



al purdy was here

A FILM BY BRIAN D. JOHNSON

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Al Purdy Was Here

RT: 92 MINUTES

AL PURDY WAS HERE

Al, who had the looks and manner of a brawler, wanted to be a poet. And what is great is that he was a bad poet for a long time and that didn't stop him. That's where the heroism comes in.

- *Michael Ondaatje*

"I don't know of any good living poets. But there's this tough son of a bitch up in Canada that walks the line."

- *Charles Bukowski*

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AL PURDY WAS HERE is a Canadian documentary feature produced and directed by BRIAN D. JOHNSON, executive-produced by RON MANN, co-produced by JAKE YANOWSKI, and co-written by MARNI JACKSON and the director. The team also includes Director of Photography NICHOLAS DE PENCIER, Editor NICK TAYLOR and Composer CASEY JOHNSON. The cast features MARGARET ATWOOD, GEORGE BOWERING, JOSEPH BOYDEN, BRUCE COCKBURN, LEONARD COHEN, GORD DOWNIE, MAC FYFE, SARAH HARMER, STEVEN HEIGHTON, DENNIS LEE, KATHERINE LEYTON, DOUG PAISLEY, GORDON PINSENT, BRIAN PURDY, EURITHE PURDY, GERRY SHATFORD, SAM SOLECKI, HOWARD WHITE and TANYA TAGAQ. The film was developed and produced with the support of the CBC Documentary Channel, the Rogers Documentary Fund and the Rogers Cable Fund.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

What does it take to carve out a career as a poet? Why on earth would anyone attempt it? *Al Purdy Was Here* is the portrait of an artist driven to become a great Canadian poet at a time when the category barely existed. Al Purdy is a charismatic tower of contradictions: a "sensitive man" who whips out a poem in a bar fight; a factory worker who finds grace in an Arctic flower; a mentor to young writers who remained a stranger to his sons. Purdy has been called the last, best and most Canadian poet. "Voice of the Land" is engraved on his tombstone.

Before finding fame, Purdy endured decades of poverty and failure. A high-school dropout from Trenton, Ont., he hopped freights during the Depression, and worked in mattress factories from Vancouver to Montreal. He finally found his voice in an A-frame cabin on Roblin Lake in Ontario's Prince Edward County. Built from salvaged lumber by Purdy and his wife, Eurithe, in 1957, the cabin became a mecca for the pioneers of Canadian literature, including Margaret Lawrence, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Dennis Lee.

Fifteen years after Purdy's death, Canada's arts community rallies to save the cabin and turn it into a writing retreat for a new generation of poets. As Al's 90-year-old widow, Eurithe, relinquishes a home full of memories, a young feminist poet moves in and finds herself possessed by the ghost of an old-school male. The narrative is paced by performances of original songs inspired by Purdy. And as the poet's legacy is revived, his untold story is revealed.

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LONG SYNOPSIS

In a graveyard by the bank of an old millpond, 90-year-old Eurithe Purdy is tending the tomb of her husband, poet Al Purdy, who died in 2000. It's a black granite slab in the shape of a book, with "Voice of the Land" engraved on the spine. Eurithe picks up some mementoes people have left on the stone: a beer cap, a seashell, a small metal turtle.

Purdy pilgrims come to the southern Ontario village of Ameliasburgh, looking for Al's grave and the A-frame cabin, where he and Eurithe lived off and on for four decades. Poets gravitate to graveyards, but none so much as Al Purdy. Whenever a TV camera crew came calling, he would take them to the local cemetery. In a black-and-white archival clip, we see Purdy swigging from a whiskey bottle by the tomb of a local ancestor who inspired his epic poem, *In Search of Owen Roblin*. Cut to the present, and to Queen's Park in Toronto, where the poet's own bronze monument, a life-like sculpture of Al, holds court. Most of the college kids passing by can't identify him.

So who is Al Purdy? Interviews with those close to the poet and his work—publisher Howard White, editor Sam Solecki, writers Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Steve Heighton and George Bowering—paint a portrait of a complex, provocative, unforgettable figure. Al is a charismatic tower of contradictions: a self-professed "sensitive man" who reads a poem after punching a man to the floor in bar; a factory worker who finds grace in an Arctic flower; a mentor to young writers but a father who remained a stranger to his sons. Winner of two Governor General Awards, Purdy has been called the last, best and most Canadian poet. He travelled the entire country, capturing its landscapes like a one-man Group of Seven. But before finding fame as the country's unofficial poet laureate, he endured years of poverty and failure.

Born in Wooler, Ontario in 1918, Al was a high-school dropout who hopped freight trains during the Depression. He lived all over, often working in mattress factories. After two decades of writing what he admits was bad poetry, in 1957 he and his wife built an A-frame cabin in Ontario's Prince Edward County, the country of his childhood. There he found his voice, and surprising success. The A-frame soon became a mecca for the early pioneers of Canadian literature, writers like Margaret Laurence, Dennis Lee, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. And in this rustic salon, well irrigated by Al's wild grape wine, a cultural community took root.

Now, 15 years after Purdy's death, artists and patrons have rallied to restore his ramshackle home as a writers' retreat. It's a quixotic enterprise. But as the A-frame comes back to life, it generates a Purdy revival, and an album of original songs inspired by his life and work. The film features performances by artists including Atwood, Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen, Bruce Cockburn, Gord Downie, Gordon Pinsent, Sarah Harmer, Felicity Williams, Doug Paisley, Tanya Tagaq and Joseph Boyden.

The narrative, which shifts between Purdy's story and the A-frame revival, is paced by a series of tweets from Al Purdy's statue. These are real tweets, not scripted by the filmmakers. Two years before the film's production started, Purdy's statue in Queen's Park already had a prolific Twitter account (@statueofalpurdy), created by a mysterious scribe who posts Zen-like tweets from the statue's P.O.V. almost daily. He seems fixated on squirrels.

