



# THE VIEW FROM ACROSS THE ROCKIES: WHEN CALGARY BECKONS

By Barbara Bruederlin

It would be a lot easier if those damn mountains weren't in the way. But with increasingly stringent regulations at the US border and increasingly complex hoops that a band must jump through to get a work visa to play in the US, it seems immeasurably easier for a BC band to just check the brakes on the old van and make the arduous trek across the Rockies into Alberta instead.

Greg Murray, drummer for the Vancouver band, Portico, agrees, explaining that obtaining the required work visa to perform stateside can be difficult and costly. Having a work visa in hand is no guarantee that a band will not be inexplicably turned away at the US border.

"Playing shows in the US does have plenty of benefits, but sometimes the red tape involved can make the shorter trips seem a lot less worthwhile. Sadly, hopping the border to play one or two US shows over a weekend just isn't feasible."

Portico is currently planning national tours in the spring and fall to promote the upcoming release of their third album. They have toured nationally, and extensively throughout western Canada, so are all too familiar with the unique challenges facing any band that calls BC home.

The members of Portico (drummer Greg Murray, vocalist/guitarist Lyn Heinemann, and bassist Mimi Mahovlich) are generally pragmatic about the geographic isolation facing BC bands. They acknowledge that being based in Vancouver, far removed from the heart of the music industry in central

Canada, makes gaining national exposure more difficult. "Getting attention from industry folks requires a bit more effort," Greg concedes. "We can't simply call up a record label or magazine and invite them to come check us out at one of our local shows."

Unlike their contemporaries in Toronto or Montreal, who can drive to other major centres in a couple of hours, Portico are faced with a daunting twelve hour drive to the next major hub in Calgary. They stress the importance of planning your road-trips accordingly.

Crossing the Rockies can be tricky and something best restricted to the good weather months, which of course further limits a band's opportunities for greater exposure further afield. But even in pleasant weather, every trek across those mountains is fraught with inherent difficulties waiting around each hairpin turn. When I saw Portico perform at the Sled Island Festival in Calgary this June, they were playing on borrowed instruments. Their gear was still somewhere in the Rockies, in transit with another band that had run into difficulties on that onerous trek.

And aside from the issues of schlepping gear across challenging geography and mind-numbing distances, the members of Portico warn of the all-too-real issue of cabin fever which inevitably sets in en route. They stress that it's on these lengthy road trips, cooped up inside a metal box, creeping along tortuous mountain highways, that you realize

the supreme importance of choosing your band-mates wisely. With the right people sharing your space and under the right circumstances, you can fend off the squirrelliness that threatens your sanity. Under the right conditions, those hours of involuntary containment can actually lead to some truly serendipitous moments.

Following their appearance at Sled Island, Greg, Lyn and Mimi were inspired by forced confinement, road-weariness, and a Robyn cd that was kicking around the floorboards, to perfect an a cappella version of "Show Me Love", which they performed later that day at their homecoming show in Vancouver. Now that's good time management and outstanding multi-tasking.

Greg admits that they actually enjoy making the trek to Calgary. Part of this, of course, comes from the pleasure of meeting and working with contemporaries who bring their own experiences and sensibilities with them from other parts of the country.

"During Sled Island, we had a great time checking out local bands such as Azeda Booth and Chad VanGalen," Greg muses. "Wherever we go, we manage to find local acts to play shows with. All have been very friendly and supportive."

Aside from the comradery they find wherever they tour, the members of Portico maintain that a flourishing local music scene in Calgary and a particularly innovative approach to the use of unconventional concert spaces makes the city especially attractive to a mid-sized band. They lament the shrinking numbers and types of performance venues available on the west coast. With the limited number of venues that remain, most are suited to larger acts, and a few to very small acts. But very few are appropriate for a medium-level act.

Conversely, Calgary has been experiencing a proliferation of unconventional concert spaces in its downtown core in the past few years. Many under-utilized buildings in the downtown have been pressed into service as concert venues, a trend that began about three years ago and shows no signs of abating.

Knox United Church was one of the forerunners in the recent movement to welcome musical acts into places traditionally designated for worship. The superb acoustics of this pretty little sandstone building make it a spectacular place to hold a concert. Built in 1912, and obviously pre-dating electronic amplification, it was designed to allow the vicar's voice to project to the congregation in the back pews, a feature which makes it a perfect intimate venue for solo musicians or small bands. Its central location ensures good accessibility for musicians and audience alike, and also contributes to a more vibrant and welcoming city core after nightfall. More recently, Grace Presbyterian and Central United have been added to the roster of core area churches that have opened their doors to promoters looking to book interesting venues that best suit their bands.

The Grand Theatre, another previously under-utilized Calgary core area building, has also been offering great acoustics and a premium central location for a few years now. This historical building was recently upgraded with removable risers within a black box setting and a chic bar area that

can still accommodate an all-ages show. This allows for more versatility in the Grand's use as a concert venue.

The flexibility which non-traditional venues allow, in terms of audience capacity and the ability to accommodate an all-ages show, is something that entices Portico to play gigs in Calgary. They applaud the vibrancy of the music scene in Calgary, as a destination that allows local musicians to flourish while offering touring bands versatility in their choice of venues. They talk about the fun they had playing the Calgary Science Centre this spring, and how playing in such an intimate and unusual space translates into a more engaging and satisfying experience for bands and audiences alike.

"I hope this innovative idea catches on and spreads to other cities across Canada," Greg tells me. "We love making the trek to Calgary anyways, but having access to cool venues certainly sweetens the deal."

With upstart indie festivals like Sled Island leading the move to commandeer ever more non-traditional spaces into concert venues, the face of Calgary's concert scene has evolved irrevocably over the past two years. It's no longer unusual to see Chad VanGalen's mind-boggling stoner videos projected onto the ceiling of the planetarium as a backdrop to his performances, or to have the downtown legion belie its slightly seedy exterior by hosting late-night concerts by Okkervil River and Wire.

Thanks to the precedent set by the Sled Island organizers, we now see an abundance of art house theatres, chic art galleries, retro cool legions, and soulful tea houses offered up as concert spaces. Musicians and audiences have increasingly diverse options in which to interact up close and at their sweaty best. The atmosphere in the city has become increasingly welcoming for touring bands and local musicians alike.

Ultimately, the benefits of this are bestowed upon BC bands in particular. With restrictive bureaucracy curtailing those weekend gigs in the US, the explosion of the music scene in Calgary and the corresponding opening of a plethora of diverse venues has made a road-trip across the Rockies look increasingly worthwhile.

Just ignore the distance and the daunting mountains that lie in the way, but make sure you follow the sage advice of Portico before you load the guitars into the van: have good tires, and choose your band-mates wisely and your travel music very carefully.

*A recent escapee from writing grant proposals in academia, Barbara Bruederlin is a freelance writer in Calgary. She intends to single-handedly save the arts community in Canada by promoting struggling musicians and theatre troupes. Her reviews are regularly linked on the press pages of the Calgary Folk Music Festival and Sage Theatre. Barbara also maintains an insanely popular blog, Bad Tempered Zombie, where she regularly pens arts reviews as well as whatever drivel falls out of her head. Her writing has been published in Prairie Fire Magazine, Swerve Magazine, Kitschykoo! Subcultural Magazine, and recently a spectacularly bad poem has appeared in Alberta Views Magazine.*

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