an undertones that makes it less than distinctive to the ear” (Poyatos 1993, 206). Her murmured voice evokes a sense of intimacy, especially in “Come to Me”, as one has to be within close proximity to hear murmured words. These two qualifiers are used sparingly in her performance, adding subtle change to her timbre.

“Hill Country Night”

“Hill Country Night” opens with two full verses before the chorus, each describing a love that she is not prepared to say goodbye to: a person in the first verse, and perhaps a place in the second verse. These modifications reveal the creative ways in which Clepper alters form to enhance a song’s narrative structure. This song is also evocative of a place. As the song title hints, the Texas Hill Country, and specifically Rio Frio where her grandmother lives, was the main inspiration for this song.¹² Clepper even mentions aspects of nature that are native to the region including Texas live oak, mesquite, cardinals and mountain laurel. Texas Hill Country is the vernacular term that has been applied to central Texas (Jordan 2011). These elements describe the setting for Clepper’s nostalgic look back on a love – both a person and a place to which she does not want to say goodbye. Interestingly, for a song set in Texas’s Hill Country, Clepper draws on a more jazz-like musical style and uses the lap steel (an instrument associated

with country, but not unfamiliar to jazz) to evoke sounds of the region. The melody has a much more relaxed, evenly paced flow than the previous songs, as there are no unexpected breaks with the lyrical phrasing. She also draws on a jazzy syncopated harmonic rhythm of major and minor 7th chords. She even plays with experimental harmony within an E major context, shifting from Amaj7 to Amin7 chord before resolving to Emaj9 in the verses and chorus (Examples 1 and 2). This shift enhances the flirtatious feel of the song, by drawing the listener into this unexpected harmonic place, perhaps representative of the seductive “womb of the hill country night”.

The jazz element also emerges in Clepper’s breathy, husky, and murmuring voice with its small vibrato effect on certain words. Her voice type in this song will remind some listeners of jazz and country artist Norah Jones (who grew up in Fort Worth, TX), notably in her song “Come Away With Me”. Clepper’s breathy voice has a flirty expressive quality, but it also captures her feelings of admiration for person/place as reflected in the third verse. Phonographic staging of the track, which, as discussed earlier, uses short reverb to create the sense of a small space, enhances the moment of intimacy created by Clepper’s vocal performance. Not only do we feel a sense of closeness with the singer, but the staging also suggests an intimate setting like a cabin nestled in Texas Hill Country (or perhaps her grandmother’s home in Rio Frio).

The image displays a musical score for the song "Hill Country Night". It consists of four staves. The first three staves are vocal lines in treble clef, with lyrics written below them. The lyrics are: "You walk a - way a - gain — with that my - ster - ious grin — though I", "Oak, mes - quite and you — in our E - den room — and the", and "you're walk - ing on wa - ter you're def - in - ing win - ter you de". The fourth staff is a guitar accompaniment in treble clef, showing a series of chords. Below the guitar staff, the chord progression is indicated as "E+: Emaj9" and "Dmaj7(VII⁷)".

6

want you so to stay— got - ta find it in - side of me smile

bright car - din - als— that once sung be - fore is gone—

fine na - ture's or - a - cle ma - king mom - ents spar - kle a se -

C#min7(vi⁷)

8

back at us side - ways cher is the me - mor - ies

back to skin and bones this can not be ho - me no—

cret in the win - dow— blown a - way a mill - ion— times—

Amaj7(IV⁷) Amin7(iv⁷) Emaj9

**Example 1: “Hill Country Night”, Verses 1, 2, and 3.
(Instrument below vocal lines is acoustic guitar)**

Moun-tain lau - rel bloom— don't let our love give in—

E+: G#min7(iii⁷) Amaj7(IV⁷) Amin7(iv⁷)

5

May our dream live on — in the wo - mb of the hill

Emaj9 Amaj7(IV⁷)

8

— coun - tr - y ni - ght —

Amin7(iv⁷) Emaj9

**Example 2: “Hill Country Night”, Chorus.
(Instrument below vocal lines is acoustic guitar)**

“Lake Geneva” and “Freight Train”

Freight trains, and trains in general, have been romanticized in country and folk music, as many musicians have written songs about hopping cars and roaming the expansive American countryside. Trains appear in the narrative of two songs on this album that have an overridingly “country” sound: “Lake Geneva” and “Freight Train”. The album’s 7th track, “Lake Geneva” opens with the twangy pitch bends of Grass playing the pedal steel over the strummed chords of an acoustic, creating a musical portrait of vast open space. This landscape is solidified for the listener when Clepper sings about stepping off a train to find solace and freedom on the shores of Lake Geneva. The album’s last track, “Freight Train”, seems inspired by Clepper’s nomadic youth, and draws on finger-picking and close country harmonies to explore the feelings of wonder and adventure found in the freedom of the rails. Clepper revealed in conversation that, for her, this style is reflective of the Texas Hill Country, of sitting around a campfire jamming with close friends.¹³

