

Rumours of Glory: A Memoir. By Bruce Cockburn and Greg King. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. 530 pp., [8] p. of plates, illustrations. ISBN 978-1-44342-072-3.

The first sentence of this impressive book states: “This is not your standard rock-and-roll memoir.” Instead Cockburn gives the reader numerous insights into the genesis of his songs, his own development as an artist and musician, and his ongoing search for the Divine. In an interview with [Peter Howell](#), he says that the impetus for the book was a request from HarperCollins for a “spiritual memoir.” Photos judiciously occur throughout the text along with a central eight-page insert of colour and black-and-white illustrations on glossy paper. Accompanying the release of the book was a boxed set containing eight CDs, seven of which contain all of the recorded songs which appear as texts in the book. Another CD contains previously unreleased songs, plus tracks that had originally been released on recordings of other artists. The DVD in the set is of nineteen tracks filmed from three solo shows done in Massachusetts and New York State in 2008.

Cockburn never wanted to be known as a protest singer, but rather considers himself an “artist-correspondent” with his songs growing out of his experiences, encounters, and observations of the world around him. As he writes on page 280, the songs are “triggered through feeling and imagination.” Early on he had the urge to travel, but he did not want to be just a tourist with little contact or exposure to the people and their places. First, he explored much of Canada in his own camper and it was indeed appropriate that he was the singer-songwriter chosen to create and perform “Goin’ Down the Road,” which was heard in the iconic Canadian film of the same name. Through his Canadian travels, he became concerned with the impact of Minamata disease both in Canada and beyond as well as becoming more aware of the issues among First Peoples. Cockburn’s understanding of these issues was also nourished through his relationships with Shingoose and Tom Jackson as well as other Aboriginal musicians.

The work and interests of his brother, Don, sparked Cockburn’s political investigations that resulted in the album, *The Trouble with Normal* (1983). That in turn caused OXFAM Canada to invite Cockburn to accompany the team going to Central America to witness the situation of Guatemalan refugees. The experience triggered what is possibly Cockburn’s most famous song, “If I Had a Rocket Launcher” (1983).

What Cockburn observed on that trip has been carefully documented. The Bruce Cockburn Fonds at the McMaster University Archives lists the numerous notebooks he kept of his trips along with drafts of texts for songs. Cockburn credits Greg King for his research contributions to the book, notably on places and political backgrounders that complement the author’s diaries and recollections of his visits to many of the world’s most volatile regions. As a result this book can also



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be viewed as a primer detailing many of the conflicts going on in the world today and the decisions that have led to the heart-rending conditions being suffered by those most closely affected. For this reader, the detail on landmines around the world was illuminating (395-407).

Cockburn also describes how he arrived at being a fine guitarist, which he then combined with his unique vocal style and superb song-writing abilities. Through recordings owned by his family he listened to a wide range of music (including Stravinsky) while singing in the school choir and initially studying clarinet and trumpet. Soon, however, his focus turned to the guitar. Lessons commenced and he began to play in rock-and-roll bands. Then he discovered jazz and got to know Peter Hodgson, better known as Sneezy Waters, who played fingerpicking guitar. Cockburn also visited the newly-opened Le Hibou in Ottawa where he discovered folk music as well as Bob Dylan's recordings.

The interest in jazz led him to attend the Berklee School of Music to study composition. He was disappointed that no one on the school's staff could assist him in further developing his fingerpicking style of playing with the thumb producing rhythm and the fingers doing the lead. While in Boston he got involved in its folk scene which was strongly influenced by Dylan who had developed his approach there in 1961, and Club 47 also introduced Cockburn to world music, particularly Indian and Arabic. Cockburn describes his playing technique as "a combination of country blues fingerpicking and poorly absorbed jazz training" (63).

Cockburn quit Berklee and returned to Canada. He played first in Ottawa and then Toronto with various bands that often performed his songs. By 1969, Cockburn became tired of psychedelia and had discovered that some of his best songs sounded better with solo acoustic guitar. From then on, he only occasionally played with bands.

Considering his voracious appetite for reading and writing poetry, it is not surprising that for Cockburn the creation of a song means that the words come first. Then using the guitar he begins to find an ambiance that those words can sit on, and out of that finally emerges the melody. Not only is Cockburn able to write beautiful poetic lines, but his prose in the book is outstanding. My sole criticism is the absence of an index. This is regrettable in a text that abounds with references to persons and places as well as individual songs. It also would have nicely complemented the concluding discography.

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