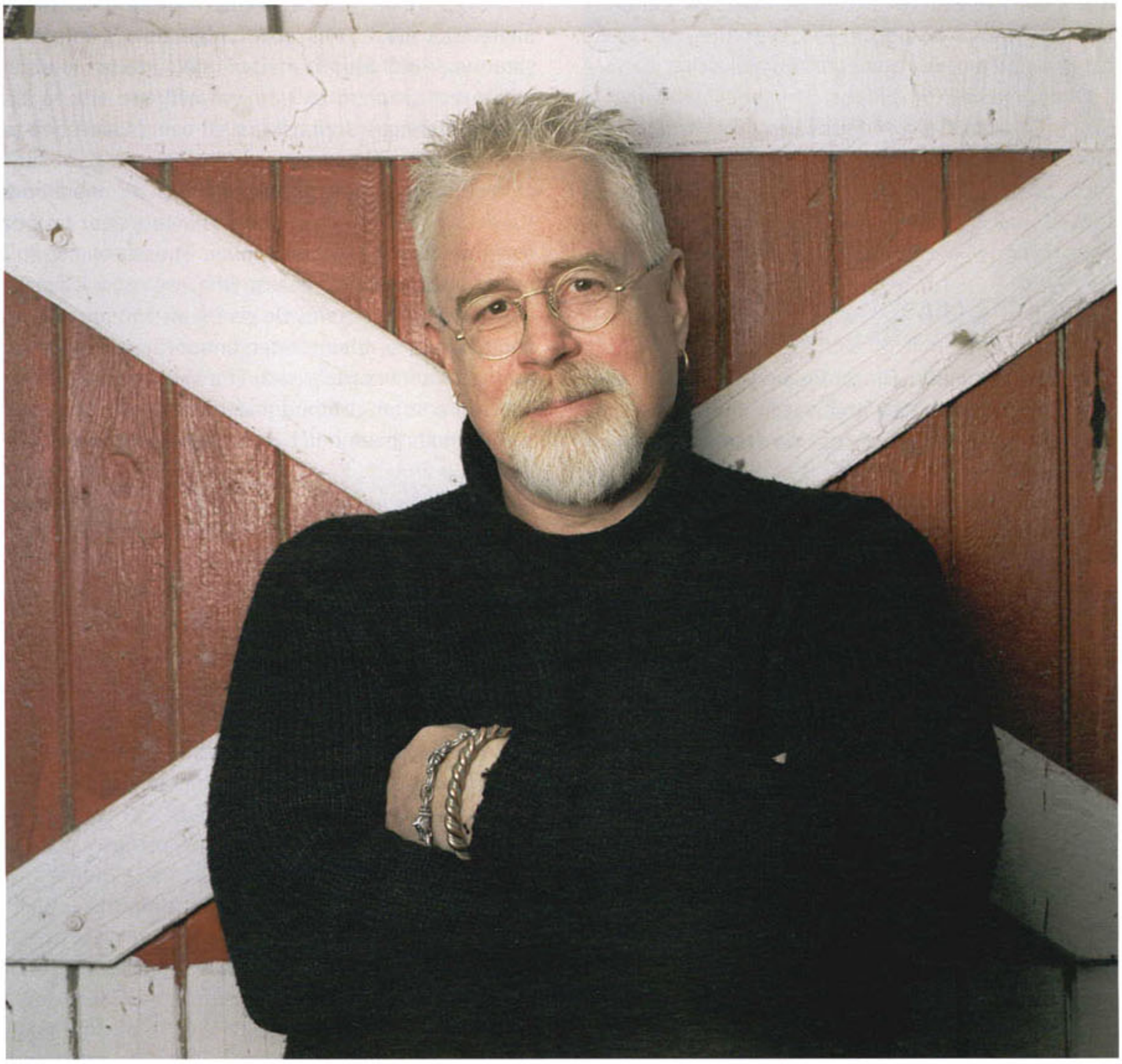
BRUCE COCKBURN: The moral imperatives of a modern troubadour

by MARK D. DUNN



Bruce Cockburn

WITH THE PUBLICATION of his remarkable 2014 memoir, *Rumours of Glory*, Canadian singer, guitarist and activist Bruce Cockburn has written an articulate and far-reaching autobiography. Like his songs, *Rumours of Glory* is self-referential without self-indulgence, which sets it apart from others in the genre. Instead, Cockburn recounts a life of courageous and unblinking observation, spiritual questing and political engagement.

