

# PRODIGAL BAND

Exploring the  
Rural Alberta Advantage.

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By CHRIS TURNER

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# W

WHEN NILS EDENLOFF WAS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT in Fort McMurray, there was a minor scandal one summer involving a gaggle of teens who decided to ride their bicycles to Edmonton. It was received truth somehow that it was a four-day journey by bike, and who could blame a kid stuck in Fort Mac for daydreaming of escape? Only the one real road out of town—who wouldn't get to wondering how far a hard-peddalling crew could get before someone's parents figured it out and jumped in the pickup to give chase? Not hard at all to imagine the fanciful conversation becoming a solid notion and then a plan. Flashlights and non-perishable food stuffed secretively in packs. A date set, a clear morning of a certain kind of inviting blue. An innocent bike ride into the woods that never looped back.

It's the kind of quiet small-town tale that you only ever hear if it goes gothic. If you know Fort Mac at all, you can already picture the churning wheels of the tarsands-bound rig, the driver who would never expect to find kids on bikes out on Highway 63. In this case, though, the story's final act simply went banal—the kids chased down, groundings administered, the details soon fading, and only the yearning goofball gall

PHOTO: ASHLEY BRISTOWE





remaining as it passed into schoolyard legend.

For some reason, though, the story came back to Edenloff a decade later, as he tried to write his way through a lonely spell in Toronto. He was a couple years out of the University of Alberta, in a self-imposed exile from an Edmonton that felt like a rut. He'd left, or so he told himself, because all the great bands that never came to Edmonton inevitably played Toronto. Some old Fort Mac friends were around town as

**A place is made important by its stories: Albertans are impoverished by our dearth of pop myth-making.**

well, and there'd been idle chitchat about getting their high school band back together, but of course nothing had come of it. Edenloff had instead taken to strumming his guitar as the co-host of an open-mic night at a Cabbagetown dive called The Winchester—he and a new friend named Paul on the drums, a rotating cast of other regulars and, often as not, barely any audience. Eventually a young woman named Amy joined them with some regularity, singing background harmonies and tinkling the keys of a keyboard or xylophone or pounding a second drum of her own.

It felt right, the three of them together, or as right as anything happening at some afterthought open-mic night in a soon-to-be-condemned tavern ever could, and Edenloff started working out some lyrics. He still wondered where he belonged in the Big Smoke—wondered if he ever *would* belong, really, as Toronto's uninvited foster kids inevitably do—and when he tried to write, he was haunted by memories of his Alberta youth. Stuff he hadn't thought of in years. Like the quixotic tale of some pipe-dreaming kids who tried to bike to Edmonton one summer.

In Edenloff's version, the kids have become teenage lovers. The weather's gone frigid, an icy wind *freezing each of the lymph nodes* as they sneak past a slumbering grandfather and peel their clothes off, finding solace in their mingling body heat and an impossible yearning for transcendence. Paul Banwatt's drums beat out the urgent fumbling double-time rhythm of teen sex and punk rock, Amy Cole's voice comes in high and piercing on the last chorus, and Edenloff finds the top of his narrow vocal range, the very limitation of it amplifying the desperate, doomed passion of the plan. *And I love you and you know / You love me and it shows / Edmonton's just a four night / Bike ride out of town.*

This is "Four Night Rider," the 11th of 13 songs on *Hometowns*, the debut album by Edenloff's three-piece band, the Rural Alberta Advantage, and there is much that is startling about it all. In particular, *Hometowns* is as intimate and tender a portrait of Alberta as any in the annals of Canadian popular music, tinged with fond memory and regret but never offhanded or syrupy in its nostalgia. And because it is so specific about its subjects, and because such specificity is such

a rarity in Canadian pop, it kind of unintentionally points to the empty expanses around it where the rest of our mythology should reside. A place—any place—is made important by its stories, and we Albertans are impoverished by our dearth of pop myth-making. For this alone—were *Hometowns* not also a fantastic collection of beautifully crafted songs, I mean—it would be a landmark record.

**F**

FIRST, THOUGH, LET'S ADDRESS THE STUFF OF standard pop criticism. If this were a straight-and-narrow music review, I'd first want to note that the RAA has taken the best possible lessons from the short-lived, cult-inspiring indie band Neutral Milk Hotel and its mercurial singer-songwriter Jeff Mangum—in particular that passionate honesty and reckless abandon trump a three-octave vocal range every time when it comes to rock 'n' roll. I'd want to mention as well that Edenloff and his bandmates have cribbed only the best parts of the oeuvre of current indie darlings Arcade Fire—a delicate dynamism, a taste for epic themes, unconventional instruments and semi-orchestral arrangements. And I'd definitely point out that *Hometowns* expands impressively on the thematic work of Winnipeg's Weakerthans, thoroughly inhabiting the prairie in every song. In the aggregate, the album is a jangling pop tour de force that is either punk streaked with folk or folk infected with punk and is melodic and catchy as all get out.

