

Waxing Americana

Canadian country star and self-proclaimed history buff Corb Lund talks music, health care and gun control

BY SUE ZALOKAR

STAFF WRITER

Corb Lund hails from a long line of cowboys. He grew up in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, Canada, went to college to study bass and jazz guitar and found himself playing bass in a hard rock/metal band for over a decade. These days, he fronts his own country roots band, Corb Lund and the Hurtin' Albertans.

Though he is still building his fan base in the United States, he has gained notoriety in his native Canada, winning the Canadian Country Music Best Roots Artist of the Year award four years in a row.

Lund's seventh album, the malaise-drenched *Cabin Fever*, was released in August of last year. It was the result of a series of weeks spent in a cabin he built with his long-time girlfriend and a favorite uncle. Within weeks of finishing the cabin, he and his girlfriend split up and his uncle died. It doesn't get much more country than that.

Corb Lund will bring his Hurtin' Albertans and their *Cabin Fever* to Mississippi Studios on May 21.

S.Z.: I understand that you are quite the history buff. What are some of the most interesting aspects of history for you?

C.L.: I like all of it. I like when I can place my family and my ancestors in particular places and times. I'm really interested in the history of the cowboys in the West. My ancestors on both sides are all from the States. My family came across the plains to Utah – they were Mormons back then. They were raising cattle down there and they came to Alberta at the turn of the century.

My favorite thing in all media in the last five years – I like it better than movies or books or music – is a podcast that comes out of Eugene. It's called, "Hardcore History" by Dan Carlin. If you've never heard it, he does this fantastic job of taking a historical period or series of events and personalizing it and making it really human. I can't say enough about how awesome it is. He's my hero, Dan Carlin.

S.Z.: As artist in residence at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, you recently curated an exhibit that combined your music and your family's history in the Albertan Province. Tell me a bit about the exhibit, "No Roads Here - Corb Lund's Alberta."

C.L.: It was a really great experience. History is woven through my songs. We took a few of them and took themes from each song and made a bunch of mini displays within the space. There was one on prohibition, another on the oil industry in Alberta. We also had themes on ranching, rodeo, gambling, veterinary medicine and Mormonism. We used a combination of the Glenbow's artifacts and my own family's heirlooms to make a display. They did a great job.

S.Z.: You are a fourth generation rancher. Do you ranch currently?



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C.L.: No, I don't know how that got started. It's embarrassing, actually. The truth is I'm from four or five generations of ranchers, but I don't ranch. I grew up that way, but somewhere along the way one of the publicists from the city got that wrong and it keeps cropping up. Maybe someday when I'm rich, I'll do both. I grew up that way, and now I'm in the city making music and singing about it.

S.Z.: For those who aren't familiar with your work, how would you describe what you do?

C.L.: I call it scruffy country or underground country. I like the term subversive country. It's a mirror of my life. The first half of my life I spent around cattle and on horseback and having a very Western experience. And the next part of my life I spent in a speed metal band in the city, playing really underground music. When I write country songs, they tend to be a little weird. They aren't commercial country that fits in the radio box.

S.Z.: You played bass in a punk, hard-rock metal band, *The Smalls*, for a number of years. You all were quite the DIY band, selling over 40,000 albums before dismantling in 2001. Can you talk a bit about your time with *The Smalls*?

C.L.: It was really fun. I mean, it was lean years, but it was very formative, musically. It's interesting because now everybody's talking about working away from the mainstream and doing it yourself, but that's what we did from the beginning in that band. That's what a lot of punk bands did in those days and still do. When we started, we just sort of assumed we would never get any support from the industry, and so we just sort of made our own records and printed our own T-shirts and booked our own tours and built our own audience that way. I

carried that over into this band (*The Hurtin' Albertans*) too. As it turns out, we did get some commercial interest, but for the most part my whole career has just been built on rolling up your sleeves and making it happen.

I'm not as big of a star as I could potentially be if I played ball, or if I was a little bit more palatable to the commercialized side of things. It builds personal power. I don't have to rely that much on the radio playing my music or the media gatekeepers' approval. I've built a relationship over a number of years with my audience and they expect me to be quirky. It doesn't matter whether the industry is paying attention to me or not. I can still play music and make a living at it – on my own terms.

S.Z.: What are the most common American misconceptions about Canadians?

C.L.: One of them is people who fool around with the Canadian accent. The "out and about" thing. That's really an Eastern Canadian accent. We sound a little more like Montanans, I think. People have to remember that Canada is a massive country. It's second only to Russia. We have one-tenth the population that you have and it's spread across this huge area, so the cultural differences are quite large among Canadians. We don't all have the same accent. But I'll give you this: We do say "eh" all the time. That's the one stereotype about Canadians that's right. We say that a lot.

There are a lot of misconceptions about our health care system.

S.Z.: Many people in the U.S. envy your health care system.

C.L.: Only half. The other half thinks it's evil Socialism.

S.Z.: What do you think about your health care system?

C.L.: I think it's really good. Nothing's perfect of course, but it's generally really good.

I want to be clear that I'm not preaching to it. America's free to have its own system obviously. (Sighs) This is a big discussion.

I think it has been misconstrued for political reasons in the States. During the 2008 election, I was down there a lot – in blue states and red states. And I talked politics all night with people. People have this idea, or I kept hearing this statistic, that 1 in 6 people die waiting for health care in Canada. It's just not true.

Sometimes you have to wait a little while if you have to have a shoulder replacement. If you have a serious issue, it's addressed quickly. My niece is 12 and she is battling stage-four cancer right now, and she has had world-class care.

Another point that often comes up in the conversation (with Americans) is "I don't want a government bureaucrat between me and the doctor." Which I can understand, but it appears that the alternative is to have a for-profit insurance company between you and your doctor. Having a bureaucrat between you and your doctor can screw things up through ineptness, but having a for profit corporation between you and the health care provider seems like a guarantee that you're going to get screwed over.

A telling example of (the success of) our healthcare system is a few years ago the CBC – the National Radio Station – they had a public vote on the top 10 Canadians in history, and I think Wayne Gretzky, the hockey player, was second or third, and the person that was number one, his name was Tommy Douglas. He's the politician who brought into place the Universal Health Care system.