The film features a cast of compelling characters bound up in Purdy's legacy. They range from his widow, Eurithe—who reflects on their turbulent marriage while overseeing the cabin's restoration with a vigilant eye—to the A-frame's first resident poet, Katherine Leyton, a vivacious young feminist who finds herself conversing with the ghost of an old-school male. Singer-songwriter Doug Paisley, an avid Purdy fan, recalls how the poet left an indelible impression on him as a teenager when he met him at a reading in a rough small-town bar. And Atwood recounts how she poured a beer over Al's head the first time they met, after he called her "an academic."

In so much of the Purdy lore, alcohol plays a supporting role. Al liked to cultivate his public image as a scrappy beer-hall bard—a persona enshrined by his most popular poem, *At the Quinte Hotel*, with its ironizing boast, "I am a sensitive man." But as Sam Solecki points out, "Al is a trickster," and his punch-drunk bravado served as a cover for a complicated man. "There are many Al Purdys," says Solecki. "Out of that trickster, there was a body of poetry waiting to appear. Forty books plus. Poetry about our history, poetry about national identity, poetry about the first nations, poetry about this *life*."

Through Al's poetry, and songs inspired by it, the film explores the many Al Purdys. At an A-frame fundraising show in Toronto, musician Gord Downie brings to life *At the Quinte Hotel*, his reading intercut with Bruce Alcock's animated film of the poem. Doug Paisley's romantic ballad *Transient* conjures up Purdy as a homesick teenager, riding a freight train home from Vancouver. Sarah Harmer, sitting alone at the piano in her farmhouse, records *Just Get Here*, an original song inspired by the notion of the A-frame as an artists' gathering place. Under the rafters of the A-frame, Felicity Williams records a haunting jazz adaptation of Purdy's classic poem *The Country North of Belleville*, intercut with a reading by Gordon Pinsent. And novelist Joseph Boyden teams up with Polaris Music Prize-winning Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq to record an electrifying rendition of *Say the Names*, Purdy's anthemic poem about Canada's Aboriginal heritage.

Through interviews and archival footage, we see how this outsider artist found a kindred spirit in working-class poet Milton Acorn, and won approval from an emerging canon of

writers such as Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton and Charles Bukowski. As he achieves success and fame, we see him work his charm on the Canadian TV personalities of the day—Adrienne Clarkson, Pamela Wallin, Pierre Berton, Daniel Richler—and become an outspoken cultural nationalist.

We also get a revealing glimpse into the private Purdy. Eurithe steps out of the shadows to talk about Al's shortcomings as a father to their son, Jim, who was afflicted by schizophrenia. And we learn family secrets that Al never talked about even in his memoirs, notably a second son he fathered with another woman, a struggling poet named Brian Purdy.

In the film, Eurithe Purdy finally gets her due as the working wife who managed her husband's career, weighed in on his poems, and kept him afloat. Her shrewd character, along with Al's, is at the core of the film. Early on, Eurithe became resigned to the fact that a marriage, or a family, could never compete with her husband's single-minded passion for poetry. Now, as she nurtures his legacy and sees their A-frame home turned over to young writers, she absorbs change with mixed emotions and stoic reserve. Her silence speaks volumes. In the final scene, to the sound of Leonard Cohen reading Purdy's "Necropsy of Love" — *"if it came about you died / it might be said I love you"* — she walks through the graveyard, now blanketed in deep snow.

* * *

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Why a film about Al Purdy? Why now?

Looking back on Al Purdy's long struggle to make it as a poet, his widow Eurithe, dryly describes his line of work as "a field that was circumscribed, at the best of times." Now the vocation of Great Canadian Poet sounds as arcane as National Blacksmith. And making a documentary about the revival of a dead Canadian poet seemed no less quixotic an enterprise.

I didn't choose this story; it chose me. My wife, Marni Jackson, brought Al Purdy into our home when she began writing a play about him then got drawn into the campaign to restore his A-frame cabin as a writing retreat. She asked me to edit a reel of archival footage for a fundraising show. Which is how it all started over two years ago.

Purdy was new to me. I'd barely read him, and his media appearances over the years had somehow escaped me, though it's unlikely any Canadian poet before or since has spent as much time on TV and radio as Purdy. He was no Marshall McLuhan, but there was a charismatic novelty to this working class philosopher-poet who could talk beer and roadkill, writing and politics, and capture the magic of the land like a one-man Group of Seven. Al was a good story: a self-made poet in a self-made house finding a voice for a country learning to invent itself. He was one of CanLit's early *coureurs de bois*, unraveling his ancestral trails while trying to shake off the colonial scent of Britain and resist the easy embrace of America.

As Sam Solecki points out in the film, "there are many Al Purdys." And beyond the Bunyan-like legend and the well-known poems, his work lay before us like a vast undiscovered country. At every stage of production, we kept dipping back into the poetry and were constantly surprised by what we found. Everyone in the crew was reading it. Al was our silent partner, shaping the film through the backchannel of his writing. We loved him enough that we feared falling prey to hagiography, which would be both dishonest and unfair to a poet who detested flattery. But Al's bravado came with a self-deprecating spin. His uniquely Canadian style of heroism lay in the fact that he embraced his failures as fully as his triumphs. And when we began to look beyond his official story, we found enough dark matter to undercut the myth.

Al Purdy Was Here began with modest ambitions. It soon outgrew them, and took on a life of its own as an array of Purdy devotees came out of the woodwork to offer up their talent and material: writers, musicians, photographers, filmmakers, graphic artists, animators. For a cigar-puffing provocateur who didn't go out of his way to be likeable, Purdy has earned an enduring affection over the years. Some of that has to do with his public persona—he was starring in a movie of his own making—but much of it has to do with his poetry, which was far deeper and more delicate than the persona let on.

We came to feel that Purdy represents a lost Canada. In *The Country North of Belleville*, he wrote, "This is the country of our defeat," and now that line rings true in ways he could not have imagined. In the end, the revival of Al's legacy, with its folklore of wild-grape wine and homemade beer, is not about enlarging the reputation of a poet who is already larger-than-life. It seems to have drummed up a collective longing for a place where poetry once mattered, and a time when our cultural horizons were still being opened up, rather than fenced in and cut back. And at every turn of making the movie, we found people keen to revive that that spirit. Not just nostalgic boomers, but young artists hoping to conjure up a Canada they never knew.

Sometimes a country needs a poet.

