



Bruce Cockburn

Faith and hard-won maturity have calmed his “angry adolescent soul”

By Peter Feniak

On the phone from San Francisco, Bruce Cockburn describes his onstage experience in Winnipeg two days earlier at the massive open-air concert to launch the Canadian Museum of Human Rights as “kind of disconcerting at first”:

“They had a big TV screen showing close-ups of the artists. I’ve done a lot of big festivals, but I can’t remember having one of those. I got used to it, but my eyes would sweep over the crowd and see these faces, and they were all turned away from me. The whole audience was staring at the screen.”

Cockburn prevailed. Eyes often squeezed shut with feeling, he delivered a powerhouse performance, opening with the impassioned “Lovers in a Dangerous Time,” a signature tune for him and, now, for Toronto’s Barenaked Ladies, extending the song with fiery, virtuoso guitar runs that thundered into the night.

Back in San Francisco—where the celebrated Canadian now lives with his wife, M.J. Hannett, and their three-year-old daughter, Iona—he’s apprehensive about another “next big event”: the publication of *Rumours of Glory* (HarperCollins, 2014), his long-awaited memoir. Cockburn has always seemed a private person, ready to talk about the causes he believes in but little given to talking about himself. *Rumours* changes that. It is in-depth and highly personal, charting a journey of painful self-discovery, growing social conscience, and evolving artistic explorations.

It’s also a book of travels, written (with journalist Greg King) about a restless life rich in new vistas. As a youngster with a guitar, Cockburn took a Russian freighter to Oslo, moved through Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam, and finally busked on the streets of Paris until his money ran out.

As he grew into a celebrated artist, he saw much of the world on tour, but he also opened his heart and mind joining humanitarian expeditions to troubled countries such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Mali, and Nepal—more recently, Cambodia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Whether in a camper, in his GMC Suburban, or on a tour bus, he’s travelled to most places in Canada and the United States. There’s a grin

in his voice as he looks back on his life on the road: “It was in high school, when I started reading the beat literature, that I really got the bug—and I think the bug fell on fertile ground.”

“Talented singer-songwriter from Ottawa.” That’s how he was first introduced to Canada by way of a modest, captivating album called simply *Bruce Cockburn* (1970). Thirty albums later (seven million sold worldwide), a long list of descriptions now trail this distinctive artist—“poet,” “mystic,” “romantic troubadour,” “wickedly good guitar player.” His fact-finding tours to some of the world’s most troubled countries (with Oxfam, the Unitarian Service Committee, and others) earned him such epithets as “activist,” “humanitarian,” “idealist,” and “crusader.” Canadians know his support of First Nations and environmental causes.

In the mid-’70s, he also became a committed Christian, a person of faith who bristles against the misuse of religion by those who seek power. “I honour non-violence,” he has written, “but I am not a pacifist. When it’s fight or die, what can you do?” He has seen war up close; his song “If I Had a Rocket Launcher” has become an indelible anthem of protest. He has also been a fascinated collector of guns, is an experienced sharpshooter, and honours Canada’s military by wearing brightly polished regimental badges on his leather guitar straps. He is also an enthusiastic horseman and the father of two daughters, 35 years apart in age.

Rumours of Glory tracks the musical evolution of this master singer-songwriter. It also opens up his personal struggles for peace and self-awareness, from his early days as an angry, self-conscious outsider, through turbulent experiences with marriage, fatherhood, divorce, and further relationships. He also shares the pain and joy of spiritual searching, including encounters with what he calls “The Divine.”

The “Big Circumstance”

Bruce Cockburn was born in Ottawa on May 27, 1945, while his father, Douglas Cockburn, a recent medical graduate, served in Europe with the occupying forces. Doug Cockburn would eventually become head of the diagnostic X-ray department at Ottawa Civic Hospital. With his mother, Lois, and two younger brothers, Bruce grew up in a middle-class home, one he describes as formal and constrained and against which he would ultimately rebel.

His young days were filled with the family’s love of music and his own creativity, and challenged by a disability. “For me,” he writes in *Rumours*, “school consisted of feeling centred out and humiliated.” He was “an outsider, the shy kid with the lop-

sided walk...born with a mild case of spina bifida [and] a right leg that was an inch and a half shorter than the left," he says.

