

ENGLISH LANGUAGE FOLK MUSIC IN ALBERTA

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Although numerous studies have been carried out concerning ethnic folk music in Alberta, it has not been until recently that any effort has been made to collect English-language folk songs from the province. The relative paucity of titles collected to date and the lack of collecting in itself may be indicative of Alberta's social history. While I have been limited in time, available resources, and indeed, by the lack of previous research in the area and applicable methodologies, I will attempt to outline the historical conditions which have made difficult the establishment of a unique Anglo folk-music tradition in Alberta. I am not attempting to deny the possibility of forthcoming material, but rather provide a likely explanation through salient trends from Alberta's past that would indicate why this material is scarce. I have no solid conclusions to offer, as much of the material is speculative. I can only hope to provide a jumping-off point for further research in an area that is mostly untouched.

The collection and analysis of native English-language folk music in Alberta would prove valuable in the field of social history. The theoretical framework of past methodologies could lend insight into the various anthropological, behavioral, and historical aspects of Alberta's past. Folklore, in its broad context, has been described as "that part of any culture that tends to balance traditional stability against dynamic change."¹ The study of music in its cultural context not only provides an overview of that culture, but also the method in which the individual and the community deals with the alterations of its social structure and institutions.² The method by which folk songs are transmitted, altered, practiced, or ignored remains the subtle index it has always been of group stress and the historical resolutions of group problems.³ However, working on the premise that the scarcity of this material is not due to a lack of collecting, but is rather a reflection on or a statement of the nature of Alberta society, its absence then becomes significant in relation to the above considerations of the social function of folk music.

The methods of studying culture and cultural values as they bear upon music are, unfortunately, poorly developed.⁴ Until the publication in 1910 of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in the United States, folklorists assumed that traditional ballad singing was practically dead in England and non-existent in the New World.⁵ Canada has carried over the British characteristic of denying the existence of their own cultural folkways (an idea I will develop later), and have only recently turned from the ethnic cultures within the Canadian social milieu to an examination of their own

traditions. Considerations for research in the field of folk music on the whole are viable areas for further study as they would relate to the development of society in Alberta. These may include:

- a) performance contexts peculiar to the community; their requirements of and effects on the musical repertoire;
- b) modes of transmission in relation to taught, inherited, and "picked up" categories;
- c) the absence of standard-setting music professionals in the community;
- d) the effect of an alien musical environment (or as it would apply here, the role of the dominant culture);
- e) as a cultural cohesive for the community;
- f) as an outlet for personal and group nostalgia;
- g) as a medium of expression for the community's cultural identity.⁶

It would also seem necessary to make a distinction between classes, and to consider the difference between rural and urban communities, and their significance in establishing and perpetuating folk music. Likewise, these are important considerations in terms of how these respective groups would identify themselves politically and economically through folk music as opposed to these other classifications.

The claim that Alberta has a scant Anglo folk-music tradition comes firstly from the lack of prominently evident material currently existing, and also from an informal paper by Dr. Tim Rogers of the Psychology Department at the University of Calgary.⁷ His efforts have uncovered 296 songs that may be said to be native to southern Alberta. He has classified them, sometimes arbitrarily, into the following categories: Songs of Settlement, The Cowboy, Historical Documents, Of the Land, and Love and Traditional Themes. Although this collection represents only accumulated published material, this is less than the collected number of holdings in the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies for the Doukhobor, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish-Canadian cultural groups.⁸ Likewise, in Helen Creighton's collection, *Songs from Southern New Brunswick*, she was able to collect 135 songs from one man alone. Therefore, it would seem that although Anglo-Albertans compose the largest segment of society, the collected material is not representative of that majority proportion of the population.

Rogers' collection in itself presents a problem of geographical definition. Because Alberta shares geographical features with both British Columbia and the other prairie provinces, as well as similar economic influences, some of these songs may have been sung in Alberta, but they are not necessarily intrinsic to Alberta's political boundaries. However, this presents a problem only in attempting to define the music as a reflection of history strictly in terms of Alberta as a definitive geographical entity.

