

LOVE AND LONESOME SONGS OF THE SKEENA RIVER

ELLEN KARP MOSES

The speakers of the three dialects of Tsimshian, the Coast Tsimshian, the Nishka, and the Gitksan, inhabit the coastal regions and valleys of the Nass and Skeena Rivers in northern British Columbia. While they share many ceremonial practices with other northern coastal tribes, particularly the neighbouring Haida and Tlingit, the language Tsimshian is unrelated to any other in Canada. Archaeologists have dated the Coast Tsimshian in their present locale back some 9,000 years; during their long period of residency in this area, the Tsimshian developed one of the most sophisticated indigenous cultures of the Americas. In their songs, dances, pageantry, and verbal and plastic arts, which reached their fullest expression in the feasts popularly known as potlatches, the Tsimshian clans and lineages celebrated a long history and rich cultural heritage.

My study of Tsimshian songs was based upon some sixty hours of interviews and song recordings made during a field trip in 1977, sponsored by an Urgent Ethnology Grant of the National Museum of Man.¹ In addition, I had access to the tapes and papers made by Marius Barbeau during his eight field trips to the area in the 1920s,² recordings of 35 Coast Tsimshian and Gitksan songs made by Laura Boulton in 1942 for the National Film Board, and smaller collections recorded at the Coast by Viola Garfield in 1932 and in the Gitksan village of Kitwancool by Wilson Duff in 1960.³

Examination of the ethnographic literature, discussions with Tsimshian elders, and analysis of the recorded collections point to an extremely wide spectrum of pre-contact Tsimshian song types. Musical and contextual analysis indicate that the total corpus can be divided into three broad groups, which correspond to chronological stages in Tsimshian historical/cultural development. These groups may be summarized as follows:⁴

1. Ancient songs said to have been given to or created by the clan ancestors during prehistoric migrations and performed (usually at feasts) by a clan elder in an ancient language. These are the most highly valued songs in the repertoire, and can only be performed at prescribed times by prescribed individuals.
2. Old songs usually commissioned by a chief from a professional composer prior to a major feast and performed by the *alixw* or village choir to accompany ceremonial protocol.
3. Newer "love" songs which might have originated in the post-contact period and usually lament the absence of a loved one or describe a lighthearted domestic situation.

Like most musical systems of the Northwest Coast, a fundamental line of distinction may be drawn between ceremonial repertoires (the first and second groups) and non-ceremonial songs (the third group). In the Tsimshian case, the ceremonial songs may be likened to a "classical" musical repertoire. This paper concerns the songs of the third type: popular songs performed outside of the ceremonial context and belonging to the widespread group of sentimental lamentations known variously throughout North America as "love songs" or "lonesome songs."⁵

The Tsimshian refer to these songs by a number of names, depending upon the circumstances under which they were created or the theme of their texts: "goodbye, sweetheart" songs, "hello, sweetheart" songs, Chinook songs, riding or pack-train songs, parting songs, lonesome songs, or *hilin*, merry-making songs, *limx leyadit* or love songs, "complaintes" (after the French), "steamboat'm" songs, homesick songs and so forth. The riding or pack train songs, for example, originated with the Yukon gold rush pack trains, while the "steamboat'm" songs, like the "Crazy Steamboat" song below, lament the absence of lovers away working the Skeena River steamships.⁶

The Steamboat Love Song.

Sung by Abel Oats, Kispiox B.C.
Recorded by Laura Boulton, 1942

Moderato

A-ye-le, a-ye-le, a-ye-le, a-ye-le, a-ye-le, a-

ye-le, a-ye-le a-ya. A-ye-le, a-ye-le, a-

ye-le, a-ya. A-ya, la-a-ay-ye la-ya.

"I want to sit at the top of the mountain so that the crazy steamboat of my heart will carry me around."

Although the Tsimshian consider these songs to be low in musical status (since they fall beyond the realm of the ceremonial context), they are, and presumably have always been, extremely popular.⁷ Women were of particular importance in their creation and transmission. At one time, for example, they sang the songs to each other in the berry-picking fields; although the songs certainly helped the time pass more quickly, singing had a purely practical function as they kept more itinerant pickers from straying too far from ear-shot.

