



The Road According to Ian Tamblyn: Accomplished Alumnus Makes His Own Way

BY DONALD FRASER '91

When I think of **Ian Tamblyn**, I think of far-flung shores, loon-call nights, and never-ending Arctic days. I think of music that helps define Canada without necessarily being defined by what we expect of our Canadian songwriters. And I think of the road.

The road is where you'll often find Ian—the back roads of Canada, where his contemporaries don't often tread. If you're a Canadian folkie looking to catch an Ian Tamblyn gig, you don't have to travel to find him. You can rest assured that eventually he'll come to see you.

I've been lucky enough to have Ian travel into my life twice in the past year: the first, an intimate house concert, where he played two long sets of songs, both old and new; and the second in my front room, where we shared some tea and a couple of hours of good chat.

The road through Peterborough, you see, is well trod by Dr. Tamblyn. And it may well be because of his time at Trent. Trent, after all, was part of the formative process that would later lead to an immense catalogue of songs, albums, stories, essays, plays, and photographs.

His songs and albums are well known across the country and around the world, with efforts such as "Woodsmoke and Oranges" and "Tiger Lily Road" gaining status as classics. Hints of his career to come were evident in his performances at Trent and in Peterborough, as well as in the recording of *Moose Tracks*, now regarded as one of the first independently released records by a Canadian songwriter.

"I don't know exactly where I fit in," Tamblyn admits. "But there was so much going on that there wasn't really a need to."

While the term Renaissance man may be bandied about in reference to a number of artists, it is a term that would fit Ian well. A very down-to-earth fellow, he would probably shrug such a mantle aside, but evidence would suggest it as apt. On top of his award-winning music, he has written numerous plays (all but one of which have been produced for the stage), is a colourful essayist with a true storyteller's flair, and is an accomplished photographer who has captured landscapes, flora, and fauna from around the world. He is one of Trent's shining lights.

Sure, his student days may have been some 40 years ago, but the Peterborough link remains strong. He didn't need much in the way of directions, for instance, when I invited him to my East City home for an interview. "I'll just hang a right at the donut store off Highway 7 and find my way there," he said over the phone.

And then there are the friendships that he has formed with many of our local musician mainstays, including **Dennis O'Toole**, **Catfish Willie**, and the late **Willie P. Bennett**.

Of course in the late 60s and early 70s, Ian was one of the fixtures of the Peterborough and Trent scene, sharing stages with luminaries such as **Stan Rogers**. But the music started earlier than the Trent years for Ian. He was already making songs as a youth, and the stories started even earlier than that.

His early life, when you delve into it, reads like a great Canadian story: life in small-town Northwestern Ontario (Fort William), visits to a grandmother who once sang in the lumber camps of Kenora and a grandfather who once owned the Great Lakes Paper Mill.

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Early in our interview he offered this snapshot: "My grandfather was an influential fellow who, despite a stroke that would leave him paralyzed in one arm and bereft of speech, would entertain powerful guests: local mayors, visiting dignitaries, and federal politicians. I'd visit after school," he recalls, "and my grandfather would be sitting with guys like C.D. Howe (the Liberal "Minister of Everything"), discussing the Great Lakes Seaway. My job was to pass the notes that he scrawled to his guests—and I could tell that they were of very different political persuasions—and to watch. It was quite something to see as a kid."

It's no wonder he developed a strong love of the story-song.

When it came time for university, Trent was a fairly easy choice: "My father was president of Lakehead University, and my politics were somewhat to the left of his," explains Ian. "It was thought that it might not be very good for me to go to Lakehead." Trent, built at the same time as Lakehead and offering a liberal arts-based education, called to him.

By this time, Ian had already gained some musical chops. "We were blessed in Thunder Bay with a coffee house called the Forth Dimension," he remembers. "And it started up when I was in Grade 10. That's where **Neil Young** would play and where—or so I'm led to believe—he first met **Stephen Stills**. So there was a wonderful, wonderful collection of people playing in Thunder Bay. Then there was the Folklore Centre

in Port Arthur, where—in the middle of the Finnish District—this Swedish Communist named Einar Nordstrom would get the new **Bob Dylan** albums—or "Bob Dielin" albums in his accent. "Hey, Ian, I have the new Bob Dielin album."

"And then there were a couple of friends who really pushed me—friends that I remain close to even today—George Rideout and Greg Tuck. Both of them are with the Drama Department at Bishops and are talented in their own rights. These guys pushed me from my short-story-writing roots to picking up the guitar. We had this friendship and this love of the Beats and Beat literature that continues to this day—and continues in some of the work that we produce together even now."



His coming to Trent was not necessarily a musical choice: "I had a lot to prove to myself and to others. I had, to put it mildly, a checkered past when it came to education—with a history of failing and a history, even, of being kicked out of school. So I was determined to break the

odds of me even going to university. And once I started to learn the art of learning and communicating what I had learned, I wanted to finish, to show I could.

