

# How the Soul Revival Is Igniting Past Glories

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## The Acorn

Move Mountains



**155**  
REVIEWS

# the ACORN



## FAMILY AFFAIRS

by MICHAEL BARCLAY

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loria Esperanza Montoya is a radiant, striking woman — likely never more so than when she speaks with immense pride of her only son, Rolf Klausener. And of course, she's especially pleased with his latest project: his folkie art rock

band the Acorn have just finished an album — *Glory Hope Mountain*, the title a loose translation of her name — based primarily on her life story.

Listening to her laugh and fawn over her progeny, you'd never guess that she suffers from chronic pain, watched her first husband die of brain cancer, immigrated to Canada from Honduras without knowing either official language, survived a flood, ran away from an abusive father at the age of 12, and barely survived her own birth.

Not that Klausener himself knew many of these stories growing up. "I knew she had a rough life," he says on the porch of the Ottawa home he shares with Acorn bassist Jeff Debutte. "I knew she was orphaned until she was seven. I knew that her father was not a good father. I knew that she eventually stumbled into Montreal and met my father. But that's it."

"He didn't know nothing about me," Montoya concurs in an interview the next day, where she speaks frankly and without regret — much as she did during the eight hours of interviews she did with her son before he started writing the album. "I was ashamed of my life. It's not that it was pitiful. I take all the good and bad as a learning experience. Whatever I went through in my life, from the day I was born to the struggle that I had, I will not live in the past. I will live in the present. If I have laughter today, then I enjoy that. I wasn't even crying when Rolfie was interviewing me. Because I could see myself in the bad times I had gone through, but then there was Rolf."

Witnessing that bond between this mother and her son is inevitably touching, especially when they talk about how music rescued Klausener from teenage depression after he lost his father at age 14. Yet whether or not Klausener would be able to write about her life with distance and perspective — and then translate that into music — is a whole other matter. In the words of an earlier Acorn song, "Heirlooms," "Sometimes treasures found are treasures best left hidden."

**WHEN KLAUSENER FIRST PROPOSED THE IDEA TO HIS BAND-MATES**, the reaction was predictable. Says Debutte, "My initial reaction was" —



PHOTO: AARON MCKENZIE FRASER

he makes an alarmingly loud farting raspberry sound — “What the fuck?! This is a really bad idea! Not in a callous way, but I thought, ‘Who cares about your mom?’”

Ah yes, but who cares about some poor schlep's broken heart? And yet pop music of all stripes continues to escalate the end of a relationship into emotional apocalypse. *Glory Hope Mountain*, on the other hand, tells the story of a woman who escaped death, abuse and poverty to live a reasonably comfortable Canadian life, though even that was marked by hardship. Take that, emo crybabies.

Despite the tale's inherent drama, Klausener is careful not to make the album an explicit narrative. The theme of journeying through struggle is rendered universally, with very few specifics offered. It was this approach that convinced Debutte that maybe the project wasn't such a bad idea after all. “As the songs started to come about,” he says, “I realised that it's also about a lot of bigger things than just his mom, and she was a good way to talk about those.”

“I didn't feel like writing another record that dealt with my inner turmoil, or insecurities, or paranoia,” says Klausener, whose two EPs of inventive melancholia, 2006's *Blankets!* and 2007's *Tin Fist*, built considerable blogosphere buzz, made them CBC and campus radio darlings and helped them become one of Ottawa's most visible exports. “I really wanted to get out of my own head and explore a story and do something narrative. I didn't want to write a record that had to do with broken hearts. Why not write about something really intense and special?”

He cites the work of his friends — and former label-mates on Ottawa's Kelp Records — Andrew Vincent, Andy Swan and Flecton Big Sky as lyrical inspirations. “Their stories are effortlessly narrative and they're so good at painting pictures.” But, as Klausener notes on the song “Dents” — a *Tin Fist* song that serves as a prelude to *Glory Hope Mountain* — “Time can't paint the picture for you.” And his mother gave him more than a few vivid pictures to work with.

Two songs, “Oh Napoleon” and “Crooked Legs,” detail a harrowing incident from when Montoya was 12 and living on her father's farm in Honduras with her 14-year-old adopted brother, Napoleon.

Klausener begins the tale: “Every night her father would get people to go out and tend to the sugar cane, because there was a refinery on the farm. When her brother was of age, her father asked him to go watch over the people working at the sugar refinery. Napoleon was terrified of the dark and refused to do it. He had polio and had a bum leg, and he had to ride a horse to do this. And if he fell off the horse, he would crack his skull open. So he was terrified to do this because he was scared of the dark, and there were no floodlights in rural Honduras in 1953.