Cockburn's commitment to the issues he takes on goes deeper than the making of public pronouncements. Many will remember his speech to the Canadian government in the mid-1990s for which he smuggled deactivated landmines into Parliament. Over the years, Cockburn has visited half-a-dozen war-ravaged countries as an observer and stood against corporate expansion alongside Indigenous communities and environmentalists. Where many celebrities have loaned their names to social and political causes, Cockburn has put boots on the ground.

Those who've followed his career often complain the Ottawa-born songwriter hasn't received the recognition he deserves. Yes, he is an Officer in the Order of Canada and his solo concerts still consistently sell out, but many feel his music has been

underappreciated and overlooked. An objective review of his musical output — 24 studio albums, five live albums and six compilations — including the recent nine-disc box set, which Cockburn calls "the soundtrack" of his memoir — reveals a body of work that legitimately stands alongside that of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen or any of the "legacy" artists still cranking it out. Cockburn's albums differ from those of more widely celebrated artists in that there is not a dud in the bunch. Not even the most dedicated Dylan or Neil Young fan can make that claim.

Okay, maybe I'm biased. I've been listening to Bruce Cockburn since discovering *Joy Will Find a Way*, his sixth album, in the discount bin of a local record store 32 years ago. For a new guitar player, that album was mind-blowing. "How many hands does this guy have?," I remember thinking.

Pacing the cage

Waiting by the phone for Bruce Cockburn to call is an exercise in anxiety. There are only so many times one can review notes and check the connection. When the call finally comes, my heart does some gymnastics. But the anxiety is soon defused by the man's humility and thoughtfulness.

"You can be a legend, or you can be present," he says about his fame. "You don't get to be both. I don't think too much of that legend-status thing."

To illustrate the point, he references "No Footprints" from his 1979 album, *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws*, a song that resolves to leave "no footprints when we go."

"To me, that's better," says Cockburn. "If people are going to think of me at all, I'd like for them to love me and think I was a wonderful presence on the planet, etcetera. But I won't be upset if they're not thinking of me at all because they have other things to think about."

He describes music and the guitar as part of his "spiritual role in the universe." Social engagement, presumably, is another. "I think there's a responsibility when you open your mouth in public, no matter how big or small your public is, to present something as close to truthful as you can make it. There's a moral imperative there that goes with inviting people to listen to you."

One of Cockburn's more recent engagements is the LEAP Manifesto, the visionary and transformative call-to-action that grew out of a two-day conference of activists and concerned individuals organized by author Naomi Klein.

LEAP is, in Cockburn's words, "an alternative to the crap, basically." He says he "honestly didn't have to study it very deeply to decide to endorse it because it just seems like a statement that's worth making. How likely it is to be put into practice, with all its detail and optimism, I don't know. But I think it's a statement that bears making loudly. To the extent that we can make it work, we're all better off for it."

In a funny and jarring scene from the 2012 documentary, *Bruce Cockburn: Pacing the Cage*, when asked about the planet's ecological future, the singer replies "I think we're fucked."

Asked if he's since changed his mind, Cockburn says, "Not much. I hope not, obviously. I have this three-year-old daughter who's going to grow up in whatever horror show we hand her, and I hope it's not a worst-case scenario. So, I have an incentive to try to be hopeful and to try to do something.