And even though I'm aiming for more than a standard music review—because I think *Hometowns* deserves more care than that—there are some other details I should probably get out of the way. The name comes from a defunct provincial government marketing slogan, by way of an e-mail from Edenloff's brother in which he half-seriously told Nils he was "off to explore the Rural Alberta Advantage"—by which he meant that he was headed to their family cabin near Donaldia to hang out with some girls he'd come to know. Edenloff went to Toronto around 2002 and the band coalesced as a three-piece around 2006 or so. They started writing songs and paid their dues up and down Queen West, and by early 2008 the RAA had a self-produced, self-released debut. So did every other half-talented assemblage of indie-rockers in the free world. That and three bucks will, at best, get you a latte on Queen West, dig?

Anything could've happened next. But what did happen next—this being 2008—was that the songs skipped from hard-drive to hard-drive and they developed a bit of an Internet following (which inexplicably included a handful of very influential American entertainment lawyers and venture capitalists). Thus did the RAA come to the attention of the overseers of a subscription music downloading service



L to R: RAA members Amy Cole (vocals), Paul Banwatt (percussion) and Nils Edenloff (vocals, guitar).

called eMusic.com, a sort of hipster iTunes whose influence was just then hitting the meaty part of a steep upward curve. *Hometowns* was named eMusic's unsigned pick of the month for November 2008, and because the RAA are in the aggregate more mathematically inclined than many aspiring rock 'n' roll bands (Edenloff is a software engineer by training), they can verifiably attest that their fan base saw literally exponential growth, more or less overnight. Then came a spotlight gig at the career-making SXSW music festival in Austin, Texas, after which Saddle Creek Records, a highly influential indie label best known as the home of A-list singer-songwriter Conor Oberst, picked up the album and rereleased it to an even larger audience in early July. Pitchfork Media—the *Rolling Stone* of online pop music geekery—gave it an eight out of ten, which in that forum is a hair's breadth from instant-classic status. The RAA embarked on their first real tour, played New York, Chicago, Seattle, L.A. Also Calgary and Edmonton, for the first time ever, which I'll also come back to.

None of this matters much to me, though, except the eMusic thing, because I'm a subscriber and the moment I saw the band name I had basically no choice but to download it. I don't know what I was expecting, but I wasn't ready for possibly the

best Canadian pop debut I've ever heard.<sup>1</sup> And I was wholly unprepared for a series of musical sketches of Alberta so powerful it made me stop to realize there's never really been any other pop-music picture of the place this specific and compelling maybe ever. Which, finally, is the reason we're even talking about all this.

The 13 songs on *Hometowns* are fully saturated with Alberta.

1. Superlatives like this are all too common in pop criticism, but I've gone back through my record collection and scrolled through my iTunes library and I think this one's legit. Four of the tracks on *The Songs of Leonard Cohen* are full-on masterpieces, but I couldn't hum a bar from a single one of the others. I'm not sure which record you'd call Neil Young's debut, but in any case it was recorded in LA, and what's more he didn't make one that I consider a masterpiece until his second solo album (*Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*). The Tragically Hip didn't hit full stride until their fourth album (*Fully Completely*), and Blue Rodeo is more of a singles band. Sloan's *Smear* will always have an exquisite first-year-of-undergrad magic for me, but there are only four or five of 12 tracks I've bothered to import into iTunes. There's an argument to be made that either the Arcade Fire or Broken Social Scene debuts (or both) are maybe more polished than *Hometowns*, more fully formed, but there's also a preciousness to both that eventually starts to grate on me. The New Pornographers' *Mass Romantic* is a real contender, and I know I haven't spent as much time as I should with all the songs on Wolf Parade's *Apologies to the Queen Mary* that aren't "Shine a Light" or "Dinner Bells." Still.

The landscapes that are too often harsh but just as often transcendent in their quiet beauty, the cities and towns that both attract and repulse and are never entirely left behind. And most of all, yes, the abiding, authentic love Alberta can inspire, usually hard-won and sometimes bittersweet but all the more potent for it.

