

Before the Gold Rush: Flashbacks to the Dawn of the Canadian Sound. By Nicholas Jennings. Toronto: Viking, 1997. 292 p. \$32.00 ISBN 0-670-87381-0

The demographers predicted it correctly years ago: as the baby boomers settle into middle-aged complacency, nostalgia is becoming a growth industry. A new generation is discovering the wisdom of Casanova's observation that "True happiness is the one offered by reminiscence." If you are one of those who tuned in, turned on, and dropped out during the 1960s, then here is a book to help you happily reminisce about the experience, at least musically speaking.

The subject of this book is Canadian pop music between 1961 and 1970. The author, a music critic and contributing editor with *Maclean's* magazine, interviewed over 100 people in the course of doing his research for the book. He also had access to lots of ephemera from the period, for the book is generously filled out with about 200 illustrations, including photos, posters, drawings, records, and record jacket covers. Jennings was just 17 years old in 1970, so that although the music he writes about is obviously close to his heart, the book is primarily based on the testimony and experiences of others, rather than an insider's account of the era. Nevertheless, there are plenty of revealing anecdotes about many of the key players of the period.

The title of the book is a play on the name of Neil Young's album *After the Gold Rush* of 1970, but it also refers to the flood of successful Canadian pop music groups in the 1970s. This musical gold rush began on Aug. 16, 1969, when Dick Clark presented Winnipeg's The Guess Who with its first gold record for selling a million copies of the single "These Eyes." Then in May 1970, The Guess Who became the first Canadian based group to hit the No. 1 spot on the influential *Billboard* chart in the United States with

its song "American Woman." Within the next 12 months, 36 Canadian singles and 12 Canadian albums made it to the Top 100 in U.S. playlists, a phenomenon that some were quick to dub "the Canadian invasion" by analogy with "the British Invasion" of the 1960s. In part thanks to the CRTC's decision that a minimum of 30 per cent of the music played on AM stations had to be Canadian from January 1971 on, the airwaves were suddenly awash in the "Canadian sound." Jennings devotes a few pages to a discussion of what the Canadian sound is, before admitting rather lamely that it is "something that can't be defined" (p. 241). Others have been more blunt, stating that there is no such thing as a Canadian sound.

"You know all those dirty long-haired kids with no direction in Yorkville?" Neil Young asked a *Toronto Star* interviewer in 1969, "Well, I was one of them" (p. 201). And so were most of the other people that Jennings writes about. Indeed, the book is primarily a celebration of Yorkville in the 1960s. I visited Yorkville only once during that decade but, to an innocent teenager from small-town Ontario, it was quite an eye opener. The smell of pot smoke hung in the air, and drug paraphernalia was openly for sale in any number of shops located in Victorian houses that were decorated in psychedelic colours. Yorkville then was not a neighbourhood but rather a "scene," like Greenwich Village in New York or Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. It was Yorkville that helped to transform Toronto within the space of a decade from a bigger, duller version of Belfast - God-fearing, sectarian, and narrow minded - into a smaller, friendlier version of New York - cosmopolitan, hip, and tolerant.

Central to the Yorkville ethos was the coffee house, and the success of the coffee

house was driven by the musical entertainment on offer. (Incidentally, hygiene regulations were obviously more lax in the 1960s, to judge by the picture on p. 104 of a nude male chef at The Mynah Bird coffee house.) At its height, Yorkville was home to about two dozen coffee houses; by 1977 only The Riverboat was left, and it too closed down the next year. By then, Yorkville had been transformed completely by the developers, who bought up the Victorian properties and converted them into expensive, trendy boutiques such as York Square (1968), Cumberland Court (1973) and Hazelton Lanes (1976). The times, they had a-changed.

Jennings describes in loving detail a plethora of second-rate, mostly short-lived rock groups whose musical aspirations were far grander than their achievements. These naive musical alchemists hoped to turn the dross of their three-chord tricks into the gold of a million-selling record. Instead of the philosopher's stone, though, they mostly relied on illicit chemical substances to do the magic. To listen once again to the music of the period is to be astonished afresh at how mediocre much of it was. Jennings, though, is mostly uncritical in his observations. Describing Ian [Tyson] and Sylvia [Fricker], Jennings writes of the "eerie combination of their distinctive voices - Tyson's warm and smooth as leather, Fricker's cool as the night air" (p. 27). But their 1963 recording of Tyson's song "Four Strong Winds" strikes me as appallingly bad. The

intonation is dreadful, and Sylvia's vibrato is so tremulous and out-of-control that it almost sounds like her voice has been electronically altered. And this was one of the better acts appearing in Yorkville in those days. "None of you guys know how to sing," Leonard Cohen's lawyer observed in 1967. "When I want to hear singers, I go to the Metropolitan Opera" (p. 160).

To be fair, though, there was some good music making going on. Gordon Lightfoot may not be a great singer, but he is certainly one of the finest songwriters around. "If You Could Read My Mind" is as good a pop song as any of its time, although much of the credit for Lightfoot's own recording of it must go to the person (Ben McPeck perhaps?) who arranged the magnificent string-orchestra accompaniment. The song was later covered by over 100 other musicians, and the royalties allowed Lightfoot to stay in Canada and buy a handsome house in Rosedale. Most of his compatriots who had any real talent, though, like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, ended up moving to the United States. The time was not yet ripe for pop musicians to flourish in Canada. Yorkville ultimately proved to be a dead-end street rather than the road to riches; the gold rush took place elsewhere.

Robin Elliott
University College Dublin

