



On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock

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David Bidini, rhythm guitarist with the Rheostatics, knows all too well what the life of a rock band in Canada involves: storied arenas one tour and bars wallpapered with photos of forgotten bands the next. Zit-speckled fans begging for a guitar pick and angry drunks chucking twenty-sixers and pint glasses. Opulent tour buses riding through apocalyptic snowstorms and cramped vans that reek of dope and beer. Brilliant performances and heart-sinking break-ups.

Bidini has played all across the country many times, in venues as far flung and unalike as Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto and the Royal Albert Hotel in Winnipeg. In 1996, when the Rheostatics opened for the Tragically Hip on their Trouble at the Henhouse tour, Bidini kept a diary. In *On a Cold Road* he weaves his colourful tales about that tour with revealing and hilarious anecdotes from the pioneers of Canadian rock - including BTO, Goddo, the Stampeders, Max Webster, Crowbar, the Guess Who, Triumph, Trooper, Bruce Cockburn, Gale Garnett, and Tommy Chong - whom Bidini later interviewed in an effort to compare their experiences with his. The result is an original, vivid, and unforgettable picture of what it has meant, for the last forty years, to be a rock musician in Canada.

On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock Details

Date : Published October 1st 1998 by McClelland & Stewart

ISBN : 9780771014567

Author : Dave Bidini

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Music, Cultural, Canada, Autobiography, Memoir



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From Reader Review On a Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock for online ebook

Yolanda Ridge says

I really only read the first few pages before giving up. I don't know much about the music scene - I thought this would be a good education. Reading about the start of his music career was interesting, but I was done as soon as he started quoting other musicians... it just became too diluted for me.

Barbara McVeigh says

On a Cold Road is the first book on my list for Canada Reads 2012. The point of Canada Reads is to find the most quintessentially Canadian book for the year to recommend to all Canadians to read.

On a Cold Road delivers what the subtitle says: tales of adventure in Canadian rock by documenting the Rheostatics as they open for the Tragically Hip on a cross Canada tour. Interspersed with Bidini's poetic expressions of band life, are interviews with the founders of Canadian rock. The book begins quietly dealing with the troubles of the music business, travelling on desolate country roads and playing in high school auditoriums, before building up to the debauchery of groupies and of Yonge Street, playing the hallowed ground of Maple Leaf Gardens, and detailing the end: band implosions. The book takes the reader on quite a tour.

As well, Bidini's prose is exquisite. In a blizzard, wind "knuckles the roof" of their touring van, and Vancouver is described as a "kiss from a ponytailed girl". The book is also a love letter to Canada. From experiencing "skin-peeling" prairie cold in playing small towns, to wild nights in Hamilton, the band "got to know Canada way more than [they] ever wanted to". Through the music, Canada becomes a place "waiting to be explored".

This book gave me a chance to relive my youth: These were the bands and songs that were playing on the radio when I was in high school and university.

I also felt a different sense of nostalgia while reading the book: The book describes a Canada that used to exist: a country where we citizens had much more in common. All the kids of a certain age listened to the same music. I don't know if that's true anymore.

Or at least it felt that way. This was the Canada I knew when I left in the mid 90s to live in Europe. Canada was not the same place when I returned. Canadians had suddenly become diverse without a common sense of self. I didn't know what Canadians shared anymore.

Also, I initially found the transfer from Bidini's narrative to the interviews jarring. I needed to YouTube videos of the singers and bands mentioned to remind me of who they were. Certainly they created great songs. Unfortunately, I haven't remembered their names. Also, until now, I never knew some of these guys/gals were Canadian.

So a combination of the book being set in a Canada Past, and the fact that the musicians are no longer household names made this book feel dated.

Would *On A Cold Road* then be the ideal book for all Canadians to read this year?

Marcel Pierre says

Do not call yourself a Canadian music fan till you've bought and read this book.

Sarah says

I really didn't know what to expect from "On a Cold Road". I thought the book was a tour recap by Dave Bidini, a member of the Rheostatics.

What I got was an overview of Canadian rock from the 60s to the 90s. Bidini's stories of his tour with the Tragically Hip are interspersed with stories from Canadian rock greats such as Ronnie Hawkins and Kim Mitchell.

