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Canada's Cowboy Junkies have found a new range

BY GARY GRAFF
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Margo Timmins says she and the other Cowboy Junkies pass some of their off-stage touring time by laughing at bad reviews.

In that case, the band must be a jolly bunch this year.

The four-year-old Canadian quartet has become the latest example of the music critics' sophomore setup. A year ago, it was one of the hippest bands in the land, and its debut album, "The



Margo Timmins

Trinity Session," was roundly praised for a moody, breathy brand of melancholy music that is laid back farther than a relaxed Californian. The Junkies are the kind of group that could take Lou Reed's garage rock classic "Sweet Jane" and turn it into something that wouldn't sound out of place at a funeral.

The critical kudos overcame a lack of radio airplay, helping "The Trinity Session" sell a million copies worldwide. This year, however, "The Caution Horses" — which sounds nearly identical to its predecessor — is receiving a markedly cooler reception. A recent New York Times article is typical; after calling the music "bland," it goes on to say that Timmins "can barely rouse her breathy voice to sing a higher note."

"We laugh at the insults; we really do," Timmins, 28, says by telephone from her Toronto home during a break in the group's world tour. "I love reading reviews, good or bad. They're always amusing."

"We have a running tally of who gets slandered the most, which is our running joke. I tend to be the one, though I also get the most compliments when *they* come. We have no problems remembering that when you read press or reviews of your shows or albums, it's just a person's perspective. Even when it's positive, sometimes, it's very difficult to believe. When somebody's saying I'm the greatest singer since such and such, you say, 'This is ridiculous. I know how good I am, and I'm not that good. Yet.'"

Timmins laughs, but she can't obscure the pride she and the other Cowboy Junkies — her brothers Mi-

ON STAGE: *The Cowboy Junkies and Townes Van Zandt will perform at 8 tonight at the Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 668-8397 anytime.*

chael and Peter, and Alan Anton — have in "The Caution Horses," regardless of what the critics say. To them the album is a triumph over adversity in which they beat back expectations, pressures and a recording faux pas that could well have sabotaged the project.

As "The Trinity Session" — which was recorded at a cost of \$162 in single session at Toronto's Trinity Church — was becoming the surprise smash of 1989, Cowboy Junkies decided to record their follow-up the same way. This time they journeyed in April to suburban Toronto's Sharon Temple and recorded an album, again in one take, that included many of the songs that ended up on "The Caution Horses."

But that album is still in the vaults. After recording it, the group toured Europe. Listening to the tapes when they returned, Timmins said, they "realized it wasn't what we wanted. The atmosphere of the album sounded too much like 'The Trinity Session.' It wasn't the sound we envisioned."

So the band made the hard decision to scrap the whole thing and start again. "That's where the pressure most reared its head," Timmins says. For its new recording, the Junkies opted to work in a formal, state-of-the-art recording studio, a venue they'd eschewed to avoid the temptations of overdubs and technical trickery, things they didn't want in their music. But by holding to the one-microphone, one-take approach of "The Trinity Sessions," the Junkies found the studio surprisingly palatable for "The Caution Horses," an album of lost-love songs.

"We realized," Timmins says, "that the studio is an environment like any other environment, like the church or the garage. . . . It's a matter of conquering the environment, working your sound out in that room."

And that discovery, she says, may have an effect on future Cowboy Junkies recordings.

"It's exciting in the studio. I'd never been in one. Now I definitely some day would like to do backup vocals for my own vocals, things like that. If you don't go crazy overdubbing everything 50 times, I think you can do some good things in a studio."