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## About Colin Linden -- The Whole Book

### Colin Linden: Sad and Beautiful World (1975-2001 version) (by Rob Bowman)

For the past four decades blues, country, gospel and other assorted roots musics have maintained an inordinate influence in and around Toronto. This has manifested itself in an amazingly healthy local scene that has produced such internationally known artists as the Band, Neil Young, Gordon Lightfoot, the Travellers, Jeff Healey, Ian and Sylvia and Bruce Cockburn. It has also helped determine the musical inclinations/proclivities of a host of lesser known but equally impressive musicians including Luke and the Apostles, McKenna Mendelson Mainline, Downchild Blues Band, the Sidemen, Fathead and the Whiteley Brothers.

Colin Linden has been an integral part of this scene since he was a teenager. In the quarter century since he recorded Robert Johnson's "They're Red Hot" as a fifteen year old for Sylvia Tyson's CBC show "Touch the Earth," Colin has blossomed into what can only be described as a national treasure. As a songwriter, producer, guitarist and singer, Linden has successfully integrated the roots musics he has been intoxicated with from the age of eleven into a body of work that is emotionally mature, stylistically diverse and, ultimately, extraordinarily moving. The journey along the way has been fascinating.

#### THE BEGINNINGS

Born some forty years ago in Toronto, as an infant Linden's family moved to White Plains, New York. It was there at the tender age of four while watching the Lloyd Thaxton Show on TV that the music bug first hit him. "They used to have kids come on and lip sync songs," he smiles, "and there was a guy lip synching to Johnny Rivers' record of 'Maybelline.' That was it! That was when I thought, this is the coolest thing."

Television also introduced the youngster to the country, pop and rockabilly stylings of Rick Nelson and James Burton on the Ozzie and Harriet Show. Consequently, the first LP he ever owned was Nelson's A Long Vacation. In that same period a cousin introduced him to such seminal artists as Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly.

"I can't remember life without them," continues Linden. "The emotions, singing and drama in those records seemed so real. The

room sounds, believe it or not, were things that made me think that Roy Orbison was in a deep, dark place. These things affected me a lot. There are certain things that have always appealed to me in an instinctual way, which is real pretty melodies and really funky grooves. I'm sure when I was a kid that I heard some swamp pop songs. That idea of major key melodies over blues kind of grooves has always appealed to me. It's the things that I drift too, that I can't let go of if I have something in my head. It just creeps up all the time."

Colin was originally drawn to the organ and drums but seeing an advertisement for a guitar and amplifier at the age of eight ultimately proved to be too alluring. "I couldn't avoid it," he laughs. "I had to play guitar!"

Initially learning to play in an open tuning courtesy of one of his older brothers, pretty soon Linden bought a songbook and learned how to play chords. In the meantime, the precocious youngster began to check out shows. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the majority of rock artists played a circuit that consisted of ballrooms or small theaters. Only fifteen minutes from Colin's home in White Plains, the Capitol Theater in Port Chester, New York was one of the regular stopping points for touring rock groups of the time. This would have mattered little if Linden hadn't been fortunate enough to have an inordinately hip mother who was happy to either take him to the shows herself or to send him with his older brother. In the year he turned ten, Linden took in a heady assortment of contemporary rockers at the Capitol including Van Morrison, the Flying Burrito Brothers, James Taylor, John Mayall, Johnny Winter and Taj Mahal. As 1970 drew to a close, the family moved back to Toronto, leaving the Capitol Theater behind.

### **BACK IN TORONTO, MEETING THE HOWLIN' WOLF**

By this point Linden was already familiar with the white blues reinterpreters of the late 1960s, had taken a shine to a young Taj Mahal and had heard country blues man Mississippi Fred McDowell on a Capitol Records sampler LP entitled The Spirit of Capitol. Colin's real introduction to blues culture, though, and the turning point in his life was when a friend of his brother turned him on to one of the giants of post-war blues, Chester Burnett a.k.a. Howlin' Wolf. In a word, Colin was stunned.

"It seemed like he had just more intensity, more power and more sincerity," reflects Linden. "It was like it was just more serious. I could tell that as a kid. I thought, 'Wow, this is the real guy. This is what all those [rock] guys were trying to imitate.' It seemed like [with the rock groups] I had been listening to kids as opposed to adults."

Shell shocked, Linden quickly purchased Wolf's latest recording, The London Sessions, which saw the venerable blues man teamed up with some of the cream of British rockers including Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts. A few months later, Howlin' Wolf was booked to play a week at Toronto's Colonial Tavern. The

Colonial was a very special place, especially for those who were hip and younger than the then-current drinking age of 21. The venue had an upstairs and downstairs with a big cutaway so that those on the second floor could see and hear the band. While the downstairs had the standard liquor license, the upstairs had a restaurant license which meant that anyone, no matter what age, who could afford the one-to-two dollar cover, could come in and see the show. The club routinely booked the finest blues and jazz artists, each group playing a week of shows including a Saturday afternoon matinee.

Colin's mother took him to see his newfound idol at the Saturday matinee that week. More than a trifle anxious, Linden insisted they show up two hours early. Imagine his excitement when he entered the club and there downstairs eating his lunch was the giant blues man himself. Precocious to a fault, the eleven year old Linden went to the top of the stairs that led to the lower floor, introduced himself as a big fan and asked Howlin' Wolf if he would come upstairs and sit and talk with him. The improbable pair ended up spending three hours together with Colin asking the Wolf all kinds of questions about where he came from, what blues singers he knew, how he started making records and so on. Who knows what the Wolf thought when he was first confronted by this ebullient eleven-year old but he patiently answered every question that Colin could muster and by the end of the afternoon Linden could refer to his hero as a newfound friend. It's a day that Colin has never forgotten.