Christina Vasilevski says

Review originally posted on www.christinavasilevski.com

About the book: In the mid-90s, Bidini's band, The Rheostatics, was the opening act for The Tragically Hip on their "Trouble at the Henhouse" tour. *On a Cold Road* is Bidini's memoir of the tour, compiled from the journal entries he wrote during it. However, the book also aims to serve as a collective history of touring across Canada, and includes anecdotes and recollections from Canadian musicians from the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

What I liked: In this book, Bidini captured the allure of travelling and performing on the road, and made it comprehensible to us non-musicians. He made me feel the urge to pack up, get in a van, and drive across the country to visit all of the little hole-in-the-wall places that I could – despite the fact that I still don't have a driver's license.

His emotions became my own. I felt the frustration he did when The Rheostatics kept on encountering the rising popularity of The Tragically Hip in unexpected places and comparing it to their own lower level of success. I felt the sadness and alienation he did when he thought he became friends with Joey Ramone, only to meet Ramone at an autograph signing and find out that the other musician looked worn out and didn't remember him at all. His realization made a cold wave of sadness wash over my stomach: "He had no idea who I was. I left the store. Outside, the rain felt like spiders." Is there anything else one can say after that?

What I disliked: The book's structure was disjointed, and the anecdotes provided by other Canadian musicians about the growth of the Canadian music scene in the 50s, 60s, and 70s didn't mesh with the framework provided by Bidini's own writing. The stories that the other rockers provided were grouped together by theme, but I often found it hard to detect a throughline between what everyone else was talking about compared to Bidini's narrative frame.

More egregious, though, was the *huge* gender imbalance between the number of male musicians that were quoted compared to female musicians. Given the context (Canadian rock in the mid-20th Century) I understand that there probably weren't a lot of women in the industry. But the number of times that women musicians were quoted or mentioned absolutely pales in comparison to the number of men. I bet that Greg Godovitz had more space in the book devoted to him than all of the women in it *combined*.

On top of that, most of the men who did mention women in music in any sort of context talked about the wonderfulness of having groupies. I didn't need to know about how some musician in the 60s got a tongue bath from a willing groupie, or how some lovely angel of a young woman rehabilitated some hapless rocker by taking him in and doing his laundry. Women as sex objects? Rock on! Women as maternal caregivers bringing hope and cleanliness? Great! Women as equals and musicians in their own right? Meh.

The verdict: Bidini is obviously skilled with words, and some stories he captures, like the experience of performing at Maple Leaf Gardens, are imbued with magic. It also helps that I'm a huge Tragically Hip fan, and that I have a copy of "Live Between Us," their live album made from the same tour that Bidini was part of. However, *On a Cold Road* still didn't "spark" to me very much. While I was reading this book, I had some money in my iTunes account, and it never occurred to me to buy a Rheostatics album with it – instead, I spent the money on some Neko Case music. I think that's pretty representative of my stance towards the book – interesting enough, but not so interesting as to encourage further investigation.

Johanna says

I am not a Rock afficiano, but I had heard of the Rheostatics before I took a writing course recently at U of T taught by none other than Dave Bidini. He has 10 books to his name all on music or sports, neither of which particularly interest me in a book format - or so I thought. Dave was an outstanding teacher and very regular for a rock star so I set forth to explore what he has written. I could not put this book down. I am familiar with a lot of the names and some of the music but it was rather Dave's down to earth, having a conversation over a drink with me style, telling me about his experiences and deftly weaving in the experiences of countless musicians he has interviewed. He has no pretensions and sometimes shares with a raw honesty that always rings true - something he kept telling us in class. You can bullshit your way in a lot of art but not in writing, your readers always know when you are not being honest. The truth is always the hardest to write about. He knows whereof he speaks.

Ruthie says

I did enjoy this book, but it took me a while to find and feel comfortable with the rhythm of the writing - anecdotes from dates of the Rheostatics cross- Canada tour with the Tragically Hip, interspersed with related and relevant anecdotes from a large group of Canadian musicians. Some of the musicians I recognized, some I had to be reminded of, some were unknown to me. I was continually going back to the list of names/groups to try to place the speaker and the era to which they were referring. That was annoying!

Bidini is a very, very good writer, his descriptions were so sharp and beautiful. You feel the cold, smell that bus....If you are/were a fan of this band, this is a must read. If you ever wondered what it would be like to tour, not with private jets or luxury buses, but old-school rock touring, this will give you the full picture. If you have a kid who wants this life, this book might change their mind...

