

LIFE SHORT



Back in 1980, Bob Gersztyn was reading a copy of *The Wittenburg Door* featuring a story about Bruce Cockburn. The article defended Cockburn for using a four-letter word in one of the songs on his then-new album, *Humans*. The reason why everyone was upset was because Cockburn professed to be a born-again Christian and everyone knows that Christians never use profanity, even for artistic expression. At least up until then.

Soon it became apparent that this was *not* your typical Christian singer-songwriter. The melodies were haunting, and the lyrics were mind-altering in their insights into topics ranging from honest Christian doubt to ecology to the war in Nicaragua.

Cockburn's musical career now spans

five decades and he's shared the stage with musical legends from Jimi Hendrix to Wilson Pickett.

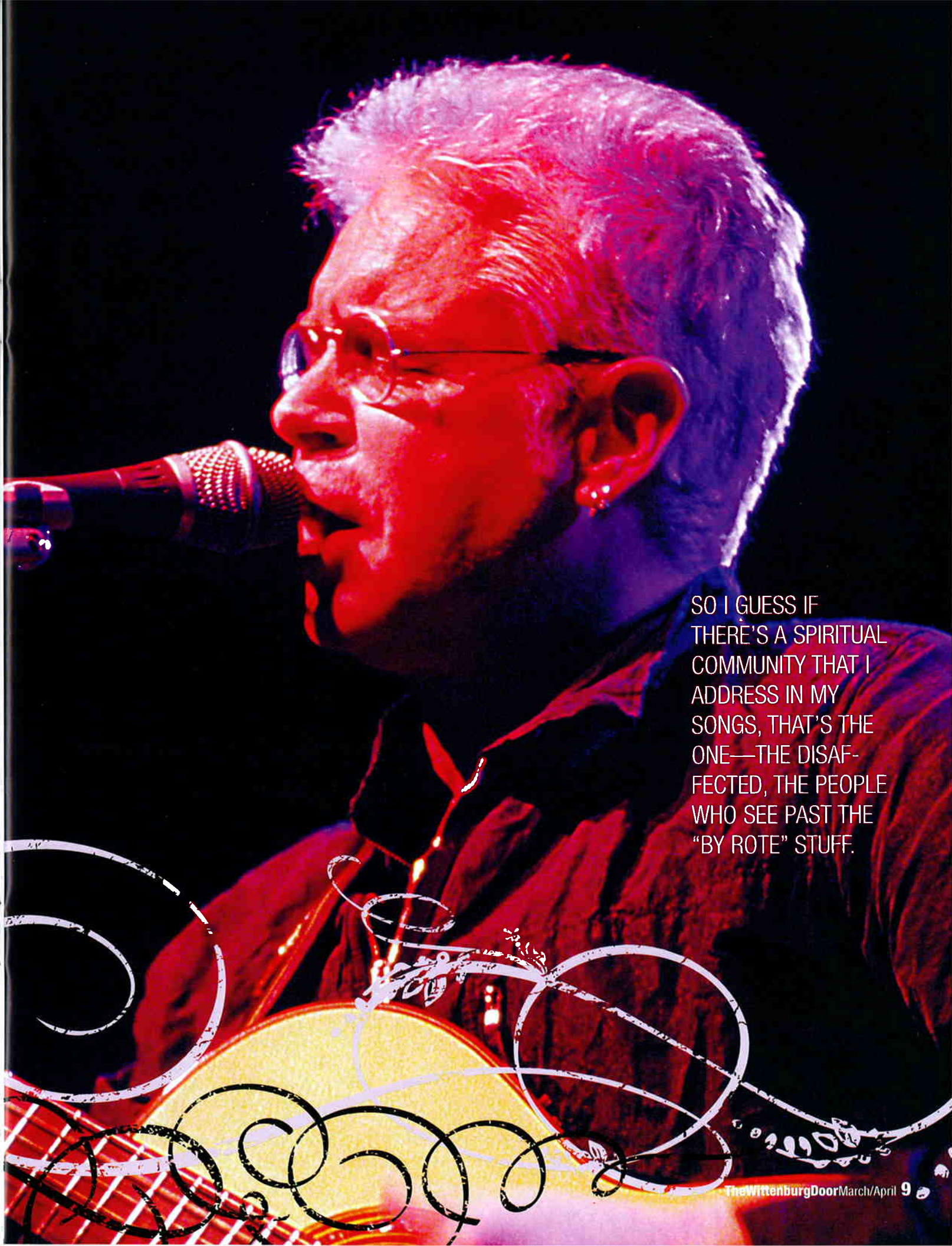
Although he's won every music award that Canada has to offer, he still has somewhat of a cult following here in the U.S. *Life Short Call Now* is Cockburn's 29th album. It is an intensely personal album, one that investigates the spirituality of everything from television infomercials to environmental issues and war.

