

# THE TOP OF: Six Globe writers and editors who have their ears to the ...

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# THE TOP 25 CANADIAN POP SONGS

Six Globe writers and editors who have their ears to the pulse of the nation stride past the merely good to crown the very best songwriting the country has produced

There's something very clear and simple about a numbered list. Perhaps that's why so many find it so tempting to impose lists on things that aren't simple at all. It's damn difficult to measure the relative merits of, say, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, so why not just settle the question with a blunt numeric ranking? We can argue the details later — and, believe me, we will.

In the same spirit, the Globe Review offers its first, and possibly last, numeric ranking of the best Canadian popular songs. The list was compiled during a two-hour argument in a Toronto bar among six Review writers and editors: national arts reporter James Adams, music critic Robert Everett-Green, arts assignment editor Andrew Gorham, freelance pop reviewer Alan Niester, blues reviewer Brad Wheeler and Scene columnist Carl Wilson.

Our task was to stride past the merely good, and crown the best. Our process was more oblique. It wasn't enough, we realized, to think only in terms of craftsmanship. Our list also had to convey

some sense of the history and flavour of songwriting in Canada, over as wide a span of years and styles as possible.

That span turned out to be embarrassingly short. Canadians have been writing songs for at least 200 years, in both official languages and many unofficial ones. But popular songs tend to lodge in a generational slice of common memory, and our panel's connection with songs from before 1950 was slim. And while Quebec theatre and literature get a frequent airing in English Canada, francophone pop remains the near-exclusive possession of *la belle province*.

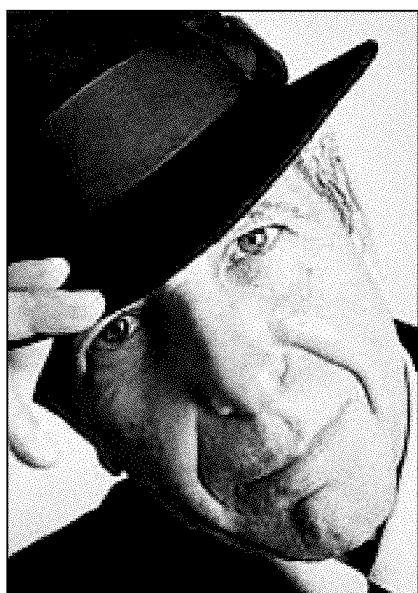
Some songs were eliminated because of doubts about their source, or their Canadianness. *Born to Be Wild*, written for Steppenwolf by Canadian Mars Bonfire (aka Dennis Edmonton), was ruled an adoptive American hit. *You'll Get Used to It*, a smash hit from the war years, dropped from contention because its German-born author, Freddy Grant (aka Fritz Grundland), wrote it before emigrating to Canada.

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## 1 Hallelujah

Leonard Cohen, 1984

Cohen's mid-career masterpiece — as he grew from poetic scoundrel into wisecracking monk — has it all: eloquence, humour, sex and God. Covered by John Cale, Jeff Buckley, Rufus Wainwright and (in concert) Bob Dylan, it outranks even *Tower of Song* as a hymn to hymn-making, as the singer endures a dozen trials only to “stand before the Lord of Song/ with nothing on my tongue but ‘Hallelujah.’” Meanwhile, he gets away with rhyming the title with “what's it to ya?” and singing about the song's own harmonic structure: “It goes like this/ the fourth, the fifth/ the major fall, the minor lift/ the baffled king composing *Hallelujah*.” Untouchable.



## 2 Powderfinger

Neil Young, 1979

The hub of *Rust Never Sleeps* — an album that, in one go, spotlights Young's singular talent for delivering acoustic songs of spare beauty in one breath, and corrosive rockers the next. *Powderfinger*, like album-mate *Pocahontas*, is fashioned in first-person narrative — but to more striking effect. The dead man's tale (“Just think of me as one who never figured/ To fade away so young/ With so much left undone”) doubles *Rust's* (and rock's) enduring believed truth: It's better to burn out than fade away.

## 3 Gens du Pays

Gilles Vigneault, 1976

In the run-up to Quebec's first referendum, the man who gained fame singing that his country was winter came out of retirement with a new anthem for his non-existent nation. The simple, rising tune exhorting a people to “let ourselves speak of love” goes to the very soul of Quebec life, whatever its political arrangement. And it attained a cultural status unlike any English Canadian song's: Not only is it sung at parades, rallies and wherever Quebec expats meet, it has even become the Québécois version of *Happy Birthday*.

