

Reviews

100 Mile House. *From Fall to Fall*. Denise McKay, 7607-86 Ave., Edmonton, Alta. T6C 1H6 (no postal address on packaging); ilive@100milehouse.co.uk; www.100milehouse.co.uk

100 Mile House. *Hollow Ponds*. (addresses above)

In examining the cover art of 100 Mile House's two albums, *From Fall to Fall* (2009) and *Hollow Ponds* (2011), one is immediately transported to the serenity, stillness, and visual symmetry of the prairie landscape. Indeed, the music of this Edmonton-based trio can be described in a similar way to the album cover – tranquil, soothing, and organic – but it is certainly not only that.

100 Mile House consists of the husband-and-wife team of Peter Stone and Denise McKay along with multi-instrumentalist Scott Zubot. Recorded two years apart, all songs on both albums were written by Stone and McKay and arranged by all three performers. The exception is an instrumental track on *Hollow Ponds* written by Zubot. Although I do not listen extensively to the singer-songwriter genre (although I am a fan of such artists as Suzanne Vega, Aimee Mann, and Tori Amos), I am still familiar with the overall sound of Canadian songwriters and folk bands through radio and friends' collections. While I cannot expertly compare 100 Mile House to specific groups or artists who share similar songwriting styles or instrumentation, the last piece on *From Fall to Fall*, “She's Gone”, did remind me of the writing of Jann Arden, although the vocals of McKay and Stone are obviously softer than Arden's.

Each album, as a whole, is coherent, consistent and meticulously organized. The band's sound is defined by the steady and persistent acoustic guitar supporting the relaxed yet intimate lead vocals of Stone and backing vocals of McKay. The songs are further layered in various places with drums, bass, violins, and banjo, with guest appearances by other instruments such as organ, glockenspiel, harmonica, hand claps, tambourine, and occasionally drumming on a suitcase. Although the first album was reportedly “recorded, mixed, and mastered in bedrooms, front rooms and a bathroom in Edmonton, AB” (as written on the inside cover), the recording quality of the album was excellent, clear, and balanced. By contrast, *Hollow Ponds*, which won the Edmonton Music Award for Folk/Roots Album of the Year in 2012 and was nominated for a 2012 Western Canadian Music Award for Roots Duo/Group Recording of the Year,

was recorded at Peter's home-based studio, called The Bird Shop, which has recorded a number of other independent artists such as Sister Gray and Backside Attack, among others. I must say that I enjoyed the debut album more than their second, more acclaimed album. Despite the tighter arrangements and slightly superior sonic quality of *Hollow Ponds*, the band sounded more adventurous and unrestrained in *From Fall to Fall*, in terms of songwriting, arrangement, and even performance. Perhaps it is the excitement of making a debut album, or the more controlled and self-conscious environment of a recording studio, that make the arrangement and delivery of the songs feel slightly more effortful and restrained, though more polished, in *Hollow Ponds*. Interestingly, I also noticed Peter's British accent more in the debut than in their second album.

The major strengths of 100 Mile House are Stone and McKay's attention to detail in their arrangement and instrumentation, and the poignancy and sensitivity of their lyrics. What impressed me the most, on first listening, were the moments in almost every song in which some subtle changes in the arrangement – whether it be a simple pause, the unexpected addition of an organ in the chorus, or a syncopated drum fill in the middle of a verse – refreshed the song up to that point, or provided some pleasantly unexpected listening. Standout tracks on their debut include “Wolves”, a fun, upbeat opening track that showcases their aforementioned talent for creative arranging, and declares that they've “got something to show” and will “give this all that [they've] got”. “Fight” is a sparse yet poignant piece (“she's gone back to fight/she's not quite right”); and “She's Gone”, a lilting and fitting closing track that references a number of Canadian locations, including Peggy's Cove, Toronto, and Margaret's Bay.

The opening, titular track on *Hollow Ponds* is a bold and conscious departure from the sound of their debut, beginning with the thick chords of an organ, in which you can hear the various clicks and noises of the instrument. Peter's familiar vocals and guitar accompaniment soon enter, and the chorus is beautifully layered with the “100 Mile House Choir”. Other memorable tracks on *Hollow Ponds* include “Edward IV” (an upbeat track similar to “Wolves”), “Better, Still” (winner of the songwriting contest Grand Prize at the 2012 Calgary Folk Festival), and “Goodbye”, a simple, waltzy piece where Denise McKay sings lead vocals for the first time (more about this later).

