

Bruce Cockburn

A Burning Light and All the Rest

by William Ruhlmann

The first time that an American record company tried to promote Bruce Cockburn seriously in the United States, back in 1980, the advertising tag line it used was "Canada's best-kept secret." With several charted records and much press attention since then, Cockburn perhaps no longer deserves that double-edged description. But it is nevertheless true that with more than 20 years of performing and recording to his credit, he is still a developing artist in commercial terms in the world's biggest record market, even if his artistic accomplishments have long since placed him up with such singer-songwriter contemporaries as Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell.

Many attempts have been made to establish Cockburn in the U.S., but he may now have his best shot ever, as Columbia Records has contracted not only to release his new recording, *Nothing But A Burning Light* (issued in November 1991) in the U.S., but has also undertaken to reissue Cockburn's entire 19-album back catalog, some of which has not appeared in the U.S. previously.

Concurrent with the new album, Columbia released *High Winds White Sky*, Cockburn's second album, *Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws*, his tenth, *Stealing Fire*, his fifteenth, and *Big Circumstance*, his eighteenth. On March 3, 1992, the label followed up with the eleventh album, *Humans*, the thirteenth, *Inner City Front*, the fourteenth, *The Trouble With Normal*, and the sixteenth, *World Of Wonders*. Another bunch will be released by the end of the summer.

This should finally end the hopscotch from which Cockburn's U.S. career has suffered, with his releases appearing on such labels as Epic, Island, Millennium/RCA, Gold Mountain/A&M, MCA/Gold Mountain and Gold Castle. That is, when they were released in the U.S. at all. Finally, American consumers may have a chance to view Cockburn's extensive career as a whole and appreciate his work in the same way his fellow Canadians have been able to since the beginning. And so Cockburn may come to be recognized generally for what he has always been: one of the major singer-songwriters of his generation.

Bruce Cockburn was born May 27, 1945, in Ottawa, and raised partially on a farm. His introduction to popular music, like so many of his generation, occurred when Elvis Presley emerged as an international star in 1956. "I liked rock 'n' roll from the very first moment I heard Elvis Presley," he is quoted as saying in his Columbia Records press biography. "It caught me in a big way."

Cockburn had tried playing trumpet and clarinet, but now began taking guitar lessons and playing the piano. "I started out playing guitar because I wanted to play rock 'n' roll, basically," he said in a recent interview. Cockburn played in Top 40 bands in high school and "fell in with some folkies." In the '60s, he was a street musician in Paris, but also picked up formal training by attending the Berklee School of Music in Boston, studying composition and arranging. "The guitar style I've been using ever since developed from all these influences," he said.

At the same time, his musical tastes continued to expand. "I discovered other kinds of music, jazz and what-not," he recalled, "and I thought I might want to do that, but when I actually got down to studying it, I discovered I didn't really want to work that hard, and in the meantime I'd been learning to fingerpick, playing ragtime, country blues and stuff."

The major rock artists of the '60s influenced Cockburn's lyrical bent. "I always loved the poetic use of words," he said. "When I first heard Bob Dylan and John Lennon, it was revealed to me that you could put poetic words with music."

After Berklee, Cockburn returned to Ottawa, where he played in a succession of rock bands, such as the Esquires and the Children. No released recordings resulted from these associations, though there were some attempts made. "There were some demos, but nothing that was ever intended for release," Cockburn said. "Probably all the bands I was in, with maybe one exception, had demo tapes made. One of them even tried to get a gig doing a commercial for Salada tea, without success. But we had a song called 'Tea Freaks Blues' that we used to do that we'd written for this tea ad campaign that was far too weird for Salada tea. Which is just as well, 'cause I don't think I really wanted to get into the advertising world anyway."

At the same time, Cockburn was beginning to gain a reputation as a songwriter, leading to at least one recording of his work that he could recall. "There's an album that was recorded by a Canadian group called Three's A Crowd, I believe on Fantasy Records, but I'm not absolutely certain of that," Cockburn said. "It was produced by Mama Cass, and it had at least two of my songs on it and some co-written with another guy named Bill Hawkins that I used to work with in Ottawa at the time. They did a song of mine called 'Bird Without Wings.' There's also a song that's erroneously cre-

ditated to me that Bill Hawkins wrote, which I think was 'Cotton Candyman.' This was '68, around that time, and the album would be a very obscure addition to anyone's collection at this stage."

Soon enough, Cockburn himself turned to the idea of recording, though not in the rock band format. "By '67 I had a little body of work that I'd written, some of which was specific to the various bands, but some of which transcended the limitations of those bands and stood on its own," he explained, "and I discovered that I liked all those songs better when I just played them by myself."

