



Going up against chaos

Bruce Cockburn in Central America

by Rick Janson
Atlantic Bureau Chief
Canadian University Press

Bruce Cockburn perches himself in a corner table of a Halifax hotel coffee shop. It's a depressing room and the service is anything but brisk as he taps the table awaiting a much needed coffee.

The previous night's show went well. The audience responded enthusiastically to his new songs—including the angry ones.

Angry songs—a new side to a man who always seemed just a little too together. But then again, with this Canadian musical composer, one is always discovering new sides.

Cockburn's music has been in a constant state of evolution over the last 14 years. Originally labelled a "folk artist," he has made the record racker's job a nightmare, welding together a disparate range of musical styles incorporating everything from jazz and reggae to rock and roll.

But through it all his audience has remained faithful to this whirling mass of creativity, with few exceptions.

"When I first started playing electric guitar there were people who didn't like what I did because it wasn't acoustic," he said. "Then when I became a Christian the Jewish part of my audience got nervous. When I started getting into politics the Christians were worried that I wasn't singing about Jesus very much."

"I feel really honoured by the fact that my audience is that tolerant and that open to whatever I'm trying to say to them. To me that speaks very well of those people—I'm not sure I'd be that tolerant."

His audiences are a little older than most pop music crowds. They sit intently in their seats, picking up on the intricate guitar work interwoven with Cockburn's unique lyrical content. Many of these people have followed him since the early days when the shy, soft-spoken kid in blue-jeans and loose-fitting shirts wowed them with considerable talent and a lot of heart.

"There was story after story of people being rounded up and herded into a structure like a church and the church being burnt down with them in it."

Cockburn now travels with three other band members. His silver-toned hair contrasts with the black leather clothing he's wearing.

The music is tougher sounding and the messages are more direct. There is a sense of urgency in his new songs—his songs about Central America.

Cockburn travelled to Central America a year ago as part of an OXFAM investigative tour. OXFAM was arranging trips to Guatemalan refugee camps. Buying up all the medicine they could carry while in



ILLUSTRATION: JANSON FOR C.U.P. 1984

Mexico City, they chartered a plane from the town of St. Margaritas to the camps on the Mexican-Guatemalan border.

"We rented the plane from this fantastic character," Cockburn said. "He ran his own airline out of this town with nine single engine planes. They were these rickety old things with all the seats taken out so they can either take luggage or passengers. His main business is serving the coffee plantations in the area, carrying supplies in and crops out."

Cockburn said the only radio equipment the aircraft's cockpit was equipped with was a small transistor AM radio.

"He flies one of the planes himself, although he's never taken flying lessons. He learned to fly from watching other pilots. He was the one who flew us into the camps."

After a half hour climb over mountains the terrain dramatically gave way to lush jungles with brown rivers snaking through the sea of green. Down below Cockburn could see a clearing.

The runway was flanked on one side by a small Mexican village and on the other by a refugee camp of about 3,000 people. Below, dogs scurried on the runway and people gathered about to inspect the visitors.

"The camp from the air looked the same as the Mexican village, both built out of the same materials—only the camp was a lot bigger," he said. "But then when you got up close, the people in the Mexican

village looked poor but they looked fed."

When they arrived they found a small infirmary run by three nuns. The infirmary served two camps totalling more than 8,000 people. Inside, the medicine shelves were empty.

Cockburn was impressed how these people had managed to keep their social order together in the camps under extreme circumstances.

"They had no food, no medicine and they had fled from the most disgusting and horrifying things imaginable."

Cockburn tape-recorded hours of stories from refugees on atrocities in their villages and reprisals by the Guatemalan government on the camps themselves.

Shortly after their visit, word had come that a nearby camp had been strafed by a Guatemalan helicopter.

"There was story after story of people being rounded up and herded into a structure like a church and the church being burned down with them in it."

The worst stories dealt with government atrocities aimed at intimidating the villagers.

The government prevented villagers from establishing any kind of organization for themselves, whether it was a church organization, a farm co-op or "anything that smacked of people getting together."

Cockburn reluctantly tells of the stories while contemplating his breakfast of

poached eggs on toast.

"There was a guy who was organizing for a farm co-op. The army took him out in front of his house. In front of his pregnant wife they beheaded him with a farm hoe, then cut open her belly, tore out the fetus and stuck his head in its place. They were left like that for the villagers to see."

Throughout Cockburn's Central American visit, culture was to provide a consistent thread in keeping people's lives together.

"The first camp had a marimba they carried piece by piece over the mountains from their village. Each person carried a piece of the marimba in their escape."

Cockburn jammed with the marimba players in the camp while girls 8-12 years old danced around in a circle with babies on their backs.

"They were not used to working with a rhythm guitar player, but it didn't matter—they played so much louder no one could hear what I did anyway," he said.

Cockburn said there were between 80,000-100,000 refugees in southern Mexico, about half living in camps. The rest are dispersed among the Mexican population.

"The Mexican population has been extremely generous with their space and energy in helping these people. The church has been helping them too."

When Cockburn—himself a born again Christian—returned from his trip he had problems dealing with the North American Christian community over the Gua-