

# Reviews

Edited by John Leeder

## Recordings

**The Arrogant Worms.** *Space*. AW-6006. 539 Frontenac Street, Kingston, ON, K7K 4M3; [arrogantwormies@gmail.com](mailto:arrogantwormies@gmail.com); [www.arrogantworms.com](http://www.arrogantworms.com)

With a career spanning over two decades, the Worms' output now includes 14 albums (as well as one DVD). Released in March 2014, *Space* is the latest addition to their catalogue.

On the musical front, the group is still made up of its three core members, Trevor Strong (vocals), Chris Patterson (bass and vocals), and Mike McCormick (guitar and vocals). But as usual, their topical comedy has them roving between musical idioms. As such, they engage an array of guest artists who wield various instruments – banjo, ukulele, fiddle, trumpet, bass, sax and keyboards. Several tracks – e.g., “Yoga Pants” and “The Guy Who’s Always Out of Tune” – contain horn arrangements.

Lyrical speaking, the Worms tackle a variety of topics. Once again they flaunt their penchant for placing everyday phenomena under a satirical microscope. In “Uncomfortable Chair,” a mundane annoyance is treated with wry severity through continuous key modulations. Allergy sufferers will find fellowship in “Histamines” and “River of Snot.”

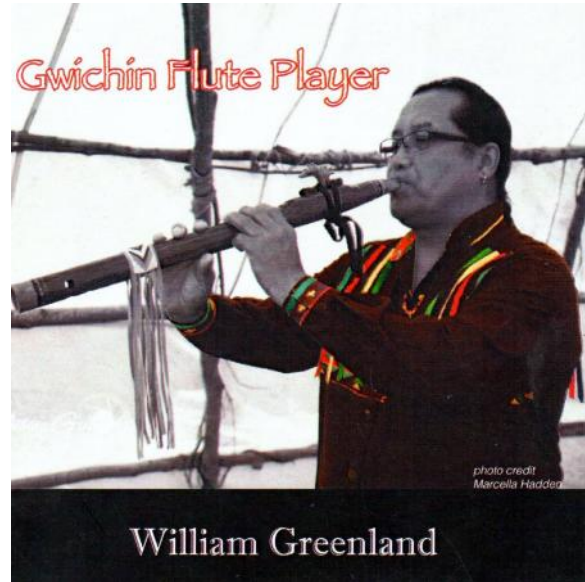
As with their previous work, the Worms include a slice of nationalism on the album, this time with the self-described “We Talk About the Weather,” and “When Canada Rules the World” (an ironic take on colonization).

The group’s trademark irony infiltrates their use of musical genre itself. “Trapped in a Country Song” bundles together all the musical tropes of said genre, while “Meaningful Love Song” has a male voice spoofing the melodic arc of a pop ballad.

And finally, the Worms remain up-to-date by lending us their take on current trends. See “My Facebook Friends” and “Yoga Pants” for an affirmation that your newfound guilty habits are universal.

*Sija Tsai, Toronto, Ontario*

**William Greenland.** *Gwichin Flute Player*. P.O. Box 2072, Sta. Main, Yellowknife, N.W.T. X1A 2P6; [gwichintalker@gmail.com](mailto:gwichintalker@gmail.com)



William Greenland, originally from the community of Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada, is a member of the Gwich'in<sup>1</sup> Nation. The Gwich'in reside in the northwestern parts of North America, spanning from Alaska to the Mackenzie Delta region in the N.W.T. William currently resides in Yellowknife, where he recorded this debut CD of spiritual flute music.

The Native Flute is an instrument originating from Aboriginal cultures far south of the Gwich'in. In parts of the U.S.A., the instrument has had a recent comeback, as its healing and restorative powers have been rediscovered. William travels frequently, and has spent time with many different First Nations peoples throughout North America. Wherever he travels, he shares the knowledge that has been passed down to him from Gwich'in elders, and he in turn learns the culture and traditions of others. This includes spiritual rituals, stories, drumming, and, lately, flute playing.

