

Entertainment

Spirit of the west stakes territory

interview by Mike Spindloe

In just three short years, Vancouver based Spirit of the West have staked out their territory as the hottest, and perhaps only, new wave folk group in Canada. Their second album, "Tripping Up the Stairs", has been firmly lodged on CJSR's Top 20 playlist since its release this summer, they've impressed audiences at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival two years running and they returned to Edmonton for a sold out concert Sunday night.

The term "new wave folk" is actually a contraction of the description given to them in the Folk festival program this summer; "the Clash meeting the Dubliners at the Canada Pavilion at Expo." J. Knutson, on the phone from Calgary last Thursday, laughed at that description of the band but doesn't mind it at all. "That just shows how hard it is to pigeonhole our sound. In Vancouver, we've long been considered an alternative act, but outside, especially in the Prairies, we've gained much of our audience through playing at folk festivals."

The Spirit of the West sound is a unique blend of rock and roll energy, folk lyrical conventions centered around various facets of (mainly) Canadian life, and combining a variety of instrumentation including two unusual instruments, a bouzouki (a stringed instrument from Greece, by way or Ireland) and a bodhran (a Celtic drum). Although they've usually appeared as a trio in the past, the group is augmented on bass by Hugh McMillan on their current tour. "Having him along gives us more freedom on stage," says J., "because even though I've played bass on our albums, none of us is really a bass player."

Along with J. Knutson, on guitar, bouzouki, bass, synthesizer and percussion, Spirit of the West is comprised of Geoffrey Kelly, on whistles, flute, bodhran and synthesizer, and John Mann, on guitar and bones. All three brought previous professional musical experience to Spirit of the West, which helped them to graft together more quickly as a band.

The current tour takes them across the prairies for the next month or so, playing in a variety of different kinds of venues, both in size and in the kinds of music the venues usually present, in keeping with their dual status with music fans. "In a way it's sort of funny," says J., "when we get 40 or 50 year old folk fans coming out to these new wave clubs that they'd never go to otherwise to see us."

The band will then "hopefully have some time off for Christmas" before embarking on an eastern swing and then making their first ever trip to the U.K. and the European continent in April and May. Both of these ventures are somewhat risky, but exciting, for the band, as J. explains: "We're not as well known east of Manitoba, so we'll be playing smaller places, and being our first time in Europe, we really have no idea how the audiences there will react to us."

Considering the traditional jigs that routinely turn up on the records and at the live gigs, there should be at least some instant identification between Spirit of the West and their U.K. audiences. They come by their influences honestly at least: "Geoff was born in Scotland and emigrated here when he was nine or ten years old, and John and I both have some British background but we're really Canadians."

Scotland occasionally turns up in Spirit of the West lyrics as well. "Down on the Dole", from their eponymous debut album in 1984 (still available and into its third pressing on an independent label), documents the perennial unemployment situation of the town in Scotland where Geoff's uncle lives but "you don't have to look too far, you can find it in your own backyard."

Spirit of the West haven't neglected their own backyard either, as songs like

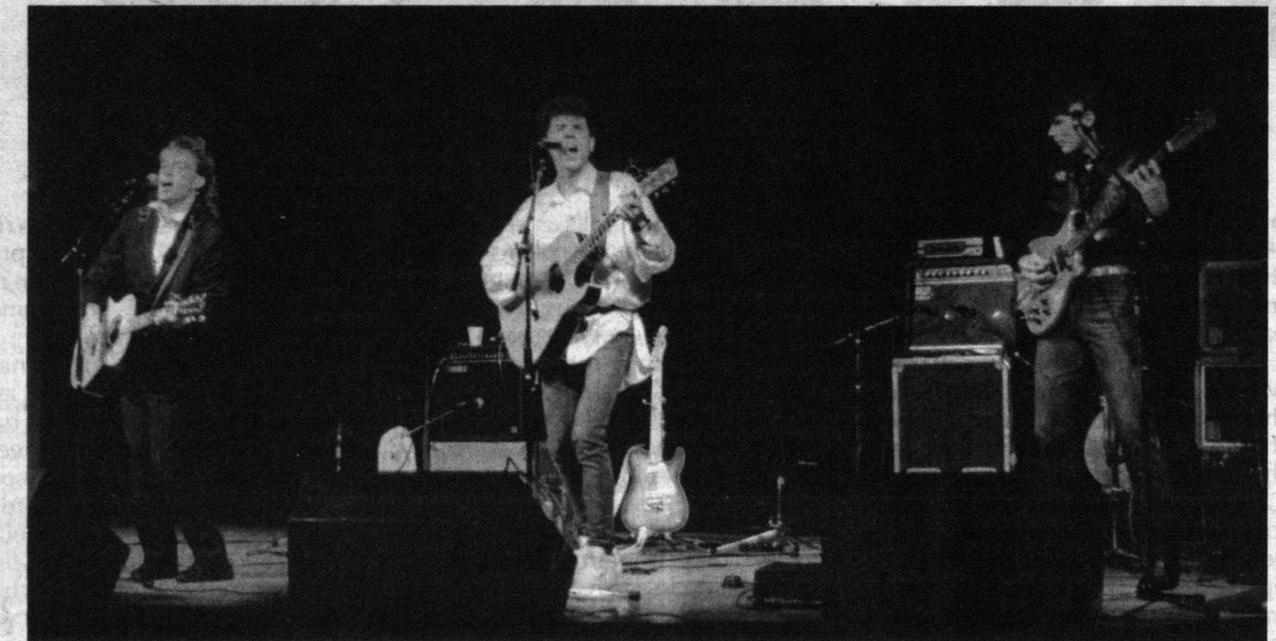


photo Mike Spindloe

"Homelands," documenting the struggle of the Haida Indians on Vancouver Island, from the latest album, show. Much of the time, though, their lyrics have dealt with fictionalized accounts of real or possible situations, like "Rock at Thieves Bay," which is "roughly based on the way they used to deliver the mail in the Gulf Islands." From the tragedy of a shipwreck, the song focuses on the grief of the wife of the ship's captain.

