

Interview with Guitarist Bobby Baker of the Tragically Hip

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by Adam St. James

Canadian rock heroes The Tragically Hip are yet more proof that building your career regionally, one show at a time, can lead to the big time. Of course it can also take awhile to get that career off the ground. The Hip started out in the early-'80s in Kingston, Ontario, Canada - far from the rock capitals of Los Angeles or New York City, and even a couple hours from Canadian cultural hub Toronto. They played incessantly in their early days, racking up live gigs like pool sharks rack up gambling winnings. Even after a major record label president caught their live act and signed the band, it still took several years and a handful of albums to reach major international acclaim.

Though the Hip quickly scored plenty of college radio airplay, they initially broadened their fan base only in pockets of the U.S., and primarily not far south of the Canadian border either. But they of course followed that up with low-budget tours that introduced them to new fans throughout North America, one club or college auditorium at a time. Eventually more people took notice, and The Tragically Hip moved up to larger stages.

Now The Tragically Hip are a main stage attraction wherever they play. Guitar.com spoke with guitarist Bobby Baker a couple weeks ago, hot on the heels of the group's newest release, *In Between Evolution*, and right after the group had played a series of warm-up club gigs in anticipation of their next tour. Baker discussed songwriting and collaboration, vintage guitars and amplifiers made out of old movie projectors, and even the burgeoning ukulele scene in Seattle. Get hip.

Guitar.com: Hi Bobby. You're at home today?

Bobby Baker: Yeah, I am.

Guitar.com: Kingston is halfway between Buffalo and Toronto, isn't it?

Baker: No, we're about two hours north of Syracuse, at the other end of Lake Ontario.

Guitar.com: I grew up in Buffalo, so I should know where Kingston is. You guys played Toronto and all of New York State a lot, all through your early days, I'm sure?

Baker: Yep, certainly.

Guitar.com: You've got a new album out, are you pretty excited about the new stuff?

Baker: Yeah, I'm really happy with it. It's going to be a great live record to play. A lot of the record was recorded very live, no overdubs. Some of it's a bit more traditional than that. And I think it reflects what the band does live more than a lot of the records have in the past few years. I think it's going to translate really well to the stage.

Guitar.com: You guys had been exploring the studio mode more in the past few years?

Baker: I think we had sort of explored recording live off the floor, and trying to make it sound like it does live off the stage, which never really happens in the studio. And you're always frustrated with that, so then you start trying to do something different. So you build it from the ground up, which seems like a logical approach, but you can have really mixed results doing that. Sometimes the tunes that will shine live will suffer from that approach, and the tunes that are maybe more marginal - or whatever, half baked - really benefit from being built up like that. I think it can make for very interesting albums that don't really reflect what the band sounds like live. And I think we kind of got into that with a few records.



Guitar.com: Right. And you've always been very much a live thing.

Baker: Yeah, very much so. I think that's the bread and butter of what we do.

Guitar.com: When you're playing your parts live, you're drawing a lot of energy from the crowd. Do you feel that, even with the band playing live in the studio, is it different?

Baker: I notice that if it's the five of us playing with just our crew in the studio. As soon as you throw someone into the mix who is kind of an outsider, it instantly becomes a performance - whether it's one or two people, or a huge crowd. It doesn't really make a big difference. Once you're performing, you're performing. But if we're recording out at our clubhouse, it's a very different feel. Not at all like live.

Guitar.com: How involved are you with the songwriting, especially on this disk?

Baker: We're all involved. All credit is shared equally. Gord Downie writes the lyrics. But basically we took about 18 months from the time we started writing until we're ready to go back on the road. So there's probably a better part of a year writing the record, which means that everybody goes off to their own studios and amasses 20 or 30 ideas. You bring them to the band, and you probably only get the chance to "audition" maybe your five best ideas, that you think are the most suited to the band. And of those, maybe two or three will really get a chance to do anything.

Guitar.com: Plenty of material coming in that way, though. That's great. That's a lesson that all unsigned bands need to take notice of.

Baker: Yeah, we find it makes for a wide variety of material. And regardless of whose idea it is that comes in, we've found that if someone comes in with a full song idea, it doesn't really - it's almost like a bit of a barrier to the rest of the band. If you come in with something that's a little bit more half-baked, so to speak, then the rest of the guys have something to contribute, and it becomes a band song very quickly. And by the time you record the song

it's pretty much forgotten who brought in the idea. It just becomes a shared contagion after awhile.

Guitar.com: So do you just write musical parts, or do you contribute lyrics too?

Baker: I do, but I don't really present those to the band. I wouldn't presume to go to Gord Downie and say, 'I think these would be great lyrics.' He's got a very unique lyrical style, and he's very good at what he does. But having said that, I think that the other guys in the band all try to be more complete songwriters. The band is a great outlet for our songwriting aspirations, but there may be other avenues as well.

Guitar.com: What do you do to pursue other songwriting opportunities?

