

“This one goes out to all the Canadians who are freezing up north, and the ones who are sunburnt down here.”

The Canada of the snow felt far behind on 2nd Street Friday night, when B.C. label Mint Records showcased in Club 115. Even after the sun had gone down, the heat still hung in the Austin air – record temperatures for Day 3 of SXSW. And indoors, even the unlikeliest Canadian band down here was reaching through the haze to new ears.

Wearing red sashes and looking very much like the loveably geeky, bright-cheeked crew of high-schoolers, the five gals and three guys of The Choir Practice took the stage without an ounce of rock swagger or attitude. And the name itself captured the ingenuous, innocent intent: The Choir *Practice*. Judging by the harmonies, all that woodshedding when the other kids were getting stoned paid off.

Down several members couldn't make the trip from Vancouver (detention maybe?), they turned six guitars and an octet of polyharmonies into giddy pop. Deceptively simple, but all who heard it are defied to wake up this morning not whistling Red Fox (the one about taking off your clothes).

Carolyn Mark is a human instant hootenanny, whose set might work almost as well here if quoted in bon mots: “You're not a whore if no one's payin' ya” or “I'm a stupid monkey with a retarded heart.” With a great band (which seemed include every other smiling person holding a beer and a guitar in Club 115), she laid out a sassy, asskicking show including “a medley of our hit” and a 10-gallon hat of roadhouse charm. But there is depth to this. A west-coast Martha Wainwright? Perhaps. Mark uses charm to disarm, because behind the good-time talk, robust vocals and rollicking guitars, there were lyrics infused with regret and lessons learned.

But she's a honky-tonker at heart, which means heartache is transcended in song. “Come on, you coward / Burn my schoolhouse down” she sang, and of the many Canadian artists performing here, Mark's set makes a short list of those with a perfect leather-tolled fit with the Texas singer-songwriter aesthetic: tough and tender, wise and whisky-savvy. Hard to believe she isn't already a star down here.

This is confidence, unassumingly displayed: Daniel Lanois emerged into the blue light of the Bat Bar in the Austin Convention Center to play the song he'd already played during a soundcheck in front of a full house. Picking up his vintage Gibson Firebird, Lanois leaned into The Maker and brought it to life as though the worshipful crowd didn't already know what was coming.

But that is Lanois: something like a genius of ambience and harmonics, and a guitar player of deep intuition, he was a major figure at this SXSW. He and his

drummer wove a spell, playing off one another with jazzman attentiveness. "Here's a song that was born in my neighbourhood – Hamilton, Ontario – about my native compadres." Still Water led to a piece on pedal steel blending Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings with J.J. Leaves L.A. In a black cap and interesting glasses, Lanois looked like a neo-J.J. Cale; he exuded New Orleans kudzu atmosphere, which is not bad for a boy from the bad side of the Ottawa River.

Montreal trio Plants And Animals hit Maggie Mae's with one member in a caftan/poncho thing (which may or may not have been a tribute to Stevie Ray Vaughan, given the locale). They lived up to the name: sunny, humid, an organic presence, with something inside tightly coiled and ready to pounce.

It's a 1972 aesthetic with contemporary muscle, somewhere between Cat Stevens and post-rock – or everywhere between, given the climactic codas to the songs and the cascading racket they made, in defiance of the Swedish blues-prog band blowing their amps apart upstairs in Maggie Mae's. That meant big endings, and this trio had them. The band's suite-like songs were unashamedly post-modern hippie in their way, which makes sense – in some ways, hippie never left Quebec, and there's a sunny pop sense here that is pure '70s Québécois-love. Montreal's mojo is still throwing its head back and roaring.