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# **HIP AND DIVINE**

THE TRAGICALLY HIP'S GORD DOWNIE AND BY DIVINE RIGHT'S JOSE CONTRERAS

Tête à Tête: ART BERGMANN

ISAAC HAYES • NARDWUAR vs ROSS REBAGLIATI

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The Legendary Horseshoe Tavern.

# "It's a small road after all..."

The Tragically Hip's

Gord Downie &

By Divine Right's

José Contreras



It's a foggy, damp mid-afternoon in late December as I hoof my way along the wide Queen Street West sidewalk, on the way to Toronto's legendary Horseshoe Tavern. I slip in through the front door under the familiar green awning, and make my way along the narrow outer room with its long, inauspicious bar and tile floors.

Even on this Monday afternoon there are a few people sitting around drinking and chatting; convivial attempts to disperse the gathering pre-Christmas tension. A couple of guys are smacking up the pool table near the back. These guys mean business: A particularly nasty break shatters the huddled formation of shell-shocked spheres and sends them skittering for cover. The lucky ones find a hole.

Me, I'm heading for the far corner, bound for the bar's inner-sanctum: The larger back room, famous for its cubby-hole stage and its atmosphere of casual tradition. For denizens of the live music scene in Toronto, The 'Shoe is equal parts hallowed ground and familiar watering hole. Now officially known as The Legendary Horseshoe Tavern in celebration of its 50th year, it's a mantle the club wears with ease. A country music venue in its early days, its walls are adorned with old concert bills from that era. Hank Williams peers out from the past, sizing up the current crop of rock, punk and alt.country bands that have followed in his footsteps, one way or another. The whiff of musical history and legend is in the air.

Or maybe in the carpet. As it happens on this day, renovators are ripping out the old floor covering — nondescript matting that had been there for years. I wonder what would come tumbling out if you took it out back for a good shake? How much great music has it soaked up along with the countless spilt beers? How many broken hearts have hit that floor, ground into its wizened fibres like a cigarette butt under a callous boot heel? How many tapping toes and stomping feet have worn it thin over the years?

This is the first time I've ventured here during daylight hours, and in a non-patron capacity. Here to conduct an interview, I feel an insider's sense of privilege. My purpose in the back room is to meet two front-men: José Contreras of By Divine Right and Gord Downie of The Tragically Hip.

José is here, but Gord is late. Well, a musician being late is no cause for concern; frankly, I'm a bit more suspicious about José being on time. Of course, since By Divine Right will be opening for the Tragically Hip on their *Phantom Power* winter '99 Canadian tour, it makes a certain amount of sense that I meet the BDR singer/songwriter/guitarist first, just as Hip fans across the country will when the tour hits their towns — at least those smart enough to get to the show early and catch this rising band's set.

Contreras, 27, formed By Divine Right eight years ago in Toronto with drummer and high-school friend Mark Goldstein. The two comprise the nucleus of the group, becoming accustomed to a revolving cast of bassists over the years. Recently they've been relying on the talents of ex-hHead bassist Brendan Canning, with Leslie Feist joining them for live gigs on second guitar and keyboards.

BDR's last album, 1997's *All Hail Discordia*, was picked up by Nettwerk Records and received its fair share of critical acclaim. After touring extensively, they were tapped by Downie and The Hip for the opening slot at five surprise charity/release-party shows around southern Ontario this past July. That went so well, Downie asked BDR to join them on the road for The Hip's current tour.

The high-profile gig happily coincides with the release of BDR's brand new album, *Bless This Mess*. It's their fourth release, and from the tracks I've heard, it could be a groundbreaker for the group. They've continued in the direction *Discordia* promised, with more cohesive songwriting and a more open, inviting sound. Loose, groovy, sometimes off-kilter pop-rockers are the order of the day, anchored by a crunchy bottom end and shaped by Contreras' full-toned, expressive guitar chops. Contreras' voice adds the final element: Marshmallowy easy and soulfully charming. He's the kind of singer who can put across an "Oh yeah" or a "C'mon" like it's invested with every ounce of his soul.

Add up their musical growth and the exposure of The Hip tour, and 1999 could be a big year for BDR. It may be a bit premature to predict BDR's ship coming

in, but at least their benefactor has finally arrived. With his sweatshirt poking out below a well-worn jean-jacket, comfortably loose-fitting work pants, green sneakers and a small, rolled-up black toque perched on his head, Gord Downie looks more like a rangy stevedore than a bestower of divine opportunity, as he wanders into the Horseshoe's back room.

With their most recent album, *Phantom Power*, nearing quadruple-platinum status in Canada (400,000 sold), The Tragically Hip are set to embark on their biggest Canadian tour yet — having just wrapped up a six-month tour of the U.S. *Phantom Power*, although classically Hip in many ways, represents a slightly more rootsy approach and sound, with tracks like "Thompson Girl" and "Bobcaygeon" conveying a homey feel, an organic vibe. Even the rockers like "Something On" and "Fireworks" sound like they have a little soil under their fingernails. The warmth in these songs will be a welcome addition to their sets when they hit the cold road this winter.