William made the flutes featured on this recording himself. As well, he taught himself how to play. I asked William if there are oral or written records of the Gwich'in using any type of wind instrument in their culture. To the best of his knowledge, the answer is “no”, but he grants that it is conceivable that simple wind instruments were once fashioned out of reeds. Much traditional knowledge regarding the use of musical instruments has understandably been lost amongst the Gwich'in, especially in the N.W.T. It is interesting to note that the Alaskan Gwich'in have not lost as much of their traditions, owing, in William’s

view, to a less lengthy and damaging history with European colonizers. Like many other Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the Gwich'in have struggled with the loss of their language, culture and traditional knowledge, thanks to Residential Schools and other factors.

There is little information about William or his music on the CD cover, and no liner notes are provided. The tracks – there are 18 of them in total – are not named or even numbered. Perhaps this is done intentionally, so that the listener approaches each piece with an openness devoid of expectation or preconception. If a track were titled “Trees in the Wind”, then that would evoke predefined imagery as one listened to the music. That cannot happen when listening to William’s CD.

Though the notes may be sparse, William does share with his listeners that, since learning how to play the flute in 2010, “it has changed my life”. Knowing William as I do, and understanding a little about the history of the First Nations people of the North, I know this is no flippant statement. William’s music is not just relaxation music; it is spiritual music, not unlike the religious prayer songs of other peoples.

The Native Flute, indeed any traditional wind instrument, has a way of connecting one’s individual spirit with a greater spirit. As a recorder player myself, I can certainly appreciate this. Whether or not you believe in Native Spiritualism, there is no doubt that the kind of music played on this instrument is very soothing, calming, and relaxing. William tells me that his CD has been a hit with local yoga classes and massage therapists. But to relegate his CD to what some might consider the airy-fairy realm of New Age healing would be fair neither to the music nor to the musician.

The majority of the tracks on the recording feature the flute. Only two, towards the end of the CD, are songs, accompanied by guitar. One is a song telling of William’s very personal journey towards healing and of his thanks to the Creator. The other, which he wrote in 1989, has a repetitive double-tracked refrain: “Let your spirit fly”. The song and its refrain urge one to live life and celebrate it to the fullest. In fact, that refrain serves as an apt alternate title for the CD, since one’s spirit does seem to fly when listening to the haunting, echoing notes of the flute on the other 16 tracks.

I asked William whether the songs on the CD were all his own compositions. They are, but not in the sense that they are written down and arranged, to be played the same way again and again. The pieces do not follow a pattern of notes. They follow the path

of his spirit as he plays. He thinks of a subject, and starts playing in a musical free association.

The spiritual effect of the flute compositions is conveyed in different ways. Some tracks sound like they were recorded outdoors. Some employ effects like echo and reverb. He occasionally uses effects like the sounds of wind or birds, or other outdoor sounds, as a means to enhance the connection he feels – and we are invited to feel – to the Creator. Several tracks also include traditional drumming and drum song in the background, serving as an interesting counter-melody to the flute, forming a cross-cultural medley of Aboriginal musical traditions supporting and complimenting each other. The Dene drumming is courtesy of a Dehcho First Nations man from Wrigley, N.W.T., called Lawrence Nayally.

William has been singing and performing for many years, but until he discovered the power of the flute, he never recorded his music. When I spoke to him about this review, he still shone with the joy that this discovery has given him. In fact, William, eager to spread his joy around, is on the cusp of releasing a second album of flute compositions. He also has made some of his pieces available to a wider audience through YouTube.

There are regrettably few recordings that come out of the North which can be considered as representing traditional First Nations cultures. There are archive recordings available of drumming and drum song, but they are not widely accessible to the public. Although William’s CD isn’t music indigenous to the Northern Canadian Aboriginal peoples, it still captures the essence of Native Spiritualism, and I am glad he has brought the Native Flute’s power to the north.

