



MUSIC REVIEW

by Bill Moller

Steve Bell's new CD, *My Dinner With Bruce* arrived in the mail the other day directly from Winnipeg, Canada where Steve makes his home and Signpost Music, his record label, is based.

I have to admit I've been looking forward to this CD for many months – ever since I heard that Steve Bell was preparing a collection of Bruce Cockburn cover tunes – and since its arrival, I've listened to the CD dozens of times. Seriously, I can't stop listening to it. The melodies seem to grow more intricate and the lyrics gain greater depth with each new iteration. I've been moved repeatedly through smiles to tears and back again by the sheer beauty of the poetic lyrics, mesmerized by the magnificent arrangements that only Steve Bell and company could deliver.

I first heard about Steve Bell four or five years ago at a Carolyn Arends concert. Her *Travelers* CD had just been released, and during her performance Arends gave Bell, the executive producer, a plug - a complement she reiterated when I saw her perform at Sandy Cove in Maryland last spring. These Canadian artists (Bell, Arends & Cockburn) are incredibly talented people who bring a perspective on life that is fresh, organic and truly inspiring.

For those of you unfamiliar with the songs of Bruce Cockburn, imagine a cross between Phil Keaggy and Bob Dylan – insightful and complex lyrics heavily drenched with spiritual overtones and sewn together with exceptional guitar melodies in a driven folk/rock style. Steve Bell has personalized these outstanding Cockburn tunes by sifting each one through his own creative filter. The results are amazing! Most of the songs retain much of their original feel, but now sport Bell's distinctly gentle and flowing guitar style and delicate vocals. If you listen carefully, you'll sense that intangible quality that takes music beyond pop classic toward transcendent beauty.

You might ask why anyone would get so excited about a collection of cover tunes. Think about it this way: the hit song *Turn! Turn! Turn!* by The Byrds was written by Pete Seeger; the Eagles trademark song *Take It Easy* was penned by Jackson Browne; Michael W. Smith owes the writers Paul Baloche and Lenny LeBlanc for his hit *Above All*; and I'm rather certain George Beverly Shea didn't write *How Great Thou Art*. Even Martin Luther adapted traditional German folk tunes and made them acceptable for Sunday

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SPECIAL INTERVIEW

with Steve Bell

It was my distinct pleasure to exchange a series of emails with manager/producer Dave Zeglinski of Signpost Music. As a result, I was fortunate enough to catch Steve Bell between concert dates, and the dialog that follows contains his thoughtful and compassionate replies to my questions about life, faith and music. I hope you enjoy his remarks as much as I have.

CogentNotion: From the reviews listed on your website (www.steve-bell.com) it appears you are receiving some very high praise for your new CD release, *My Dinner With Bruce*. Yet, interestingly, you confess to never having shared a meal with Bruce Cockburn. Has the call come through yet? Do you anticipate an opportunity to meet with him or maybe even perform together? I suspect there is a NJ audience ready and willing to attend.

Steve Bell: I don't expect to hear from Bruce. I understand he is a very private person and not likely looking for a new-best-friend.

But I have met him a couple of times – very briefly. The first time was at the JUNOSs in Vancouver at a pre-show party. He thanked me for recording his song *Can I go With You* (on my *Romantics* and *Mystics* album). I blushed and thanked him for writing such good songs – he blushed – then someone else butted in and that was the end of that.

More recently, in Dec/05 I met him at an event in Winnipeg at which he was being honoured. He told me he was looking forward to hearing *My Dinner with Bruce* and encouraged me to "bring something new to the table." Already I was feeling a little tentative about having changed the feels of some of the songs. He basically gave me his blessing to make them my own – that was a gift.

Last week his manager called me and we talked for quite awhile. Bernie was quite enthused about the project – that's enough for me.

CogentNotion: I noticed a large percentage of the lyrics in your previous CDs are taken directly from the Psalms and other portions of the Bible. In looking over the Bruce Cockburn lyrics on your new release, I didn't see any overt Scripture references. Yet, this deeply poetic storyteller is, in many respects, not terribly dissimilar to King David in his thoughtful reflections. Do you find listeners are drawn to this introspective narrative form of writing?

Steve Bell: Bruce is most definitely a modern day Psalmist. To be sure there are not many direct

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mornings. Talented individuals have been borrowing and adapting the work of fellow musicians for centuries, often producing unique and delightful creations that overshadow the originals..

