

"STRENGTH IN NUMBERS."

THAT'S WHAT TRAGICALLY HIP GUITARIST PAUL LANGLOIS KEEPS TELLING HIMSELF. WHEN I SPOKE WITH HIM IN LATE MAY, THESE WERE THE WORDS THAT FORTIFIED HIM AS HE FACED A DAUNTING EVENT. HIS ONLY COMFORT WAS THE FACT THAT HIS FOUR BANDMATES AND FRIENDS WOULD BE THERE WITH HIM AND THEY'D ALL GET THROUGH IT TOGETHER. STRENGTH IN NUMBERS.

THE TRAGICALLY HIP

REMAIN IN LIGHT

BY JIM KELLY



But it's not an impending personal tragedy that has Langlois seeking support in the company of his comrades. And he's not fretting about the upcoming nine-month tour to promote the band's new album, *In Violet Light*. No, it's three days before The Tragically Hip is to be inducted into Canada's Walk Of Fame in Toronto, at a ceremony where they'll receive a star on the sidewalk, along with fellow inductees Dan Aykroyd, Wayne Gretzky, painter Alex Colville, author Timothy Findley and the cast of *SCTV* — and Langlois is nervous as shit.

"To be honest, there's the awkwardness of putting on the penguin suit and going down and being in the spotlight, standing there as it's unveiled — I would probably be happier not to be there," says Langlois, the trepidation audible in his voice, speaking from his home in Kingston. "I don't think we're generally that comfortable in those kinds of spotlight situations unless we've got the guitars on and we're playing. But we'll get through it."

Whether they're comfortable with it or not, The Tragically Hip are Canadian rock music icons. And as Langlois' reaction to the Walk Of Fame attests, they're also among the most down-to-earth cultural icons you'll ever meet; good Canadian hometown boys who play solid, honest rock music (albeit with a more pronounced artistic sensibility, but what can you expect when your lead singer and lyricist is a published poet?). Yep, icons you can crack open a beer with. That's the Hip. That's Canada.

Langlois himself seems about as unaffected as they get; as straightforward and rooted as the steady rhythm chops he grinds from his guitar. Though he's a member of the biggest rock band in the land, it wouldn't seem unnatural to see him in the coffee line-up at Tim Hortons.

Part of what makes the Hip so endearing to us is that they started out as five buddies who wanted to be in a rock band and make music together and that's still essentially what they are. They've grown up together over the past 18 years, making music, building a successful career, surviving the pressures of life on the road, starting families and experiencing all the changes, challenges and triumphs that good friends go through together. The fact that they are close friends is probably one of the main reasons for the band's longevity. That and their policy of making decisions — and music — by consensus. How Canadian is that?

When the time came to record their ninth studio album, *In Violet Light*, the band decided on two things right from the outset: First, that they wanted to record the new album elsewhere, after having recorded their

previous three albums at their own Bathouse studio, a converted farmhouse in Bath, Ontario, not far from hometown Kingston; and secondly, that in casting about for a producer, they would aim high.

One of the names at the top of their list was Hugh Padgham, whose resume includes The Police, XTC, Phil Collins, Sting and David Bowie. All the band members, especially drummer Johnny Fay, were fans of The Police and admired Padgham's production work on their *Synchronicity* album. So they sent a demo tape of their new songs to Padgham's manager, which was then forwarded to the producer, and literally a couple of days later, the group received word that he wanted to do it.

"I think we were all very pleasantly surprised," says Langlois. "He also wanted to do it right away — this was around about October — and he wanted to get going quickly because that was his window of time, so it all came together very quickly."

So the group gathered up their songs, packed their bags and flew to meet Padgham in The Bahamas, where they set up shop at Compass Point Studios on the island of New Providence, just 10 miles west of Nassau. Behind the studio sat five self-contained apartments, so each band member enjoyed his own private digs. In such a tropical paradise, one might think that it would be difficult to keep Hip noses to the ol' grindstone. But in addition to the beautiful surroundings and state-of-the-art facilities, the location also provided the isolation that the band sought. With not much nearby except a small resort down the road, the guys were able to focus on recording.

"We knew there'd be very few distractions and obviously the weather's gonna be OK to deal with," Langlois says. "[It was] relatively comfortable at Compass Point, but not like the lap of luxury or anything, just a really positive work environment. We wanted to isolate ourselves for this experience. We've done that before, but it had been a while, so it all just kind of fell into place. I think it was really the right place to go and the right people to work with."