Baker: Everyone has different things they do, working with various people, whether it's up and coming local artists or - Gord goes off and does solo records. Paul Langlois has been working with a guy named Hugh Dillon from a band called the Headstones. They've had a few Canadian hit records. I've been doing some songwriting with Craig Northie, the guy from the Odds, a very good band. And Johnny has worked with lots of young groups, produced a couple of records. Everyone has their little side things going on, but we keep our main focus on what we do, which is writing songs and touring with the Tragically Hip.

Guitar.com: Are you in rehearsal now for upcoming shows? How do you deal with that?

Baker: I could call it rehearsal (laughs). It was two days. We don't get too intensive about that. [After all this time] we know each other; we know how to feed off each other, and sort of where we're all going. But we're also not trying to fix the songs into, 'This is the way the song has to sound.' Because you can play the song a thousand times and get all the parts right, but as soon as you take it on stage in front of an audience, something happens to the song. And if nothing happens to the song, you need to get a new song.

Guitar.com: So you leave room for adventure.



Baker: Yeah. The songs have to develop. If the song sounds the same three months from now as it did when we rehearsed it, then that's a problem. And that song won't last three months. It will fall by the wayside much more quickly than that.

Guitar.com: What about years down the road with songs that you're still playing? Have they changed drastically?

Baker: Oh I think they do. There are some songs that have sections, or guitar breaks, that stay pretty much the same from night to night. But there are whole sections of songs that change and morph into other things. And the songs that don't, they seem to crop up less frequently in the set.

Guitar.com: How long are your shows going to be this year?

Baker: About two hours. I think contractually we're obliged to play 70 minutes, but the shows are more like 90 minutes to two hours. You don't want to overdo it with folks.

Guitar.com: Will you be bustin' out songs you haven't played in quite awhile that die-hard fans will be happy to hear?

Baker: That's definitely the hope. We're about to head out next week and do a series of pre-release club shows in western Canada, and obviously we ran through the new songs - two times each, to make sure we were all tight on that. And then we ran through probably about 10 songs that we haven't played in at least three or four years, and maybe one or two that I don't know if we've ever played live. We ran through them once to see how much we remembered, and we were surprised how good they were.

We just thought, particularly for the club shows where you tend to get more die-hard fans, then you want to give them something different. When you get into the big outdoor shows where you run into a wider variety of people, you're gonna play the new album and you're going to pepper the hits and the signposts in there.

Guitar.com: How did you decide to work with producer Adam Kasper? What were some of the key things he said when you met with him that made you feel he was the right guy? What do you want to hear from a producer?

Baker: It kind of depends on your mind set at the time. In this case we've come off a couple of ... we did a very Pro Tools oriented record, two records ago - where you get into all kinds of crazy shit where you have 120 tracks on one song, and you've delayed all your mixing decisions. So you want to avoid that. And then the last record we had a great producer, and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, but he was very frank about the idea of, 'I HATE guitar solos. No guitar solos.' And ... that's kind of what we do, if you've seen the band. That's part of what we do on stage. And as much as we enjoyed the experience, we decided that we had to work with a real guitar guy - a guitar, bass, and drums kind of producer.

And Adam came and saw the band, and he said, 'You guys have great chemistry, and the trick is to try to capture that in the studio.' And of course you can't capture a live gig in the studio - or it's extremely difficult. But you try to keep the chemistry intact, and he was definitely after the same things that we were after. And we certainly gave him free reign to mess with anything, or if he had any suggestions.

Guitar.com: Is he a guitar player himself?

Baker: He's more of a ukulele player (laughs).

Guitar.com: Seriously?

Baker: Yeah.

Guitar.com: Well that's a rare skill.

Baker: Well, he's from Seattle, and the Seattle scene has gone from grunge to ukulele.

Guitar.com: (laughs)

Baker: I'm not kidding you! I couldn't be more serious. Eddie Vedder is a ukulele genius, apparently. Adam, having worked with those guys, decided he had to take up the ukulele. And going around the music stores, ukuleles are in all the shops. It's quite odd.

Guitar.com: That is pretty odd! So what kind of ukulele are you playing these days? Or not. Tell me about your gear.

Baker: Well, I didn't play any on the new album, but I just got a bunch of Ernie Ball guitars that I like. I'm about to take those on the road.

Guitar.com: What models?

Baker: Two Silhouettes. I've never played them before rehearsal and really like them. On the record it was the usual suspects: I've got a '63 Tele, and a mid-'80s Tele Custom. I used those on most of the record. I've got a Paul Reed Smith that I played on a couple tracks. I think it's the McCarty. I'm not a super gear-head - it's the red one (laughs). And on two tracks I played an old 1953 Fender lap steel, the kind with two eight string necks. I have those tuned differently.

Guitar.com: How did you tune those?

