



Amble On

The changes in the Cowboy Junkies sound on *Lay it Down*, their sixth album, are subtle rather than radical, but the Toronto quartet clearly views its arrival as an important career step. *Lay it Down* is their debut for Geffen Records, the powerhouse American label at the forefront of so much modern rock. The fact they'd consider a major investment in a band now eligible for the veteran tag (over 10 years together), that remains faithful to its idiosyncratic take on roots music, clearly augurs well for the group's next decade. To Junkies guitarist/chief songwriter Michael Timmins, this interest was reassuring.

"In this day and age, everyone is after the new thing. With Geffen, there was a lot of understanding and respect for what we'd done."

The departure from original label RCA/BMG was both inevitable and smooth.

"We had a nice long run with BMG, but both sides were getting too used to each other. We knew what to expect from them, they knew what to expect from us, and it was getting very stale. We asked to go, and Geffen was our number one choice."

Coincidentally, Jim Powers, the label exec' who signed Cowboy Junkies to RCA, had just moved over to Geffen.

"We talked with him and he said he'd be delighted to work with us again," explains Michael. "We didn't even bother to shop around. This was our choice, they wanted us, so, 'let's do it!'. A bidding war is what happens to young bands — we'd gone through that first time around. This time we knew what we wanted."

The honeymoon period for the new partners still flourishes.

"It's exciting to meet new people who have a new perspective on what we do and who we are," says Michael.

Prior to the label change, the band's commercial fortunes had been flagging. Upon the release

of 1993's *Pale Sun*, *Crescent Moon*, singer Margo Timmins confided that no Junkies album had come close to the phenomenal success of their 1988 breakthrough, *The Trinity Sessions* (over a million copies sold worldwide). "Maybe this will sell 200,000, the next 100,000, then we'll disappear!"

Her partly joking pessimism has now been arrested. With *Lay it Down*, the band have produced their most consistently strong album of the decade. Reviews have been largely positive, the first single, 'Common Disaster', has scored solid airplay, and they've just begun an extensive North American tour.

Cowboy Junkies relocated to musical mecca Athens, Georgia, to record *Lay it Down* last summer, with noted producer John Keane (Indigo Girls, REM).

"We knew we wanted to work with someone on a co-production basis," recalls Michael. "We scouted some people we thought might be appropriate. We knew John from his work with songwriters — the sound of the last Vic Chestnut and Grant MacLennan records clinched it for us."

Keane's studio is in his house outside of Athens, and was a congenial environment by all accounts.

"It was very comfortable, no distractions," says

Michael. Despite their proximity to a lively music scene, the band didn't do much night-clubbing.

"We only went out once, to see Vic Chestnut," Margo explains. "I like to focus on the recording, get plenty of sleep, eat well and work."

Such a regimen and recent sessions with a voice coach paid off with a stellar vocal performance on *Lay it Down*.

"Not that you can expect me to sing opera in the future, but I'm just much more comfortable about what I can do with my voice," says Margo. "Before I'd be really anxious about my performance, whether I'd hit certain notes. Now I just find other things to get stressed out about!"

The band enjoyed their Athens sojourn, but Margo jokingly confides: "I couldn't see myself living there. It is too much of a student town — makes me feel old!"

It is, however, precisely this kind of American college town that first embraced the Cowboy Junkies sound, and almost a decade later remains a crucial part of the band's audience. Michael Timmins is very aware of that.

"Even as an independent band, we played quite a bit in college towns like Athens, through Georgia, Virginia and the South. A lot of our influences come indirectly from that area, so it's nice to be accepted there."

The Cowboy Junkies debt to American roots music — country, blues, folk — is overt, but it is their somehow quintessentially Canadian take on the music that has transformed it into something valuable and lasting. The hauntingly melancholy feel of Margo Timmins' voice is the perfect vehicle for brother Michael's restrained, subtly intelligent songwriting.

In turn, Cowboy Junkies have had a definite influence on younger American bands. Mazzy Star is the most obvious and popular example, but the adjective 'Junkies-like' has gained wide currency. With typical modesty, Margo claims: "I can't really comment on other bands people say sound close to us. I can't really hear it."

On the Canadian side, the band can take credit for being one of the first domestic independent acts to make serious waves there and in the US in the mid 80s. They released 1986 debut *Whites Off Earth Now!* on their own label, Latent, back "before it was sensible to do that", as Michael explains with a chuckle.

"Alan [Anton] and I took our lead from the English indie scene of the late 70s, and later worked there as musicians [Hunger Project, Germinal]. That's where our DIY ethic came from. It seemed impossible to Canada then, but the industry is so vital here now. I don't really see any direct connection between us and bands happening now, but I'd be flattered if someone made that connection. I'd like to think our success as an independent band may have encouraged some people at the time to follow on that path."

It's not easy to get the undemonstrative, soft-spoken songwriter to discuss it, but the observation that the Junkies have been consistently undervalued by the Canadian music industry and

media does strike a nerve.

"There's a strange relationship between us and the Canadian music industry, and I'm not quite sure what it is! It may be our own seeming disregard for the industry here, which I don't necessarily agree with. We've just apportioned our time to the market where we sell the most records, the US and Europe. We don't hang out or do a lot of the gladhanding that seems a natural part of the industry. We don't go to the right parties, stroke the right people. We're not like that as people. We're not there for the right photo opportunities! At times it's frustrating, but it's usually a joke."

