

## CENTENNIAL

Six months, 100 gigs and a lot of pig roasts. Matt Masters got up close and personal with his Albertan brethren and learned a thing or two about his home province,

DAVE EBNER writes

# Alberta found

CALGARY

The gig list — a winding scroll of 100 shows throughout Alberta to celebrate the province's centennial — is odd: Seniors homes, a casino, a cowboy-poetry gathering, several schools and a friend's wedding. Also, several times, Broken City, a downtown Calgary indie music bar. There was a fishing derby along the way, too.

This unlikely selection of venues forms just a short part of an epic six-month adventure, one that has seen country troubadour Matt Masters cover roughly 25,000 kilometres. It ended Thursday, on Alberta's 100th birthday, as Masters and his band, the Gentlemen of the Rodeo, played gig No. 100 under the Calgary Tower as part of the Brilliant City festival.

History permeates the project. Masters — a "Western gentlemen" according to his calling card — is fascinated with history and did something of an epic undergraduate degree in the subject, taking an extended nine years at the University of Calgary.

Over a drink in The Oak Room of the 91-year-old sandstone Palliser Hotel in Calgary this week, Masters passionately bounded through tales of Alberta's musical history, having particular fun relating the tale of a Parisian fiddle-maker who relocated to the distant outpost in the late 1800s.

"It was all about the fiddle in the early days," Masters said, having unearthed the info in a university course on that era's architecture. "Accordions, too, harmonicas. They were the most popular instruments, the most portable. But people brought in pianos, too, lugged them out on covered wagons."

His gigs are a history lesson of Alberta in song and next year he plans to chronicle the province's musical past in a book of 100 song sheets, 10 per decade, along with two CDs. He hopes to publish the effort with the University of Calgary Press, seeing his plan very much as an academic history project to catalogue a subject that hasn't received attention before.

One CD will feature Masters singing songs, but it is the other CD that Masters is more excited about, a disc that is to feature music that was never written down, particularly aboriginal work.

"It's a huge part of Western Cana-

dian music," he said. "Alberta's not just white dudes singing in English, though that's the way we're often perceived."

At gig No. 96 last Monday at Broken City, where the tour began in February, Masters and the Gentlemen of the Rodeo opened their set with what Masters announced as "an old pioneer song" called *Little Old Sod Shanty on my Claim*. It's based on an old Irish sea shanty that was reworked countless times in North America. Another version of the song, Masters added as a footnote, was the first commercial country track ever recorded, put down by Fiddlin' John Carson in 1923.

The sets included other Alberta standards, such as *Oilman's Lament* from the sixties, that complement Masters own work — *Whisky Business* is a standout — and covers such classics as Gordon Lightfoot's *Alberta Bound*.

As Masters toured Alberta, he discovered the province's future looks much like its past — boomtowns built on oil. He was in the oil sands capital Fort McMurray in the far northeast of the province last week, where growth is off the hook. An average single-family home in July cost more than \$450,000 — just one example of economic madness in the throbbing heart of the current oil boom in Alberta.

Masters played a seniors home and a casino, the aptly named Boomtown Casino. "There were about six people watching and 300 people gambling," he said. "They were preoccupied. It's a tough town."

It reminded him of reading the history of Calgary's early days, when a population of 4,000 in the late 1800s exploded to more than 40,000 by the mid-1910s when oil and natural gas had been discovered.

"That's inconceivable growth," Masters said. "It's the Alberta story. It's Fort McMurray's story."

While Masters grew up in Alberta, he is a city boy, rarely straying beyond Calgary and most recently spent several years in Toronto. Last October, he quit his job as general manager of the Toronto Blues Society to make his living in music, quickly taking on the quest of a 100-gig tour on the Boxing Day suggestion of Jane McCullough. She is program director at CJSW, the U of C radio station, which underpinned a grant application with the federal



JEFF MCINTOSH/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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government, from which Masters recently secured \$15,000.

Tramping through rural Alberta, which by stereotype is populated only by gun-toting rednecks, was a lot more fun than Masters expected. "I was nervous about it, admittedly, I didn't know what to expect. People might say, 'You're from Calgary? Sorry about that.' Then they'd invite me in for dinner. I think you can find the same friendliness everywhere."

Getting gigs just meant calling on folks to see if they needed someone. "I'd call up a pig roast and ask if they needed 40 minutes of country and western. They'd say: 'Of course,

that's exactly what we're waiting for.' That's what they'd usually say. There's been four or five pig roasts. We roast a lot of pork in this province. It's not just red meat."

At Broken City on Monday, with about 150 young Calgary hipsters in attendance, he remembered the beginnings of the 100-show odyssey. Dressed nattily in a newly acquired \$8 vintage grey suit, with a cowboy hat and black cowboy boots, Masters recalled announcing to his first audience in February: "World, I'm going to play 100 shows in Alberta." The room wasn't so crowded and not many people noticed.

The 29-year-old is getting noticed now, handling a dozen or so local interviews in recent weeks as the centennial tour reaches its crescendo. Masters — born Burgener — has recorded three independent albums and is planning at least one if not two more this fall.

Of all the adventures on the road, it was the 18th Annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Pincher Creek that has stuck with Masters the most. The small town in southwestern Alberta is nestled up against the Rocky Mountains and in mid-June had just been pounded by rain and flooding.

"I haven't found a distinct Alberta musical style but there's a distinct storytelling, it's the prominent feature," Masters said. "And that's best represented by the cowboy poets. They're funny and sometimes get dirty — in a classy way. I fell right in with those guys."