Songs of this type are often associated with the circumstances under which they are created. Mary Johnson, for example, one of the principal singers in the region, responded to a question about how songs were created with reference to a particular composition:

I've seen an elderly man that composed this song. And he went out trapping, he said, and he got two dogs with him, and they were out of food on their way home to the village, and the dogs got nothing to eat. So he sat down to rest, and he heard that other dog howling behind him, and the other one howl before him. Went on ahead, and he just sat in between and he composed this song. He said his heart felt bad, his heart is in half, he didn't know which way to go. . . .⁸

She later referred in a similar vein to the circumstances under which the infamous Simon Gunanoot composed a love/cremation song.⁹

While the professional songmakers were required to adhere to musical and textual standards in preparing songs for ceremonial presentation, the makers of love songs could take inspiration from a wider range of sources. In a letter to the missionary Crosby dated 18 July 1910 a colleague named E. Odlum wrote:

One noted singer was asked how he came to learn to sing before he was taught by the white man. He answered in a manner thus: "I went into the mountains and heard the torrents singing their war songs and I learned to imitate them. I went out into the ocean in my canoe and heard the hissing noise of the wind as it tore the heads off the wild billows, and I tried to do likewise. I walked by the sea, heard the gentle lapping of the quiet water and felt that I could sing a love song. When the birds were mating and chirping their songs of sweetness, my voice would break out in strains of praise. All nature and her children sing, cry, talk, chant and voice the Great Spirit: so I tried to do as they did. I got time from my paddle stroke and from the swinging of the tall trees. . . ."¹⁰

The authorship of the love songs in the present repertoire is ascribed to three sources:

- (i) Traditional lyric songs which, like the European popular ballads, have fallen into the realm of the anonymous.
- (ii) Those said to have been composed communally. It is not unusual, for example, to hear that a particular lyrical song was composed by "the womens" (as Laura Boulton's singer Abel Oaks put it). The berry-picking fields, referred to earlier, were presumably 'fertile grounds' for both the rapid dissemination of these songs, and collective composition. In addition, this situation lends itself easily to "communal recreation" — the adding of verses, changing lines, and so forth.

(iii) Those with known composers.

Since the creation of this material was not restricted to professional songmakers, many individuals took as great a delight in the making as in the singing of them. George Wilson of Kispiox, for example, the composer of "The Owl and the Grouse" (given later), was so fond of songs of this type that he requested that a particularly comfortable gravehouse be built after his demise so that his friends might sing his songs and remember him in luxurious surroundings. (Unfortunately, this gravehouse burnt down in a fire which swept through the cemetery several years ago.)

Generally these songs are performed solo, or occasionally by a group of women, and a drum usually accompanies the vocal performance. Songs which originated with the Carrier often have a duple drumbeat; the Tsimshian songs make use of the so-called "love song" beat, a triple heart beat rhythm. Melodic ranges are often an octave or greater and the songs are performed in a fairly high tessitura. Tsimshian songs tend to have undulating contours and wide intervals in their melodies; the Athabaskan songs descending phrase contours. Delivery is straightforward with few melismatic or ornamental effects. Most songs are strophic with four-part phrases in verse and refrain.

Song texts most often lament the absence of a loved one or describe humorous domestic situations. Most contain alternating stanzas of *semye'e*, or meaningful text, and *tlahandit*, or vocable refrains. Texts are often in English, Tsimshian, Chinook, Carrier, or any combination of the above, as will be shown later.

Musically these songs speak most clearly of cultural contact. The intervals and pitches of the diatonic major triad are most important, melodic rhythms tend to be regular, and songs often make use of a recognizably "white" diatonic scale structure. It has been suggested that many of the songs attempt to approximate a white sense of musicality since they were created by native women in honour of white lovers, who tried to emulate the popular white musical style of the period.¹¹

Native/white contact came relatively late to this region. While Fort Connelly at Bear Lake was built in 1826 and was accessible to the most northerly Gitksan, the first Hudson Bay fort actually situated within Tsimshian territory was constructed at Fort Simpson, on the mouth of the Nass, in 1833. Five years later another fort was built in the interior at Lake Babine and the renowned Coast Tsimshian tribal chieftain Legaic began his fierce monopoly of the Skeena River trade. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, settlers were attracted to the region by the Omenica gold rush, and also by the possibilities of obtaining jobs with the Western Union Telegraph Company and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad. The town of Hazelton was founded in 1867, largely to service the telegraph and railroad

workers, and later became a transfer station for supplies taken from the steamboats which plied the Skeena in the early part of the present century.