"There are certain things he said that I remember from that very first time," recalls Linden with a trace of wistfulness. "He said, 'I'm an old man now. I'm not going to be around for too much longer. It's the young people who've got to keep on playing.' He also said, 'If you're gonna go out and play music, you have to make sure that no matter if there's three people in the audience or three thousand people, you've got to play the same.' And, he said, 'It doesn't matter what kind of people--black, white, Mexican--you have to really put out as much no matter who it is.' He had a way about him that made me feel that it was something really special to be able to play music, that it was a real honour to be able to do it, and a responsibility to do it right."

Wolf also turned Linden on to the musicians that had originally inspired him to play such as Charlie Patton. "He said, 'If you want to learn how to play, listen to the people who taught me.'"

The original meeting between Colin and Howlin' Wolf occurred in November 1971. Wolf returned to the Colonial the following June and, naturally, Colin spent some more time absorbing pearls of wisdom from the master. During these and subsequent visits the budding musician learned a lot of very fundamental lessons that continue to resonate with him to this very day.

Midway through the second visit the Wolf had asked Colin to play with him but, alas, the young musician was too intimidated by the situation. Frustrated with his lack of courage, the now twelve year old resolved that the next chance he got, he was getting up on stage. A month later opportunity presented itself at the Open Sing at the

annual Mariposa Folk Festival. Colin had worked out a routine that went something like, "I left New York two years ago when I was ten and now I'm sixty-two. So, I grew 52 years in 2 years and if that ain't the blues, what is?" He then proceeded to blast his way through Chuck Willis' "Don't Deceive Me" which, not surprisingly, he had learned from Howlin' Wolf and the Wolf's own "Built for Comfort." The next night an exuberant Linden again got up onstage and added King Biscuit Boy's "You Done Tore Your Playhouse Down" and Blind Boy Fuller's "I Want Some of Your Pie" to his mini set. A success on both days, Colin never looked back.

### **PLAYING FOR PEOPLE**

The Mariposa program that year had an ad for Fiddler's Green Coffee House. Buoyed by his success at Mariposa, every couple of months Colin would learn a few new tunes, head down to Fiddler's Green and try them out. Amongst his early repertoire were two more songs learned from Howlin' Wolf records, "Sittin' on Top of the World" and "Louise." At the time Colin was still a rudimentary guitarist, strumming his way through Wolf's repertoire using a flat pick while imitating the Wolf as best as he could in a false bass voice. This would change when a few of the regulars at Fiddler's Green hipped him to the fact that most of the blues guys were finger pickers. Inspired with this latest revelation, Colin spent most of 1973 trying to learn how to finger pick, aided and abetted by much appreciated tips from some of the more experienced local players such as Chris Whiteley.

In early 1974 Chris' brother, Ken Whiteley, along with local harmonica player Jim "Doctor Limbo" MacLean, opened another local coffee house they named Shier's in the suburb of Don Mills. Over the next few years Linden would spend most of his weekends at Shier's learning finger picking technique from John Thibodeau, Ken Whiteley and others. In October of that year, all the local players were blown away when Reverend Gary Davis' star pupil, Larry Johnson, was booked into Shier's.

"It changed Ken's life and it changed my life," proclaims Linden excitedly. "It was really great. It put me on a certain path guitar-wise that I think was really the beginning of my own style--very influenced by chord melody the way Rev. Gary Davis' playing is. It was a little flashier and a little funkier than Gary Davis' playing. That was kind of the birth of a lot of the chord melody stuff that I still do."

Earlier that summer Colin met David Wilcox at Fiddler's Green who taught him how to play Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues." By summer's end Colin, with his mother and brother in tow, journeyed to Montreal to play his first ever professional gig at the Yellow Door Coffee House.

Meeting Wilcox was the catalyst for Colin's decision to learn how to play slide guitar. When Wilcox was subsequently hired by Maria Muldaur in early 1975, he bequeathed his 140 or so blues albums to his new protégé. A few months shy of his fifteenth birthday, Colin elected to take the next day off school to immerse himself in his

newly-acquired library. That summer he met Paul Mills, the producer of Sylvia Tyson's "Touch the Earth" show, at the Winnipeg Folk Festival. "Touch the Earth" was an outlet on the CBC for acoustic roots musics. Mills was sufficiently impressed with Linden that he booked him to play on the show on a number of occasions.

### **THE FIRST RECORDING – CBC AT AGE 15**

The very first time was in October 1975 when, in tandem with Chris Whiteley on second guitar and Jim MacLean on harmonica, Linden planned to perform Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Cat Man Blues," Charlie Patton's "Elder Green Blues," Blind Boy Fuller's "Step It Up and Go," William Brown's "Mississippi Blues" and Willie Brown's (no relation) "M & O Blues." To warm themselves up, the loosely constituted threesome decided to rough their way through Robert Johnson's "They're Red Hot," a song they had never played before and that Colin didn't know the words to. Somebody was impressed enough with the result that they decided to record the impromptu performance and include it on Tyson's show. Six years later CBC Records released a double album of various highlights from "Touch the Earth." In amongst performances by such venerable Canadian folkies as Stan Rogers, Willie P. Bennett, David Wiffen and Valdy, was the fifteen-year old Linden's version of "They're Red Hot." A preternaturally accomplished performer, the recording stands up some twenty-five years later, prompting its inclusion on this anthology.

### **SAM CHATMON**

At that same Winnipeg Folk Festival, Colin spent a lot of time with Mississippi bluesman Sam Chatmon. The two had originally met at the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1974. Chatmon was an original member of the 1920s and 1930s black string band the Mississippi Sheiks and, as had been the case with Howlin' Wolf four years earlier, the elder bluesman immediately took a shine to Linden. Holger Peterson, who would later found Stony Plain Records, actually recorded Colin and Sam playing together at the festival but nothing was to come of the tapes.