Other songs document occurrences many, or most, people can relate to: flooding of homes, lonely truckers' wives, etc. There is always a striking honesty in the way the songs are presented, though, and the upbeat rhythms and melodies contrast the serious nature of the lyrics. These kinds of songs, however, are always balanced by humorous or just plain good times tunes like "The Crawl", a lighthearted jig in which the crawling is all done in pubs, until its time to crawl home, or "An Honest Gamble", "a look at living in Lottery land," in which the poor sucker finally gets an even break and wins the lottery.

According to J. though, there is no concerted effort at a balance. "We just write about whatever we feel like or think

we should and it usually works out OK." And judging by the ecstatic reaction given by audiences at last summer's folk festival, it really does.

As for playing indoors in the winter, the band enjoys it because "it gives us more control over the situation and we can do a longer show," as opposed to the 30-40 minute sets that all too often seem to be cut short just as the band and the audience are getting warmed up at festivals: For this tour they've taken advantage of the opportunity to break their show up into two sets, each an hour or so long, which "gives us the opportunity to play a lot of material that we wouldn't get to otherwise."

Spirit of the West's latest album was produced by Paul Hyde of Payola\$ fame. On working with Hyde, J. says "he was a real easy guy to work with, lots of fun to have around, and of course he has a wealth of experience and studio attitude, which was good for us." The album does boast a clear, well-produced sound and was released on the local label Stony Plain Records, which has a national distribution deal with RCA, which should help garner Spirit of the West a higher profile in the

eastern provinces.

And, yes, the band did play at Expo, several times in fact. "It was a really different experience," says J., "the money was really good of course, but it was strange doing four sets a day, seven days a week, for such a transitional audience. You know, we'd finish and they'd be practically already be gone." Thanks in part to Expo bucks, the band can now survive on the income they derive from touring and album sales, a condition that has only occurred in the last six months. As the title of their latest album suggests, they're finally "Tripping Up the Stairs" of the Canadian music industry.

To my suggestion that Spirit of the West has already become something of a Canadian institution, J. just laughed, but judging by the amount of attention they have deservedly been receiving from discerning musical audiences, that evaluation may not be too far off the mark. However it may be though, Edmonton concert audiences can look forward to one regular bright spot on the calendar since Spirit of the West seem unlikely to forsake us for the Hollywood Bowl, at least for a while yet.

Folk band in best of spirits

Spirit of the West
In Concert
The Provincial Museum

review by Mike Spindloe

Spirit of the West rolled into town Sunday to an ecstatic reception from a sold out crowd at the cozy 400 seat Provincial Museum Theatre. The band seemed genuinely overwhelmed by the level of applause that greeted them and were even moved to jokingly ask where the applause signs were.

The crowd needed no prompting, though, cheering on the band through a two-and-a-half hour set (plus intermission) of standards from their two albums, a few cover versions (T-Bone Burnette, Richard Thompson, Johnny Horton) and, as an added bonus, previews of several new, unrecorded songs.

The band was tight, a side-effect perhaps, as they suggested, of their residency at Expo this summer. New bassist Hugh McMillan meshed perfectly with the others, reeling off fluid, virtuoso bass lines to underpin the guitar and bouzouki accompaniment of J. Knutson and Geoffrey Kelly and the bones and light bodhran thumping supplied by John Mann. All four contributed vocally, with lead duties split between

the three original members of the band.

One of the most endearing features of Spirit of the West's show is their between-song banter and introductions to songs, which often turn into hilarious monologues running on for several minutes. These guys poke fun at everything, including themselves, but they also managed to involve the audience without coming across as anything but likeable, real people. Sample: "It's a big thrill to come here at this time of year and plug my car in for the first time ever." Or something like that. Only once, in the intro to "Tripping Up The Stairs/An Honest Gamble", did an overly long intro cost them momentum, as the crowd seemed lost in reflection as opposed to clapping along to the jig as they did most of the time.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this band is the energy they exude on stage. They seem to alternate between complete relaxation between songs to total concentration during songs, certainly a requirement in view of the high level of musicianship they consistently demonstrate. They still manage, somehow, while playing, to dance around the stage with a fervor equal to any rock and roll band.

So in between jokes about Reagan and

Central America, the weather, leaving car headlights on, the size of beer cups at Expo, broken guitar strings, and so on, we got a well-paced set of all the Spirit of the West live standards, including "We Are The People of The Frozen North", a humorous look at how Canadians are perceived by foreigners and also by ourselves which, as usual, brought the house down.

The more serious songs dealing with the problems of common people received an equally good reception from the crowd, and the exhaustive introductions made them come to life doubly from the recorded versions. The band also invited patrons to visit in the lobby after the show and get albums autographed if they wished, another indication of the basic decency that these guys seem to encompass.

All in all, an evening to remember and a superb performance. It is unfortunate only that the show had to be held in such a small venue, as by all indications, Spirit of the West could have sold out the SUB Theatre just as easily. If you missed them this time, make sure you get your tickets early for the next, because they'll be going fast.