

Mondo Canuck

By Wyndham Wise

Mondo Canuck, by film and popular cultural critic Geoff Pevere and television producer Greig Dymond, is subtitled *A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey*. It might also be subtitled *The Revenge of Canadian Pop Culture* or *Death to Morningside*. Since Pevere was noisily let go in 1993 as the host of CBC Radio's first attempt at a show on popular culture, *Prime Time*, and it was replaced by reruns of *Morningside*, he has plotted this book. Co-written with his *Prime Time* producer Dymond (who is now the entertainment producer at CTV's *Canada AM*), *Mondo Canuck* proudly waves the flag of Canadian pop culture—indeed, the first image of the book is Johnny Wayne saluting with his trademark childish grin while Frank Shuster holds a small Canadian flag atop a globe—while systematically dismantling the officially sanctioned Canadian culture represented by the CBC, Peter Gzowski, Pierre Berton, *Front Page Challenge* and Norman Jewison.



Photo courtesy of CBC Photo Collection

Pevere and Dymond outline their case in the introduction: "Here's our suggestion. What if, for a moment, we were to drop that conventional Canadian middle-brow disinclination toward popular culture—a disinclination that is still very much alive and well—to suggest Canada is every bit as distinct in its approach to schlock as it is to art, and than the former may indeed reveal vastly more of a national distinction that the latter. That it's possible to see as much of ourselves (if not more) in Mike Myers as it is in Margaret Atwood. Moreover, what if, contrary to the established Canadian tradition of disowning anyone who dares to seek and find success elsewhere, we were to expand and ventilate our notion of what's Canadian to include what Canadians are doing on the globe pop-culture stage?"

Pevere and Dymond then proceed to expand on this "what if" to include 53 eclectic chapters on Canada's contribution to global pop culture, on topics ranging from hockey to hunks, hosers to Hollywood. For instance, the chapter on hockey ("Obsession: Hockey Days and Nights in Canada") includes bios on three of the top broadcasters of all time (Foster Hewitt, Danny Gallivan and Don Cherry), (Rocket) Richard's Grecian formula commercial, a brief discussion of *Face Off*, described as the "most exquisitely awful" Canadian film ever made, books about hockey, songs about hockey, a brief history of hockey cards, and a play by play account of Paul Henderson's immortal goal against the Russians in 1972. Each chapter is relatively short and packed with information, not unlike a very well constructed web site. The book is specifically designed to encourage browsing, with lots of striking imagery and short bytes of information. There is a chapter on animation ("King of Cartoons: Canada's Animated Empire") with 22 reasons why Canadians have come to dominate this rapidly changing art form; a chapter on Canadian Babes ("Schwing Time: The Great Canadian Babewatch") and why Playboy's Hugh Hefner has a taste for Canadian women; a chapter on Anne Murray ("A Great Broad"); Gordon Lightfoot ("Blood on the Tracks"); the sound explosion of the nineties (Alanis Morissette, k.d lang, The Tragically Hip, Shania Twain); the rock endurables (Robbie Robertson, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and Neil Young); and chapters on *SCTV*, game show hosts (Canada seems to have produced more than its fair share), children's TV (which Canadians excel at), Pierre Trudeau, Stompin' Tom and Moses Znaimer.

Nearly half the chapters are devoted to Canadian film and television, acknowledging the enormous influence Canadians have had on the dumbing down of North American humour. Tracing a line through the old *Harvard Lampoon*, *Animal House*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Meatballs*, *SCTV*, *Ghostbusters*, *Wayne's World* and *The Kids in the Hall*, the careers of Ivan Reitman, Lorne Michaels, Dan Aykroyd, Mike Myers intersect, all of them nurtured in the rec rooms of southern Ontario, watching American TV. Indeed, to make the connection even more complete, *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michaels was married briefly to Rosie Shuster, the daughter of Frank, therefore tracing Canadian domination of North American comedy to its roots in the Wayne and Shuster comedy sketches for *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Pevere and Dymond compile lists of the coolest English Canadian movies in a chapter on *Goin' Down the Road* ("Life is a Highway to Hell") and the same for French Canadian films in a chapter on *Mon oncle Antoine* ("Fade to Black"). My only quarrel here would



Ron Mann's CD-ROMS

By Jennie Punter

be that Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain* is not included. The most successful French-language film ever made in this country, it achieved the ultimate stamp of pop cultural success: Hollywood wanted to do an English-language remake. The list of the Canadians who have made it in Hollywood ("The 'Eh' List: Canada's Hollywood") pretty much correspond's to *Take One's* Distinctly Canadian list which was published in our Summer 1996 issue. I would quarrel only with the inclusion of Alan Thicke on this list. Granted Thicke has become a major Hollywood player, but his impact on the movies is negligible. Curiously, *Mondo Canuck's* list does not include James Cameron, who, along with Jewison and Reitman, is surely on Hollywood's 'A' list of directors.