- *Brian D. Johnson, August 2015.*

PRODUCTION NOTES

Making a documentary feature is never easy. But finding support to make a documentary about a dead Canadian poet presents some peculiar challenges. *AL PURDY WAS HERE*, which began production in February 2014, evolved organically, from a seed planted five years earlier—by a slim volume called *The Al Purdy A-Frame Anthology*, put out by Harbour Publishing in 2009. This collection of photos, anecdotes and essays helped launch a Canada-wide campaign to save and restore a literary landmark—Al Purdy's legendary A-frame cabin in Ontario's Prince Edward County—and transform it into a writing retreat for a new generation of poets. The book inspired author Marni Jackson to begin writing a play about Purdy and his wife, Eurithe. In the process, she got drawn into the A-frame campaign, which is led by Vancouver editor Jean Baird, along with her husband, poet George Bowering, and B.C. publisher Howard White.

Jackson helped organize and script a fundraising show at Toronto's Koerner Hall in February 2013, which featured a stellar line-up of Canadian artists, including Margaret Atwood, Gord Downie and Gordon Pinsent. She asked her husband, Brian D. Johnson, then a writer with *Maclean's* magazine, to edit a montage of archival clips for the show. "That was my first encounter with Purdy, and I couldn't get over how compelling he was on camera," says Johnson. He also arranged to film the show, and that shoot would become the catalyst for *Al Purdy Was Here*.

It took almost a year what to figure out what to do with the footage. In January 2014, Johnson ended his 28-year career as a Senior Writer and film critic at *Maclean's*. Soon after, he developed a proposal for a Purdy documentary and a tandem project that would fuel the film—*The Al Purdy Songbook*, an A-Frame fundraising album of original music inspired by the poet. "Songwriters have a natural affinity with poets," he says. "I put together a wish-list, and the response was phenomenal."

But even before he had cast any stars for the film or the *Songbook*, Johnson took his proposal to producer-director RON MANN (*Grass*, *Altman*), who executive-produced Johnson's two experimental Bravo!FACT shorts (*Tell Me Everything*, *Yesno*). Mann was no stranger to poetry—his second documentary feature, *Poetry in Motion* (1982) is still fondly remembered. Signing on as Executive-Producer, Mann agreed to help raise financing and distribute *Al Purdy Was Here* through his company, Films We Like.

In summing up his approach, Mann quotes record producer Todd Rundgren, who produced albums for The Band, the New York Dolls and Patti Smith: "If you know what you want, I'll get it for you." Explains Mann: "From the outset Brian knew what he wanted. My role as Executive Producer was simply to get him whatever he needed." BRUCE COWLEY, Creative Head of Digital Channels at CBC, got the ball rolling by offering a broadcast licence from the Documentary Channel. Rogers Documentary Fund, the Rogers Cable Fund and the Canadian Media Fund.

With an extremely modest budget and a tight schedule, the production turned into a barn-raising, supported by an endless supply of goodwill. Writers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, animators and graphic artists donated their work and time. "As a young producer passionate about making Canadian films happen," says co-producer JAKE YANOWSKI, "I couldn't believe my luck when I stumbled upon the Al Purdy story. The outpouring of talent, generosity, and flat-out kindheartedness of everyone involved made this project a thrill from Day One." Yanowski brought invaluable experience from his role as researcher and post-production coordinator on Mann's *Altman*, another posthumous portrait of an artist. "At first I thought I was hiring an assistant," says Johnson, "but Jake became an vital creative partner at every stage of the film. It's strange to find yourself being mentored by a 25-year-old."

Among the small crew, the most experienced filmmaker was Director of Photography NICHOLAS DE PENCIER. Best known for shooting and producing award-winning documentaries with director Jennifer Baichwal (*Watermark*, *Manufactured Landscapes*), De Pencier had worked with Johnson on *Yesno*. He brought his eye for *vérité* and sense of a visual poetry to the film, whether filming October landscapes in the "country north of Belleville" or Margaret Atwood shooting pool at the Pilot Tavern.

"One of the challenges in making a movie about a subject who is no longer living is how to humanize that subject," says De Pencier. "Lucky for us, there were many living links to Purdy. Filming Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, and of course his widow, Eurithe, was like looking through a series of windows back to Al, with an emotional connection to the man, not just his work. The interviews were shot with a minimum of artifice or stylization—a transparent view—to feel the most direct impact of the subjects' presence. This provided a visual anchor that liberated us to be more 'poetic' with the camera in other moments."

Poetry saturates the film in multiple forms—song lyrics, landscapes, images of Al's original typescripts. There are also readings, not only by Purdy, but by GORD DOWNIE, GORDON PINSENT, MARGARET ATWOOD and LEONARD COHEN. The notion of having poets deliver another poet's lines was the basis of Johnson's short film *Yesno*, in which Cohen, Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje read work by Dennis Lee.

Although Leonard Cohen met Purdy in Montreal in the 1960s, they were not close, personally or stylistically. In his memoir, *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*, Purdy recalls that "beyond admiration, I felt a little jealous of Cohen, because I knew his mystic priestly attitudes were something foreign to my own character. I couldn't steal a damn thing from him." He also gave him one of Cohen's books a mixed review. Nevertheless, Cohen made one of the first major donations to the A-frame charity early in the campaign. And his intimate reading of Purdy's *Necropsy of Love*, recorded in Los Angeles, is a priceless gift from one poet to another.

Purdy was an incredibly prolific writer, with a body of work that seems as large and diverse as the country that inspired him. Selecting and adapting his poetry—and his life—to fit a 90-minute film was daunting. But this film, about a writer, was created by two writers under one roof, the director and his wife, MARNI JACKSON, who spent countless hours sifting

through Purdy's memoirs and poetry, shaping the narrative. "You don't really write a documentary, of course, you build it, like a nest—or a cabin," says Jackson. "The story of how Al and Eurithe used salvaged lumber and a mail-order blueprint to assemble the A-Frame struck me as a metaphor for the hard work, risk and resourcefulness you need to write a poem, or make a film. You use what's at hand, creatively. As Al says, 'You just do it.' Which is the only way a country's culture gets built, too."