Sumofparts says

I didn't love the book nor do I think it's one I recommend for Canada Reads. It was too scattered for me; there's this central narrative from the Rheostatics interspersed with stories from these other Canadian bands but I couldn't tell where Dave Bidini was going with it all. Either write about the Rheostatics or about the other bands. Or if a combination is absolutely necessary, change it somehow. I can appreciate that it was more of an oral history and I did think the format was interesting but it didn't hang for me. I could see the connections sometimes but other times, the stories felt randomly stuck in. Also, I wish there was more background about each of the bands/musicians; I was gleaning some narrative to tie it together but not enough to paint a proper picture. I don't think non-fiction has to necessarily be like a novel, with a beginning, middle and end, but I think there should be a path the writer is leading you on or a direction the writer is pointing to. Bidini could've done this better, I think, if the stories were separated better but even so, I can see how the individual bits wouldn't have worked exactly because they were all basically transcriptions of interviews. Although, I wonder how this would work as a documentary or movie.

The description of how the band broke up was interesting to me though; of how, even though the members were great friends and loved each other, the relationships became toxic; also, how the payoff gradually decreased and how the balance tipped in terms of how much each member was willing to put up with the (actual) bad for the (potential) good.

I guess I did enjoy the central narrative and I really enjoyed the more "travelogue" aspects. Overall, there were great parts but the book wasn't greater than the sum of them.

Janelle Z says

The idea for Dave Bidini's book *On a Cold Road: Adventure in Canadian Rock* first came about when excerpts from his tour journal were published in the *Toronto Star*. The dairies depicted the experiences of Bidini and his band The Rheostatics when they opened for the Tragically Hip on a cross-country tour. The Rheostatics are not new faces in the Canadian rock scene. Since 1980, rhythm guitarist Bidini, drummer Dave Clark (later replaced by Don Kerr), lead guitarist Martin Tielli, and bassist Tim Veseley have been playing their quirky art rock for a steady and dedicated fan base. Before their separation in early 2007, the band had released a total of fourteen albums, including *Whale Music* and *Melville*, both of which have made it onto numerous "Best of Canadian Albums" lists.

Bidini's intention with this book, it seems, is to provide a comprehensive and fascinating look into what it means to be a rock musician in Canada. His own tour dairies are the backbone of the book, which is interspersed with tales from well-known Canadian artists. His interviews with various famous players in the Canadian rock scene throughout the last 50 years include Triumph, Trooper, Crowbar, BTO, The Guess Who, Bruce Cockburn, Gale Garnett, Goddo, The Stampeders, Max Webster, The Collecters/Chilliwack, and April Wine. Bidini gathers these varied players and presents their stories to show the common ground upon which these experiences are founded. These stories are always entertaining, full of the expected sprinklings of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, but the book deals heavily with some other common themes in a musician's world as well: the emotional roller-coaster of touring, meeting your idols, the complex relationships between band members, and first musical experiences.

Bidini, being the writer of the band, is fluid with words. He writes with a kind of honesty and openness that makes the reader genuinely like and relate to him. Even when describing his own ego and egg-headedness, Bidini still comes off as a very affable guy – the kind of every-man with whom you can picture yourself sitting down in your parents’ basement and have long chats about life and music. His prose is effectual and has the ability to bring us directly to the places he writes about, evoking the same emotions. The moments feel real and immediate when we read about them, but only a secondary kind of reality, fogged by the dreaminess of memory and nostalgia.

Before picking up the book, I had only a brief introduction to the Rheostatics, specifically through the CBC Radio 3 program hosted by Grant Lawrence. Their music had never struck a chord in me or laid a fairly heavy imprint on my musical memory, so I went into the book with limited expectations but a willingness to learn. What I experienced was something quite rare and interesting, getting to know the band, not through their “obscure, cultish art rock”, but through the literary voice of their rhythm guitarist. Throughout my progress, I would occasionally look up a referenced personality or song on the internet, which helped me to develop a better visual landscape of 70’s and 80’s Canadian rock.

For a debut, Bidini certainly proved himself to not only be one of Canada’s most distinctive musicians, but a fine writer as well. *On a Cold Road* accomplishes what it sought to do in the beginning: it brings readers onto the road with the bands and the musicians who made up the Canadian rock scene for the last fifty years. Not only is this an insightful read for the seasoned music fan, but it is also an entertaining and poignant story of realizing your aspirations.

Tina Siegel says

Wonderful book! I was a bit skeptical when I started it, but Bidini turns out to be a terrific writer. His prose is clear and easy and he knows when to add a poetic flourish. I enjoyed his self-deprecating humour and his passion for music. I really wish there'd been more of him and fewer anecdotes from other people (which made up a significant portion of the book).

