

Reviews

Recordings

Highrise Lonesome. *One Way Street*. #314, 1422 East 3rd Ave., Vancouver, B.C. V5N 5R5; sue@suemalcolm.com; www.slowpitchjam.com/highriselonesome

Wild Rose Xpress. *Wild Rose*. 485 Rainbow Falls Way, Chestermere, Alta. T1X 1S5; wildrose-xpress@shaw.ca; www.wildrosexpress.com

When first encountering a bluegrass recording, I listen for several things: Sound. I don't mean the quality of the recording, although this is obviously important. Rather, I try to get a sense of the band's sound – are they confident, is there a sense of musical cohesion, does their music reach out and grab me? Chops. Are the players in command of their instruments? Are the vocals accomplished, and do they speak to me? Repertoire. Is the selection of songs balanced between standards and originals, or do the players rely solely on standard songs and tunes? I recently listened to CDs by two bluegrass bands from Western Canada, and had a different reaction to each.

Wild Rose, by Alberta-based Wild Rose Xpress, is an enjoyable compilation of tunes from the bluegrass and traditional country canon, along with several original pieces. The band comprises Sandy Hirth on lead vocals and guitar; Tim Babey, mandolin and vocals; Randy Jones, fiddle and vocals; Karl Lingwood, banjo, Dobro© and vocals; and Morgan Luchinski, bass and vocals. The band state that they recorded around live studio mics, presumably to retain the sense of spontaneous interaction that typifies the classic recordings in bluegrass. Although there is an element of that kind of interaction, the recording unfortunately sounds a wee bit murky. Instrumentally the players are competent but not outstanding, and the banjo (played by Karl Lingwood) is tubby. Vocally the band is oriented around the lead vocals of Sandy Hirth, who has a strong voice that is more reminiscent of country music – think Dolly Parton – than of bluegrass. The male vocalists are capable as well, and the harmonies are good, if a bit low-key. The song selection relies on a number of bluegrass and country standards, such as “Driving Nails in My Coffin” and Parton’s “Jolene”, balanced by some less common songs, such as John Hartford’s “Old Riverman”. The recording also includes three originals: the instrumental “Karl’s Breakdown”, which has an interesting melody; the nice waltz “Wild Rose”; and the very nice gospel song “I Ain’t Done Walking”. In fact, the latter is the highlight of the album, in my opinion.

Overall, *Wild Rose* is a pleasant and competent recording. I enjoyed listening to it, but found nothing

that really grabbed my attention, with the exception of the aforementioned gospel song “I Ain’t Done Walking”. Recommended.

The other recording is *One Way Street*, by the Vancouver-based Highrise Lonesome. The band comprises several well-known figures in West Coast bluegrass: dobroist and multi-instrumentalist Don Fraser, who has been a stalwart in Vancouver’s music scene for over 40 years; banjoist Jay Buckwold, who founded and runs the B.C. Bluegrass Workshop; and lead singer and guitarist Sue Malcolm, known for leading the slow-pitch jam at the Workshop. The recording also features Vic Smyth on mandolin and vocals and Stu MacDonald on bass and vocals. The recording’s sound is up-front and well-balanced, and the band is impressive instrumentally. Fraser’s playing on the Dobro© is simply outstanding; Buckwold’s banjo playing is authoritative and original, and he pulls good tone out of his Huber banjo, and Smyth’s mandolin is punchy. Vocally the group really shines, particularly Malcolm’s vocals, which are powerful and appropriately bluegrass-y (including a yodel ending on “Blue Night”). Smyth’s lead vocals are excellent, although perhaps lacking the “high lonesome sound” of traditional bluegrass, and Fraser’s lead on one song is funky. The harmony singing is good, although again, less hard-edged than traditional.

Highrise Lonesome chose to populate their album with mostly original tunes, a pretty gutsy strategy that would have backfired if the songs were weak. However, I can report to you that they succeeded, because their original material is generally strong and worthwhile. The material ranges from traditional bluegrass to ragtime (Fraser’s “Use it or Lose It”), to old-timey (Malcolm’s lovely “Dragonfly,” complete with her clawhammer banjo playing), to vaguely klezmer-ish (Fraser’s tasty instrumental “The Salish Sea”), to gospel (Fraser and Malcolm’s “Walk On, Brother”). They also included two bluegrass/country standards, Bill Monroe’s “Blue Night” (which should more accurately be attributed to Kirk McGee, but who am I to quibble?) and Jack Clement’s “Just Someone I Used to Know”.

One Way Street is an enjoyable album that deserves multiple listenings. It really grabbed my attention. Highly recommended.

Michael Corcoran, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Enoch Kent. *Take a Trip With Me*. BCD202. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; www.borealisrecords.com; info@borealisrecords.com

This is Enoch Kent’s sixth CD, all of which have been released since 2002; it has 14 tracks. The title

comes from the first line of the first song on the CD, Woody Guthrie's "1913 Massacre".

