

FOLK MUSIC IN CANADA TODAY

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For those of us interested in genuine folk song and music, a survey of the contemporary Canadian musical scene gives little cause either for enthusiasm or for optimism. To clarify my reasons for this assertion, some preliminary discussion is necessary.

As we all know, our Canadian musical heritage resolves itself into three components. There is, first of all, the music of the aboriginal inhabitants — the Indians and the Inuit. This is an important and colourful thread in our musical tapestry, but since it is essentially a separate one I shall not treat it further in this article. Secondly, there is the music brought to our land over the centuries by immigrants from Europe, from other parts of the Americas, from Africa (directly or, more usually, indirectly) and from Asia. Lastly and (from the viewpoint of this Society) most importantly, there are the songs and tunes composed here in Canada. These may either echo the imported traditions in style and content or may be largely or wholly original; they include new words to old tunes, old words to new tunes, and new tunes, with or without new words. Most often, of course, our Canadian music derives directly or indirectly from European sources. That is not a criticism, for all folk songs and music form part of a continuing musical plexus. Innovation has only a limited role in folk music, though one that is vital to its healthy life.

How does one define folk music, anyway? That question is not easy to answer in words. The late A.L. Lloyd, in his *Folk Song in England*,¹ spent many pages striving to do so, without conspicuous success. Yet, if one listens to the music instead of just reading about it, usually one has little difficulty in recognizing the true folk idiom, whether in music or in words.

First of all, in the European tradition at least — I am not presumptuous enough to pontificate on those of Africa, South America, or Asia — the music is designed for performance usually by a single instrument, less often by a strictly circumscribed group of instruments. Moreover, it is purposive, i.e. designed as accompaniment either to a voice — sometimes substituted for by a particular voice-like instrument, such as flute or pan-pipes — or to vigorous dancing. Music depending upon an elaborate interplay of instrumental voices; music that is designed to be listened to, not sung or danced to; slow and stately dance music; processional or martial music — these constitute court music, not folk music. Such music was, and is, written for the entertainment of the leisured, moneyed classes by professional musicians, not by ordinary people for their own enjoyment.

The texts of songs usually tell the listener very clearly whether they are natural growths from the folk idiom or are hot-house hybrids planted artificially into that stern soil — and usually destined not to take root in it. If a song contains elaborate descriptive passages, of persons or of settings, then it is not a folk song; if it recounts in any detail the emotions of the singer or the persons about whom he is singing, then it is not a folk-song. In the folk idiom, descriptions are brief ("her coal-black hair and

ruby lips," "the windy heath") and emotions described sparsely ("and oh! but he was weary"). This allows the listener to add colour to those descriptions or emotions from his or her own experiences. Indeed, the very sparseness gives a universality, for each listener can accommodate the story within his own environment. Its story and its figures can be comprehended better, because they are sketches that the listeners can amplify and colour themselves. Thus the songs can survive from generation to generation, and be understood in the circumstances of the time. More precisely painted pictures and scenes, in contrast, come to seem irrelevant, even alien, as time passes.

If a song is philosophical in tone or discusses abstract concepts, then it is not a folk song. If it contains classical or literary allusions (and, in past centuries, a surprising number of songs did!), then it is unlikely to be a folk song. There are a few exceptions here; some writers of broadsides tried to incorporate such allusions, striving to imitate those whom they considered to be their social betters, and occasionally such allusions survived uncomprehended in the folk tradition (e.g. "Bright Phoebus" in the song "Thousands or more"). Usually, however, they were changed or eliminated within a few decades.

Sometimes the story relates to a particular historic event; more often its events are set at some unspecified or imagined time. However, even when a specific historic happening is described — a battle, a crime, industrial strife — the songs do not interpret it in the light of any particular political theory. True folk songs are almost never exhortative and do not often contain any explicit message. Sometimes a moral may be drawn from the story in the last stanza and the listener advised, for example, to

.... join the Union while you may
And don't wait for your dying day,

but such messages are subsidiary to the story. Sometimes the story itself is pointing a moral throughout; "The Union Maid" is an example. However, the many recent songs which exist only to preach a message of politics, religion, or feminism are identified thereby as pseudo-folksongs, not the genuine article.