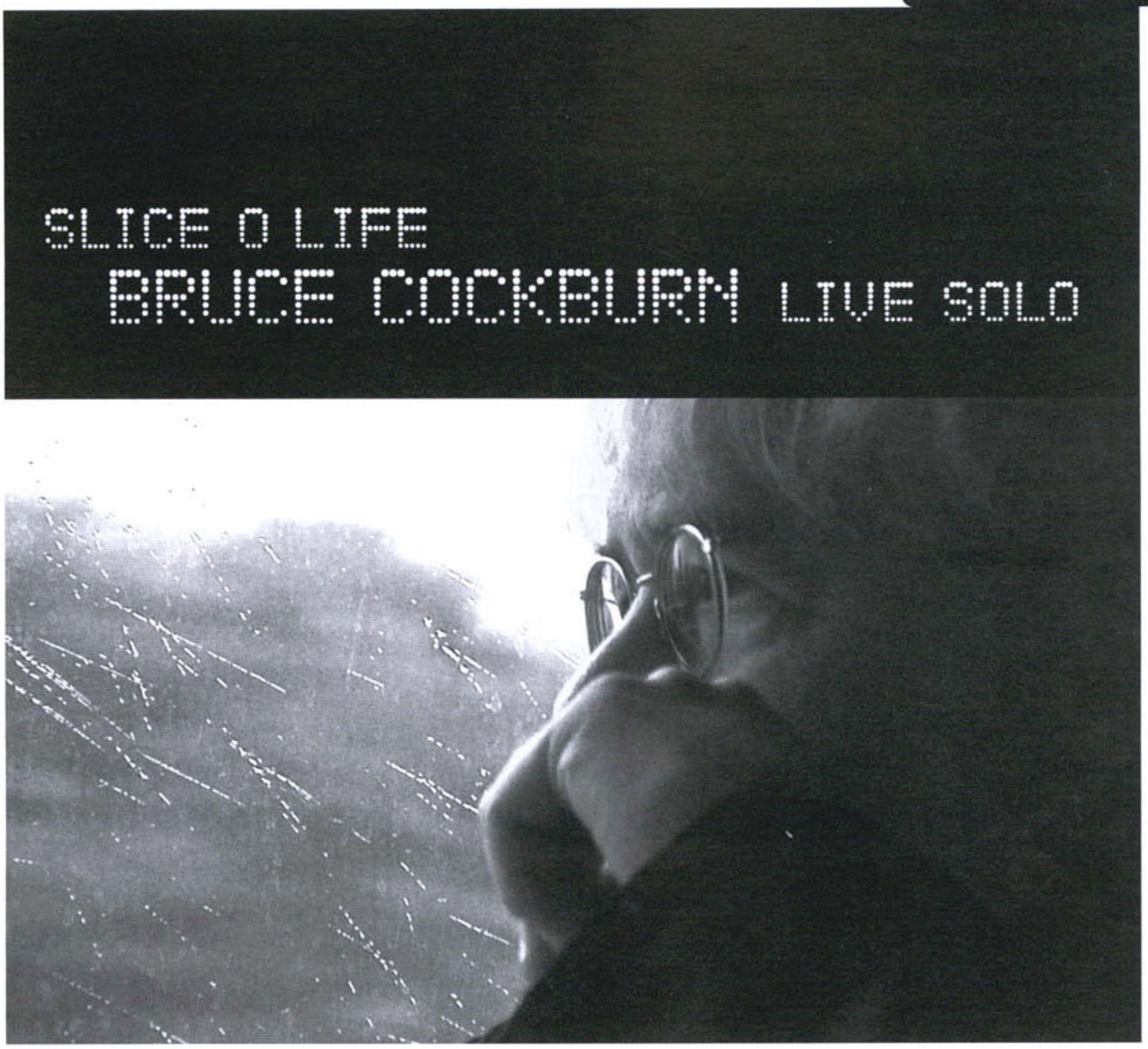
"And things like the LEAP Manifesto come along. Here's a whole bunch of people putting their energy together to get the ball rolling. These are hopeful things. But, overall, look at what we're up against. It's an uphill struggle. Or else it will require some combination of divine intervention and superlative timing on somebody's part. The Middle East is turning into a soup of blood and mayhem — I guess it hasn't really been much other than that for a really long time, but it's getting worse. And there are other trouble spots we don't really pay much attention to, but they're out there. There's a lot of scary stuff."

Guarded relief over political change

With debate during the 2015 Canadian elections focused on cultural intolerance and the perpetuation of our unsustainable economic system, it is difficult to disagree. Cockburn, who was touring the U.K. and Holland during the campaign, echoes the feelings of many Canadians regarding the changing of guard.

"I'm relieved that it's changed," he says. "But hopeful? It's a wait-and-see. The obvious pitfalls seem to me twofold. One is that the Liberals will mess it up and, come the next election, the Conservatives will come raging back in. That would be a disaster. The other thing is that the Liberals could do a whole bunch of dumb stuff that isn't really going to help much. Although they're off to a good start with (public concern) for missing Aboriginal women." (Justin Trudeau has committed to launch an inquiry within the first one hundred days of taking office.)

From early in his career, Cockburn has expressed deep frustration over the horrendous conditions in which many First Nations communities live. In "Gavin's Woodpile," a song from the 1975 album *In the Falling Dark*, Cockburn addresses the mercury poisoning of two First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario. That the symptoms of mercury poisoning, now known as Ontario Minimata Disease, were explained away as drunkenness by Canadian industry, politicians and the national media is



another shameful response to the legislated misery imposed on more than a few First Nations' communities. In the song, Cockburn observes:

Death in the marrow and death in the liver
And some government gambler with his mouth full of steak
Saying, 'If you can't eat the fish, fish in some other lake.
To watch a people die — it is no new thing.'