I fell in love with *Hometowns* through the speakers of my car stereo as I drove back roads in late winter—Edmonton to Camrose, Calgary to Taber and back again—and by the time I was done I knew my perception of my home had been

## In the final lines of “Edmonton,” a quirky Alberta pastime takes on the weight of transcendent myth.

fundamentally altered. Maybe the most striking thing about *Hometowns* is the way the sound (I’m told unconsciously) mimics the landscape. The RAA’s sound is lush and forceful but never cluttered. Smatterings of keyboard or strings slide in and then fade off, bits of skronking horn or ringing xylophone erupt and then disappear like summer rain. There are a great many empty spaces in the songs, places that draw your ear the way the wide snowy expanses between the golden tips of dead grass catch your eye. Just when you think you’re listening to a lulling ballad, the drums emerge with the sudden drama of a Badlands canyon and are just as quickly gone. In much the same way it’s impossible to watch the moon rise gently over the Ontario countryside in summer without thinking of Neil Young’s blue, blue windows behind the stars, I doubt I’ll ever again watch the snow-blanketed prairie unfold through a frosted windshield without hearing echoes of the haunting horns that fill the final section of the RAA’s “Luciana.”



A WARM JUNE EVENING IN CALGARY NOW, AND THE RAA are onstage at Broken City on the second night of the Sled Island Festival. They’d played a gig earlier in the evening at Central United Church, but this is truly their Alberta homecoming—they fit the venue as seamlessly as the Wild Rose on tap behind the bar. The album’s still weeks away from official release, but it’s clear they’ve got an expectant audience here, and you can tell it’s kind of overwhelming the band. They’re still in that modest, thanks-for-coming phase of a thing they can barely believe is becoming a career, and they’re almost embarrassed by it.

Nils Edenloff likes to explain his stories a little before launching into them. “Normally at this point,” he’s saying, “I’ll tell the audience there’s this town in Alberta where the

mountain collapsed and...” He’s interrupted by cheers and whoops. He shrugs and mumbles something like *guess I don’t need to do that here*, and the RAA launch into “Frank, AB”—a retelling of the great gothic tragedy of the Frank Slide from the point of view of a stalwart couple buried beneath the rubble in an eternal embrace. It’s one of the stronger tracks on the album, but here at Broken City on the first night it’s ever been played for an Alberta audience, it finds its own mythic level. There have to be at least a dozen people singing along: *And I’ll hold, I’ll hold on to your touch / Until there’s nothing left of us / To save you from this life.*

There are probably a thousand ways to mess up a dirge about the Frank Slide, a thousand different missteps that lead down the path to Stompin’ Tom kitsch.<sup>2</sup> The only way seemingly imaginable to avoid that trap—and never is it more apparent than it is in this room on this night—is to close it with an essentially a capella coda so naked and earnest it convinces you this is a century-old folk song the RAA must’ve unearthed from the provincial archives. The barest scrape of strings, a fading heartbeat thump of drum, and Edenloff’s taut voice finding the bloodied human face of the Slide: *And under the rubble of the mountain that tumbled / I will hold you forever / I will hold you forever.* In the stunned moment of silence before the crowd erupts, you can hear the song click snugly into some permanent place on the landscape, filling a particularly conspicuous hole in the pockmarked stone face of Canadian myth.

CANADA SELDOM GETS TO BE ITSELF IN THE BROADER globalized mythos of pop. The Beatles will forever be as Liverpudlian as Penny Lane itself, Lou Reed and the Strokes inconceivable as anything other than New Yorkers, the Grateful Dead as San Franciscan as a cable car. But the goal of Canadian pop hopefuls has until very recently been to vanish into generic Americanness, often denaturing themselves into bland pap (viz. Nickelback of Hanna, AB, and Avril Lavigne of Napanee, ON) and leading to that cloying Canadian pastime of pointing out all the disguised Canadiana out there to bemused foreigners. Hey, did you know “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” was written by a kid from Toronto named Robbie Robertson? That k.d. lang picked up her twang not in Texas but in Consort, AB?<sup>3</sup>

The trend has mostly continued even as Canada has become, in recent years, a wellspring of indie music so

2. I mean no offence here. Hell, ol’ Stompin’ Tom earned his place in the Hall of Fame solely on the merits of rhyming *plinko, stinko* and *Inco* on “Sudbury Saturday Night.” But it’s no accident that the best possible way to read, say, “Bud the Spud” is as an illustrated children’s story (which version my daughter could not get enough of at the age of about 2¾).

3. It’s even worse when it comes to film, where Alberta’s badlands are made to impersonate Wyoming. Vancouver stands in for some generic X-Filed post-industrial America, and—in a particularly highly visible (if banal) example—the Tim Hortons of Mike Myers’s real-life Scarborough youth is forced to become the entirely fictitious Stan Mikita Donuts of suburban Chicago in the *Wayne’s World* movies.

bountiful it's become a kind of in-joke—there's a Georgia-based band called Of Montreal and an influential Indiana-based record label named Secretly Canadian. Canadian pop is generally either, well, secretly Canadian or so pointedly Canuckified it never raises a tremor outside our borders (viz. the Tragically Hip, the Rheostatics and, yes, ol' Stompin' Tom). There are world-conquering pop songs about particular London neighbourhoods and certain Manhattan intersections, but try to think of a single one that contains a Canadian place name.