## 4 New York City

The Demics, 1979

“I wanna go to New York City/ because they tell me it's the place to be,” snarls London, Ont.'s Keith Whittaker sarcastically. This punk-rock classic summed up for a new generation of Canadian rockers that sick-of-it-all, small-town malaise and overall disgust with the whole damn music scene. A stripped-down, grinding palette cleanser we so desperately needed in 1979 (see Worst-Of list, below) — and the Demics delivered.

## 5 River

Joni Mitchell, 1971

A couple of decades before Tori Amos & Co. discovered the grand piano, Mitchell wheeled one out for this cool but plaintive song about the heart far from home. The tag line — “I wish I had a river to skate away on” was incomprehensible in her California milieu, but deeply resonant to Canadian ears.

Throughout her career, Mitchell has stayed true to the pedal-note of her origins, while becoming one of the most cosmopolitan and adventurous musicians of her generation. Her influence is incalculable, above all on women songwriters, but also on artists as diverse as jazz pianist Herbie Hancock and choreographer Peggy Baker.



## 6 American Woman

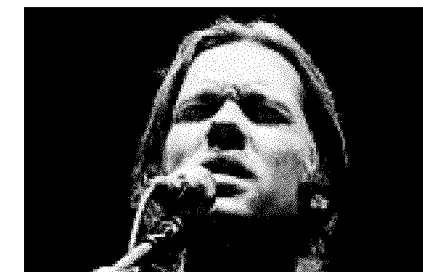
The Guess Who, 1970

Sure, it's a musical cliché today, but back in 1970, this song transformed Winnipeg's Guess Who from a Turtles-styled pop band into the next coming of the Doors. A superb pastiche of pop hooks, from guitarist Randy Bachman's memorable droning intro to singer Burton Cummings's Jim Morrisonesque yowl, it probably did more than any other song to bring so-called underground rock into the popular mainstream. And, deliberately or not, it encapsulated a whole generation's feelings toward America's involvement in Vietnam, and the imperialist attitudes that spawned it.

## 7 Foolish Love

Rufus Wainwright, 1998

Radio killed the family parlour and the afternoon musicale, except around the hearth of the McGarrigle sisters. Kate's son (by Loudon Wainwright III) stepped out in the mid-nineties with his first collection of sassy yet comfortably worn-in songs. He's a classic tunesmith born and bred, whose stuff moves easily between the rock stage and the cabaret. *Foolish Love* fuses a capacity for childish wonder with a sashaying beat that would look good strutting down St-Denis or in a Gay Pride parade.



## 8 Sundown

Gordon Lightfoot, 1974

Even when writing songs about the gap between the demands of the self and the demands of love — most famously in *If You Could Read My Mind, Love* — Lightfoot relied heavily on the tropes of the Romantic. Here, however, he's unabashedly at the dark, nasty end of that street, mixing a potent sonic cocktail of lust and shame, pleasure and guilt, menace and machismo.