“His father was insistent. He took off his belt, which was sweaty and hot because it was a sweltering night, and whipped Napoleon, who wasn't wearing a shirt. The belt wrapped around Napoleon's waist. When the father ripped off the belt, it tore an entire chunk of skin from around the torso. It was bleeding like crazy.

“So my mother, 12 years old, runs to the shed and gets a machete. She runs at her father with a machete and climbs up him as if she's going to slit his throat. She tells him, ‘If you touch him, I will kill you.’”

“Things calmed down after a bit, and Napoleon went to bed with bandages around his stomach. Later that night, my mother broke into the farm's safe and took all of her father's money. She packed it all up and got on this dirt road and walked tens of kilometres, until dawn, to Tegucigalpa, which is the capital, to the Catholic boarding school where she had stayed until her father came to reclaim her when she was about six. She said, ‘Here's a bunch of money, I'd like to stay here for as long as I can.’ They asked her what happened and she told them the story.

“The next day her father came by and said,


‘What the fuck is going on? You broke into my safe.’ They talked to him about the situation and he was like, [makes a hands-off gesture] ‘Cool, fine, fuck you, whatever, stay here.’ He left her there. She was there for two years until the money ran out, and then moved out and started living on her own.” As Klausener recounts the tale, he starts visibly shaking, still a tad incredulous at this recently uncovered family lore.

Part of his challenge in setting these stories to music was not dwelling on the drama. “Halfway through writing the record, I realised that a lot of the songs were slow, quiet and kind of sad,” says Klausener. “I wanted there to be some uplifting stuff on this record, because ultimately her story is really uplifting and beautiful. It was trying to find a way to talk about these themes in a positive way, and not focus on how crazy and challenging her life was. Which was hard.”

He goes on to recount a rather amusing tale of how his mother decided on a whim to go to

The Acorn began as a one-man bedroom-recording project focused mainly on a balance of electronics and acoustic guitar — not unlike Chad VanGalen — before it evolved into a typical rock band populated by atypical players. And so just as Klausener was trying something new with his lyrics, he was also itching to explore musical avenues outside the indie rock ghetto. Around the time of the *Tin Fist* EP, Tsui and Debutte started picking up ukuleles and banjos to round out the sound, and Devaux joined in on keyboards and started to learn marimba.

While researching his mother's story, Klausener figured he could better situate himself in the story by seeking out Smithsonian recordings of Honduran folk music from the '50s, as well as researching the country's history and mythology. In particular, he was struck by the Garifuna rhythms of Honduras, which combined indigenous traditions with those of the West African slave population. The latter resonated



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Canada after a Miami vacation. She arrived in Montreal with nothing, floating from job to job. One night she woke up to a rather graphic realisation that her boarding house roommate was a prostitute. She packed up immediately and left, wandering the streets of Montreal at three in the morning — which is where she had a chance reconnection with a Catholic nun from Honduras, who helped her get on her feet at a convent. It was there that she was introduced to Bernard Klausener, a Swiss diplomat with the UN.

During these tales, Debutte looks on, fascinated, and probably hearing some of these details for the first time. During the conception of *Glory Hope Mountain*, Klausener parsed out details to his band-mates on a need-to-know basis. “On songs like ‘Lullaby’ and ‘Hold Your Breath’ we knew exactly what was going on,” says Debutte. “Some songs he just gave us a précis. A song like ‘Oh, Napoleon,’ he'd just say: ‘You don't want to know.’”

**THE PERSONAL NATURE OF THIS PROJECT** shouldn't overshadow the other members of the Acorn whose mothers have yet to be mythologised. Part of what has distinguished Klausener from legions of other indie rockers with acoustic guitars is the textured approach of drummer Jeffrey Malecki, keyboardist Keiko Devaux, and multi-instrumentalists Debutte and Howie Tsui. Half of the Acorn are heavily schooled musicians; the other half are intuitive players who relish in colouring outside the lines. Klausener himself is somewhere in between, with his finger-picked acoustic guitar prominent in the mix, and rarely conforming to traditional rock or folk clichés that usually accompany the instrument.

with Klausener's early exposure to African music, fostered when his family lived in Mali while he was young; his mother was an avid concertgoer and record collector while there.

His initial immersion soon blossomed into a minor obsession. Yet though there are strong traces of it in the first single, “Flood” — with group percussion and vocals at the forefront — the Garifuna influence is merely part of the overall backdrop on “Crooked Legs” and “Low Gravity,” simply another layer amidst the atmospheric art rock.