If you encounter a song in praise of war or urging soldiers to battle, you may be sure it is not a folk song. Folk songs are almost always implicitly, if not explicitly, pacifist; usually they regret the bitter consequences of war; only rarely do they extol its glories. "Chevy Chase," though it tells of a battle, is much more a lament for its grievous consequences than an advocacy of conflict; and most of the few later folk songs that do recount the details of battles stress the blood, toil, and weariness of war. Certainly, there were songs that were paeans of victory, but most of these — even such fine ones as "The Agincourt Song" — were forgotten within a few decades. The very rare exceptions were songs concerning martial encounters limited enough to have the appeal of a sporting contest, with the favourite downed by the outsider ("The Chesapeake and the Shannon") or the little 'un tweaking the nose of the big 'un ("Paul Jones' Victory"). Similarly, the few material heroes remembered in folk song are remembered, not because they won a war for their country, conquered a foreign land, or brought home lots of treasure, but because of their personal qualities — usually their kindness and humanity to their men, in an age when such treatment was rare. Such

songs certainly retell the hero's exploits, but more particularly they lament his passing (e.g. "Bold Benbow" and "Brave Wolfe").

In Ireland, things are admittedly somewhat different. Patriots who received meagre support, and indeed endured betrayal, in life are lamented in death, as if in posthumous propitiation or atonement (e.g. "Bold Robert Emmet" or "Henry Joy McCracken"). Orangemen extolled in song the victory at the Boyne; Republicans remembered the triumphs of "The Ould West Cork Brigade." Such folk songs were used, and are being used, as ammunition in a continuing battle. They will remain current until the battle is resolved — if it is ever to be resolved. If it *does* end, then I suspect those songs will come very swiftly to seem redundant and will fade from the folk song repertoire.

Indeed, songs relating to specific historic events do usually fade swiftly from currency as the memory of that event fades, though their tune may persist to be used for new purposes. The songs that survive best are those whose drama and flexibility allow them to be understood, and to generate responsive emotion, in any place and at any time. The tune must be attractive and the language must be at once simple enough to be understood wherever that language is spoken, yet vivid enough to catch the memory. The story of the unfortunate rake may have been modified in detail and its tune changed drastically from place to place, but it has travelled far indeed. Though her names may be varied a little, the song and story of "Barbara Allen" vary scarcely at all, in any of the wide lands where that song is remembered.

Of course, there are shifts in style. In western European folk song, the tune being sung is elaborate and includes musical decoration enough; the instrumental accompaniment, if any, merely echoes or underscores that tune, for it does not need to provide additional decoration. In some eastern European traditions the vocal line may be simple, even boring; the musical excitement is provided by the instruments, not by the singer. And of course, there are some blurrings of boundaries, some "grey areas" between folk music, classical and popular music. This is to be expected, for music is an infinitely mutable as humanity itself. Yet, in general, true folk music can be readily identified.

Sadly, traditional folk music is too little heard nowadays to be understood by most Canadians. This is in part a consequence of an expansion of the rich and leisured classes. By the definitions of past ages or even of the whole present-day world, there are few poor people in Canada, few who must make their own music, not through choice but because it is the only music they can reasonably expect to hear. It is also in part an effect of the availability of radio and television, tapes, records, and films, all at prices that can be afforded by most of us and all serving to fill up the time during which we might have been making our own music. Mostly, however, it is a result of commercial pressures, a force-feeding of musical pap so flavourless that it must be quickly changed, substituted by a newer variant, before the consumer is aware of that poor taste. Why advocate traditional music when there is so little money to be made out of it? Why encourage people to make their own music when it stops them from spending dollars?

Moreover, we have two specifically Canadian problems of attitude. As I wrote with surprise when I came first to the Prairies,² most Canadians do not know how to handle our music, because

...folk music is culture with a small 'c'; there are no established authorities to

follow and your average Albertan or Manitoban does not know how he's expected to deal with it. Moreover, folk music is something like an old building — maybe it's getting in the way of progress, maybe it ought to be torn down, forgotten, replaced with something more up-to-date. Let's forget it and switch on the radio...

Consequently, whilst federal and provincial grant-awarding agencies can be persuaded to hand out money for maintaining symphony orchestras or subsidizing operas, the folk festival, club, or musician that requests a grant is usually given short shrift or, at best, a token contribution.