The following spring Linden decided to add a few weeks to either side of his school's spring break and, together with Jim MacLean, made a pilgrimage to the South in search of many of Chatmon's contemporaries. On the way down they stopped in Detroit and saw Sippie Wallace. In Ashville, North Carolina, they hung out and played a gig with Peg Leg Sam. In Mississippi they spent some time with Chatmon before heading back north, stopping off in Rochester to see the legendary Son House. Along the way they played three or four coffee house gigs they had set up through connections that various Toronto friends had.

In Mississippi, Chatmon had suggested they make a record together. While nothing immediately came of the idea, it lodged itself firmly in the back of Colin's mind. Four years later, in the spring of 1979, he decided to act on Chatmon's idea. While on the road subbing for Ken Whiteley accompanying Leon Redbone, Linden looked up Flying Fish

Records owner Bruce Kaplan when the tour stopped off in Chicago. Kaplan was a logical choice as he had actually done a new Mississippi Sheiks album which featured Chatmon in 1972. Kaplan's response was simple, if Colin could do it for \$2,000, it was a deal. Colin next phoned up Toronto bassist Terry Wilkins and asked him to produce the project, and then made an arrangement with Chatmon's management stating that Colin and Jim MacLean would play on the record but would not take any money for their efforts. The end result was the excellent but little known Sam Chatmon and his Barbeque Boys. Long out of print, we have included Chatmon's arrangement of the traditional "Mean Ol' Frisco" on this collection.

### **DAVID WILCOX – FIRST BAND GIG**

The years between meeting Chatmon and recording the Flying Fish album were busy ones. In 1976 David Wilcox had asked Colin to join his relatively new band, the Teddy Bears. Colin originally declined, stating that he really wasn't interested in playing electric guitar."

"When I finally heard them," rues Linden, "I thought, 'Oh, yeah, I do have an interest in playing electric guitar!' So, I felt like a real idiot. I [then] quit school because ultimately in my heart I felt like I had made a wrong decision. I should have joined his band! And, I was playing guitar so much and school was a real stress. With encouragement, a lot of it from [David Wilcox], I quit school and then, a few days later, he hired me!"

Upon acquiring an electric guitar in the summer of 1976, Linden attempted to learn all the solos off the Band's Stage Fright album.

"Hearing David's band," continues Colin, "brought me back to a lot of the things that I had loved before I even knew blues. In rock and roll music, the main one was the Band. Those first three albums [by the Band] I listened to constantly. When I got into electric guitar the two things that hit me closest to home were the Band and Jimi Hendrix. But, mostly the Band 'cause they had all of the elements in blues that I loved including their lyrical sense. They also had a lot of the things that I loved about rock and roll before that and a lot of the things that I had listened to and internalized from hearing all the singer songwriters at Fiddler's Green and Shier's. They just really appealed to me. I saw the Band play at the Canadian National Exhibition in August 1976. It was amazing! That was the thing that sealed it for me, really wanting to really learn how to play electric guitar deeply."

Early 1977 was spent attempting to pay the rent by playing solo gigs wherever and whenever possible. In April he did his first western Canadian tour, booked by Holger Peterson. In Edmonton he met a then 13-year old Colin James, the two Colins embarking on a professional and personal friendship that exists to this day. That summer, Colin got his first ever sideman gig as a lead guitar player with Colleen Peterson. His debut performance in this capacity was in front of 40,000 people on a Barge in the Detroit River. While he was successfully supporting himself as a musician, as summertime came to a close Colin found himself at a bit of a crossroads.

"I bummed around a bit, trying to get something going," he relates. "At the end of the summer I was trying to think of what to do to learn how to play electric guitar. Again, David Wilcox came to the rescue. He said, 'It's time for you to get your own band. If you want to learn how to play solos, well, play thirty of them a night.'"

### **FIRST BAND – THE GROUP DU JOUR**

By the end of November, Colin Linden and the Group du Jour played their first ever gig at the Horseshoe Tavern in Toronto. The template for the band closely mirrored that of David Wilcox and the Teddy Bears, to the point that the two groups played a number of the same tunes. Linden's repertoire at the time included Otis Redding and Carla Thomas' version of "Lovey Dovey," Etta James' "Talk to Me Baby," Robert Johnson's "Walkin' Blues," the Soul Stirrers' "Touch the Hem of His Garment," the Supremes' "Come See About Me" and Louis Jordan's "Beware." It was a heady mix of covers interspersed with a few Linden originals which were more than a little Band-influenced.

Most of the winter of 1978-79 was spent in the Bay Area on the suggestion of another guitar playing roots-oriented Canadian legend, Amos Garrett. It was during this sojourn that Colin hooked up with Leon Redbone and recorded the Sam Chatmon album. By May 1979 he was back in Toronto and, with a reconstituted Group du Jour, decided to continue pursuing a career as a band leader.

"New Matchbox," modeled on Blind Lemon Jefferson's 1927 recording "Matchbox Blues," is representative of what Colin sounded like at this stage of his career. The vocals are a little rough and perhaps a tad mannered, but over the course of nearly five minutes, he gets so far into the song that it becomes a tour de force with significant emotional power.

"I remember one night I just started playing it," reminisces Colin. "I wanted to have a pretty melody but with a blues form; really stick to a major key kind of melody but still do blues. It kind of just evolved and was reflective of what I was going through at the time."

### **THE FIRST ALBUMS AND HONING A CRAFT THROUGH THE 80'S**

The performance was recorded live at the now defunct Toronto club Larry's Hideaway in August 1980 and was one of ten tunes included on Linden's first album as leader, the appropriately entitled Colin Linden Live!. Especially worth noting is the second guitar solo which bears more than a slight trace of vintage Robbie Robertson.

"It's Robbie, it's Amos Garrett, it's David Wilcox and it's Freddie Keelor," asserts Colin. "That whole Toronto sound."

Released by local independent label Ready Records in 1981, Colin Linden Live! made enough of a noise to get famed New York City impresario Sid Bernstein interested in taking over Linden's management chores.