I was slightly surprised to not find any printed lyrics in either CD, as the intimate and clear vocals

suggest an emphasis on the lyrics, which can be described as poignant and nostalgic, often describing and depicting nature, memories and mementos of family, friends, lovers, cross-country travels, and the various emotions associated with these experiences. If I had one criticism of these albums, it would be the fact that, with the exception of “Goodbye”, all the lead vocals are performed by Peter McKay. Even in “Goodbye”, McKay’s lead vocals only enter more than halfway through the song. Since most of the lyrics are not gender-specific, and Denise contributes beautiful harmonizing work in almost every song, it would have been nice to hear more of her voice on its own.

Their newest album, *Wait With Me*, was released on March 12th. All of their albums are available for purchase through their website (see above). Peter’s home studio is www.thebird-shop.com.

Heidi Chan, Toronto, Ontario

Jocelyn Pettit. P.O. Box 33, Squamish, B.C. V8B 0A1 (no postal address on packaging);
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Jocelyn Pettit’s self-titled debut album was recorded when she was just 14. Raised on the west coast of British Columbia – a region not known for its Celtic music scene – Pettit was introduced to the fiddle music of Cape Breton and other “Celtic” traditions via a local folk festival and CDs. (In fact, she credits listening to recordings as her most important learning tool.) Pettit quickly became known (at least on the West Coast) as a “Celtic sensation” and now markets her style as “blazing ‘New Trad’ Celtic and World music” (<http://www.jocelynpettit.com> (accessed 15 Feb 2013)). While emphasizing a rootedness in various musical traditions (including Cape Breton, Irish, Scottish, and Québécois fiddling), it is clear that Pettit wants to market her fiddling as something unique – as her own musical style, created via the amalgamation of several fiddle traditions. In this way, her approach reflects a broader change in the Canadian fiddle scene, as more and more fiddlers from the younger generation, influenced by the easy availability of recordings, begin borrowing from multiple fiddle (and non-fiddle) traditions.

Jocelyn Pettit features an interesting mix of instruments, some expected on a “Celtic” album (e.g., piano, guitar, and bodhran), and others not so much (e.g., cello, viola, and cittern). The album also includes tracks that use voices as accompaniment, adding timbral interest and texture, and a track that features Pettit as a vocalist. All of the tunes on this album are carefully arranged, with most arrangements attributed to Pettit. She doesn’t simply present tunes, but rather presents her unique version of each tune,

something that is often missing in recordings featuring young fiddlers, or even recordings featuring adult fiddlers. These arrangements are in fact one of the album’s greatest strengths, creating variety and interest between tracks. It is clear from start to finish that Pettit has an excellent team supporting her in the studio, from creating an attractive and professional-looking CD cover and liner notes to employing competent backing musicians (although, interestingly, these musicians include both of her parents). The creation of this CD was certainly not child’s play.

The tunes included on this album draw from a wide range of sources. Most, however, are tunes by contemporary folk musicians coming from so-called “Celtic” traditions (Cape Breton, Scottish, Shetland, Donegal, and Irish). Pettit also includes two tunes from outside the traditional fiddle scenes (“Keidas Oasis” by contemporary Finnish band Frigg, and “Tongadale Reel”, which, while arguably “folk”, was written by experimental Scottish composer Farquhar MacDonald). Pettit also includes some of her own compositions, with “Shades of Mist” being, in my opinion, her most effective composition, due in large part to the grooving cello line, but also to the beautiful vocalizations by Pettit as the tune closes. Interestingly, just one tune is listed as traditional (“The Reconciliation”) and just one was written before the 20th Century (“Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of His Second Wife”). This album, then, has a clear focus on contemporary fiddle repertoire and the music of contemporary folk musicians (although folk musicians from diverse countries).

Although this album is generally strong – certainly there was nothing that struck me as “bad” (with the vocal track being somewhat of an exception, as discussed below) – it has a few weaknesses. One thing that struck me most when I first listened to the album is that Pettit does not clearly distinguish between the styles included on the album. The result is that the album comes across as *generically* Celtic(ish). Furthermore, Pettit often does not dig deep enough into the groove, or, as fiddlers would say, she does not quite have the right “feel”, something that, to me, indicates that she is not 100 per cent comfortable with the groove expected from each style. (Given that one of the most important ways in which the different fiddle styles distinguish themselves is via rhythmic emphasis, effectively switching between styles can be very difficult.) Another weakness is the vocal track. Although Pettit has a pretty voice, it sounds decidedly immature compared with her skills on the fiddle. Certainly it begs the question: Why do so many young fiddlers (especially female fiddlers) feel the need to include vocal tracks, when their skills on the fiddle are enough to carry the album?