## 9 Ahead by a Century

The Tragically Hip, 1996

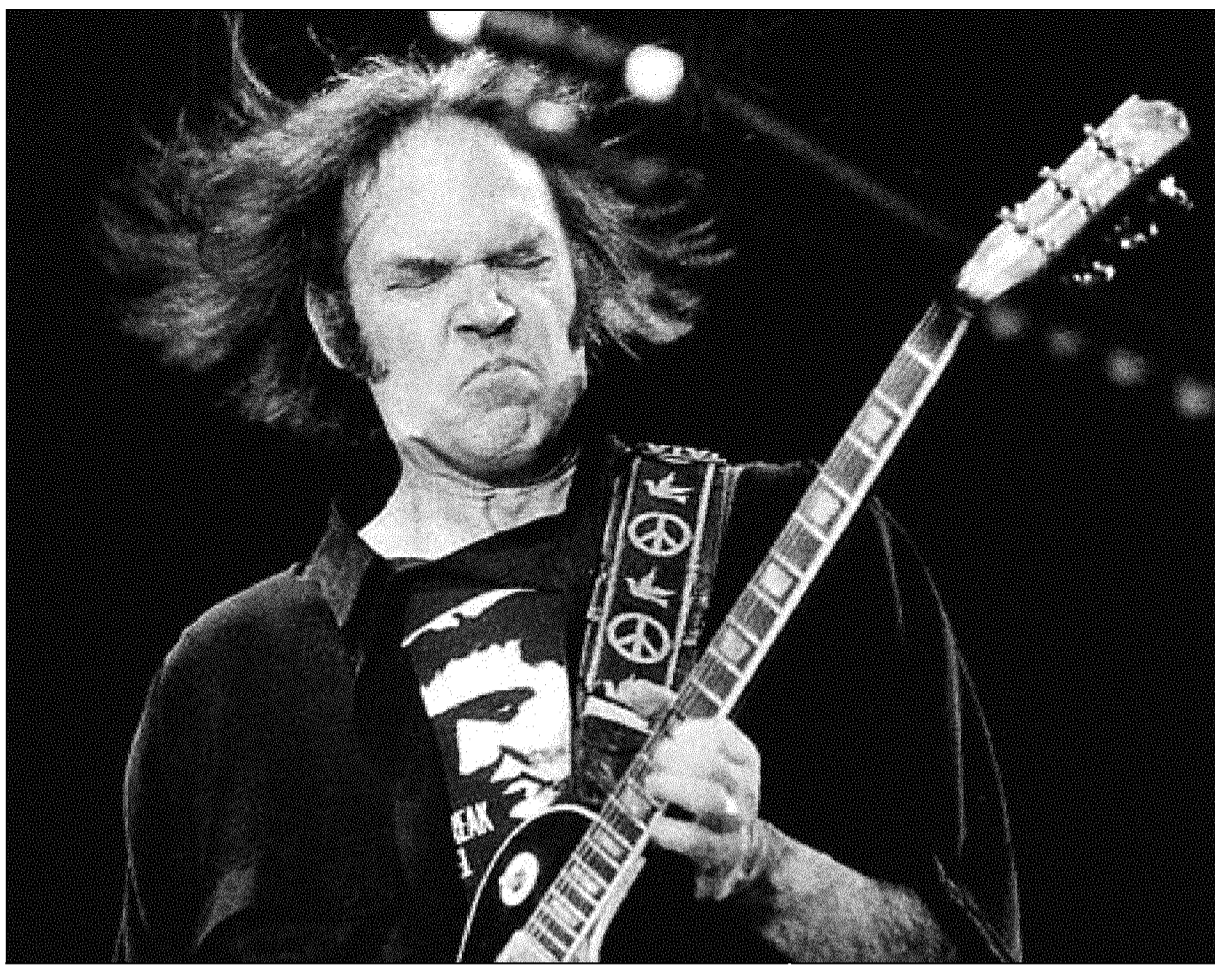
“With illusions of some day casting a golden light/ No dress rehearsal, this is our life.” When singer Gord Downie put down the stage-prop banana and picked up the acoustic guitar, the Hip moved from bruise and muscle to touch and finesse. *Ahead by a Century* marks that turn, and finds the band, in song craft and execution, at the top of their game. An amped-down tone and adolescent tree-top musings place the song sherpa-high above the band's more brooding fare.

## 10 Letter from an Occupant

The New Pornographers, 2000

Sounding like the bastard spawn of Blondie and the Beach Boys, this campus-radio hit leapt out of nowhere with woo-hoo choruses, pulsing organ, high-power guitar and tense, cryptic lyrics. It's one of a dozen madly catchy tunes by this Vancouver indie “supergroup” led by Carl Newman (Zumpano) and Dan Bejar (Destroyer) with alt-country star Neko Case on “New Wave robot” vocals. As fans such as Ray Davies of the Kinks attest, it adds up to a kind of pop perfection Canadians seldom even attempt.

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Neil Young: *Harvest Moon* showed the rocker's tender side.



Rough Trade: *High School Confidential* is still catchy after all these years.

# Pop tops: The rest of our best

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**11. Harvest Moon, Neil Young, 1992**

Like Elvis Presley, who once issued an LP with rock 'n' roll on one side and balladry on the other, Young has his tender side. This wistful open-air song of passage alludes to more than it states, with a simplicity that connects the moment to eternity.

**12. Famous Blue Raincoat, Leonard Cohen, 1971**

A simple letter to a friend hides the vast and complex emotions strewn through this delicate epistolary ballad about "L. Cohen" gently confronting a friend who has slept with his wife.

Cohen is rarely subtle, which makes *Famous Blue Raincoat* a stand out amongst his large repertoire.

**13. Barrett's Privateers, Stan Rogers, 1977**

Rogers's love and understanding of the Maritimes — its humour and its pain — was unabashed and true. This salty ballad of misfortune on the high seas, sung in robust a cappella, is proof the man was truly at home on the Atlantic.

**14. High School Confidential, Rough Trade, 1980**

The Ohmigod single of 1980 took the homoerotic overtones of glam rock and feminized them, with a tough beat and a lurid depiction of hallway lust. Still catchy after all these years.