Bernstein was probably banking on Linden being embraced by that element of the early New Wave that was already patronizing British pub rock groups such as the Inmates, Graham Parker and early Elvis Costello. Unfortunately, though, as the eighties took hold the New Romantics took over the New Wave and Linden was hearing a lot of people telling him that "No one's gonna be playing guitar or roots music in five years. You better get yourself a fancy haircut and learn to play synthesizer."

"It was a bitter pill to swallow," admits Colin nearly two decades later.

Doing his best to survive, his solo career ended up taking a back seat while he paid the bills as a sideman for the likes of Joe Mendelson, Willie P. Bennett, Gwen Swick and Amos Garrett. In between functioning as a hired hand, Colin continued to periodically play solo gigs and in 1985 entered the studio to record his second album, Colin Linden and the Immortals, issued by Stony Plain in 1986. Consisting of ten Linden originals, the album reflects Linden's attempt to find a space for himself amongst what was then commercial pop.

"I felt like when I made the Immortals," explains Colin, "I was trying to extend what I was doing. I did the best I could and I thought there was a certain amount of soul in that music but it was sort of like what was really central for me to do, whatever my own strengths were, were things that weren't really valued in pop music, especially in Canada, at that time. I was kind of writing with my brain, trying to get clever music that was interesting. What was really true in my heart was maybe a little bit more obscured in the interests of trying to make [the record] fresh and contemporary."

### **JOHN WHYNOT & GARY CRAIG, THE BAND, AND THE RETURN TO ROOTS**

While this may not have been the most gratifying period in Linden's career, two musicians joined his band who would remain cornerstones of his sound and musical approach to the present. First on board was keyboardist John Whynot. Colin had previously heard Whynot play with B.B. Gabor and the Bleeker Street Band. A big Garth Hudson fan, Whynot joined the Immortals in January 1984. Six months later, another alumnus of the B. B. Gabor band, drummer Gary Craig, signed on. Whynot would leave in November 1989. Craig plays with Linden to this day.

The not very satisfying position Linden and many other roots musicians found themselves in through much of the 1980s began to abate when John Mellencamp released The Lonesome Jubilee in the summer of 1987.

"That record changed a lot of things," affirms Linden. "It was like it was okay to have roots music. It was like the flood gates opened for me when that happened. It was very inspiring. A lot of material came out really quickly and that's kind of when I really delved deep into the Band again."

Part of what attracted both Linden and keyboardist/co-producer John Whynot to the Band was the group's aesthetic of reckless abandon actively embraced by all three lead vocalists. "It made us a lot freer," smiles Linden. "It made us feel a little less self-conscious about singing, more [confident] that the spirit of what we were trying to do could just come through without being too worried about it."

### **LEVON, RICK, GARTH & "WHEN THE SPIRIT COMES"**

Fate being what it is, as Linden and Whynot were putting the finishing touches on the Immortals album, the group was booked to open up for the reconstituted Band at the Diamond Club in Toronto. That night Linden got a chance to meet three of the original members, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson and Levon Helm. In the summer of 1987, Linden met Danko once again at the Edmonton Folk Festival.

"At that point I was listening to nothing but the Band's music," attests Linden. "I was just completely entrenched in what they were doing. I was getting ready to do *When the Spirit Comes* and I said to Rick, 'Do you ever work on other people's records?' He said, 'Well, you know sometimes I do.' He was a little tentative about it because he thought I meant playing bass. Then he said, 'But I love to sing on my friend's records.' I said, 'Well do you think when we get time to make a record, could I send you something?' He said, 'Absolutely!'"

Not one to let such an opportunity pass by, shortly thereafter, Linden sent some tapes to Danko's home in Woodstock. As luck would have it, Danko fortuitously had a gig scheduled in Toronto right when Colin was getting ready to do over dubs on the *When the Spirit Comes* LP.

Danko and Linden immediately clicked in the studio, the former ending up singing backup vocals on three songs that made the original album, "Thy Will Be Done," "I Know Her" and "When the Spirit Comes," plus two outtakes that are available on the present CD edition of the album, "Chest Fever" and "Put it in the Ground."

As Linden mentions in his brief notes on the *When the Spirit Comes* CD, the main guitar figure of the title song owes a lot to Son House. Danko provides harmony throughout the performance and takes a lead vocal turn on verse three. Two weeks later, Linden headed down to Woodstock to get Garth Hudson to overdub some of his trademark organ filigree. The net effect makes the track sound like some long lost Band-outtake. While various alternative radio outlets picked up on the wondrous beauty of "When the Spirit Comes," "Miles Away from You" was a modest hit on the rock charts. Meanwhile, the album received staggering good reviews in the rock press and Colin Linden's solo career began to move into ascendancy.

The difference between the Immortals album and *When the Spirit Comes* was like night and day. While the former felt somewhat forced, the latter bespoke of an aesthetic that was much more grounded in roots American musics filtered through several years of musical maturity developed night after night, gig after gig. "A lot of it was because I realized I don't sound good glossy," reflects Linden.

"It's not flattering to what I do. It's like wearing a white suit for me. That was something that John Whynot and I, when we made *When the Spirit Comes*, were really conscious of. I remember John and I talking about it. We said, 'Let's make a record like a cedar box, not like a crystal chamber.' That's exactly what we thought of and, in a lot of ways, it was the basis of the production style that both us have mined to a large degree since."

### **RICHARD BELL, JOHN DYMOND, PRODUCING ALBUMS, & THE BRUCE COCKBURN BAND**

*When the Spirit Comes* was released by A & M in 1987. That same year Linden signed a publishing deal with Warner Chappell and he began to do a lot more producing for the likes of Mendelson Joe, Morgan Davis, Jackson Delta and Hans Thessink. In November 1989 John Whynot elected to move to California. Coincidentally, a month later keyboardist Richard Bell moved to Toronto, more than ably filling the vacancy left in Linden's band by the departure of Whynot. A former member of Ronnie Hawkins' Hawks, Bell had also played in Joplin's Full Tilt Boogie Band and would soon join a late period edition of the Band. Aesthetically in the same head space as Linden, eleven years later he is still a vital cog on Linden's records and in live gigs.

