

With his rare gift of communicating "good-getting-older" life experiences into memorable songs and humorous stories, Bill Usher creates an evening in the theatre that brings the generations together in a head-nodding appreciation of those universal truths that happen in families as some grow up while others grow old.

Three-Time Juno Award Winner

BILL SIACE heaters

Listen here:

Live concert performance circa 2006

Slowdancing in the Ballroom of Life circa 2004



TESTIMONIALS

I spoke to Coco Love Alcorn, Tom Landa and Pharis Romero and told them about my dream of reaching out to BC presenters and playing theatres again. I asked them to take a listen and let me know whether they thought my songs and performance had value for their generation and today's audiences. Here's what they wrote back:



Then Bill Usher opens his mouth to sing, it's a head-turning-stop-and-listen kind of moment. Slowdancing in the Ballroom of Life starts off like a call to come shimmy in a dance hall, and takes you into dark corners and sunlit porches with Bill's growling and richly textured voice leading the trip.

Sometimes he gently speaks to you, and you know you're experiencing years of singing, story-telling, yelling, whispering and loving it so hard. There's always a pulse and groove, and he writes hooks like most people say hello. Usher makes you feel strangely right at home in a house you didn't know you wanted to live in before. Welcome home, friend.

Pharis Romero



First let me say that I thoroughly enjoyed *Slowdancing in the Ballroom of Life*. Great songs and great playing/singing.

These well crafted songs draw from Roots, Folk, and Blues music, and have the kind of hooks that stay with you long after the record has stopped playing. What really draws the listener in though, is Bill's voice and his laconic delivery, reminiscent of Ry Cooder.

I thoroughly enjoyed this album. Like him, Bill's music is easy going, engaging, and easy to like.

Tom Landa, The Paperboys, Locarno



Bill Usher the musician is much like Bill Usher the person. I've known him a little bit for a long, long time and the whole way along I've always felt that he could fit in any musical situation just as he can fit at any dinner conversation. He is that perfect mix of easy and relaxed, yet quick.

I've jammed with him a good handful of times as a drummer, and he has those two golden elements... the groove and the spark. He listens and lays back but also has that element of surprise.

It was lovely to sit back and listen to a live recording of his trio. All these years and I didn't know he was crafting these great songs... and I didn't know he could sing!

I don't even want to say that he's a drummer who can sing, or a singer who can play drums. Either of those phrases would place one above the other. Bill is a great singer, full stop. Bill is a great drummer, full stop. But I think a place where he is really special is that spark. When you are in the same room as Bill Usher, he has that easy charisma that pulls you in. And when Bill steps on stage, he casts that same spell.

Here's the thing, I've never actually been to a Bill Usher show. But now that I know there is such a thing... I want to be in that audience! Bill's easy charisma, with those great songs, and his voice and groove, and that spark!?! I know there would be magic.

Coco Love Alcorn

Whitehorse rocked, beat to the rhythm, laughed and danced for a week to Usher's heartfelt honesty and warmth.

Yukon International Storytelling Festival And Whitehorse Concerts

Bill's lyrics now move me as his rhythm always has. I keep them 'round my studio—they are inspiring.

Valdy

How did a three-time Juno winner, a first-rate professional conga player, a major TV series writer and producer, a veteran recording artist, a sideman who toured with Bruce Cockburn and producer of Sharon, Lois & Bram how in short did Bill Usher manage to infiltrate the Atlantic Fringe Festival without flights of angelic trumpets or at least a 50-piece brass band to announce his coming? Expertly paced and delivered this is a funny and touching piece of work enlightened with original song and super-charged drumming, in which Usher recalls significant events of his own journey toward the light of love and understanding. This show is a big time Fringe hit!

Stephen Pedersen, Halifax Chronicle Herald

Like many of my songwriting colleagues, I'm delighted and surprised to see our favourite drummer turning out these beautiful and evocative songs. Canada desperately needs to hear Bill's unique voice and to experience his singular vision of how we live in these times.

David Essig

Wonderful, warm and witty. I laughed out loud and cried to myself. A must see.

Patricia Gardner, Audience

Great music, insight and compassion. Makes you feel like you are sitting right there with him in his living room.

Amy Ness, Audience

These are songs that provide a make-youmove earful with words that make you 'moved' too, touching tender places you thought were yours alone. Give yourself a treat. Listen to the stories Bill Usher has to sing. They are our own simple truths sung in the air for us all to hear.

Linda Page, Adlerian Psychology Annual World Conference

I was told I'd laugh and I'd cry and I did, until I held myself with delicious pain!