At one point in the film, DUNCAN PATTERSON, the architect overseeing the A-Frame restoration, says: "We have to find a contractor, but we can't just find *any* contractor, that's just not going to work. We have to find somebody who reads poetry! How do you find a contractor who reads poetry?" Just as the A-frame found a poetry-reading contractor, the film found a poetry-reading editor. While editing the film, NICK TAYLOR, who studied poetry at Carleton University, kept delving into Purdy's oeuvre, plucking out gems. "At the beginning of the project I was unsure if I even liked his poetry," Taylor recalls. "Purdy seemed a relic, a particular kind of mid-20th-century man—all bluster, entitlement and casual chauvinism. But the more I got into his work and saw its breadth, the more I found stuff that resonated with me. He could write wonderful gothic scenarios and then something small and tender."

The biggest challenge was to find the right balance between two timelines—the contemporary story of the A-Frame revival and the biographical portrait of Purdy. Initially, it was tilted toward the contemporary story. "When I embarked on the project," the director explains, "I was determined not to make an archival doc stuck in the past. But when we screened a rough cut, *everyone* wanted more Al Purdy. Though he was a public figure, and on TV a lot, it's amazing how quickly fame fades. Now people are ready to discover him all over again."

Creating rhythm and harmony between past and present appealed to Taylor (also a professional musician), who says he was "eager to use music, imagery and sound editing to have the past echo into the present and vice-versa." Music plays a central role in the film, with seven original Purdy-inspired tracks, commissioned from Canadian musicians Bruce Cockburn, Sarah Harmer, Greg Keelor, Doug Paisley, Snowblink, Felicity Williams—and from an ad hoc trio formed by Tanya Tagaq, Joseph Boyden and Jesse Zubot.

Keelor, Snowblink, Williams and the Tagaq trio all adapted individual poems. Harmer, Paisley and Cockburn were each inspired by a variety of works. Most of Purdy's poems don't rhyme or follow a song-like metre, so his lines couldn't simply be turned into lyrics. The musicians were urged to take poetic licence and adapt his poetry as freely as they wished. The result is an unprecedented convergence of songwriting talent around the work of a Canadian poet.

Some artists were already familiar with Purdy. Asked if he'd like a volume of his collected poetry, Bruce Cockburn he said, "I've already got it." Doug Paisley, a fan of the poet ever since meeting him in a bar as a teenager, has a collection of rare Purdy editions. Felicity Williams is another fan who discovered Purdy in her teens. Years before being approached by the filmmakers, she'd already performed a suite of songs adapted from his poetry. And

jazz artist GERRY SHATFORD had created an entire album of instrumental pieces inspired by Purdy—two of those tracks ended up in the movie.

But other artists were discovering Purdy for the first time, such as Snowblink duo DANIELA GESUNDHEIT and DAN GOLDMAN, who chose verses from Al's poem *Arctic Chrysanthemums* to compose the haunting rhapsody of *Outdoor Hotel*. Neither Tanya Tagaq nor Joseph Boyden had previously encountered *Say the Names*, which Purdy published not long before his death. With producer/violinist Jesse Zubot, the author and the Inuk throat singer improvised an electrifying version of the poem, an anti-colonial incantation of Aboriginal place names.

NEIL YOUNG was also approached to write a song, and was sent "My '48 Pontiac," a Purdy poem set in an automobile junkyard. He liked the poem, and though he did not adapt it, Young graciously donated his 1971 Massey Hall performance of *Journey Through the Past* to the film's soundtrack.

With the *Songbook* tracks taking up so much of the film's musical real estate, the original score had to play a very focused role. The composer CASEY JOHNSON took an unconventional approach. He recorded the entire score in his own studio with vintage analog equipment. "So many film scores have the same synthetic sound these days," says the director, "as if they've all come from same cookie-cutter software. Casey's music has a raw sound and a distinctive voice that corresponds to Al's ear for authenticity."

"I approached the score as if I were writing material for a stand-alone album," says Casey. "With the help of some great collaborators, I took what you might call a method-acting approach, and worked my way toward an unknown end point, with a lot of trial and error. I tried to find sounds that would evoke Purdy, using a variety of instruments including Hammond organ, double bass, acoustic and electric guitar, pianorgan, a drum machine, and tape echo. We created a huge amount of material—the score is just the tip of the iceberg."

This collaboration between a father making his first feature and a son composing his first film score was a bold move for both. "I think the score is the least 'direct-able' element of a film, and it has huge influence," says Brian. "I remember a journalist in Cannes asking Quentin Tarantino why he didn't use a composer. Tarantino said, 'The music is the *soul* of my film! Why would I trust the soul of my film to a composer?' I can see his point. But I trusted Casey."

* * *

— THE CAST —



Al Purdy

Born in Wooler, Ont., in 1918, Alfred Wellington Purdy lost his father when he was 2. His mother sold the family farm and moved to Trenton after her husband's death. Al began writing poetry in his teens, but dropped out of high school at 17. He hopped boxcars during the Depression, riding back and forth to Vancouver. In 1939, he enlisted in the Air Force but was considered unfit for combat. Purdy married Eurithe Parkhurst in 1941, and was posted at RCAF bases in Vancouver, Woodcock and Kitsilano, B.C. He rose to the rank of corporal, but his attitude got him successively demoted until, in his words, "I was saluting civilians." After the war, Purdy lived all over the country, piling sacks of dried blood in a slaughterhouse on Granville Island, and working in mattress factories in both Vancouver and Montreal. He also launched an ill-fated taxi company. Meanwhile, Purdy spent two decades writing more than 1,000 poems that he later dismissed as not worth keeping. He finally found his voice not far from his birthplace—in an A-frame cabin that he and Eurithe built in 1957, with salvaged materials, on Roblin Lake in Ameliasberg, Ontario. In 1962, Purdy made his breakthrough with *Poems for All the Annettes*, in which he abandoned traditional rhyming verse for a more adventurous, colloquial style. He spent the last half of his life as successful writer and a celebrated Canadian media personality. He travelled widely, and visited Cuba with Pierre Elliot Trudeau before Trudeau was prime minister. Purdy's legacy would include 39 books of poetry, a novel, two volumes of memoirs, four books of correspondence, radio and TV plays, an Order of Canada and two Governor General's Awards. Weeks before his death from lung cancer in April 2000, the League of Canadian Poets proclaimed Purdy "The Voice of the Land," the phrase engraved on his gravestone and on a bronze statue in Queen's Park unveiled in 2008. Purdy fathered two children—Jim, his son with Eurithe, died at 67 in 2002; Brian Purdy, a son from his brief marriage to Ila Bachelor in 1946, lives in Halifax.