With Bell playing the 88's, Linden became much more interested in playing live and began once more working a lot of blues tunes into his set. "I felt with Richard in the band," confirms Linden, "immediately there was this new element that really revitalized things."

Linden seemed bolstered on all fronts and *When the Spirit Comes* represented a quantum leap in Linden's songwriting and singing skills. In both departments, Bruce Cockburn seems to have had a substantial influence. While Cockburn's influence rears its head at a number of points, it is most pronounced on "Two Halves of a Whole," "There Goes the Neighborhood" and the bonus CD track "I Was in Chains."

In 1991, as Linden's solo and production careers moved into full swing, he received a phone call from Bruce Cockburn asking him if he wanted to play in his band. "That really changed my life in a gigantic way. I was hugely honoured," Linden declares. Cockburn next asked Linden who else he would like in the band and, of course, Colin suggested Richard Bell and bassist John Dymond, both of whom were now part of his regular band. Linden would go on to work the road with Cockburn for the next three-and-a-half years, playing guitar on two albums, before becoming the veteran singer-songwriter's co-producer, working behind the board on Cockburn's subsequent three records, *The Charity of Night*, *You Pay Your Money and You Take Your Chance* and *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu*.

### **SOUTH AT EIGHT, NORTH AT NINE**

While working the road with Cockburn, Randy Labbe of Deluge Records, asked Colin if he had any interest in making a blues album. Linden and Labbe were already well acquainted as Colin had played on a number of Labbe's productions for blues artists signed to Deluge

such as Eddie Kirkland. Back in Toronto, in early 1992 Linden began planning on recording primarily an acoustic blues album, maybe with three or four songs featuring his working band. John Whynot flew up from Los Angeles to record the affair and the two iconoclasts decided it would be interesting to begin recording the record in a little room in a friend's warehouse space. Once the recording gear was set up, things immediately clicked and Linden ended up cutting nine songs in four days.

At this point Linden's relationship with the various members of the Band had solidified. With Richard Bell actually in the Band and the Woodstock-based group planning on recording a track that Linden had written with Jim Weider entitled "Remedy," Colin and Band drummer Levon Helm worked out a deal where Colin would work on the Band's new CD, *Jericho*, for free. In return, Helm would give Linden free studio time to do the overdubs for the album he was recording for Deluge. Linden, Whynot, Bell and company would work on the overdubs for his album in the morning and after lunch, everyone would work on *Jericho*.

Linden's blues album was eventually released in 1993 titled *South at Eight, North at Nine*. Deluge put the album out in the United States, but for Canada Linden worked out a deal with Sony to distribute the record. All parties were more than delighted when the disc won a Juno Award in the "Blues and Gospel" category. It would be the beginning of a relationship with Sony that continues to this day.

*South at Eight, North at Nine* took its name from a line in Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Black Horse Blues." The latter was one of four blues covers that Linden recorded for the album, the others being Sonny Terry's "Gonna Get on My Feet After Awhile," Willie Dixon's "I Want to Be Loved" and the traditional "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning." The rest of the tracks were written by Linden. Guests on various tracks included Bruce Cockburn as well as Rick Danko, Garth Hudson and Levon Helm of the Band. Nearly all electric and consisting mostly of originals, it was a very different album than Deluge had bargained on.

"Go Wherever You Want To" was the lead track on the original album. Written with k.d. lang's musical partner, Ben Mink, the track features Colin playing a Sharvell Surfcaster guitar, which he had originally bought to play on the road with Cockburn. He achieves a wonderfully thin, trebly sound with it reminding one a bit of Mark Knopfler's trademark timbre. There is a much darker guitar track that Ben Mink had come up with in trying to imitate a Wurlitzer organ. This sort of attention to details of sound had been one of the quintessential characteristics of the Band at their prime. While Linden had always been sound conscious, his constant involvement with producing records in the five or so years leading up to the recording of *South at Eight, North at Nine* had allowed him to develop much greater facility in this area.

One of the defining features of the album was the total absence of drum sticks. "It was such a great sounding room," explains Colin. "If you played quietly the room sounded great, if you played loud it

wasn't so flattering. So, basically the songs that we chose to cut for South at Eight, North at Nine were the ones that we thought we could do well quietly. So, there's no sticks on the album. That really is a huge part of the character of the record. It kind of wouldn't have worked in that room if we had done anything else. So, in a lot of ways, that 'limitation' really gave us a certain character or feel."

Colin wrote "The Way Heaven Feels" with Sam Cooke in mind. "It's always singers who are unattainably great," he quips. "My wife and I were up at her family cottage in Northern Ontario around Christmas time of '91. We were listening to the Staple Singers while we were driving home and I just thought at that moment in time that driving in from Northern Ontario was a really, really beautiful thing. I felt like I wanted for nothing at that moment, that that was as good as it gets. That feeling was an overwhelming thing. That one came out so naturally without thinking too much."

Part of the song's power stems from the palpable gospel influence, while part of the beauty of the recorded version has to do with Rick Danko's emotionally-laden harmony singing. "Rick has sung on twelve songs on three albums of mine," proclaims Linden. "Of all of the songs that he sang on my records, that is my favourite. Every time I hear it, it makes me cry. I can't listen to it without getting teary. I think he really liked the song too and he knew exactly how it should have gone. He sang it so beautifully."

