

Hip's essence raw

interview by James Ingram

The Tragically Hip are a band whose music possesses a definite sense of place. The basic blues-rock they play smells of Mississippi Delta mud, backroad Texas dust, and the smoke of a dozen dingy Tennessee taverns. Which is a little surprising, given that they come from, and still reside in, Kingston, Ontario.

"We're all very Canadian," guitarist Bobby Baker assured me over the phone from Winnipeg last week. Confronted with the opinion that the Hip capture the American sound better than a lot of American bands do, Baker argued that music can't be classified by nationality. "I mean, what does a Canadian band sound like? I sometimes get the impression that Canadian bands sound like they've been designed to appeal to the mass audience, like they're trying to crack American radio."

Far from being instant-celebrity products of the corporate music machine, the Hip have grown gradually over the past nine years. They started the band in high school, and kept at it when they moved up to Queen's University in Kingston, "playing to put ourselves through school. One guy was studying film and politics," Baker says with a chuckle. "He took an early graduation. Gord Sinclair, the bass player, got a history degree, and I got a fine arts degree: minor in music, minor in art history, major in painting and print making."

After graduation they decided to seriously pursue a musical career and hit the Toronto club scene. Their success in Canada's most competitive live music market encouraged them to tour the rest of Canada and, on the

basis of reputation alone, they sold out houses across the country. They took some time off to record a self-entitled mini-album, which captured the raw blues essence of the band. It sold respectably and, after another year or so of touring, they were signed to MCA to make their first LP.

Showing remarkable confidence in the young band, MCA brought in producer Don Smith, fresh from a string of successes including Tom Petty, the Travelling Wilburys, Roy Orbison, and Keith Richards. Smith suggested the Hip record in Memphis, Tennessee, a place he had worked before. It came as a surprise to the band, but ended up working very well. "Memphis is a real music town, the kind of music we all dig. We wanted a place where there wouldn't be any distractions." The band was able to complete the album in "five weeks of very intensive work" and are very happy with the result, *Up To Here*.

The album is a little more than half-driving, frenetic electric blues; the rest of the album is comprised of slower, sparer acoustic songs. The best example of the latter, and my favorite track on the record, is "38 Years," a tasteful mid-tempo mix of strummed acoustic and piercing slide guitar. It tells the story of a man who returns home after spending eighteen years behind bars for killing the man who raped his sister. "It's actually about a prison break that happened in Kingston. It was written the first or second day we were in Memphis. The version that's on the record was our second attempt at playing it."

That the Hip are at their best when they're being spontaneous reflects the raw, unpolished nature of their music. Baker cites



The Tragically Hip will be playing Dinwoodie October 14.

the Rolling Stones as the single greatest influence on the band. "When I was about twelve years old I became a huge Stones fanatic, and through the Stones I got turned on to country and blues." This rawness could also be because the Hip are primarily a live band. "We've been on the road for about the last two and a half years. That's how we make our living. It's not from the record," Baker jokes. "At least not at this stage."

Whether that changes remains to be seen.

The current North American tour is going well, and both the album and an accompanying video are starting to be played on both sides of the border. The continued existence of the Tragically Hip does not, however, depend on huge commercial success. Baker explains: "You keep doing it because, like Keith Richards said, there's a different greatest rock and roll band in the world every night. I think we've had our share of nights, and I think that's why we go on."



Ukrainian dance comes west

interview by Boris Zvonkovic

The first Ukrainian dance troupe from North America to have actually performed in the Ukraine is about to make its Western Canadian debut. The Winnipeg based Rusalka Ukrainian Dance Ensemble has, in its 27 year history, performed throughout the world, from Japan to Mexico, but will make its first Western Canadian tour this month. "We have always wanted to tour Western Canada but the circumstances were never right. This tour is long overdue," explains Merv Pichlyk, dancer and administrator with the group for the past 12 years.