Other songs followed: the celebratory and apologetic "Red Brother, Red Sister" from 1976, and the incendiary "Stolen Land," first performed in 1986 during a benefit concert to support land claims of the Haida Nation.

The contemporary expansion of open-pit mining (an example of Stephen Harper's "Barbaric Cultural Practice" if ever there was one) and the pressure to sacrifice land for pipelines have increased the pressure on many First Nations people. As early as the late 70s, before the tar sands had torn through traditional lands, Cockburn became involved with the Lubicon Cree, who have borne the brunt of industrial expansion in Alberta. The Lubicon have never entered into treaty with the Canadian government. As such, their claim on their traditional lands has gone unrecognized.

"You could see (the tar sands) coming a long way off, too," Cockburn says. "It started before the tar sands, in my view. It started with the clear-cutting up there. Maybe they, the people promoting the clear-cutting, knew what was under the forests at that time back in the late-70s and early-80s. I got involved because of the Lubicon Cree and my lending support to far more meaningful efforts other people were making to try to rectify the injustices done to the Lubicon, which has been unsuccessful, pretty much. In the process, you saw the destruction of the environment.... It seemed, at times, that it was done rapidly so that when the lawsuits finally went through it would be a done deal and too late. That (deforestation) was there, and the tar sands just seem like the next step."

Securing clean water, sanitation and food security for northern communities is at the forefront of Justin Trudeau's ambitious plans for rebuilding the Canadian government's relationships with First Nations.

On this promise, Cockburn cautions that the problem may be systemic:

"Let's hope he can do it. He'll be up against some serious opposition. I'm a little out of touch with this in recent years, but with the various involvements I've had, it seemed that the post-colonial — can't really call it 'post' or 'neo' — it's just a continuously colonial attitude that is deeply entrenched in the Indian Affairs department. The 'mandarins' that really call the shots are totally committed to that course of action, regardless of pronouncements from the floor of the House of Commons. It'll be a tough fight."

Canada the invader

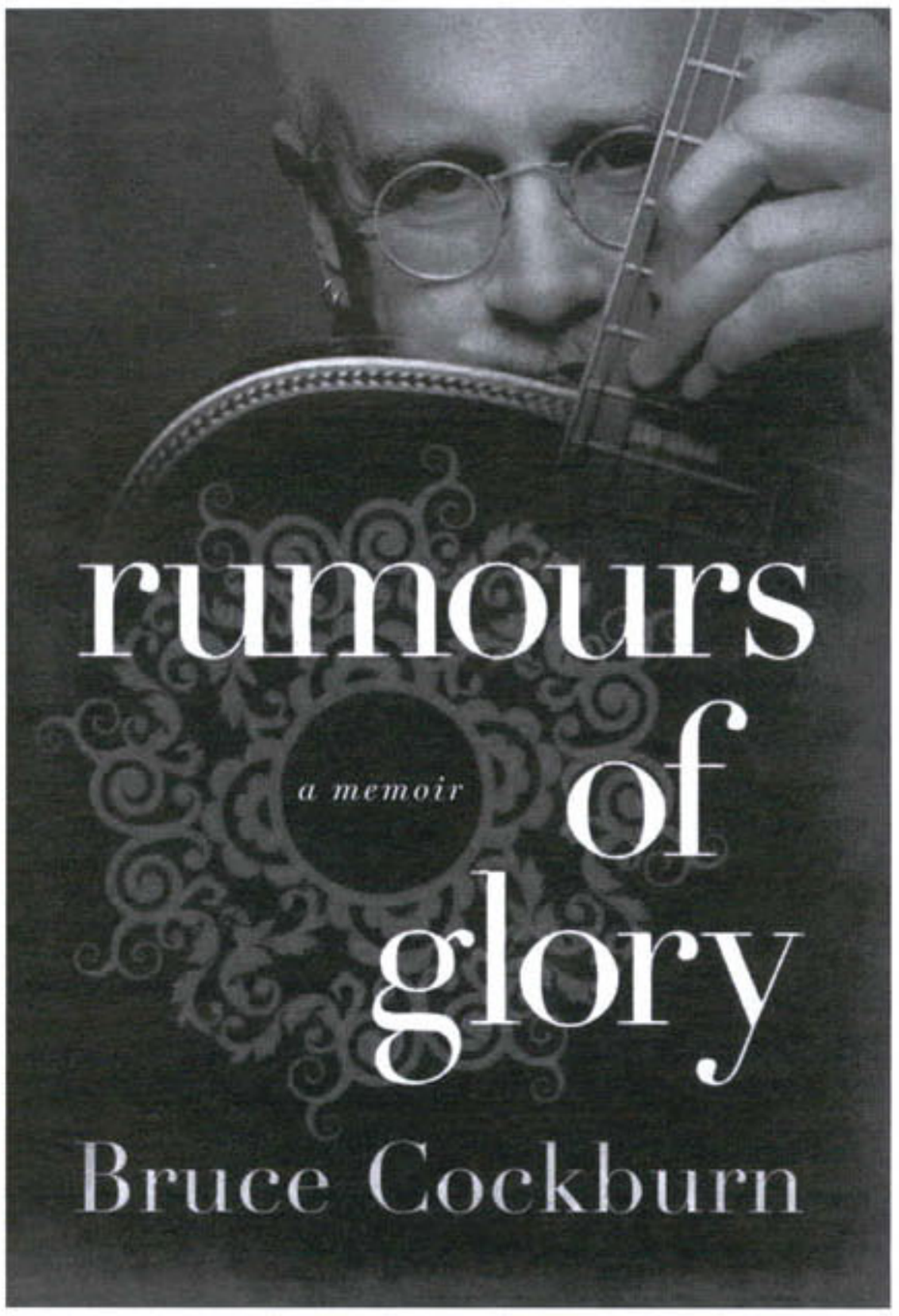
"When I went to Baghdad (in 2004), I made sure I had a big, fat maple leaf showing on my shoulder bag because I didn't want to be mistaken for any of the occupying forces. Little kids recognized the Maple Leaf and would point, saying 'Canada. Canada.' They were very approving because Canada wasn't an invader. That stands in contrast with the reception one might get, presumably, in Afghanistan."