The move toward a solo, acoustic approach was in keeping with the temper of the times at the end of the '60s, which saw such performers as Neil Young and James Taylor turning away from playing in bands to make folkish music. "There was a general feeling of exhaustion in the air anyway, with the psychedelic scene and all that, which I

felt, the same as a lot of other people did," Cockburn said. "And I thought, 'Betcha there's a lot of people that would like to hear songs with just voice and guitar right about now.' So, I went solo, and it took me another year or so to extricate myself from the band involvements. I had been doing the odd solo thing through that period anyway, and started concentrating on that in earnest, and it wasn't all that long before I got an opportunity to record."

"Initially, I wanted to record because I wanted to forget those songs. I felt choked up. I'd written all these songs, and I wanted to put them out in front of people and then get on to writing other ones, naively, of course, because I didn't have any idea that once you recorded a song that's what people wanted to hear then, but I found it out quick enough."

Cockburn got the "opportunity to record" through a combination of associates in

1991



Courtesy Showtime Archives (Toronto)/Finkelstein Co. Ltd.

strong." (In 1979, *Night Vision* became Cockburn's first album to be certified gold in Canada.)

With his fifth album, *Salt, Sun And Time*, Cockburn finally found some resolution to his philosophical conflicts, explicitly embracing Christianity. "Two thousand years and half a world away/Dying trees still grow greener when you pray," he sang on "All The Diamonds In The World," the album's single and lead-off track.

Biographical accounts of Cockburn's life tend to use such words as "fundamentalist" and "mystic" to describe his beliefs. But it seemed a good idea to let the man himself explain what he believes, since, especially in the U.S., such words are highly charged.

"They sure are," Cockburn said with a laugh before discussing his faith. "I became a Christian in 1974, officially, to myself," he explained. "Before that, I was kind of heading that way, but I didn't perceive it as a real personal involvement requiring any kind of commitment until after a certain point in the summer of '74, and then I started writing about it. The song 'All The Diamonds In The World' was the song that sort of marked that turning point. Like anything else that's new, just like Alcoholics Anonymous or any other kind of thing where you discover some great new thing, you want to go out and tell everybody about it, whether they want to hear it or not. I was suffering from that to a certain extent, not so much in the songs, but in the way I would present myself to people in interviews or onstage to a degree.

"I was looking. I wasn't sure, because I was a new Christian, and I didn't really grow up in the faith. I grew up with the symbols around me, but not with any real personal understanding of it. So, I was trying to figure out what it meant to be a Christian now that I'd made this move, and the first thing you try to do is, you try to find out what all the rules are, and then you try to obey them. That makes you kind of a fundamentalist. I kind of thought that because we all shared the same faith that these people (fundamentalists) must have something going, too, that I didn't understand, maybe, but I should understand because it was Christian. And I tried to make apologies to myself for the gross tactics of TV evangelists and all the rest of it.

"But in the end I was completely unsuccessful at being a fundamentalist because what a fundamentalist really is is somebody that takes the Bible literally, who takes the traditional teachings literally, and I couldn't do that. I don't think that's what it's supposed to be at all, and I just grew up as too much of a free thinker to be able to submerge myself in a belief system without any question, and I also don't think that's what we're asked to do as Christians at all, either. But some people do think that.

"Mystic, well, that's kind of a catch-all. It's the term people use when they know you're talking about something spiritual, but they don't know what you're talking about, so you must be a mystic. I never felt like much of a mystic. Although T Bone Burnett [also a Christian, and producer of *Nothing But A Burning Light*] called me a mystic too, to my face, and I just laughed. I don't know



what he means, but maybe there's something.

"Everybody sees things a little differently. Maybe I see things a little differently than other people do, and that looks like mysticism. I certainly have a sense of the presence of the spiritual in things. I value that sense quite a lot, too. It's kind of a sense of interconnectedness that goes beyond anything that you could easily put into words or define in any way, but that is nonetheless very present and real and comforting, in a way, because it's so much deeper and bigger than the things that humans normally do to each other and all the rest of it."

One aspect of Cockburn's developing beliefs that stood in great contrast to what most people think of in regard to fundamentalist Christians was that his political consciousness, also becoming more defined at this time, was taking a distinct left-wing rather than right-wing slant. His sixth album, *Joy Will Find A Way*, recorded in the summer of 1975, while continuing his expressions of faith, also included "Burn," a sarcastic account of U.S. foreign policy that declared, "You'd buy or bury everyone/For liberty and life and just plain fun."

Asked about the relationship between his religious convictions and his political views, Cockburn said, "It maybe has partly to do with coming of age in the '60s, and it also connects in some ways to [Trappist monk and theological writer] Thomas Merton and his ability to find similarity between Zen and Christianity and my own spiritual

inquiries before I became a Christian, which included Buddhism, at least the sort of Buddhism that the Beat generation fancied, and the occult and that sort of stuff.