The fact that Alberta's English-speaking population has been

predominantly British or British Ontarian stock introduces a factor which is a prevalent theme in Canadian society, that is, Anglo superiority. During the time in which the British Empire was at its peak, those of British background laboured under the illusion that theirs was the most highly advanced and superior culture in existence. The Industrial Revolution combined with the fact of her colonial empires epitomized the notion of Anglo-superiority. Consequently, upper- and middle-class Britons became alienated from their folk roots as they increasingly appeared to be the remnants of a less progressive or outdated time.⁹ British immigrants to Canada not only carried with them but propagated this belief system both officially and unofficially. In a country that was soon to be composed of a large multi-ethnic population, it became necessary to exemplify this Social Darwinistic notion through the denial of any traits or customs which might be identified with the "less progressive" ethnic elements flooding into the country. Folk material came to be the "quaint, charming, and decorative, but ultimately unimportant possessions of the strange, foreign, or 'backward' people in their midst."¹⁰ This attitude is readily observable in Canada today where the term "ethnic" automatically precludes anyone who has English as a mother tongue.

Given this attitude, it is not likely that the ethnic-British, or Ontarian population would be largely predisposed to propagate in Alberta an older British folk-music tradition. When compared to other areas in Canada which are more renowned for their rich musical culture, Quebec and the Maritimes for example, we find that they have drawn substantially from a wealth of material from the European homeland.

If we accept this premise argued by Carole Henderson, it then follows that the nature of the initial settlement process would not lend itself to the development of a strong Anglo folk culture. The latter part of the nineteenth century in Alberta saw economic development dominated by the ranching industry. The extension of the Ontario elite through both large and land-holders and the RCMP (who by definition are both of the upper class and of British background, and therefore comprise the two elements that Henderson argued would deny the elements of folk tradition) would give Alberta a substantial proportion of the population not inclined to the practice or propagation of folk music. However, once again, this is not to say that this fact entirely excludes the possibility of folk music activity; for it was surely this period that gave rise to the cowboy, ranching, and mounted police content of collected material. Indeed, if Alberta has one activity or lifestyle which is almost unique in Canada, it is that of the cowboy. In his collection, Rogers has precluded most material which has obvious American roots, which leaves 35 percent of this material representative of this element.

There is no doubt, however, that a music tradition did exist to

some extent from the period of initial settlement to approximately the 1940s. Both the urban centres and rural settlements used music as a tool for community socializing. Rural school-house dances are well documented in Western Canadian literature. "No gathering was complete without a sing-song, or some instrumental contributions — mouth organ, parlor organ, piano, or flute — that added to the joy of life.¹¹ But Alberta was the outer fringe of the frontier. Not only was its musical tradition comparatively late in starting, but it was relatively short lived. The ideal environment in which a musical culture might establish itself in Alberta, let alone one that was unique to the province, flourished only briefly. The time span of perhaps sixty years is a relatively scant allowance for development of this nature, especially considering that comparative folk-music cultures were developed, molded, and passed down by centuries of generations. Seventy percent of the titles Rogers collected have associated authors which would indicate the relative newness of the material.

While it is one thing to acknowledge the presence of music as a method of social intercourse during this period, an examination of the content would also be necessary to ascertain the amount of native Anglo-Albertan material. No doubt the advent of radio and American popular music had a profound effect on the content. Also the nature of block settlement in Alberta, i.e., the tendency towards block or group settlement of like nationalities, would lead one to believe that a musical culture would remain relatively pure. However, the existence of several folk songs which carry a "foreign" melody to accompany English lyrics might challenge this idea.

Given that a viable musical tradition was practiced as a form of entertainment, it is necessary to speculate on the probable causes of its decline. It has been suggested that the advent of radio is the most likely culprit for the demise of a unique musical culture — although there has been some evidence that folk culture may indeed survive the over-powering effect of the media.¹² I think that this is valid only inasmuch as it would be reflected in the content of the music. I do not believe that the popularity of the radio *per se* affected this form of social interaction, for community dances were a common occurrence at least until the end of the Depression. Indeed, it is likely that this form of makeshift entertainment prospered in hard times, especially when a lack of income made more expensive social distractions less attainable. I think rather that one must look to the easier accessibility to transportation through the automobile, as well as a surplus of individual income which would allow the rural community to pursue a wider variety of pastimes in larger urban centres, as a prime factor in the decline of rural cultural events.¹³

The probable effect of technology on the decline of rural social activity was also compounded by the effect of rural depopulation. In 1946, 56 percent of the population was considered rural, yet by

1966, 69 percent of Albertans were living in urban centres. The exodus from the land combined once again with the availability of transportation served to consolidate educational services so that the one-room school house, the centre of community activity, fell into disuse.¹⁴ Thus, as the environment decayed in which native folk music might have been propagated, so would that event inhibit further musical development.

