



Gordon Quinton

Past Perfect

Gordon Quinton's reputation places him among the finest acoustic guitarists in Newfoundland, if not the whole country. His various inspirations range from Joni Mitchell to Vincent Van Gogh. Jean Hewson lends an ear.

In the 1950s, Newfoundland and Labrador was a newly minted Canadian province, emerging from the aftermath of both Confederation with Canada, and the Second World War. The fishery and other resource-based industries were still thriving but the traditional life of outport Newfoundland was being altered by modern influences. The inhabitants of small, isolated communities were resettled to larger towns with better services. Young people opted to come to St. John's to go to university and trades college instead of fishing with their families. Television, radio and the many American bases that had sprung up during the war introduced a legion of musical styles to the populace, and accordion players and traditional singers had to make way for country pickers and

rock and rollers.

During that time of social flux, guitarist Gordon Quinton was born in the central Newfoundland town of Grand Falls-Windsor. His guitar style beautifully captures the mixed bag of cultural influences that transformed post-confederation Newfoundland. The arrangements on his latest CD, *A Guitar's Story*, include lovely settings of traditional melodies, blistering renditions of country favourites, and impressionistic, original pieces in alternate tunings. It represents the history of a self-taught musician whose passions encompass the old, the new, and the cutting edge.

"When I was 12, my older brother Doug had a friend by the name of Roy King from Windsor. Roy was in the army and he travelled a lot. Once, he came home with a guitar, which he loaned to my brother. When they went out I would take it and practice what I saw them doing. I learned D, G and A7. It was a Gibson archtop. It was really easy to play, with a beautiful tone. I thought all guitars were like that till I got a little older," laughs Quinton, reminiscing about the challenges of learning to play an instrument without formal instruction.

His grandmother was a fine accordion player and singer, and through her he came to love traditional music. Radio and television brought different musical genres into his life.

"On the radio we would hear a lot of

country music. We also had a TV station in Grand Falls in the early '60s called CJCN. Every Saturday evening they would feature a local band called the Exploits Valley Boys. We didn't have a TV but our neighbours left their window open in the summertime, so I could look in and see their TV and hear the people playing. Howard Bailey, one of the guys on the show, would do a solo on the guitar like *Steel Guitar Rag* or *Guitar Boogie Breakdown*. I couldn't believe it. That's when I started to flatpick the guitar."

After high school, Quinton moved to St. John's. The coffee house scene was in full swing and before long he became the guitarist of choice for many local acts. He played on CBC's *All Around the Circle* and toured with everyone from Joan Morrissey and Dick Nolan to Rufus Guinchart.

"Back then I was playing clubs seven nights a week. I really got tired of playing every night, it was becoming a bit of a grind. I would go on the road for seven or eight weeks, then come back home to pay the rent and go off again. I started to lose interest in music, I didn't enjoy playing anymore.

"One day at a friend's I heard a piece called *Rockport Sunday* by Tom Rush. It sounded really different, I couldn't figure out what the guy was doing. The guitar sounded so beautiful, like a harp. A few weeks later someone told me it was in an

Tubthumping

open C tuning. I also heard Joni Mitchell and Bruce Cockburn who were using tunings. Bruce did a song called *Foxglove* which I loved. Duane Allman had this piece called *Little Martha*, and I thought, 'Gee, I'd love to do something like that!'. Allman was a rock musician but this particular piece was on an acoustic in an open E tuning. Even now, all these years later when I hear it, I get shivers up my spine, it's so joyful and expressive."

The search for a deeper musical experience led Quinton to the recording studio. In the '80s he released his first three solo albums: *Guitar Songs*, *Woodnight Moon*, and *Wildwood Flower*. These recordings were largely collections of his arrangements of traditional and folk tunes. The title track of *Woodnight Moon* was an original piece, and was well received by his friends and fans. With their encouragement, he locked himself away for six months and created the music for his first recording of original music, *Sea Winds*, released in 1989.

"I like to interpret vision and sound and

translate those things to the guitar. Myself and my wife, Patti, loved to walk on the waterfront and look at the boats. One night we saw a Russian ship, and it was dark and mysterious, so I wrote a piece for it. On my latest CD [*A Guitar's Story*] I composed a piece called a *Night of Shimmering Stars*. I was out at Cape St. Mary's and there were a billion stars out that night, and I was also reading a book about Vincent Van Gogh that a friend had given to me, so the tune was inspired by those two things. I enjoy the process of taking different themes and creating pieces for them."

Over the course of his 40-year career, Quinton has released nine solo albums and a record with Ward Six, which is now a collector's item. He has also played on innumerable local albums and CDs. Many of Newfoundland's best-known musicians and guitarists, including Sandy Morris, Duane Andrews, Glen Collins, Chris LeDrew, and Bob Sutherby, consider him a musical inspiration and an icon. Dave Panting, instrumentalist and songwriter with

Rawlins Cross, says, "I was a bit in awe of him when I was young. Even then he had the reputation of being Newfoundland's top acoustic guitarist. To me, Gordon's playing has a vibe all its own; a gentle and contemplative mix of country, jazz, classical, and folk with Newfoundland trad thrown in there. He set the bar for me in those days and he still does."

These days, when he performs he generally stays close to home, but in a place where folk heroes are discovered in their 70s, and embark on international tours well into their 80s, it is possible that the busiest years of his career still lie ahead. Quinton laughs at that suggestion, and says that he still loves to play and learn new things, and that he is far from done.

"I've been playing the guitar for so long, but I always feel like a beginner. I love the look of it, the feel of it. It's not just for my own gratification. I like to move people with music. That's what it's all about, the shared joy. I never get tired of it, there's always something new to discover."