Likewise, Cockburn's spiritual evolution since that first interview is startling—life has weighed heavily on him and he's struggling to regain the clarity of his earlier commitment. But one of the main reasons why we love his music is because that passionate struggle is painfully, transparently revealed in every song. (continued on page 10)

CALL NOW

The Wittenburg Door
Interview:
Bruce Cockburn
By Bob Gersztyn

Photography: Bob Gersztyn



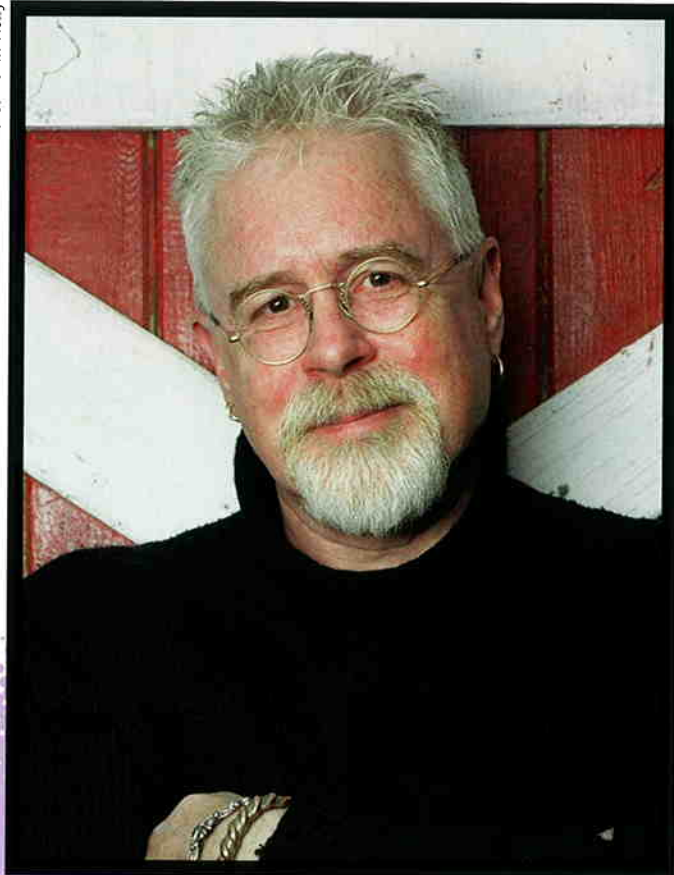
SO I GUESS IF THERE'S A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY THAT I ADDRESS IN MY SONGS, THAT'S THE ONE—THE DISAFFECTED, THE PEOPLE WHO SEE PAST THE "BY ROTE" STUFF.

WITTENBURG DOOR: If you had a chance to sit down with President Bush for five minutes, what would you say to him?

BRUCE COCKBURN: The first thing I would do is try to angle for a longer period together, because there'd be a lot to talk about. I don't think that this would ever happen in a million years, but I did have lunch with a number of his aides. They have kind of a little discussion reading group. There are groups of White House aides, some Senate aides, and so on, and I got invited to meet with them at one point when I was playing in D.C. They're all Republicans and they're all Christians, but they were willing to listen to reason and they responded well to being treated with respect.

There were a lot of things that I didn't agree with them on and they were willing to listen to what I had to say and were actually curious to hear what I had to say. Maybe these are the honorable conservatives that one fruitlessly searches for. The high profile people all have their own private agendas and you can't believe anything they say—and

Photo: Kevin Kelly



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that's just as true, I suppose, of the Democrats—but it's really evidently true of the Republican crowd. Where are the honorable conservatives? Because they must exist, and I found a few of them, in this group, I think. But Bush? I don't know what he is. I don't know if he just doesn't get what's really going on,

or if he really gets it, and really likes it. So first of all you have to find that out. Then the discussion would ensue, depending on that.