Eurithe Purdy

She hails from a family of 11 children raised in the hardscrabble farmland that inspired *The Country North of Belleville*, one of her husband's most canonical poems. Eurithe Mary Parkhurst met Al when she was 15, they married in 1941 and had a son, Jim, in 1945. Despite some turbulent times and separations, they remained together until Al's death in 2000. Eurithe was always Al's first editor. And she helped support his career by working

various office jobs, then buying and selling real estate. In their later years, Al and Eurithe travelled extensively, and lived between their house in Sydney, B.C., and the A-frame in Ameliasburg, Ont. Since Al's death, Eurithe has diligently curated his legacy. By agreeing to sell the A-frame to the Al Purdy A-Frame Association, she allowed a home laden with half a century of memories to be restored as a writing retreat for a new generation of poets. After selling the A-Frame Eurithe watched over the restoration with a sharp curatorial eye, and even after selling the property, scrubbed and cleaned until the first resident poet moved in. Now 90, she plans to publish a new volume of "selected uncollected" poetry, drawing from Al's previously unpublished work.



Margaret Atwood

Born in Ottawa in 1963, Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 40 volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and non-fiction. Her novels include *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin*, which won the Booker Prize in 2000, and trilogy of novels that included *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *MaddAddam* (2013), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Her non-fiction book, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* was adapted for the screen by Jennifer Baichwal in 2012. Her new novel, *The Heart Goes Last* will be published in September 2015. Atwood famously poured a bottle of beer on Purdy's head when she first met him as a young poet ("He called me an academic"). But they became fast friends, were lifelong correspondents, and she wrote one of two prefaces to his final book of *Collected Poems*. (Michael Ondaatje wrote the other.)



Dennis Lee

Dennis Lee's poetry has ranged from popular children's verse to bold experiments of thought and language. Born in Toronto in 1939, he co-founded House of Anansi Press, where he edited a Purdy collection, and was poetry editor at McClelland & Stewart from 1981-84. Lee has published 19 books of children's poetry, notably *Alligator Pie* (1974). He was Toronto's first Poet Laureate (2001-04), and his honours include the Governor General's Award, the Toronto Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement, Officer of the Order of Canada, and honorary doctorates from the University of Toronto, Ryerson University and Trent University. He has been a Resident Artist at Soulpepper Theatre since 2011. His most recent book of poetry is *Testament*, which merges *Un* and its apocalyptic sequel, *Yesno*, which was adapted into a short film by Brian D. Johnson in 2010.



Leonard Cohen

One of Canada's most revered artists, Leonard Cohen is a master songwriter, musician, poet and novelist. With an international career spanning six decades, 23 million albums sold and 12 books, his influence is inestimable. He has been honored as a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient, and inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, the Canadian Music Hall Of Fame, the Canadian

Songwriters Hall Of Fame and the Songwriters Hall Of Fame. Other honours include the Glenn Gould Prize and Companion to the Order of Canada. Cohen, who first met Purdy in Montreal during the 1950s, was one of the first major donors to the A-Frame campaign. He contributed performances to both of Brian D. Johnson's short films, playing jaw harp on the score of *Tell Me Everything* and reading a Dennis Lee poem in *Yesno*. In *Al Purdy Was Here*, Leonard performs a V.O. reading of Purdy's *Necropsy of Love*.



George Bowering

With over 100 titles to his name, George Bowering has enjoyed a prolific career as a poet, novelist, essayist, and professor. Born in 1935 in Penticton, B.C., he and Al Purdy belonged to rival poetry movements, but they were longtime friends and their correspondence was voluminous. Bowering has published a book and many essays about Purdy, including a feature on the A-Frame for

Cottage Life. He became Canada's first poet laureate in 2000. Other honours include the Order of Canada, two Governor General's Awards, and an Honorary Degree from the University of British Columbia.



Jean Baird

A Ph.D. in literature, Jean Baird is the Vancouver-based director of the Al Purdy A-Frame Association, a charity to which she has devoted herself for six years without remuneration. Baird has worked as professor, editor and researcher. She has extensive experience with national campaigns: she authored a Canada Council paper about use of Canadian literature in high schools, ran Canada Book Day for the Writers' Trust, and recently

spearheaded BC BookWorks, which successfully lobbied the Ministry of Education to mandate Canadian literature in B.C. high schools. Baird is married to George Bowering.



Howard White

Born in 1945 in Abbotsford, B.C., Howard White founded *Raincoast Chronicles* and Harbour Publishing in the early 1970s. Based in Pender Harbour, B.C., he was Al Purdy's last publisher, with books that include *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* and collections of his letters and prose. White's own books of prose and poetry include *A Hard Man to Beat*, *The Men There Were Then*, *Spilsbury's Coast*, *The Accidental Airline*, *Patrick and the Backhoe* and *Writing in the Rain*. He has been awarded the Order of Canada, a Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour, and an honorary doctorate of laws degree from the University of Victoria. As publisher of *The Al Purdy A-Frame Anthology*, White has played a key role in preserving Purdy's legacy.



Sam Solecki

Sam Solecki is emeritus professor of English at the University of Toronto. A former editor of *The Canadian Forum*, he edited a number of Al Purdy's books, including *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* (2000), *Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets: Selected Poems 1962-1996*, *Starting from Ameliasburgh: The Collected Prose of Al Purdy* (1995) and *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy* (2004). His own books include *The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy* (1999), *Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje* (2003) and *A Truffaut Notebook* (2015).