### **THE BAND, "REMEDY", AND "EVERYBODY SLIDES"**

South at Eight, North at Nine was licensed by Deluge owner Randy Labbe to the French label Sky Ranch for European distribution. When the latter label began work on an anthology of slide guitar playing, they naturally asked Labbe for a track from Linden. Still smitten with the work of the Band, Linden chose to record an instrumental version of Robbie Robertson and Richard Manuel's "Whispering Pines." It had always been a track that Linden had felt a deep-seated affinity for, so much so that he and his wife had worked out a similar version that they played at their wedding.

It was always one of my favourite songs," affirms Linden. "It has such a beautiful melody and, of course, I couldn't sing like Richard Manuel but I thought it would be a really nice melody to play on slide."

The Sky Ranch record was eventually titled Everybody Slides and released in 1994. Two years later, Rykodisc licensed the record for North America.

"Whispering Pines" had been recorded in 1992. A year later the reformed Band issued Jericho. It was the first album they had recorded since 1977's Islands. It was also the first album the group had attempted without the songwriting, production and guitar playing chops of Robbie Robertson. To the surprise of many skeptics, Jericho was superb, evoking the essence of a number of roots American musics at every turn. The leadoff track on the disc and the first single to be pulled from the album was Linden's "Remedy." The song

received substantial radio play and ended up reaching #6 on the Canadian CAR listings, providing the Band with their highest chart placement ever.

### **"THROUGH THE STORM, THROUGH THE NIGHT" – DEEPER INTO GOSPEL**

"It's hard to say what the greatest thrill of anything could be," smiles Linden, "but, having my favourite group in the world record that song is a pretty hard thing to top. It was an honour beyond belief and the song, of course, is really influenced by them to begin with. We wrote that one with those guys in mind."

The version included on the present anthology was recorded by Linden's own group live in 1995 and released on the CD single of "Out of the Wilderness." The latter track stems from Linden's fifth solo album, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, released in 1995. If South at Eight, North at Nine and When the Spirit Comes evinced substantial growth in Linden's songwriting and singing abilities, *Through the Storm* represents a quantum leap to the next galaxy in both departments. A stunning album beginning to end, it was difficult not to chose even more than the four songs included here, "When the Carnival Ends," "No Rest for the Wicked," "Homesick in My Own Backyard" and "Sad & Beautiful World."

Before recording the album, Linden spent time taking vocal lessons from Bourbon Tabernacle Choir singer Dave Wall. Over a period of several weeks the two Toronto musicians worked on breathing and warm-up exercises and practiced using different parts of one's voice, as Colin learned how to control the degree of nasality employed in any given timbre. "He helped me out in some very fundamental ways," declares Linden.

Part of the reason to go to Dave Wall was Linden's deepening interest in the gospel tradition. Ken Whiteley had initially pulled his coat to the wonders of African-American sacred music and it was while on the road supporting *South at Eight, North at Nine* that Colin began to get heavily into gospel records. "Dave had such a deep understanding of gospel music," continues Linden. "At the time I was getting into a form that was more of a singer's than a player's form. With blues, I was drawn to the guitar so much that for me it was more of a player's form. With gospel, it was really a singer's medium."

While the influence of gospel music manifests itself in a variety of ways on a number of different songs on *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, it comes to the fore on the cataclysmic "No Rest for the Wicked." The track opens with Colin working his way through three extraordinarily evocative slide guitar licks before he moves into the first verse, sole accompaniment provided by Colin's shuffling rhythm guitar part. Richard Bell, bassist John Dymond and drummer Gary Craig join in by line three, substantially upping the ante, but it is at the beginning of the second verse with the introduction of the legendary post-war gospel quartet the Fairfield Four that things start to get impossibly rich. The Fairfield Four's harmonies project the whole performance into emotional overdrive and Linden's slide guitar

solo in the middle of the piece evokes a level of spiritual depth that is simply scary.

By the end of the song's six plus minutes, the listener and, one assumes, the band are just drained. Perhaps Linden's finest vocal performance on disc to date, the song sounds like it could just as easily have been written in the 1940s as the 1990s. While there are many inspired and magical moments in Linden's corpus of recorded works, this has to be one of the absolute highlights. Unbelievably, the actual recording was the first time the band had played the song through beginning to end.

"When the Carnival Ends" harkens back to Linden's ever-present interest in the Band while the style of finger picking he employs on his National Reso electric guitar stems from Bruce Cockburn.

"Those are things that Bruce does a lot," agrees Colin. "It wasn't even really that conscious but I played guitar next to him for several years. On that song he really is in there!" Rick Danko again provides harmony on what has to be one of Colin's most plaintive and wistful melodies.

Many of Linden's melodies have an ageless sad, yearning, melancholy aura about them, none of them more moving than "Homesick in My Own Backyard." The song was written with the vocal sound and phrasing of the late Band vocalist Richard Manuel in mind and the basic track was recorded by Colin in his apartment. "There's a certain intimacy that comes from sitting alone in your room," shares Colin, "with absolutely nobody else recording the song."

With the basic track in hand, Colin decided to overdub a horn section consisting of alto, tenor, trombone and trumpet (the latter played by Chris Whiteley). He had originally wanted the Band's Garth Hudson to write the arrangement but when Hudson couldn't find the time to complete it, Linden and John Whynot pulled it together the night before the session. They managed to perfectly capture Hudson's old-timey approach. The net affect is simply gorgeous.

"Sad & Beautiful World" concluded the original album and provides the title for the present collection. The idea for the song came from a line uttered by Roberto Benigni in the film "Down by Law." As with so many of Colin's latter-day compositions, the lyric gets at some hard-edged truths of life that become so much more powerful and, perhaps, seem so much truer due to the musical setting. This time Richard Bell did the horn arrangement and contributed church-inspired organ while Linden attained a depth and resonance out of Gary Craig's drums that underscores everything the lyric is about. All of this is overlain by swirling slide guitar lines that eventually supplant the lyrics, engage in call and response with the horns and take the idea of the song beyond where mere words are able to go. The net effect is masterful.