Late night, the cowboy poets would be around a campfire and Masters sidled up his first evening there. One cowboy demanded the young poet play a tune, so Masters plucked his acoustic guitar and the reception was positive. The cowboy, he said, concluded: "That's all right, kid."

## Who needs the CBC when you have lock-out podcasts?



CARL WILSON  
OVERTONES

There's a long history of reporters publishing "strike newspapers." Perhaps the most memorable came when striking critics from The New York Times in 1963 started the New York Review of Books, whose intellectual wattage immediately outshone the paper's standard books section, and still does.

Now a similar urge has catapulted locked out broadcasters from CBC radio into what's been dubbed "the Podquake" — the audio-downloading "podcasting" craze.

On website [www.cbcunplugged.com](http://www.cbcunplugged.com), you find Shelagh Rogers heading off on a cross-country picket line pod-tour, genial Vancouver personality Bill Richardson fuming over how "pissed off" he is, and national reporter Curt Petrovich doing a poker-faced interview with "CBC management" as portrayed by his babbling eight-week-old daughter.

If only CBC normally had such passion. Unplugged is now among the most popular podcasts in the Canadian iTunes store, second only to CBC Radio Three's weekly show of Canuck indie rock.

How far the medium has come

since former MTV talking head Adam Curry (known in geekdom as "the Podfather") launched the first daily podcast last year.

If you're just tuning in, a podcast is an audio file (almost always an MP3). It could be a hobbyist DJing his favourite new music, a couple bickering about their sex lives, or a public radio show. The twist is that you use software to "subscribe" to the podcast so that it's automatically downloaded when there's a new episode, to be heard on your MP3 player (often but not necessarily an iPod) or at your computer, at your convenience.

It mixes aspects of blogging, Internet radio and digital TV recorders such as TiVo. One technology consulting group has projected that in five years, 60 million people will be listening.

More months ago, reports on podcasting usually began like this: "Each day Bill Muggertson dashes home from his chicken-plucking job, puts his children to bed, then heads to the garage, where he stammers into a microphone covered in a pink sock (to dampen pops) about his favourite *Battlestar Galactica* episodes for his 7,000 listeners."

"I don't get it," says his wife Bernice.

That stereotype was snuffed in July when Apple added podcasting capacity to iTunes, the life support system of the iPod (and the service that made paid legal downloads sexy). Podcasting has become professionalized at record speed, with media and marketers desperate



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not to be snookered by yet another communications revolution.

CBC Unplugged is cited in on-line resource Wikipedia as the first major use of podcasting for "advocacy." Members of Congress and a potential U.S. presidential candidates (such as John Edwards) have already tried their hands at politicking (podlitics?). Meanwhile Paris Hilton and the Fox network have podcasted to promote movies and TV; NASA has had a podcast from space; and there's podnography (or "sexcasts"), downloadable church sermons ("Godcasts," including one from the Pope), serialized novels and a 'cast for every interest from wine to NASCAR.

One corporate radio station in San Francisco has gone all-podcast, placing popular podcasters and audience-submitted recordings on air in a talent-scouting,

"Podcasting Idol" spirit.

Public radio has been especially gung-ho — the BBC has many of its finest hours available for web download, and the U.S. National Public Radio network put up a podcasting directory this week.

Considering many podcasters' stated mission of ending radio as we've known it, it looks a bit like the British bringing goodwill cups of Earl Grey to the Boston Tea Party.

But the giddy amateurism of podcasting's founding generation was never built to last. If most people wanted stuttering, winningly self-indulgent culture mavens, college-community stations would get a lot more listeners. The found-art aspect of podcasting has the half-life of a mood ring. Like the most-trafficked websites, the most-followed podcasts will be slicker affairs. Basement hobbyists

will recede into the "long tail" of more marginal media.

But as Townes van Zandt once sang, "You're gonna drown tomorrow if you cry too many tears for yesterday." Podcasting is part of an array of changes rattling the audio world, along with satellite radio, digital radio, the U.S. anti-payola crusade, Warner Music's new downloading-only record label, a recent breakthrough in download-service subscription by Playloder and Sony in the U.K., among others. And did we ever need them.

The obstacle is, as usual, record companies, who are trying to charge prohibitive music-licensing fees, just as music publishers attempted to cripple early radio. This stalemate has to break.

(One upside is that the quest for "podsafe" music is drawing attention to artists allowing fair use, un-

der alternatives to copyright such as the Creative Commons license.)

The ubiquity of white iPod earphones can't continue on song shuffling alone — most people don't actually like music that much, or that much music. Podcasting restores advice, debate, sports and current events to the portable mix, but demands more distinct voices from each one. And for the tune-obsessed few, podcasts revive the context and commentary a skilled DJ can bring, as I've found on New York station WNCY's *Soundcheck* program or Toronto critic John Sakamoto's weekly podcasts.

No one's sure how to make money on it yet ("podvertising" or "pledgecasting"?). But for public radio, perhaps the greater challenge is the lonely figure of the MP3 listener, in contrast to the mass broadcast audience. Should a network meant to bind a nation together really assist our retreat into individual sterile white capsules, where we download indie rock and science shows while rejecting, say, the farm report?

Whatever the answer, CBC must be able to manoeuvre. And the lockout podcasts show its employees already are as flexible and adaptable as management says it needs. The deeper fault is in the network's lumbering inertia. When the talent sounds tougher and smarter when it's working against you, for free, the real threat isn't the fine print on their contracts.

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