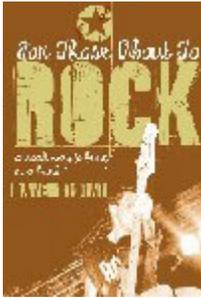


Excerpted from *For Those About to Rock*



## Chapter 10 FROM SEA TO SHINING SEWER Going on Tour

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Most of my rock and roll touring has been done in Canada, which is to say, in the winter. Touring Canada is adventure travel. Those contestants on “Survivor” wouldn’t last a week in a heatless van hurtling across the ice-encrusted prairie in January. The first time the Rheos played in the UK, our road manager advised us, before retiring to her room, “Okay, we’ll meet in the lobby at noon for our drive to the next gig.” It seemed absurd having to travel fewer than six, seven hours to the next city, through a weatherscape lacking in marauding winds and snow. In Canada, not only are musicians required to fight the industry’s narrow passageways, and challenging geographic trade routes to get from city to city, but you must do battle with the screaming elements for five, six months out of twelve if you’re to play at all.

Still, “it’s a lot better to record guitars in the winter than in the summer,” producer Michael Phillip-Wojewoda has suggested, just another absurd example of how Canadian bands have come to embrace that which has long tried to kill them. Despite black ice carpets and frost-clawed trees, many songwriters have paused to find beauty in the terrible menace of winter. Joni Mitchell, balled up in the crook of her divan by gentle Californian moonlight, wishes she had frozen river to skate away on. In “Alberta Bound,” the dirty city snow is not quite true enough for Gordon Lightfoot; he needs the wailing Grande Prairie gale to face the day. “The Coldest Night of the Year” is Bruce Cockburn’s excuse for a love song. The Band’s exiled Acadians long for the taste of frost in the sultry heat of the bayou. Rush wrote “By-Tor and the SnowDog.”

Yup, weird.

There was this one time in Drumheller, Alberta. We’d decided to divert our rock and roll tour for a look at the famous dinosaur museum, but the place was closed by the time we arrived. On our way there, we noticed groups of small people with strange, hairy faces tromping through the snow; I’d forgotten that it was Hallowe’en. When we arrived at the empty park, a few of the guys got out of the bus-- driven by our Australian road manager, Richard Burgman, his switchblade eyes taking in the desolation of the place-- only to press their noses against the cold glass for a long look at the old bones.

Then, they disappeared. They became engulfed in a roar of snow and ice, and it wasn’t even November. Richard sat in the driver’s seat and told Australian cannibal stories-- Richard liked to tell Australian cannibal stories-- as my band-mates vanished in the chilling haze. I turned on the radio in an attempt to mute his tales of bone-eating and skin-stripping, but the signal was intermittent. Above us, the bus’s antennae whipped and poinged in the gale. When the signal finally came through, it settled upon a CBC news broadcast: a rescue team had been dispatched to

assist the passengers of a small plane downed in Alert. They'd been stranded there for four days. Time was running out.

I imagined the survivors sitting in the blazing cold, the spectre of cannibalism lurking among them. In the cabin behind us, Tim prepared a rock and roll feast of barely-toasted bread with a knife-length of peanut butter. He told us, concerned (Tim is, generally, concerned): "We should really get some more supplies for this trip." After the wind settled, the guys returned to the bus. Eventually, we pressed on, driving into the teeth of the storm to Red Deer, where, at Mortimer's Nightclub in the Capri Hotel, we played to four people.

Gigging in the winter isn't the worst thing that can happen to a touring musician-- not being invited to tour is a lot worse-- because, in their own way, winter gigs can be more glorious than those performed in the mellow summer. There's something to be said for playing a packed club in deep July, but winter gigs are always a little more memorable. Being in a hot place when it's minus 18 outside gives fans and musicians cause to rejoice even before the first scroll of gaffer tape. The heat and power of the music have an immediate effect on a crowd thrilled to be there in spite of cars that didn't start, subway tracks that froze, sidewalks that robbed them of their footing, or driveways blocked by lumpen snowbanks. In the winter, every gig is an oasis, every fan a symbol of cultural defiance. When you arrive at a warm club or theatre, you've already been stimulated by the elements, your senses goosed awake. Lazy, stoned summer crowds are fine and easy, but winter crowds keen and lurch towards you, drawn to your sound like moths to a lamplight.

