



Andrew Baulcomb

EVENINGS & WEEKENDS

Five Years in Hamilton Music, 2006–2011

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PROLOGUE

HAMILTON, ONTARIO, CANADA is a blue-collar town of five hundred thousand souls living in the shadow of the country's largest and most affluent metropolis, Toronto. It's where I was born, and I've called it home for all of my thirty-two years. For more than half those years I've wanted to be a writer, and writers in Hamilton have never starved for new material. It's a wild burg with a colourful, tumultuous, tragic history that's often stranger than fiction. As a storyteller, it's the perfect place to cut your teeth and get a little grime under your fingernails.

Hamilton smells bad in the summer and sparkles in the winter. We have steel factories in the east and a university in the west, suburbs to the south and one of the country's largest freshwater lakes to the north. We have cascading waterfalls and industrial wastelands, bright young students and desperate vagabonds. The city has maintained a long, sordid relationship with hard drugs, motorcycle gangs and organized crime, but it's also known as a haven for artists, innovators and entrepreneurs.

In the lower city, the part that lies beneath the Niagara Escarpment, the houses are tall and narrow, and built with solid red bricks and vinyl siding. They're tight-knit, like the people who occupy them. On top of the Escarpment, an area we refer to as "the Mountain," the lots are a little wider and the people a little more well to do. For older generations, enemy territory in

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Hamilton extends east or west beyond James Street – a major thoroughfare that slices through the heart of the city. For younger Hamiltonians, this cultural divide can also involve the upper and lower city.

Downtown Hamilton was a wonderful place to live and work during the middle of the twentieth century. It was full of department stores, office towers, transit lines and movie theatres with thousand-seat auditoriums running up and down King Street. Gore Park, a beautiful pedestrian promenade flanked by shops and restaurants, was the envy of the country.

But by the time my generation inherited the downtown core in the early 2000s, Eaton's, Kresge's and other department stores had skipped town. The grand old theatres had been shuttered or condemned. The streetcar tracks had been ripped out of the ground. There were few pedestrians and fewer concerts, and none of the hip art galleries and boutiques that now pepper the core. There was no money and no plan. Traffic flowed in one direction and all roads led to the city limits. Some locals never left – those who'd built a life in the core; they still remembered better times. They loved their fish markets and their hockey rinks and their corner delis and their lovely old neighbours with faded Portuguese and Italian flags draped over concrete stoops, swaying in the breeze. They weren't going anywhere.

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During the dawn of the Jazz Age in the late 1910s and early 1920s, temperance movements in Canada and the United States created a black market bootlegging ring around the Great Lakes. The north end of the city, the docklands, became a rowdy stopover for budding criminals ferrying homemade booze throughout the region. Rocco Perri, a Hamilton-based gangster

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and rum-runner originally from Calabria, Italy, became known as “King of the Bootleggers” and “Canada’s Al Capone.” Hamilton’s penchant for illegal activity, coupled with the emergence of large steel mills and other factories farther east along the lakeshore, helped fuel our long-standing love affair with hard-driving music for hard-living, hard-drinking people. Rock and roll may as well have been forged on the waterfront.

By the middle of the century, Hamilton had earned a reputation as a thriving musical hub. Ronnie Hawkins, a swagger-filled singer from rural Arkansas, came to Hamilton in 1958 and used the Grange Tavern as one of his early proving grounds. Long before filming *The Last Waltz*, the Band tested their mettle as one of Hawkins’s early backing bands, performing regularly in Hamilton’s saloons and ballrooms before winning the affection of Bob Dylan. Richard Newell, a local harmonica player better known as King Biscuit Boy, shared stages with the likes of Muddy Waters and Janis Joplin. John Ellison, a West Virginia blues-rocker famous for the hit “Some Kind of Wonderful,” moved here in 1974 and never left. British bluesman Long John Baldry also made a home in the area for many years. Area groups such as Lighthouse, which featured Hamilton-born Skip Prokop, and Crowbar, with their 1971 monster hit “Oh What A Feeling,” carried the city’s reputation for anthemic, blues-driven rock and roll well into the 1970s.