### **BLACKIE & THE RODEO KINGS AND MORE PRODUCING**

Through the Storm, Through the Night was recorded at the end of 1994 and the beginning of 1995. Right before work began on the album, Linden was busy in the studio producing LP's by Lori Yates, Lennie Gallant and John Bottomley. In 1996 Colin won a Juno in the Blues/Gospel category for his production work on Gallant's The Open Window. 1996 was also the year that Linden co-wrote with Colin James the latter's hit song "Real Stuff" and, in tandem with Tom Wilson of Junkhouse and Stephen Fearing, formed Blackie and the Rodeo Kings. Originally conceived as a one-off tribute record to Canadian singer songwriter Willie P. Bennett, the group's debut release, High or Hurtin', was issued by True North Records. The disc received immediate acclaim, began receiving radio play and the three solo artists found themselves gigging as a band.

In 1999 Blackie and the Rodeo Kings issued their second album, the Juno winning two-CD set Kings of Love. Partially drawing on the radio success of Junkhouse, this time out Blackie scored a rock radio and MuchMusic video hit with Tom Wilson's "Lean on Your Peers." While Kings of Love does include another six Willie P. Bennett compositions, it differs from High or Hurtin' in that it also contains originals by Linden, Wilson and Fearing as well as songs by Fred Eaglesmith, Bruce Cockburn, David Wiffen and Murray McLauchlan among others. The basic band on both discs is Gary Craig on drums, Richard Bell on piano and John Dymond on bass.

Representing Linden's work with Blackie and the Rodeo Kings on this anthology is "Vale of Tears," written by Colin's wife, Janice Powers. Reminiscent of a typically tragic Appalachian ballad, the track features Colin on electric dobro and an absolutely chilling accapella ending.

### **"RAISED BY WOLVES" & TRIBUTE TO HOWLIN' WOLF**

In between the two Blackie and the Rodeo Kings albums, Linden co-produced Bruce Cockburn's Charity of Night disc and Colin James' National Steel, produced a solo album by Linda McRae of Spirit of the West as well as Stephen Fearing's Industrial Lullaby, conceived, played on and co-produced with Randy Labbe a tribute album to Howlin' Wolf and issued his sixth solo disc, (raised by wolves). In February 1998 Linden shared the Maple Blues "Producer of the Year" award with Colin James for his work on National Steel. A year later, Linden received the prestigious Toronto Arts Award, an annual award given to one individual each year who works in film, theatre, visual art, dance or music. Previous recipients from the field of music have included Oscar Peterson and Bruce Cockburn.

A Tribute to Howlin' Wolf was issued on Telarc Records in the summer of 1998. For the occasion, co-producers Randy Labbe and Linden gathered together the core of Wolf's long-standing band, pianist Henry Gray, guitarist Hubert Sumlin, saxophonist Eddie Shaw, bassist Calvin Jones and drummer Sam Lay with Colin joining in on guitar on eight of the album's thirteen tracks. The band was then paired with a number of special guests including Taj Mahal, James Cotton, Colin James, Lucky Peterson, Ronnie Hawkins and Lucinda Williams. "Just Like I Treat You" features Colin on lead guitar and vocal fronting

Wolf's band, bringing things full circle back to November 1971 when, as a precocious eleven year old, Colin first met his idol. The scintillating harp work is courtesy of James Cotton. In early winter 1999, A Tribute to Howlin' Wolf was nominated for a Grammy Award in the category "Best Traditional Blues Album."

The title of (raised by wolves) is a nod to Howlin' Wolf that Colin decided to print in lower case and house in brackets because he "thought it was something that should be said from the corner of your mouth." Recording ensued in the summer of 1997 down at Daniel Lanois' studio in New Orleans. It was while mixing Bruce Cockburn's The Charity of Night record that Linden had been introduced to the pleasures of Kingsway Studios. He instantly loved the atmosphere of the house and the sound of the rooms.

"I also wanted to record in the summertime," offers Linden, "and I wanted to record where it was really hot. It has a way of affecting how you play! I knew (raised by wolves) was going to be a more aggressive record. I wanted something that was kind of louder and nastier sounding, furrier than some of the other records. I wanted a record that rocked a little harder. But, some of the songs are still real New Orleans influenced. There was some sort of an r & b element in it as well."

The New Orleans rhythm and blues influence that Colin refers to comes through loud and clear on the horn line for "Love's Like Rain." The parts were arranged by Richard Bell, the main influence being famed New Orleans producer Allen Toussaint's work on the Band's "Life is a Carnival" and Lee Dorsey's "Yes We Can." The horn section was made up of some of the brighter members of the new generation of black horn players in New Orleans. "There's just a certain way of playing that people are born and bred with down there," smiles Linden.

Co-written by Jimmy Weider, "Love's Like Rain" was also recorded by the Band but their version was never released and it has been covered with Kim Wilson and Mavis Staples singing on an album by rockabilly great Paul Burlison.

The harder rocking sound that Linden referred to above is especially evident on this compilation's opening track, "Love Everyone." It sounds to me like Linden had been spending a lot of time listening to Keith Richards' guitar lines and production style. There is one Telecaster guitar part in particular that is strongly emblematic of Richards' approach. "Exile on Main Street is a huge influence on me as a producer," explains Colin. "Sonically that's there. For me, the Staple Singers are big time in that song in terms of the guitar sound, the sentiment and the singing." A couple of the lines in the song are ideas that Colin lifted from a sermon by W.L. Richardson of the Fairfield Four.

The basic idea for "Love Everyone" came from Tom Wilson and his Junkhouse partner Colin Cripps. Apparently, they were thinking about the Cramps when the song was in its early gestation period. Obviously, it changed quite a bit by the time Colin was through with

it.