After we score some coffee to burn off any fog that might be lingering in our noggins, the three of us sit down at a corner table to talk about their bands, their music and their lives on the road.

Though known for his often manic intensity onstage and his enigmatic lyrical flights, in conversation Downie is somewhat reserved, low-key. A bit guarded even, but friendly and somehow quite open just the same.

You can see him pondering as he considers a question or an idea, focusing in on the right thought to express.

I'm curious to ask him how The Hip's recent American jaunt went. They've been hitting the States for years now and have developed some pockets of support, but — as the well-known storyline goes — have yet to achieve that big breakthrough in the U.S., much to the befuddlement of all their Canadian fans. However, "Poets," the first single from *Phantom Power*, did crack the Top 20 of American Triple A radio. Are they finally making inroads?

"We toured for quite a while, covered a lot of ground," says Downie, "and so now it's like we've kind of got a foothold in some places. We'll maybe go back to those places, play fewer dates. Fewer, more special dates. It was six months; three weeks on and then a week or so home, depending. So it was a lot of in-transit stuff. And that was really tiring, necessary, fulfilling. But it's over now and it's sort of left us with some revelations and new plans and things like that. So I think it was positive in that sense. Tons of grist. Yeah, a success."

To accompany them on the road, The Hip have chosen some great tourmates over the years: Rheostatics, The Odds and Change Of Heart, to name a few. More recently, Hayden, Julie Doiron and, of course, By Divine Right.


"They're ultimately helping us out; it's not the other way around," Downie offers graciously. "Y'know, in terms of making it a complete evening. I personally require it."

"And I'll get to watch you guys every night," he adds, to Contreras, "so it's a bit of selfish pleasure there. It's supposed to be a big rock show and it will be. And anyone who knows anything about us knows that these are bands we like. I saw every Rheostatics set, and they were great every night. It's gonna be nice surroundings too. The stage is going to look really good and very inviting. Warm."

Contreras is looking forward to the tour as well, if the shows they played with The Hip this summer were any indication of what's to come.

"They were some of the best shows we ever played," he says. "Feel-wise too, between the bands. I was totally surprised about The Hip's audience. Everyone set us up for the fall. Even, um... unnamed people who said we were gonna get eaten alive. So we were just so taken aback by people being receptive. It was a





*"They (The Hip's opening acts) are ultimately helping us out; it's not the other way around. Anyone who knows anything about us knows that these are bands we like."—Gord Downie*

really good energy in the whole organization of it. So it was kind of like a dream. This whole thing seems like a massive gift, on many, many levels," Contreras says with genuine gratitude.

Somewhat of a contrast to Downie's low-key, contemplative manner, Contreras is unabashedly expressive and bursting with unbridled romanticism. He wears his spirit on his sleeve. Contreras has a striking, unwavering belief in the power of positivity. But is the clubland veteran up for the challenge of playing in larger arenas for the first time, and filling the bigger space with his music?

"Yeah, definitely on one level it's a challenge," he admits. "On another level it's just so exciting, because I really believe that you get what you give. I think that what we want to put out, and what we put out when it all works, is a really open thing. So I'm really excited to try that out on that scale. I'm excited about that opportunity because I actually think that my heart is big enough.

Know what I mean?"

"That's key; it's good," observes Downie, then adds playfully: "Let your love light shine."

"Yeah, sometimes I feel like I have enough hope to go around the entire planet," Contreras beams. "My whole intention is to go up there and rip my chest open and have as much light come out as possible."

That light certainly shines through BDR's songs, especially the infectious "Goodbye Paralyzer" from the new album, with its lyric: "My heart is on the line/I'm here to see you shine/Move mountains/... We can defeat the paralyzer." No sad-core self-indulgences here.

"This record's a lot more vulnerable," Contreras acknowledges. "It's less hip and clever, which to me is a super achievement. I'm insecure about it because people could make fun of me, and I think that's a really good place to be as an artist; to be worried about getting beat up at recess."

"It's pretty darn uplifting, too," Downie chimes in. "Everything sounds like it's occurring to you as it's happening. And that's rare with records."

"I also feel that our new songs work in that [larger] space," Contreras says of performing live. "In those shows that we played with The Hip, we tried our new material and it worked. It was, like, 'Wow, they filled this place up nicely!' And in a small place it almost doesn't quite work as well. I almost feel like I gotta get rid of more intimate songs in a club now. Whereas in that [larger] space I feel like it can be more intimate."