Carol Pederson, Audience

We were lucky enough to share a concert stage with Bill. What a fantastic performer! He has somehow found that magical combination of fresh vitality and seasoned wisdom in his show. His songs are personal yet universal, moving the entire audience to laugh, sigh and sing along. We highly recommend Bill's performance to all presenters in BC.

Chris Frve, The Bills





ultiple Juno award-winner Bill Usher could be one of the most accomplished but, not-so-famous people in the world of Canadian music and arts!

Starting in the 1970s, this self-taught drummer has played and recorded with several festival's worth of well-known artists, from Bruce Cockburn and Ronnie Hawkins to Valdy, Willie P. Bennett and Stan Rogers.

He's produced 60 albums, most notably the first four ground-breaking albums for Sharon, Lois & Bram, but also for Stringband, the Nexus Percussion Ensemble, Big Bird & Oscar the Grouch and many others — and received numerous Gold and Platinum records for his efforts. (And yes, that was Bill who made those Five Little Monkeys jump on the bed!)

Then there was his four-year stint with CBC Radio where he researched, produced, and hosted four dozen documentaries on such diverse artists as Taj Mahal, Ewan MacColl, and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. He won his third Juno in the mid 1980s for *DRUMS!*, a solo stage show that he performed hundreds of times in cross-country tours. Later, he wrote and performed two musical plays — *Sonofadrum* and *Lover, Father, Husband, Son, Baby Boomer with a Drum!* — explorations of family life that were presented widely in theatres and at Fringe Festivals across Canada.

During the '90s, Bill emerged as a songwriter, releasing two albums with his band The Space Heaters. Two notable gigs involved playing Peter Gabriel's WOMAD festival in Toronto and Festival Rhyme du Monde in Montreal. By the early 2000s while working as the Ontario Arts Councils' Performing Arts Touring Officer he created a whole album's worth of songs with the release of *Slowdancing in the Ballroom of Life*, a deep dive into the challenges and rewards of surviving into middle age – a thoughtful and groove-filled look at, mostly, the good things about getting older. From gospel-tinged hints of redemption to the sort of love songs that can only be written after you've been in love for a very long time, *Slowdancing* had a lot to say and said it very well indeed. "These songs have already sung their way into my life," wrote Dugg Simpson, longtime artistic director of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. "They're about things that I have lived and about things that I am living, in a musical language that I can understand."

Pursuing a long held dream to leave the city behind, Bill and his wife moved west in 2002 and settled in Golden, BC. "Pete Seeger's elder advice to me backstage at the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1975, was my 'north star' growing older," says Usher. "Pete told me, 'You don't find community. You make community.' So simple, yet so powerful."

So Bill started volunteering for the small Golden arts council and was soon appointed the artistic and executive director leading Kicking Horse Culture's phenomenal growth these past 18 years. Honoured with the town's Community Development Award in 2012, Mayor Christina Benty said, "Bill has proven time and again an ability to hold and sustain vision while working shoulder to shoulder with those on the ground. Over the breadth of his career, this has translated into a litany of impactful work in numerous cultural industries and truly sets him above and apart."

It goes without saying, the pandemic shut down has been a revelatory time for artists. "As a presenter of concerts, I spoke to so many artists during COVID who despaired — questioning themselves, their identity, and their future. That struck a major chord with me," Usher says. "I've been away from performing regularly for many years now but that wonderful feeling that comes from delighting an audience still simmers and I asked myself, if now's not the time to go back out on the road, then when?"

Usher has developed a rare gift of communicating 'good-getting-older' life experiences into lyrics that are relatable and universal. He brings an elder's perspective that is not common in today's indie folk/pop music by crafting lyrics that are direct in expressing matters of the heart sung upon melodies that are simply beautiful. Dugg Simpson adds, "These are the kinds of love songs that a kid can't write...and surely shouldn't sing. Finally somebody singing songs about life that resembles the one I'm living through these days."

The last word goes to Bill, "Hey don't forget to tell folks about the groove," Usher laughs. "I've been drumming for over 50 years now, so you know there's going to be a groove!"

Slowdancing in the Ballroom of Life ■ Bill Usher and The Space Heaters

Liner Notes by Dugg Simpson (2002), A.D., Vancouver Folk Music Festival

Dear Bill,

The record arrived here safely, and thanks for sending it Canada Post. My youngest brother and my sister-in-law both work for the post, and my mail carrier is a volunteer at the Festival each year so it felt like it was "all in the family" when I started to listen.

I think that maybe you just changed my world. Which, as you probably know, is the sort of thing guys say when they mean "you changed my world." "Rocked it", I guess, would be more contemporary but neither you nor I are kids anymore and I get the feeling we're both good with that.

