

RECORDING REVIEW

From the Big Land: Music of Makkovik Featuring Gerald Mitchell. 2011. Compact Disc. Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place (MMaP), Memorial University of Newfoundland. MMAP-CD05. Booklet (41pp) by Joan Anderson and Beverley Diamond with photographs, song texts and musical transcriptions. \$20.00.

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Canada's "Great White North" continues to capture the imagination of artists and musicians, inspiring numerous commissions for new compositions. The vastness of the North, however, cannot be expressed through simple motifs that imply remoteness and isolation. Produced by the Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place (MMaP), *From the Big Land: Music of Makkovik Featuring Gerald Mitchell* introduces the musical culture of one Northern town, fulfilling one of the Centre's goals: "to foster pride in the cultural uniqueness of places and communities" (<http://www.mun.ca/mmapp/about/>). Combining archival and new recordings, consultation of personal memoirs and interviews, and highlighting local musician and artist Gerald Mitchell, this project is a model of how particular people and landscapes make a place unique in the too-often generalized landscape of the North.

With a population of approximately 360 (<http://www.makkovik.ca/home/profile.htm>), Makkovik is one of five northern Labrador communities that

form the new autonomous region of Nunatsiavut. Most of the people are Inuit or of mixed Inuit and European ancestry. While permanent settlement began with a trading post in the 1860s and a Moravian mission in 1896, it was in the mid-twentieth century that Makkovik took its current shape, following the forced relocation of Inuit from more northerly communities and the establishment of a United States military radar base nearby.

The seventeen tracks on the CD include archival and new recordings of songs along with an archival interview. The music and influence of Gerald Mitchell is featured throughout. Raised in Makkovik, Mitchell has been well known across Labrador since the 1960s and 70s, when he had a regular CBC radio spot called "The Labrador Balladeer." In the 1970s, Mitchell also recorded two LPs for the Toronto-based country label, Marathon Records. His sound is reminiscent of early Canadian country-folk singers such as Wilf Carter or Alan Mills. Mitchell's songs are regionally distinctive in part through use of local landscapes and landmarks, and through lyrics that move across traditional categorizations such as labour or patriotic songs. He sings on most of the tracks, accompanying himself with strummed patterns on guitar.

Seven songs on this CD are archival songs by Mitchell, and he recorded four new tracks for this project as well. Family members perform on another two tracks. The three remaining songs include a hymn in Inuktitut (the language of the Inuit) sung by Susie and Joas Onalik, and two tracks performed by

Brandon Pardy.

The content of the archival songs is invaluable (tracks 1, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 17). The lyrics are filled with references to local landmarks, such as the “depot” in “Lay That Bucksaw Down,” Mokami Mountain, Lake Melville, and the Grand River (now the Churchill River). There are local histories in songs such as “Young Billie,” which, while not a depiction of an actual event, tells the all-too-familiar Northern community story of family lost in a storm. The final track, “Sons of Labrador,” has become an anthem for Labrador and closes this CD as it did Gerald Mitchell’s original LP. Like “Young Billie,” “Sons of Labrador” is patriotic, praising the life of hunters. Written by Mitchell and Byron Chaulk, the song remains popular; several video performances in Inuktitut appear on YouTube.

The new recordings by Gerald Mitchell (tracks 2, 4, 7, 15) are very clear, allowing the listener to hear the rich quality of Mitchell’s voice and guitar playing. The first, “Pearly White City,” is a hymn, familiar in Makkovik, that reflects Mitchell’s habit of including a hymn in his weekly CBC broadcasts. The song “Captain John Grieve” is about the leader of a logging camp and features other local figures and places. “Grand River” recounts Mitchell’s personal history, traces the renaming of the river after Winston Churchill, and tells of the importance of the river to long-gone trappers. The final new recording (track 15, labeled as 14) has a different character from Mitchell’s other songs. Mitchell plays the melody on guitar before he begins to sing. Originally written by Leslie Pardy about Cartwright, a

community some 200 kilometres south, Mitchell alters the place-based imagery to reflect Makkovik, “demonstrating how a composition gradually transforms in the oral tradition” (35). While it would be useful to see or hear Pardy’s original composition, it is not included.

The remaining new recordings are made by Mitchell’s family (tracks 3 and 10) and friend (tracks 14 and 16). In “One Part of My Life,” a song about life at Dunn’s Island, a popular summer workplace for residents of Makkovik, his nephew Gary sings and plays guitar while his daughter Jennifer echoes the melody on accordion. Track 10, written by Mitchell’s grand-nephew Paul Mitchell, tells a second story of lost hunters, but with a happy ending. Tracks 14 and 16 are performed by Paul’s friend and band-mate Brandon Pardy. “Land Called Labrador,” written by Harry Martin, celebrates the geography of Labrador, while “Big Land Shore” by Richard Neville tells the true story of a rock band that performed on the south coast of Labrador. Like Paul Mitchell’s song, these represent a newer form of songwriting that uses contemporary harmonic and strophic structures.

The large DVD-sized format of the packaging makes the 41-page booklet stand out as worthy of a few words in its own right. A brief overview of Makkovik is followed by twenty-two pages documenting the town’s music history, together with a biography of Gerald Mitchell. Thirty-two black and white photographs and three hand drawings fill out more details of Makkovik’s musical life, showing the church and its musicians. The booklet has a description of each track, and melody and lyrics for

the four previously unpublished songs by Gerald Mitchell.

The musical life of Makkovik is intimately tied to the Moravian mission, including its brass bands and long tradition of having a church organist. Given the prominence of the church, Moravian music is notably absent from the CD. There are no archival recordings of the brass bands pictured on the cover, and the two hymns on the CD are not necessarily representative of the Moravian church.

The notes acknowledge that the archival recordings of Gerald Mitchell vary in terms of sound quality. As expected in transfers from 1970s vintage LPs, there is white noise throughout these tracks. “Lay That Bucksaw Down” has the most deteriorated sound, with distortion at the loudest points and muting at the end. Other tracks, such as “High on the Mountain of Old Mokami,” share some of the distortion, but the volume stays consistent in most. The Inuktitut hymn “Jesusip Pairiallamanga” is the other archival recording on the CD. Made at the Sound Symposium in St. John’s in 1986, it does not suffer the same distortion as Mitchell’s tracks. Overall, however, this collection preserves these songs and makes them accessible.

Anderson, Diamond, and the Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place are to be praised for producing this project. *From the Big Land* sets the special flair of local people and the unique history, landmarks, and character of Makkovik within the context of the Canadian North. ❁