

STANLEY COLLINS: A SINGER-SONGWRITER OF SCOTSVILLE, CAPE BRETON*

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As Dr. Edward Ives points out in his article "A Man and His Song: Joe Scott and 'The Plain Golden Band,'" ¹ there is a very real problem for the folklorist who is studying folk creations and the creative process involved. The folklorist is interested not only in what is created, but also in what is accepted into folk tradition; and to study the acceptance and rejection of material, the local context is invaluable. The problem is that most songwriters are dead or not in a condition to be interviewed by the time their songs become part of the tradition. To quote Ives:

. . . and it should be doubly interesting to be able to study people who made up songs that they not only hoped would be sung by their contemporaries but that actually were sung by them. But it takes a certain amount of time for a song to become so established, and given the moribund state of folksong tradition in the Northeast today, I don't think it is likely we will run into many people whose songs have become established in tradition who are still in fit condition to be talked to.²

Stanley Collins, a sixty-eight year old songmaker from Scotsville, Cape Breton, has always encouraged others to sing his songs and today has people singing them as far away as Toronto, Montreal, and Boston. A larger number of people hold collections of his works and even more are familiar with them. His songs have not yet become firmly planted in tradition but they are in the process of being established in it. Hence a folklorist studying Stanley's work has the precious situation where he can collect original compositions, and study their transfer into tradition within the local context. Ultimately this is of importance to the oral historian as well because the community is very involved in deciding what songs are carried into the tradition, and in making their selection they reveal certain aspects of their values and sentiments about community history.

I met Stanley last summer while engaged in a four-month project.³ Living in a village close to Scotsville, I collected and transcribed material from several songwriters. My observations in this paper are based on data collected from Stanley that summer, together with some information gathered inadvertently from the community.

Stanley was born in Quebec in 1912 to a father from Wales and a mother from Little Island Cove, Newfoundland. Before 1917, the family moved to Halifax, and in the Explosion, his father was killed and his mother inflicted with wounds that caused her death three years later. Stanley and his six brothers and sisters were then sent to an orphanage in Truro, Nova Scotia, and a year later, Stanley (aged

nine) was adopted by a family in Scotsville, Cape Breton.

In Scotsville, a small village on Lake Ainslie, Stanley grew up and married a local girl, and together they farmed and raised a family of three boys. While there had been opportunities for him to move away from Scotsville, he chose to stay and has never regretted that decision. Like other men in the village, Stanley supplemented his income with any seasonal work available in the area. The most common of these jobs was cutting Christmas trees in the fall, and for a short period of time there was a bauxite-fluorspar mine nearby where Stanley worked above ground. On one occasion he left Cape Breton and worked four months at a mine in Elliot Lake, Ontario. He, like many of his contemporaries, had been forced to leave for financial reasons but here Stanley differs from the majority in that he left only once and for a relatively short period of time.

Stanley has been involved in music, either passively or actively, all his life. His parents sang and, according to Stanley who remembers them singing around the house, they were good singers. But Stanley remembers only one of their songs and that is a lullaby of his mother's. When he lost his parents he was probably too young to have picked up their songs or perhaps he didn't sing at all. I know very little about this time in his life because it is a delicate subject with him. Hence, I have been left to pick up details only when they have been offered or have fallen naturally in the conversation.

I do know, however, that Stanley was very actively involved in music while living in Scotsville. He participated in local *ceilidhs* where songs in both English and Gaelic were sung, Gaelic milling frolics, and the favourite pastime of singing and exchanging songs with friends. In 1933 at the age of twenty-one, Stanley started to compose. He also started to sing his own songs and gradually the traditional songs he had sung previously (songs like "John Ladner," "Lost Jimmy Whalen," and "Giant MacAskill") were almost exclusively replaced by his own compositions. As Stanley explained to me, 'I couldn't sing the old songs because everyone wanted me to sing my own songs.'⁴

Stanley was the recognized singer-songwriter of Scotsville. His songs came into such demand that a collection was typed and photocopied by a friend so that copies might be distributed to Scotsville residents and former residents, and friends and relatives of each in places as far away as Boston, Montreal, and Toronto. His compositions encompassed a wide gamut of topics. Figuring most prominently were tributes to local and national figures and songs extolling the beauties of Cape Breton. There were also songs about the war, about personal experiences, religious songs, songs that poked fun at friends, and even one song that struck out against the hippies of the sixties who — in Stanley's lyrics — "look more like an ape than a man."