Clepper’s song is reminiscent of the American folk song of the same name written by Elizabeth Cotten (1893-1987).¹⁴ Featuring her signature “Cotten picking” finger-picking style,¹⁵ Cotten wrote her “Freight Train” when she was just 12 years old, about a train that passed by her childhood home.¹⁶ Her song

was popularized during the American folk revival and has been performed and recorded by a number of artists including Chet Atkins, Joan Baez, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Pete Seeger, and Peter Paul and Mary.¹⁷ While not necessarily a source for Clepper’s own “Freight Train”, both songs feature a simple arrangement of finger-picking acoustic guitar and voice to explore a popular theme of riding the rails to escape the hardships of reality.

* * *

The songs on *What You See* reveal different aspects of Clepper’s unique musical language; her musical style is characterized by unpredictable melodic breaks that interrupt lyrical flow, elastic metric sensibility, and country and jazz instrumentation and harmonic language. While her voice has primarily a soft, husky quality, she adopts additional paralinguistic qualifiers and vocal nuances to express a range of emotions, from vulnerability to weakness or loneliness to a seductive flirtation. Cry breaks are used sparingly to convey the pain of heartbreak. Furthermore, the recording strategies for the album used short reverb not only to emphasize the place of the voice in the mix, but also to enhance the space of the live recording, making each song sound as though they are occurring within a small intimate setting.

Québéco-Texan Roots Style

Music theorist Mark Spicer has reflected that it is often impossible to categorize some artists “within the boundaries of one particular style; [in such cases] stylistic *eclecticism* becomes the defining feature of their music” (2010, 124). Stylistic eclecticism is certainly the case for Clepper, whose music pulls from folk, country, and jazz influences. She is a unique artist whose music evokes many artists and styles, but does not sound like one single person or style in particular. When listening to *What You See*, it is easy to rattle off a list of names of artists that Clepper sounds like: she has the elastic or unpredictable sense of phrasing of Sarah Harmer and Ani DiFranco, the vocal nuances of Emmylou Harris, DiFranco, and Björk, the palatalized voice of Macy Gray and Chantal Kreviazuk, and the husky tone of Americana artists Lucinda Williams, Patty Loveless, or the jazzy Norah Jones.

When discussing her musical style, Clepper suggested that it’s “America with her perspective, with our perspective” (Cormier 2011).¹⁸ In these songs and album as a whole, Clepper draws from a variety of roots music styles: the poetics of folk songwriting, the instrumental colors (lap steel), vocal twang (cry breaks) and harmony from country music, syncopated harmonic rhythms and smooth husky vocals from jazz. She even makes use of non-traditional instruments such as a musical saw on “You You” – an instrument used by several Texas musicians. Taking the full album into consideration, her songs range from an indie-rock style (“Come to Me”, “Wearing You”, “No Use in Trying”, “You You”, and “Don’t Break the Spell”), to folk rock (“Sara and Isaac”), to jazz (“Hill Country Night”), to country-rock (“What You See”), and straight-up country (“Lake Geneva” and “Freight Train”). Clepper’s music is an amalgamation of words, melodies, harmonies, and instrumental sounds from across southern American roots musics, offering a Québécois take on the Texas Americana tradition.

Bibliography

- Clepper, Emilie. 2011. Interview with the author, October.
- Cormier, Sylvain. 2011. “Entrevue avec Emilie Clepper – Texas en Québec.” *Le Devoir* (February 18), <http://www.ledevoir.com/culture/musique/317027/entrevue-avec-emilie-clepper-texas-en-quebec>
- Côté, Émilie. 2011. “Emilie Clepper : travailler à sa manière.” *La Presse* (February 19)

http://www.cyberpresse.ca/arts/musique/201102/19/01-4372055-emilie-clepper-travailler-a-sa-manie-re.php?utm_categorieinterne=trafficdrivers&utm_contentinterne=cyberpresse_B9_arts_244_accueil_POS3

Doyle, Peter. 2004. *Echo & Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Guimond, Josée. 2011. “Dans les yeux d’Emilie Clepper.” *Le Soleil* (February 12), <http://www.cyberpresse.ca/le-soleil/arts-et-spectacles/sur-scene/201102/11/01-4369463-dans-les-yeux-demilie-clepper.php>

Fox, Aaron. 2004. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jordan, Terry G. 2011. “Hill Country.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/r_yh02. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

Krims, Adam. 2007. *Music and Urban Geography*. New York: Routledge.

Malone, Bill C. 2002. *Country Music, USA*. 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Poyatos, Fernando. 1993. *Paralanguage: A Linguistic and Interdisciplinary Approach to Interactive Speech and Sound*. Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.

