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Topp: Promoter Gary Topp Brought Us the World

David Collier and Gary Topp

Wolfville : Conundrum Press, 2020. 140 pp. ISBN 978-1-77262-032-0 (paperback)

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If you weren't part of Toronto's Queen Street scene in the 70s and 80s, then you might not have heard of the Two Garys before reading this book. Nevertheless, as music and concert promoters, Gary Topp and Gary Cormier contributed to the vitality of Toronto culture in a decade that seems in retrospect the last innocent time before the insidious globalization of e-everything. The story of the Garys also functions as a reminder that the Jewish community's contribution to Canadian culture goes way beyond Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton. That bold pronoun in the title "Us" as in "Brought Us the World" captures the brave otherness of being Canadian on the northern side of a fence demarcating the line between cool and un-cool, between home and world. But the Garys imported pop culture across that border, while remaining staunchly part of "us."

Topp and Collier have chosen the graphic format, which has become common for the telling of memoir or semi-autobiographical narrative. With no page numbering (making it difficult to provide exact references) the book feels almost like a comic – a real comic, the kind you used to buy at the corner store with your allowance. No superheroes here, however – just an earnest story of middle-class ambition and youthful rebellion. Like Spiegelman's *Maus*, the classic in the Jewish graphic novel, *Topp: Promoter Gary Topp Brought Us the World* tells an individual story that expands to be the story of a generation. For both Garys, Collier fills in the family backstory two generations back, including references to the Topp clothing business. Collective graphic memoir might be a better designation for this genre.

When the narrative focuses on the adolescent tribulations of Gary, it has the raw intimacy of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, with classically Canadian motifs of summer camp, etc. The intimacy occasionally takes us a bit too close up, as in the anecdote of an intestinal accident on a bus. One example of Gary's teen rebelliousness is shown in a reproduction of a letter he sent as a boy to CHUM AM, Toronto's most popular radio station, protesting against their blacklisting of The Rolling Stones in 1964.



Collier's graphics have the tentative scribble of the neurotic; there are few of the straight lines and rounded edges of the animated cartoon. This is a Woody Allen film in graphic form. The frenetic hatching and diagonal lines capture the edgy beat of the pop scene, sometimes haloing the performer as in the image of Bob Dylan. Len Chandler tells Gary "Go see Bob Dylan," to which Gary replies, "I was up on my folk, but I'd never heard of the guy." After the concert, Gary notes "Scruffy hair, tightish jeans, cowboy boots, suede winter jacket... He played with acoustic guitar and harmonica with frenzy and beauty. He was into country blues. He rocked."

Most redolent of the age and the zeitgeist is a page of posters advertising performances by the Garys' clients: The Ramones, The Police, etc. The collage of graphics is lifted by re-representation into an immersive tour of the musical sound of a generation in the inside front cover, featuring Dread Zeppelin, Ornette Coleman, Sly and the Family Stone, The Ramones, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, Iggy Pop, James Brown, the B-52s, Toots and the Maytals, and more. These were some of the biggest pop artists of the era, and the collection is a reminder of how, exactly, the Garys brought the world to Toronto.

One of the pleasures of perusing this book, for Canadian readers, is recognizing names and places, such as the Roxy Theater, Yorkville, The Purple Onion, The Horseshoe Tavern, Tim Hortons, the Carlton streetcar line, and many others.

Topp had personal encounters with many big names, most positive, others not so much. For example, "Bryan Ferry studiously ignored me – me, who had worked hard to make Roxy Music known in North America. Finally, he glanced my way, with a look like I was some kind of assassin [sic]."

Hidden in the speech bubbles are some trenchant remarks about pop music and Canadian culture – for example, in a flashback, Topp's son asks "Dad! What were you doing, wearing a t-shirt with a swastika on it?" To which Gary replies,

Nobody in those days ever dreamed that someday Nazis would again be taken seriously. For the vast majority of punks, that ideology was a way of saying "I'm stupid and hopeless (please help me)." Punk wasn't particularly political then. Mostly, me and my friends only believed in being annoying.

Throughout this book, Collier appears to covertly observe a self-imposed set of Canadian content rules. It is not as though he needs to – the Garys are Canadian, and made a lasting contribution to promoting Canadian culture. Nevertheless, he fills the landscape with Canadian icons, such as the CN Tower, preparation of outdoor ice hockey rinks and Camp Tamarack summer camp, creating a rich background of the Canadian experience to set the stage for the international cultural exchange the Garys brought to Toronto.