*Maira Cameron, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories*

<sup>1</sup> The name is spelled without an apostrophe on the CD cover.

**Anais Mitchell & Jefferson Hamer.** *Child Ballads*. WILDER 002. Wilderland Records, #160, 511 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10011, U.S.A.; <http://www.wonderingsound.com/label/wilderland-records>; Cadiz Music, 2 Greenwich Quay, Clarence Rd., London SE8 3EY, U.K.; [info@cadizmusic.co.uk](mailto:info@cadizmusic.co.uk); [www.cadizmusic.co.uk](http://www.cadizmusic.co.uk); Liz Riches, [liz@karakter-worldwide.com](mailto:liz@karakter-worldwide.com); [www.karakter-worldwide.com](http://www.karakter-worldwide.com); Anais Mitchell, P.O. Box 710, Montpelier, VT 05601, U.S.A.

Interpreting the big traditional ballads in Sir Francis Child’s 1882-1898 *English & Scottish Popular Ballads* can sometimes seem a very “niche” occupation,

so it is always good to discover that someone else is doing it too. Anaïs Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer provide almost 40 minutes, covering seven classic stories in song. They sing and play guitar, joined from time to time by Viktor Krauss on bass, Tim Lauer on accordion and pump organ and Brittany Haas on fiddle. Four out of seven songs have happy endings (a high percentage, this, for Child ballads!); in “Willie of Winsbury”, “Willie’s Lady”, “Riddles Widely Expounded”, and “Tam Lin”, love and resourcefulness win the day. In two of the other three ballads, “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Clyde Waters”, we have death by drowning, and in “Geordie” a projected hanging. “Willie of Winsbury”, “Riddles”, “Geordie”, and “Tam Lin” were already favourites of mine, “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Clyde Waters” I know but don’t perform, and “Willie’s Lady” I just heard recently while at the Princeton, B.C., Traditional Music Festival last August. These seven make a balanced selection of material.

Art appreciation is a subjective matter, but I have to say how much I like the graphics provided by Peter Nevins. Seven separate vignettes (six on the insert, one on the cover), reminiscent of old-fashioned coloured woodcuts, depict scenes from each of the featured ballads. (The cover one I at first thought was a second illustration for “Tam Lin”, but suddenly realized it was “Riddles” that was being evoked, because the picture itself is a puzzle... if you buy the CD, you’ll see ). My only concern – by choosing to focus on the graphics, the duo sacrificed space where we might have learned more about the background of the performers and the songs performed.

Much time and trouble has gone into producing a splendidly-crafted sound on these tracks. Voices and instruments interweave to produce arrangements which are very “together”, and there is fine guitar playing by Anaïs and Jefferson on intros, extros and instrumental breaks. In “Tam Lin” there are also some lovely guitar modulations from the minor to the major key at the end of certain verses. This said, I have some reservations. I am not all that happy when the vocalists sing together; their voices are quite different, and to my mind sound better separate. And sometimes all this artistry seems a bit much – there’s just too much going on to allow the listener to concentrate adequately on the story. The story, of course, is important in ballads, and I commend both vocalists for their (mostly) clear enunciation. Since there are no printed lyrics, one needs to know what’s happening. However, too elaborate a musical arrangement can also interfere with this – one gets caught up in a wash of sound and loses the thread of the story. It also detracts from the sense of drama that is an integral part of so many ballads.

I found the dramatic element underplayed on several tracks, for example, in “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Geordie”. “Tam Lin”, which I liked best of all, had plenty of momentum and suspense, with good timing; also “Clyde Waters”. “Willie of Winsbury”, though, lacked drama and opted instead for a gentle, rocking treatment, very pleasant to listen to but losing a sense of urgency. To tell the truth, my overall impression, after listening to the CD several times, was that it was *all* very nice listening but possibly just a little bland.