In schools, children are taught all about Beethoven or Puccini, but in far too few classes do they hear folk songs as part of their musical curricula. Nor are many children even given opportunity, after the kindergarten level, to sing. If they learn music, it is to enable them to read their parts for band performances. They are not taught to learn songs or music by ear; rather, they are discouraged from doing so, since this is considered to hinder the sight-reading of music. They are not encouraged to write their own songs or to improvise on their instruments: even school jazz performances tend to be formalized, with strict adherence to written parts. Yes, I realize that I'm generalizing and that there are honorable exceptions in some school systems or some individual classes. I am well aware that followers of the Kodaly system, in particular, have been using folk songs regularly in their presentations and that such singers as Brandywine in Alberta and Christine Lindgren in Saskatchewan have been taking traditional folk music into some schools. Yet how regrettably few these exceptions are!

As a consequence of all this, we have a curious situation at present. While the term "folk music" is properly understood, at least in broad terms, by most Canadians, the terms "folk song" and "folk singer" are profoundly misused. Folk music? Why yes, that's the jolly music on accordions we heard backing that Ukrainian dance group. Folk song? Oh, you mean Bruce Cockburn and Gordon Lightfoot....

Yet, of course, these gentlemen and their many male and female equivalents have little indeed to do with folk music. Their material and their style derive directly, not from the popular music of past times, but from the court music. Very often their songs exhibit a considerable degree of erudition. Rarely do they tell a complete story; instead, they tell fragments of a story, recounting the happenings of an hour or a day, the emotions of a moment. It is not the story that is important; rather, it is the singer's thoughts and reactions. Such songs are written for and by people who have both the leisure and the capacity for reflection and self-analysis. They are lineal descendents not of folk songs, but of the compositions of court musicians, of troubadours.

Such singers do have a much larger audience nowadays than their predecessors did a century back, but that does not transform them into folk musicians. Only a few can reach out from the particular (themselves) to the general (us) by telling a story that has wide relevance and interest. (Those few include Connie Kaldor and the late Stan Rogers — but not always, only in some of their songs). Nevertheless, if we can empathise with the singers and their emotions, then we can enjoy their music. Indeed, in all fairness, the songs are often excellent *of their kind* — but, despite the general misapprehension, that kind is *not* folk music!

Well, one might argue, is this not because true folk music has become an "endangered species" in Canada, existing presently only in such iso-

lated refuges as the Newfoundland outports and likely to survive, even there, only if rigorous protective measures are taken? Today, the argument might continue, the few people who do learn folk songs or tunes are no longer doing so in the traditional fashion, from their parents or from the other people among whom they grew up. Instead they are learning the songs or tunes from sources outside their immediate community; aurally, from records or tapes, or visually, from songbooks or sheet music. If the oral tradition is dead, then in a strict sense folk song and folk music must be dead also, vanished like the stage-coach and the prairie schooner. Surely folk music has by now been drowned in the waves of mechanically-reproduced (and sometimes, one suspects, mechanically written!) music that emanate from television and cinema screen, from record-player and ghetto-blaster?

If this is the case, our arguer might ask, then is not the music of Cockburn, Lightfoot, *et al.* the true, lineal descendent of folk music? Does it not speak in the voice of the people of today, as traditional folk music did in past times, and for us all? No, it does not! For the reasons I have stated, it must be regarded as the equivalent of the court music of the past; court music for a larger public, admittedly, but *not* folk music.

Well then, if such musicians are not the present voice of the people of Canada, how about country-and-western music? Surely *that* tells stories enough; surely it is a voice that is heard, not just in rural kitchens but also in those of the city, speaking in simple language and familiar accents to everyone? Was not Wilf Carter, for example, a man of the people who spoke for the people in his songs? Yes, of course he was and of course, at times, he did; but his genre of music, though close indeed to traditional folk music, all too often is just another commercial product, containing a plethora of platitudes and oozing with surplus, saccharine emotion. The overlap with folk music is broad, admittedly; but country-and-western music is only an offshoot from folk music, not its lineal descendant.

Well, that tiresome interlocutor might ask, *does* traditional folk music have any lineal descendants? Yes indeed; not only are Maritime musicians like Jim Payne of Newfoundland producing songs right in the genre, but also there are songs and tunes being written here and there, right across Canada, that are sprouts from the roots of traditional music — roots sometimes rather withered, admittedly, but still capable of producing an abundant new life if properly tended. To select just a few examples that show a diversity of origin and theme, one might list Stan Rogers' "Barratt's Privateers," Leslie Partridge's "Big Jim," Grit Laskin's "Life on the Rolling Sea," Connie Kaldor's "Grandmother's Song," Brandywine's "Gingerbread Man." Bob Bossin's "The Casca and the White Horse Burned Down." and Ean Hay's "The Kettle Valley Line." When one thinks for a while, one can identify many songs that are new and of high quality.