The first time we played in Sydney, Cape Breton, we arrived just after nightfall at a club called Chandlers, named, regrettably, after the character from the TV show Friends. Chandlers is a tavern with tile floors, old, wooden tables and a small stage, with the front window of the club as its back wall. After setting up our gear, we were taken to our dressing room in the dark, mouldy basement of the bar. No sooner had we sat down when a gush of grey water burst from a pipe in the ceiling. It sprayed us, dousing our clothes, including the only item of winterwear -- a wool sweater -- that Martin had brought on the January tour. I excused myself and told the guys that I was going to the hotel. When I got there, I ordered a hamburger that had bits of green in the meat. I turned on the television to find an episode of Ken Burns's *Jazz*, where Charlie Parker leaves a train to wander alone in the desert looking for heroin, then dies.

I trudged back through the frozen streets, head down, heart sunk. When I opened the door to the club, I was assaulted by heat. Inside, there were 400 kids, some of them swinging from the ceiling pipes. It was an incredible gig. Plied with tequila, we played for hours, and then more, and then more still. Later on, we went to a party at a big house right next to Rita MacNeil's. One of us vomited happy in the kitchen sink, then fell asleep in a closet. I walked home laughing like a goof at the brutal, blue cold.

Here's another diary entry cribbed from "On A Cold Road," about touring in Alberta:

*"We're swamped by monstrous snowfall, a white wall of wind and savage cold that threatens to shut down the province's main north-south arrow. Gary Stokes, our soundman, bites his lip and holds the steering wheel like he's working the horns of a bull. The blizzard kicks the sides of the van like a band of rampaging thugs. We pass rows of ditched cars, some of them buried under huge churches of snow, their side mirrors sticking out like frost-bitten hands signaling for help. We hunch to look out under the frostline of the front window and see nothing but cars shimmying wildly across lanes, rebelling against years of drivers' moving them in straight lines. A copsickle standing outside an emergency cruiser painting the snowbanks with blue light waves his mitten at us. We skid, but can't stop, so he windmills us through and we inch closer, slow as erosion, southbound to Calgary."*

Geddy Lee once told me a story about Rush's early days touring Canada in the winter: "We were playing in either Melville or Estevan, Saskatchewan, I can't remember which. We were scheduled to play at the arena in the evening, but when we arrived in the afternoon to do sound check, we discovered that the local hockey team had refused to allow the ice to be covered. They had a big game coming up and thought that the concert might wreck the ice. So our gear was set up at one end of the rink, the mixing consoles were in the stands, and the lighting console was on stage with us. Just as we began sound check, the team started skating around the rink and practicing. It was very surreal. In the evening, the crowd was seated at the far end of the stands and we were playing way down at the other end because the ice remained uncovered."

If there's an up-side to these near impossible conditions, it's that they make touring other countries much easier. Canadian bands are rich in character because they have to endure interminably long stretches during white-outs on treacherous highways, pulling together merely to survive the physical journey. In the US, there are millions upon millions of people waiting to embrace your music, while in Britain it takes nothing to saunter less than an hour from town to town. In Canada, you hit Regina and you think, "Whew, finally a big city!" even though Saskatchewan's capital would fit three-fold into most American metropoli. I think that those Canadians who aspire to fame, and who stay on top -- Bryan Adams, Celine Dion, Alanis Morissette -- do so because they've endured the geographic struggle inherent in Canadian rock.

There are a million different kinds of tours, including the imaginary kind (I refer, specifically, to Sam Moon and the Universal Truth, who, as a young Maritime band, used to load their equipment into a U Haul and drive around New Brunswick on the weekend, practising being on the road). There are certain maxims that musicians should heed when heading out on the road in any season. First, there's the food. When the great singer and slide guitarist Lowell George (of Little Feat) died, his band-mates explained his death by telling the press that he'd had "one too many road burgers." While this was a veiled reference to George's heroin addiction, they also meant it in a plain sense, for, on the road, you can't help but return to the burger no matter how hard you try. Not that I am one, but it's the darnedest thing trying to maintain a vegetarian or vegan diet, especially when the only restaurants you have time for are run by guys named SLAPPY, whose presence is announced on a neon stick at the side of a highway. It's hard to finesse your diet on the road, but if you don't at least try, then the stomach blues will get you sooner or later. Our second drummer, Don Kerr, was forever arming himself with little plastic bags filled with kale and miso and corn chips, which he purchased in cities for those long trips between health food stores. As with book and record stores, Don knew the location of every health food store in Canada.