"I'd been hanging around various spiritual scenes for a while, and it didn't seem as simple to me as people were making it, and still doesn't, of course. You can't look at any one thing and say that it's all right and all wrong, because the divine revelations get handed to us through an all-too-human filter every time, and that filter is, however brilliant the individual person who happens to be the filter might be, still the product of a culture, and the culture determines a lot of the language that's used and the symbols that are used and all that, and in the end it comes down a lot more to intent.

"Only God can judge somebody's intent, but nevertheless, somewhere in there there's room for a lot of tolerance for other people's actions based on the assumption that there are good intentions behind them and that in the eyes of God the details of the act may be far less important than that intent." (Happily, as we shall see, Cockburn's political song lyrics tend to be far more concise and direct than his explanations of his motives.)

At the end of 1976, Island Records became the second U.S. label to take up the cause of Bruce Cockburn, releasing his seventh album, *In The Falling Dark*. A typically evocative effort, the LP included "Lord Of The Starfields," still perhaps Cockburn's most moving expression of faith. The association with Island led Cock-

burn to travel south for the first time in years (he had played at the Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1974).

"It wasn't really until the latter part of the '70s that I started to seriously want to work outside of Canada," he said. "We did a little bit when *In The Falling Dark* came out on Island here, which was the next sort of big record. It was the first time we actually had a real release here, and it got sort of a good little buzz happening around it, but we were never able to parlay it into much more than that. But I did do some club work around the northeastern United States." (The album became Cockburn's first to chart in the U.S., getting to #191 according to *Cash Box* magazine's listing.)

Cockburn also undertook a tour of Japan in 1977 with fellow Canadian singer Murray McLauchlan (whose *Hard Rock Town* album was a True North release), and though these were tentative steps, they were the beginning of what would be a tremendously important influence on Cockburn's work. As he traveled more, his songs began to reflect an increasingly international viewpoint. He was also able to establish himself as a live performer, something he had already done in Canada, where his next release (also issued in the U.S. on Island) was a double-pocket live set entitled *Circles In The Stream*, recorded at Massey Hall in Toronto on April 8 and 9, 1977.

If his first album had been intended to be a tombstone for the songs it contained, with the artist moving on, *Circles In The Stream* was a kind of last hurrah for the folkie Bruce Cockburn. Drums and slightly more rhythmic arrangements had begun to creep into his records, but it was on his next studio LP, *Further Adventures Of*, recorded in the spring of 1978 and released in September, that something like conventional folk-rock and rock music began to become Cockburn's common style, albeit still with a prominent acoustic guitar. In subsequent albums, the style would grow even harder.

All of this, of course, was gradual. "I'm inclined to play things safe most of the time," Cockburn said. "I mean, I don't have anything against the idea of a sudden drastic step in any particular direction, but it would be very artificial. At the time, for instance, when I first discovered reggae and punk music, when punk first came along and kind of revitalized rock for me, it would have been totally artificial by that time to just suddenly pick up an electric guitar and start playing punk music, which is kind of what I felt like doing, because it sounded like a lot of fun.

"But by that time I had established a certain presence for myself as a singer-songwriter in the acoustic format, and I had been around long enough to know that [if] I'd start playing punk music, I wouldn't have any idea what I was doing because I'd be coming at it as an outsider, adopting it instead of being one of the kids that had grown up with it. So, it was a gradual thing, but you did start to hear, like, a guitar more in the records at that point, or at least, dirtier sounding electric guitar, and more drums and a less jazzy approach to the band, less of an ECM kind of sound and

more of something like rock."

Cockburn's move toward the pop-rock mainstream did not go unnoticed. He recorded his tenth album, *Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws*, in the spring of 1979. This time, True North pacted with Millennium, an imprint of RCA Records, to release the album in the U.S., and when *Rolling Stone* magazine obligingly called Cockburn "Canada's best-kept secret," the label launched a publicity campaign and Cockburn undertook a U.S. tour with a band.

The result was a dramatic upsurge in his recognition and popularity in the U.S. *Dancing* entered the *Billboard* magazine LP chart on February 23, 1980—Cockburn's first *Billboard* chart placing—and rose to an amazing #45, lasting 24 weeks in the charts. A single, "Wondering Where The Lions Are," got to #21. (In Canada, the album went gold; by 1983, it had gone platinum. Cockburn also won a 1980 Juno award for "Folk Artist Of The Year.") Cockburn's 15-city spring tour was recorded by Millennium for a promotional record released to radio in July called *Selected Cuts From U.S. 1980 Tour*. The label had previously sent to radio an album version of Cockburn's appearance on the *Thirsty Ear* program recorded in January and called *Bruce Cockburn Radio Special*. The album featured both selections from Cockburn's albums and interview segments.