"Right from day one," he adds, "I discovered a gift for constructing alternative realities."

As a teenager, he also discovered a rusty guitar in his grandmother's attic. It was love. With a better guitar and lessons, his talent grew quickly. (Cockburn has often been flagged on lists of "best guitarists.") His burgeoning imagination filled notebooks with stories and poems, much-influenced by the horror and science-fiction literature he then favoured. He would become a vivid, impressive writer. "I just love his music, and as a lyricist—and a political lyricist—he's pretty fantastic," says his friend Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje.

"My dad had great empathy for people who were in difficult circumstances. But for me to get those feelings, it took encounters with people."

Cockburn graduated from Ottawa's Nepean High School, and his talent earned him acceptance into the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. There, his sense of personal rebellion growing, he recalls being "a lazy and undisciplined student" with an appetite for jazz and poetry. He also became a close observer of the early '60s folk music scene in Cambridge, MA, where genre greats including Joan Baez, Tom Rush, and Jim Kweskin got their starts.

Returning to Ottawa before completing his degree, he moved out of his parents' home and began playing with local folk and rock groups. Soon, despite a serious reticence about appearing alone onstage, he was performing his own songs as a solo artist. Next for the youngster with the round-rimmed wire-frame glasses, the appealing tenor, and the impressive dexterity on guitar was Toronto and the then-vibrant Yorkville coffee house scene.

Spring of 1969 brought what he likes to call a "Big Circumstance":

"It was a chance meeting with [musical friend] Gene Martynec at the Upper Crust Café in Yorkville. We're sitting there having a coffee and talking about records and about production and what I wanted, and then Gene brings Bernie down to hear me play and we talk about making an album and it all happens."

"Bernie," now Canadian music legend Bernie Finkelstein, was at the time a young, ambitious Yorkville scenester with just enough money to finance a simple album. It proved to be the launch of True North Records and the recording career of the man Finkelstein, Cockburn's manager ever since, calls "one of the world's greatest solo artists in his field."

In his own memoir, (*True North*, McClelland & Stewart,

2012), Finkelstein writes, "From the opening number, it was obvious [Bruce] was intense about his music." He would learn that the artist was also a strong-minded perfectionist. But their career together unfolded as one of mutual respect. Through the '70s, Finkelstein writes, "Bruce continued to put out a quiet stream of great albums, each one doing better than the last."

Cockburn had recorded eight studio albums before *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws* (1979), which yielded the surprise hit "Wondering Where the Lions Are," an infectious Cockburn classic with a reggae beat, based on one of his dreams. The album was his first to be distributed internationally, and "Lions" became a hit in the United States. Suddenly, he was on NBC's *Saturday Night Live* and on tour to the North-eastern United States, Italy, and Japan.

Cockburn embraced the travel and new audiences, but, as *Rumours* tells it, his remained a troubled and conflicted soul. As the '80s began, his decade-long marriage to Kitty Macaulay ended. Together the two had shared much, including his growing life in the Christian faith. Their daughter, Jenny, was born in 1975. Cockburn relocated to Toronto, picked up on the urban energy of what he would call the "Inner City Front," and created new, tougher music and new life patterns.

"Be Quiet, Listen, Feel."

When, in early 1983, he was asked to travel to civil-war-torn Guatemala with Oxfam, his life changed again. Like many Canadians, he had been raised with a from-a-distance compassion for the unfortunate. He recalls:

"In my teens, there'd be talks about the state of the world around the dinner table, family discussion. My dad had great empathy for people who were in difficult circumstances. But for me to get those feelings, it took encounters with people. It took meeting native folks who had grown up in the residential school system; it took meeting those Guatemalan refugees to really bring it home, to kindle those feelings of outrage and compassion and empathy for me. It was a shock."

