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MUSIC PREVIEWS

An Alberta boy in The Big Smoke

Expat draws from his Prairie past for The Rural Alberta Advantage
Published June 25, 2009 by [Chris Turner](#) in [Music Previews](#)

As oddball band names go, the Rural Alberta Advantage ranks high on several WTF scales — a parody of a mostly meaningless and thankfully defunct government marketing slogan, suggesting that the promised advantage is nothing but a joke. It also faintly evokes proggy '70s band names like the Alan Parsons Project, which is rarely a good thing.

Yet the band in question arrives in Calgary for three Sled Island appearances (its first shows in the province that gave the band its unique moniker) in a highly advantageous position. Less than a year ago, the RAA was one of countless smart, punky folk-pop bands peddling a self-produced, self-released debut. Last November, though, influential online distributor eMusic.com named that debut, an earnest, infectious and often flat-out brilliant collection of hymns to life and love in Wild Rose Country, as its Unreleased Selection of the Month. Sales of the album, *Hometowns*, instantly skyrocketed from the dozens to the thousands. A glowingly reviewed South by Southwest showcase and a record deal with Conor Oberst's Saddle Creek Records soon followed and now lead singer, guitarist and primary songwriter Nils Edenloff returns to his home province after a seven-year Toronto exile looking like he'd chosen the name as a simple descriptor.

"Every day there's something that sort of surprises me — I can't believe it's going so great," says Edenloff, who grew up in Edmonton and Fort McMurray — and often vacationed at a family cabin on pasture land near Donald, which provided the inspiration for the band name. "I'm not even really sure if we could've possibly planned it out to go this way. It was kind of just out of nowhere."

Edenloff emigrated to Toronto after graduating from the University of Alberta in 2002, and eventually found himself co-hosting an open-mic night at a storied Cabbagetown dive called the Winchester, alongside versatile percussionist Paul Banwatt. They experimented with a range of lineups before coalescing as a three-piece with the addition of multi-instrumentalist Amy Cole, whose crystal-clear high harmonies provide a lilting counterpoint to Edenloff's bracing yowl on many of *Hometowns'* standout tracks.

The RAA's sound is a stunning mix of jangling guitars and raw, urgent drums, with bits of horn, keyboards, strings and even the odd metronomic drum-machine beat sprinkled throughout. *Hometowns* is eclectic and lush even as it somehow remains as spare and cutting as a prairie winter wind — a perfect complement to Edenloff's finely crafted, aching tales of true love buried beneath the Frank Slide or blinded by the purple floodlights of the Alberta legislature.

The songs were mostly inspired by Edenloff's first couple of hard-luck years as a Prairie boy overwhelmed by the Big Smoke. "I was always losing when I first moved to Toronto," he says. With everything he'd brought with him stolen and unable to find a job for months on end, beat down by "a city that's always on the attack" (as he puts it in "Edmonton," the ambitious mini-epic that provides a sort of crescendo to the dozen songs on *Hometowns*), Edenloff found solace in his own private Alberta.

Imagine Neutral Milk Hotel's Jeff Mangum fronting a stripped-down version of Arcade Fire to howl homesick odes to an Alberta that's sometimes hard to love but impossible to shake and, in the process, producing a strain of prairie pride in the same vein as the Weakerthans. Imagine as well just how much potential would lie in a brew that potent, and understand that the album's self-evident songcraft and the advance word on the RAA's unpretentiously dynamic live act suggests they might actually be as good as those ingredients. This is that all-too-rare mix of talent, timing and momentum that can produce the kind of gig that defines a young festival's purpose and just maybe gives its audience a lifetime of saw-them-just-before-they-went-supernova bragging rights. Highly recommended.



Marc Hodges

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