The only other caution I'd have is that, unless you're massively into Canadian music, all the name dropping may get a bit tedious. Ignore that, and you'll be fine.

Sarah says

This is probably a much better book than I am giving it credit for. I found the parts when Bidini wrote about his experiences with the Rheostatics to be the best parts of the book. However, I did not enjoy the many quotes from musicians. I could understand why people would love this book - I was just not the right audience.

Dorothy says

This book was one of the five selected for the Canada Reads 2012 short-list. This year the contest focused on non-fiction books for the first time. Each book had its Champion, the person who would argue their book's

merits and defend it against the other contenders. After each day's debate, one book was voted off by the Champions. Moderated (at times refereed) by Jian Ghomeshi, it was "must listen" radio for the four days of the debate.

It was through listening to this broadcast that I first became aware of the book, and then, through the passionate description from its Champion, model Stacey McKenzie, became interested in reading it.

Ostensibly, it tells the story of Dave Bidini's band, The Rheostatics, during their cross-Canada tour with The Tragically Hip. In fact, that is only used as framework for the many anecdotes of the road and touring life told by various members of the Canadian music scene. These anecdotes are grouped by themes; they seem to be answering a specific question, such as: What was your first performance in front of a paying audience? What was your worst experience on the road? etcetera. These blocks of anecdotes are interspersed with Bidini's own experiences growing up wanting to be a musician, then realizing that dream as a touring band.

The stories related by the various musicians (e.g., Kim Mitchell, Randy Bachmann, Ken Tobias, Rik Emmett) and others deep in the music scene (e.g., Peter Goddard, Alan Niester, Richard Flohil) were very interesting and enjoyable. It gives an unvarnished insight into the true nature of the land and people of this country. For those of us who grew up exclusively in big cities, this alone is a revelation.

Many of these bands were part of my teen/early 20s: The Guess Who, April Wine, Max Webster, Downchild, Trooper, The Stampeders) and that brought an additional layer of nostalgia to the anecdotes.

The book is a true love letter to music, musicianship, and the necessary ritual of touring across Canada with your band.

At several points, the interviewees speak about the lack of a "star system" that would scout and nurture young artists, grooming them for musical stardom. Shortly after reading this book the CBC did a piece on the Can-con subsidies in radio. Established in 1971, it was largely responsible for the additional exposure of many Canadian musical acts that might not otherwise gained a wider audience, including those featured in this book.

This is a quintessentially Canadian book. It speaks to the grit, the passion, the drive that is necessary to live your dream to play in front of a live audience. However, if you are not familiar with the groups, or that time in Canada, or your musical preferences do not include classic rock and roll, this may not be the book for you.

Pooker says

This was the second read for this book and I think I enjoyed it more the first time. The first time I read it I was delighted to find "stories" about musicians I knew. I was also startled to realize that in 1996 and perhaps the case remains today that young musicians start off in the same way as they did in "my day" (25 years prior to 1996) with their buds in garage bands and they tour for the sake of promotion by bus & on a wing and a prayer and peanut butter.

The second time I read it, while I still found all of this very interesting, I think I was saddened that this is still the case and I wondered why anyone would do it. Obviously because they love music, but the author's love for the music itself did not come through for me as strongly as I would have liked.

I did appreciate the reverence for playing in Maple Leaf Gardens. No kidding!

Carly says

A west to east story of The Rheostatics' tour with The Hip that was awkwardly interrupted by yarns from other Canadian musicians. I wish it had been more linear, more focused. I also wish Bidini hadn't relied quite so heavily on his thesaurus. Over all decent writing, bits of Canadian music history and a somewhat interesting memoir.

catechism says

So, I didn't actually mean to read this book last night, because I started it at midnight, but then I didn't put it down until I was finished. It's basically the tour diary of the Rheostatics' Dave Bidini from when they opened for the Hip, interspersed with hilarious vignettes from earlier pioneering Canadian artists. I wish there had been a bit more information about who they were -- I had to google all of them; even if I recognized their names, I wasn't sure which band they'd been in, except that dude from Bachman-Turner Overdrive, because his name is Bachman. ANYWAY. I enjoyed reading about awful early shows and terrible conditions and buses catching on fire in the middle of nowhere and almost freezing to death in Quebec and how driving across the prairies is great for thinking and playing the Maple Leaf Gardens and basically, although I have complaints, they were not enough to make me stop reading and go to bed.