In his songbook, Stanley wrote introductions to each of his

thirty-three songs⁵; and it is here, together with some of his comments, that insight into the difficult area of a composer's aesthetic can be gained. Just what — in Stanley's mind — constitutes a good song? To date, I have discovered three elements that he values highly: a degree of truth, a story or message, and a limited number of "uncommon words." The latter was a writing rule Stanley followed and in conversation with the well-known Cape Breton bard, Walter MacFarlane (now deceased), he discovered it was a criterion used by Mr. MacFarlane as well. It seems significant that both these prolific songwriters kept the same writing principle in mind and perhaps it is a subject worth investigating, first to determine the men's definition of "uncommon words" and then to survey the prevalence of this criterion in the aesthetics of composers and listeners as well.

Stanley's preference for a true song and a song with a story is common among folksingers. Such eminent folklorists as Cecil Sharp and Herbert Halpert have observed the notion in other communities and have encouraged the further investigation of it. Stanley's comment "I like a song that has a story — more than just repeated words — making no sense at all — like you get in those Rock 'n Roll songs today" sounds very similar to those collected by Dr. Halpert and cited in his article "Truth in Folk-Songs — Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude." It is interesting that the remarks most resembling Stanley's were in answer to Halpert's question "Why do you like true songs?"⁶ It appears the concepts of truth, story, and making sense are somehow linked together in the minds of most folksingers.

In Stanley's introduction to the only song in his repertoire that is *not* based on fact, he feels compelled to write, not that the story is fictitious, but rather that the story is "very true to life." This statement harks back to Halpert's article again — to similar comments made by his informants and to Halpert's observation that many folksingers base the validity of a song on its adherence to human experience. Stanley and his colleagues seem to be of the same opinion and hence Stanley's statement to cover his fictitious song.

Some of Stanley's songs (7 percent to be exact) are based on fact but purposely incorporate a lot of fictitious detail. These songs take a local incident or person and fabricate a story around the facts so as to make fun of that incident or person. In his song, "My Neighbour and the Woodpecker," Stanley has his neighbour out in a blizzard shooting at a woodpecker who is pecking holes in his barn. The pecker keeps pecking, the neighbour keeps shooting, and the barn ends up with more holes than ever. Because the songs are written in a lighter vein and about a topic with which the community is well aware of the facts, Stanley feels no embarrassment or need to explain their fictional content. In his own words, "it's anything to make a song."

Thus far we have been talking about a composer and his products. There is, however, another important component of the creative process that should be examined, that is the audience and their reactions to the compositions. To illustrate how the community can influence the writing of a song and reveal its values through the song it selects to sing, let's look at a particularly good example from Stanley's repertoire called "The Inverness Seashore Tragedy."

The Inverness seashore tragedy happened in the summer of 1949. Two boys in for a swim got caught in a strong undertow and drowned. Minutes later villagers flocked to the shore and a human chain was strung out into the water to find the two bodies. Hysteria reigned and another two men drowned; but the desperate search for the now four dead bodies continued until late into the evening when the RCMP finally ordered them to stop. In calmer water the next day, boats from all over the immediate area searched out two of the four bodies; a few days later the third was found; and weeks later the fourth washed up on shore.

Shortly after the drowning, when minds and conversations were preoccupied with the tragedy, Stanley wrote his song. As with all his new compositions, Stanley would have sung it for friends; and they in turn picked it up to sing elsewhere or made copies to show others, or at least perpetuated the process by spreading word that he had written the song. The song was in effect Stanley's contribution to the topic of conversation at the time.

Today the song is still being sung by Stanley and friends and copies are being requested. Many Invernessers are familiar with it, particularly because Stanley's son recently sang it at a local concert. The song, which holds for the community a special memory of an emotional experience, is making its place in local oral tradition.

Another observation here is that the song has lapsed into a memorial status. When the event was still "news," it played an active and topical role, offering comment to conversation at the time; thirty years later it operates on a more passive and historical basis, as a relic of the past, although it is kept alive in an active singing tradition. Within this dual function, there is an interplay between the community, the songwriter's inspiration, and the life expectancy of a song, all of which has important implications and merits further investigation.

When Stanley wrote "The Inverness Seashore Tragedy" he was not necessarily inspired by the event itself but rather by the community reaction to the event. He writes in the first verse: "I'll sing you a ditty (how sad but true) just as it was told to me," which suggests that Stanley wrote the song after he received the information through conversations with other villagers. I know he was not at the event. Because the topic was a popular one at the time, Stanley could be sure his song would be of interest, but this is not to suggest that he wrote it solely for this reason. The topic is a conventional

one — coming, I feel, out of a general community desire to console the bereaved. It is arguable, however, that Stanley was aware of but not inspired by the community conversation. Here another example from Stanley's repertoire sheds some light on the matter.