Steve Bell has selected more than a dozen songs to include on the *My Dinner With Bruce* CD; some carry light melodies; others contain mournful tales, but all will challenge you to think about life's ups and downs while providing beautiful rhythms that will delight your ears and warm your heart time and time again.

The CD begins with the song *Lord of the Starfields* in which Bell brilliantly adapts Cockburn's trademark swirling style. A gathering whirlwind of sound builds and fades while instruments seem to enter and leave the mix. Then, unflinchingly, the lyrics pierce the storm clouds and bathe the listener in radiant sunshine. Bell and company have meticulously crafted this CD, giving each selection its own special feel. Many of the songs are deceptively simple folk melodies (*Wondering Where The Lions Are*); while others have what I'll call a smoky/sultry jazz-like demeanor (*Thoughts On A Rainy Afternoon*). There are a few love songs of a sort (*All the Ways I Want You*) and a couple of the cuts are quite whimsical (*Going to the Country*) - providing relief from the immensely weighty subject matter that surrounds them (*Red Brother Red Sister*) - also a characteristic of Cockburn creations. There is not a wasted note in the collection. Steve Bell has successfully taken exceptional material and honed it in such a manner that the finished product rivals some of the finest contemporary music I've heard in a long time.

Each pass through the mystical journey of this CD seems to shift my favorite song marker. When I opened the CD for the first time I couldn't wait to hear *Pacing the Cage*, a song about the struggles of self definition, and one with which I identify powerfully. But, as I write this review, I'm leaning toward *Southland of the Heart* - a bouncy song with a Psalm 23 message. However, I think I'm moved more by *Closer to the Light* - a deep heart-cry about loss and survival. Then again I find the poetry in *God Bless the Children* really challenging, and I haven't even mentioned the songs *The Coming Rains*, *My Lady and My Lord*, or *Love Loves You Too* - each of which stole a piece of my heart while traveling through my soul.

It's quite obvious by now: I can't choose! This process is like trying to pick the best coffee flavor. I may like a straight Columbian brew, but my friends love mocha-nut-berry-crunch lattes. You'll just have to listen and choose for yourself. They're all great! Kudos to Steve Bell and Signpost Music!

To learn more about Steve Bell and Signpost Music visit:

www.steve-bell.com

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references to scripture in his songs, but it is evident to me he is steeped in the stories of Christ and the passion of the prophetic poets of the Bible. Christians who will attend to the lyrics of Bruce's songs will find deep resonance with the primary hopes and grief of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament.

CogentNotion: Most of your CDs have a very clean sound consisting of minimal instrumentation, tight harmonies and a unique folk style all your own - your 2000 release *Simple Songs* being one of the purest examples, using just a guitar, a mandolin, and very little else. The new release seems to take that purity and adds a new level of intensity - adding more players and instruments yet using them sparingly, reminiscent of the *Each Rare Moment* CD when Hugh Marsh on violin and Fergus Marsh on his amazing Chapman Stick played and toured with you. Can you tell us a little about the other musicians who played on the new CD and will be touring with you over the next few months?

Steve Bell: The primary musicians on this disc are familiar to those who have followed the last years of my work. Both Mike Janzen (piano) and Gilles Fournier (bass) were part of the early wood-shedding of this project. Both are tremendous talents who gave so generously of their creative jazz/folk intuition to this album - as did Daniel Roy on drums. Then, Toronto veterans Brent Barkman (B3 Organ) and Kevin Breit (guitar - Holly Cole / Nora Jones) added nuances I can only smile at in awe. What an honour to have guys like that eh? Then, percussionist Alex Acuna (Elvis, Weather Report, Leo Kottke and on, and on, and on) brought the project to a new level of life with his light and energy. I would be remiss if I didn't mention my son Jesse who engineered a fair bit of the project and offered much creative input - and finally my co-producer/engineer Dave Zeglinski who reined the whole thing in and gave the project sonic direction and coherence. I'm a blessed man to be surrounded by such talent and love.

CogentNotion: To give our readers a little background: Your father, a Baptist preacher, served for a time as chaplain at Drumheller prison in Alberta Canada; your mentor was the late Father McDougall a Catholic missionary of sorts; one of your close spiritual advisors and occasional co-writer is Rev. Jamie Howison, an Anglican priest from Winnipeg; Marty McCall, an artist on Signpost Music (your record label), is the worship leader at the McLean Bible Church, an evangelical mega-church in Virginia; and Bruce Cockburn, the writer of all the songs on your latest release, describes himself as a "faithful person" yet doesn't generally refer to Christianity as his worldview. How has the exposure to such a diverse collection of belief systems enriched your own faith walk?