DOOR: You're one of the few artists to creatively continue from the 1960s through today. It seems to me that the 21st century is still reaping from the activism of the '60s.

COCKBURN: I think that it is, but it's hard

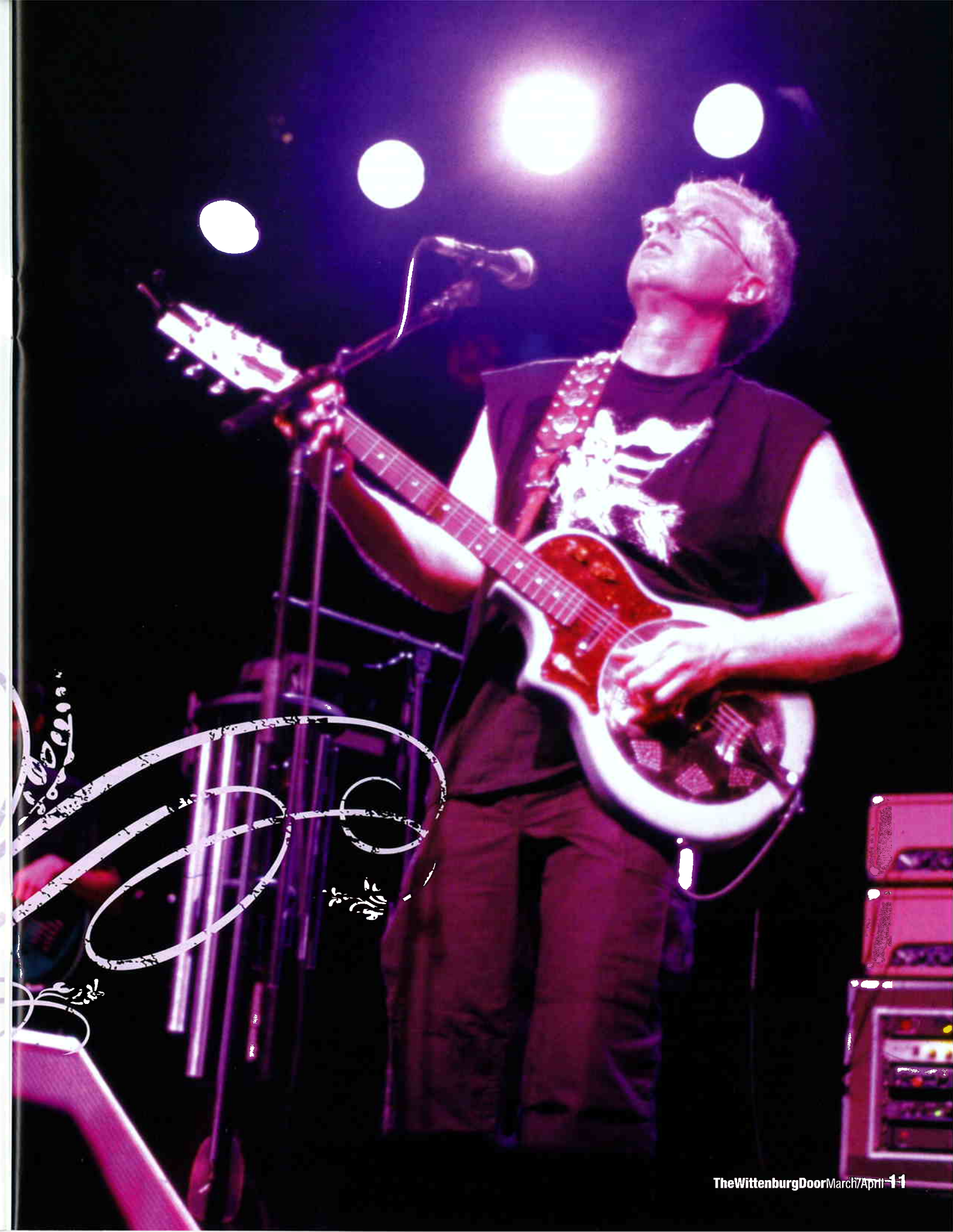
philosophy and energy that was flowing around. It flowed through the clerics as much as it flowed through everybody else. It was just in the air. It touched everybody, whether they wore the uniform or not, of the hippie movement. As a result of Vatican II, the church began to teach people in Latin America to read. As a result of people in Latin America learning to read, they started trying to overthrow the governments that were keeping them poor, malnourished, and not getting medical attention. Many church people became supporters of that kind of social change and we've been living with the result ever since.