After twenty years, the Rheos become wise to the routine. We've learned to stop at Blackies deli while leaving Victoria to catch the ferry -- which means leaving the hotel thirty minutes early, which means getting thirty minutes less sleep -- as well as keeping an eye out for Hunky's Perogi shack outside of Brandon or the Wild Rice restaurant north of Sault Ste. Marie. I've found that if you discover a decent truck stop anywhere in Canada, you have to be vigilant about returning to it, because there are really very few. And even in the good ones, it's best to choose salads and soups over the Tex Mex Salsa chicken. You can avoid these decisions by making sure there's enough food on hand in the bus or van: corn chips, nuts, trail mix are all good. Think of yourself as a *courier du bois* trying to survive for a month in the wilderness, which is pretty much what touring is like anyway.

I'd like to pass on some wisdom regarding touring clothes, *etc.*, but keeping yourself clean is a near impossibility on the road. I suggest that you not fight it and go with the stink. As a rule, bands on the road smell. They're unkempt and foul. The scent of rank footwear and crusted armpits follows young musicians like a creeping slime. Depending on the nature of the gig, your time, in the beginning, will consist of moving from fetid van to fetid club to fetid dressing room to fetid hotel, which are, sometimes, one and the same. On our first Canadian tour, we played two venues like this: the Royal Albert in Winnipeg, and the National Hotel in Calgary. The minute we

arrived at the National, a bedraggled woman came up to Martin and told him not to go into the washroom because, she told him, her boyfriend was waiting in there to kill him. After seeking refuge in the relative quiet of our rooms, I turned back the sheets to find my pillow stuck to the bed with dried blood. Another time, a musician I know was bathing in the communal washroom on the second floor of the Royal Albert when a disoriented rummy walked in and peed on his back. No amount of industrial deodorant is going to keep that sort of thing from happening.

Other than your instruments, I'd advise leaving your valuables at home. A tour is a great repository for lost things. Even though the Rheos travel on planes these days, I leave my computer at my desk. This gives me a chance to write in note-books (I even brought a suitcase typewriter with me on one trip), which also gives me a chance to separate my Home self from my Away self. Touring is a place where you're forced be somebody you aren't anyway, drawing on such road-worthy qualities as instinct, tolerance, endurance, diplomacy, chastity, and resilience when unleashed into that great murky Gigland. You learn a lot about coping beyond your comfort zone, testing your mettle as both an individual and team player. Can you tolerate the drunken bass player falling over you while confessing his deepest fears in the van after the gig, when all you want to do is sleep? Does it bother you singing into a microphone that smells of vomit from the last band that used it? Can you deal with the suspicion that another band member is getting most of the attention at shows? Are you uncomfortable being with the same group of people for such an intense period of time? Do you object to using a filthy, seatless toilet for the better part of two months? Do you like long drives across vast, empty terrain in closed, airless vehicles with people you're only just starting to know?

Touring means steeling yourself against constant assaults on your character. One of the main differences between being a musician and having a normal job is that criticism doesn't only come from your boss or co-workers, but from yourself. Anxiety and insecurity are two hallmarks of the creative mind, and it's on the road where these qualities are exposed. Every gig is a test of character, of self-worth. I've witnessed band-mates on the verge of nausea after particularly humiliating performances. The first time we played Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver, we opened for the Barenaked Ladies, to date the biggest show of our lives. That night, the performance got off on the wrong foot, literally. We started with a difficult song, "When Winter Comes," a ten-minute triptych which began with Martin finger-tapping his guitar alone at the foot of the stage. It looked and sounded huge from the wings, his sharp body soaked in foggy blues, his rubbery sound filling the cavernous sports bowl while young kids found their seats. But from there, things went terribly awry. Dave Clark -- not the world's smoothest runner -- jaunted across the darkness towards his white Milestone drum kit, only to step on a foot pedal which completely shut down Martin's guitarworks. Hearts panicking in the wings, Tim and I climbed on stage to humming silence filling the arena. We stood there as cold as snow on an iceberg. I felt like voiding my bowels. Martin fell to his knees and pounded his gear like a caveman taking a rock to a coconut. Finally, his sound kicked in, but so did forty minutes of misery.

After the show, we pushed our heads into our hands, wallowing in the crushing disappointment of the occasion. But once we understood that, no matter how difficult things would become over the course of our career, it would never be as bad as that, the tragedy of the gig turned into a celebration of rock and roll survival. Somebody cracked a beer, told a stupid joke. I grabbed my guitar from its case and started playing whatever came into my head. Friends arrived backstage to help balm our wounded pride, and within hours, we'd gone from the excitement of playing the great hockey rink to the sorrow of blowing the gig to singing at the top of our lungs in the bowels of the arena. It was a musician's life wrapped in a single day: high to low to high, in extreme measures. At two in the morning, security came and asked us to go home.