

# Alberta Musicians Rock

Landscape, lifestyle and community draw talent  
to the land of opportunity

by DAVID VEITCH

**A**NNE LOREE WAS MOVING TO Alberta and feared she might have to buy a banjo and a belt buckle the size of a dinner plate. It was 1983 and the aspiring singer-songwriter had decided to relocate to the Stampede City, where her brother was living, after spending several fruitless years trying to launch her musical career from her hometown of Toronto. There was just one problem. She didn't have the slightest clue what kind of musical community she would find. Well, OK, she did have one assumption. "I thought Alberta was definitely all bluegrass," recalls Loree, now chuckling at her misguided notion. "I didn't know there was such an eclectic scene. I was shocked. I felt like I totally fit in." Loree had learned what many local musicians already knew and what newcomers would soon find out: Alberta is a great place to make music.

The recent flurry of record-company signings within the province seem to bear this out. In the past five years alone, Jann Arden, Paul Brandt, Terri Clark, Tim Tamashiro, Zuckerbaby and Tariq have been signed to major record labels in the U.S. and/or Canada. Lin Elder had her debut album distributed in Canada through A&M Records. Chixdiggit had its first album released by Seattle's influential Sub-Pop label, the birthplace of grunge. Folk-circuit favorites James Keelaghan and Oscar Lopez have earned an international following for their recordings and tours. And this list doesn't even touch upon acts signed to independent record labels (Ian Tyson and Amos Garrett to Edmonton-based Stony Plain Records; Huevos Rancheros to Vancouver-based Mint Records; Brown-Eyed Susans to Los Angeles-based Permanent Press, to name a few), or the wealth of blues, folk and jazz talent the province is producing and nurturing. For decades, Alberta has been known for its agriculture, cattle and oil industries. Get ready to add music to this list.

But what is it about Alberta that's not just producing prodigious musical talent, but also attracting singers, players and songwriters from other parts of Canada and the

world? Ask Alberta artists what the province means to them, as artists and as people, and three recurring themes emerge: It's the landscape and lifestyle, the musical community, and it's a good place to get noticed.

## Landscape & Lifestyle

**J**AMES KEELAGHAN COULDN'T WAIT TO come home. For the past two years, the Calgary-born folksinger has been living in Toronto. Now Keelaghan speaks excitedly about moving back in May to the province that inspires him, and to the city he calls home. The Juno Award-winning singer-songwriter admits he had difficulty writing songs down east, suggesting by leaving Alberta behind, he had also left behind his muse. For him, the province is inextricably linked to his creativity. "I think we're all a result of the places we come from," explains Keelaghan, whose historical story songs always have a strong sense of time and place. "I've not been afraid to say the landscape you grow up in has a tremendous effect on how you see the world and the way you describe the world. Not just the cultural landscape, but the physical landscape. I write rather sparse, monosyllabic stuff that conveys bigger ideas. And there's something very prairie about that to me."

Loree knows exactly what Keelaghan means. She says her lyrics have become less "smart-alecky" and more "personal" since moving to Alberta—and she knows why. It's the landscape. "I'm reaching in further," says Loree, known for writing bittersweet love songs such as Arden's international hit *Insensitive* (also covered by America's 15-year-old country music phenom LeAnn Rimes on her latest record). "That's what happens out here. It's a lonesome feeling—the big sky, the big space. You can get in touch with yourself a little bit more. I spent a lot of time looking after a friend's house down south of Calgary, in the High River area. It was a little farmhouse right in the middle of the prairie. No one was around. It was a big skydome. I looked after

this place on my own and I probably did the best writing I've ever done out there."

That kind of serenity appealed to Canadian music veteran Alfie Zappacosta. He had lived in Toronto for more than 40 years when he flew out to Edmonton in 1995 to star in a four-month dinner-theatre production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. "Once I was here, I rented a mountain bike and I started cruising around the area," recalls the pop-soul singer responsible for the mid-'80s hits "We Should Be Lovers" and "When I Fall In Love Again." Zappacosta says, "I realized when I was going through all these quiet streets that I just loved the serenity of it." He convinced his wife to relocate to Edmonton after the run was over. "I had done the chaotic end (in Toronto). When it comes down to writing, I tried to be prolific under a great amount of stress and, of course, things do get done." Living in Alberta, Zappacosta points out, "has helped in allowing me to refocus, to get a good look at myself and realize why I started doing this in the first place."

However, one could argue no musician has been affected by the province's vast stretches of prairie as profoundly as Ian Tyson. He was born in Victoria, B.C., and became an international star as a member of Ian and Sylvia while living in Toronto in the 1960s. But Alberta became the heartland of his soul and, in a way, he has become the soul of the province. Ask Keelaghan to name one artist who personifies

Alberta and he answers Ian Tyson, without hesitation. "He's just done a really good job of giving us a sense of place about Alberta," Keelaghan explains. 'Four Strong Winds' is one of the first songs we learn and it's got the name of our damn province in it. . . . It makes me feel like I'm home when I hear it."