Cockburn's increasing radicalism and internationalism were apparent on his eleventh album, *Humans*, recorded in the summer of 1980 and released in the fall. The songs were written in Paris, Milan, Tokyo and Denver in addition to Canada, and they were full of first-person observations, plus ever more bluntly expressed convictions. "When you're the fighter/You're the politician's tool," he sang in "Guerrilla Betrayed," though admitting, "I'd like to put a bullet through the world." The political feelings were also intermingled with romantic ones, as in "Fascist Architecture," which is more about the singer's need to reconnect with his "old lady" than with fascism.

One often has the sense in Cockburn's work, both because of its directness and because of such details as his tendency to date and locate the songs on his lyric sheets, that there is a strong autobiographical content to them. "A lot of it is autobiographical," he said, "in the sense that most of the songs are the product of my own experience fairly directly, either as a direct experience of mine or something that I am presented with strongly, like from hearing it directly from somebody who experienced something, in most cases. Sometimes it's just living with the thought of something for a long time. I don't make up very much in those songs. Most of it is drawn directly from the day-to-day or whatever life experiences are going on."

Of the time when *Humans* was being composed, Cockburn noted, "There's a certain style of song that started to show up, [and] became more typical of my songwriting through that period, which is a kind of documentary-style thing, structured like a little movie. 'Tokyo' [a song on the album] is like that—it was one of the earliest ones—

where you try and set up these little scenes that relate to each other but where you don't have to explain the relationship but there's an impression that's created out of it that adds up to something."

Humans did not match the commercial success of *Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws*, but it did reach gold status in Canada, where Cockburn was named both "Male Vocalist Of The Year" and "Folk Artist Of The Year" in the 1981 Juno awards, and it got to #81 in the U.S., where the single "Rumors Of Glory" "bubbled under" the hot 100 for four weeks, getting to #104.

For a twelfth album, compilations were released in both Canada and the U.S. in 1981. Millennium's *Bruce Cockburn/Resume*, several of whose songs were previously unreleased in the U.S., got to #174. True North, meanwhile, issued *Mummy Dust*, four of whose 11 selections were previously unreleased, among them the newly recorded single, "The Coldest Night Of The Year." (By the way, a German compilation, *Rumors Of Glory*, issued in 1985 and containing an otherwise unreleased song called "Yanqui Go Home" is also recommended.)

Cockburn's thirteenth album, released later in 1981, was *Inner City Front*. It continued to press the conflict in his feelings about politics and religion, as, in the song "Justice," Cockburn asked, "What's been done in the name of 'Jesus, Buddha and others, and demanded, 'Can you tell me how much bleeding/It takes to fill a word with meaning/And how much, how much death/It takes to give a slogan breath.' 'Everybody loves to see justice done,' the song concluded, 'on somebody else.'"

Inner City Front, released on Millennium, failed to chart in the U.S., perhaps due to the declining fortunes of the label. But it was an international success, earning the Dutch music industry's Edison award and garnering the artist two more Junos in Canada.

Cockburn's international popularity meant that he now spent the better part of the year on the road, playing in the Far East and Europe as well as in North America. Working with a steady group of musicians, his music took on more of a rock band sound. Also, the experience of all that stage singing seems to have given Cockburn a more expressive vocal approach, the result being that as the '80s went on, he became much less an introspective singer-songwriter and a more forceful singer and stage performer, which was all the better given the increased militancy of his lyrics.

All of this was reflected in his fourteenth album, *The Trouble With Normal*, which, in the U.S. appeared on Gold Mountain Records, a custom label run by music journalist/record executive/personal manager Danny Goldberg and distributed by A&M. (Note, Gold Mountain, a literal translation of Goldberg's name from the German, is not to be confused with Golden Mountain, which is the name of Cockburn's song publishing company, and with which it has no relation.) Unfortunately, the new label association did not get Cockburn back in the U.S. charts. (In 1985, the album would be re-released with a re-recorded version of the title song.)

Shortly after finishing the LP, in early 1983, Cockburn toured Central America as an official observer at the behest of the charitable organization Oxfam and saw firsthand the effects of war in Nicaragua, among other countries. The trip had a profound effect on an artist already sensitized to the troubles of Third World peoples.

Asked if such trips necessarily give the observer the clearest possible view of what's really going on, Cockburn replied, "I wouldn't say so, but it gives you a vivid view." Then he went on to explain.

