

# Spirit of the West trip upstairs to success

**Tripping Up The Stairs  
Spirit Of The West  
Stoney Plain Records**

review by Rod Campbell

A lot of water has flowed under the Lions Gate Bridge since the Vancouver trio, Spirit Of The West, released their excellent debut album in 1984. That first recorded effort is now in its third pressing, and the band has subsequently become the hottest live act on the Canadian folk scene. With the release of *Tripping Up The Stairs* their second venture onto vinyl, SOTW has achieved an album of rare musical and lyrical quality, far surpassing their earlier promise.

In concert, SOTW tackle their material with a raw, infectious enthusiasm. The Herculean task of capturing the atmosphere of the band's gigs fell to producer Paul Hynde of Payollas fame. Hynde is not your average folk album producer and appears to have more tricks up his sleeve than the sorcerer's apprentice. Hynde uses lots of reverb to simulate concert hall conditions on the more rousing numbers while his overall craftsmanship creates the appropriate ambience for the listener.

SOTW's music is a collage of Celtic reels and jigs which are embraced by the band's own lyrics and melodies. Although this concept is not entirely novel, never have the results been so appealing.

The most significant aspect of this album is the way, track by track, the band scratch away the cliché ridden veneer of B.C. as "lotus land". Instead, the listener is left with a hollow social and ecological structure that beats to the sound of austerity programs. "An Honest Gamble", "Till the Cows Come Home", and "Room Without A View" all document the tightrope walk between employment and unemployment. "An Honest Gamble" contains some wonderful proletarian lyrics: O'Connell was a steel worker/A blue collar man he was labelled/ Been 21 years on the Yarrows Dock/ Stringing welding cable/He married a good Catholic girl/At the age of 21/By the time he reached 28/She had borne 7 young."

Although the protagonist, O'Connell, comes up trumps by winning Lotto 649, there is an undertone to the song which indicates that no matter how hard workers labour their dreams and aspirations will always be out of reach unless a miracle occurs.

The theme of hard work for little reward is also highlighted in the country twinged, "Till The Cows Come Home", a song that depicts the relationship between a truck owner and his wife. While the woman is left at home

lonely, the trucker must work night and day to "... keep that smile on his rich old bankers face".

The third song on the economic plight of BC residents is "A Room Without A View". "Room Without A View" is a sensitive portrayal of an old age pensioner who is evicted because her building is condemned. Although the song was written before Expo, the resulting evictions because of the fair, has made the song more relevant with the passage of time. John Mann's vocals are especially noteworthy on this track, creating a subtle blend between anger and sympathy.

If a stagnant economy is the bane of the population, the polluted "Mists Of Crofton" on Vancouver Island also stem from lack of financial equity to protect the environment. As a contrast, the band offers a natural disaster; the flood of 1984 which swept the Pemberton Valley. "When Rivers Rise" gives a feeling of the fighting spirit needed to create change, or to carry on even in the face of disaster, unlike the Islander's who must bow to the economic whims of their times, despite the cost. The choice is there to be made within the context of those two haunting songs.

The album's "tour de force" is undoubtedly "Homelands", a song dedicated to the Haida Indians. "Homelands" is an impeccable piece of arranging, which if given enough exposure, would certainly have commercial potential.

Not all the songs on this album are topical, the band offers their special brand of humour on "Our Station" and "The Crawl".

"Our Station" is written as a tribute to the Railway Club in Vancouver, and contains these legendary lines: "Some dress for volume, everythings turned up loud/It's a designer's nightmare to stand out in this crowd". The song is interspersed with some tasty guitar licks from Jay Knutson, whose all-around musicianship is in evidence throughout the album.

As the sleeve note states, "The Crawl" is a drunken swagger through the neighbourhood pubs of North Vancouver. This song will no doubt at some period become part of traditional music. "The Crawl" can stand beside the classic drinking ballads such as "I'm A Rover Seldom Sobber" without compromise.

With the exception of a few minor quibbles too minor to mention, "Tripping Up The Stairs" is the best folk album to come out of Canada since Stan Rogers released "Northwest Passage" in 1980. If you're inclined to buy one folk album a year, make sure it is this one, for SOTW are doing for folk music what K.D. Lang did to country.

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**A SOUTHERN THING HAS NO PLACE HERE.**

Yukon Jack never said much but, when he did, he had something to say. He was, in his way, very particular on matters of taste. "Southern things have their place" he would say "and that place is not here."

I guess what he meant was that light and airy and sweet things are fine and good, if that's what you like, but that here in the North a thing must be more substantial. Finely crafted, smooth and sturdy. It must be something you can put your hands around.

Yukon Jack did not believe in comfort for comfort's sake, he saw no point to it. But he did appreciate the finer things. Another paradox.

**THE BLACK SHEEP OF CANADIAN LIQUORS.**

For Yukon Jack recipes write: YUKON JACK RECIPES, Box 2710, Postal Station "U", Toronto, Ontario M8Z 5P1

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**TOP 10 ALBUMS**

1. Various Artists — It Came From Canada, Volume 2 (OG - Canada)
2. Skinny Puppy — Mind: The Perpetual Inter-course (Netzwerk/Capitol)
3. Spirit of the West — Tripping Up the Stairs (Stony Plain/RCA)
4. David Sylvian — Gone to Earth (Virgin/Polygram)
5. The Woodentops — Giant (Roughtrade - US)
6. Beat Rodeo — Home in the Heart of the Beat (IRS/MCA)
7. Phil Alvin — Unsung Stories (WEA)
8. The Gruesomes — Tyrants of Teen Trash (OG -Canada)
9. Raunch Hands — Learn to Whap-A-Dang with the Raunch Hands (Relativity - US)
10. Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds — Kicking Against the Pricks (Homestead/Dutch E.I.)

**Singles, EP's & Tapes**

1. Peace Corps — Terror of History (Toxic Shock/Pollution Control)
2. Cottage Industry — The Winter's Tale (Ikon -Canada)
3. The Thrubs — Proud To Be Loud (Precision -Canada)
4. The Dull — She's a Nuclear Bomb (Toxic Shock/Pollution Control)
5. CIA — CIA (Rude - US)
6. Mad Parade — Right Is Right (Toxic Shock/ -Pollution Control)
7. Chain of Fun — Chain of Fun (independent -Canada)
8. Artless — Artless (Placebo/Pollution Control)
9. Fearless Iranians from Hell — Self-Titled (Boner/ -Pollution Control)
10. Generics — Societal Hemorrhage (independent - Canada)