



KEN BEATTIE of RADIOGRAM Interview:

Ken Beattie is all over the place. Wired, jetlagged and unshaven with eyes like saucers, he twitchily scans everything around him. He can't afford to miss a single trick in the confines of Brighton's legendary community roots venue The Greys, where he will later play only his second ever British date, in support to Paul Burch.

He's never been out of his native Canada before and is pulsing with excitement for every second of experience. At London's Jazz Café the previous evening, he and the slimmed down, water-testing Radiogram of multi-instrumentalists Ida Nilsen and Jonathan Anderson played a gig he can already barely recall, such is his sensory overload. But, he feels, it was good.

I'd known Ken from afar for around two years, since his sublime Vancouver alt.country collective's *Unbetween* debut first held me fascinated and charmed. This was our first meeting, but he greeted me like lost family.

(At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that my life has been greatly enhanced by my running into Ken as I did back then. He sent me Flophouse Jr's *Woodland*. Some months later, they played their European debut at my Brighton alt.country club night, The Gilded Palace of Sin. The band's Susan Young and your scribe fell in love that night. Now she lives with me, and we're getting married. Ken is my cupid. He didn't have his bow with him on this visit.)

There could be so much to talk about, but I wanted to keep it simple this time. I wished to learn the truths behind and catalysts for the dangling lyrical carrots scattered throughout his second album *All The Way Home* - a release that has heard the whispers of glum-core country devotees everywhere turn to full-throated roars. But we couldn't discuss it here - too noisy, too many distractions.

Twenty minutes later, Ken is wolfing down steak in a more serene hostelry, as Susan catches up with her homie Jonathan at the next table. With real ale to calm Ken down and soup me up, I begin to probe the amiable and open songwriter, his eyes still darting from décor to plate to condiments to me:

Ken, *Summer Song Summer* opens with the line *my idea of a perfect day / would be to lie in bed and just melt away*. Is that true?

Yes. (Ken leans back, folds his arms, and smiles). *Absolutely.*

Would you care to expand?!

Well, it all goes back to the bigger picture of the song. It's basically about being in love with music, and how that affects you. You know when something happens to you, and you hear a song for the first time, and then every time you hear that song – boom – you're transported instantly to that time and that place, and from the first notes of that song, you have no control over it – it controls you. That's what that song is about. I grew up with the one hit wonders of the '70's, and would flick between the different AM stations...

Distressingly, yet hilariously at this very moment, a DJ who has snuck in unnoticed slaps on a hideous jazz-funk platter. We both dissolve into giggles. So much for a setting conducive to conversation.

Well, we'd go to my grandmother's house and I was the only boy with nine girl cousins. I'd go into the back room and listen to the radio. I was fascinated with lists – top 10, top 5; all my favourite songs – and this all relates to a time when you could lie in bed all day. You know, when I was a teenager and I'd sleep in 'til noon, and that's kinda cool. Sometimes you think you're wasting your life away and the song harkens back to that period.

Do you still do it?

I'm unable to now! Even when I'm on the road – as my bandmates would attest – I'm always the first one up! I try my hardest to stay in bed, but I lie there looking at my watch and fidgeting, but I'm now unable to stay in bed all day and just melt away! I've lost the ability to, even though I really, really want to! It's a guilt thing, I guess. I get pangs that I should be doing something more constructive.

(A freeform trumpet solo screams away in the background.) You've stated to me before that you prefer to record in the winter. The seasons crop up a lot in your lyrics, particularly on the new album. You talk of *seasonal behaviour, coming on too strong*. What do you mean by this? Are you uncomfortable during the summer months for some reason?

It seems like there's more to lose in the summer. The sun's up and it's a beautiful day, isn't it? You're supposed to be having a great time and I think there's just too much pressure sometimes. You don't want to have a beautiful day every day. Why aren't you smiling? It's a gorgeous day! Well, maybe I don't feel so gorgeous, you know? There's just more pressure to be happy in the summer. I recoil from that, you know?

Along those lines, how do you feel about parties – a similar situation, where you're almost obliged to have a great time?

Oh God! If I've held a party where I haven't managed to say at least a few words to

everyone there, I wake up next day and think ‘Oh no! I didn’t ask her about the new job, or him about this or that!’ Yep, it’s a horrible, horrible thing! Too much pressure!

Can we talk about *Cemetery Summer*? The lines *once I had a secret / it was so dark and deep / I buried it in the basement / hid in a record sleeve*: Are you implying here that your songs are where your secrets are stored, and this is the only way you will reveal them?

Yes. Yes! Exactly... that’s very good! I’ve been waiting for two months for someone to ask me about that, so thank you!

(Shucks!)

Drowning crops up in your songs. Everyone has a way of demise they fear more than any other, so is drowning yours?

Yeah – drowning and fire.

Is this down to personal experience, or just how you think it would be?

Yes. I nearly drowned as a kid. Twice. I don’t like swimming; I’m not a water person, apart from using it to get clean and to drink. Water, fire, heights. I remember a time when I was up in Manitoba, at the top of a waterfall where my cousin was fishing, and I came so close to falling in. A waterfall – height and water – ooh! I know these are not uncommon fears, but to me, it’s as if there are forces wanting to pull you over, and there’s this uncontrollable urge to jump.

Are there any fears that you have conquered?

Er, no... I have a fear about putting out my music, but there’s more a fear of not doing it than doing it. It’s to do with critique and the fear of being misunderstood. I’ve often said to my wife that I’m much more fearful of being bitter than being broke!

CanAmerica is undoubtedly your most overtly political statement to date, where you explicitly portray Canada as a US satellite. Tell me more about this view:

They consider themselves the most powerful nation on earth, and being next door, we can really feel that. I’m sure you can feel it over here as well. They push their culture on everyone and we just eat it up. There are 72 channels on my TV, and 70 of them are from the US. CanAmerica is the 52nd state. The idea for the song had been kicking around in my head for 10 or 12 years, after I heard on the news about Canada selling its water to the States. Our lakes are all for sale! I wrote that song in the time it takes to play it. I tried to change the lyrics to make it more subtle, but it didn’t feel so honest. It was on the album, off the album, on, off... because of 9/11 as well, but because of that, we’ve become more CanAmerican than ever. You could hear the American anthem being sung in Vancouver, and there were American flags everywhere. It was a terrible tragedy, of course, and my heart still breaks for everything that went on then, but for better or

worse, I put it on the album. It provokes a reaction, and I'm happy about that.

Ida sucks alternately at coffee, stout and Marlboros, hopping from accordion to piano to trumpet. Jonathan screws up his face in pulling every variation of weeping distortion from his lap steel. Ken softly strums his acoustic with eyes shut tight, repeatedly falling to his knees, overcome with private euphoria. A rammed house stands silent and stunned, as Radiogram's brand of ambient country melancholia charges the room. Ken smiles as *Whisky In My Bed* draws to an elegant close, and I wonder if he could afford himself a lie-in in the morning.

TOM SHERIFF

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