Canada on the whole has a history of a lack of "tradition carriers," i.e., those people, particularly adults, who preserve and teach the culture both to immigrants and newborn children.¹⁵ This idea, modified in terms of a uniquely prairie, or moreover, a distinct Alberta folk culture, assumes more particular proportions. "The recent arrival of a fairly large immigrant population undoubtedly contributed to the unsettled nature of Alberta society. Alberta had a higher proportion of foreign-born and alien residents than any other province, as well as the highest proportion of recently arrived immigrants."¹⁶ In the five-year period from 1921 to 1925 approximately 85,000 people emigrated from Alberta,¹⁷ and in 1931 almost 60 percent of Alberta's population had been born outside the province.¹⁸ Here exists the problem of consolidating the English-language folk-music culture as such, and having a stable enough continuity of generations within the same approximate location where it might survive.

In summary, the establishment of a strong viable Anglo folk culture in Alberta has been hindered or stunted by three major factors: the attitude of Anglo-superiority and the reluctance of Britons to identify with folk culture; a lack of tradition-carriers due to the instability of the population through immigration, emigration, and rural depopulation; and the influence of prosperity and technology on the fledgling folk-music culture.

The study of English-language folk music in Alberta is well deserving of further research. Relatively little collecting in the area, especially in terms of field work, hinders the possibility of any comprehensive analysis within the music itself. But the fact that this facet of culture has been relatively ignored may also be indicative of particular social aspects of Alberta. If folk music is a measure of traditional stability against dynamic change, perhaps it would be valid to argue that the scarcity of this material indicates that Alberta has not had a strong element of traditional stability, or at least that which may be a measure of dynamic change.

I have no doubt that the premises that I have put forward as possible explanations could be effectively expanded, criticized, or invalidated. I have attempted to outline certain prominent facets or trends which support the meagre existence of a unique musical tradition in Alberta. These historical trends, at this point, remain valid considerations until further exploration in this field can vali-

date the existence of a uniquely Albertan English-language folk music culture.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jan Harold Brunvand, *Folklore: A Study and Research Guide* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 30.
- 2 Roxanne C. Carlisle, "Ethnomusicology in a Multicultural Society," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 4:2 (1974), pp. 97-109.
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 99.
- 4 Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (U.S.: Macmillan, 1964), p. 271.
- 5 Brunvand, p. 18.
- 6 Carlisle, pp. 105-6.
- 7 This is a collection and brief analysis of published material accumulated as an informal pursuit by Rogers.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 9 Carole Henderson, "The Ethnicity Factor in Anglo-Canadian Folkloristics," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 7:2 (1975), p. 18.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Norman J. Kennedy, *The Growth and Development of Music in Calgary (1875-1920)*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1952, p. 3.
- 12 Rogers, p. 3.
- 13 This opinion was expressed in an interview with Merv Hendrickson, a native of rural Saskatchewan, on April 22, 1981.
- 14 This opinion was expressed in an interview with Betty Sittlington, an Alberta school teacher, on April 24, 1981.
- 15 David Bell, Lorne Tepperman, *The Roots of Disunity* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 91.
- 16 Myron Johnson, "The Failure of the CCF in Alberta," *Society and Politics in Alberta* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), p. 89.
- 17 Carle F. Betke, "The United Farmers of Alberta, 1921-1935," *Society and Politics in Alberta* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), p. 23.
- 18 Carlo Caldarola, "The Social Credit in Alberta, 1935-1971," *Society and Politics in Alberta* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), p. 35.

Résumé: *On a remarqué que la musique folklorique anglo-canadienne est relativement rare en Alberta. C.J. Hendrickson souligne ce qu'elle croit être les raisons de cette rareté comme la réticence des anglo-canadiens de s'identifier à une culture traditionnelle; une pénurie d'informateurs valables due à l'instabilité de la population à cause de l'immigration, de l'émigration et du dépeuplement rurale; enfin l'influence de la prospérité et de la technologie sur la culture musicale traditionnelle.*

TROIS DISQUES D'INITIATION AU FOLKLORE QUÉBÉCOIS ET ÉTRANGER

Abstract: *Here Donald Deschênes assisted by Yves Patry and Hélène Larouche-Legault reviews a new record series of French-Canadian music produced by teachers in Montreal's Catholic schools. Designed for use in the classrooms, these fill a great gap for there was previously no satisfactory Canadian material available. The first provides simple songs for primary children, the second dance music for children of nine to twelve; and the third folk songs reflecting Canada's multicultural heritage. The booklets accompanying the records give the music, and the second has direction for the dances.*