All in all, Pettit is a very talented young fiddler, and overall I enjoyed listening to this album. But, in the end, while Pettit shows incredible potential, this potential is not yet fulfilled on this album. However, with a few additional years of experience and some musical maturity, Pettit will likely bloom into a fantastic fiddler. Perhaps we will hear this maturity in her next album, due out in 2013.

Monique Giroux, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Mighty Popo. *Gakondo*. BCD210. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M5A 1W7; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com

I was delighted to get a chance to review *Gakondo* by Mighty Popo. From the first cut I knew I was in for a treat. Okay, I like world music and most of the African music I've heard, so I had high expectations, which were not at all disappointed.

The songs are sung in Rwandan, which of course left me pondering as to the meaning. But being an instrumentalist myself, I generally listen to the music, that is, melody, rhythm, orchestration, vocal quality and arrangements, before I listen to the words. So the lack of English didn't distract me at all.

The recording is excellently produced, with flawless performances and excellent mic'ing, no feeling of artificial ambiance or EQing the instruments unnaturally. Everything seems clear and balanced. I wonder how much was recorded live off the floor, as opposed to multiple overdubs.

The mix of Western and African instruments is completely acoustic, which in itself is a huge departure from almost every other African CD I've ever heard. I recognize a few names of notable B.C. musicians, such as Doug Cox and John Reischman, on slide guitar and mandolin respectively. Their contributions add greatly to the cross-ethnic diversity, but it is mostly Popo himself, who draws from many deep wells.

In the first cut I can hear a repeated vocal lick that is either Arabic or East Indian in its scale and delivery style. This was surprising when it occurred the first time, but doesn't sound out of place. Neither does the blues licks or solo, which is reminiscent of Jerry Garcia, on Popo's guitar.

The whole album has a gentleness to it that gives me a feeling of the spiritual connection these songs have with the songs and poetry of Royal Court or Ibwami, which Popo draws his inspiration from.

The ninth cut, "Nibarize", was particularly interesting, as Popo sings in the now-defunct whispering style. Since I was driving with a few friends as we listened to the CD for the first time, I hadn't read any liner notes, and surmised that this may have been a

style developed by hunters sitting quietly for extended periods in the bush, waiting for prey to come into sight. Other songs had what sounded to me like the type of mbira or thumb piano meditative repeating patterns that might have been played under these same conditions. I don't know that this is a fact, but it made for a nice image. At least one of my passengers had heard Popo perform live in Regina and was very impressed, but all of us enjoyed the CD.

I noticed that many of the songs are in a 3/8 or 6/8 time signature, which is not completely unusual for African music, but was surprising in their consistency from song to song. The fourth cut is an exception, in that it appears to be in a count of 11! Yikes, that was hard to count! I'm not totally sure of this, since it sounds as if there are different parts going on in different time signatures simultaneously. This poly-rhythmic event is not unusual in African music, but this one sent my head spinning a bit while trying to count.

All in all, a great CD.

Paul Gitlitz, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Karine Polwart. *Threshold*. W2BCD9901. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M5A 1W7; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com; www.karinepolwart.com

I first heard of Karine Polwart at an International Ballad Conference held in Cardiff, Wales, in 2008. In a paper on the dark side of lullabies, the presenter illustrated one of her points with a song by Karine Polwart entitled "Baleerie Baloo" (from *Scribbled in Chalk* (2006)). The song is sung in the persona of a Scottish woman, Jane Haining, who worked as a missionary at an orphanage in Budapest during the Second World War. She was forced to sew golden stars on Jewish babies' clothes so they could be more easily identified when the Gestapo came. The woman wept as she did this task, and finally she was taken too, as a "sympathizer", and died in Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of 47.

Clearly, Karine Polwart is not afraid to choose uncomfortable, even harrowing, subject matter. She has also written songs about dementia ("Fire Thief") and the abduction and murder of a schoolgirl half a mile from home ("Half a Mile"), but I did not find any of these songs on *Threshold*, which is pleasant rather than powerful listening. Borealis Records has made this compilation CD to introduce Karine to North America, where she is less well known than in her native U.K., though here too she is fast acquiring a following. The fact is that her best songs are scattered amongst four or five earlier titles, and for someone who has *not* heard her before, it might be better to explore *Faultlines*, *Scribbled in Chalk* and

This Earthly Spell than to rely on *Threshold*, as I think this CD fails to do her justice.

