POLL

On top of the world

While the rest of the world sinks into despair, Canadians have never felt so upbeat about the future. And we don't care who knows it. By **Nicholas Köhler**.

FOR THE PAST three weeks or so, the highest reaches of the *Billboard* 200, which ranks top-selling albums in the U.S. across all genres against Nielsen SoundScan sales data, has been dominated by one single, identifiable group: Canadians. In late November, the Toronto-born hip-hop artist Drake entered at No. 1 with *Take Care*, its 631,000 in sales making it the third-bestselling debut of 2011. Michael Bublé, of Burnaby, B.C., followed at No. 2 with his *Christmas* album, and Stratford, Ont., native Justin Bieber rounded out the top five with another seasonal offering—*Under the Mistletoe*. *Billboard* magazine writer Keith Caulfield noted, though, that Drake wouldn't hold on to the top position for long, "as early forecasts from sources suggest Nickelback's new *Here and Now* (released Nov. 21) may open at No. 1." The prediction didn't entirely carry: Bublé climbed to the top spot, and Nickelback debuted at No. 2.

A coincidence, likely, this preponderance of Canuck talent gathered at the top of America's premier pop chart. It may also reflect a new Canadian swagger on the world stage, and yet another sign we've become a nation less timid and more muscular—no longer "punching above our weight," as we've long liked to claim, but stepping into a brand new, beefier class altogether.

Fact is, Canadians have been feeling pretty terrific about themselves lately. According to an Angus Reid Public Opinion poll conducted recently in partnership with *Maclean's*, we're much more satisfied with our lives than our counterparts in the U.S. and Britain. Forty-two per cent of us think Canada's best days lie in the future rather than the past. By contrast, only 36 per cent of Americans are that optimistic, and fully 58 per cent of Britons believe their day in the sun has been and gone. And where once a vague sense of inferiority defined us, the online Angus Reid survey now shows most Canadians—86 per cent, in fact—agree with the idea that their country is "the greatest in the world."

Canada's high numbers defy an unmistakable trend in the U.S. toward pessimism and a creeping sense of decline. According to Pew Research Center polling published last month, just 49 per cent of Americans agree with the statement, "Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others." That's down from 60 per cent in 2002, the first time Pew asked, and from 55 per cent just four years ago—a swift decline. More dire still, a recent Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey

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says only 17 per cent of likely U.S. voters believe the U.S. is heading in the right direction. That's in sharp contrast to Canada, where 63.5 per cent of respondents believe that Canada is generally moving in the right direction, according to a Nanos Research survey conducted for *Policy Options* magazine. Such attitudes in the U.S. and the U.K. speak to high unemployment rates, the hyper-polarized politics of the U.S. and the fact that Britain has gone from economic downturn to political upheaval to eurozone angst in just a few short years.

The Brits are dab hands at feeling impotent—it's been a while since the sun never set on their empire—but for Americans the sensation is new and therefore sharp. Just a few years ago, easy credit was feeding real estate booms in Florida, Arizona and California—today the graveyards of American economic might.

What began as nebulous uncertainty in the wake of the housing collapse is now congealing around a nasty likelihood: that the U.S. is in store for a Japanese-style Lost Decade, and that its global influence is being sapped when it can least afford it. Another Pew survey, from June, found that 12 per cent of Americans believe China has already replaced the U.S. as the world's leading superpower—more than the Chinese themselves, at six per cent—and that 34 per cent think China is sure to overtake them one day.

Gloomy. No wonder the majority of Canadians feel this country offers more opportunities than we'd find in the U.S. or the U.K., the Angus Reid poll shows (astonishingly, only 17 per cent of Canadians believe they'd get better work in the U.S.). Eighty-seven per cent of us think Canada is the best place to raise a family, while only 61 per cent of Americans believe that about their country. And most Brits think Canada is far better than home; almost half would prefer to raise families here. The brain drain, which gripped policy makers with fear last decade, has run dry. Canada wasn't included in this year's Pew survey, but the last time we were asked, in 2007, 52 per cent of us agreed our culture is superior to others; it's impossible to tell, but the Angus Reid poll suggests Pew would likely have found us even more boastful in 2011 than we were four years ago, ahead of our traditionally big-headed friends in the U.S. (Western European responses to the "cultural superiority" question have remained stable—and quite low—over the past decade, with even the French, who've long had a reputation for chauvinism, scoring a miserable 27 per cent this year.)