There is just one case where the '60s definitely affected current history—and is still affecting it—because those revolutions have come and gone and they've been repressed violently in almost every case, but the reason for them being there hasn't gone away, so they keep coming back. It was the church deciding to identify itself with the poor that changed that, and I really think that wouldn't have happened in any era, other than the '60s, in the same way that it did.

We don't still have a Vietnam War because people in the '60s decided that they'd had enough. One of the things that contributed to the success of the civil rights movement was the support of white liberals, who constituted

a voting bloc that politicians had to pay attention to. It wasn't just a sudden humanitarian awakening on the part of the government of the day. Their awakening had to do with pressure from voters, the anticipation of losing elections, and stuff like that. That's a little before the hippie movement, but it was still going on, still evolving, as it is today, because the need is still there for it to evolve—and things are not quite equitable yet.

I just see all these trends that are going on. The fashion comes back and the young kids going around looking like hippies today don't have any idea what it meant to be looking like that in 1967. Because people used to hassle you for looking like that back then and now they just think that you're weird.



DOOR: In the 1970s, when you first became a born-again Christian, you wrote a psalm-like song called “Lord of the Star Fields.” Then in the 1990s you wrote another one called “Strange Waters.” Is this reflective of your religious evolution?

COCKBURN: There’s a reference to the Psalms in “Strange Waters,” of course, kind of a backward reference there. The thing is, if you believe in having a relationship with the divine, as I do, that relationship is a fluid thing that hopefully involves growth. It doesn’t stop. You don’t sort of sign up for the thing and wear a uniform and that’s the end of it. It’s life, it’s rich and evolving, and you learn as you go.

One of the things that used to bug me about some Christians, back when I was trying to be a “By-the-Book-Christian”—which is in that period of the ’70s when I wrote “Lord of the Star Fields”—is this: I’d see these people on TV saying, “My life was a mess. I was an alcoholic. I lost my job. My wife was leaving me and taking the kids. But I found Jesus and it

turned everything around. Now my wife is back, the kids are happy and I’ve got this great job, blah, blah, blah.”

By the end of the ’70s, when I was divorced, and had been pretty devoted, and seriously exploring what it meant to believe in God, and to have a loving relationship with that God, I could stand there, I could watch these people on TV, and I could stand up and say, “Yeah and I became a Christian and my marriage broke up, and now I drink and smoke and I didn’t used to, and everything was exactly the opposite for me.”

DOOR: There are a lot of people like that, only they don’t get the chance to be on the Pat Robertson show.

COCKBURN: Exactly. So I guess if there’s a spiritual

community that I address in my songs, that’s the one—the disaffected, the people who see past the “by rote” stuff. And how it’s changed since then, well, it’s been an ongoing process of growth, and over time I’ve learned as much about God from Hindus, and Sufis as I have from Christians, and from just the experience of life. In all the different places I’ve seen and the different landscapes I’ve found myself in. You think it’s not as simple as the books like to say, and that’s why it says in my heart that God is too big to fit in a book.

DOOR: The clues are everywhere. They may be in a church or temple, but they may also be in a bar or a brothel. Didn’t you write “Fascist Architecture” during that period?

COCKBURN: That was a moment of discovery when my marriage was breaking up. It was clear to me that as painful as it was, and as traumatic as it was, it was a grand learning opportunity, and the chief thing to be learned was that you can try to impose your view on the world all you want, but one of these days a big wind is going to come along and blow it all away and you’ll be left sitting there saying, “What was wrong with the way I pictured things?” What I learned right then was don’t get too attached to your picture of things, because it’s a very narrow view that we have as human beings and it is subject to frequent modification.

