

Phileas Fogg with a Guitar

The transcendental power of music rides a global whirlwind.

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Around the World in 57½ Gigs

Dave Bidini

McClelland and Stewart

311 pages, hardcover

ISBN 9780771014659

To be blunt: either you love the Rheostatics, or you've never heard of them. There is a third possibility, one involving taste that I won't get into.

With the release of their first album, 1987's *Greatest Hits*, the Rheostatics became Canada's pre-eminent underground phenomenon. Loved by critics and musicians but largely ignored by mainstream media, the Rheostatics entered the national music scene at a time when the hits of the 1960s and '70s were on permanent repeat and Neil Young's chestnut "Helpless"—with its invocation of "a town in North Ontario"—was the most Canadian song on the airwaves. While the Canadian music scene slept, dreaming of the past, the Rheostatics charged into the game with songs about hockey, beer and hoser history. The Rheos danced a limbo below the perceptions of the masses, producing strange and beautiful music for a small, appreciative audience. Over the years, the band released eleven studio recordings, a children's book with companion CD, a live double album recording and a movie soundtrack. They also toured with an exhibition of the Group of Seven sponsored by the National Gallery of Canada. What other working class prog-rock art band from Etobicoke can boast having shared the stage with Tom Thomson and Lawren Harris?

In 1998, Rheostatics' co-founder Dave Bidini published his first book, *On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock*. Now an essential title in the rock canon, *On a Cold Road* documents the Rheos' cross-Canada tour as the opening act for the Tragically Hip while it traces the stories of many forgotten musical pioneers who braved the black ice and frightening diners of the Trans-Canada Highway.

Bidini's eighth book, *Around the World in 57½ Gigs*, begins with the end of the Rheostatics. Band co-founder Tim Vesely's announcement in an Edmonton hotel room that the time has come to say goodnight to a 30-year partnership sends Bidini into a musical identity crisis. As any retiree will attest, the vacuum after a lifetime of dedication is often more difficult to face than the nine-to-five grind. Bidini, not a nine-to-fiver

by any means, faced a similar void. What was he if not the frontman of an underappreciated Canadian rock band? With these questions before him, Bidini sets out on a scaled-down global tour, backpacking with some friends into "the greater world of rock 'n' roll."

The author's search for identity is the launch point of *Around the World in 57½ Gigs*, not its primary concern. Quite early into the journey—which over the course of a year saw the author perform in Britain, Finland, Russia, China, the United States, Canada and Africa's west coast—it becomes clear that the search for self is a search for community. Wherever Bidini travels, he meets young musicians playing exotic versions of American music. The book's driving concern—beyond the superficial angst of the author's personal identity—is how music, politics and culture mix in unique, yet similar, ways around the world.

Planning his tour, Bidini muses, "when most touring musicians study their gig map the first time, they almost never tremble with excitement, wave their passports, and shout, 'Finland!'" But it is in Finland that the journey begins.

Summoned to the land of Nokia by a fan from Tampere, a city of 200,000 in the south of Finland, Bidini enters a surreal world of celebrity obsession. Finnish pop culture, it seems, has its own Britney in Olympic-jumper-turned-rock-casualty Matti Nykänen, whose descent from superstar into weeping lounge act with a prison record has mesmerized the public. That's the lurid backdrop: Bidini himself ends up jamming with folk musicians in pubs, making real music for often impassive audiences.

The Finland chapters, four in all, establish Bidini's voice, allowing the author a chance to entertain his reader. Bidini's writing is sharp and witty. He possesses a journalist's eye for detail and a knack for meeting strange characters. His willingness to jump into situations, to open his pages to others' stories and to set aside his own narrative agenda and ego make Bidini a top-notch storyteller. In many ways, Bidini's writing recalls the experiential journalism of George Plimpton, who humbled the authorial voice with a bumbling narrative persona that directed the spotlight to the story and its participants.

The adventure forges on into countries devastated by war and oppression where music, we learn, is more than entertainment, more than a spectacle to accompany a night of hard drinking—where it is a means to survival. Here Bidini's writing rises to the challenge, casting off introspection and ego to absorb as many of the stories as he can from young people clinging to music as one clings to a life raft.

In China, Bidini finds that the essence of rock 'n' roll is alive and well, and largely ignored by the state. In relation to western popular music, China is a time capsule. The Beatles, Bidini learns, are huge, as are tribute acts. Without the burden of 40 years of popular music—a history the author relays in a three-page Joycean sentence—Chinese youth are able to discover rock on their own terms. The scene, as Bidini describes it, is as vital and exciting as the early days of rock 'n' roll in North America.

The most powerful chapters of the book come toward the end as the author tours West Africa with War Child Canada, a non-profit group advocating for health education and children's rights in war-ravaged areas. Here Bidini visits Buduburam, a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana that, nearly two decades after the Liberian civil wars began, has become a small town and home for generations of young people who have never known anything but life in exile.

The author meets the King's Jubilee, a group with one CD to their credit although they have no instruments with which to practise and infrequent access to recording equipment. Eddie Amilcar and Terry Williams, members of King's Jubilee, relate horror stories from the war "without any of the shock or sadness that [overwhelm]" both author and reader. As Terry tells Bidini, "one of the most difficult aspects of the war was how muted we became ... Music is one of the ways we can sustain our voices, no matter what's happening at home." The experience leaves Bidini wondering if Canadians' "habit of ignoring our culture [is] so deep that we'd forgotten what it was in the first place."

Music in West Africa is not the ego-driven farce of North American pop but a lifeboat carrying cultural memory and the hope for a better world. A young rapper named Lus, taking his message to a classroom of children, sings about his home:

I see the children begging by the streetside
I see the children begging by the streetside
It's hard to believe what we see now
It's hard to believe.

Part of the power of music is its ability to process events that overwhelm the mind. With this power, music offers unimagined possibilities in the face of oppression and horror. With *Around the World in 57½ Gigs*, Dave Bidini gives his readers a taste of the transcendental power of music and its ability to carry the cultural essence of the people from whom it emanates. It is a story as varied and full as the music it describes. ☐

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