“It was important that it wasn't just like bringing in a sitar player and claiming to play Indian music,” says Debutte, “which is a typically Western thing. Obviously, it's a bit different because Rolf is half-Honduran, so it's part of his heritage. For me as a random white dude, I didn't want to feel like we were just taking some Honduran elements and sticking them into our sound and getting to talk about how influenced we were.”

“But in defence of our common whiteness, I barely speak Spanish,” says Klausener, a self-identified “Swispanic.” “I'm kind of brown in the summertime, but I'm pale in the winter. All this was totally new to me. I was glad that Jeff was reminding me the whole time that we were not out to make a Garifuna record with English lyrics.”

Klausener was also bolstered by a conversation with John Higney, his band-mate in the country group Greenfield Main and a music professor at Carleton. “Higney said, ‘You don't have to copy this stuff. Listen to the cadence of the singing. Listen to the accents of the rhythms. There are things you can access there.’ He really made me realise that you don't have to borrow it

all. You can find inspiration in titbits that you attach yourself to. That was a big revelation.”

Indeed, even if a new listener didn't know this album's back story, its unique sound could just as easily be attributed to the band's open-eared musical collections. While driving from Guelph to Ottawa before the interview, our conversation features an annotated soundtrack that includes Miriam Makeba, Rheostatics, Daniel Lanois, Califone, M. Ward, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Bill Callahan, Björk, Paul Simon and Os Mutantes.

And yet one of the biggest influences on the Acorn is Ottawa itself. Klausener plays in Greenfield Main, the Recoilers and Flecton Big Sky — all of whom release albums on Kelp Records, as did the Acorn until now (*GHM* is on Paper Bag); Klausener also had a one-off electronic collaboration with Kelp founder Jon Bartlett called Hoffenheimer. Debutte leads his own band, the Soft Disaster. Both consider it a career highlight when, for one Eastern Canadian tour, the Acorn served as the backing band for Snailhouse, the solo project for Mike Feuerstack of Ottawa legends the Wooden Stars.

Klausener insists, without a hint of false modesty, “I've always felt very low on the song-writing totem pole of this city, when you have people like Feuerstack and Jim Bryson and Miche Jetté and they can encapsulate all these wonderful sentiments and ideas. I spend just as much time listening to those records as I do anything else.

“I get starstruck pretty easily,” he continues. “Going to see [late '90s Ottawa band] Werbo at the Hi-Fi with 50 other people there, I felt like I may as well have been at some huge stadium seeing U2 in 1987. I remember pissing next to Mike Feuerstack in the Hi-Fi bathroom, which was the first conversation I ever had with him. I think I said something like, ‘I was really nervous about talking to you for the first time, because I really love your music.’ He just looked over and said, ‘Huh. Well, that's stupid.’ That kind of changed everything.

“The Wooden Stars are an example of people who could take two guitars, bass and drums and do something completely different with it. For me, it was the craziest music I'd ever heard, and it was being written around the corner. Actually, I don't know what's so special about that: seeing or hearing a mind-blowing work of art and then realising it comes from the same city.”

In many ways, it's not unlike hearing a mind-blowing life story come from the mouth of your own mother. It's all too easy to underestimate the familiar, to be wilfully ignorant of the wonder and mystery of our immediate surroundings. And yet, in a society that drifts paradoxically towards a collective monoculture that emphasises individual retreat rather than neighbourhoods and communities, it's all too easy to forget the rich histories that exist even in our own families — especially in a nation of immigrants.

It's something that Klausener wrestled with while writing *Glory Hope Mountain*. “Last March, we were getting close to the last leg [of recording] and I was hammering away at the lyrics,” he recalls. “The Arcade Fire record [*Neon Bible*] came out, and I read articles about how they wanted to get away from things that were close and personal to them, and talk about a global perspective. I remember thinking that this is the complete opposite. This is about one person's life — two, maybe — and how unsexy that was. Here's a time when World War III is pretty much going on, and to take a vacation from that and write a story about one person's life seems really inconsequential and selfish.

“But I have a friend who works for the David Suzuki Foundation who told me, ‘Some people choose to try to save the world, and other people celebrate it.’ That really hammered home the whole reason why I was doing this.”

*Glory Hope Mountain* took two years from conception to conclusion, and though he's exhausted, Klausener is immensely satisfied. “This project was so all-consuming in so many ways. It's kind of scary, because I hope to god I can do something this special again sometime in my life. There are times when I listen to it and think that I won't. I hope this is just another step in the process.”