There’s no reason to assume that that frequent modification doesn’t come from God. It’s part of life, which is what God is all about, it seems to me. If you get all bitter about it and don’t learn anything, then it’s wasted. But all of these things that happen to us are opportunities to learn and grow.

DOOR: Do you have any particular religious leaders that you look to, that you respect, or listen to what they say?

COCKBURN: I listen to a lot of what a lot of people say and I try to take from it what is useful to me—or what I can grasp. A lot of times people’s experiences

are harder—especially in the spiritual arena—they’re hard to articulate and hard to share sometimes. I have a teacher, whose opinion I value, who I’m engaged in a kind of Jungian dream analysis work with. That’s kind of the closest thing I have to a spiritual leader at the moment. In the past, I don’t think that I had one at all. I kind of just trusted God to take me where I needed to go—and I still do that. But one of the places that He took me was into an area of study with this particular guy.

As for religious leaders or people who are, by virtue of their ambition, or design, or God’s design, happen to be in a position to tell other people what to do—I don’t have a lot of faith in that kind of stuff. To those people, infallibility is so painfully fallible that I could never buy into that. If the Pope isn’t right, then why should Jerry Falwell be right—or anybody else? We know they’re not, because they keep making these outrageous statements about this or that or the other thing, things that are based on their prejudices more than anything else.

I heard this guy the other day. I don’t know who it was now. It was one of the sort of high-profile loudmouths of the Christian right in the U.S. and he was quoted as saying ... well, I forget what it was. I can’t even remember what the issue was—something or other that he didn’t care for—was “an insult to God.” Which to me is exactly the language of the Ayatollahs. It’s exactly what Ayatollah Khomeini said about this or that or the other thing, and exactly what fundamentalist leaders like to say all around the world, in every faith. It seems to me, anybody who thinks that they understand what insults God has seriously let their ego come between them and any understanding of God that they might have. If God is Who we believe He is, how could He possibly be insulted by anything?

DOOR: Yeah, some omnipotent deities can be so touchy ...

COCKBURN: When I started being a Christian, I accepted C.S. Lewis’ definition of Christianity, which is that if you recognize the divinity and reality of Christ, then you are a Christian. That’s all it takes. You can be a bad Christian and not observe any of the things that you’re supposed to observe, but if you believe that it’s real, then you’re a Christian. On that basis I’ve called myself a Christian and I kind of still do because I think that

