

**Getting Out of Here Alive: The Ballad of Murray McLauchlan.** By Murray McLauchlan. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1998. xv, 396 pp.\$32.00 ISBN 0-670-87659-3

Hearing the name of Murray McLauchlan, I immediately think of "Child's Song," "The Farmer's Song," "Sixteen Lanes of Highway," "Down by the Henry Moore," and the warm, engaging host of the CBC program *Swinging on a Star* that ran from 1989 to 1994. The songs are quintessentially Canadian, but have also been covered by many non-Canadian artists. As a radio commentator and performer, McLauchlan pulled out stories from his guests of their experiences and how this was reflected in their songs. Essentially McLauchlan, in this book, has explored on a broad canvas the links between his own lot in life, his role in the music business, and his production as a singer-songwriter.

For those who are intrigued with Canadian identity issues, his story has much to offer. Obviously he exemplifies a fundamental involvement with basic Canadian myths, those of space, winter's cold, and obdurateness like the Canadian Shield that covers much of the country. Even at the very opening of the book he compares the differences of surroundings, environment, and landscape of Paisley, Scotland, where he was born, with Toronto, where he arrived at the age of five. Obviously he fell in love with what he found in his new country and, through his adventures, came to know it intimately. That is what he has been able to give us, his fellow Canadians, through his songs and in the process define what has been called the Canadian folk sound.

As might be expected we find many details here of how particular songs came about and grew out of circumstances in his own life at the time. The concept and the

processes used to create each of the 19 albums of his *oeuvre* are outlined. Of course, these details expand into the murky area of the music business, and particularly the position of a Canadian artist in the North American market. McLauchlan does not whitewash its sordid elements or even his own role in its ancillary aspects such as the wide-spread use of drugs. Even the mind-numbing drudgery of the promotional tours comes across, with McLauchlan's ability to find humour in the situation urging the reader on.

Historically McLauchlan sees major differences between Canada and the United States in the TV shows of the 1950s that presented singers. The Americans promoted "the most homogenized and commercial brand of music" while the Canadian productions "mixed a whole bunch of interesting music together: traditional, singer-songwriter, good-time and commie-controversial stuff." With respect to the Canadian music business, I particularly found his comments on the emerging coffee-house scene of Yorkville in the 1960s to be fascinating. He documents various venues as well as his first encounters with musicians like Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Ronnie Hawkins, John Mills-Cockell, Bruce Cockburn, and Buffy Sainte-Marie. Surprisingly he makes no mention to the CRTC rulings for CanCon requirements beginning in 1971. Instead he attributes the greater success of Canadians within Canada to the rise of the FM stations. These stations certainly had an impact on musical taste and what got heard all over North America in the decade of the 1970s, and possibly their role

within Canada needs to be more carefully assessed.

With regard to his own stylistic development, traditional folk music and then Bob Dylan were strong early influences. From folk music McLauchlan views himself as moving to hard rock and rhythm-and-blues, but also including novelty and ballads. He attributes his failure to make a stronger impact in the U.S. market to the fact that his material cannot be pigeon-holed according to business categories. He was hailed as a New Country artist in the late 1980s, but the label seemed ironic to McLauchlan since *Timberline*, which he considers his best album to date, preceded the genre by a decade. Perhaps because of his early training as a painter, an activity to which he has returned, McLauchlan has put out albums strictly as an art product (*Heroes*), or has deliberately placed songs, each geared to a different genre, on the same album (*Midnight Break*). What has been essential for his productivity is spontaneity.

Much of this book is peppered with his experiences in aviation including the adventure circumnavigating Canada in a Cessna 185 floatplane for the 1986 special, "Floating Over Canada." The discipline necessary to become a licensed pilot gradually helped in giving him inspiration, ideas, and encounters for songs, as well as learning control both professionally and personally. He freely describes himself as being self-centred for almost all of his first four decades, and details how he struggled to find a balance between his career and his relationships with others, including family members.

This well-edited memoir is McLauchlan's odyssey to find that balance. In his telling he not only enlightens us about his own career, but also about what is really important to us Canadians, our landscape, how we relate to it, and some of the people who have lived and created within it. Murray McLauchlan is a wonderful story-teller.

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