By the end of the 1970s, punk rock had taken over. In fact, Canadian authors Sam Sutherland and Liz Worth argue the genre owes as much to Hamilton as it does New York, London or Los Angeles. “The members of Teenage Head are real-life rock soldiers,” Sutherland writes in *Perfect Youth*, his fantastic retrospective of early Canadian punk. “They formed in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1975. They drew from the same set of proto-punk influences as the Ramones. They started to play short, atavistic rock

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and roll in 1976, before they ever heard the word ‘punk’ or a note played by the Sex Pistols.” Along with Teenage Head, bands such as Simply Saucer and Forgotten Rebels cemented Hamilton’s punk reputation during the late-1970s and early 1980s. Frankie “Venom” Kerr, lead singer of Teenage Head, died in 2008 following a lifetime of substance abuse and hard living. But his shadow looms large over Hamilton’s music community to this day.

During the mid-1990s, Hamilton rock groups Junkhouse and the Killjoys joined Sloan, the Tragically Hip, Change of Heart, Our Lady Peace and Alanis Morissette in Canada’s alternative music boom. Daniel Lanois, who had already produced landmark records from U2, Peter Gabriel and Robbie Robertson, launched a music career of his own on the strength of the albums *Acadie* and *For the Beauty of Wynona*. Sonic Unyon, an upstart indie label based in the downtown core, helped launch or revive the careers of Treble Charger, Hayden and Thrush Hermit, and issued records from local bands such as SIANspheric and Tristan Psionic. It was all fun to watch and listen to and absorb, but it never really belonged to my crew.

• • •

My generation was asked to get comfortable with less, and to do it in a hurry. We had gone off to university in record numbers, with the promise of careers and comfort at the other end, only to graduate and enter the workforce just as the bottom fell out of the global economy. Many of us were tens of thousands of dollars in debt before we even had a full-time job. Young people with engineering and commerce degrees from prestigious Canadian universities began working as bartenders and stock clerks. Student loans became impossible to pay back. Home ownership slipped out of reach – not just in Hamilton but major Canadian

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cities from Halifax to Vancouver. For many of us, the prospect of taking on a mortgage, driving two cars, having two kids, collecting a pension and retiring at sixty – the dream and the legacy of the baby boom – was suddenly more fantasy than reality. We were a generation of renters and boomerang basement-dwellers. We were underemployed, single and running around the city much longer than we should have been. We had more free time and restless energy than we knew what to do with.

In the midst of this economic turmoil, music and culture in Hamilton began to flourish. People looked inward – not to Toronto or Montréal or New York – to create something special that reflected our unique time and place in the world. The music was still tough and tenacious, but in many cases, also defiantly original. People started going downtown again. New independent businesses opened on long-abandoned street corners. Concert halls and underground clubs suddenly had lines snaking around full city blocks. I was fortunate to witness the birth of a whole new cultural movement first-hand.

I began writing the book that became *Evenings & Weekends* in 2011, while working as a newspaper reporter at *Niagara This Week*. During that period, I spent my evenings and weekends interviewing bands and hammering out copy, driven by the sheer knowledge that something special had taken place in my own backyard during the previous five years. More than anything, I wanted to capture the tempo of the times – the highs and the lows, the ugly, unfiltered truth. Young Rival drummer Noah Fralick gave the first interview for this book on August 3, 2011. Max Kerman, lead singer of Arkells and a former classmate at McMaster University, sat down with me for the second and third interviews in October. That's when I knew it was really going to work.

More than anything, this is a book about being in the right place at the right time. Sharing a common experience. Meeting

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like-minded people. Experimenting and taking chances. Feeling the need to create and consume and binge and purge with no need for external validation or fear of making a mistake. Like Manchester in the late 1980s or Seattle in the early 1990s, the Hamilton of my twenties was one of those unique and powerful scenes that appear in the unlikeliest of places. Those who are lucky enough to experience those times for themselves never forget them.

These are the stories of Juno Award winners and after-hours downtown DJs; of folk-rock troubadours and electronic music pioneers; of idealistic punks and gritty hip-hop heads; of venue owners, reporters, radio hosts, students, burnouts, girlfriends, boyfriends and downright weirdos – all bound by a desire to escape the mundane and devote their lives to the pursuit of music and art in Hamilton, at a time when everyone else was saying the city was dead. And every single word of it is true.