Steve Bell: My dad is a Baptist for sure - but he always held his tradition with an open hand. I remember when I was young, the Catholic mystic/humanitarian Jean Vanier stayed at our home while on a cross-Canada speaking tour of prisons. Even as a thirteen year old, his faith and presence was

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overwhelmingly invitational to me. About a month after his visit I asked my Dad how one might decide on a path in life. Dad said something like, "pick someone you deeply respect, whose walk is honourable and worthy of your emulation (for who they are, not what they've done) and then follow in their footsteps." I said, "But what if that person is a Catholic?" My dad broke into a big smile, "So be it."

Both my mother and father looked for truth and dignity wherever it was to be found and honoured God for it. They taught me to recognize The Good and place myself in its path. I've had worse counsel.

CogentNotion: In his book *Dark Night of the Soul*, John of the Cross talks about going through difficult times as a Christian when God seemed distant or unconcerned. You mentioned in your recent *Incarnation* Audio Newsletter that you struggled last year with a few difficult experiences yourself; an emotional visit to Palestine, relocating from a county home you loved to a city dwelling you weren't too comfortable with, and the loss of your friend and mentor Father McDougall. On the new CD, the song *Closer to the Light*, in which the refrain reads "Another step deeper...into darkness...Closer to the light." seems to touch on that topic. How have you seen God guide you through the dark times in life as he moves you closer to the light?

Steve Bell: St. John of the Cross suggests that the darker things get, the more likely it is we are close to our heart's deepest longings. Our culture distains suffering and disorientation as if these were an embarrassing, personal affront to all that we are entitled to. Yet the witness of scripture suggests such disconsolations may be God's fond wisdom and guidance. More so, they may be God's wooing call to leave all that is managed, safe and predictable for the apparent irresponsibility of the wild freedom of love and trust. Our culture is one that manages risks and protects securities at the expense of the weakest. I'm not so sure it bears any resemblance what-so-ever to the culture of the Kingdom of God. But for some reason it is still positively frightful to abandon what has never really worked in the first place.

CogentNotion: I see in the liner notes of your CDs the imprint, "We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada Music Fund for this project." Here in the US we have an ongoing conflict over "separation of church and state" and recently we've heard a good deal about the Canadian government passing some very troubling laws about anti-bias and religion. Can you tell us about the Government of Canada Music Fund and the role it plays in your music and ministry?

Steve Bell: The government of Canada has long been a practical supporter of the arts. As much as Canada is viewed by many to be a Godless socialist country, I've never personally experienced even the slightest discrimination. I have received many grants from the Government to record overtly Christian albums. Ironically, I get more air-play

from our national CBC radio station than I do from the Christian radio stations that strangely seem to march to the drum of Nashville instead of our own cultural impulses (this is a generalization of course). I think Canadians are interested in respectful dialogue, not smug monologue. Christians have not always been exemplary in the former - and so they often find themselves talking mostly to themselves.

CogentNotion: Last year you released the CD, *Solace - For Seasons of Suffering*, a work inspired by a friend Ben McLean, who was struggling with renal cancer and was encouraged and sustained, in part, by your music. The CD is a collection of the songs in which Ben and his family found peace and comfort. Part of the *Solace* Project is an effort to place the CD in the hands of 50,000 individuals in "end-of-life" (palliative) care situations, at no cost to them. How is that effort going?

Steve Bell: I think pretty well - we're nowhere near the 50,000 mark but have so far been enabled to give away many thousands. This is an ongoing project, it seems to have blessed many and I trust will go as far as the good Lord wills. I'm very proud to be part of it.

CogentNotion: In 2003 you released a CD entitled *Sons and Daughters*, which you recorded with your daughter Sarah, and that year you toured with her doing live performances across Canada. On some earlier CD's as well as this new one, both Sarah and your son Jesse have participated. What is it like to work on these creative projects with your children?

Steve Bell: I cry if I think about it too much. My daughter is getting married in a few months and then immediately moving quite far away with her husband to a new community and new life. I'm thrilled my kids talk to me at all - that they would create with me, perform with me and generally want to contribute meaningfully to what is important to me is the deepest satisfaction. I quite like the three of them (my youngest son, Micah has also recorded with me) - they make me proud each in their own way. Parenting is the most bitter sweetness of all.

CogentNotion: Is there anything else you'd like to let our readers know?

Steve Bell: Oh, there are so many things - the best things I have not yet found language for. "God is closer to us than we are to our own breath," - if somehow we could grasp and live from that knowledge... what glory there would be!