Baker: One is tuned to C6, kind of like a Dobro tuning, except in C, with a couple of As in there. And the other neck is in an E13 tuning, which is what I use on the song "Vaccination Scar." For years I've been trying to play slide guitar on my standard guitars, not having anything specifically set up for slide guitar, and I always found it a little frustrating and limiting. And whenever I went and played on a little lap steel, I just enjoyed the sound so much more. And I thought, 'Well, I've had this '53 lap steel kicking around for years - I picked it up in Nashville probably 10 years ago. So I thought, 'OK, let's see if I can do anything with it.' And I got two good tracks out of it, and I learned at least one more song on it, from our catalog.

Guitar.com: Cool. Where did you get the '63 Tele?

Baker: I just picked it up at a local shop. It's a nice old Tele.



Guitar.com: Are you into vintage gear?

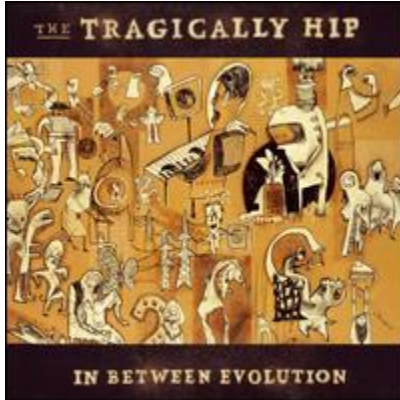
Baker: Not in a big way. I'm very utilitarian about my instruments. I want to be able to play them, and I know that I'm going to drop them. And I don't want to play them in the studio and then not be able to take them on the road. Gord Sinclair is more the vintage guy. He's got some great stuff: a '56 Tele, a '58 Strat. The kind of really nice stuff that you put in a climate-controlled closet when you're on the road.

Guitar.com: What does he play on the road?

Baker: He's got an Ernie Ball bass, he's got a couple of Fender P-basses. I think he's mostly playing the Fender P.

Guitar.com: And what about everybody else?

Baker: Paul used to be the Tele Custom guy. I was always Strats and he was always Teles. And then I kind of moved to Teles and PRS, and he moved to Les Pauls. And he's actually got quite a nice collection of old, early '60s through '70s Les Pauls and Les Paul Juniors. I think he particularly likes the Les Paul Juniors.



Guitar.com: And where do you guys shop for all these things?

Baker: There's a guy in town who runs a vintage shop, and we just keep our eye on him, whatever he's got coming through. He usually gives us advance notice. I want to get either a Strat or a Tele made in the year I was born, just for reasons only I could understand.

For years I've taken a guitar on the road that my dad bought me when I was 12 or 13 years old. It was a Strat that looked - to me - identical to the one Robbie Robertson of the Band played, and when I was 12 or 13, Robbie was like God. I saw it in the store and it was second-hand, early '70s. And I was like, 'Yeah, that's the one I've got to have.' And for years I've taken it on the road, but I'm about to retire it, because it's starting to take on more sentimental value than I like to have in a guitar.

Guitar.com: And what does Gordon Downie play live?

Baker: I think he's playing a Guild these days. But he's not too fussy. For him - he gets it in his in-ear monitors - and I think it helps him with his vocal intonation. And he can just sort of know that that chord is there if he needs it.

Guitar.com: And what kind of amps are you and the rest of the band using?

Baker: Live, Paul is using a Line 6 amp. He also has a battalion of small amps. There is a guy in Hamilton, Ontario - everyone just calls him Bernie. And Bernie makes these amps out of old film projectors.

Guitar.com: He makes amps out of old film projectors?

Baker: Yeah. You get these old film projectors and they're all set up for tube technology. And basically you just route out one side and throw a speaker in it, and make them into amplifiers. I know a guy locally in Kingston who is doing that for me. He gets all the specs for old amps, and he's built me a '64 Bassman, a '62 Princeton, and a '64 Champ - all of them made from old film projectors.

Guitar.com: Wow. I've never heard of that. Do these guys have websites?

Baker: Probably not. My guy's name is Clint Hierlihy and he's in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

Guitar.com: OK. Maybe people can find him on the web. So what amps are you using live?

Baker: At the present I'm still using the Tremoverb - I take two Mesa/Boogie Tremoverbs. And then I have a sort of standard pedal board with the Line 6 pedals: The green delay, the distortion, and the modulation. And then you throw a wah-wah on there, and expression pedals on all the effects. That gives you a pretty wide range. And to me it's a better option than the Line 6 amps. But those are not without their charm as well.

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Guitar.com: Well, that all sounds cool Bobby. Thanks a lot for your time, and good luck on the tour this summer.

Baker: Thanks Adam. We'll see you out there.

About the Author Adam St. James joined Guitar.com shortly after the website launched in the summer of 1999 and has been the site's Editor for several years. Adam is the author of several guitar instructional books, including "101 Guitar Tips: Stuff All the Pros Know and Use" (published by Hal Leonard). He fronts blues and rock bands in the Chicago area. See www.adamstjames.com for info on all Adam's books, bands, and barstool banter.

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