Rusalka is a volunteer, non-profit dance ensemble made up of 34 dancers, many of whom are third and fourth generation Ukrainian-Canadians. The group evolved in 1962 from the Ukrainian National Federation School of Dance in Winnipeg, and has continued to grow in both size—thanks mainly to its own fundraising efforts—and in stature—due to its worldwide appearances. As Pichlyk explains, Rusalka is not a professional dance troupe because it is something more: "We are a volunteer organization, but we strive for a professional calibre show...

we dance from the heart because we have a real love of the culture. The mandate of our group is to preserve the heritage, culture, and traditions of the Ukraine through the dance medium." Pichlyk goes on to explain that every dancer in the company is aware that they are ambassadors of the Ukrainian culture and of Canada.

Rusalka has a vast repertoire of Ukrainian regional dances and considers itself uniquely different from other Ukrainian dance groups. "We are different from many other Ukrainian dance groups in that we are very vocal: we add the elements of singing and dance theatre to our performances."

Rusalka has proven through its many tours and worldwide appearances that one does not have to be of a particular ethnic background to enjoy ethnic dance. As Pichlyk states, "you don't have to be Ukrainian to enjoy our show... you will see something exciting, something dynamic, something funny, something sad." These things we can all appreciate whether we are Ukrainian or not.

The dance ensemble will appear at the Jubilee Auditorium, Friday October 13 at 8:00 p.m.

Cheng exhibits passion

Edmonton Symphony
Angela Cheng, Piano
Jubilee Auditorium
Friday, October 6

review by James Ingram

One of the reasons discussion of the fine arts often seems so stiff and contrived is that arts orthodoxy demands that some perfectly legitimate opinions be repressed, and anyone who defies this taboo is made to feel like a Visigoth wiping his chin with an original manuscript by Aristophanes. But the truth is that some ballet does look like aerobics for the sexually indeterminate, some opera does sound like surgery without anesthetic, some art does look like industrial waste. And, hard as it may be for the CBC crowd to admit, there is a fair bit of really boring classical music. I say this now so that those who find this idea offensive may be forewarned and skip the last paragraph of this review.

The highlight of the show, former Edmontonian Angela Cheng's performance of the third Beethoven piano concerto, was far from boring. The concerto was written by Ludwig Van at the peak of his composing

career, when it seems he was in a good mood, and it's full of robust energy. Cheng played not only with considerable passion, but with an excellent sense of showmanship. She swayed back and forth with the music, her eyes closed and her head thrown back much of the time, her hands swooping and diving over the keyboard. Her pauses were tantalizing, her runs dazzling, and her pianissimos so quiet, delicate, and restrained they held the audience collectively breathless. Some may call it cheap show-offery, but it is how concertos are meant to be played, and it is perhaps the best way a musician can communicate with a concert hall full of people. The orchestra did a good job staying out of her way after getting her "wrong note for the night" over with in the introductory passage, and Cheng had us, as they say, in the palm of her hand.

The opener was also not boring: an engaging, dramatic piece by Torontonian Gary Kulesha, who was in attendance for the premiere of the large orchestra version. The three-movement work is entitled "Dreams" and is meant to describe the mind's journey through sleep. It is a series of simple, bold,

broadly melodic passages strung together with anarchic, almost dischordant transitions. The orchestra handled the contrasts expertly, sounding alternately brittle and lush, all the while maintaining a steady sense of motion. Unfortunately, the piece, especially the middle movement, suffered from the same incoherence that marks its namesake. It was hard to find direction or unity among the many intriguing and often catchy snippets of music, and, as with a dream, I was left with vivid fragments, but no sense of a larger design.

The last piece on the programme, and the reason for the introductory paragraph (you knew I'd get back to it), was a symphony by Cesar Franck. The program notes call it "expansive" (the program-writer's word for "very long"), so I supposed I was warned. I got the feeling that if anything very interesting happened in the life of Monsieur Franck while he was writing this symphony, he purposefully kept it out of the music. The program notes excitedly go on about an English horn solo in the second movement, and I did enjoy the solo, but it didn't last much more than half a minute. There were a few good melodies, loud bits followed by soft bits, fast bits followed by slow bits, all of which were played well enough by the orchestra, but I just wasn't able to find anything emotionally or intellectually stimu-



lating in all of it. I'm sure all of you who are reading this with your freshly completed thesis on "Truth, Love, Beauty, and Class Warfare in the Music of Cesar Franck" by your elbow will dismiss this as brazen heathenism, and you might be right, but in the interests of intellectual democracy I can only describe this symphony as boring.