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# Aboard a Gull-chased Ship

Reviewed by Dr. Lambert Zuidervart, associate professor of philosophy, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

*i ran aground in a harbour town  
lost the taste for being free  
thank God He sent some gull-  
chased ship  
to carry me to sea.  
("All the Diamonds in the World")*

These lines come from a musical profession of faith. The year is 1974. The musician is Bruce Cockburn (pronounced "Coh-burn"), one of Canada's finest songwriter-guitarists. A year earlier Cockburn had seen his freedom to roam become a freedom to explore Christ's salvation.

A spiritual quest permeates all Cockburn's albums, from his antiurban *Going to the Country* (1969) to his liberationist *World of Wonders* (1985). This quest is also obvious in "Dialogue with the Devil" (*Sunwheel Dance*, 1971). Like Jesus in the wilderness, the singer confronts three temptations—to become superficial, to be self-satisfied, and to be successful. But there is something greater to embrace, despite the devil's claims:

*and we shall kiss the sun in spite  
of him  
so why don't we celebrate?*

The lyrics are subtle, and Cockburn's guitar work is exquisite. This classic song leaves little doubt: Cockburn seeks depth and integrity, despite superficiality in much contemporary popular music.

For some people a Christian conversion means simple answers and even simpler questions. Cockburn's experience has been different. Since 1973 his songs have remained complex and innovative. Their lyrics have ranged widely in topic and style. The folk, blues, and jazz elements of earlier albums have been enriched with elements of reggae and native Indian music. Cockburn's interpretation of his faith has also changed, most notably as of 1980.

Cockburn's albums from 1974 to 1979 convey joy mixed with sadness. While he



Bruce Cockburn

does not ignore social evils, he observes them at a distance. In "Gavin's Woodpile" (*In the Falling Dark*, 1976), for example, indignation at the native Indians' plight evaporates into a detached hope for something better:

*and i'm left to conclude there's no  
human answer near . . .  
but there's a narrow path to a  
life to come  
that explodes into sight with the  
power of the sun.*

After 1979, however, the observer begins to participate. No longer detached, Cockburn enters with hope into the human struggle for justice and peace.

This direct participation propels "Grim Travellers," the caustic opening cut of *Humans* (1980). The angry singer doesn't know why "we're grim travellers in dawn skies." One year later, on *Inner City Front*, new-wave toughness completely replaces Cockburn's antiurban folk

styles. But it is a toughness that aches for complete healing. The wail of "Broken Wheel" pierces a lull between urban battles:

*You and me—we are the break in the  
broken wheel  
Bleeding wound that will not heal  
Lord, spit on our eyes so we can see  
How to wake up from this tragedy*

All of us are responsible for social evil, according to Cockburn. His spiritual quest has led him to see social liberation as part of Christ's salvation.

In subsequent albums Cockburn seeks out signs and means of liberation. *The Trouble with Normal* (1983) lurches into a sullen attack on "normal" securities. He admonishes us: "Misplaced your faith and the candy man's gone." Is this pompous propaganda for nothing in particular? Or do we hear echoes of Matthew 6:19–34 in a godless age? Gradually the mood becomes wistful, until the album leaves us with poignant images of earth and humanity:

*This bluegreen ball in black space  
Filled with beauty even now  
battered and abused and lovely . . .  
Each one in our own heart  
Desperate to know where we stand  
Planet of the clowns in wet shoes  
("Planet of the Clowns")*

*Stealing Fire* (1984) captures Cockburn's experiences in Central America. He expresses solidarity with the oppressed in explicit lyrics, Hispanic musical idioms, and frequent background vocals. The album's title might refer to Prometheus, who stole divine fire for human welfare. Cockburn also is stealing fire. He seeks songs that speak of liberation for people in need, despite the powers that rule popular music in North America.

Not all of Cockburn's songs are excellent, nor is his search always compelling. Nevertheless, his work is significant and moving. Much of it is innovative, well crafted, and complex. He raises troubling questions and makes the gospel resonant in modern life. Into the struggle against social evil Cockburn has sailed a "gull-chased ship."