Katherine Leyton

Katherine Leyton was the inaugural Writer-in-Residence at the Al & Eurithe Purdy A-Frame in the summer of 2014. Her poetry and non-fiction have appeared in numerous publications in Canada and abroad, including *The Malahat Review*, *Hazlitt*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Edinburgh Review*. She has a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh and is the founder of the highly unorthodox video poetry blog HowPedestrian.ca. During her time at the A-Frame, she took the *Pedestrian* concept to the countryside, and shot videos of local residents reading Purdy poems, some of which became part of the film. A native of Toronto, she has lived in Rome, Montreal, Edinburgh and Forlì, and has made her living as a bartender, tour guide, porn writer and library assistant, among other things.



Steven Heighton

Born in 1961 and based in Kingston, Ont. Steven Heighton is a poet, novelist and essayist who became a good friend of Al and Eurithe Purdy as a young writer who frequently visited the A-Frame. His most recent books are the Trillium Award finalist short story collection, *The Dead Are More Visible* (2012), *Workbook: memos & dispatches on writing* (2011), the novel *Every Lost Country* (2010) and the poetry collection *Patient*

Frame (2010). He is also the author of the novel *Afterlands* (2006), which appeared in six countries, was a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice, and a "best of year" selection in ten publications in Canada, the USA, and the UK. The book has recently been optioned for film



Michael Ondaatje

Born in Sri Lanka and based in Toronto, Michael Ondaatje is an internationally celebrated author based in Toronto. His six novels include *In The Skin of A Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992) and *The Cat's Table* (2011). He has also published 13 collections of poetry, most recently *Handwriting* (1998). His non-fiction work includes *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (2002). A friend of Al Purdy's, Ondaatje

wrote a preface to his *Collected Poems*. In *Al Purdy Was Here*, he reads a letter that he sent to Purdy not long before his death.



Gordon Pinsent

Born in Grand Falls, Newfoundland, in 1930, Gordon Pinsent is one of Canada's most beloved actors. He is also a screenwriter, songwriter and director. Pinsent is known for award-winning performance in theatre, movies and television. His film roles range from *The Rowdyman*, a 1972 Canadian classic that he scripted, to Sarah Polley's Oscar-nominated drama *Away From Her*, in which he co-starred with Julie Christie. Pinsent has been honoured with

a Canadian Film Award, three Genies, four Geminis, two Canadian Screen Awards, a Governor General's Award for the Performing Arts, and was made a Companion of the Order of Canada. He portrayed Al Purdy in the CBC's *Yours, Al* (2006), based on the poet's letters. At the A-frame fundraising show at Toronto's Koerner Hall in 2013, Pinsent read Purdy's poem *The Country North of Belleville*.



Sarah Harmer

Born in Burlington, Ont. in 1970, Sarah Harmer is an acclaimed singer-songwriter. Among her five solo albums, two have gone gold and her breakthrough effort, *You Were Here* went platinum. Her country/bluegrass album, *I'm a Mountain*, garnered three Juno Award nominations. Harmer, who lives in the country near Kingston, Ont., says could relate to the idea of a place like the A-frame where artists gather because she has done the

same thing herself with groups of musicians. That touchstone, and some of Purdy's poems, inspired *Just Get There*, an original song that she composed, and recorded for the film on the piano in her house.



Bruce Cockburn

Over four decades, singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn has enjoyed an illustrious career shaped by politics, spirituality, and musical diversity. He has embraced folk, jazz, rock, and world-beat styles, while engaging in activism over Native rights, land mines, the environment and Third World debt—and working for organizations such as Oxfam, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, and Friends of the Earth. The Ottawa-born artist

has recorded 31 albums. He has been honoured with 12 Juno Awards, an induction into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, a Governor General's Performing Arts Award, and the Order of Canada. For the film, Cockburn wrote *3 Al Purdys*, an epic ballad that he recorded at the legendary Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, Calif. It's the first song he's written in two-and-a-half years. Now that the creative juices are flowing again, he hopes to record a new album soon, and expects the Purdy song to be on it.



Joseph Boyden

Born in 1966 in Willowdale, Ont., Joseph Boyden is an award-winning author of Irish, Scottish and Anishinaabe heritage who divides his life between New Orleans and northern Ontario. He writes novels and short stories rooted in First Nations culture. His novel *Three Day Road* (2005) was nominated for the Governor General's Award and won the Rogers Writers' Trust fiction prize, and the Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award.

His second novel, *Through Black Spruce* (2008) won the Scotiabank Giller prize. His third,

The Orenda, was named the 2014 winner of the CBC's *Canada Reads* contest. In a recording session at Blue Rodeo's Toronto studio, Boyd plays jaw harp and reads the Purdy poem *Say the Names*, accompanied by singer Tanya Tagaq and violinist Jesse Zubot.



Tanya Tagaq

Tanya Tagaq was raised in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, and attended high school in Yellowknife, where she first began to practice Inuk throat singing. Later, studying visual arts at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, she developed her own solo form of throat singing, which is normally done by two women. Tagaq's debut album, *Sinaa* (2005) won three Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards. Her career exploded with *Animism* (2014), her third studio

album, which won the prestigious \$30,000 Polaris Music Prize as well as the Juno for Aboriginal Album of the Year. For the film, she improvised *Say the Names* with Joseph Boyden and violinist Jesse Zubot (whose work on *Animism* was honoured with a Juno nomination for Producer of the Year).



Gord Downie

Born in Kingston, Ontario, Gord Downie is the lead singer, songwriter and driving creative force behind The Tragically Hip, which has been one of Canada's most popular rock bands for over two decades. He is also a poet. His solo releases include *Coke Machine Glow*, *Battle Of The Nudes*, *The Grand Bounce*, and the latest album *Gord Downie, The Sadies, and the Conquering Sun*. Downie portrayed Al Purdy in a short film

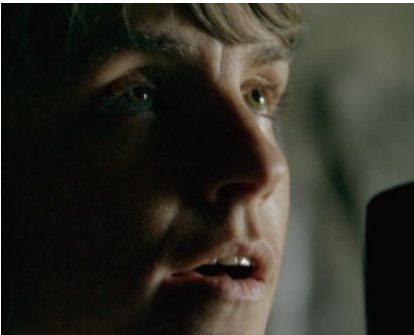
dramatization of *At the Quinte Hotel*. A strong supporter of the A-Frame campaign from the outset, he performed a song and read *Quinte Hotel* at the A-Frame's Koerner Hall.