**15. The Weight, the Band, 1968**

Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm and Co. went deep into their musical roots and the Dylan lyrics bag for this quasi-biblical tale of ignored pleas and debts honoured and dodged. This masterpiece could have been written a century earlier



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The Dream Warriors: *My Definition (of a Boombastic Jazz Style)* heralded a Canadian grassroots hip-hop scene.

and it would have sounded exactly the same.

**16. Body's in Trouble, Mary Margaret O'Hara, 1988**

There's no inside or outside to O'Hara's songs, just a fluid membrane that connects the heart and the ear with the distant murmuring of the stars.

*Body's in Trouble* flicks at the limitations that make life worth the striving, with a patient drum-and-guitar beat to keep the singer tethered to Earth.

**17. Heart Like a Wheel, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, 1975**

With this song, a hit for Linda Ronstadt, Quebec's singing sister act not

only lent exquisite melody to a gaze into the abyss ("It's only love that can wreck a human being and turn him inside out"), but announced a dynasty that would continue through nine albums and produce heirs Rufus and Martha Wainwright.

**18. Magic People, the Paupers, 1967**

Canada's first great piece of psychedelia, *Magic People* soared on drummer Skip Prokop's drum-corps rhythms and guitarist Chuck Beal's unfettered guitar feedback. As heavy as anything coming out of San Francisco at the time, it is truly Canada's forgotten psychedelic classic.

**19. My Definition (of a Boombastic Jazz Style), the Dream Warriors, 1990**

The polished pop rap of Maestro sold bigger, but it was this indie single — with its goofy game-show-theme sample and loopy De La Soul-style rhymes — that heralded a Canadian grassroots hip-hop scene, the harbinger of Kardinal Offishal, Swollen Members, Buck 65 and others coast to coast.

**20. Takin' Care of Business, Bachman Turner Overdrive, 1974**

The history of rock is peppered with guilty pleasures and dumb moments. This Bachman beauty, part plodder, part crowd-rouser, is a brilliant contribution to that side of things.

**21. The Hissing of Summer Lawns, Joni Mitchell, 1975**

Songwriting in the key of mood, through a sunny haze of dust and regret. Mitchell's soft-swinging elegy for the missing souls of suburbia could be the soundtrack for David Hockney's pleasurable empty portraits of poolside life.

**22. Try, Blue Rodeo, 1987**

If Gram Parsons had survived into the eighties and joined a real rock band, the result might have been

something akin to this archetypal Blue Rodeo ballad.

**23. Fred Eaglesmith, Time to Get a Gun, 1997**

Canada's great underrated country songwriter struck his most iconoclastic blow with this rocker about a pretty good guy trying to figure how to defend himself against crime and the "government man" planning to put a highway through his farm — even if the wife (and some Fred fans) wouldn't understand.

**24. Underwhelmed, Sloan, 1993**

With Rain Man lyrics and fuzzed-out guitars, Canada got grungy with it. Not since *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* has adolescent angst been so much fun. We were amused, we were overwhelmed.

**25. Tokyo, Bruce Cockburn, 1980**

Canada has produced an illustrious cadre of folkish singer-songwriters — Murray McLachlan, Valdy, Sarah McLachlan, Ian and Sylvia among them — but Cockburn stands alone in his longevity and consistency, and his ability to both hold and build an audience. This irresistible hit, about a *Bladerunner*-esque visit to Japan, is the finest song in a fine oeuvre.

## Just a little quid pro quo

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*Hockey Night in Canada's* rugged theme song was written by a Brit, and *Alouette*, the best known of all Canadian folk songs, may have been carried over from France.

Nobody, however, wanted to eliminate anything by **Joni Mitchell**, Neil Young or Leonard Cohen, though all three have lived and written outside Canada for much of their careers. That triumvirate also prompted us to accept a two-entry cap for any one songwriter. Giving five or 10 places to Young songs might be defensible, but not very indicative of the range of Canadian writing.

Beyond that, our choices were often compromises, or exercises in quid pro quo, as in, "I'll let you have Mary Margaret O'Hara, but don't think you can come back later and challenge me over Bachman Turner Overdrive."

Struggling to design a horse, we watched helplessly as our camel took shape. In the end, one thing was screamingly clear.

Making lists like this one is a political activity. It's about exercising a dubious power of anointment and exclusion, of first, last and also-ran.

It's about being ambushed by the hidden and often amusing prejudices of others and of oneself, and somehow blundering through to a conclusion that no one feels aggrieved or stubborn enough to keep on challenging.

In sum, to paraphrase Hamlet, we exposed all that is mortal and unsure in contest for an eggshell. And here it is.

— Robert Everett-Green