'ALL THIS SWAGGER COULD LEAD TO SOMETHING ELSE NOVEL: THE UGLY CANADIAN'

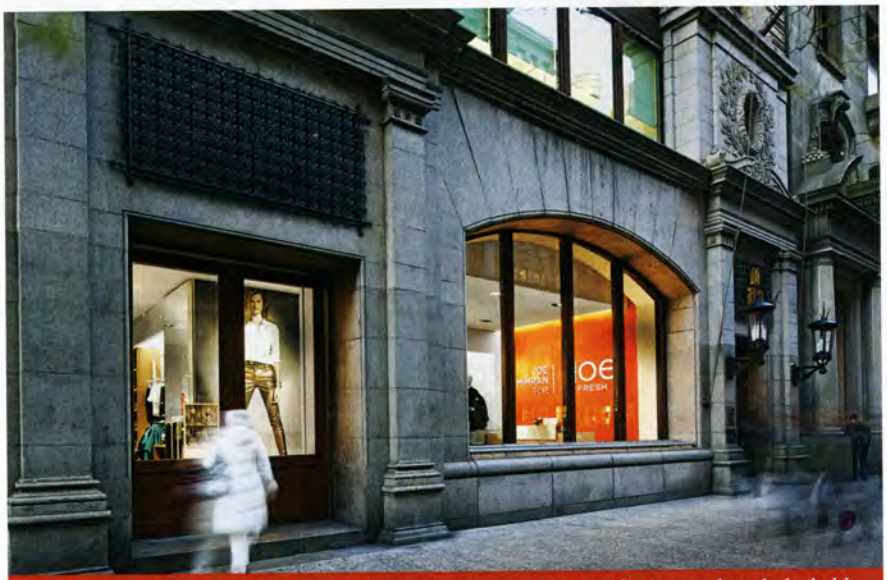
The explanation for this buoyant mood in Canada goes straight to our DNA as Canadians—the satisfaction we take in the simple pleasures of peace, order and good government. "There's a level of respect for the institutions here that doesn't exist in the U.S. or the U.K.," says Angus Reid VP Mario Canseco. "The idea that no matter what happens, the economy's going to be okay, the banks are not going to rip us off, and that no matter how sick I am, some doctor will see me." Of course, that might be wrong—Ireland and Iceland demonstrated high levels of optimism a few years ago, and look where that got them. At the same time as he's kept interest rates at historic lows, Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of Canada, has complained that we're borrowing too much—a household debt-to-income ratio that the bank says reached a record-breaking 149 per cent in the spring, higher than the U.S. At the same time, Canadian real estate remains hot, a circumstance that suggests a bubble not so different from the ones that popped in the U.S., Ireland and Britain.

STILL, THE PERCEPTION of good health could well prove to be true. Jack Mintz, director of the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary, says many of us are benefiting from commodity booms in Western and Eastern Canada; from jobs in Ontario's manufacturing sector, which services those booms; and from the reputation of our financial and business-services types as good stewards, which generates a tidy living for so many on Bay Street and beyond. All this, in turn, stems from sound public policies introduced in Canada over the past 15 years—strict regulations, debt reduction and tax and pension reform, "things countries in Europe and the U.S. are now struggling with," Mintz says. "Luckily, we got into a position by 2008 that we could deal with recession. We've done a lot of smart things. Can we do things better? Sure. But when you compare things to where we were 20 years ago, I think we should be proud—and not afraid of saying, 'Look, people can learn some things from us.' "

If you don't believe Mintz, former head of the respected C.D. Howe Institute, then take it from Bieber: "Canada's the best country in the world," the pop singer told *Rolling Stone* magazine this year. "We go to the doctor and we don't need to worry about paying him, but here, your whole life, you're broke because of medical bills."

No wonder our confidence levels are soaring. But there's something else going on too. For almost 50 years, Canadians have prided themselves on their middle-power likeability—the peacekeeping and peace-brokering values instilled in us during the Lester B. Pearson-Pierre Trudeau period of our history.

HITTING THE RIGHT NOTE *Chart-toppers (clockwise from top right) Drake, Justin Bieber, Michael Bublé and Nickelback*



CROSS-BORDER SALES *Canadian fast-fashion retailer Joe Fresh took the bold step of opening on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue*

But our growing confidence makes for an ill fit over that old, aw-shucks heritage.

Consider again our latest wave of chart-toppers—Bieber, Drake, Bublé and Nickelback. All, to one degree or another, embody that peculiarly Canadian talent for absorbing an idiom—usually an American one—refining it, then mirroring it back, frequently in safer, less threatening style. Bublé is the quintessential crooner, *sans* the gangster menace of Sinatra or (most of) the Rat Pack debauch. Bieber's done much the same with R & B—gut it of sex. Drake is a hip-hop innovator whose power derives in part from a multi-faceted background—"a biracial Canadian Jew who grew up in an affluent suburb of Toronto and starred on *Degrassi*," as *New Yorker* pop music critic Sasha Frere-Jones put it—i.e., a rapper who's never boasted of peddling crack or taking a bullet (something that instead happened to Drake's *Degrassi* character).