The decision by the Harper government to deploy Canadian CF-18s in Syria and Iraq drew criticism from activists and political hopefuls this year. On this subject, Cockburn is both adamant and conflicted.

"I have no use for ISIS," he says. "I think they're as close to human shit as you can get. You can quote me on that in big letters because I really despise what they stand for, or what they appear to stand for.... They represent a real deep pathology. What do you do with a real deep pathology? You cut it out!"

After a sip of coffee, Cockburn adds: "Now, I try to live my life along Christian lines and it doesn't sit right with me to hear myself say that or to feel that way, but it's the truth. If a way can be found that doesn't involve exterminating them, then great, let's do it. In the meantime, I don't think we're going to be successful in exterminating them. I think that scene is going to get worse and worse for quite a while."

Although Cockburn's view that ISIS deserves to be "exterminated" may shock some, it's a similar emotional response to injustice that inspired one of his most famous and popular songs, "If I Had a Rocket Launcher." That song, Cockburn has recounted in interviews and in *Rumours of Glory*, was inspired by visits to Guatemalan refugee camps on the Mexican border. The unarmed refugees were mostly farmers and their families fleeing brutal attacks by the Guatemalan military. Regularly, military helicopters would arrive to strafe the camps. Cockburn's lyrical response — that "some son of a bitch would die" should the narrator get his hands on a rocket launcher — shocked even the singer with its violence. In concert, Cockburn has stated he felt the pilots of those helicopters had "forfeited their



humanity" through the vicious assaults on the innocent, defenceless refugees. As recently as August of 2015, Cockburn said in response to a fan's shouted request for the song: "Ah. It's so depressing. How about I play a new one?"

Is the song still painful to sing after all this time?

"It is. If I'm practicing with people or by myself it's just matter of fact, but when I'm actually performing it — as with any other song — I put myself where the song is, which means where I was at when I wrote it. And it is painful and I don't like singing it."

A life of engagement in potentially transformative action can leave one saddled with disappointment. Yet, on occasion, effort bears positive results. On Sept.17, 2015, the *New York Times* reported that Mozambique is now free of landmines.

Cockburn was thrilled: "Yeah. That's a great thing. It's one of the tiny pieces of evidence that there is room for hope. ... Mozambique was not the worst-off country with respect to landmines, but it had a problem for sure, and a big one. The fact that they've been able to clear it to that degree is impressive, but it's also instructive for people who haven't really thought about how long it's taken to do that.

"It was one of the very rare occasions where you can be involved and see positive results of your efforts. In most of these things, that's rare. If the various environmental efforts do bear fruit, I'll be dead before that happens, or I'll be dysfunctional, most likely. But there are all kinds of local successes that people have worked for. In each of those cases, people have put themselves out there and got the job done."