In 1949 in California a little girl, Kathy Fiscus, fell into a well and died before she could be rescued. Stanley responded with a song and sent it to her parents in California. Initially, I was surprised that he had written about something so far away but then he explained, "everyone was talking about it." The community had heard about it on the radio and had read the story in the newspapers and obviously had been moved by the event.

The important distinction here is that the song was not inspired by a local event but by an event that stimulated local interest. Furthermore 50 per cent of Stanley's songs were inspired by events, most of which would have moved the community in a similar way. During World War II — the event that caused perhaps the greatest (most certainly the longest) emotional stress in the village during Stanley's lifetime — Stanley was in Scotsville and wrote a number of songs: songs commemorating local men killed overseas; a song boosting the morale of the village by elaborating on the popular theme "doing our bit"; and songs condemning Hitler and other enemy leaders. Other songs about events of local interest have already been mentioned: the long-haired hippy song reflects the sentiment of most villagers, and in the many tributes Stanley mourns the loss of an important person together with the community.

That the community influenced what Stanley wrote is certain; to what extent is harder to determine. There were songs, particularly those written about personal experiences, that were written out of a private desire, but they represent a small percentage of his total repertoire and are not the popular ones — a point that will be discussed shortly. The immediate point is that Stanley wrote over half of his songs about events, most of which caused some emotional response from the village; and while the community helped inspire the songs, Stanley wrote them out of feelings he shared with the community.

Because Stanley is in fact one of the community it follows that his songs should reflect the view of that community in which they were created. This is illustrated nicely in "The Inverness Seashore Tragedy" and also points to some of the possible reasons why that song and others have remained popular with the people.

If we look at the facts of the Inverness tragedy available through newspapers and secondary interviews, Stanley's song is accurate but it does miss some of the details. It has all the structural requirements of a traditional disaster ballad as set out by Ives⁷: the invitational opening, the discovery of the body, the aftermath, but in the third of Ives' sections — the description of the accident —

Stanley devotes one verse to the boys' drowning and the five remaining verses to the rescue attempt and the drowning of the two rescuers. He also adds to the conventional structure an unconventional chorus which represents the lament of the local people. In these omissions and additions, Stanley has placed an emphasis on the community involvement in the accident rather than the accident itself.

This was particularly appealing to the community since the song expressed an ideal that the people liked to remember — how they fought long and hard to find the bodies, how two men risked their lives and died in the rescue attempt, and how the people mourned afterwards. All these things created a drama in which the community played a role that it liked to see itself playing. The song immortalized a personally moving experience for them and, since it portrayed the community in a role of which they approved, they picked the song up and held on to it.

“The Inverness Seashore Tragedy” is an example of a local song that was accepted by the community and that is making its way into oral tradition. By studying its acceptance within the local context as Ives suggests, insight is gained into community values and views of local history. The implications for further study are great but before that can happen, the community view of Stanley's songs needs to be investigated extensively. This I intend to explore through interviews with Stanley's fellow villagers and singers of his songs.

FOOTNOTES

*My thanks are extended to Martin Lovelace for his helpful comments and suggestions.

- 1 Edward D. Ives, “A Man and His Song: Joe Scott and ‘The Plain Golden Band’,” in Henry Glassie et al., *Folksongs and Their Makers* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1970), 73–74.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 3 Partially funded by the Beaton (Archives) Institute of the College of Cape Breton, Sydney, Nova Scotia, and the Nova Scotia Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness.
- 4 Comments made by Stanley but not recorded were copied down in my field notes as close to verbatim as possible. Any comments extracted from my field notes and used in this paper are indicated by single quotation marks. Direct quotations from written sources or tapes are enclosed by double quotation marks.
- 5 In addition to the thirty-three songs in his songbook, Stanley has copies of twelve more songs of his own composition and an unknown number of songs that he has since forgotten or lost.
- 6 Herbert Halpert, “Truth in Folksong: Some Observations on the Folksinger's Attitude,” in J. Harrington Cox, *Traditional Ballads from West Virginia*, ed. George Herzog and Herbert Halpert (New York: National Service Bureau, 1939), 19.
- 7 Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 156–60.

Résumé: *Déborah Meeks fait l'étude d'un compositeur de chants du Cap-Breton, âgé de soixante-huit ans, afin de découvrir les facteurs qui déterminent le choix de ses sujets, sa méthode de composition et la manière dont ses chants sont acceptés par la communauté locale.*