With only a few exceptions, the songs on the CD have a strong sense of place, as does the singer, a Scot by birth who has lived in Canada since the 1960s. Kent's strong Scottish burr somehow does not impair his renditions of American or Australian songs. Kent sings "1913 Massacre", by an Oklahoman, about a tragedy that took place in Michigan, in a way that retains the sense of place in North America, even though his voice throughout is identifiably Scottish. The songs themselves come from Canada, the U.S., Scotland, England and Australia.

This said, some of the strongest tracks on the CD are Scottish songs, especially Robert Burns' "A'e Fond Kiss" and the traditional "Bonnie Susie Cleland". Kent's rendition of the latter is particularly powerful.

This CD is above all dominated by Kent's voice, although many of the tracks have instrumental accompaniment. Four of the tracks are done by Kent a cappella. The instrumental accompaniments are, wisely, understated and not at all flashy. Kent's vocal style is rough, not as rough as Woody Guthrie's, but definitely without the feel of a polished delivery.

The songs on five of the tracks are by Kent; these range from the sentimental "Pawnshop Window" to the topical but yet extremely moving "Peas Brose", which he performs a cappella. This latter song is about the economic problems of shipyard workers in Northern England and in Scotland, but the song is considerably more interesting than is its description.

A common thread that links all of the songs by Kent and most of the others on the CD is a sense of solidarity with and concern for what are conventionally called the "working people". In some of the songs, trade unions are explicitly referred to; in those in which they are not, the viewpoint of the person having difficulty in keeping head above water in the economic sense is maintained. Whether the song is about sheep station hands in Australia or a murdered miner on Vancouver Island or shipyard workers in Britain, the side taken is that of an underdog, alienated class in unfair combat with the powerful of society.

In addition to "A'e Fond Kiss", "Bonnie Susie Cleland" and "Peas Brose", alluded to above, several notable tracks are the following:

"The Gallowa' Hills": An a cappella rendition of the traditional song about a man about to leave his home to join the effort to restore the Catholic Stuarts to the throne, with a romantic component in which the protagonist asks his love to accompany him in the outlaw life.

"The Murder of Ginger Goodwin": The story of a labour activist in the coal mining region of Cumberland, Vancouver Island, who was murdered in

1918. This song is by Kent, and states especially clearly his sympathy for the powerless in situations of conflict with the powerful.

Other songs on the CD include one by Australian Banjo Paterson, who also wrote the words to "Waltzing Matilda", and one by contemporary Australian songwriter Judy Small. This is a very interesting CD, despite its being without flashy instrumental work or vocal harmonies, and one which is well worth the time to listen to and reflect on.

Jim Grabenstetter, Calgary, Alberta

Norman Walker. *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*. PPM 02. 2235 Robinson St., Regina, Sask. S4T 2R1; normwalker@accesscomm.ca; www.normwalker.com

A while past, I had the opportunity to live with my grandparents a year. Every other week, I would spend a couple of hours sitting with my grandmother, perusing one of her photo albums and listening to the stories she told with each picture. No matter how many times she showed me these snapshots from her past, I loved to hear her remembrances; it always gave me a sense of being grounded.

That is how I felt listening to Norman Walker's latest CD. Each song was like a snapshot in a photo album, and his thoughtful singing interpreted the stories behind the pictures. The analogy is apt, I think, given what I know of Norman. For the last several years, Norman has been on the Storysave Project committee, a branch of the organization Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada. Storysave's mandate is to archive material from storytellers across the country.

Norman's own view is that anyone can and should archive their own stories or those of loved ones, and ought not to wait for someone else to do it. Being endowed with a talent for songwriting has provided Norman a unique method of archiving the stories of the place where he lives (Saskatchewan) and of the people he knows or has heard about from others. Admittedly, the word "archive" calls to mind something very academic and dry. *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* is anything but.

Norman Walker is arguably better known for his humorous rewrites of popular urban legends (refer to the review of his previous CD *'T' Time – Time Tested Tales*, published in the Winter 2004-05 issue of this magazine). However, I believe pigeonholing Norman as a comedic songwriter underrates the value of his other material. He is one of those rare and gifted songsmiths who can write equally well on serious topics as on not-so-serious ones.

His song "Magic" is a case in point. Without giving too much away, it is a provocative and critical examination of the entire 9/11 episode, and reminds me very much of the writing style of Leon

Rosselson, one of England's best political activist songwriters. Whether or not one agrees with Norman's point of view (which he only really explains in the liner notes, leaving the song itself more open to the listener's interpretation), it is a beautifully and intelligently-scripted song chock full of folktale, literary and biblical references and powerful imagery, held together by a hauntingly simple-sounding mandolin accompaniment.

