

Elliott BROOD to perform at Village Playhouse Feb. 17



By Nate Smelle

For more than two decades the Canadian alternative country band Elliott BROOD has been making music and performing together across Canada and around the world. On Feb. 17 they will add Bancroft to the long list of audiences they have shared their music with, when they bring their 'Across the Great Divide Tour' to the stage at the Village Playhouse. The three-piece Juno award winning band is comprised of: Mark Sasso on lead vocals, guitar, banjo, ukulele, harmonica, and kazoo; Casey Laforet on guitar, lead vocals, backing vocals, bass pedals, keys, and ukulele; and Stephen Pitkin on percussion, sampler, and backing vocals. Last week, Bancroft This Week had a chance to speak with Sasso about their music, the upcoming show in Bancroft, and how their creative process has evolved over the past 20+ years. Throughout Elliott BROOD's musical journey, they have released 11 albums, with their latest record, 'Town' - the first half of a double album they have called 'Town and Country' - being released last September. According to Sasso the band will release their twelfth record, 'Country' this coming spring. Noting that each of the albums on their own will feature eight songs per side, he said once they have sold out of these special editions they plan to condense both records into a single double album. Although they have toured Canada extensively, this will be the first time Elliott BROOD will have performed in Bancroft. For Sasso, venues such as the Village Playhouse are the band's favourite, because they encourage them to engage with the audience in a uniquely intimate way. 'Personally I like the smaller towns,' said Sasso. 'I actually enjoy going to places that are slightly out of the way. You get to see something different as opposed to just going to big cities. I feel as though there's a different appreciation and there's a different vibe wherever you go.' Further explaining why they love playing venues such as the Playhouse, as well as what the audience can look forward to at their upcoming performance in Bancroft, Sasso continued, 'From the get-go, as a band - and I'm going to speak for Casey and Steve as well - we've always seen it [performing live] as a conversation. It's a house party that you've invited people to, so we are not going to invite people into our house and not talk to them, right. For us, the thing that we thrive off of is the audience, and the call and response from that. That's how we approach our music, not that we write specifically for that. We want to have that dialogue with people. We take them on an emotional journey, and that's what we as a band thrive off of is that emotional connection with the audience.' Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Sasso said the band has been playing a lot of smaller towns. As was the case with many musicians and artists, he said the pandemic posed a range of challenges in terms of making and performing their music. 'We were kind of in a unique position, in that we were releasing a record,' Sasso told Bancroft This Week. 'It was supposed to come out in May 2020 at first, and everybody was like, 'oh, Covid is only going to be a few months, so we'll just postpone it.' Our label is kind of required to put out a certain amount of records per year. Well, they have their expenditures, so we ended up putting an album out and couldn't tour it.' With Laforet, living in Los Angeles full-time and unable to return to Canada at the time because of the pandemic, Sasso said he and Pitkin did a couple gigs without him, where they tried to reimagine their music. As difficult as it was during Covid, he said it was also life affirming when things

temporarily opened up for a portion of the summer and they returned to the stage. 'It was like, yeah this is what we are meant to do,' Sasso said. 'There are sometimes over your career where you are like, 'is it waning?' You kind of question if you should keep going and all that stuff? I think Covid cemented all of that for us. We are a band and we're going to go as long as we can go. It's in our blood. It was a tough go for a lot of people, because I know there were a lot of musicians, for whatever reason, where that was the death knell for them. That was an unfortunate aspect of what happened with Covid. For us it was life affirming and we doubled down on what we're doing? I think it helped us to hone our skills for sure.' As musicians and storytellers, Sasso said when it comes to writing their songs they of course draw from their own personal experiences. Considering Elliott BROOD has been on the road touring their music since their inception in 2002, he described their music as 'road music.' Shedding light on his and the band's creative process, Sasso said, 'Whenever we write a record we road test it. We put it in our cars and then drive around. Even when we're writing, when we're in the initial phase, I find that driving down the highway and listening to the music you can come up with better lyrics. You kind of zone out, and you're in this bubble alone? It opens your brain up to everything. There's something that happens on the road when you're listening to music. All of these filters fall away and you get to see something purely. You get to listen to the music and it just sounds better, for whatever reason. All of the different little things, the nuances, jump out at you. We've always road tested all of our stuff.' As a lifelong lover of music, Sasso is grateful for all of the musical inspiration he has received from fellow storyteller/musicians over the years. With his musical roots stretching deep into the national landscape, he acknowledges how the music of Canadian icons such as Neil Young, Gord Downie, The Band, Gordon Lightfoot, and others have influenced his musical evolution ,and motivated him to persist in his creative endeavours. 'Those are the people that inspire you; they're like your parents,' Sasso said. 'You know how a child kind of sounds like their parents? They don't sound exactly like them, but they have inflections or different little things. Stuff that you wouldn't think of has passed through you as a listener. We've listened our whole lives to music ? Gordon Lightfoot, The Band, Flying Burrito Brothers, CCR, Gord Downie for sure as well, Neil Young ? those things pass through you as a person and get regurgitated in a different way. I might not necessarily see it or hear it, but other people can, because those are our influences. I kind of see them as your grandparents or your parents. For whatever reason they rub off on you in a certain way, and you take what they've given you and you go out into the world and write your own stories from your own perspective ? but they filter in. I would never deny any of my influences. I think Neil Young was a massive influence on me. You realize that there is a Canadian guy out there, and as a Canadian kid, when I learned that The Band was predominantly Canadian, except for Levon Helm, that was an inspiring moment, because it was like, 'oh sh*t, there's people out there writing music that moves me and inspires me, and these guys are Canadian, so we can do it too!' Growing up in Windsor you're inundated with American culture and American musicians, and you don't think that you can necessarily achieve that and go out there and write your own music. But you can use that as a kind of jumping off point and be like, 'oh, Neil Young, he's from Canada. That inspiration drives people to create their own music.' To learn more about Elliott BROOD and listen to some of their music, check out their YouTube page and visit their website at: www.elliottbrood.com/. For tickets to the show on Feb. 17, visit the Bancroft Village Playhouse website at: www.villageplayhouse.ca/elliott-brood-across-the-great-divide-tour.