Moreover, we have many good singers in traditional style; not just recent immigrants, like Ian Robb and Margaret Christl, Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat, but also native Canadians like Charlotte Cormier, Phil Thomas, Paddy Tutty, Jonn Wiznuk, Jim Paynes and many more, as well as a positive plethora of excellent musicians on fiddle, guitar, accordion, and a variety of other instruments.

And *is* the oral tradition dead, anyway? Of course it is not! Stand for a while in any schoolyard and you will hear, not only songs and rhymes that have been transmitted from child to child through many generations,

but also new songs and rhymes that the children of today have coined in the old mould but to altered or original designs. Did you learn no songs, no rhymes, from your own parents and grandparents? Whether you did or not, were you never in a group — a sports team, a student gathering, a summer camp or a skiing party — where someone sang a song or recited a rhyme that you'd never seen written down or heard on record, but which you enjoyed and remembered? Some of those rhymes and songs — many children's songs among them! — may be considered too improper for publication in a songbook, even in these liberal days; they may survive only *because* they are transmitted orally; yet they reflect a part of human experience, a facet of life, and most of them are true folk products on any definition.

Okay then, let's agree that the oral tradition is still alive and that good songs are still being written, and good music performed, in traditional folk style. However, if anyone interested in traditional folk song and music had toured the Canadian folk festivals (so-called) of 1985, they would have returned pretty depressed. Yes, they would have heard some spirited folk music, performed most often as an accompaniment to dancing; but it would have been Scottish or Irish, Chilean or Ukrainian, rarely or never Canadian. If they heard any traditional folk songs outside the Maritime Provinces and Quebec, probably it would have been in workshops and not on the main stage. The Winnipeg Festival brought in much outstanding European traditional folksinging talent, but scarcely mentioned them in its advance publicity; nor were its few Canadian traditional performers featured to any degree in pre-Festival advertisements. Yet at least they were there, to be heard by those who sought them out. At many other festivals — big ones like Edmonton, small ones like Redberry Lake in Saskatchewan — only contemporary and country-and-western singers were featured.

Sometimes such musicians include an odd traditional song or instrumental in their performance, from affection or (maybe) a vague sense of guilt; more often they stick to their own songs or those of their contemporaries. Folk festivals with even a 10 per cent traditional music component have become unusual; festivals with 10 per cent of *Canadian* traditional musical content have, alas, become phenomenal. And this, of course, serves not only to confirm audiences in their mistaken view of folk music, but also to render ineffective one of the best available means of exposing Canadians to the pleasures and riches of our musical traditions.

Australia and Canada have histories, if not climates, that are closely comparable. Each has been relatively recently settled, each depends for its income primarily on its natural resources, each has large cities spaced at wide intervals in a relatively empty countryside and nowadays steadily growing larger, while that countryside grows ever emptier. Each has an essentially linear population distribution — in Canada, from west to east, in Australia from southwest to northeast around the sub-continent's southern and eastern peripheries. Each has a population drawn from many lands, but primarily from Europe. Yet it is strange and disturbing that, whilst Australia has a vigorous folk music sub-culture, Canada does not. Most Canadian folksingers know several Australian songs; how many Australians, I wonder, know a single Canadian folksong? Yet we have just as many good native songs as do the Australians!

One factor in this difference may be the puritanical attitude to alcohol

that so long pervaded our country, the prairies in particular. Folk singing flourishes in Australian bars and in that country, as in England and Scotland, most folksong clubs meet in pubs. In much of Canada, singing in bars has long been prohibited, and in some cities and provinces it is not permissible even yet. Currently, Canada has only a few folk-music clubs and, of those few, even fewer are allowed to serve alcoholic drinks. The Rocky Mountain Folk Club in Calgary is a fine example of the excellent atmosphere that good singing and a little alcohol can generate. However, even given favourable local circumstances and bylaws, it takes both effort and good fortune to produce such an atmosphere, after the tradition of singing in bars has been broken for so long.

Nevertheless, the roots of traditional folk music are spread widely in the soil of Canada. Good songs and tunes not only have been, but *are being* performed and written all the way from Newfoundland to the Gulf Islands, from the Niagara Peninsula to the Northwest Territories. Given only a little encouragement — the fertilization of funding, the sunshine of adequate media attention — those roots can sprout again.