Since relocating to the province in the mid-'70s, Tyson established a ranch south of Longview where he raises and trains cutting horses and has continued to write lovingly of Wild Rose Country in songs such as "Alberta's Child" and "Springtime in Alberta." Known to be as rugged and unforgiving as the prairies themselves, the master chronicler of cowboy life speaks with genuine affection about what the province means to him, as a songwriter and as a man. For Tyson, laying down roots here "was an experience of coming home and becoming who I was always supposed to be; being the person I should have been all those years. It was a rejuvenating thing."



**HEART AND SOUL:** Since the sixties, Ian Tyson's lyrics have evoked the Albertan landscape and given us a strong sense of place.

TERRY WICKHAM HAS BEEN EXPOSED TO A lot of Alberta musicians, as a talent booker for Calgary's Centre for the Performing Arts in the mid-'80s and now as the producer of the Edmonton Folk Festival and the Calgary Folk Music Festival. Though Alberta music is incredibly varied, he says most of the musicians share one quality—they are supportive rather than competitive. "I see a camaraderie and a great spirit, especially among singer-songwriters," Wickham says. "It's encouraging to go down to the Sidetrack (a roots-music nightspot in Edmonton) and see Winnipeg singer-songwriter Ben Sures bring out his CD and all of a sudden you turn around and there's (Edmonton singer-songwriters) Mike McDonald and

Luann Kowalek and three or four more. . . . There is a spirit of we're-all-in-this-together. I like that spirit because that spirit helps."

Oscar Lopez will vouch for that. Nowadays, the 44-year-old Calgarian is among the finest Spanish guitarists on the planet and his latest album, *Heat*, has been released worldwide on the U.S.-based Narada label. But the Chilean-born musician remembers a time in the late '70s—while living in Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver—when he was stuck playing in Top-40 cover bands because there were no venues in those cities for a Spanish guitarist. "I was playing in bars with the same band, playing the same thing. I wanted to change the pace a

little bit," Lopez says, so he followed his sister out to Calgary in 1980. He was hired to play Spanish guitar during Sunday brunch at a trendy local eatery named Marty's Cafe (where Keelaghan and Loree, among many others, got their start). "That was my first opportunity to play my own music," Lopez recalls. "In the meantime, I was meeting great musicians along the way. It was an incredible musical community. Very tight. This musical community was accepting me, accepting my music, accepting this Latino guy playing Spanish music."

In addition to his solo work, Lopez was recruited for an Alberta supergroup, The Cold Club, an eclectic aggregation that also included blues-jazz guitarist Amos Garrett, Garrett's Eh! Team keyboardist Ron Casat, swing-influenced violinist Karl Roth and Celtic-country mandolinist David Wilkie. Lopez would later team up with his good friend Keelaghan to form the duo *Compadres*. In both cases, Lopez says he was able to play his music, yet he also found



# WHEN YOU SEE JANN ARDEN, PAUL BRANDT AND ZUCKERBABY OUT THERE MAKING BUSINESS DEALS, IT HAS TO INSPIRE UPCOMING BANDS. I CAN'T THINK OF A BETTER PLACE IN CANADA TO BE RIGHT NOW.

## A Good Place To Get Noticed

JANN ARDEN, INTERNATIONALLY-RENOWNED recording artist? Definitely. Jann Arden, clairvoyant? Possibly. The day was March 20, 1994, and the Calgary singer-songwriter had collected the first two Juno Awards of her career during a nationally televised ceremony in Toronto. Two hours after the show had ended, Arden was still dizzy with excitement but determined to tell this writer she had no plans to leave town. "We're proud to be Calgarians and we're going to stay there," she said, also referring to her management team. "We're going to be moguls and you can quote me on that. There's an industry to be had there (in Calgary)."

Those were brave words four years ago. At the time, few Alberta acts were being signed to major recording deals. Among them: Consort's k.d. lang, who inked a deal with Sire Records in the U.S. in 1986, followed a couple of years later by Cochrane's George Fox, who signed to Warner Music Canada. And there hadn't been a major act come out of Calgary since The Stampeders scored international hits with "Sweet City Woman" and "Wild Eyes" in the early-'70s; by then, however, the group had relocated to Toronto. "There was always a lot of talent in Alberta. There was just no one there to develop it and exploit it," recalls Rich Dodson, singer-guitarist for The Stampeders. "Most of the bands that stayed in Alberta never went anywhere." Yet here was Arden, typically fearless, predicting Alberta artists were on the cusp of national recognition—and they wouldn't have to pack their bags to attain it. And, of course, she was right. "There was just too much talent here not to be noticed," she says now.