Spicer, Mark. 2010. “‘Reggatta de Blanc’: Analyzing Style in the Music of the Police.” In *Sounding Out Pop*, edited by Mark Spicer and John Covach, 124-153. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Stimeling, Travis. 2012. “Music, Place, and Identity in the Central Appalachian Mountaintop Removal Mining Debate,” *American Music* 30/1: 1–29.

Watson, Jada. 2011. “Dust-blown Tractor Tunes: Representations of Environment in Butch Hancock’s Songs about Farming in West Texas.” *Canadian Folk Music* 45/1: 10–18.

Watson, Jada. 2014. “The Dixie Chicks’ ‘Lubbock or Leave it’: Negotiating Identity and Place in Song.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8/1: 49-75.

Discography

Emilie Clepper. 2011. *What You See*. La Tribu.

Notes

¹ This article was influenced by my doctoral analysis exam at Université Laval, where I was asked to analyse songs from Emilie Clepper's album *What You See* and discuss her musical style. In October 2011, I was fortunate to meet and speak with Clepper about her album, musical influences, and Texas roots. I would like to thank my advisor, Serge Lacasse, for introducing me to Clepper's music.

Lyrics for "Hill Country Night" are reproduced with permission of Nikolas Gravel, Publication Manager of La Tribu. The photos of Emilie Clepper are reproduced with permission of La Tribu.

² « Je suis Québécoise, je suis née ici, j'ai grandi dans la région de Québec, j'habite encore là, mais j'ai des mots et des mélodies qui viennent du Texas. C'est mon paysage, mon imaginaire. C'est dans mes gènes » (Cormier 2011).

³ Recent musicological studies have considered relationships between music and place, including Krims 2007, Stimeling 2012, and Watson 2011, 2014.

⁴ « Je suis pas juste bilingue, je suis double." Deux langues, deux cultures, deux façons d'écrire en une seule et même Emilie » (Cormier 2011).

⁵ « Je n'ai jamais suivi de cours de guitare ou de voix, mais il y a toujours eu des instruments de musique autour de moi » (Côté 2011).

⁶ « Je ne suis pas capable d'écrire avec d'autres gens. Pour moi, l'écriture est un moment de solitude » (Côté 2011).

⁷ « Mes principales influences sont mon père et mon frère, explique-t-elle. J'ai acheté deux CD dans ma vie. J'écoute la musique des gens que je rencontre » (Côté 2011).

⁸ « Il y a eu un jam au bord d'un lac, où est née une grande complicité musicale. «Joe Grass a les mêmes influences que mon père » (Côté 2011).

⁹ The album tracks can be listened to in the « Poste d'écoute » (the listening post) on the La Tribu website: <http://postedecoute.latribu.ca/ecoutes/default.asp>

¹⁰ « Joe [Grass] a su saisir l'essence des chansons et faire ressortir les sonorités » (Guimond 2011).

¹¹ This is not meant as an insult to Clepper, the palatalized voice type is quite common in popular music. R&B artist Macy Gray is known for this husky palatalized voice type (especially on her 1999 hit "I Try"). Likewise, the Australian artist Natalie Imbruglia and Canadians Chantal Kreviazuk, Emily Haines (of Metric), and even Feist have this palatalized voice type. Clepper's palatalized voice is sometimes accompanied by an *alveolarized voice* (Poyatos 1993, 227), or a lisp.

¹² When discussing her attachment to Rio Frio, Clepper revealed that her grandfather drowned in the Frio River, stating that he is now part of the landscape. In conversation with the author (Montréal, October 2011).

¹³ In conversation with the author (Montréal, October 2011). Clepper also told me that "Freight Train" is most representative of her musical taste and influences. Though this style of music is what she is drawn to, she admits that

she did not want to give this style to the album as a whole so that she would not be labeled only as a country artist so early in her career.

¹⁴ Cotten's performance can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43-UUeCa6Jw>

¹⁵ A left-handed guitarist, Cotten used a right-handed guitar upside down and played bass lines with her fingers while plucking melody with her thumb. This style of picking can be viewed on the link Cotten performing "Freight Train" above.

¹⁶ Bibeau and Melcher 2005, <http://toto.lib.unca.edu/sounds/piedmontblues/cotten.html>

¹⁷ Many artists have actually created their own version of this song, changing lyrics or modifying the melody or instrumentation.

¹⁸ « C'est l'Amérique avec ma perspective, et avec notre perspective » (Cormier 2011).

Canada's Folk, Roots and World Music Magazine

Canada	2 years -	\$76.50 CDN	1 year -	\$23.50 CDN
USA	2 years -	\$62.00	1 year -	\$19.00
UK & EU (air)	2 years -	\$126.00	1 year -	\$63.25 CDN
UK & EU (regular)	2 years -	\$86.50 CDN	1 year -	\$43.25 CDN

Subscribe Now!

Penguin Eggs, 109-12 80 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T6G 0R1
Telephone: 780.433.8287 email: penguineggs@hotmail.com
Subscribe online: www.penguineggs.ab.ca