"Despite this," he admits, "I was not at all seen as odd at Trent University. It was a place of glorious eccentrics—not that they would have seen themselves that way. But it was a good place for me to be."

He recalls John Hillman, who taught sociology and social theory: "He invariably would have his lunch on his tie—and would snack on it by mid-afternoon—but was also quite brilliant."

Hillman would leave a lasting mark: "He taught me to see things differently. He gave me, for example, a right-wing social theory book and then provided me the tools needed to take it apart, to deconstruct it, to use it as a mirror for looking at what was going on with myself and what was going on around me. They are tools that I still use today. I bring it up in songwriting courses to this day."

Of course, music did become a major motivator for him. And he found the Trent scene to be similar to the one he had left in Thunder Bay. "Though there was an emphasis on more traditional elements," he recalls. At least at first: "My first experience was people like **Stan Rogers** and **Nigel Russell** doing a fairly traditional style of music. And then later I found a much more experimental edge—and Peterborough is really famous for its experimental edge.

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"You see there were a couple of scenes. There was Stan and Nigel and folks like that. Then there were people like **Cris Cuddy '65**, who went on to be **Max Mouse**, and **Marcus Waddington '66** and **Peter Cragg '66** and **Paul Grady '68**. I don't know exactly where I fit in," he admits. "But there was so much going on, so there wasn't really a need to. Attached to this scene were people from outside the Trent community: **Dennis Delorme**, who would go on to **Prairie Oyster** fame, **Catfish Willie**, **Dennis O'Toole**, the list goes on. And we can't forget the rock scene—people like **Don Tapscott**, and **Paul Butler**."

Ian recalls that with academics and music there was a whirlwind of thoughts and ideas colliding at the same time. It is a feeling he tries to keep with him even now: "If you are filled with change and have a number of different inputs in your life—if you are living and experiencing a lot at once—you don't end up seeking stasis. The danger of falling into a physical and mental conservatism is lessened."

He takes this philosophy a step further. "The physical fear often informs the mental one. The hesitation in leaping over a stream because you might miss a rock or break an ankle is the beginning of that conservatism of the mind."

It is this desire to shake off personal conservatism, this desire to take on a number of challenges at once that has shaped his career.

Not content to play it safe in the years after graduation, he decided to make his own way in the world of music. From that first independent recording, through his next two releases on the tiny Barge record label, to the 27 records, cassettes, and CDs he has released under his own label, he has refused—"for better or for worse"—to attach himself to the more corporate side of music. Even when the more corporate—and financially rewarding—side of music came calling.

"I'd always play Orono or Elora rather than Toronto," he says without the least trace of remorse. "Or Peterborough or Haliburton. Or smaller towns across the country. I'd take all the back roads of Canada and not once play Toronto or Winnipeg, Calgary or Vancouver."

When asked why he chose this stubbornly independent route, he has a simple answer: "I thought it would work."

And it has worked. While he doesn't have the marquee value of some of his contemporaries—say, **Bruce Cockburn** or **Murray McLauchlan**—he has forged an impressive career that has him in constant demand and lauded with accolades. The words "national treasure" often appear in magazine articles and folk-festival introductions.

If his hesitance to play it safe is evident in his record-label and tour decisions, it is even more so in the music itself. Ian refuses to be pigeon-holed.

Ask a dozen people to describe his music and you'll get a dozen answers. There are elements of traditional folk, singer-songwriter balladry, pop, roots, new age, and experimental instrumental composition. While he is primarily known as a folk singer, he is much, much more than that.

His latest releases exemplify this: 2009's *Gyre* sees him performing a

roots/rock/folk hybrid and examining the human and social condition, while the two albums preceding it, *Raincoast* and *Superior: Spirit and Light*, feature new and re-recorded songs about the coastlines of Canada. While these nature-based singer-songwriter albums reflect Ian's reputation as a folkie with a bent for the Canadian landscape, they actually represent a right turn from the work that immediately preceded them: 2005's *Machine Works*. *Machine Works* features synthesizer-based instrumentals married to a backdrop of industrial sounds from steel refineries. It is a recording that challenges even the most ardent fans of Ian's music.

It is, however, this fierce independence and strong sense of musical individuality that makes his music so special. It is his unique sound that makes his recordings so distinct and fresh. It is the small rooms he plays to in far-flung locales that makes him so approachable in concert. And it is the long road he travels that ensures he will enter the hearts, minds, and consciousness of so many Canadians.

It is this road that brought Ian to my house for an interview. And it is this road that brought our conversation to an end. With a show lined up for later in the day in Meaford, a few hours to the northwest, he had commitments to keep. While he doesn't regret the time he spends travelling, he did seem to regret having to leave "the Patch."

But, then, a part of him never leaves. Those who have met him and seen him play will attest that he leaves a good portion of his wit, his humour, and his wisdom behind. I caught myself humming "Woodsmoke and Oranges" as he pulled out of my driveway. Apparently, he also left behind a song. **T**