Doug Paisley

Doug Paisley is a Toronto-based songwriter and performer. His music, described as roots, folk and country inflected, has been released to critical acclaim worldwide from *Rolling Stone* to *The New Yorker*. As a teenager, Paisley met Purdy in a bar in Peterborough, Ont., and became a lifelong fan, collecting nearly all his books, including valuable rare editions. For the film, Paisley composed and recorded *Transient*, which takes its name

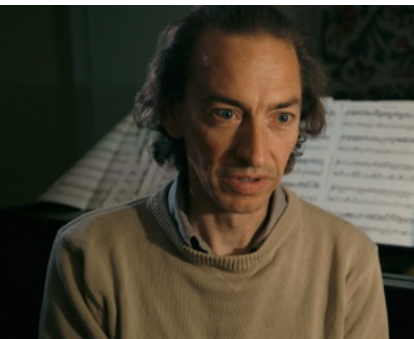
from a Purdy poem about the poet riding a freight train across Canada during the Depression.



Felicity Williams

Based in Toronto, Felicity Williams has toured internationally as a singer with the band Bahamas, whose latest album won three Junos and was longlisted for the Polaris Music Prize. Williams also sings with Hobson's Choice, a contemporary chamber jazz group. As a songwriter, she has drawn inspiration from Purdy's poetry, which she first encountered at a reading when she was 16.

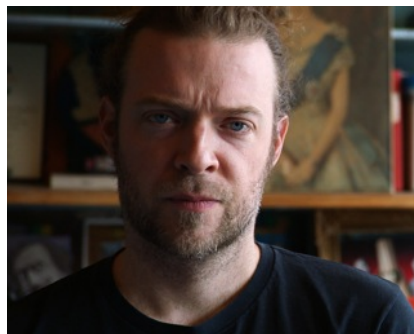
Years before the film or the *Al Purdy Songbook* were in development, she performed *The Purdy Project*, a series of songs based on his poems. Williams recorded her adaptation of *The Country North of Belleville* at the A-Frame with guitar, marimba and double bass.



Gerry Shatford

Born in Calgary and raised in Toronto, Gerry Shatford is a graduate of the McGill University Faculty of Music and has performed with leading jazz musicians across the country. After living in Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa, he is now based in Toronto, where he completed graduate studies at York University. His thesis, *When I Sat Down to Play the Piano: Compositions Inspired by the Poetry of Al Purdy*—a suite of eight instrumental tracks adapted from

Purdy poems—was released as a CD in 2013. In the film, Shatford performs the album with his trio at the Active Arts Studio in Rednersville, Ont., not far from the A-Frame.



Mac Fyfe

Mac Fyfe is a Toronto-based actor who has performed at the Stratford Festival, and recently portrayed Pierre Elliot Trudeau in two critically acclaimed plays presented in Toronto by VideoCabaret and Soulepper Theatre—*Trudeau and the FLQ* and *Trudeau and Lévesque*. His screen credits include the TV series *Saving Hope*, *Cracked* and *Being Erica*. He has admired Al Purdy's poetry since childhood, and remembers reciting it with

fellow students at the National Theatre School. Fyfe played Purdy in a recent workshop of Marni Jackson's play, *Al*. In the film, he reads a passage from Purdy's poem *In Search of Owen Roblin*.



Duncan Patterson

Duncan Patterson is a writer and an architect at MJ | Architecture. His interest in Al Purdy began at the age of 14 when he saw Al read. In 2008, hearing of the potential destruction of the A-Frame, Patterson commenced a detailed architectural study of the house. That led to him joining the board of the Al Purdy A-Frame Association guiding the eventual stabilization and rehabilitation of the house.



Brian Purdy

Born in 1948, from Al Purdy's fleeting marriage to Ila Bachelor, Brian Purdy is the second of Al Purdy's two sons, although neither he nor his mother are mentioned in Al's memoirs. Raised in Brampton, Ont., and based in Halifax, N.S., he has worked as an antiquarian bookseller and his poetry and short fiction have appeared in over 50 publications. He was interviewed for the film in Toronto at Grossman's Tavern, where he once worked.

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— THE CREW —

BRIAN D. JOHNSON (Producer, Director, Co-Writer)

Brian D. Johnson is one Canada's leading film critics and cultural commentators. He is also an author, filmmaker, musician and broadcaster. He is president of the Toronto Film Critics Association, where he created the annual TFCA Awards gala in 2008, now home to the \$100,000 Rogers Best Canadian Film Award. From 1985 to 2014, he was a Senior Writer with *Maclean's* magazine, where he remains a Contributing Editor.

Born in England and raised in Toronto, Johnson received a B.A. in English at the University of Toronto, where he served as Editor of *The Varsity*. He was a reporter at the now-defunct Toronto *Telegram*, then the Montreal *Gazette* in the early 1970s. He has written for publications ranging from *Rolling Stone* to *The Globe and Mail*, and is the winner of three National Magazine Awards. A frequent guest on radio and television, he co-hosted CBC TV's *On the Arts* for three seasons. He has also hosted onstage interviews with authors, actors and filmmakers, notably an evening of conversation with Al Pacino at Massey Hall as host of *Pacino: One Night Only* in September 2013.

Johnson is the author of three non-fiction books: *Railway Country: Across Canada by Train* (1985), *The XV Olympic Winter Games: The Official Commemorative Book* (1988) and the TIFF history *Brave Films, Wild Nights: 25 Years of Festival Fever* (2000). His book of poetry, *Marzipan Lies* (1974), was the first work published by the Porcupine's Quill. In 1994, he published a novel, *Volcano Days*.

Johnson has produced and directed two BravoFACT shorts, *Tell Me Everything* (2006), a montage of hands at work; and *Yesno* (2010), based on a book of poetry by Dennis Lee.