Langlois likens Padgham's style of recording to that of Don Smith, who produced the band's first two full-length albums, *Up To Here* and *Road Apples*. The new songs have a fresher, crisper, straight-up rock sound.

"It's certainly a large part credit to Hugh and [engineer] Terry Manning as well. Hugh was pretty willing to just let us get our sounds and then capture them and I think our attitudes were the same. We just wanted them to be really strong songs and ones that worked playing them in a room and sounded good with the five of us without much overdubbing."

After two months recording and mixing in The Bahamas,

the band returned home to Kingston and recorded two more songs at the Bathouse with their own soundman Mark Vreeken. The two extra songs were the album's lead-off track "Are You Ready" and the mid-paced rocker "Silver Jet." A line from the latter track provides the album's title, which can be read a couple of different ways. The most obvious reading is a straightforward reference to violet light, the shortest wavelength of light that's still visible to the naked eye, perhaps bringing to mind thoughts of twilight or shadows.

"The thought of 'in violet light' just seems to be a cool kind of mood," Langlois says. "It's appropriate because we did a lot of recording at night and violet light is a pleasant thought."

Or it could be read as 'involute light' — that which endures, unhindered, uncorrupted, inextinguishable.

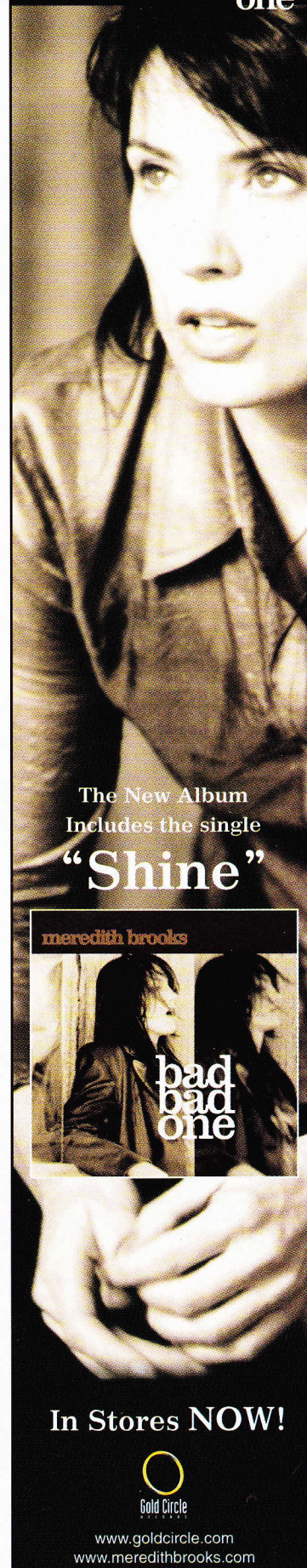
"It strikes me that if we can be proud of anything as a band, it's just the determination and commitment to each other," says Langlois, "and the determination to continue making music regardless of what's happening with it after we put it out. In general, things have gone well for us, so it's kind of an easy decision to make, but we're also a band and sort of a committee, and that takes work, like a marriage except married to four different people. It's something that requires commitment, and so the light that we create, the art that we create has to plow through some emotions and disagreements and everything. It has to be a priority and we all make it one. So it feels like the title speaks to all that."

While many of the songs on the album are relatively up-tempo, rockier numbers, including a couple of songs — "Use It Up" and "All Tore Up" — that the band debuted at a surprise club show in Toronto in February, the first single, "It's A Good Life If You Don't Weaken," departs from the mold. It's a languid but powerful song built around Langlois' dreamy guitar pattern. In the press notes that accompany the release, the band's singer/lyricist Gord Downie explains that the song refers to life on the road, which he characterizes as "a life in search of somewhere to go all the while suspecting that one grows where one is needed."

For the remainder of the year, The Tragically Hip will be back out on the road, putting that theory to the test, as they have from the very beginning. But Langlois isn't nervous about that. He'll have his friends with him. Strength in numbers.

"It's kind of a joke really, just that it's all worked out," he says. "And it's not only worked out, but we feel like we're a good band, and that there are nights where we're a really great band and yet we're all long-time friends. That's probably our biggest achievement really." ☐

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