Of course, not all is serious on this album. In one epic 7 ¼-minute track, "Guardian Angel", Norman recounts four of the more-well-known Urban Legends. It is joined by other light-hearted urban myth songs and several quirky original numbers. "The Apostrophe Squad", for example, is written in the style of political activist protest songs, giving one visions of boisterous mobs of grammarians marching down a main street somewhere chanting its chorus: "We will fight, fight, fight for the apostrophe....".

The music on this album stays with one for days after listening; the melodies are often quite catchy and have a tendency to stick in the mind. A few of the light-hearted numbers on his CD are clearly tunes first, with lyrics tacked on for added fun. The playful "Chicken Strumstick Reel", which opens the recording, features the "Strumstick" – an instrument Norman calls his "anorexic dulcimer". Another reel, "The Reel Gardener", takes the listener through the very detailed cycle of a garden. The tune I am humming as I write – it simply won't leave my head – is the one Norm composed for a beverage of which he clearly has much personal knowledge: the "Single Malt".

In keeping with the archive theme, the album includes several songs honouring real people with valuable stories to tell. The "Ballad of Alex Ronyk" takes an entertaining look at one of Saskatchewan's colourful characters, who started as a coal miner in the '20s. The title track of the album, "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts", is a warm, contemplative song honouring Stephen Foster, one of America's greatest songwriters. My favourite is a musical tribute with a relaxed jazzy swing about a U.S. jazz musician who at 100 years old was still performing in a band. Sadly, she died on May 4, 2011, but Norman's captures her lifelong sense of joy and playfulness in "Sweet Velzoe Brown".

Norman has recorded a very well-rounded CD, and is tastefully joined on a number of the tracks, both vocally and instrumentally, by many other excellent musicians: Paddy Tutty, Kathy Cook, Natasha Platt, Barry Luft, Countess "Tess" Bassie, David Wilkie, Cedric Blary and Ken Hamm (who also produced the recording). I say "tastefully" because Norman knows when to back off the accompaniment and let the story speak for itself.

The relaxed, intimate feel of this album makes the listener imagine that Norman is right there in the living room performing a live house concert. A criticism made in the review (cited above) of his first album was that the "change in tone" from the reflective to the ridiculous was "jarring". I would wholeheartedly disagree. As he states in the liner notes, "this CD is intended to be a multi-dimensional slice of life". This is important for a performer who strives to entertain and provide his listeners with variety. In this endeavour, Norman Walker has succeeded.

Moirra Cameron, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

A Peak in Darien

Some of these will be reviewed in upcoming issues; some are outside our purview, but are included as a courtesy to the people who sent them to us, and to inform our readers.

Recordings

Radmilla Cody with Herman Cody. *Shi Kéyah: Songs for the People*. CR-6502. Canyon Records, 3131 West Clarendon Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85017, USA; canyon@canyonrecords.com; www.canyonrecords.com

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; mike@folklore.bc.ca; www.hokumsteamers.ca

Tom Lewis. *Poles Part Too: The Song Goes On*. ASM106D. Self-Propelled Music Ltd., P.O. Box 1095, Salmo, B.C. V0G 1Z0; tom@tomlewis.net; www.tomlewis.net

Ralph McNeil. *Roots*. 343 Hawkstone Close NW, Calgary, Alta. T3G 3P1; RalphonWeb@hotmail.com

Northern Cree. *Drum Boy – Misttikwaskihk Nape-sis: Pow-Wow Songs Recorded Live at Saddle Lake*. CR-6493. Canyon Records (addresses above)

Mike Stevens & Matt Andersen. *Push Record: The Banff Sessions*. BCD208. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; www.borealisrecords.com; info@borealisrecords.com

Valdy and Gary Fjellgaard. *Contenders Two: Still in the Running*. Stony Plain Recording Co., P.O. Box 861, Edmonton, Alta. T5J 2L8; info@stonyplainrecords.com; www.stonyplainrecords.com; valday@saltspring.com; www.valdy.com



Canadian Society for Traditional Music

Société canadienne pour
les traditions musicales

The Canadian Society for Traditional Music is a registered charity, so all donations made to the CSTM are tax-deductible. Until recently, only a small number of our members have made use of this benefit, and we value their generosity.

The time has come to spread the word about the CSTM and our growth! You might have noticed a few changes in the Canadian Society for Traditional Music lately. We are proud of our organization's recent renewal and revitalization, which has included:

- a new logo
- a new journal format
- electronic access to our journal via ProQuest
- a redesigned website
- expanded conferences that include three days of concurrent papers
- a new CSTM office housed at folkwaysAlive! at the University of Alberta
- improved bilingual services, including a bilingual website
- an ever-growing listserv with more than 230 subscribers

But we have even more planned! We plan to increase our journal's publication schedule from annual to semi-annual. We have made our magazine made available electronically at Athabasca University. And we are working to inaugurate an endowed fund for a student conference paper prize.

To accomplish all this, we need *your* help! We are asking members to consider making a donation to the CSTM. This is fully tax-deductible in Canada, and you will be issued a receipt for income tax purposes.