Different interpreters deal with projecting emotion in different ways, and I’m not saying these ballads *must* be sung a cappella; on the contrary, musical arrangements can be most effective. But it seems it is ultimately the voice that is the primary instrument of dramatic storytelling, spoken or sung. The most powerful renderings of these intrinsically powerful ballads convey emotion and feeling through the voice, though opinions may differ as to how much emotion is good and how much is too much. Often restraint is more powerful than histrionics. On this CD I felt the drama sometimes got lost in the elaborate web of vocal and instrumental sound.

On the other hand, it is an odd fact that the recordings one listens to most often are not always the sparest, most raw and powerful ones. They are too demanding. As a result, there is an important place for traditional ballad performances that come under the rubric “easy listening”. They are likely to appeal to a wider selection of people and to introduce them to what I have called a “niche” genre of folk art. Anaïs and Jefferson and their fellow musicians have produced a CD which successfully marries voice and instrumentals, creating a sound that is sometimes upbeat, sometimes more gentle, but is always pleasant to listen to and at its best draws out and showcases dynamic images and stories.

*Rosaleen Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta*

**Ten Ten. *De-Bayashi*.** Aki Takahashi, 203-717 Eglinton Ave. West, Toronto, Ont. M5N 1C9 (no postal address on packaging);

[taiko@kiyoshinagata.com](mailto:taiko@kiyoshinagata.com); [www.tentenCanada.com](http://www.tentenCanada.com)

**Ten Ten. *Ko-Banashi*.** (addresses above)

The artistic director and founder of Ten Ten is Japanese-born multi-talented artist Aki Takahashi, currently living in Toronto. She is a shamisen player, singer, taiko player, multi-instrumentalist, composer, songwriter and textile designer. She was raised in an artistic family; her grandmother loved folksinging, a love she shared with Aki. Aki also has a passion for

calligraphy, which she learned from her father, who was accomplished in this art. She moved to Canada in 2001. In 2003, she joined the ranks of Toronto-based taiko group Nagata Shachu, under the direction of Kiyoshi Nagata. Besides Ten Ten, she performs with other musicians from different musical backgrounds, composing music for film and dance, as well as composing for Nagata Shachu. Following the creation of her group Ten Ten in 2007, she has been performing on a regular basis in Canada, Japan and the United States, making a living with music.

As for her two CDs, the first one, *de-bayashi*, was released in 2007, the second in 2013. The two are quite different. Although in the first CD she has few traditional Japanese folksongs, as most songs are her own compositions, we can notice the strong influence of min'yo, Japanese folksongs, while in the second one she gives us original songs of which the influences are very diverse, including Japanese min'yo, of course, using a bass and a cajon alongside her shamisen, a shinobue (small transverse flute) and other percussion instruments, including taiko. We notice in the second CD an obvious evolution, going beyond her background as a Japanese folksinger (apparently, she knows many thousands of these songs).

Notwithstanding the folk style character of the first CD, her arrangements are unusual from a Japanese point of view. For example, most of the songs are harmonized with secondary voices, something which is not common in Japanese min'yo, and one other thing that differs from what could be heard in Japan is that her harmonization does not follow the Western harmonic canon. She did not try, so to speak, to please non-Japanese ears by harmonizing her songs and arrangements with chords. Although she makes use of harmonic lines, she remains traditionally Japanese, since she does \*not\* make use of Western harmonies and chord progressions. The same can be said for the songs of the second CD. Although the influence of traditional min'yo is not the main core of her songs, there is also no harmony as such, even though she uses a electric bass.

If I may make a single criticism: sometimes there are tuning problems. It must be said that the way the shamisen is built, as well as the way the musician hits the strings with a large pick that has to be held by the whole hand, means that it easily gets out of tune. The player must regularly retune the strings while playing. This out-of-tune character is, for me, what makes the charm of this instrument. But as well, in singing in a Japanese traditional style, the musical modes she uses are not tempered, and differ from the common Western two main modes. Sometimes, a min'yo song could

even have a tuning that is unique to it, something which Aki Takasashi takes advantage of.

