

# Canadians in the Spotlight

*Joni, Leonard, Gordon, Robbie—they're all here in this well-crafted tribute.*

MARK D. DUNN

**Whispering Pines:  
The Northern Roots of American Music ...  
From Hank Snow to The Band**

Jason Schneider

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I AM A NEW KIND OF BURNOUT—BURNED OUT ON boomer nostalgia. Born too late to know firsthand the excesses of the 1960s, I did not have the chance to stir-fry mind and soul back in the day, but have lived in the hazy shadow of that most celebrated of decades since I became aware. It is a cultural obsession that, as I enter my own version of middle age, has me asking: Having missed the party, why must I suffer the hangover?

The tinfoil-enhanced rabbit ears on the black and white Magnavox in my childhood home drew episodes of *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Gilligan's Island* and *Bewitched* from the ether-like signals from a distant, extinct star, ten years after they'd first aired. It was all new to me, of course. And I bought into the myth of glorious pasts, eschewing as rubbish any peep or image from my own time.

This nostalgia-induced cultural vacuum had its apex for my generation in the 1980s, when a constant reel of documentaries on Woodstock, Vietnam and the summer of love crowded the eye, and the soundtrack from another generation's youth claimed the program schedules of countless radio stations.

At the time, I loved it. The music of the 1960s beat the hell out of the pop and synth sounds of the '80s. Even I, born six months before mankind's One Giant Leap, recognized the energy and authenticity of the new classics. And the characters were right out of a Tom Robbins novel, walking archetypes that set the standard for the cultural icons yet to come.

Later it occurred to me that the Mobius-strip replay of 1960s glory helped to rob members of my generation of a genuine awakening. The most documented generational coming-of-age—recorded with all the tools of post-war technology—became the only generational coming-of-age ever to its participants, who, by the 1980s, had become the stewards of the institutions they once opposed.

But just when I think I can take no more of the golden age of transcendence, Jason Schneider's

*Whispering Pines: The Northern Roots of American Music ... From Hank Snow to The Band* comes along to stir up an exhausted interest. The stories Schneider tells are those of the Canadian musicians, famous and forgotten, who contributed to the musical revolution. These are stories that, quite often, are ignored or downplayed in works celebrating the 1960s and '70s. Schneider liberates the Canadian presence from the footnotes to celebrate it as central text of the era.

The narrative of *Whispering Pines* is constructed in a figure eight that weaves through five decades of music making, beginning and ending with The Band's legendary Last Waltz concert at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom, and looping in loose chronological order to explore Wilf Carter and the birth of the "Canadian scene," touching all points between.

Schneider writes with a historian's eye, placing the lives and work of the musicians within the context of their times and measuring the influence of larger forces on their music and careers. The major international figures—Carter, Snow, Hawkins, Ian and Sylvia, Lightfoot, Cohen, Mitchell, Young and The Band—have whole chapters dedicated to them. Other artists with smaller profiles, those who avoided much of the madness of celebrity for careers as working musicians, are grouped together. All this jumping around through time and place could easily become a tangle, but Schneider keeps a taut narrative throughout.

The author is at his best when discussing the larger themes. On Gordon Lightfoot's relationship to the Canadian landscape, Schneider writes:

He acknowledged the inner turmoil of the many who felt ambivalent, whose smalltown upbringings caused them to resist the pressure to choose sides, or even dare to look at life in black-and-white terms, since nature alone was the great equalizer ...

It was an idea that went straight to the heart of the Canadian psyche, and Lightfoot's unmatched output over the last half of the sixties was driven by the Canadian audience's desire to vicariously experience the place his songs embodied. It was a place they knew had existed all along, but could not locate within their increasingly urbanized lives ... Lightfoot's songs were the first step in connecting these sometimes immeasurable distances, where the real destination was often the trip itself.

One of the recurring themes in the book is the reluctance with which Canadian audiences embraced their musicians and writers. There was no entertainment system in Canada when many of these artists began making music. Until as recently as the 1980s, in many cases it was thought Canadian

musicians had to go stateside in order to find success. There were exceptions, of course. Lightfoot, for one, remained in Canada and, along with Ian Tyson, Bruce Cockburn, the McGarrigles and Murray McLauchlan, helped to form an infrastructure to support Canadian music within Canada. Yet even Bob Dylan was trashed by the *Toronto Star* for choosing Canadian musicians to back him for two shows at Massey Hall in 1965. His band, led by Robbie Robertson and later known as The Band, was dismissed as a "third-rate Yonge Street band" by the *Star's* Anthony Ferry, whom Schneider quotes but does not name. (John Goddard, however, did name him in an article in the *Star* in 2000.)

*Whispering Pines* goes further than focusing solely on the musicians. It peeks backstage at what Joni Mitchell called "the star-maker machinery behind the popular songs." There we meet American impresarios, such as John Hammond and Albert Grossman, and Canadian music pioneers Bernie Finkelstein and Mary Martin, who created what we now know as the modern music industry.

Where *Whispering Pines* falls short is in its obsession with the personal lives of the artists. In this regard, Schneider, at times, is guilty of a kind of unflattering voyeurism. Granted, the details of romantic liaisons might seduce the reader in the manner of tabloid journalism, but these accounts often come at the expense of documentation of the creative process. The book would better serve musicians if it delved into the details of recording sessions rather than the turnstile love affairs of the famous. Nowhere is this shortcoming more explicit than in the chapter on Mitchell. While Schneider acknowledges the inherent sexism of the music industry, recounting that *Rolling Stone* named her "Old Lady of the Year" and listed her "high-profile affairs, some of which were inaccurate," he also goes out of his way to categorize Mitchell's relationships as sexual or platonic. There is an assumption here that Mitchell was intimate with every male she knew, unless the author states otherwise. This failing is balanced (somewhat) by some of the most thoughtful gender analysis of Mitchell's work to come along in quite some time. On her resistance to tradition, Schneider writes, "few female voices had expressed such wisdom on record before; Mitchell refused to paint herself as a muse for others—instead allowing the men in her life to play that role for her."

Taken as a whole, *Whispering Pines: The Northern Roots of American Music ... From Hank Snow to The Band* is a fine piece of writing that condenses and contextualizes five decades of music into an entertaining and thoughtful document. Given the breadth of the subject matter, and the degree to which the era has been explored, Jason Schneider offers a concise, brilliantly organized and original take on Canadian cultural influence.

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