The heart of Pevere's argument lies in the chapter on CBC's *Morningside* ("Canadian Shield: Who asked Peter Gzowski to save this country anyway?"). Here he outlines the myth of officially sanctioned Canadian culture, those writers, musicians, pundits, politicians, poets and farmers who make *Morningside* "the audio equivalent of Robert Bateman's wildlife paintings, W.O. Mitchell's prose or Kevin Sullivan's *Road to Avonlea* TV series: an appealing invocation of a mythical Canada (predominantly rural, simple, moral), whose absence in real life merely boosts its mythical currency. It is, in other words, a wilful act of denial—a comfort zone." Gzowski has become the official spokesperson for the enduring myth of Canada as an electronic village; however, his show is listened to by less than 15 per cent of the entire nation. Or, as Pevere concludes: "Whether or not one believes that whither goes Gzowski, so goeth the nation, this much is certain: when he finally does make his exit, an idea of Canada, if not the real thing, will probably go with him. The fact is, if the elder leaves, only 15 per cent of the country might feel that their village is on the brink of oblivion. The other 85 per cent won't even notice, and for a perfectly understandable reason: because they've never been invited inside."

Pevere and Dymond storm Canada's cultural ramparts with *Mondo Canuck*, arguing with confidence for a broader notion of Canada's contribution to North American, and therefore world, pop culture. Although they never ask the question, "Is Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* a Canadian film?" the answer is obvious. *Ghostbusters* is as much Canadian as it is American and speaks volumes for what we can achieve outside the narrow confines of officially sanctioned Canadian culture.

Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey.
By Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond.
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While many of us are used to dimming the lights, popping the corn and putting our feet up before settling in to watch a film, switching off the screensaver is not normally part of the ritual. But a seat in front of the computer is a great venue to take in Canadian filmmaker Ron Mann's *Poetry In Motion*, a documentary featuring Beat legends, younger punk upstarts and other spoken word artists, or *Comic Book Confidential*, a comprehensive (albeit with a counterculture bent) look at comic books, their creators and even their detractors.

A few years ago, Mann turned both acclaimed documentaries into CD-ROMs for Voyager, the highly regarded publisher of arts-oriented interactive multimedia titles (*The Residents' Freak Show*, *The Complete Maus* etc.), who then got Mann to start producing original works for CD-ROM. *Poetry In Motion II* presents quality interview and performance footage—from old faces like Charles Bukowski, Jim Carroll, Allen Ginsberg and Canadian Michael Ondaatje, as well as a dozen new faces like Spalding Gray, Peter Orlovsky and Bob Holman—Mann couldn't work into its predecessor. I recommend starting with *Poetry In Motion* because it includes the entire film, as well as additional footage and lots of supporting text. Then, if you just can't get enough, check out the sequel, which doesn't contextualize the material nearly as well, for obvious reasons.

Mann's latest CD-ROM is *Painters Painting*, a fabulous multimedia extension of the revealing 1973 documentary on the post-war New York art scene by Emile de Antonio, featuring big names like Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns. Like the *Comic Book Confidential* CD-ROM, *Painters Painting* not only includes the entire documentary, but also contains an extensive text biography of each artist, full-colour examples of his or her work (that can be looked at close-up), and other quality text-based materials that put the film subjects in their appropriate historical and cultural contexts.

Painters Painting also includes an excellent live interview with de Antonio (from a public television broadcast) in which he discusses his earlier, controversial political documentaries, and never-before-published excerpts from the filmmaker's journals. Author and critic Douglas Kellner acted as editor on the *Painters Painting* CD-ROM, and also wrote most of the text.

Based on his previous work with Voyager, Mann was the obvious and perfect choice to transform this fascinating, visually stunning documentary (which Kellner jokes should have been titled *Painters Talking*) into a multimedia format. The interface is seamless, easy to navigate and wonderful to look at. After a while, you get used to watching the film in a small frame (by way of the Quicktime player, a version of which is included on each CD-ROM, along with a good Help file). And be warned, the picture quality will vary depending on your system (requirements for Macintosh and Windows systems are listed on the back cover). The beauty of watching a movie with a mouse at hand is that you can move anywhere in the narrative in one click, or stop at any point to dive into the background material. Unless you have a full day at your disposal, this CD-ROM is impossible to get through in one sitting.

Poetry in Motion. CD-ROM by Ron Mann.
Released by Voyager and CityROM (On the web: www.citytv.com).
Emile de Antonio's Painters Painting. CD-ROM
by Ron Mann, edited by Douglas Kellner.
Released by Voyageur (On the web: <http://www.yoyagerco.com>).

