

Alberta Bound

Provincial acts leave inferiority complex behind and take centre stage at sled island

BY MIKE BELL, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 24, 2009



The Rural Alberta Advantage write predominantly about the province.

Photograph by: Courtesy, RAA

Spotlight

Rural Alberta Advantage perform Thursday at Broken City and Central United Church, and Friday at Royal Canadian Legion No. 1. Beija Flor perform Saturday at the Marquee Room. For complete listings go to sledisland.com.

The the first rule of wordsmithery--write what you know.

But what if what you know, what you've truly experienced and truly understand, is literally so provincial it's appeal is something you're certain won't translate outside of the region and its borders?

Or even worse, what if what you know has long been considered the epitome of uncool?

Well, if you're an Albertan, do it anyway and do it from the heart. The rest of world is certain to come around.

That seems to be a growing sentiment in the psyche of the prairie musician, as more and more artists are having success wearing their Alberta inspirations--good and bad --on their sleeves.

Look at Corb Lund, whose roots run deep through his albums that are often rural Alberta love-ins. Or there's Rae Spoon, a longlist hopeful for this year's Polaris Music Prize, whose latest album *superioryouareinferior* is very much borne from struggling with sexual identity in a place where that seems to carry an even greater stigma.

Or, more immediately, you could pick from any number of artists from the more than 120 on the Sled Island roster who call this province home. The local acts are, according to festival director Zak Pashak, "the meat of the Sled Island sandwich." He laughs. "That sounds a bit gross, maybe that's a bad analogy."

Gross but apt, considering one of the stated goals of the event is to celebrate and showcase local music.

And Pashak, too, has noticed that out of that collection of bands--be they punk acts, hip-hop, pop, garage, folk, metal, etc.--there seems to be a willingness to embrace and in-turn showcase the region, itself, as an influence, either subliminally or unabashedly.

"I think people are less ashamed to be from here," Pashak says, before pointing to a recent show he caught in Lethbridge which featured Sled Island participants The Moby Dicks.

"And they were singing about the diner they like to go to after shows, and it was definitely about Lethbridge. There was no shame in singing about Lethbridge. . . . It was good to see that."

Perhaps a more obvious example is the dream pop trio known as The Rural Alberta Advantage.

Though based in Toronto and made up of two-thirds Ontarians, the band's songwriter Nils Edenloff

was born, raised and is very much a product of the province, having lived all over the area, including a great deal of time spent in the provincial capital. And beyond merely twisting a slogan for his own musical moniker, Edenloff's songs --which make up the soon-to-be-released (July 7) Hometowns CD--deal almost exclusively with his former turf, with titles such as The Dethbridge in Lethbridge, Edmonton and Frank, AB.

Surprisingly, even in the self-centred Big Smoke it's helping to earn it an audience broader than the proverbial barn.

"It definitely hasn't put people off--the topics or the name," Edenloff says, explaining shows in the States (New York, Chicago, etc.) have been equally well received.

"I guess there's something about the music itself which connects with people and the topics in it."

Perhaps that's because the songwriter says the name, the song titles and the lyrics--all meant affectionately and without a hint of irony--were never part of any grand design or schticky, contrived identity, but rather came from what he describes as "a very honest place."

"I never really gave it much thought. . . . I was at a point when these songs started coming out where I had moved from Edmonton to Toronto, and it wasn't until I moved away where I realized how much of growing up (in Alberta) and the things I remembered and the stories I heard, how much that shaped who I became and what I was. It wasn't until moving out there where I was like, 'Oh, yeah it was a really great place to grow up and I'm happy about it.'

"And I think those feelings are shared by a lot of people out there. Being from a small town and going to a big city or even vice versa, going to a big city and going to a change.

"I think those are universal things that, even if you dislike Alberta, it can connect with you."

Acclaimed Calgary band Beija Flor also isn't shy about professing how much growing up here has influenced its music, although perhaps minus the perspective distance has provided Edenloff, it's not entirely positive.

In fact, songwriter Stephen van Kampen says the chamber roots pop act's latest release *The American*, deals a great deal with the love-hate, or as he terms it "abusive" relationship, with his hometown, although perhaps not as nakedly stated as in *The Rural Alberta Advantage's* songs.

"I think that our lyrics are typically cryptic enough that it can apply to other places, as well," van Kampen says.

"A lot of this stuff is socioeconomic problems that you can find anywhere. So I don't think we specifically call out to specific regions of where we are all the time. . . . If people make the connection, well, that's understood, but if they find it makes a connection to Kathmandu, that works, too. A lot of these issues we deal with you can find anywhere.. . .

"I think you have to keep it open-ended to certain extent," he continues.

"If I listen to a song and it's talking about a certain situation in a another town . . . you write what you know, right? And I can still take that and put it against my own experience and say, 'Hey that matches up against me as well.' "

He, as example, mentions Toronto band Ohbijou, which peppers its songs about love and relationships with the grit and grime of Hogtown.

"I don't fail to make a connection with them," he says. "I also appreciate they're writing about Toronto and I appreciate that they have a love for their home."

As to how it all plays out in the hometown or the region being written about, Beija Flor's success speaks for itself--it's considered one of the city's best and brightest, with 2008's *The American* showing up on a number of local year-end lists.

And *The Rural Alberta Advantage*? Well, that's yet to be seen.

The group's Sled Island dates will be the first time it has ventured into this territory since forming almost four years ago.

"(But) we've got our fingers crossed," says Edenloff. "We've never really been heckled--not that I can think of. It's always been a pretty warm response. So hopefully that won't change."