One of the reasons I find I am good with a touch of grey these days is because I notice a lot of things now that I never used to. I have taken to calling these all-too-fleeting perceptions "good getting older things". This record is some wicked full of "good getting older things". From the sound of players who are playing to the songs instead of themselves to the instruments that sound like what they really are to finally somebody singing songs about life that resembles the one I'm living through these days.

The record sounds great. There are a lot of nice solid bottom grooves- the bass and drums sound good together, and there's enough space that one can actually hear some things that for my money we don't hear enough of any more. ... like how a snare drum used to sound in the days before some L.A. studio rent-boy decided it had to sound like an over- processed Schwarznegger-end-of-the-movie knock-out punch.

The sound you've created here reminds me of some of those great bands that used to haunt the clubs and high schools in Toronto back in the day, like the Mandala Soul Crusade, Lighthouse and Ronnie Hawkins' ever-evolving Hawks. Back in the day indeed, when we learned that a dirty guitar is just about the best kind of slow dance you can get.

I confess that I had all but forgotten how good a dirty guitar could sound, especially when a Hammond organ through a Leslie slides in underneath. Next thing you know you're into a 6 minute groove that could go to sixty minutes, man, or even seventy-two.

In this ambience, there's these words (and you might want to consider a warning sticker for the shrink-wrap when this gets racked) that are going to give any number of folks pause for reflection. They sure hit me in the head and in the heart.

I have a ring on my finger too that I spend some time turning around each day. And this may be one of those "guy things" that makes a lot of women roll their eyes, but it can take time to wrap one's head around the knowing- not the thinking, the knowing-that the one sitting across the table from you this morning is The One and that you are now really, truly and officially not a conquistador anymore. You're the first guy I've ever heard write and sing a song about this moment...but, as the record makes so very clear and as some of us have been fortunate enough to find out, there is no kind of love that will kick your ass, slap you upside the head or bring a smile to your eyes like a love that's been going on for a long time.

No other kind of love can get that naked.

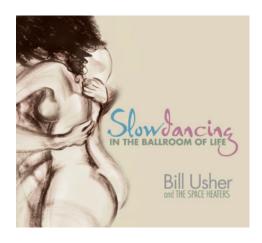
It's a kind of love song that a kid just can't write... and surely shouldn't sing. It's the kind of love song that you can only pull off when you actually have been in love for a long, long time-long enough to just about lose it once or twice and to have made the choice together to come back from the edge... together.

There's a nice gospel feel on some of the songs. Those notes of redemption seem very natural to my ears, because even though these songs are as up close and personal as I ever want a song to get, you make it clear that even we sinners can still have a prayer... we can get close enough to The One to slow dance our way back into the temple of love, if we are willing to learn a few new steps.

It can also take some time- and this too may be "a guy thing" or even a "good getting older thing"- when one comes to some seemingly profound revelations around the stone cold truth about just how big a jerk one can sometimes be... and just how many people there are in one's life who came to this realization something like a light year before one did ones' self. One may even find one is living with several of them. This is something there are surprisingly few songs about... uh... given ...well, given how many guys are writing songs these days.

Or maybe not.

Anyway, you nailed it and thanks, because while I may not completely enjoy remembering my own greatest hits as a jerk, it sure did my heart good to hear another guy singing about how he could be too.



So I think maybe you've written some of the songs that Joni promised us would come to aging children so long ago... the ones that come after going through a few things and bouncing off a few metaphorical and less metaphorical floors. We're still here and while we may, even now, find ourselves from time to time in a situation best described as "kind of a bitch", on a good day we find we have the leavening, chops, experiencewhat used to be called "depth of character"- that has come from all those floors to know we're going to get through this one too. Part of the reason is, as these songs make so clear, that one's ability to love has grown over these years and through these highs and these lows to include a family, to include The One and even on a truly fine day ones' own self... another of those "good getting older things" for sure.

These songs have already sung their way into my life. They're about things that I have lived and about things that I am living in a musical language that I understand and so to my ears this is folk music.

Who ever said it couldn't have a groove?

And though these economically imperative, zip-a-de-do-dah, hard-driving times may try to keep us ratracing instead of slow dancing, these songs are a wake-up call that maybe what the world actually does need now is a little less typin' and a lot more lovin'. Because this kind of love isn't just good... it's the best.

I dearly hope that a lot of people will listen to these songs together and find themselves up a little later than they should be, with an empty bottle of wine and nothing on- not even the radio- smiling and humming one of these songs and slow dancing together.

That's what music is for, isn't it? All the best from the wet green west, Dugg