I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to Steve Bell for his willingness to participate in this interview, and for his powerful and personal remarks. I'd also like to thank Dave Zeglinski and Tim Plett of Signpost Music for their generous cooperation!

You can order Steve's latest CD and other material at:

www.signpostmusic.com

SEMINARS & CONFERENCES

I have been very fortunate to have seen and heard many wonderful Christian teachers, preachers and musicians. Each experience has broadened my understanding of Scripture, deepened my Christian walk, and enriched my life in general.

In an article I wrote a few years ago titled "What is a Thinking Christian?" I mentioned the importance of getting outside the four walls of the local church to help balance one's perspective and training. That can be accomplished in many ways, but my preference is to attend concerts and seminars frequently. I often drag friends or family along as I investigate new venues - some of which have been

hundreds of miles away from my home. I search long and hard to find musicians and speakers who are faithful yet innovative, as well as seminar topics that challenge and encourage. Most important in all this is to bring what I learn home - both the positive and negative lessons - so I can share them with my friends at church and in my small groups. The key is putting in the effort necessary to find and attend the events, and keeping my eyes, ears and heart sufficiently open to hear God's message when it presents itself.

Below, is a small sampling of speakers and events happening around the country in the coming months. May I encourage you to consider attending one or more of these events.

Ravi Zacharias
9 April 2006
Guest Speaker at 12:00pm
 Brooklyn Tabernacle - Brooklyn, NY
www.brooklyntabernacle.org
 (718) 290-2000

Brian McLaren
21 April 2006
A Conference on
the Emergent Church
 Moravian Theological Seminary
 Prosser Auditorium, Bethlehem, PA
<http://www.moravianseminary.edu>
 (610) 861-1519

Dr. Os Guinness
21-22 April 2006
Coming to Grips With Globalization
and Its Human Challenges
 C. S. Lewis Institute Seminar
 Cornerstone Church, Annandale, Virginia
www.cslewisinstitute.org
 (800) 813-9209

Dallas Willard
17-20 May 2006
Spiritual Formation Forum
 Westin Hotel, Long Beach, CA
www.dwillard.org
www.spiritualformationforum.org/sff_event.html

Leonard Sweet
28 May 2006
Morning Service
- Ocean City Tabernacle
 Ocean City, NJ
www.octabernacle.org
 (609) 399-1915

Craig Detweiler
7-10 June 2006
Reel Spirituality:
Movies & Their Meaning
 Glen Eyrie Conference Center
 Colorado Springs, CO
www.gleneyrie.org
 (800) 944-GLEN (4536)

Brennan Manning
16-18 June 2006
Healing Our Image
of God and Ourselves
 Glen Eyrie Conference Center
 Colorado Springs, CO
www.gleneyrie.org
 (800) 944-GLEN (4536)

Kay Arthur
27-29 June 2006
Kinsman Redeemer
 Billy Graham Training Center
 The Cove, Asheville, NC
www.thecove.org
 (800) 950-2092

Richard Foster
16-20 July 2006
Renovaré Covenant Retreat
 "Solitude and The Way of the Heart"
 Snow Mountain Ranch
 Winter Park, Colorado
www.renovare.org
 (303) 792-0152

Woodrow Kroll
16-18 July 2006
Summer Homecoming Series
 Sandy Cove, NorthEast MD
www.sandycove.org
 (800) 234-2683

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
16-22 July 2006
Chautauqua Institution
- 2006 Summer Program
 Chautauqua, NY
www.chautauqua-inst.org
 (800) 836-ARTS

Crawford Loritts
19-20 July 2006
Summer Homecoming Series
 Sandy Cove, NorthEast MD
www.sandycove.org
 (800) 234-2683

Luis Pulau
5-12 August 2006
Summer Conference Series
 Cannon Beach Christian Conference
 Center - Cannon Beach, OR
www.cbcc.net/index.htm
 (800) 745-1546

Dr. Stanley Toussaint
& Dr. Erwin Lutzer
12-19 August 2006
Summer Conference Week
 Word of Life Conference Center
 Schroom Lake, NY
www.wol.org/inn
 (518) 532-7114

Lloyd Ogilvie
15-17 August 2006
The Character Transplant
 Billy Graham Training Center
 The Cove, Asheville, NC
www.thecove.org
 (800) 950-2092

D. James Kennedy
27 August 2006
Evening Service
- Ocean City Tabernacle
 Ocean City, NJ
www.octabernacle.org
 (609) 399-1915