

After Hours: The Driving Force Behind Caribou

Published in *Renegade Radio* (September 2008)

Tyler Pantella

When a musician finds success, we often attribute it to hype or dumb luck. Caribou is the most solid example I've ever found of a hard-working, self-critical approach to music. Now that Caribou's 2007 release *Andorra* has been selected as a finalist for the prestigious Polaris Prize, maybe the slow-but-steady songwriting and extensive touring will all pay off.

Andorra is a mind trip into a world of synthesizers, multi-layered vocals, reverberation, and atmosphere. The journey ranges from pacing to full-on running. One picture the world as distorted through a glass jar. Reviews were favourable, including a positive score from the normally critical Pitchfork Media, and Caribou's fan base skyrocketed. Of course, I was already a fan.

Caribou is the brainchild of Dr. Daniel Victor Snaith. I meet with Snaith for coffee at Hollywood Video in downtown Victoria. The man who walks through the door seems caught between the sensibilities of a hip young musician and a mature intellectual. He unzips his lime green jacket and sits at my table, introducing himself in a soft voice, eager to talk about the state of his tour.

"It's been really good. The major crisis of the tour was when our drummer broke his wrist a couple weeks into the tour," says Snaith. "We found a replacement and we've only missed two shows. He learned all the songs in one day. That is incredible." Snaith's admiration is sincere and he seems to compliment everyone but himself. "I'm more than happy with my band. They're fantastic and that's what I enjoy primarily about playing live. Just kind of like, interacting with other musicians and I get enough of playing all of the instruments when I'm at home."

While Snaith's backup musicians are competent for the live incarnation of Caribou, it was no easy feat to arrange *Andorra* for live performance. The album is rooted in electronic music production techniques and lush instrumentation. In the recording process, Snaith played every instrument. To tour in support of the album, Snaith needed to reconstruct the songs entirely.

"We got together for a month before we started touring and kind of broke all the songs apart and tried lots of different ways of playing the songs," says Snaith. "We needed to know who was going to play what, and what we were going to leave out. We do still trigger some samples, things like string parts. We obviously aren't going to have a string section on stage. The songs kind of developed as we've played them live."

The packaging on *Andorra* mimics the musical content. Yellow flowers are pictured in a clearing, in front of a blurry line of trees. The yellows, greens, and browns remind one of past film photographs. But text is presented in a solid, modern font. This visual appeal carries through other facets of the band. On stage, the band performs to an array of projected patterns and colours, an interactive cornucopia beyond that of Windows Media Player's visualizations.

Snaith details the evolving process to me. "We've had projections since we started touring. We used to have these guys, Delicious 9, who made all these kind of

animated music videos for us and in the past. They were very narrative. They used to be just totally locked to the music. The downside of that meant that we couldn't change the songs, whereas now, that's exactly what's happening with the kind of new visuals, they're more interactive, pattern-based, more just like patterns with light and kind of strobing effects and they are being triggered as we play."

This attitude towards an interesting experience comes across outside of recorded material and concerts. A YouTube video linked from the main Caribou website shows Snaith walking along a street, playing an acoustic guitar and singing, with the rest of his band members positioned further down the street. "That's actually this website called La Blogothèque, they've done hundreds of bands the same way in Paris, and they just take the band out on the street. It was totally their idea. But it was fun because we've never done any acoustic shows or anything. I really want to stay away from that unless it's particularly interesting."

When I ask him about his sleep schedule, he chuckles. "We don't get much sleep but that's kind of part of being on tour. And when I'm at home, like when I was doing a Ph.D. and making music, I didn't get much sleep at all. And still, any waking moment I'm probably making music. Yeah, sleep's overrated. I end up working all day and then definitely working late into the night as well."

Snaith and I are equally uninterested in talking about his doctorate in mathematics, something he has been hounded over in nearly every interview in his musical career. "At the moment I'm so happy being able to do music full time and spend all my time recording and playing music around the world. It's incredible. I don't really do anything academic anymore, to be honest."

Vinyl releases have been growing in recent years and Snaith tries to ensure that Caribou is not left out. "I hardly ever buy CDs and I compulsively buy vinyl. I definitely pushed to make sure that the album came out in both North America and Europe on vinyl." He offers the following surprising fact with pride. "When we go on tour, the vinyl copy of the album is the thing that we sell the most of."

Touring has now stopped, after over 200 concerts over the last year. Caribou may be in the running for the Polaris Music Prize for best Canadian album, but Snaith thinks more towards the future. "I get home after a tour and I just kind of start from scratch every time. Nobody really tells me what to do. I just give them a finished product and it's done. I'm definitely not going to lean towards anything that I've done before."

Snaith's demeanor is so calm, calculated, and precise. He's like a really smart raccoon. And his work ethic is impossible to hide. He offers some final advice. "Over a year, in recording 45 minutes of music, there are bound to be times that aren't productive. Most of the time I consider as being 'not productive,' even if I'm making lots of music. I just keep at it. Don't give up."