

# NEO-PUNK MEETS OLD FOLK

## Bruce Cockburn cut and pasted with Green Day

By ERIC SIBLIN

**F**or those torn between two concerts falling on the same day next week - Bruce Cockburn and Green Day - snippets of two interviews may help sort out the aesthetic differences.

A tale of two interviews begins thus:

Bruce Cockburn, singer-songwriter with high-minded causes and eloquent songcraft, telephones from a hotel in Oregon, perfectly punctual. He describes the scene: "It's beautiful. Fall weather, warm but the leaves are changing. Cool at night."

Tre Cool is the nom de plume for the drummer of California punk-power-pop band Green Day, considered the heir apparent of Nirvana in some circles. He is staying in an Atlanta hotel under an impressive alias, Sam Pelegrino. He is difficult to reach and when the phone finally picks up, Cool answers it with an unprintable expletive: "You crazy motherfucker, you're late! Who is this?"

Who do you think?

"It's dude from Montreal, maybe?"

The new Green Day album, *Nimrod*, expands its punk horizons slightly on to rockabilly and country with strings. Asked whether the new material required any changes to his musicianship, Cool replies with easy-going confidence:

"No man, I'm the best drummer there is. I don't have to struggle. Everything comes easy - I'm so good." For good measure, he adds: "I'm the greatest rock'n'roll drummer on the planet."

Is that right?

"That's what I've been told?"

By who?

"Everybody. Everyone with half a brain."

Cockburn's new album, his 23rd, is titled *The Charity of Night*, a jazz-infused departure from recent recordings. Commenting on his intricate fretboard forays into jazz territory, Cockburn downplays his guitar skills. "I don't think I'd have the nerve to tout myself as a jazz musician at this point, but as the years go by and I get better, I learn more and I can absorb more of those kinds of elements into my music."

Cockburn is associated with a roots music that borders on Americana but is maple leafy. What are the trade links? "Well, Americans are pretty much focused on their own concerns, that's less true than it used to be, thanks in part to the spread of hockey franchises; people know where Montreal and Toronto and Edmonton are, whereas 10 years ago they didn't.

"In musical terms there's a general recognition some of the songwriters (Americans) value highly are of Canadian origin and sometimes they'll comment on that, and of course they're thinking of Robbie Robertson and Neil Young and Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, and they're talking to me" – he laughs – "so I don't know whether they include me or not."

Tre Cool raises the topic of Canada's national sport: "I'm actually wearing a Montreal jersey right now. Is that the one with the C and the H in the middle? They gave it to us when we played the arena. I got my name on the back – Tre, I'm No. 1." When Cool plays hockey on Nintendo his winning strategy is based on trading away the Russian and Czech players and "keeping the Canadian dudes."

There is a Canadian musical sensibility apart from the U.S., suggests Cockburn, though he's not entirely sure what it is – "less of a sense of imposing ourselves on the landscape. It's all tied up in whatever the national psyche is, of course, and it's a national psyche that does not swear allegiance to its flag every morning when it goes to school."

Tre Cool, who figures he's got some "fur-trading Canadians" in his blood, has an impressive geographical grasp of Canada, based on his own voyageurisms. "I've done acid in Edmonton," he recounts, "crashed bikes in Saskatchewan; I shoveled shit in Manitoba, cut hair in Ottawa, body-painted in Newfoundland, harvested pop in Quebec, in British Columbia did all kinds of spray-painting, carrying on, partying, debauchery."

Green Day's last concert in Quebec took place on the evening of the 1995 sovereignty vote. "We were there last for the vote for...I forget what the word was for that, to...split away..."

Referendum? "Referendum! We were there that day! We played Quebec City. And we played Montreal the day before so there were all these demonstrations; it was great. Tres jolie! I thought: 'Yeah man, go ahead, split away, go ahead, get out of here.'"

Cockburn, who is based in Toronto, is less sanguine about Quebec sovereignty. "I don't want to see them go. If I was Quebecois I might be sorely tempted to join the sovereignist ranks because I'd be looking at the rest of Canada, going, 'Why do I want to belong to that?' But I would be really sad to see it go because I think Quebec culture would be in greater jeopardy as an independent entity than it is now."

Both Cockburn's and Green Day's new albums are impressive in their own ways. Cool's band has a punk exuberance that – like the drummer's bravado – refuses to take itself all that seriously, songs that use noise but don't abuse it. Cockburn's recording features Gary Burton on vibes, and his own intricate guitaring is harnessed for truly beautiful songs and spoken-word musings.

On the adventurous and ominous song *The Mines of Mozambique*, Cockburn inveighs against the evils of land mines:

"Rusted husks of blown-up trucks/Line the roadway north of town/Like passing through a sculpture gallery/  
War is the artist/But he's sleeping now...And in a bare workshop they'll be molding plastic/Into little prosthetic limbs/  
For the children of the artist/And for those who farm the soil that received his bitter seed."

The last track on Green Day's *Nimrod* explores the theme of prosthetics through *Another Prism*. *Prosthetic Head*, a bouncy number with the best drumming on the planet, goes as follows:

"I see you down in the front line/Such a sight for sore eyes, you're a suicide makeover/Plastic eyes, lookin' through a numskull/What's his face. You erased yourself so shut up/Don't let up."

Cool has a fondness for the song, the only one on the CD that enabled him to use his trademark drum roll.

"Some drum rolls are mine and no one else can have them. They're definitely mine, signature Tre Cool licks. There is one in particular that I do – backaloo-backaloo- backaloo-back – no one else ever did that before I did and I don't think anyone can pull it off yet."

What is Cockburn's signature? Is there something called Canadiana and he's playing it?

"Ask me that in a hundred years."

As for Green Day, Cool knows more or less where the band stands in history. "Oh, we're the greatest rock n' roll band on the planet."

[Bruce Cockburn and Green Day perform – separately – on Tuesday.](#)

[Cockburn plays Salles du Gesu \(\\$25\); Green Day is at Metropolis \(\\$20\).](#)

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