

Bob Carty's Hope In Desert Times Or Hope In Desert Times

By Kelly Haggart

CBC Radio journalist Bob Carty calls *Desert Eyes* his "sanity project." Producing a CD of his own songs was not only fun, he says. It also helped see him through a rough patch.

While the award-winning documentary radio producer for The Sunday Edition and The Current was undergoing treatment for cancer, he was also recording some of the "songs of justice and spirit" he has written over the past 20 years.

"It provides pain relief to a certain degree to have something to focus on," says Carty, who has lived with his family on Aylmer Avenue since 1993. "You get in front of a microphone and your endorphins start up — and your body responds to that, so it was great."

Carty produced the CD with the help of James Stephens, whose Stove Sound in Chelsea, Que., is the recording studio of choice for Ian Tamblyn and many other local musicians. An accomplished multi-instrumentalist (and member of the 1990s group Fat Man Waving), Stephens provides confident musical backup on many of *Desert Eyes'* 21 tracks.

"I thought it would be a small project," says Carty, who launches the CD on March 14 at Library and Archives Canada. "But then I'd start saying, 'An oboe would really sound fantastic here. What about a cello there?' And so it expanded.

"I was very slow at it. Because of my energy levels, I could only work two or three days a week, and creatively only for about three hours a day. But with James playing a lot of the instruments — fiddle, some percussion, mandolin, bass — I didn't have to do the heavy lifting for part of the day and we would get six hours in."

Dozens of Carty's friends and neighbours took part in his sanity project. Community members joined forces with a few CBC voices to form the 26-strong adult choir featured on several tracks. (Their contributions were recorded in the Church of the Ascension on Echo Drive, Carty says, because of the building's "very bright acoustic.") Other melodious vocals were provided by three local children, as well as Carty's son Michael, who is a tenor with a sideline occupation as a trilingual interpreter.

Carty and his wife, Frances Arbour, lived in Costa Rica when Michael was young. From 1988 to 1993, Arbour worked with Guatemalan refugees while Carty covered the region's conflicts for the CBC, The Globe and Mail and National Public Radio. Carty's religious faith and passion for social justice infuse *Desert Eyes*. Both are evident in the lively and lyrically powerful "Till We Get Home" and in "You Washed Our Feet," which evokes the heroism of assassinated archbishop Oscar Romero:

*You spoke the truth in Salvador
You spoke of God to the dogs of war
You looked into their lying eyes
You lift the host before you die.*

Above all, Carty's debut studio-produced CD resounds with hope. The title track refers to the new way of seeing that city slickers would learn during retreats into the Arizona desert led by the late Quaker activist Jim Corbett. At first, retreatants would see only a parched and barren terrain, but after a few days would develop "desert eyes."

"They would begin to see life in the desert," Carty explains, "flowers, lichens, seeds, animals, a full spectrum of colour by day and wondrous stars by night. They'd begin to understand that even in the most desperate of times — even in times of great evil and death — there is still life and hope."

Before his move to Central America, Carty belonged to a Christian reflection group in Toronto that also included anti-nuclear crusader Rosalie Bertell. In a stirring tribute, she writes: "Bob's music captures a new liturgical spirit of hunger and hope. These are lean, desert-like times, and there is a need to both accept its desolation and see the seeds of new growth which need to be nourished. Bob has captured the songs which speak clearly to both dimensions of our time." Sister Bertell, who turns 80 this year, has asked her old friend to send her the piano sheet music for *Desert Eyes*.

Carty, who hopes to return to work at CBC Radio in April, is delighted to have others play his songs. "They're meant to be sung communally, and most of them work quite well that way," he says. "And because I sing in a local church [St. Margaret Mary's] and do folk nights in support of a



Photo by Franziska Heinze

housing project in Guatemala and a water project in Cameroon, I've tested all these songs, in a certain sense, to be singable."

Friends have adopted "On the River of My Life" as a paddling song, he says. A catchy addition to the Canadian canoe-song canon, the simple, beautifully arranged tune might also serve as a reminder of its composer's own recent struggles and abiding positive spirit. Sweet young voices start things off, then make way for the exquisite tenor of Michael Carty, who in turn cedes the stage to his father:

*I'm on the river of my life
So I paddle slow but paddle strong
And as I face the next portage
I know a little more of life.*

To order *Desert Eyes*, send a cheque for \$23 to: Bob Carty, Box 21113, 1166 Bank Street, Ottawa K1S 5N1. More information at www.bobcarty.ca

Bob will perform at a benefit concert for the OK Clean Water Project at the NAC Fourth Stage in May.