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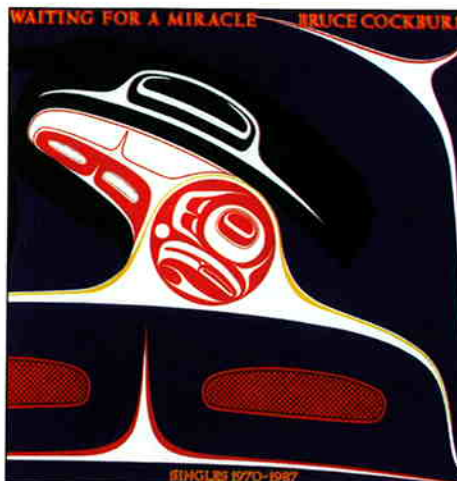
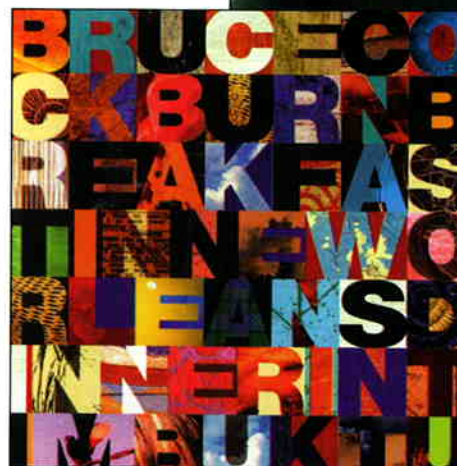
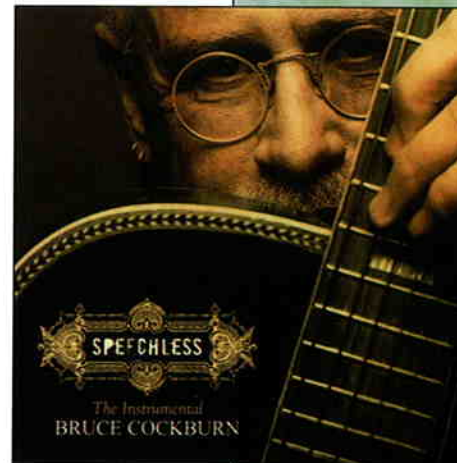
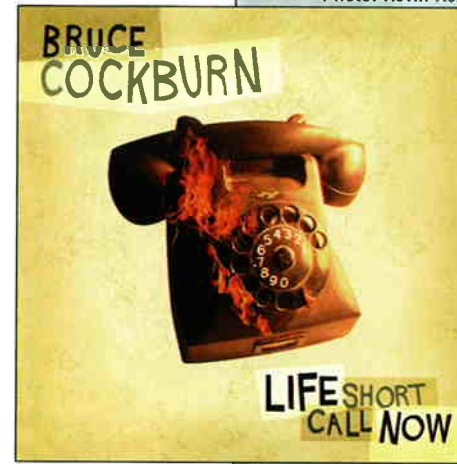
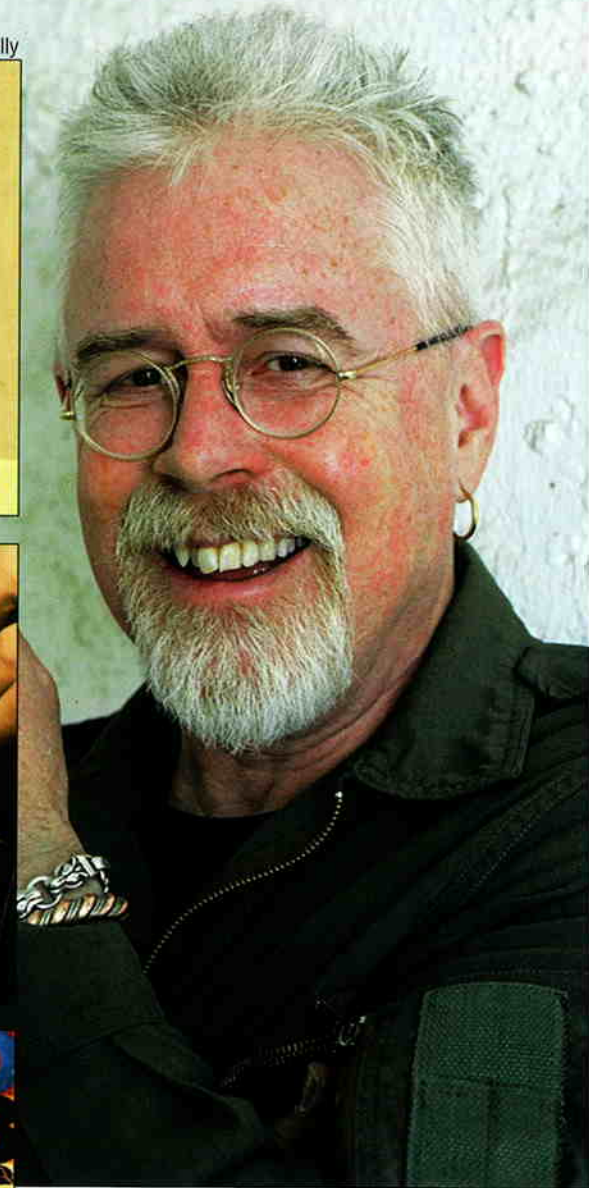


Photo: Kevin Kelly



even if it’s mythology, the important thing for us as human beings, is to have a sense that there is a God, and that our relationship with God is something that we need to pay attention to.

Beyond that, we have to be really careful about drawing lines around things, and thinking that we have the perfect understanding of what that relationship is supposed to be to the exclusion of other people’s experience and understanding. So if that makes me wishy-washy, New Age, or something, so be it, but I just see a lot of people making some very serious mistakes—or what I think are that—and I don’t feel like my own experience has provided me with anything that allows me to justify that kind of view.

I feel God. I feel like God is in my life, but He, so far, hasn’t any inclination to go and tell me to go and kill anybody on His behalf, or go and raise money on His behalf, for that matter, or any of that stuff.