"The moving part of it for me," he said, "was, well, first of all, to see what suffering people can really experience, and then to see how people respond to that suffering or to the threats that they're under and so on. Especially in the refugee camps, people were so together, given the circumstances, and had such an ability to not fall into hopelessness. That was the most moving thing of all, and that, combined with the threat of violence against those people particularly, was a terrible feeling and a terrible set of feelings to have and a terrible sort of juxtaposition to see.

"These people had absolutely nothing and no prospects whatever. Still, they were trying to get something going, they were still building schools in their refugee camps even though they had nothing to put in them, no books and no teachers. They built a little infirmary even though they didn't have any medicine, just so they'd be ready when it did come, and it never did, of course. The Mexican army went in and burned it all down after a while.

"But those people still had this ability to go, 'Well, okay, we're gonna build something here.' That just made the kind of cynicism, that we who live in the developed world can so easily feel about the usefulness or not of political action, seem so pathetic. It seemed like complete self-indulgence for us to sit around going, 'Oh, well, there's nothing we can do.'"

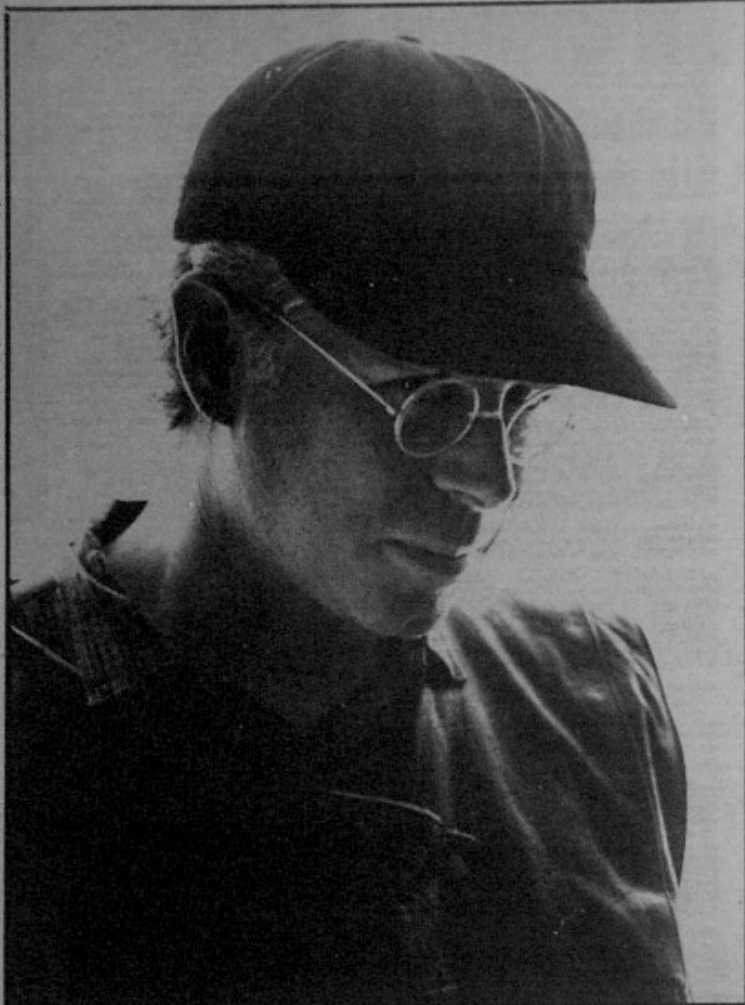
Naturally, Cockburn tried to express such impressions in song. "Art, particularly songs, deals with little fistfuls of feeling," he explained. You can't expect to do much more in a song than hand little bundles of stuff over to people, and I've tried to push that sometimes, but really that's what it comes down to. So, you're dealing in pretty graphic little images and as strong a shot of feeling as you can put into it, which is something that magic does very well, but non-specifically, until you put words with it. It makes it interesting, it's an interesting angle from which to approach songwriting, but also, not that much intellectualizing goes into it."

The result of Cockburn's attempt to evoke fistfuls of feeling about his experiences in Central America produced some of his most impassioned—and controversial—songs, including "Nicaragua," a tribute to the Sandinistas that declared, "You're the best of what we are," and "If I Had A Rocket Launcher" which advocated an armed response to "generals and their stinking torture states." "When I talk with the survivors of things too sickening to relate," Cockburn wrote, "If I had a rocket launcher. . . I would not hesitate."

July 1990



Courtesy Glenn A. Baker Archives



1985

"When I wrote 'Rocket Launcher,' I was in San Cristobal de los Casas in Mexico," Cockburn said. "I was in a hotel drinking a bottle of Scotch the day after I came out of the refugee camps, and I was in tears thinking about it and writing this song. It doesn't get much more direct than that. And the songs from Nicaragua were written after the fact, but with notes; they were almost complete in the notebook in Nicaragua. 'Dust And Diesel' is one of those, so is the song 'Nicaragua,' although it's got a bit more editorial content. 'Dust And Diesel' is straight reportage, really. All I did was make a list of things that happened and put it to music."