*Bruno Deschênes, Montréal, Québec*

**Various (musicians), Douglas Community Centre (executive producer), Laura Risk and Glenn Patterson (producers).** *Douglastown: Musique et chanson de la Gaspésie / Music and Song from the Gaspé Coast.* Centre communautaire Douglas / Douglas Community Center, 28, rue St-Patrick, Douglastown, Gaspé (Québec), G4X 2Y2; [centre.douglas@douglastown.net](mailto:centre.douglas@douglastown.net); [www.douglastown.net](http://www.douglastown.net)

This collection of historic and contemporary music from Douglastown, Quebec, a village on the Gaspé Coast, grew out of an oral history project that focused on the village's Irish roots. Beginning in 2010, Luc Chaput and Linda Drody conducted more than 60 interviews and collected over 70 hours of home recordings from both local and diasporic Gaspésians. These recordings, some of which date back to the late 1950s and '60s, were digitized by audio engineer Denis Martin; the final tracks included on this 73-minute disc were then selected by ethnomusicologists Laura Risk and Glenn Patterson. This process is described as one of collaboration between outsiders (Risk and Patterson) and the community. The result is a CD, accompanied by extensive, bilingual liner notes, that explores not only Irish influence in the area, but also the exchange among French, English, Scottish, and First Nations peoples.

One of the most interesting aspects of this collection, especially when considered alongside similar collections, is the inclusion of numerous female musicians. Since the producers do not draw attention to this fact, the reason for this inclusion is unclear. Were the producers particularly careful to seek out recordings by women, or was the older generation of women in Douglastown more involved in traditional music-making than women in other areas of Canada? Whatever the case, the women included have contributed to the musical life of the town as fiddlers, pianists, pump organists, and vocalists, and, as described in the liner notes, these women played at home, passing on the tradition to the younger generation, as well as at social gatherings and on the radio. In this way, this collection highlights the varied contributions that women have made to Douglastown's musical life.

Musically, this collection includes a number of particularly memorable tracks. Fiddler Erskine Morris's infectious groove and crisp clogging (especially on "Fat Molasses") is particularly striking, as is harmonicist Alphonse Matte's version of "Soldier's Joy," featuring almost constant pulsing chords under

the melody line. Listening to pianist Corinne Rooney's version of "Joe Drody's Jig" with square dance calls by Bernard Rooney may make you want to take up square dancing, while Brian Morris and Brigid Drody's guitar duet complements the more up-tempo tunes with its beautiful simplicity. Finally, a compilation track comparing four versions of "The Cockawee" as played by four fiddlers highlights both stylistic commonalities and differences among the fiddlers, while Beatrice Fortin-Morris's vocal version of "The Four Corners of Saint-Malo" proves that a fiddle is not needed for a good old-time dance.

This collection ultimately provides listeners with a valuable introduction to music in Douglstown, offering "a window into the cultural life of the Gaspesian village". Since the majority of these tracks feature tunes drawn from Douglstown's fiddle tradition – tunes that are sung using vocables, or that are played on harmonica, pump organ, piano, or fiddle in the bluegrass, Canadian old-time, and regional style (i.e., the "old-style") – it will be of most interest to those who study or have an affinity for fiddling in Quebec or, more broadly, North America. (Thirty-seven of the tracks are directly connected to the fiddle tradition. Six showcase ballads or Irish songs, while three are excerpts from interviews.) But besides the interest the collection may have for outsiders, for Douglstowners this collection will undoubtedly be a cherished token of their musical life as a community.

*Monique Giroux, Winnipeg, Manitoba*



Canadian Society  
for Traditional Music

Société canadienne pour  
les traditions musicales

