

On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock. By Dave Bidini. Toronto:
McClelland & Stewart, 1998. 278 p., ill. ISBN 0771014562. \$19.99

When the Tragically Hip embarked on its *Trouble in the Henhouse* tour in the winter of 1996, the Rheostatics were invited to be the opening act. The offer was a dream come true for the self-described “Canadian Shield art rock band.” Dave Bidini, a rhythm guitarist and founding member of the Rheostatics, decided he would also take the opportunity to write about his experiences. Thanks to Mitch Potter, the *Toronto Star* ran some excerpts from Bidini’s tour diary in December of 1996. This exposure interested McClelland & Stewart which, two years later, published *On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock*.

The adventures begin in Vancouver and take the reader eastward across the Prairies. After a couple of brief stops in the U.S., the tour moves on to the Maritimes and Newfoundland, and ends with a triumphant hometown performance at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto.

Bidini uses his original tour diary as a kind of narrative catalyst which triggers memories of his life as an ardent fan, developing performer and working musician. For example, the Rheostatics had been signed to Sire Records and so, while the tour moves through New York City, Bidini recalls some of his experiences with famed punk rocker Joey Ramone, also with the Sire label. As a teenager, Bidini was infatuated with Ramone and he actually got to know him fairly well when he was doing interviews as a rock journalist in the early 80's. However, years later at an autograph session in Ireland, he was finally disillusioned. “[Ramone] was sitting at

a table with a bunch of posters in front of him. His skin looked blue and he could barely keep his head up ... ‘Joey. It’s me, Dave.’ He had no idea who I was. I left the store. Outside, the rain felt like spiders.”

In Toronto Bidini arrives at a different point on the musical spectrum. Inspired by the “poignant heaviness” of *My Stompin’ Grounds* he sets out to find the self-exiled Stompin’ Tom Connors. Protesting what he perceived as an American bias in the Canadian music industry, Stompin’ Tom had stepped out of the Canadian music scene in 1977. After a long and dogged search, Bidini gets a lead from an employee at Connors’ record label in Mississauga. Armed with a “Tom, We Want You Back” petition, he finally meets Connors at his 50th birthday celebration. “My memory flutters at this point. ... My band loves Canada, hockey, the National Dream, besides, we think you’re really, really great”

In addition to his obvious love for music and Canada, hockey is clearly one of Bidini’s passions. It is therefore fitting that most rock venues usually turn out to be coliseums or hockey arenas. As the tour moves through Winnipeg he writes lovingly of goaltender Charlie Gardiner; at Le Colisée in Montréal he exclaims, “Bélieau played here”; and he gives us a glimpse of the Tragically Hip and life offstage as they all take to the ice for a friendly game of shinny at the Max Bell Centre in Calgary.

One of the unique features of this book is Bidini’s use of selected stories and anecdotes

gathered from a group of people he collectively refers to as the “chorus.” This group represents a cross-section of people and musicians Bidini feels were responsible for blazing the original rock tour trail across Canada. It’s not entirely clear why this particular group of people was chosen over some of the others one might expect to find in a collection like this. Contemporary concerns dealing with life in Canada’s current musical climate are also missing. Nevertheless, these vignettes serve to enrich Bidini’s own stories and provide a nice oral history of life and survival in the earlier days of the Canadian music industry.

For instance, guitarist Frank Soda describes one of his performance ideas: “I had this song called “TV People” about people getting brainwashed watching too much television. I imagined a guy’s head turning into a TV. I thought, wouldn’t it be funny if we could get a TV and put it on someone’s head and just blow it up? So I got this old TV from a used-electronics shop, gutted it out, put it about twenty feet away and we blew it up with these pots. We realized that it didn’t move too much if you loaded the powder right. It made a lot of noise, but it didn’t appear that dangerous. So we padded the inside, and I tried it on my head. I added more and more powder and it worked great. Later on, if the roadies were a bit drunk, they’d put too much powder and I’d burn my hair. But it sounded and looked great in arenas, like cannons exploding out of my head” Some of the other more memorable tales are told by Greg “Godd” Godovitz, Ken Tobias, Rik Emmett (Triumph), and Dave and Richie Henman (April Wine). There are also some great black-and-white photographs sprinkled

throughout the text, including Frank Soda with a yet-to-be-detonated television on his head.

Some might criticize Bidini for what could appear to be a reluctance to tell the whole story. There is no sensationalism here. Drug and alcohol use do come up from time to time, but the tone is casual and the treatment is secondary. At one point Bidini describes the Rheostatics as “mostly a chaste band ... (some would call us a dumb band).” Is this integrity or reticence? Considering that his primary concerns tend to focus on things like band dynamics, the performing experience and personal growth, rather than scandal or gossip, this reviewer prefers to side with integrity. He is an observer. He looks at the people and events that have inspired and influenced him, and relates them to his current perspective and life experience.

Bidini has been writing since he was a teenager and has developed into a wonderful storyteller. His writing is clear, thoughtful and entertaining, and although his style is very personal it is never self-indulgent. He has an excellent sense of dramatic timing that goes well with his ability to express his own struggles and successes in this somewhat obscure independent musical group. The book is worth reading for these qualities alone, but it is also worthwhile for its honest portrayal of life on the road and leaves the reader with a warm appreciation of the Canadian rock music scene.

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