The songs were included on Cockburn's next album, *Stealing Fire*, which was released in the summer of 1984. The album rivaled *Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws* as Cockburn's biggest U.S. seller, reaching #74 and staying in the charts 20 weeks. Amazingly, given its content, "If I Had A Rocket Launcher," released as a single, got to #88 in February 1985.

Though Cockburn had expressed similar political sentiments before, the combination of the forcefulness of "Rocket Launcher," which, after all, makes even Bob Dylan's "Masters Of War" sound tame, Cockburn's renewed popularity due to the commercial success of *Stealing Fire*, and the fierce controversy regarding U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s, made Cockburn a controversial figure and earned him

some negative press notices.

"When the Central American thing was what people were noticing about my songs and I was called upon to talk about that a lot, a lot of journalists, particularly the mainstream news variety especially, tended to go, 'You're just playing to an audience of the converted. The people who are coming, buying your records, they already like those damn Sandinistas anyway,' or whatever," Cockburn recalled. "There was this kind of attitude and cynicism, and I thought, I don't think that's true, because, first of all, more people bought that record than had bought most of the previous records."

"'If I Had A Rocket Launcher,' I still hear about that, 'cause it had a video, it got shown a lot and it was kind of noticeable as a song. It stood out from the rest of what was on the radio, and there's all kinds of people that—truck drivers'll go by and recognize me on the side of the road and go, [derisively] 'Eh, where's your rocket launcher?' or this kind of thing. But it's in a good-natured way, they're making a joke, and it's okay, and those people heard that song."

"Whether they really paid attention to what it was about or not, they heard it, and some of them actually liked it, and some of them went out and bought the record, because I do hear from that end of the social spectrum a lot, especially [because] where I live now is out in the country, and that's

who's around, is farmers and truckers and general working people. And none of them are very far to the left and a lot of them know some of my songs. Some of them even have a couple of albums.

"I don't have any desire whatever to preach to the converted or to preach to anyone else, for that matter. I mean, when I write these songs I'm not trying to sermonize to anyone. I'm mad or I'm hurt or I'm happy, or whatever the case may be, and I want to share it, I want to just put it out there for people to see, and of course after that fact I hope that by doing that it may produce an effect, but it's not the purpose in writing the song in the first place. They're not propaganda pieces, and perhaps people sense that, they don't feel propagandized to, for the most part. Once in a while somebody does, but most of the time not."

Unwilling to let Cockburn off the hook, or the trigger, as the case may be, his interviewer pressed the point one step further. "Rocket Launcher" in particular seems to cross the line from observation to involvement. It sounds like the kind of song you write before you give up something as passive as songwriting and go join the revolution. Had Cockburn been tempted, like Rimbaud, to put down the guitar and actually take up that rocket launcher?

"No, actually," Cockburn said. "Whatever temptation I feel to be involved with that has more to do with fascination than frustration. The frustration I feel is the more honest—well, not more honest, it's the more useful feeling, and that says to me that the solutions like the kind of response that 'Rocket Launcher' talks about are not the way to get things done. I mean, sometimes they're inescapable, but it's not a principle on which to act, really, for me, especially because it's not natural to me to do that. I'd be just another honky trying to get in on something, trying to give my life meaning, if I went and did that, and I don't have to resort to that to give my life meaning. But I have [supported] and will again support people in those kinds of positions who are doing that kind of thing because I don't think they have much choice sometimes."

"But there also is something very attractive and fascinating about a war situation. That's why journalists become war junkies and why some military people become mercenaries when the war's over, because things are just so intense and immediate in the presence of that much death. The life that's going on around you becomes really intense and special in a way that it normally is not. When I came back from Nicaragua the first time, and somebody was asking me about what it was like to come back from that—I mean, not that I experienced anything so drastic or dramatic, but I was there where stuff was happening, had happened, would happen again, and surrounded by people to whom it was happening. It was just like coming from color to black and white to come back home after that. Things just didn't look the same. Nothing was the same after that. And when I went to Mozambique [in 1988], it was like that."

"It isn't only the presence of potential violence, it's also the novelty of a situation that makes it like that, that sense of being on

the edge, and the fear that nags at you. I've never been in a situation where I was directly threatened with extinction from bullets or anything, but I've been close enough to it where you have to go around with a certain edge of fear—"What's around the next corner? And I guess that's the big thing that really heightens everything, that extra little shot of adrenalin that you live with all the time. Plus the fact that you know that the emotional contacts you make with people may be very short-lived. Everybody feels that in those kinds of situations, and there's kind of a shared warmth. It's like a massive shipboard romance."

