

## REVIEWS

Christianity Today

By Russ Breimeier

Oil greets the listener with thunderous drums that echo in your speakers, leading into the rousing Celtic-flavored alternative roots rock of "Watchmen." It's a fitting start to this excellently made project from the Russ Rosen Band, showcasing their blend of folk styles from America, Canada, and Ireland – think Ceili Rain with folk and alternative rock leanings. Russ has worked for years in various youth ministries and worship events; he leads the band as primary songwriter, vocalist, guitarist, and harmonica player. The band proper is rounded out by his wife, Sandy, on vocals and keyboards, and Kathleen Nisbet on vocals and fiddle. Joined by a backing band of studio musicians, this project is equally revelatory of the talents of producer Alan Shacklock (Phil Keaggy, Shaded Red, Graham Kendrick). It's purely coincidental that I've featured this guy in back-to-back independent artist features (Rev 21 last time), but it does amaze me that this guy doesn't get more prominent work in the Christian music industry. He can make a band like this one rock with joyful bombast on one track, and then shift them to delicate and beautiful pop the next – in other words, he's absolutely amazing on this album. "Stand," for example, features Sandy's vocals on an Irish-flavored track reminiscent of Enigma's modern New Age sound. This is followed by the loud and rousing Celtic rock of "Warriors," which is like some crazy blend of The Chieftans, Dave Matthews Band, and The Who. Russ' vocals sound like Randy Stonehill when he's soft, and Dave Matthews when he belts out his strong growl. Later, Kathleen takes the lead vocals on the bluesy gospel of "Down to the River." Lyrically, Russ presents a wide array of worship styles that range from inspirational and modern worship to southern gospel and traditional church. The songs are consistently interesting as the album progresses, thanks to the intriguing blend of styles, the strong musicianship, and the stunning production. I dare anyone who says modern worship lacks creativity and originality to come away from Oil unimpressed.

Christian Musician Magazine

By Shawn McLaughlin

Talk about surprises! This Canadian band condenses many influences into a unique and vital stew on Oil, sounding a call for action to believers everywhere with lyrics that eloquently, yet simply speak of an authentic adoration and love for Christ. Vocalist/Guitarist Russ Rosen, with wife Sandy on keyboards, and fiddler extraordinaire (and darn fine vocalist to boot) Kathleen Nisbet, seamlessly meld Celtic, English folk and American roots styles into a brew that represents Rosen's worship oriented songs with passion and style. The cuts, 'Watchmen' and 'Warriors' are rollicking, ramshackle romps of joy that exhort believers to a renewed level of commitment to their savior and His call to harvest new souls. Both tracks feature stunning drumming, reminiscent of Larry Mullen Jr.'s martial style and the cacophonous beauty of Keith Moon's work with The Who. Both of the aforementioned band's vocalists are reflected in Rosen's alternately gruff (Daltrey) and sensitive (Townshend) delivery. The production, by noted knob twiddler Alan Shacklock is revelatory. Shacklock buttresses the arrangements with emotional and muscular guitar playing and appropriately atmospheric and subtle electronic touches that result in each cut adding a unique tapestry to the projects compelling whole. In short: This is one of the finest discs of original, worshipful rock & roll to be released in the last decade. It is that good.

## Canadian Christianity

By David F. Dawes

RUSS ROSEN has been a fixture on the B.C. Christian music scene for many years. The Fort Langley musician has worked on various projects, for ministries such as Rise Up and Upstream Christian Initiatives; and he provided an outstanding CD for the final March for Jesus. Among his better-known songs are Dancing in a Field, and Wind of the Spirit. Oil is Rosen's ninth album -- and the first to fully reflect the unique sound of his group. Produced by recording industry veteran Alan Shacklock, it was recorded in Surrey and Nashville. It features all-original material, mostly by Rosen, much of it presented in an exuberant Celtic style; one key to the music's success is the outstanding violin work of Kathleen Nisbet.