This said, I got more out of my second listening than my first. This may be partly because Karine “grows on you”; it’s also because between listenings I went to her website and read her lyrics, since there are none provided with this CD. My personal opinion is that CDs are *always* better if lyrics are included in the package. I think this is especially important with singer-songwriters, since traditional material can usually be found somewhere, but only the songwriter knows what he or she wrote, and although one can, as I did, seek out the lyrics on-line, it is a better CD if one doesn’t have to take this extra step.

My favourite tracks on *Threshold* are “Take Its Own Time”, a tender song written for Karine’s father, extolling the virtues of “let[ting] it all hang out and take its own time” – a song for retirement; and “Follow the Heron” [home] – evocative lyrics celebrating the end of winter, with a nice blending and intertwining of voices and instruments. However, this provides me with another gripe: the backing musicians on *Threshold* aren’t even named on the CD, nor are we told what instruments they’re playing (drums and pipes, at least!). This information could easily have been provided, and its omission is not fair to the talented musicians involved, who do a good job (apart from some rather thumpy drums on “Sorry”).

Of the other tracks, “Rivers Run” is another tender song of hope and faith in the environment, inspired by the birth of Karine’s baby son, Arlo. “Medusa” is a song about Remembrance Day; a good poem, but still not nearly as good a song as, say, Eric Bogle’s “And the Band Played ‘Waltzing Matilda’”. “Daisy”, a gentle putdown of those activists who expect everyone to agree with them, is one of Karine’s best-known songs, but, although I get the point, and we all know someone like Daisy, I find myself ultimately unconvinced and concluding that it’s a damn good thing there are people like Daisy around – let’s not belittle them just because they’re sometimes irritating! And when Karine says “Some people don’t think at all,” I find it hard to believe she really thinks this is a good thing.

There are two Child ballads – “Dowie Dens of Yarrow” and “The Death of Queen Jane”. Both reveal Karine to be a fine singer of traditional material, with an understated and thoughtful delivery; the piano backing on the first of these is at first hearing unexpected, but the overall effect is tasteful and works well, and the drone in the background on “Queen Jane” provides the right atmosphere of loss and foreboding. Karine’s earlier CD of traditional material is *Fairest Floomer*.

My last gripe – this CD has only 46 minutes play-time, which is not very long for a recording company

that is trying to introduce a singer-songwriter with as much material as Karine has produced – there would have been plenty more tracks to choose from. (For example, what about “The Sun’s Comin’ Over The Hill”, which has a country music flavour many North Americans would surely find appealing?) If you already are a fan of Karine’s, you will find this CD enjoyable (but then you will probably have her earlier titles anyway). If you don’t know her work already, search out some of her earlier titles, especially those including her more powerful numbers. Most are available on Amazon.

Rosaleen Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

Corin Raymond. *There Will Always be a Small Time*. www.corinraymond.com (no other addresses on packaging)

This CD is Corin Raymond’s second solo compilation. These 12 strong songs are written with a wide range of emotion, from sadness to unabashed joy. It really shows off Raymond’s strength and diversity in songwriting, and has a very interesting blend of sounds, from straight-up country to the Tex-Mex/Cajun feel of “Micheline”, and even a bit of soul in “I Wish I Was in Love”. Raymond writes and sings with a sense of honesty and authenticity. He believes in what he says in his music.

I immediately loved this album. It didn’t grow on me; it caught me from the first line of the title track, which incidentally was co-written with Jonathan Byrd. “There Will Always Be a Small Time” is a song about playing music for people for the sheer joy of doing it. This theme of enjoying life as a singer and performer resonates throughout this CD on songs like “Paid to Party” and “Stealing My Heart Away”.

But it’s not all party with Raymond. He writes a mean love song, and hits many facets, from lost love to looking for love and even “glad-I’m-out-it” love (“Better Him Than Me”).

Raymond is backed up here by a great group of performers, with sidekicks David Baxter, Treasa Lévasseur and Brian Kobayakawa (members of his band, The Sundowners, and all Juno Award nominees) and co-producer Sean Cotton (co-conspirator in the duo The Undesirables) giving the CD a live feel.

Corin Raymond is grass roots to the core, and I’d strongly recommend *There Will Always Be a Small Time*. Also keep an eye out for his new offering, *Paper Nickels*, a CD totally funded with Canadian Tire Money . . . Yep . . . grass-roots to the core.

Blaine Hrabi, Calgary, Alberta