

VANCOUVER

Everything's bigger in the shadow of the Rockies. They say the medium is the message – well, there's a message here, but it's extra-large.

The leading edge of this music has a heightened, febrile quality running through it, like a violin string thrumming with something that feels like prophecy. Start with the aural landslide of Black Mountain, lauded by *Rolling Stone* for their megaton Sabbadelic sound. Mix in Twin Crystals' menacing synth-noir. Shake.

Destroyer's fans do, every time he releases an album. Destroyer – aka Dan Bejar – has a wild-eyed cult of adherents hanging on his every lavish melodic and lyric flourish.

Songwriter Dan Mangan's voice has gravel and gravitas, a bottomless indie-folk depth. He sounds like he knows a secret... and Carolyn Mark sounds like she's giving them away, singing "I just wanna be the one that got away with it" with sass and hard-earned wisdom.

Anthemic alt-rocker Matthew Good writes with a politically-conscious purpose. And Go West, Young Lady: The Pack A.D. is the only booze-rock duo we know of whose members both answer to "Miss," and Vancougar is a gang of fun-lovin' punkettes on a mission. Their debut *Losin' It* was recorded in a land-speed-record four days.

The counterpoint to that messianic zeal is an almost valedictory loveliness. They say it rains here half the year, but you wouldn't know it from Bella's bryte, shiny magpie-pop. The Choir Practice really is exactly that – polyharmonic singers on a pop spree. No Kids make omnivorously geeky and smart electro-pop with the whole Crayola box of sunshine, while Beasts and Superbeasts' winsome avant-folk redeems the accordion for the '00s. As they used to say about this magical place: everything is super, natural.

HEARTLAND

Spacious skies... amber waves of grain... Emily Dickinson wrote that “to make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee / and revery,” and she would find dreamlike prairie as far as the day is long in the dreamy and open-space sentiments of Lorrie Matheson, Woodpigeon, Jen Lane, Christine Fellows and Lindsay Jane.

But you knew that – you *felt* that. The land of Joni will stop producing songwriters when the trees run out of wood. The Canadian heartland hits SXSW to exceed expectations, again.

Start in Winnipeg, the dead-center bullseye of the country, where guitar bands grow like golden on wheat. The Perpetrators' J Nowicki is a blues-garage gunslinger who will be recognized by half the guitar aces in Austin. The Weakerthans namecheck Jennifer Jason Leigh (we just like that). There's no devil in the Details' angular, intelligent and passionate (post-)emo; although plenty of devilment hops through the Waking Eyes' uptempo alternapop and Comeback Kid's face-first hardcore. And Saskatchewan gets into the act with the 90-second punk blasts of Ultimate Power Duo and the deep and immense '70s/'00s fusion of the Blood Lines. Two sibling sets in this band. And three brothers in Inward Eye. It's a family affair.

And then they dance: Grand Analog's Odario Williams delivered the dub message in Get Live and Go, the new-millennium holla-back to Electric Avenue. They lurch: Edmonton's Shout Out Out Out Out rewire the scene with widely admired (and let's face it, feared) electro-vocodo syntho-samplestein monster music. Not to be outdone, Calgary's Smalltown DJs bring the DIY electrophunk with party soul. Finally, we defer to Cassius Khan, a genius who combines tabla virtuosity with singing Ghazals, Indian love poems. It is a feat so remarkable that he is universally conceded to be the only one in the universe capable of it. That may sum up the heartland: doing twice as much as expected.

TORONTO

Live from Toronto: it's Rocky Night in Canada! Now that we've fed the cliché beast, let us slay him: the country's economic and media powerhouse weighs in with its most comprehensive music scene. The range of this music would suit some large countries. All of which Daniel Lanois has visited. He leads the Ontario delegation. He wrote The Maker, which would be plenty. Bono also has him on speed-dial. If you don't know Canuck legends Blue Rodeo, just trust us on this one.

Chances are they'll all be catching the Constantines, who are something like the conscience of alt-rock, splicing Strummer's integrity to Bruce's heart, and vice-versa.

The like-minded Attack in Black charge in passionately, as much Neil as noise.

Aside from being the first Arts & Crafts band without a member of Broken Social Scene, the Most Serene Republic weave sun-fried dreams into their eccentricities. All 'round, you can book your week around Toronto's alternative presence at SXSW, from the loveably itchy Born Ruffians to Tokyo Police Club to the Midway State, and finish up with a bracing face-full of the Russian Futurists' snowglobe of sound.

In the country that codified singer-songwriting, Toronto is the magnet. Everywhere-everyman Luke Doucet is called "the hand-held camera of country music." They make wide-screen hand-helds now?

City and Colour – that's Dallas Green's clever moniker – survived emo-rock success to find songwriting. Members of Attack in Black played on his album (that's sooo Canadian). Hawksley Workman is here, and wouldn't you love to hear him produce a Leonard Cohen album? Silky neo-soul balladeer Justin Nozuka conjures a blend of Ray LaMontagne and Lauryn Hill, while classically-trained Laura Barrett entrances with tales of Robot Ponies on her kalimba.

