

The Canadian Bob Dylan: A conversation with Bruce Cockburn

Okee dokee folks... Are you "Wondering Where The Lions Are"? Have you ever thought to yourself, "If I Had A Rocket Launcher"? Or maybe, just maybe, you're puzzled as to why they "Call It Democracy" in this country when the system is being rigged? If so, then you are definitely in need of a night of music from the legendary Bruce Cockburn.

The first time I ever heard of Bruce Cockburn he was described to me as being the Canadian Bob Dylan. He has been around almost as long as Dylan and produced an impressive body of work in that time. His music is revered world wide and he's won countless awards, including 13 Juno awards.

Bruce Cockburn will be performing solo at the Narrows Center for the Arts in Fall River on Wednesday, March 2. I had the opportunity speak with Cockburn via phone from his California home about the upcoming show and his career. It took a couple of attempts to get this done as Bruce was in the middle of moving into a new home.

Bruce Cockburn: Sorry about missing you the other day, we just moved and there is a lot going on, yesterday was the big moving day.

John Fuzek: No problem at all, thanks for calling! Where did you move to?

BC: I'm in San Francisco, I have been living here for the past dozen years but we moved to a new place in San Francisco.

JF: Moving can be traumatizing.

BC: It can be!

JF: Why did you move to San Francisco? You're a Canadian.

BC: I married an American.

JF: I figured that these days people would be more apt to go to Canada than the US because it's so messed up here.

BC: (laughs) There is that, yeah but the messed up nature was less apparent a decade or so ago than it is now. But I lived in Boston in the 60's.

JF: That's right, you went to Berkeley.

BC: Right and it wasn't very different back then, we didn't have COVID-19, which has put pressure on all the systems everywhere, but there was the war and racial tensions, the polarity that those things brought out is the same polarity we are seeing now.

JF: True. I was only a kid in the 60's so I only have vague recollections but didn't have to deal with it as people of your generation did. I am sure that it impacted you as a songwriter.

BC: The whole era did, not just the social milieu; it was me and every other songwriter who were the products of that. There's a continuous line, you can go back to Joe Hill and the early days of the labor struggles and you'll find singers singing about political stuff that we can actually relate to and understand. And if you want to look at the spiritual side of things people have been singing about God forever.

JF: I am singer-songwriter as well and I was influenced by your work in the mid 80's, most notably "If I Had A Rocket Launcher." I had a bit of a late introduction to you though. Someone I used to work with turned me on to your music. Then "Rocket Launcher" influenced me to write more socially and politically minded music. I do have to thank you for that!

BC: You're more than welcome! We're all influenced by somebody and for me Dylan was probably the biggest influence, I was listening to him before I started writing my own songs- or at least before I started taking the idea of writing song seriously. I tried to write a couple of songs while I was still in high school and that's about when I started to listen to Dylan, he more than anyone else, but there were others, too: well, the Beatles and The Stones and the other songwriters of the time that were writing rock or pop songs. They were able to say more in their songs than previous generations, like my parent's music was able to say. There's some older stuff that speaks about this too- of course Pete Seeger was of my parents' generation and he was busy doing that same thing then- but I didn't know about him then.

JF: Pete Seeger is my musical hero.

BC: He was great, he was a great presence in the world as well as being great at what he did.

JF: I saw you a few times in the 80's and at the Newport Folk Festival in the 90's. One of the times I saw you at the Folk Fest you were doing this thing with wind chimes attached to your mic stand and you would occasionally kick them.

BC: I have done quite a few things with wind chimes over the years.

JF: Was there a significance to the wind chimes?

BC: Other than sonically, no. I have them there because I like the sound. They're a bit weird to use outdoors- I don't do it much outdoors now because outdoors there is actual wind that makes them go. And you're hearing wind chimes whether you want to or not. I have these big sets but when I am playing solo I'll use the smaller sets. With the band I don't tend to use them because the mics pick up too much of the drums and everything else. I did a couple of tours with these very large sets of wind chimes, they're five feet long, I have two sets that play in D minor and two sets that play in E minor and use them in different songs, depending in the key. That made for a really rich and interesting thing, and we rigged up some bass drum pedals to make them go so I didn't have to actually kick them because I'm getting a little old for the high kicks (laughs). The last tour I was using them for one song and it was a pretty effect, that tour I was playing a song from Bone on Bone that I wrote on the charango, a song in French called "Mon Chemin" and that went really well with strings and the wind chimes. This tour I am not.

JF: On this tour are you solo or will you have others with you?

BC: Actually, I lied, I am using them, but not the same ones! I just remembered, sorry. This is a solo tour. Completely solo.

JF: What are you reaching into your catalogue for to play this tour? Are you changing it up every show or sticking to a strict set?

BC: Pretty much the same show from night to night, varies a little in the encores possibly but I tend to do that. I get a show that works and I stick with it. Unless there is some drastic reason to change it: sometimes there is poignant request for someone who is local and just died and would I sing such and such a song in their honor; things like that you can't ignore, so then the set will change a little bit. It's a cross section of the old and the new, that what all my shows have been over the years, but a different selection of older stuff. In particular from the past tours: this is our second attempt at the 50th anniversary tour, trying to do the "anniversarial" thing!

JF: A lot of folks have run into that, what was supposed to be the 50th is now really the 51st or 2nd at this point because things have been postponed so much.

BC: It's interesting how many of those anniversaries there are.

JF: That's when all the good stuff came out! All the good stuff and all the good performers are aging out. The new stuff is just not as memorable.

BC: Yeah but something will come out of it that is, I bet.

JF: I hope so!