Highlights include Through the Curtain, a slow, touching song about God's love for his children; Stand, written and sung by the band's keyboardist, Sandy Rosen; Courts of the King, which presents fervent worship, set to a very tight 5/4 rhythm; Time; and Warriors, an exhilarating call to spiritual warfare, which has a forthrightness that might make some listeners a bit uneasy. Rosen's singing is energetic and appealing throughout; but my favourite vocal is provided by Kathleen Nisbet on Down to the River -- in future CDs, I hope she's featured on more solos. All told -- if I can be forgiven a dreadful mixed metaphor -- Oil is dynamite!

## Gold Records USA

By Tom Lennie

Though a new name to me, Russ Rosen has in fact worked extensively on eight previous recordings, such as projects with youth ministry Rise Up and Canadian March for Jesus. The first independent release of his own songs with his own band - Oil is a thoroughly eclectic fusion of styles - rock, blues, tribal, Celtic - much of it infused with infectious American country-folk vibes!

The songs were penned at different times over the last ten years and each carries a lyrical originality that is both arresting and profound. While Rosen's rough, mature voice undergirds the set vocally, it's undoubtedly

Kathleen Nisbet's versatile fiddle ability that adds that 'yee-hah' hillbilly feel to several - especially those early - tracks, while the traditional reels, strathspeys and jigs that are mixed in with some tunes gives those tracks an obvious 'Celtic' quality. A particular longing of the team is for a move of the Spirit upon their native Canada; such yearning is pronounced on tracks like 'Watchmen' and the title-cut prayer-cry, who's bluesy vibes (both here and elsewhere) come care of Russ's supple harmonica. And while the battle-call drama of 'Warriors' is over-strong for pleasant listening (but boy can that guy use those drums!), The prophetic truth of 'Through the curtain' is highly convincing, so too the soulful blues of 'Down to the river', sung by Ms. Nisbet.

This music is decidedly intense, though a closing chorus of tender worship shows these folk like a bit of adorational simplicity too! Produced by Alan Shacklock (he's worked with guys like The Alarm, Graham Kendrick and Paul Oakley), who also provides a variety of authentic guitar effects, Oil is linked to Upstream Christian Initiatives, a group 'dedicated to sharing the love of God with people who are not in the habit of attending church'. Despite the depth of spiritual concern expressed, there's certainly nothing remotely 'churchy' about this innovative and vivacious set. If you're seeking more variety in your worship collection, I can guarantee you'll find something very fresh here!

## The Phantom Tollbooth

By Alex Klages

What do you get when you blend Biblical texts, edgy alternative country-rock, a Celtic-influenced fiddle player, and layered vocal harmonies? I'm not sure either, but that's exactly what the Russ Rosen Band delivers on their debut album, *Oil*.

The quality of this album is the biggest surprise. It quite simply looks and sounds like a big-label effort, from the packaging to the performance to the overall sound of the mix. It is hard to believe that the Russ Rosen Band is not on a big label, or even on a well-respected independent label. Producer Alan Shacklock has done a good job at enhancing the basic acoustic guitar (Russ Rosen), keyboards (Sandy Rosen) and violin (Kathleen Nisbet) of the trio that is the Russ Rosen Band with a solid rhythm section. On most of the tracks, the album just would not have had the same punch without the additional players.

The songs were composed over a stretch of 10 years, dating from 1992 to 2001, yet come together as a coherent package of music. There is an exuberant, sometimes even aggressive, tone to the songs which revel in God's grace and deliverance. A strong example of this is the opening song, "Watchmen":

Come, come  
Climbing up the slopes of Zion  
No more tears, no more cryin'  
Come, come  
We're comin' back with shouts of joy  
Coming back, shouting for joy  
God has blessed us  
Heaven smiled, we're bringing with us  
Grain, new wine, and oil

These opening words are half-shouted over tribal-sounding drums and the opening guitars, climaxing on the word "oil", where the violin breaks into a jig-like figure. The overall effect is very powerful.

The song "Warriors" could be best described as heavy Celtic, as overdriven guitars and harsh, throaty vocals ask for God's holy fire to "Drench the nation / With Your cleansing tide."