With a small Canadian contingent, he walked into the teeming camps of refugees from the Guatemalan Civil War—mostly rural Mayans. The Canadians heard firsthand how the camps would be strafed from above by the Guatemalan government's death-dealing military helicopters. Stunned by what he had learned, Cockburn would write, through tears of outrage, of those deadly helicopter attacks: "How many kids they've murdered/only God can say./If I had a rocket launcher,/I'd make somebody pay."

"If I Had a Rocket Launcher" shook the complacency of many and became the song most identified with Cockburn's activism. As he travelled to other troubled zones, his songwriting became more political. Music figures looking for another upbeat "Wondering Where the Lions Are" were dis-



mayed. Told that his new songs wouldn't make the charts, he replied, "I don't care."

The songwriter also continued to struggle with his inner self—and to find a lasting relationship—while dealing with long-held anger and churning emotions. He charted new musical directions, soaking up influences, adding talented accompanists, opening his ears to music from around the world. "These songs, their stories, come from life," he has said. "They are not reproductions of life. They spring from a confidence that God, in leading me beside what at times have been very strange waters, knows what he's doing."

Faith remains fundamental to him, though he chafes against quick-fix conversions, "the intolerance of the Christian Right," and the use of the Bible as an excuse to "hate thy neighbour."

"Outside of our collective darkness," he writes in his memoir, "lies something that touches the core of us, perhaps what we call 'love.'" He adds, "The real voice, that of the spirit, is saying to us: 'Be quiet, listen, feel. Be kind. Accept differences, even those of Divine belief. Learn from the differences. Feed your neighbour. Take your anger out on an untilled field. Librally apply compassion, especially to yourself.'"

Faith and hard-won maturity have calmed what he has called his "angry adolescent soul."

"It's never gone completely away," he says from California, "but it certainly doesn't steer me the way it did back then, that's for sure. So much has been added to it. It's been tempered by all sorts of other experiences and understandings that have come in time."

New Experiences Ahead

In recent decades, Cockburn's reputation has continued to grow outside Canada. Some of the best of his music, he believes, has come in the '90s and in the new century. Canadian fans often lament that rigidly programmed radio stations rarely play that new music. He still writes about love, faith, and the humanitarian and environmental outrages that plague our times. "What doesn't kill you," he observed once, "makes a song."

Though he makes little of it in his memoir, the recent years

have brought cascading honours for the brilliance of his work over decades. He is an Officer of the Order of Canada, holds a Governor General's Performing Arts award, is in numerous halls of fame, and holds eight honorary degrees from academic institutions. His songs have been recorded by artists as diverse as Jerry Garcia, Judy Collins, Chet Atkins, and k.d. lang.

He is "not a wealthy man," Finkelstein says, but he has been successful enough to choose his own path, including time off from music. "Lots of people try to do this stuff," Cockburn says of his adventurous music career, "and are not able to feed themselves doing it. I got lucky and I hooked up with Bernie early on, and I never really thought about that side of it much."

Cockburn's memoir stops in 2004, as he journeys to Iraq, his second marriage imminent. "I chose to stop there because it changed again. It's a whole new chunk. We would have had to add another hundred pages. I don't have a perspective on the last 10 years like I do on the previous decades. It's still unfolding for me. But I hooked up with MJ, who I love, and she's much younger than I am. So there you go. We have this wonderful little three-year-old."

Is M.J. Hannett an artist, as well? He chuckles. "MJ's an attorney. She works for Homeland Security. Like I say, it's a whole other direction."

Has Cockburn come to feel the years, given his nearness to another new decade?

"It varies. There are moments when I kind of feel the same as I did when I was a kid, and there's more of the time when I don't. I'm not sure it's feeling my age, but I certainly feel the presence of the experiences I've had."

New experiences lie ahead with the release of *Rumours of Glory*, Canadian concert dates, and, in the spring, an American tour:

"I've got these songs and I want to play them for people and I don't want to screw them up. I don't want to embarrass myself. So there's a certain stress that goes with that. But I'm pretty familiar with what it feels like to be onstage. That nervousness is tempered by experience, for sure—and by what you get back from the audience. It's a job that I embrace willingly." ■

Solutions to this month's Crossword puzzles, page 66.

Cryptic Crossword #367C.

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Regular Crossword #367R.

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