The final track from (raised by wolves) and the last track yet to be discussed in these notes is "Raging River." As is so often the case, the song came about as the result of serendipity. Colin Linden and Colin James had spent a whole day attempting in vain to write a rock song. After dinner Linden stumbled into the basic idea for "Raging River" in an open D minor tuning. As it happened, Colin James' guitar was still tuned in G minor from some earlier ideas they had tried. The result was that the two Colins discovered a number of beautiful chords and voicings that they wouldn't have got if they were in standard tuning or had both been in D minor. Colin Linden had never previously played in an open tuning where he wasn't playing a part that was in the key that the open tuning was tuned to. The result was an extremely haunting and evocative tune.

### **O BROTHER AND A LOT OF PRODUCING**

Several months after (raised by wolves) was released, Linden received a call from T-Bone Burnett. The two roots musicians had met way back in 1991 when Burnett produced Bruce Cockburn's Nothin' But A Burning Light album. Sharing an affinity for the gamut of American vernacular musics, Burnett and Linden quickly became fast friends. In the closing months of 1999 Burnett had been hired to produce the music for O Brother Where Art Thou. He originally called Linden to ask him to teach Chris Thomas King how to play Skip James' evocative "Hard Time Killing Floor". Although it was not included on the soundtrack album, Linden would eventually record an instrumental version of the tune which was also used in the film. Linden would also include a vocal version of the eerily haunting tune on his next solo album Big Mouth.

In May 2000 Linden played in the Down From The Mountain concert at the Ryman Auditorium, dueting with Chris Thomas King on "Hard Time Killing Floor" and "John Law Burned Down The Liquor Store". He would subsequently play a number of dates, including the fabled Carnegie Hall concert, on the Down From The Mountain tours.

In the meantime he kept busy producing and playing with a who's who of Canadian roots-oriented musicians. The quality of his work was eminently recognized when at the 2000 Juno Awards, Colin won three awards, in the "Blues" category as the producer of Ray Bonneville's Gust Of Wind, in the "Roots and Traditional: Solo Artist" category as the producer of Bruce Cockburn's Breakfast In New Orleans, Dinner In Timbuktu and in the "Roots and Traditional: Group" category as a member of Blackie and the Rodeo Kings.

That same year Linden produced blues singer and guitarist Sue Foley's Love Comin' Down and Paul Reddick and the Sidemen's Rattle Bag. Both records were superb roots music recordings and both were nominated for Junos in the "Best Blues Album" category, Foley winning in 2001 and Reddick ironically losing out to Linden's own Big Mouth in 2002.

### **BIG MOUTH AND BEYOND**

For his seventh solo album, *Big Mouth*, Linden decided to eschew the harder rocking approach he took on (*Raised by Wolves*). Instead, he settled into Tragically Hip's studio just outside Kingston, Ontario, where he had produced *Rattle Bag* and cut a mostly acoustic disc which included duets with a handful of his favourite musicians including Keb' Mo', Bruce Cockburn, Lee Roy Parnell, Jonell Mosser and Lucinda Williams. The Williams cut, "Don't Tell Me", closes the present compilation.

"One of the things that Lucinda and I have in common," offers Linden, "is a great love of blues music. I kind of thought that the nature of the lyric of 'Don't Tell Me' would be suitable to have somebody making fun of me the whole time I was singing it. I had mentioned Butterbeans and Susie to Lucinda, the kind of duets they used to do in the twenties, and Lu knew exactly what I was talking about. She looked at the lyric and said, 'Here, let me try this' and that's what you get."

Linden remembers writing the song early in the morning "before I was cognizant of anything" with Ray Charles' "It Should've Been Me", blues guitarist Jimmy Rogers' "My Last Meal" and an introductory shtick that Reverend Gary Davis used to employ in concert all serving as inspiration. A perfect close for this anthology, "Don't Tell Me" is a delightfully playful insouciant track featuring Williams' non-stop signifying on Linden's portrayal of the song's hapless protagonist.

In 2002 *Big Mouth* won a Juno for "Best Blues Album". That same year Linden found himself involved in five Grammy nominations. His production of Lucinda Williams' version of "Cold Cold Heart" for the Hank Williams tribute album, *Timeless*, was nominated for "Best Female Country Vocal Performance". While Lucinda Williams lost in that category to Dolly Parton, the *Timeless* CD won the Grammy for Country Album of the Year.

In between attending award ceremonies, Linden spent 2002 co-producing Blackie and the Rodeo Kings member Stephen Fearing's *That's How I Walk* and Bruce Cockburn's *You've Never Seen Everything*. Both albums were released in 2003. That same year, Linden made his acting debut, playing the role of a guitar playing priest in the latest epic from the Coen Brothers, *Intolerable Cruelty*. Linden can be heard singing snippets of two Simon and Garfunkel tunes in the film and playing a ragtime/blues version of "The Boxer" during the closing credits.

In June of 2003, the third Blackie and the Rodeo Kings CD, *BARK*, was released, a variety of tracks receiving sustained airplay on Canadian rock and country radio. When the disc was issued in the U.S. in early 2004, the group was picked up by both Americana and Triple A radio formats. Linden spent the rest of 2003 producing an independent CD by Sally Barris and serving as executive producer of *Beautiful*, a tribute album to Gordon Lightfoot, and *Johnny's Blues*, a tribute album to Johnny Cash, as well as playing on sessions for Emmylou Harris, Lee Ann Womack and Jessi Alexander.

Finally, as I write these notes in June 2004, Linden has recently

produced soon-to-be-released discs by Gary Nicholson under the nom de disque Whitey Johnson, Janeva Magness and Paul Reddick's follow-up to Rattle Bag, entitled Villianelle. While Colin Linden's career is clearly firing on all pistons, to my way of thinking it is time for the roots maven to begin work on his eighth solo album. In the meantime, *Sad and Beautiful World: 1975 to 2001* provides an opportunity to take stock of the career of one of the finest musicians Canada has ever produced.