A few years back there were almost too many photo opportunities for the band's liking. The incredibly photogenic Margo was listed by *People* as one of the world's most beautiful women, and Gap ads and *Interview* fashion spreads followed. She never appeared totally comfortable with that role, and admits now she enjoys living in Toronto, with "that Canadian habit of not bothering 'celebrities'".

Over their career, Cowboy Junkies have got to work with many of their musical heroes. They have toured and recorded with folkie legends John Prine and Townes Van Zandt, and Michael sees that as "the ultimate compliment".

"Last year we were asked by Neil Young to perform 'Helpless' at the Governor General's Awards in Ottawa. These are people I grew up glued listening to on the stereo. To not just meet them, but have them say something decent about what you're doing is the ultimate."

And, of course, Lou Reed is on record calling the Junkies cover of 'Sweet Jane' the best version of one of his songs. It got fresh exposure with its inclusion on the soundtrack of Oliver Stone's recent, typically controversial flick, *Natural Born Killers*. Michael Timmins has mixed views on that movie.

"I liked it as a technical piece of film making — it was amazing looking and sounding — but I'm not a Stone fan. His attempt to make some kind of social commentary was ridiculous."

Given the success they've had covering the material of others, it's something of a surprise *Lay it Down* features only group originals.

"Funnily enough, we worked on more covers for this album than ever before, but none quite fit naturally with what we were doing," explains Michael.

Those worked on included Talking Heads' 'Heaven', Leonard Cohen's 'That's No Way to Say Goodbye', Patti Smith's 'Dancing Barefoot', and Todd Rundgren's 'Hello, It's Me'. They'll likely appear as b-sides.

Michael would love his songs to be covered by others in the future.

"That's one of those peaks I hope will happen, no matter who did it. We've had people at shows come up with tapes of them doing our songs, and that's real cool. If they go along and become better known, maybe they'll keep some of those. It takes a while for songs to seep into the pop fabric."

KERRY DOOLE

MR HOLLAND'S Opus COMPETITION



The critically acclaimed new Richard Dreyfuss movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* has a soundtrack that includes Shawn Stockman of Boyz II Men and classic pop and soul tracks such as Spencer Davis Group 'Keep On Running', John Lennon 'Imagine', Ray Charles 'I Got a Woman' and Stevie Wonder's 'Uptight'. *RipItUp* has 10 t-shirts, 10 movie soundtracks and 10 double Hoyts Theatres passes to win. To be in to win just answer the two questions below:

1. Name a movie Richard Dreyfuss has appeared in:
2. Name two artists who appear on the *Mr. Holland's Opus* soundtrack:

Name

Address

Post your entry to Mr Holland's Competition, RipItUp, PO Box 5689, Auckland 1 by May 25.

taking care of business

FLYING NUN USA

Flying Nun are to open an office in the USA in June. American **Mike Wolf**, previously employed at the Minneapolis indie **Amphetamine Reptile**, will work from a base in the college town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The first priority of the USA office will be to work releases by **Garageland**, **Loves Ugly Children** and the **Able Tasmans**. "It's going to start by him trying to boost the label's profile and do promotion for the stuff that we'll be releasing," says Nun's **Lesley Paris**.

RAP FUND

Phonographic Performances (NZ) Ltd has set up a **Recording Artists and Producers Fund** to distribute broadcasting royalties direct to recording artists who are played on NZ radios and their record labels. To be eligible musicians must register their recordings with the fund. For registration forms please contact RAP

Fund, Phonographic Performances, PO Box 9241, Wellington. Phone (04) 384-3523 or Fax (04) 384-5060. Forms are due by May 10.

FELIX

The first releases on the new **Felix** label are two CD EPs in May — **Muckhole** *Where's the Corndogs?* and **Future Stupid**, *Future Stupid*. Felix is run by **Murray Cammick** owner of the Wildside label. Felix will be distributed in New Zealand by **BMG**.

SKC CD OFFER

Korean electronics giant SKC have a special offer for manufacturing 1000 CDs — the disc with printed cover and case for \$3,200. For further information phone 0800-752-661.

AUSTRALIA'S ENTERTAINMENT WEALTHY LIST

The *Business Review Weekly* magazine listed the 10 highest earning

Australians in entertainment for 1995 (in millions):

1. **Mel Gibson** \$16 m
2. **AC/DC** \$12.5 m
3. **George Miller** \$11 m
4. **Silverchair** \$6.4 m
5. **John Laws** \$6.2 m
6. **Michael Gudinski** \$3.5 m
7. **B1 & B2** \$3.3 m
8. **Alan Jones** \$2.5 m
9. **Tina Arena** \$2.4 m
10. **Paul Hogan** \$1.9 m

MUSICAL CHAIRS

Manager of Hamilton's **Radio Contact**, **Adam Hyde** has been appointed station manager for **95bFM** at Auckland University ... **Megan Chittick** will leave **BMG Promotions** in mid-June to travel overseas ... **Jubt Avery** has left **Flying In** and returned to **bFM** as a sales rep.