

Songs of war and peace

Jason Wilson's new CD looks at conflict from the point of view of the soldier



ALEX UROSEVIC/SUN MEDIA

In its review of Toronto historian Margaret MacMillan's 2003 best-seller, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "For anyone interested in knowing how historic mistakes can morph into later historic problems, this brilliant book is a must-read."

For six months in 1919, after the end of "the war to end all wars," U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and French premier Georges Clemenceau met in Paris to shape a lasting peace. Reviewers have said that MacMillan's book offers a dramatic and intimate look at those fateful days.

In the award-winning book is a photograph that made a huge impact on singer/songwriter Jason Wilson.

It shows the chauffeurs of the three statesmen playing cards "while their bosses were upstairs carving up the world — with mixed results — following WWI," Wilson says.

"The photograph was just so powerful for me," says Wilson, who christened his just-released ambitious double-CD, *The Peacemaker's Chauffeur*. "The task at hand for

those upstairs in the hotel was the fate of the world post-WWI, while the task at hand for the drivers outside was simply playing cards to pass the time.

"I thought that given their position as drivers of the three most important people in the world at that time, they were probably tired of hearing rumours or discussing potential outcomes of the conference like, 'What was going to happen to Poland?' or 'What of the French and Syria?' and so forth. All the drivers could really do was enjoy a round or two of cards."

Adds Wilson, "In the end, most of us are just card-playing chauffeurs while a finite number of people frame the rules for us."

That may be true, but if you put Wilson's last comment in a musical context, you would have to separate him from so many of his contemporaries who seem content to sit around and turn out mindless pap.

On his own and with his reggae group, Tabarruk, Wilson has always pushed the proverbial musical envelope by adding jazz into the mix and

treating listeners to smart, literate songs. He's definitely one of the more cerebral songwriters around.

On his sprawling 2-CD set, *The Peacemaker's Chauffeur*, Wilson looks at various aspects of war and peace.

He says he's always had "a peculiar fascination with WWI" and has written extensively on the Canadian experience for various publications, including a book titled, *Frontlines: Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War*.

"Add to this that I come from a long line of Scots who have done their duty from WWI through Vietnam and you can understand that I possess a rather deep reverence for soldiers and soldier-families," Wilson says. "So, while I understand that the theme may seem timely, it really was something that had been brewing in me for many years."

Writing the songs, Wilson says, came easily.

Songs like *If Ye Break Faith* was written from the perspective of the unknown soldier at Vimy Ridge and *Your Love Shines a Light For Me* addresses the loneliness of soldiering.

Wilson says he wanted to "faithfully represent the experience of

conflict without trumpeting the glory of war or adding more banal 'war is bad/peace is good' drivel to the pop world's catalogue."

You've got to admire the fact that Wilson persevered for four long years to bring this project to fruition. And here's testimony that he's regarded with much respect outside of his home base.

The album features heavies such as legendary Jamaican guitarist Ernest Ranglin, Pee Wee Ellis, a former bandleader for James Brown and Van Morrison, ace singer/songwriter Ron Sexsmith, Brinsley Forde, former lead singer and guitarist with British reggae trio Aswad, and Canadian folk-icon David Francey.

"I think the guests were really keen on the album's concept" Wilson says. "Brinsley Forde rushed out to buy MacMillan's book after I wrote the title track and then he lobbied to be the guest on that particular song."

"It was one of those 'pinch yourself' moments when one of your heroes asks to record one of your own songs with you!"

Errol Nazareth's Rhythms N Rhymes column appears every Friday. He can be reached at errol.nazareth@sunmedia.ca

Now
HEAR
This!

Errol's can't-miss list:

- 1 One of my favourite local bands, **The Sadies**, bring their high-energy psychedelic country rock to The Horseshoe tonight and tomorrow. They're killer live! 370 Queen W.
- 2 Find out why there's so much hype around local jazz bassist and Juno Award winner **Brandi Disterheft** when she plays a free show at Yonge-Dundas Square Wednesday. 12:30 p.m.
- 3 On the subject of jazz, the **Jazz At Lincoln Centre Orchestra** and **Wynton Marsalis** blow into Massey Hall next Friday (Oct. 10). For tix, call 416-872-4255.



Errol Nazareth
RHYTHMS N RHYMES