Big It Up

*You Get Bigger As You Go*, M.D. Dunn (Fermata Press)

'You Get Bigger As You Go' is actually the title of a song from singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn's 1980 record *Humans*, an album that mostly revolves around Cockburn's divorce. It's hard to see how the image of an absent partner becoming larger than life works as a title for the book, but there are many other moments in this enthusiastic and welcoming book that made me sit up and take note in a far more positive way!

Dunn is first and foremost a fan of Cockburn's music and it is this, rather than any academic approach or chin-stroking analysis, let along the misguided evangelical appropriation of Cockburn's spirituality by Brian Walsh in a previous book, that keeps this book motoring along. Cockburn, who has been making albums since 1970, is regarded as a Canadian musical treasure. He has slipped in and out of critical appraisal around Europe, Asia and in the USA but has never really become a star away from home, which is presumably why there is little to read about him: an autobiography, a chapter in an academic book about Canadian music, Walsh's misguided tome, and an excellent consideration of Cockburn's music and lyrics by James Heald.

Dunn has the advantage over Heald because he has interviewed Cockburn himself, as well as many of the producers and musicians who have worked with him, not to mention Cockburn's manager Bernie Finkelstein, who is also the owner of True North Records, the label Cockburn records for. Dunn doesn't assume everyone will know who Cockburn is: the book starts (as indeed it goes on) with Dunn's encounter with Cockburn's music and how it affected and affects him, before moving on to an informative, longer section that asks 'Who Is Bruce Cockburn?'

It's clear that Cockburn is all sorts of things to all sorts of people, something that Dunn teases out when he discusses 'Persona and Perspective', writing and activism. Dunn doesn't always escape the contradictions he raises about listeners confusing singer and narrator, nor totally sidestep the notion that heartfelt and true songs are best, but he does offer readers useful biographical context and lyrical deconstruction alongside his deeply personal responses to the songs.

One thing there is no question about is Cockburn's accomplished guitar playing. I was initially somewhat alarmed to find a section 'On Guitar' containing sections such as 'How To Play Guitar Like Bruce Cockburn' and 'Tutorial #1' and '#2', but I shouldn't have worried. Although Dunn offers a readable description of Cockburn's technique, introduces us to Linda Manzer, who has built several of Cockburn's guitars as well as a charanga for him, and briefly mentions Cockburn's cartilage problems because of his playing, he also takes a jokey approach to the ideas of anyone else being able to play guitar like Cockburn. Step 12 of the 'How To...' instructions is 'Face reality. You will never play like Bruce Cockburn. Learn to play like yourself.'

Armed with information about guitar playing, some biographical background, and Dunn's own engagement with the music, we are ready for an album by album guide. But woah! Dunn regards the first sixteen of Cockburn's albums as a 'Development Period', which is pretty weird considering that several of those albums are regarded as many fans, including myself, as absolute career highlights! Fair enough to note the ordinariness of the first few folky albums, followed by the gradual introduction of jazzier experimentation – for me often the highlights of those earlier albums, but by the time albums such as *Further Adventures Of...*, *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaw*, *Humans* and *Inner City Front* arrive, we are in different musical territory.

The first of these albums contains two songs that seem to have been influenced by the new wave guitar workouts of Television's Tom Verlaine. One is a tale of urban disillusionment, the other a response to Harvey Cox's book about the medieval Feast of Fools festival, where a commoner would be crowned king for the day and power structures turned upside down. At Cockburn's 'Feast of Fools' 'Everybody has a voice, Outlaws can all come home' and it will be 'time for the silent criers to be held in love'. *Further Adventures Of...* is a tentative step away from the music that has gone before, which was neatly summed up by a marvellous double live album *Circles in the Stream* the year before, which was my own entry point into Cockburn's music.

Cockburn wouldn't really follow through on that guitar music, although he would stay electric for a while. *Dancing in the Dragons Jaw* is a strange, hallucinatory, mystical album written in response to the novels of Charles Williams (a friend of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis) where the occult and human matter-of-factly occupy the same geographical and personal space. It is an album of uplifting, joyous songs that celebrate nature and the transitory, with the final song pointing out that we leave no footprints when we go.

*Humans*, for me, is Cockburn's best ever album. It is raw, gritty and urban, rooted in despair, loss and hurt. Even when it is not focussed on divorce, separation or absence, the songs point out the darkness all around: car crashes, mercenaries in illegal wars and the ability of the singer to imprison himself in 'fascist architecture of my own design'. Slowly, the song shakes this despair off and declares he will never lock up his love again before the album resolves with a song drawing upon T.S. Eliot's poetry and a mystical return to 'the silence at the heart of things'.