Then there's the rock band Nickelback, with its cocksure strut and Nascar aesthetic—a mix that's helped it preserve some of the danger of the genre and yet still appeal to the middle-of-the-road consumers who've made its albums mega-hits. Nickelback has taken the hedonistic attitude that Canadians have always kept to themselves—in the form of our wildly aggressive frat-boy-inspired beer ads (the "I am Canadian" campaign, to name just one)—and projected it onto the world at large. The band represents something new to the Canadian psyche: a willingness to offend. When news broke that Nickelback was to perform at halftime during the Thanksgiving game between the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers, Detroit erupted; soon, an anti-Nickelback petition had grown to 55,000 names. Why is the band so hated? In a *Funny or Die* video spoof featuring its members and released to exploit the controversy, a crisis-management consultant asks whether it might have something to do with rumours they fornicate with goats. Singer Chad Kroeger demurs: "We make *love* to goats," he says. Asks another consultant: "Could it be because you're *Canadian*?" If in the past we've suffered the world's indifference, we're now learning how to savour the thrill of being hated—of being less Pearsonian and more... Kroegerian?

Is this a happy development? Canadian swagger may sell records, but some wonder whether it may lead to another novel Canadian product: the Ugly Canuck. "We really have lost a sense of humility," says Amir Attaran, a lawyer and immunologist who holds the Canada Research Chair in law, population health and global development policy at the University of Ottawa. "What made us effective as a middle power in the past is that we were conspicuous about that humility, and therefore threatened nobody. We had wonderful power as an aw-shucks nation. And we don't have that anymore."

TO BE SURE, there are good reasons, outside of the U.S. pop charts, for Canadian pride. Our banking system, the rudder that helped us glide above the turbulence of the global credit crisis, is reputed to be so fabulous that the Bank of Canada's Carney was recently named head of the Financial Stability Board, an increasingly important player in global economic governance. Iceland, perhaps the world banking catastrophe's hardest-hit victim, is even looking at scrapping the country's troubled currency, the króna, in favour of our dollar.

Canadian fast-fashion retailer Joe Fresh has opened up on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. Beyond the throngs of children in London who played hooky to swoon over Bieber last month ("the small but perfectly formed Canadian superstar," the *Daily Mail* called him), Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven have also swept the British capital, the first time their wilderness paintings have been shown there in almost 90 years. The notoriously grumpy British critics responded effusively—*London Evening Standard* critic Brian Sewell called Thomson and the gang "brave painters" who "flick into being with fat but lightning touch the rush of the river's tumbling rapids." Meanwhile, Kalle Lasn, founder of Vancouver's anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, has been internationally acknowledged as the mastermind behind the global Occupy movement.

Yet Canadians are increasingly demonstrating a "cavalier manner" on the world stage, to quote a recent critic. Speaking before an audience at the Durban climate conference in South Africa, Environment Minister Peter Kent boldly indicated that Canada, after years of flouting its emissions limits, would not sign on to an extension of the Kyoto Protocol. "Kyoto, for Canada, is in the past," he said. (We later withdrew completely.)

The next day, Ottawa announced it had approved French oil and gas giant Total's Joslyn North oil sands project in Alberta, a move some called an affront to the Durban talks. The timing did seem deliberate, reflective of a broader drift in our energy policy away from "dirty" oil sheepishness and toward a more aggressively articulated "ethical" oil stance—the notion that our oil sands crude may be emissions-intensive, but at least we're not the Saudis or Hugo Chávez. "There was a time when Canada would have looked at some of the international opprobrium and we would have looked at our shoes and said, 'Gosh, we don't like people not to like us,' " says Brian Lee Crowley, managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, an Ottawa think tank. "Whereas now people are saying, 'Look, this is a resource of geopolitical significance. We're responsible, we care about the environment, and if you don't like it, tough.' I think we're much more clear-eyed about Canada's interests."

When Kent made what he called a "gentle remark" about India's willingness to commit to a carbon-reductions regime with teeth, India's environment minister, Jayanthi Natara-

jan, swung back, suggesting Canada had helped "junk" Kyoto "in a cavalier manner." She added: "Countries which had signed and ratified it are walking away without even a polite goodbye—and yet pointing at others."