"All the other stuff just seems kind of unimportant, and whoever you're with at the time is—I'm not speaking of sexual things, just of any human contact, just who you're with at the moment becomes very important to you, that contact is very important and immediate, and that's very attractive. So, if I were to go off and become a guerrilla, it might be falling prey to that kind of temptation more than the failure of reason."

The success of *Stealing Fire*, which went platinum in Canada (where *Joy Will Find A Way* and *In The Falling Dark* were certified gold in 1985) led to more touring for Cockburn, and his recording schedule started to stretch out. He finally returned to the studio in the fall of 1985, and emerged with *World Of Wonders*, his sixteenth album, which was released in the summer of 1986. By now, Gold Mountain had switched distributors, and the album came out under the imprimatur of MCA Records, which had a curious response to the lead-off track and single, "Call It Democracy."

"Call It Democracy" is perhaps the only song ever written about the International Monetary Fund, which Cockburn accuses of fostering "insupportable debt" in Third World countries. Typically not pulling any punches, Cockburn charges that the IMF doesn't "really give a flying fuck about the people in misery." That earned it a few bleeps on radio and on video channels, but no one seemed to notice the chorus, "IMF, dirty MF." We won't spell out here what "MF" stands for, but it can be easily imagined.

"You know who noticed that was the American record company," Cockburn said, "'cause that came out when the whole Tipper Gore thing was really peaking [the Parents Music Resource Center's campaign against x-rated lyrics], and they were talking about sticking records and everything, and I can't remember now even who the independent label we were dealing with was [Gold Mountain], let alone which was its major distributor [MCA]. But that big label, anyway, was determined that there should be a sticker on that record or else we had to print the lyrics on the back of the record [jacket], and they did [print the lyrics], and they highlighted in yellow [the potentially offending lines]."

"It was just such absolute nonsense. I mean we were laughing about it, except that it was kind of tasteless. But it was such a joke. They got over that. I guess that people just realized that by doing this they were aggravating the situation, if anything. But

it's just such a load of crap. My mother didn't like it. She said, 'Did you have to use that word?'"

Yellow dirty words and all, *World Of Wonders* got to #143 in the U.S. charts. It also reached the Top 30 in Germany, one of many countries Cockburn toured at the time. In fact, he was on tour for most of the 1986 and 1987, and, dispensing with his



band, returned for a solo tour in 1988. On these dates, Cockburn would turn up on stage with several guitars and a bevy of electronic effects in performances that emphasized his lyrics and his impressive guitar playing facility.

Cockburn's record company supported all the touring with a two-disc compilation, *Waiting For A Miracle*, which gathered together his singles, as released in Canada, dating back to 1970. The album contained two new tracks, the title song and a protest song about North American Native peoples called "Stolen Land." In the U.S., it came out on Danny Goldberg's Gold Castle label. In Canada, naturally, it went gold.

Cockburn's next regular studio album, *Big Circumstance*, was released at the start of 1989. It reflected the continuing expansion of the artist's political and geographic concerns, containing such songs of reportage as "Tibetan Side Of Town" and songs of advocacy such as "Where The Death Squad Lives" and "Radium Rain." "If A Tree

Falls" (which concerns rainforest destruction) reached *Billboard's* "Modern Rock" chart, a measure of college radio play (it also hit the Top 30 in Australia as a single), and the album got to #182.

In August 1989, in the midst of a tour that lasted from February to November and covered the world, Cockburn and two backup musicians, bassist Fergus Marsh and drummer Michael Sloski, recorded Cockburn's second live album, *Live*, which was issued in the spring of 1990 and contained a charming version of the Monty Python song, "The Bright Side Of Life."

After the end of the 1989 tour, Cockburn stayed off the road for two years. Meanwhile, his manager, Bernie Finkelstein, and Columbia Records president Don Jenner were in negotiations, resulting in the new recording deal and the release of Cockburn's twentieth album, *Nothing But A Burning Light*.

For an artist who has made a point of consistency and continuity, the new album represents several departures in approach. What else can one say about a Bruce Cockburn album that was produced in Los Angeles by T Bone Burnett? "I've tended to work with one group of people for a while and then turn that over and make a different group," Cockburn noted. "First of all, I've been off the road for two years now, so the people I was playing with had to find other things to do for a living. But it was time for a change anyway. I'd been working with those guys for five years and, I won't say we had done everything we could possibly do, but

we'd done a lot of things, and it was time for a change.