The vocal styles are partly what set this band apart. Russ Rosen's vocals are distinctly gritty, a little like Phil Madeira, and provide a nice counterpoint to Sandy Rosen's soprano ("Stand") and Kathleen Nisbet's strong alto ("Down To The River"). "Down To The River" is a laid-back 50's-styled rocker, which gives just enough diversity to the album to keep the listener from being too overwhelmed with the heavier tone of the other songs.

Very rarely does an album grab my interest every time I listen to it; this one does. Whatever the particulars of this sonic combination are, the result is a joyous celebration of God and His working in the lives of His people, and an album that deserves much wider listening than it is likely to get as an independent. If they keep making albums like this, the Russ Rosen Band has a bright future indeed.

## Worship Leader Magazine

By George Werner

Mix Celtic fiddles with bluegrass harp along with overdrive tube amps and driving drum rhythms, and then add a double portion of kingdom passion and the result is Oil. The Russ Rosen Band, out of British Columbia, Canada has produced a truly eclectic sound on this disc that really defies any label.

This fresh fusion includes traditional fiddle reels and jigs, bluesy piano tunes, hints of country twang and soft acoustic guitar ballads. The one thing that runs consistently through the project is a deep emotional cry for more of god.

The arrangements are fairly complex on most of the songs. One would wonder if this is a "listening only" album when you first spin it. It has great value in that regard. The lyrics and music are stirring to the mind and spirit. However, the last two songs are perfect to use in a congregational setting.

"Through the Curtain" is a very personal conversation between the singer and the Father that speaks about the nature of their love relationship. There is safety and certainty in this tune that will elevate any group of believers and evoke a renewed devotion to God. The final song, "Radiant Beauty", is a sweet simple ballad which one can immediately identify.

At some point in time most believers will be filled with awe for the beauty of God's handiwork and respond in the same fashion, "Jesus, I love you/In you, I find my worth."

Author and friend

Mark Buchanan

"How good and pleasant it," the Psalmist exclaimed, "when brothers dwell together in unity." And then he evokes an image whose appeal, at first blush, is hard for us to grasp: "It's like oil," he says, oil poured over a man's head, running down his beard, soaking into his clothes. Isn't that what they do at stag parties and hazing rites? But this is an image of priestly anointing – being set apart for God, marked out for His purposes.

Oil, the newest Russ Rosen CD, is a fitting tribute to the image. As "musician-aries," Russ and his team over the last 7 years have travelled across Canada and around the world, bringing Christ's message of reconciliation. How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity. But how difficult, too. Apart from the oil of anointing, apart from the priestly acts of mercy and forgiveness and sacrifice, apart from the active work of the Spirit convicting and consoling, apart from the cross, all reconciliation falls woefully short.

The new CD grows out of the band's wounds and prayers and victories in that ministry. The songs have to them the rawness and freshness of testimony. They are like desperate prayers, like dispatches from the front lines. From the rolling war drums of the opening track "Watchmen," to the battle cries and urgent rhythm of "Warriors," to the bluesy sassy rocker "Something's Rattlin'," to the serene perfection of "Radiant Beauty," these songs themselves seem anointed, drenched and glistening and fragrant with oil. Russ has an earthy voice. Sometimes he moans with an aching like Jeremiah must have had when he saw Jerusalem plundered. Sometimes he hollers like David must have done when he ran toward Goliath. That voice, and his wife's Sandy's richly textured background vocals, and Kathleen Nisbet's dazzling fiddle work – all add to the unguent quality of the whole.

The title track is particularly effective. Opening with a mournful harmonica riff like a distant train's whistle, gathering steam with Russ's percussive guitar, and building into one of Kathleen's wild dizzying Irish reels breaking free like a runaway caboose, the song is at once both wistful and brimful of promise. By the end, you feel like you're running headlong to catch that train, the wind with you. The Russ Rosen Band manages to combine sounds at once festive and combative, a dancer's jig, a warrior's cry. This is music for a party or a battle. Or both. Which is exactly what it takes - a battle, a party - to see the Kingdom come. Feeling a bit rusty? Get Oil, and use liberally.