And because SXSW is a dream in action, Basia Bulat cashed in her student loans to record her urban folk album Oh My Darling among the ghosts in Montreal's Hotel2Tango studio. Fingers crossed that she plays her gorgeous cover of the Strokes' Someday. The lilting Birds of Wales are a UK sensation for their "sharp, young and intellectual" indie-folk.

In another register, the electro scene just keeps raising its voltage and IQ as well. Former DFA 1979 man Jesse F. Keeler makes leering techno with AI-P in MSTRKRFT. Crystal Castles draw UK raves for their progressive Atari-fied electro. Put the Rifle Down inherit some of the glacial elegance of New Order.

We've gotten quasi-intellectual. Let's get nasty. When you call yourselves Cancer Bats and your album Hail Destroyer, we expect certain qualities... but this heavy metal actually swings. Heavily, of course.

You know those "Purple Monster" cocktails Britney Spears likes to gag back? Let's Go To War sound like they invented them. Uber-aggro electro hip hop bad boys. And the guy who called it "Toronto the Good" obviously missed the hardcore of Fucked Up and all-world electronoise band Holy Fuck. Say those names again – it will be freeing, until your mother slaps you.

MONTREAL

Montreal is a city that gets pop, which makes for perfect symmetry now that pop gets Montreal.

Beneath the illuminated cross on Mount Royal (you really should see it someday), a hybrid population spreads itself between two rivers. 'Purism' has no place here – not in a city whose DNA was crossbred from the get-go, entwining French and *Anglais* in a perennial two-cheek kiss. That's the way we've always played and sung it.

And so in motley Montreal, the nations and musics champion the urge to merge, the way pop intended. Three years after the pop revolution started here, the party continues with the Stills, refining their neo-classicist sound, and Hot Springs, who may be – no, they *are* the sexiest band in rock'n'roll.

Behind them, newcomers Hollerado mix – somehow – a Replacements ethic with a Steve Miller/Tom Petty hookiness. The United Steel Workers of Montreal drag Tom Waits into the truckstop. It's called "Citygrass" and it will charge your battery.

Instrumentalists Torngat fuse Beatles sunniness and ambient-pop ambitions on – among other things – an effects-laden French horn. And – paging Dr. Frankenstein! – Grim Skunk and CPC Gangbangs live up – or down – to their gnarly names, pounding out progressive neckbolt-rock.

Speaking of hybrids, Martha Wainwright carries the DNA of two brilliant parents – Loudon Wainwright, Kate McGarrigle – and finally claims her place as one of the finest songwriters of her generation. At last year's SXSW, she had Pete Townshend as a backing guitarist. Great, but with all due respect to the glorious Pete, she is mesmerizing on her own. Katie Moore mines lovely alt-country, and Krief is a Dears guitarist on a sweet, melancholy side-band escapade. Likewise, Handsome Furs includes a Wolf Parader on his own minimalist *wanderjahr*.

Creature bust out new-millennial club-pop grooves. They could be Donna Summer. They could be Brigitte Bardot. They could be Talking Heads in a bikini. Dance and discuss. And in case you haven't heard the mad mixes or felt the chest-caving Bpms: A-Trak, Ghislain Poirier, Sixtoo, Skratch Bastid and Megasoid make this city a global player in DJ/hip hop/dance. Remember, when you kiss these guys, you get two back.

ATLANTIC

Of Beauty and the East...

Anyone who's been fortunate enough to stay over in the Atlantic provinces knows when it comes to hospitality and warmth, the people here make the Irish look like the Mongols. Maritimers can't help being the world's nicest people. They'll give you the cod right off their banks...

And the ocean-soul of their music. There is a built-in ache and longing to the Maritimes, and you can hear it beneath the seafoam dreaminess of her daughters.

Meaghan Smith blends '30s jazz horns, strings, swing and... turntables from DJ Kid Koala. We'll call her the siren of a sweet new "retrocontemporary" movement. Think of it as music your parents wish they'd had when they were making you. Listening to Jenn Grant's Orchestra for the Moon, you can imagine Joni Mitchell and Billie Holiday next to you on the couch.

They know about distilleries out here, as anyone who's been knocked backwards by a glass of homemade Screech will tell you. Yes, they know about spirits. There's a bewitching rasp to the vocals in Rebekah Higgs' folktronica. Catherine MacLellan's Church Bell Blues weave soul into roots. Julie Doiron's elegant understatement counterpoints the smoky sophistication of Jill Barber's songs.

And because they actually do have boys out here, too, Halifax alt-rock icon Joel Plaskett is as commanding in the roadhouse as he is at the podium: East Coast Music Awards for Single, DVD and Songwriter of the Year, and an album, Ashtray Rock, that drew raves nationwide. In a music business too often looking for new ways into wallet, these folks will only steal into your heart.