According to many musicians, Arden's success focussed the eyes and ears of the record companies on Alberta. "Does

(Arden's success) have us paying very close attention to Alberta? Yes," says Steve Jordan, lead talent scout for Warner Music Canada, from his Toronto office. "But I would say we pay that close attention to every region in the country. You can't ignore anywhere when you're trying to find your next big act." He does, however, admit the provincial music scene has piqued his curiosity. "There's something musical going on that has its own set of traditions and aesthetics that's different from other places in Canada. That is what has me interested," says Jordan. "It's not Jann Arden or Paul Brandt, or whoever else has sold a lot of records, it's: 'Is there an appreciation for songcraft?' And: 'Is there some sort of musical tradition that comes out of the area?' I would have to say yes on both counts." But Jordan encourages Alberta musicians to stay where they are and not feel compelled to move to Toronto. "No, you don't have to be here," he says. "We're not in the days of the pony express. All the major labels have branch offices in Calgary and most in Edmonton as well. It doesn't take us long to find out about an act. It's just a phone call away."

**NOT BLUEGRASS: Anne Loree feared she might have to buy a banjo and belt buckle the size of a dinner plate when she moved to Alberta. She was surprised to discover such an eclectic scene.**

Tariq, who signed to EMI Music Canada two years ago, backs up Jordan's claim. Moving to Alberta "moved things along for me a lot quicker . . . as far as having a record deal," he says. "I was just reading an article in *Musician* magazine, which talked about things you can do to inspire (record companies) to listen to your material. One of the things they said is never forget

the value of your own hometown. If you can create some kind of a buzz there, you can inspire (record company) people to take interest. I just created that vibe in the city. I couldn't have done that as easily in Toronto. It would have taken a lot longer."

Neil MacGonigill, Arden's manager for the past 11 years, insists staying in Alberta was a key to their success, explaining the province's relatively low cost of living allowed them to survive financially during their early lean years. "I couldn't have done what I've done with Jann if I lived in Toronto or Vancouver





**FOLK GODS, SUPERSTARS AND NEW-COMERS THRIVE HERE:**

**James Keelaghan (above), Jann Arden (opposite page) Tariq (right) Oscar Lopez (below) remain loyal**

**to their roots. Jann Arden says, “We’re going to be moguls and you can quote me on that. There’s an industry to be had here.”**

because I couldn’t have afforded to hang on as long as I did,” he says. Arden has remained in Calgary even while her career took off around the world—a fact many Alberta musicians point to as proof times have changed in the industry. For her part, Arden says it’s no big deal. “People are always surprised I didn’t move to Toronto or Los Angeles. All my friends and my family are here. Why would I go anywhere? . . . I like it here. I like what I’ve accomplished here. The support I’ve received in all of Alberta has been outstanding. I feel people’s pride in what I’ve done and I really appreciate that.”

MacGonigill thinks things can only get better for musicians who stay in the province. “I have to think this run will

continue,” he says. “I don’t think it will go backwards. I think there’s more and more knowledgeable people here . . . and success breeds success. When you see Jann Arden and Paul Brandt and Zuckerbaby doing business out there and making deals, it has to inspire upcoming bands. I think we’re going to grow. I can’t think of a better place in Canada to be right now.”

Photo: DENISE GRANT

**LET’S NOT GO OVERBOARD. ALBERTA IS NOT** the centre of the musical universe. Calgary’s Paul Brandt and Medicine Hat’s Terri Clark moved to Nashville after signing American record deals— if you want to make it in the States as a country singer, you’d better book a flight to Music City U.S.A. “It wasn’t that I thought Canada wasn’t good enough,” says Brandt. “I just wanted to be a real big thing . . . and it made sense to move to Nashville. That’s where the business is based.” Tariq is having his arm twisted by his new Toronto-based management to relocate to Hogtown, where he’ll be nearer to EMI Canada’s head office. “If that’s what’s needed for me right now, that’s what I’m going to do,” Tariq says. “I can stay here forever and sell all my records here. It’s not going to work that way. I’m only going to sell 2,000 albums.”

Similarly, MacGonigill says Arden has to record in Los Angeles because Alberta studios —although ideal for making “good, little rootsy records” at a reasonable price—don’t allow him to make pop albums that will compete against the Whitney Houstons and Sarah McLachlans.

If you’re a naturally-gifted jazz musician, Marc Vasey seriously recommends you “get the hell out of Alberta.”

The festival producer of Edmonton’s Jazz City and Calgary’s 1998 jazz festival says the province has neither enough well-paying playing opportunities for musicians, nor enough world-class jazz talent to push young players to greatness. “Having been a jazz presenter in this province for more than 30 years, part of my job is to bring people up

through the educational system, the playing system, and bring them to a world standard where they can survive in New York or London or Paris, where they will grow.”

So, Alberta ain’t perfect. But it’s home. And many musicians believe there’s no better place to be. “When you look at a horizon and you see it doesn’t end,” says Arden, explaining the appeal of the province, “you have no lack of opportunity; that you have so

many choices and so many directions that you can go. You’re not stopped by water. You’re not stopped by anything.” ■

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Courtesy: TARADON MANAGEMENT



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