RON MANN (Executive Producer)

Ron Mann is one of Canada's foremost documentary filmmakers, renowned for a genre-bending approach to that explores art forms and contemporary pop culture with vision and verve. Mann established his international reputation in his twenties with a series of documentaries about counter-culture figures in the worlds of free jazz (*Imagine the Sound*, 1981), contemporary poetry (*Poetry in Motion*, 1982) and comic books (*Comic Book Confidential*, 1988).

He followed his first decade as an independent director with a series of films exploring irreverent topics such as the evolution of a rock and roll dance fad (*Twist*, 1992), the history

of recreational marijuana use (*Grass*, 1999) and Woody Harrelson's road-tripping "Simple Organic Living Tour" (*Go Further*, 2003).

More recently, Mann has produced and directed personality-focused documentaries, about custom car superstar Ed "Big Daddy" Roth (*Tales of the Rat Fink*, 2006) and über myco visionaries Gary Lincoff and Larry Evans (*Know Your Mushrooms*, 2008), and filmmaker Robert Altman (*Altman*, 2014).

Ron has acted as executive producer on the documentaries *Brakhage* (1998), *Examined Life* (2008), *Mighty Uke* (2010), *Lunarcy!* (2012) and *Hadwin's Judgement* (2014.) He also executive-produced Brian D. Johnson's two short films, *Tell Me Everything* and *Yesno*. In 2003, he founded Films We Like, a boutique distributor of documentary, independent and international films in Canada. To date, Films We Like has released over 300 films.

JAKE YANOWSKI (Co-producer)

Jake Yanowski is a producer based in Toronto. He has worked in the Acquisitions Department at Lionsgate Entertainment and for distribution companies. His short film *Len, Sit Down* (2008) premiered at Hot Docs. He was the head researcher and post-production supervisor for Ron Mann's *Altman* (2014) and has produced music videos for the Toronto label Pirates Blend. He is currently in pre-production on a feature and a short film.

NICK DE PENCIER (Director of Photography)

Nicholas de Pencier is a director, producer, and director of photography working in documentary, performing arts, and dramatic film. He is President of Mercury Films Inc., the Toronto-based production company he shares with his partner, director Jennifer Baichwal. He previously worked with Brian D. Johnson as director of photography on *Yesno* (2010).

De Pencier produced Jim Allodi's feature film *The Uncles*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2000, named one of year's top ten Canadian films by the Toronto International Film Festival Group. He also produced *Manufactured Landscapes*, which won the Chum City Award for best Canadian feature at TIFF 2006, the Genie for best Documentary, and was distributed in 20 countries.

As a cinematographer, De Pencier shoots factual TV series and documentaries for the CBC, PBS, Discovery, National Geographic and History. In 2011 he was nominated for a best photography Gemini for *Raccoons*. In 2010 he shot the documentary adaptation of *Payback*, Margaret Atwood's Massey Lecture on debt.

As both producer and director of photography his credits include *Let It Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles*, which won the International Emmy Award for Best Arts Documentary. *The Holier It Gets*, filmed in Canada and India, won Best Cultural and Best Independent Canadian Documentary at Hot Docs 2000, and he has won Geminis for best writing, editing, and direction in a documentary series. In 2002 he produced and shot *The True Meaning of*

Pictures, about the work and world of Kentucky photographer Shelby Lee Adams, which was nominated for two Geminis and won for Best Arts Doc. *Hockey Nomad* (2003) was nominated for a Banff Rockie Award, as well as three Geminis, winning for the Best Sports Documentary. He was also producer and director of photography on *Act of God* the opening night film for Hot Docs International Film Festival. Most recently, de Pencier has been the Producer and Cinematographer of *Watermark*—a collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky—which won the Toronto Film Critics Award for Best Canadian Film, and the CSA for Best Documentary.

NICK TAYLOR (Editor)

Nick Taylor is a Toronto-based film and television editor and director, as well as a musician and writer. Born and raised in England, he moved to Montreal with his family as a teenager. He holds a B.A. in English and film studies from Carleton University, Ottawa, and worked as a film archivist, musician, cook, ESL teacher and technical writer before moving into film and TV post-production. As an editor, he specializes in documentary projects and information programming and has been nominated for Gemini and Canadian Screen Awards for his television work. His theatrical credits include Ron Mann's *Know Your Mushrooms*. He has directed several music videos and short documentaries and is currently finishing his feature directorial debut, *The Organizer*, a film about the controversial American community and labour organizer Wade Rathke.

MARNI JACKSON (Co-writer)

A Toronto writer who has won numerous National Magazine Awards for her features, humour and social commentary, Marni Jackson is the author of three non-fiction books: *The Mother Zone*, *Pain: The Science and Culture of Why We Hurt* and *Home Free: The Myth of the Empty Nest*.

Her stories have appeared in *The Walrus*, *Brick*, *Eighteen Bridges*, *Toronto Life*, *Explore*, *Saturday Night*, *Outside*, *Rolling Stone*, *The London Times*, *Hazlitt.com* and others. Formerly a senior editor at *The Walrus*, she has maintained a long association with the Banff Centre, where she served as Rogers Chair of the Literary Journalism program, and is currently on the faculty of the Mountain and Wilderness Writing Program.

She is a member of the Al Purdy A-Frame Association, and she is at work on a stage play about Al Purdy. In the fall of 2016, her debut collection of short fiction, *Don't I Know You?*, will be published in North America by Flatiron Books.

CASEY JOHNSON (Composer)

Born and raised in Toronto, Casey Johnson studied music from a young age, with a focus on guitar and cello. He earned a B.A. in history from McGill University. While in Montreal, he produced and hosted *Rock and Roll Radio* on CKUT 90.3 FM. Moving back to Toronto, he began to focus on songwriting and recording, while playing a number of professional roles, including Archival Coordinator for Sphinx Productions and Business Associate for the late

Dr. John R. Evans. Working as a camera operator and AV technician, Casey developed his skills in audio and visual media production. Under the supervision of Jody Colero at Silent Joe, he produced the radio pilot for *POV with Molly Johnson*. In 2014 he directed and composed the music for the short film *Night Bus*. Casey continues to play music and do creative work in various media. *Rock and Roll Radio* is broadcast weekly on CIUT 89.5 FM in Toronto.

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