The litany of global no-nos committed by Canada goes on. We club seals. What of it? Michaëlle Jean, our former governor general, even gutted one and sampled its raw heart two years ago, very likely a deliberate statement aimed at the European Union, which had only just voted to ban the trade of seal products there. Don't want cancer? Fine, no one's forcing you to buy our asbestos, which is banned in Canada for health reasons but which we have no trouble exporting to other, often developing, countries. Even our great success as bankers and financial regulators is starting to chafe—officials at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are apparently tired of hearing us go on about our clean books and tough rules. Meanwhile, the strong Canadian dollar has turned other Canadian companies and institutional investors into modern-day Vikings, pillaging the weak. "Canadians to buy our national lottery" bellowed a *Daily Express* headline last year after the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan bought the U.K.'s national lottery operator.

That private-sector assertiveness often has Ottawa's backing. When President Barack Obama deferred judgment on the Keystone XL pipeline, which would funnel oil sands crude from Alberta to Texas, over environmental (as well as political) concerns, Prime Minister Stephen Harper did the diplomatic equivalent of a hardball negotiator's shrug, saying Canada would just pipe its oil closer to China instead. Canada was curt also when we learned that Portugal had outmanoeuvred us last year for a seat on the U.N. Security Council, a prize regularly awarded to Canada for 60 years. This time, insiders say, Ottawa's pro-Israel stance, coupled with the unprecedented absence of American support in our campaign for the seat, scuttled the bid. "We did not barter our principled foreign policy," said Dimitri Soudas, Harper's spokesman at the time. "We did not water down our principled foreign policy."

SUCH BELLICOSE TALK isn't entirely new to Canada—we've felt at least this good about ourselves before. "The 19th century was the century of the United States," Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier once said. "I think we can claim that it is Canada that shall fill the 20th century." That was in 1904, after we'd recovered from the economically wretched 1890s. More recently, in 2003, *The Economist* magazine made an argument for why "Canada is now rather cool," based most memorably on prime minister Jean Chrétien's progressive take on marijuana and same-sex marriage. Poise and composure are at the heart of "cool"; we've grown more chest-thumping since then.

Indeed, the trend to Canadian optimism may have been accelerated by the Tory majority, which Harper fought for based on his party's commitment to lower taxes and prudent spending. His message continues to resonate with his voters: our Angus Reid poll found that while 86 per cent of Canadians agreed with the idea that this is the "greatest country in the world," 97 per cent of Tory voters thought so. Angus Reid's Canseco says a large number of Canada's optimists are Tory voters "waiting to see what Harper will do with his majority." (Liberals also outstripped the national average, at 87 per cent, which may say something about Liberal resiliency, while NDP voters were gloomier, at just 74 per cent.) Canadian optimists also skew older:

THE BIGGEST CANADIAN OPTIMISTS ARE TORY VOTERS 'WAITING TO SEE WHAT HARPER WILL DO WITH HIS MAJORITY'

"We're talking about people who went through difficult struggles, particularly in the '70s and '80s," says Canseco. "Now they look at their children and think, 'We have it pretty good here; it's definitely a better Canada than the one I had 20 or 30 years ago.' "

Perhaps these Canadians aren't old enough. "People in the 1920s thought things were wonderful," says Desmond Morton, a historian and founding director of McGill University's Institute for the Study of Canada. "Canada was the boom country of the continent, and if you read what the newspapers were saying then, it's 'spend,' 'rejoice,' 'be Canadian'—we were so much better off than the Americans." Those good times didn't last—the Great Depression intervened—and our current optimism may well be setting us up for one more comeuppance. "The big lie is that we're doing wonderfully—that we have no problems like other countries, our regulatory systems work like crazy, we're so good we can send Mark Carney overseas to tell the rest of the world how to run things," says Morton. "That's very ego-building. It's almost American."

The most troubling consequence of this new Canadian confidence, says Attaran, the U of O lawyer and immunologist, is that we've junked our Pearsonian past as a middle power, able to broker peace around the world. Attaran, whose essay outlining this shift, "The Ugly Canadian," appeared in the *Literary Review of Canada* in 2009, believes things have only gotten worse. "Once you take away from Canada its respected middle-power role, then we're nowhere," he says. "Who are we? We're just some anonymous loser nation. We're becoming Italy without high fashion and Brazil without the beaches—France with bad cooking."

At least for now, we've still got our Biebers, Bublés, Drakes and Nickelbacks—not the stuff of a lasting legacy, maybe, but optimism is often as fleeting as a pop tune's run on the charts. And like a pop tune, it can leave a headache.

PAUL CHIASSON/CP

THANKS BUT NO YANKS *When Obama blocked a key Canadian pipeline, Harper said Canada would simply sell to China*