Gord Sinclair // *In Continental Drift*

If proof were needed that a full-time gig in music is almost comically unpredictable no matter what level of fame you achieve, consider the career of Gord Sinclair.

At the dawn of 2018, for the very first time, the bassist-songwriter found himself outside the Canadian music scene looking in, despite decades of unparalleled success. His former band The Tragically Hip was finished, his dear friend and bandmate Gord Downie was gone, and making music again seemed, if not impossible, then certainly iffy.

Fast-forward two years, and Sinclair issues his solo debut *Taxi Dancers* to widespread acclaim and prepares to hit the road behind it. It's early 2020; by March, COVID-19 has shut down the planet. Tours are wiped out. Suddenly, Sinclair is stuck *inside* peering out at an industry — his industry — imperiled by a shapeshifting world.

So, what to do? Well, if you're Gord Sinclair, you count your blessings, hunker down, write a bunch of songs and, in the process, discover a whole new way of approaching this professional musician thing. The result is *In Continental Drift*, Sinclair's toweringly accomplished second solo album and one that, on multiple levels, could never have happened without the stupid, awful pandemic. Talk about a paradox.

Featuring nine original songs written and co-produced by Sinclair alongside frequent collaborator James McKenty — who also mixed, mastered, and added guitar and vocals — *In Continental Drift* found the bassist-cum-lead singer playing for the first time in a trio. Sinclair and McKenty serendipitously met future bandmate, drummer Jeff Halischuk during a blizzard-induced detour to Toronto, where a late-night craving for beer and beats led to The Rex Hotel, where Halischuk happened to be playing.

"I was blown away and I said to James, 'If we ever get a chance to play live again, he's the guy.' Eight months later in November '21, I sent Jeff some demos, he came down, and that was that. Everything happens for a reason. I never would have met Jeff otherwise."

Even wilder, the album was recorded in a reconfigured vintage Airstream RV that McKenty had fortuitously bought before the pandemic, converting it into the In Record Time Mobile Studio. That meant the trio of Sinclair, McKenty, and Halischuk could — and did — cut the album in various locations between early November 2021 and mid-January 2022 without being hobbled by COVID constraints.

"We did a three-day session here at my house in Kingston, a session at James' place in Peterborough, and finished at my dad Duncan's place north of Kingston at Buck Lake," Sinclair says. "Recording was fun. It was the first time James had done an album with that studio and certainly the first time I'd ever done anything that way. It felt fresh and exciting."

That vibe definitely seeped into the unfailingly dynamic songs on *In Continental Drift* which, like *Taxi Dancers*, is metaphorically titled. "It's a bit of double entendre. Looking at the news, you get a sense that we are coming apart at the seams, tearing each other apart, and unwilling to listen to one another.

"But there is also a nod to 'incontinence,' that we are basically all shitting the bed, turning inwards and not recognizing greatness around us. I bounced the title off James early in the recording process and he laughed, so it stuck."

Except for the strummy, relaxed “I’m Getting By” which dates to the solo debut, the mostly buoyant tracks on *In Continental Drift* were written throughout the pandemic, with many reflecting the bizarre reality that event conferred on everyone, for better or worse. Witness hard-charging, snarling lead single “Gool Guy” which finds Sinclair railing against corporate opportunists.

“I’m not a fan of social media or the people behind that industry. It was created under the guise of creating a global community, but it has just taken away real community. During the pandemic we couldn’t go to the local record store or bookstore or meet a friend for coffee. That made people turn inward toward their devices.

“Understandable, but that played right into the hands of billionaires, these ‘ghouls’ who capitalize on changing the way we connect with each other. And it’s all about money. We’re complicit too, as consumers, trying to save a nickel on toilet paper by having it delivered. But if I don’t support my local grocer, why should he support his local songwriter?”

Elsewhere, in the dirge-y, downcast “Now That’s Gone Too,” Sinclair found himself “reflecting on how fortunate I was. You can’t do that without noticing people who have it way harder. That song is about people on the margins, experiencing that sense of isolation. Playing it live, I’ve been referring to it as ‘The Covid Blues.’”

A reprieve from thematic heaviness comes via the bracing “Carole’en.” With its vividly saturated sonic palette — electric guitars hurtling forth at breakneck speed as Halischuk massacres the skins — the song feels like a rockabilly hymn that might skid into surf-rock territory at any moment.

“I’m an old punk rocker at heart and I love the energy of going out and seeing live music,” Sinclair says. “That’s what I was going for. Lyrically, it’s a twist on unrequited love in the modern age. I had this image of an unassailable member of the opposite sex who has a lot of different suitors. I was looking at where the lonely suitor fits into that orbit.”

“Carole’en” is followed by the album’s one ballad, the tender and hugely melodic “Change Your Mind” which features Kellie McKenty’s sweet, gossamer vocals shadowing Sinclair’s unabashedly nasal lead. It is also perhaps the album’s clearest example of its pared-back production.

“That was a conscious choice,” Sinclair confirms, adding that this time around, he felt more comfortable writing lyrics and singing, “especially from a technical perspective. I had to learn how to sing *a lot*.

“Part of the approach to production was me sitting back and realizing how difficult the pandemic was for my fellow musicians. It was a tough enough situation for musicians before, but the pandemic kicked the final leg out from under the table.

“Canada is such an incubator for live performance, so I wanted to reflect that live, ensemble approach to recording and playing and performing.” Which Sinclair insists his band will do as a quartet, abetted by son Elliot Sinclair on bass, as early and often as possible after the album’s release.

“Live performance and musicianship are so important to this country, and it has always given us a leg up because it’s such a hard place to tour,” he says. “Yet live music feels like it’s under threat of extinction. We need to protect the musical heritage of this country. If I’m going to advocate for live performance, I have to get out there and do it myself.”