A decade or so ago, one man, Alan Mills, was able in a short time to increase popular enthusiasm for folk music a thousandfold by his radio programs telling the story of Canada in song. Was this because he was more actor than singer, with a style more accessible to the uninformed listener than acceptable to the enthusiast? Did he form a vital bridge between our music and an audience unfamiliar with that music? How we need another Alan Mills today — a man or woman who can not only perform the songs in a similarly acceptable style, but also one who can persuade the media into providing adequate exposure — an even harder task!

Failing such an individual, what can we do to help fertilize that new growth? Well, an admirable first step is, of course, to join the Canadian Folk Music Society. Singers or musicians or even interested listeners might consider holding some "sing-around" evenings, in their homes or elsewhere. All that is needed is to gather some musicians together, encourage them to sit in a circle and take turns to sing or play — or even to tell stories or recite, if they are reluctant to sing. Those musicians don't have to be all folk singers or instrumentalists; people who may have never before heard folk music can quickly become enthusiastic about it. And we should also invite the strangers in our midst — the French or English Canadians (according to regions), the new immigrants, and the visitors from abroad. Not only can they enlarge our musical spectrum, but they can cause us to understand and appreciate our own musical heritage more fully.

Then, if the group proves strong and motivated enough, it may take the next step and form a folk song society or club, opening its gatherings to any of the public who wish to come along. It could contact the local radio and television stations, asking them to feature traditional folk music or suggesting that they give bookings to the better local singers and musicians. It might write to the mayor or the relevant provincial minister, seeking sponsorship of and financial support for folk events or urge the local school boards to give Canadian song and music more attention in classes. Since multiculturalism is being emphasized nowadays, there is hope for a positive response. It is also important to write to the organizers of the folk festivals, praising them when Canadian folk music is properly featured, protesting when it is not.

Those who wish to expand our knowledge of our tradition could buy a tape recorder and seek out the older people of the neighbourhood, people who may remember songs, tunes, and tales otherwise forgotten. Doing so, may add to Canada's cultural resources in a fashion for which future generations will be profoundly grateful. This might lead to an application for a supporting grant from some official source to expand the endeavours. Those who enjoy the collecting but don't feel competent or willing to write up the finds, could seek help from some local folklorist. In any case, the tapes should be lodged in some local or provincial archive, so that the discoveries are not lost to posterity.

If we see folk music journals or books in local stores, then we should buy them or urge our friends to do so. The more such items sell, the more the store owner will be encouraged to stock them — and thus, inadvertently, bring them to the attention of non-enthusiasts. If folk singers whom we like are making records or tapes, we should buy those recordings, for our own collection and as gifts, through the local store or through this Society. Both approaches are, for different reasons, equally desirable but, since we'll be fortunate to find *any* traditional-style Canadian folk-song records in an average record store, the Society is likely to prove the more fruitful source.

When we see traditional folk-song performances advertised as taking place in a coffee-house or restaurant, we should make a point of going along, taking some friends and applauding loudly. A meagre, cool-temperature audience is disheartening; a good and enthusiastic one will impress the proprietor and encourage the musicians immensely! If there is a local folk-song club, we should attend it — especially when there is a traditional performer, for it is even harder for such a one to scratch a living from music than it is for the contemporary performers — and the latter do not usually become rich.

We cannot reasonably expect that traditional folk music will ever attain the popular attention, or the earnings, of commercial or country-and-western music, for it is never likely to become "big business." However, there is a real prospect that, if you, me, and the other members of this Society are not content to sit back and wait for others to take action, real progress can be made. If we can demonstrate that our music has even minority support (comparable to that given to, say, opera or ballet) we can bring folk music back into the consciousness of our fellow Canadians. Not only can we keep our music from extinction, but also we can bring it to a new and greater fruition.

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NOTES

1. A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967).
2. W. A. S. Sarjeant, "Folk Music in the Canadian Prairies," *Folk Review*, 5:7(1967):4-7; rpt. *Canada Folk Bulletin*, 1:5(1978):4.

Resumé: W.A.S. Sarjeant participait souvent aux clubs folkloriques en Angleterre, son pays d'origine, et était fort déçu, lors de son arrive au Canada, par l'absence de ce genre de club. Son article traite de ses propres idées sur la musique folklorique, genre que l'on entend très peu au Canada, à son avis. L'article propose plusieurs stratégies pour le redressement de cette situation.