BC: That's my impression, too. I pretty much agree with you but I feel like I am probably not in the best

position to judge. I don't exactly have my ear to the ground at this point. I've got a ten year old daughter who listens to the radio and I hear what shows up there (laughs). I don't find that it attracts me.

JF: I haven't heard much, if anything, that I like these days.

BC: We don't hear it, but what we do hear is the surface stuff. If you listen to what was on the radio in 1965, it was mostly garbage. I think what is on the radio is almost always mostly garbage but with some good things that get through. I went through this a few years back when all these young kids were trying to play bluegrass and they were rediscovering the old folk music that we "discovered" back in our day. They're learning it from scratch and doing shitty versions of it and then it got good, and you wind up with a band like Crooked Still who are brilliant, and other bands that really took it somewhere interesting. So if you're only listening to pop music on the radio, something will surface at some point and get through. I was just reading an article about Janis Ian, who I am acquainted with, though I haven't seen her in quite a while

JF: Isn't she retiring this year?

BC: Yes, and she talks about how she could handle being part of the music business, but being part of the music industry is not something she is interested in. I think the distinction is interesting though I haven't really articulated it that way to myself, but it is like that, everything has become like that, not just music: everything is globalized and everything is corporate, everything is this and that, and more and more so Jeff Bezos is going to own everything and all of us after a while.

JF: Too much concentration of power in one place is not good and leads to homogenization.

BC: There are always going to be people who are rebelling against that, I don't know how much the matrix or the metaverse is going to take us all over. There are indications that it is happening but I don't think it's as cut and dry as some would like it to be.

JF: I hope people tire of it. I am getting tired of technology in general. It seems to be interfering more than helping lately.

BC: Yeah, I have to get an app to pick up my kid from school. What the fuck is that? It's a private school, I am happy with the school, it's a really good school. This new house we moved into has a garage, I've never had a garage, it has a door that opens automatically and in order to open the garage automatically you have to get an app!

JF: That's the kind of shit that bothers me because I don't have a smart phone and I don't want a smart phone. I have a flip phone and it's brand new, I just got it! People are just too addicted to their phones.

BC: I know, I certainly am though I'm not as bad as some people. I'm always looking at it to see what's going on and to look at the news, and e-mails, you just get into the habit of pulling this thing out of your pocket and looking at it

JF: It happens in my band, if we stop playing for two seconds the phones come out!

BC: (laughs) There's a church I go to, when I first started going to it, there's a whole bunch of really good singers and a good band and I end up sitting in the band a lot. When we did the Bone on Bone album I got a bunch of them to come and sing on it, we recorded a couple of songs with them on it and when the album came out I went around with my box of CDs and wanted to give them all a CD, but no one had a CD player! This was me being obsolete! It was also slightly distressing!

JF: Right, you have a product that once was a physical commodity and now it's a virtual thing that is hard to grasp and it has degraded the value because people don't seem to see value in something that is downloaded.

BC: I mean I have my share of downloaded music, that's just how you get music now.

JF: But you still put out CD's.

BC: Yes, and thank God for vinyl! I mean people talk about it like it's a big happening thing: it's really a small niche market, but they have the big graphics and the actual information about the album- that's the thing I miss most that downloads don't have. It doesn't come with anything. You don't get the

credits unless you hunt for them and sometimes that can be quite difficult. I mean the info is out there but where do you find it? Who played on that track and who played on this track? And who wrote the songs. You don't get that information.

JF: And then there is Spotify and the streaming platforms.

BC: The same thing applies. I mean I am happy to be out there on Spotify, I want to be heard, but I'm not making much from it.

JF: Musicians used to be able to have one hit single and that would carry them on their music career, now you have a hit single and you might be able to buy a cup of coffee.

BC: Yeah, and if you're really, really good you might be able to buy dinner.

JF: So, you have a book at, a memoir, correct? Your life, road stories, song inspirations, what have you?

BC: All of the above really, Harper-Collins came to me and wanted me to do a memoir, they wanted it to be a spiritual memoir. I asked them what a spiritual memoir is and they didn't know- I was supposed to come up with that. So, what you have is an attempt at a spiritual memoir. I still don't know what the phrase is supposed to mean. It's framed around, I mean the early childhood stuff is just early childhood stuff, but once I started writing songs the book is sort of framed around a bunch of the songs but primarily the songs that have a spiritual element to them or spiritual components. It's not exclusively that, I talk about "If I Had a Rocket Launcher" and "Wondering Where The Lions Are" too. The songs that people are familiar with it's my life from more or less a sort of spiritual perspective but it worked out to be kind of my life in the context of the 2nd half of the 20th century. This is how it's received and seen by other people. I didn't think of it that way when I was writing it but it is kind of that. It's one person's spiritual witness to the goings on in the second half of the 20th century.

JF: Do you incorporate some of the stories from this into your set?

BC: How much I talk depends partly on the mood I am in and partly on how much I have had to drink on a given night. I don't specifically tell stories: I might talk about where songs come from. In the past I'd done that a lot more, like with "Rocket Launcher" I did a lot of talking because I wanted people to understand where it came from. I mean I might talk about songs as a means of introducing them but I'm not reading excerpts from the book or anything like that.

JF: Is there anything you would like to add before we wrap this up?

BC: I've got my fingers crossed that these shows actually get to happen, but the odds are good I think and we have the same sense of suspense we had before the shows we did in December on the west coast and those worked out quite well so I am definitely looking forward to getting out and playing for people.

Cockburn will be performing at the Narrows in Fall River, on March 2. For more about the show, "Put It In Your Heart" and get to: NarrowsCenter.org

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