The mystical peace doesn't seem to have lasted long, however. *Inner City Front* starts off back in the city, where 'You Pay Your Money and You Take Your Chance'. It is a world of crying children, violence, dog shit and dirt, a world where, Cockburn observes, it is hard to be 'The Strong One', 'To be the one whose phone rings all day everyday'. (He's not talking about himself.) Things lighten up for a while though, as 'all's quiet on the inner city front' before a muzak-subverting instrumental and a pair of love songs. Then, bang, it's heavy beat and rhythm time, with the accusatory and aggressively questioning 'Justice':

 What's been done in the name of Jesus?
 What's been done in the name of Buddha?
 What's been done in the name of Islam?
 What's been done in the name of man?
 What's been done in the name of liberation?
 And in the name of civilization?
 And in the name of race?
 And in the name of peace?
 Everybody
 Loves to see
 Justice done
 On somebody else

Nobody and no philosophy, religion or ideology is spared. Cockburn suggests that the world is a 'Broken Wheel', a 'world of pain and fire and steel', before the album concludes with a song describing the contradiction of being a loner but of also falling in love anew.

Dunn has four more albums in his 'Developmental Period', four where Cockburn starts to engage with world politics, aid and wars. On the back of visits and informed reading, Cockburn chose to speak out – in his lyrics and in concert – about the violence and warmongering taking place around the world. Dunn sometimes suggests that the issues in places such as Nicaragua were not well known, which is surprising to hear, since the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign and other similar organizations were pretty high profile here in the UK. Cockburn was happy to speak out against US imperialism and aggression though, just as he was willing to share his anger at seeing refugee camps strafed with bullets from low-flying helicopters, declaring that:

 I don't believe in guarded borders and I don't believe in hate
 I don't believe in generals or their stinking torture states
 And when I talk with the survivors of things too sickening to relate
 If I had a rocket launcher, if I had a rocket launcher
 If I had a rocket launcher, I would retaliate

These four albums, remain for me, a bit of a hotch-potch, a jumble of love songs, travelogues, political diatribes and social observations, with occasional silly and inconsequential stories thrown in for good measure. (I'm particularly thinking of 'Peggy's Kitchen Wall', a shaggy dog story about the mystery of a bullet hole.) Adding to the problems of banal songs such as 'If a tree falls in the forest does anybody here', an attempt to address ecological problems, is the fact these albums are big shiny 1980s productions with lots of booming bass, synthesizers and special effects. Cockburn seemed to agree and would re-record a couple of the better tunes down the line for a compilation album.

One of the interesting things about Cockburn though is the fact that the majority of his songs work well without a band or a recording studio. Tracks such as 'The Trouble with Normal', 'Call it Democracy' and 'Lovers in a Dangerous Time' and have become staples in solo performances, *despite* their original recorded form and the first two's outspoken political critiques. The reverse is also true, as a 1997 live album makes clear, with its headbeating sound and some incendary overdrive guitar solos, all conjured from a drums, guitar and bass line-up.

What Dunn calls 'Maturity' for Cockburn, eight albums released between 1991 and 2011, certainly contains a couple of fine albums, but also the likes of *Christmas*, an excruciating set of carols and tunes. The majority of these albums are more sympathetically produced than the 1980s ones and include *Nothing But a Burning Light*, where producer T-Bone Burnett rounded up an all-star cast of musicians, including Michael Been, Booker T Jones, Sam Phillips and Larry Klein, to help make a bluesy, organic sounding album. A few years later found Cockburn working with vibes player Gary Burton on the reflective, complex and beguiling *Charity of Night* album, another stand out record from Cockburn's discography.

For me nothing has come close since, although 2023's *O Sun O Moon* is an amazing late work, full of consideration of old age, death and dying, and the possibilities of hope (I reviewed it [here](https://internationaltimes.it/all-about-love/) for *IT*; and also 2023 concert in London to promote it). What's great about Dunn's book is that he has totally different opinions and ideas to offer: his excitement, enthusiasm and readings of songs I have discarded or ignored have made me go back and listen anew. That, to me, is all any book about a musician can do: enthuse, inform and provoke. Dunn does all three by turn; it's a great read.

Rupert Loydell

(1764 words)