Which is why there's something not just refreshing but almost post-colonially validating about the RAA. The first words enunciated on *Hometowns* are these ones from "The Ballad of the RAA": *We unbearably / Left the prairies / And my heart, since / Well it never moved an inch.* A few lines later, Edenloff is on about trading Garneau (the Edmonton neighbourhood) for Dundas (the Toronto thoroughfare) and the Rockies for the Great Lakes. These are the recollections of a particular homesick Alberta kid on the streets of Toronto, an ambitious Canadian hinterlander's bewilderment at life in the Big Smoke—a phenomenon nearly as common as the tale of the small-town boy's arrival in the Big Apple but never properly mythologized until Edenloff came along. Visions of escape and lamentations for what's left behind permeate nearly every song on the album—dead roads haunted by terrible ghosts, a redemptive dethbridge (sic) that leads only out of Lethbridge, a heart turned to petrified wood and a dark, empty apartment at the other end. And then, on the second-last track, the album reaches its thematic crescendo on a mini-epic pointedly entitled "Edmonton."

*What'll I do if you never want to come back? / Sitting in a city that's always on the attack*—so Edenloff's homage to his former hometown begins, though the city on the attack is not Edmonton but Toronto. Here's Edenloff on the song's inspiration: "I guess at the time I moved to Toronto, it just seemed like, 'Aw, I'm never going to figure this place out. Why does it always suck here?' Not the city itself—it just seemed like I wasn't the right person for the place. I was always losing. When I first moved there, I got all my stuff stolen, and I got robbed, like, my first hour in Toronto and spent nine months finding a job and thinking, 'God, I suck!'"

The song changes tone midway through. A bittersweet chord progression tinged with hope overtakes Edenloff's frustrated guitar riff and a lovely little buoyant two-step erupts from the drums.<sup>4</sup> When Edenloff starts singing again his voice is soaring, almost ecstatic, and he is lost in a memory so delicate and

4. Because my focus has been largely thematic, I've neglected to mention until now that Paul Banwatt is some kind of inspired percussionist. At the risk of dancing about architecture, I'll just say there's a kind of offhand precision and completely disarming phrasing to the drums on *Hometowns* which repeatedly sets the tone for an entire song in a single rhythm change. This is particularly true of the marching cadence that pops up at 2:06 of "Edmonton," which is one of the few such percussion moments I'd put in the same class as the bit in the Rolling Stones' "Rocks Off" when Charlie Watts brings the song back from the murk of the bridge in a single staccato six-beat burst and ushers in maybe the best single line in rock 'n' roll history (i.e., *the sunshine bores the daylight's outta me*). But I digress.

perfect and almost parodically specific that in a sense it tells the whole album's story in a few lines. When Edenloff was in school in Edmonton, there was

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an apparently well-known sort of pastime in which you and your friends—or, as appears to be the case in the song, a special someone—would go in the evening to the sloping field beneath the Alberta Legislature. You'd position yourselves between the building itself and the blinding purple flood lights illuminating it, and you would stare out through the lights to the city beyond. All of it turned electric purple, luminous, a dreamscape for a thrumming city. In the final lines of the RAA's "Edmonton," the quirky pastime takes on the weight of transcendent myth. Like this: *Meet me there again under the lights at the 'Leg' / And we will burn out our eyes seeking out these purple nights.*

## R

ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION HALL NO. 1, DOWNTOWN Calgary. The Friday night of Sled Island, and whatever the original plans for the festival may have been, it feels like it's found its *raison d'être* here on 7th Ave. The streets outside are uncharacteristically dense with evening strollers headed from venue to venue, and later tonight the staid Legion Hall with its Old Style Pilsner on tap will play host to bizarre and wildly hip bands from Seattle and Brooklyn. Right now, though, the RAA's final Sled Island set is hitting its full stride, filling the old hall with a collection of stories worthy of this historic space.

Every time Nils Edenloff introduces "Edmonton" at the festival, he makes a sheepish kind of apology about it being about Edmonton, as if expecting the province's notorious bipolar urban rivalry to break out in response. It never does. This is not an Oilers/Flames game or a debate about government spending imbalances. It's a song about living in a city in Alberta and sometimes sort of resenting it but making your own fun there, and Calgaryans can relate to that as easily as Edmontonians can.

It's a great performance, but for whatever reason, "Edmonton" is not the peak of this set. The RAA really brings the house down a few songs later with "Luciana," a careening punk song about doomed love. The lyrics are half-buried in growling guitar and a ferociously unhinged drumbeat that somehow also seems to keep 4/4 time. You can tell, because there's a joyous stomp shaking the dance floor in time with it. The room feels as one, deliriously lost in the roar of a newly minted Alberta myth. ■

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