



Bruce Cockburn

Iconic songwriter releases a haunting, masterful second instrumental album.

By Mark Dunn

Bruce Cockburn's 34th album was supposed to be a sequel to *Speechless*, the 2005 anthology of previously released instrumental tracks. As the recording date approached, Cockburn realized he had enough new material for a proper album.

Crowing Ignites takes its title from the translation of the Cockburn family motto "Accendit Cantu." Through its 11 tracks, the master guitarist explores a variety of styles, demonstrating the vast storehouse of technique developed over 60 years of playing. More than just a collection of unrelated guitar pieces, *Crowing Ignites* flows with the unity of a film score.

"When we decided to record," says Cockburn, calling from his San Francisco home, "I had one or two new pieces but ended up with so many that we decided to make it its own thing. I think that the pieces were all composed within a relatively short period of a year or so gives it a thematic unity or emotional unity. If we'd collected stuff from over the decades, there'd be some pretty big differences in playing approach and style, and differences in the recording. We could have made a really nice *Speechless 2*, but it just seemed much more exciting to make a new album."

Crowing Ignites was recorded over 10 days in March 2019, with longtime producer Colin Linden. Instead of a recording studio, Cockburn opted to take over a friend's home, a converted firehall in his neighbourhood, for the sessions. The quality of sound in the space and its proximity to home were deciding factors.

"Because it was halfway between home and school, I could bring my daughter to

school then walk back halfway and hangout all day, pick her up after and go home," he says. "So, it worked very well that way. I wouldn't have thought of it had I not heard the sound of the room with music in it. I had been to a Hanukkah celebration there. They had a Greek acoustic band from Seattle playing music from the Syrian refugee criminal underground in the '30s. It was fantastic music, and it worked in the room."

Since the release of 2017's Juno Award-winning *Bone On Bone*, Cockburn has talked about the damage incurred to his hands from decades of playing. There are earlier pieces he can no longer play, and other songs he has had to adapt, but the condition seems to have led Cockburn to new possibilities on the instrument. While the playing on *Crowing Ignites* is more economical than the high acrobatics of his earlier work, they are unquestionably brilliant, blindingly fast, and inventive. It is remarkable that the instrument continues to reveal new possibilities.

“It’s a weird combination of learning and fighting a rearguard action against deterioration,” he says of his guitar playing. “But, yeah, I’m still learning. [Cartilage degeneration] forces you to adapt. It’s like being squeezed through a narrow passage, and what comes out on the other side is different than what went in. Some of the learning has to do with working with the limitations that time has created.”

Running throughout *Crowing Ignites*, Cockburn’s signature alternating or droning thumb is as steady as ever. The acoustic guitar is prominent, with Tibetan singing bowls, a charango, a few “little-ass bells,” and Colin Linden joining in on Dobro for one tune. The arrangements are sparse and haunting.

“All of the pieces came out of exploring on the guitar while practicing,” he says of composing the pieces. “What happens when I move my finger this way? And what happens if I do the same thing in a different tuning? Ideas come out of that kind of exploration. It may happen that the guitar I start using for the piece ends up not being the one I use on the recording. One piece, *Bardo Rush*, started on the 12-string, but I like it better on the six-string. It had more fluidity on the six-string, it’s a more open sound. The 12-string fills a lot of space.”

For most of the album, Cockburn played a six-string acoustic made by Boucher, which he was given upon induction into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2017. He also played a 12-string made by his longtime luthier and friend, Linda Manzer, and a Karol baritone guitar.

“[The Boucher guitar] was unexpectedly great. You never know. Someone gives you a guitar, and you figure, ‘maybe I can play it; maybe I can’t’. But it turned out to be a really special instrument. I’ve had fun playing it. I like the sound of it acoustically. I don’t use it onstage because it doesn’t have a means of amplifying it. I don’t have a very roadworthy case for it. It came with a good case but it’s the kind that airline baggage handlers like to kick around.”

For decades, Cockburn has played acoustic guitars with cutaways. In fact, Jean Larrivee, one of the early luthiers to incorporate a cutaway design into modern North American acoustics, built his first models for Bruce Cockburn. Many guitarists debate whether a cutaway design affects the tone

of the acoustic. With the lower portion of the guitar body removed to allow access to the top frets, an instrument might lose some of its presence. Or so the controversy goes. For Cockburn, it is not an issue.

