

Blue Rodeo // *Many A Mile*

It's a bittersweet truth to admit, but were it not for dreadful, awful COVID-19, there might not have been *Many A Mile*, Blue Rodeo's superb new 16th studio album. In fact, there may not have been any new Blue Rodeo studio albums.

For all sorts of reasons both complex and mundane, the band's collective will to record again after 2016's *1000 Arms* had dimmed. Yet the pandemic, despite the horror and chaos it visited upon the globe, also bestowed upon Blue Rodeo co-singer/songwriters Jim Cuddy and Greg Keelor, something they had long since sacrificed as always in-demand working musicians: time.

That proved to be the magic elixir. For Cuddy, time meant being able to "sculpt" his songs without deadlines while watching an entire season quietly unfold from a fixed vantage point at his farm north of hometown Toronto. For Keelor at his home in Northumberland outside Toronto, time meant being able to rest and heal the grisly tinnitus that has plagued him for decades.

And for the band — bassist Bazil Donovan, drummer Glenn Milchem, keyboardist Michael Boguski, and guitarist Colin Cripps — time meant being able to add their individual musical parts to the album with absolute autonomy.

So, while pandemic protocols dictated that the accomplished and multifaceted *Many A Mile* be made in a completely novel way, those same protocols unearthed a new spirit in the band, suggesting that while the universe remains wholly unpredictable, it clearly wasn't prepared to keep going without Blue Rodeo being in it.

"I don't want to sound too dramatic, but my ears were in such bad shape from the last tour, I just wasn't sure I'd be able to do it anymore," Keelor says. "The ringing in the ears gives me migraines, which are humbling to say the least.

"But that year off during the pandemic let me rest my head and make a solo record (last spring's exquisite *Share The Love*). I had a bunch of songs — I had already recorded including [the strummy first single] 'When You Were Wild' — and I phoned Jim up out of the blue, and said, 'Let's make a record.' There is no question this record would never have happened without COVID."

Indeed, Cuddy was so certain Blue Rodeo was on hiatus that he was "three-quarters of the way through" a solo of his own record when Keelor called in early 2021. "I was shocked because the last record had been challenging for everyone," Cuddy confirms. "Plus, it seemed like a strange time to be making a record, during a pandemic. We ended up making the album in a very unusual way."

Though Cuddy and Keelor have always written separately, and then shared material with each other and the band, for *Many A Mile* they also recorded separately: Keelor with co-producers James McKenty and Jim Bowskill at Ganaraska Recording Co. in Cobourg, ON and Lost Cause Studio in Durham Region and Cuddy with co-producers Colin Cripps and Tim Vesely at Toronto's Woodshed Studio.

In Keelor's case, the songs were initially sketched out with Bowskill, McKenty, and drummer/bassist Ian McKeown at Ganaraska. "It was a very efficient way to make music," Keelor says, "but I had to completely suspend ideas of how Blue Rodeo works and just trust that it would fall into place."

“Greg and I were never in the same studio at the same time at any point during this record,” Cuddy says. “I did all my tracks with the band, but we were sharing the band back and forth. One day it was a Michael Boguski day. The next day was a Bazil Donovan day, and so on.”

Cuddy continues: “It was done like a patchwork quilt. Yet it turned out great. Everybody got personal time to do whatever they needed to do in a song. We avoided those group decisions that always leave somebody feeling disadvantaged. And then Greg Calbi, who brilliantly mastered the album, pulled each side toward the other to make everything sound coherent.”

Coherent certainly, though even hardcore Blue Rodeo fans are likely to be floored by the sheer sonic scope of *Many A Mile* which, while slotting broadly into the alt-country/rock category long associated with the band, also contains a constellation of surprising textures and touches across its 12 songs, seven by Keelor — whittled from a total of about 15 — and five by Cuddy.

Take the twinkly, delicate “Symmetry of Starlight” which is buoyed by Bowskill’s luminous pedal steel and the angelic harmonies of vocalists Brittany Brooks and Melissa Payne, which elevate the song to an almost celestial plane.

“That began as a birthday song for Frances Fader-Walsh, the daughter of singer Julie Fader and her husband, producer Graham Walsh,” Keelor recalls. “They were out here making a record some years ago, just after Frances was born.

“I had never spent that much time with an infant. She was just so pure and innocent and taking in the world with eyes that I would like to borrow occasionally,” he chuckles. “I returned to that song during the pandemic.”

That song is followed on the album by Cuddy’s contemplative and intensely cinematic “I Will Wait for You,” a wistful father-to-child missive inspired in part by Paul Simon’s slyly caustic “The Only Living Boy in New York.” “He wrote that about how he felt when Art Garfunkel went off to make a movie. I wrote my song about my kids... maybe specifically one kid,” he laughs, naming no names.

Cuddy also penned and sings lead on the twangy, seriously rollicking “I Owe It to Myself” — seamlessly featuring Keelor on backing harmonies, further proof of the wonders of technology — which will serve as the new album’s second single.

Interestingly, while both Cuddy and Keelor acknowledge the pandemic’s impact on the logistical recording of the album — and the pre-recording downtime allowing them to polish their songs at length — its thematic impact on their material is negligible.

“I might disappear into my own bellybutton if I became any more introspective than I already am,” Keelor jokes, when asked if soul-searching was a writing ingredient. Adds Cuddy, “Greg’s songs have a lot of energy which reflect the young musicians he was working with. I think my songs are perhaps more self-referential because I spent so much time alone with them.”

Another new song with a fabulous backstory that’s destined for fan-favourite status is Keelor’s anthemic, slowly unfurling rock opus “Deep Dark Well” which soars on Michael Boguski’s various keyboards, which exit on a testimonial swell that’s all goosebumps and wows.

“Where I live now was once the old lakeshore of Lake Ontario. Now it’s 10, 15 miles away. But eons ago this valley was submerged in water. One day I was out walking, and I found a little seashell. It was a wonder. And it got me thinking about time and how everything is impermanent and changing.”

And so, as Keelor and Cuddy consistently (and resonantly) do, he wrote about it. Which conveniently segues into the brief history portion of the Blue Rodeo saga.

In the 35 years (!) since forming in Toronto and quickly electrifying the then-supercool Queen West scene — before dominating the soft-seaters and arenas of the nation — Blue Rodeo has sold more than four million albums, received countless JUNO Award wins and nominations, played a gazillion shows, been inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, received a star on Canada’s Walk of Fame, been named to the Order of Canada and been honoured with the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award.

Their legendary story continues with *Many A Mile*. True to form, the new album will put Blue Rodeo on the road extensively in the new year and beyond, with a renewed sense of gratitude for being able to play live... and just being able to play together.

“When I finish any record, I go through a kind of post-partum thing where all I can hear are the things I could have done better,” says Keelor, who this time out experimented with ketamine therapy — a new and fast-rising medically administered psychedelic treatment — to better manage his anxiety.

“Afterward, my doctor sent me a text to see how it went, reminding me that maybe this recurring melancholy is just part of how I make the music that I make. I can tell you that making this album was inspiring.”

Adds Cuddy, who is also still very close to the new album, “There are two great times with every new record. When I first get the master, I like just walking around listening to it and thinking, ‘My god I love it.’ I love that first flush of hearing it all together.

“The next phase is when you realize people you are talking to also like the record, which is yet to come. But I’m sure it will.”

Smart money rests on it.

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