Intimacy. Connecting with an audience. It's what the best live performers and bands accomplish, and The Tragically Hip are no slouches there. As has often been said, you haven't experienced The Hip until you've experienced them live. When they find their pocket, they can really jam up a storm. The searing, snarling guitars of Paul Langlois and Bobby Baker intermeshing as one sound, or Baker's leads slithering overtop of Langlois' gritty rhythm. Gord Sinclair's mellifluous bass lines sometimes flirting with the guitar boys out front, but never straying too far from Johnny Fay's steady, solid drumming. And Downie's fervent vocals riding on top of it all.

Part of the thrill of any Hip show is watching the crowd. It's fascinating to witness a mass of people moving as one undulating wave. When it's all working, there's a real unity of band, music and audience.

Contreras was impressed by The Hip crowds, too. "Even if I'd expected it, I was still surprised by what a gathering your show was," he says to Downie. "It wasn't so much a show or a performance, it was a gathering. I can't quite describe it. That's the energy that I felt at the [summer] shows. It was like people coming towards a flame or towards a light. And even more so, *you* weren't the light; you just *revealed* the light. And that was really interesting. That definitely makes for a connection."

"It's almost like everyone has little ritualistic things they do for the shows to get prepared for them," Downie adds. "The show always seems to be a combination of a lot of people banding into smaller groups, and they all come togeth-





*"I'm excited about the opportunity because I actually think that my heart is big enough," says BDR's Contreras. "Let your love light shine," Downie adds playfully.*

er and, I guess, try to coerce each other into adopting the other's ritual or something. This dialogue's all going on as the music is super-cranked. It's neat. It's a great feeling."

Just as audiences gather and connect in different ways at the shows, so too do various touring musicians and crews connect with each other as their paths cross on the road. One of the more deceptively alluring songs from *Phantom Power*, "Escape Is At Hand For The Travellin' Man," traces these paths that converge on the road: The friendships forged in the moment, intensified by the shared transience of the life, and then the subsequent divergence as people go their separate ways. According to Downie, that's a pretty common experience with life on the road.

"I've concocted a new saying," he says, "and it seems to really fill the gap, that void as you say goodbye to someone you've just crossed paths with. The saying is: 'It's a small road after all.' And I like that, because invariably you'll run into someone you didn't know very well six times in a year."

"I just ran into a guy who was road managing and doing guitars for Cracker, and I initially met him at our first gig ever in The Sun Club in Tempe [Arizona]. He was playing in the opening band, called The Feedbags. And it was, like, a dust-storm night, and we passed in the night a few times [afterward], and we finally were able to connect one night in Boston. So that was nice. And that is great."

"That's a really great hidden pleasure about what we do. There are tons of stories like that, and you get them and you hold on to them. But that's all you get."

Contreras is nodding in agreement. "I've met so many magical people on the road. It's almost like they're the real gigs. They're the real landmarks on the journey. They're like little checking points, when you meet certain people. Even people you don't even talk to. Someone walks up and says two words to you, or one sentence, but it's someone who knew and who got it, and who's saying 'You're on the right path, keep going.'"

Downie continues the thought: "Because you all ultimately came together one night, somewhere: The audience, the crew, the band, the staff — everybody — to entertain each other. Everyone in the room understands that obligation: 'I'm entertaining myself by watching this band, who are hopefully entertaining the crew, who've heard the same shit every night, who are hopefully entertaining the staff, who they're flirting with.' Everyone's just getting something. And it's good."


"Then if it all goes really good, four years later you run into some dude from that night, and all you've got in common is what you do, or the road, and the fact that you had something. So friendship becomes pretty big, and there are no demands. It's pretty much, 'We will agree, eternally, to come together whenever we can, usually with music as the reason or purpose.'" Amen.

Later, Gord and José are shuffling casually down the middle of the quiet street behind The Horseshoe, amiably chatting and joking while a photographer clicks away. My job here is done; theirs has just begun. In a few weeks that quiet street will give way to the demands of the road and all the chaos and beauty that goes with it.

After they finish the photo shoot, I say my thank-yous and goodbyes, wish them luck and head out through the venerable club; back out past the pool players, the beer sippers, the long outer bar and finally out through the front door. As I emerge into the dim, overcast late afternoon and turn my coat collar toward home, it occurs to me that I'd forgotten to ask Downie a question that's been on my mind since the release of their last album: What exactly is "phantom power"?

But maybe he answered it just the same; maybe they both did. Because what is that sense of connection you get from great rock 'n' roll, if not a feeling of phantom power?

Maybe it won't change the world, or even change your life — not in any permanent way. And perhaps, like those road friendships, it doesn't last much longer than the moment, and then it's gone. But its ghost always lingers, and beckons you to return to experience other moments that are waiting around the corner. Maybe those moments are all we can ask for.

If so, then that's real enough for me. 

**For a more complete photo gallery of our shoot with Gord and José, check out ChartAttack at [www.chartattack.com](http://www.chartattack.com).**