“You know, I honestly don’t give a shit. I really don’t. If a guitar is a good guitar, it’s a good guitar. They all sound different. You could take two Martin D-18s built five years apart and they don’t sound the same, although they are constructed in the same manner. It’s the individual instrument, how it feels in your hands, and how it sounds to the individual player. There are trade offs, although I don’t know if it has to do with the cutaway as much as the construction. When I say, ‘I don’t know’ I mean that literally. I haven’t paid enough attention. [The Boucher] is a nice one but I like my Manzera a lot, too.”

The instrument continues to inspire, Cockburn says, and so do other players. Cockburn tends to deflect any praise of his musicianship or suggestions that he is among the most accomplished players in the world by saying that he has been rendered speechless many times by other guitarists.

“I’ve had that experience with guitar players, too, where I don’t want to be reminded of what I can’t do. [I was given] an album by Boubacar Diabate, a Malian guitar player. The way he has translated kora music on the guitar is mind-blowing. He’s doing all this stuff, and I’m thinking, ‘Shit. Here I am about to put out an instrumental album

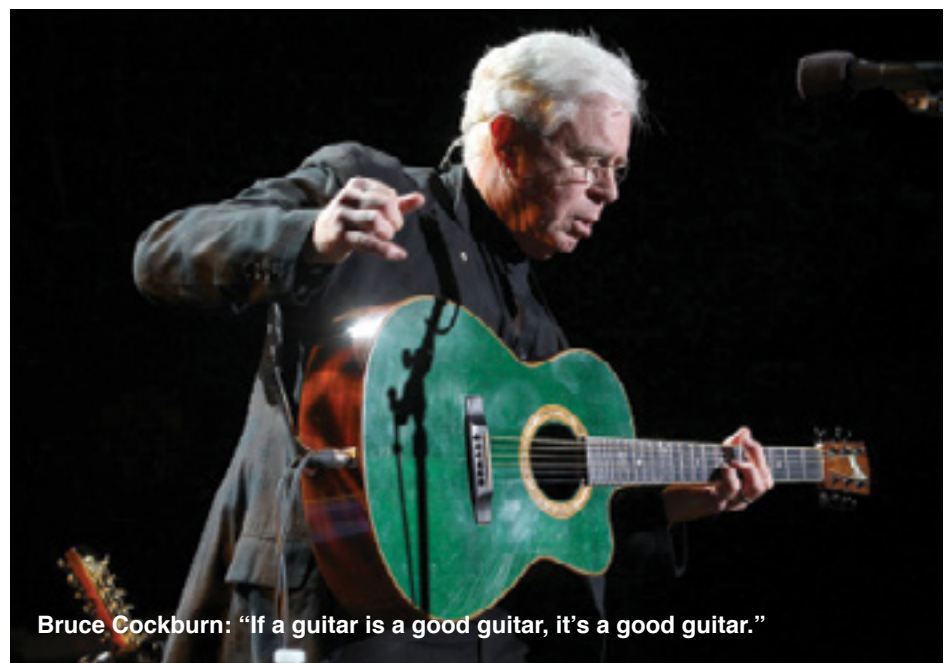
and then there is this, also a new album.

This guy’s playing circles around me.’ But in his style. He doesn’t play the way I play, I don’t play like him. But I understand that reaction. I’m sort of past the point where I don’t want to hear it anymore. I do want to hear it. Sooner or later, something will soak in and I will find it leaping out of me.

“I went through that with Ralph Towner back in the day, and a lot of the bluegrass players, like Doc Watson. Like players who combine flatpicking with fingerpicking. It’s marvellous and enchanting, and really humbling. You don’t always want to steep yourself in the humbling part of it.”

He cites Canadian Don Ross as “someone who can produce that effect in me. Especially when you see him live. Someone like that doing all these things and you can’t see what they’re doing. It’s like, ‘Oh-oh. I have some woodshedding to do.’ Kaki King is another. She comes out of that [percussion/harmonic] school in a way, but she learned to be a drummer. You can really hear it in her playing. We were on a bill together on a live radio show in the States, and she started into her first tune, and I couldn’t stop myself. I said, “Jesus Christ!” out loud. She has her limitations like everybody else. Everyone has their thing that they are really great at and not as good at other things. There’s always somebody better. It doesn’t matter who you are.”

A tour in support of *Crowing Ignites* will begin in September.



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