"And part of that change for me, the more important part than who I was working with, was getting out of Toronto. After 20 years of recording in that city, I wanted to record somewhere else, and it wouldn't have mattered where it was except that with T Bone as producer, he wanted to work in L.A. He had a certain group of people in mind for the album, and it was a good choice of people as far as I was concerned, and it ended up being that." The studio group included Larry Klein, Booker T. Jones, Sam Phillips, Michael Been, Jim Keltner, Jackson Browne and Mark O'Connor.

All the high-powered help, however, is in the service of the singer and the songs, which range from a tribute to Kit Carson to a theme for Greenpeace and a song called "Indian Wars" that assails "the so-called white so-called race." "One Of The Best Ones" is a touching declaration of love, while "Cry Of A Tiny Babe" is a re-telling of the nativity. Cockburn is still expressing his anger and hope in song.

"Now, what'll happen the next time out, I don't know," he said. "I don't imagine that we'll end up with the same group on the next album, or even the same producer, 'cause T Bone tends not to want to do the same kind of project twice in a row. But time will tell. It's a long way in the future." In the meantime, longtime fans have another thoughtful album to absorb, and new fans will have a whole library of great music to hear for the first time.

Complete Bruce Cockburn

U.S. and Canadian Albums Discography

(All True North listings are Canadian releases. All East Side listings are compact disc reissues released in the late 1980s.)

label	record #	title	year
True North	WTN-1	Bruce Cockburn	1970
Epic	30812	Bruce Cockburn	1971
True North	WTN-3	High Winds White Sky	1971
East Side	80152	High Winds White Sky	1987
Columbia	CK 48738	High Winds White Sky	1991
True North	WTNX 7	Sunwheel Dance	1972
Epic	31762	Sunwheel Dance	1972
True North	TN 11	Night Vision	1973
East Side	80172	Night Vision	1987
True North	WTN 16	Salt, Sun And Time	1974
East Side	80162	Salt, Sun And Time	1987
True North	WTN 23	Joy Will Find A Way	1975
East Side	BRUCE-3	Joy Will Find A Way	1987
True North	TN-26	In The Falling Dark	1976
Island	ILTA 9463	In The Falling Dark	1976
East Side	BRUCE-2	In The Falling Dark	1987
True North	TN-31	Circles In The Stream	1977
Island	ILTA 9475	Circles In The Stream	1977
True North	TN 33	Further Adventures Of	1978
Island	ILTA 9528	Further Adventures Of	1978
East Side	80182	Further Adventures Of	1987
True North	TN 37	Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws	1979
Millennium/RCA	7747	Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws	1979
Gold Mountain/A&M	GM 3276	Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws	1979
Gold Castle	D21Y-71309	Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws	1987
Columbia	CK 48736	Dancing In The Dragon's Jaws	1991
Millennium/RCA	DJL1-3583	Bruce Cockburn Radio Special (promotional)	1980
Millennium/RCA	DJL1-7751	Selected Cuts From U.S. 1980 Tour (promotional)	1980
True North	TN42	Humans	1980
Millennium/RCA	BXLI-7752	Humans	1980
East Side	BRUCE-1	Humans	1987
Columbia	?	Humans	1992
Millennium/RCA	7757	Bruce Cockburn/Resume	1981
True North	WTN-45	Mummy Dust	1981
True North	WTN-47	Inner City Front	1981
Millennium/RCA	17761	Inner City Front	1981
East Side	BRUCE-4	Inner City Front	1987
Columbia	?	Inner City Front	1992
True North	TN53	The Trouble With Normal	1983
Gold Mountain/A&M	GM 3283	The Trouble With Normal	1983
Gold Castle	D21Y-71308	The Trouble With Normal	?
Columbia	?	The Trouble With Normal	?
True North	TN57	Stealing Fire	1984
Gold Mountain/A&M	GM 80012	Stealing Fire	1984
Gold Castle	D21Y-71310	Stealing Fire	1987
Columbia	CK 48735	Stealing Fire	1991
Plane (Germany)	Nr. 88402	Rumours Of Glory	1985
		(Contains the otherwise unreleased track "Yanqui Go Home")	
True North	TN66	World Of Wonders	1986
MCA/Gold Mountain	MCA 5772	World Of Wonders	1986
Columbia	?	World Of Wonders	1992
True North	TN2K-67	Waiting For A Miracle	1987
Gold Castle	171 005-1	Waiting For A Miracle	1987
True North	TNK-70	Big Circumstance	1988
Gold Castle	D2-71320	Big Circumstance	1988
Columbia	CK 48737	Big Circumstance	1991
True North	TNK-73	Live	1990
Gold Castle	D2-71346	Live	1990
Columbia	CK 47983	Nothing But A Burning Light	1991

(Columbia is scheduled to release 11 more Bruce Cockburn albums, starting with another batch in the summer of 1992.)



Courtesy Showtime Archives (Toronto)/Finkelstein Co. Ltd.