

Folk Alliance International

Toronto, February 20 to 24, 2013

Frequent flyers who gather each year to enjoy some of the best roots music on the planet all agreed that this 25th anniversary bash was one of the best. It's more down-homey than SXSW offering official showcases—and tantalising close-up encounters—with artists of the calibre of Sam Baker, Eliza Gilkyson, Gurf Morlix, Cam Penner, Karine Polwart, Devon Sproule and Rachel Sermani ... in the cosy surroundings of their own private rooms. Notable bands in the line-up included The Bills, Madison Violet, New Country Rehab, Petunia & The Vipers, De Temps Antan, The Once, Elephant Revival, Fish & Bird, Oh My Darling and The Stray Birds.

In the weeks leading up to the event, there were two or three names that kept cropping up as delegates-in-waiting compared notes and shared pre-showcase hot leads. America has already wakened up to the extraordinary presence of Colorado's Elephant Revival. Their well-balanced-with-planet-Earth ethos has won them a faithful following, the heavenly tones of material from their gorgeous back catalogue having set the scene ... and it's looking particularly rosy. In a neat parallel, The Stray Birds, from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, have also emerged as a conquering force from constant coast-to-coast Stateside touring thanks to 'live' performances that are blisteringly impressive and emotionally charged. They've been turning heads while standing tall above others; their debut CD is a potent introduction.

It was, therefore, no real surprise when much of the focus landed on each of them ... and, while both bands earned themselves even more respect from real powerhouse shows, Canada showed us she had talent aplenty to match the impact they created, while hosting this prestigious musical banquet. Upcoming singer-songwriters such as Del Barber, Jenny Ritter and Rose Cousins were lined up alongside some of the best in the world, including big names from USA, Australia, Ireland and the UK.

Lesser-known (in an international sense) bands such as The Revelers,



Oh My Darling

Gordie McKeeman and His Rhythm Boys, Dry Bones and The Sojourners all attracted attention from word-of-mouth recommendations, each of them staging killer shows. In fact, there were so many stop-and-savour moments that it's almost impossible to record them all in the space available.

Cam Penner and his constant sidekick, Jon Woods, packed a jaw-numbing punch as they played material from their latest release, *TO BUILD A FIRE*—a grizzly bear of an album with a heart as big as an Ox, and gorgeous Canadian brother and sister Cristina and Quinn Bachand were utterly breathtaking. Raina Rose, promoting brand new super-songs material too, warmed hearts as she did so, while the classy old-timey duo, Pharis and Jason Romero attracted capacity crowds to all of their shows, such is the demand from their enlightened followers, to spend some quality time in their presence.

Old-timey fans who prefer their fare to be tilted towards jazzy Vaudevillian, were naturally drawn to hugely-entertaining purveyors of the genre, Sheesham & Lotus & Son who stole the show and are must-see good. Of all the solo troubadours present, Manitoba-born Del Barber created the biggest buzz to the extent that during general day-after hubbub and chat, you'd hear his name in

dozens of conversations. Likewise, British Columbia's Jenny Ritter lit up every room with a wired-to-The-Force quality that is irresistible and immensely charming, proving that her wish to go it alone after the demise of popular band, The Gruff, was meant.

Oh My Darling have a refreshing attack and a mesmerising on-stage energy that makes them stand out against other all-girl stringbands who have emerged in recent times. Smile-inducing on a range of different levels the songs are strong and the playing sharp, while effervescent. Fish & Bird have been on a similar path, fine-tuning material and developing a depth of character through hard graft and audience building across North America. Their time has come.

The greatest pleasure of the entire event, however, was to witness the impressive re-emergence of Russell deCarle, former frontman of Canada's iconic country roots band, Prairie Oyster. He is now playing in trio format with two of the finest musicians you are ever likely to hear—Denis Keldie (accordion) and Steve Briggs (guitar). It is a sheer joy to behold and JJ Calers who like a shot of honky-tonk liberally laced with tincture of rockabilly that recalls better times, will lap this up. These guys have a groove all of their own. **John Lees**