The love songs in the present repertoire are of several types and are said to have originated in a variety of ways. Some can be dated, through textual language and textual allusions, back to about 1850. A number of songs, for example (like the hauntingly beautiful "How Many Days,"¹² below, recorded by Barbeau and Boulton, and the popular "Going To Quesnel"¹³ recorded by Barbeau) were brought into the region from the south by natives employed on pack trains heading for the Yukon gold fields. Mrs. Vicky Simms, an early resident of the Hazelton area, described these trains as follows:

Then in the spring — March, the miners headed for the gold grounds. And we'd always accompany them to Two Mile, such a group, and they all carried great poles, you know, for walking, to support them in walking. . . . And we wouldn't see them again till the autumn. They had Indian packers. The Indians were wonderful packers in those days. They carried everything on their backs, the women too, you know. There was an old man, they used to name him 'Chickens'. He carried a stove on his back. He was a little of a shrimp, you know, but Oh such power. . . .¹⁴

Pack Train Love Song: "How Many Days" Sung by Abel Oats, Kispiox, B.C.
Recorded by Laura Beattie, 1942

Lento

1. Ha-niy naw, ha-niy naw, Ha-niy-naw, Ha-niy-may Ha-niy-
 2. How many days, til you come, You come back, my sweet-heart. How many
 naw, ha-niy-naw, ha-niy-naw, ha-niy-may
 days, til you come, you come back, my sweet-heart. Ha-niy
 naw-w-e ha-niy may.

Since these songs, unlike the ceremonial songs, were not restricted to a particular region or privilege-sharing group, they were subject to considerable inter-tribal trade. Another popular group of inter-tribal songs brought into the area are the so-called "Chinook songs" most aptly described by Boas in 1888:

The Indians are at present in the habit of living part of the year in Victoria, Vancouver, or New Westminster, working in various trades: in saw-mills and canneries, on wharves, as sailors, etc. In the fall they go to Puget Sound hop-picking. At these places members of numerous tribes gather, who use Chinook

as a means of communication. They have their own quarter in every city. . . . It is at such feasts in the Indian shanties that songs frequently originate. If they happen to strike the fancy of the listening crowd, they are taken up and after a lapse of a few years known all over the country. These songs convey a better idea of the character and life of the Indians living in the cities of British Columbia than a long description could do. It is a remarkable fact that these ditties, though frequently alluding to a single event, and notwithstanding their insignificance, remain in use for many years. The greater part of those I have collected was composed by women. . . . It is worth remarking that songs in the native language are also conveyed from tribe to tribe. Thus the Tsimshian sing many Haida songs, although they do not understand the meaning of the words, and the same songs are found still farther south. . . .¹⁵

Love songs are immensely popular with the Gitksan's nearest neighbours, the Athabaskan-speaking Carrier, who are pleased to share their songs with their Tsimshian cohorts. Thus, in the Tsimshian love song repertoire, songs in Tsimshian dialects are interspersed among others in Chinook, Carrier, English, and other native tongues. The "Gasoline Boat Love Song", for example, is performed in a mixture of Carrier and English. In it the women express their fears of the dangers facing their men while fishing in gas boats in Lake Moricetown, several miles east of Hazelton.¹⁶

Gasoline Boat Love Song Song by Abel Oats, Kispiox
Recorded by Leona Boulton, 1942

♩ = 160

a) Ay-a hey a -ya hey a -ya-ey (b) a -ya
c) Gas-line boat a -ya hey a -ya-ey

a-ay, ya ya ay ha hey ya hey ay ya hey ya ha.


Other love songs are performed in Tsimshian dialects. These tend to be more sophisticated in textual and musical terms than the others; their texts make effective use of the witticisms, wordplays, and satire that characterize much Tsimshian verbal lore. In the "Owl and the Grouse" love song for example, two lovers (an owl and a grouse, possibly referring to the lovers' clan affiliations) pretend to have a fight so that the elders will not realize that they are continuing their love affair:¹⁷

Listen to the owl, she changes her voice. Listen to the grouse making sounds in the mountains. I am going to bite you in the neck, my love. It's long since we were together and the old

people think it's just a while ago. Look at them kissing, it's because they are drinking wine from the keg. Looks like they pretend to be mad, and I believe it. Pretend that and nobody will know what's going on.

The Owl & The Grouse Sung by Mary Johnson, Kispixok B.C.
Recorded by E. Moses, 1977.

d. = 52

Drum  *o hun qutst qutqun yts wa ha hey. wlet ha sil liks*

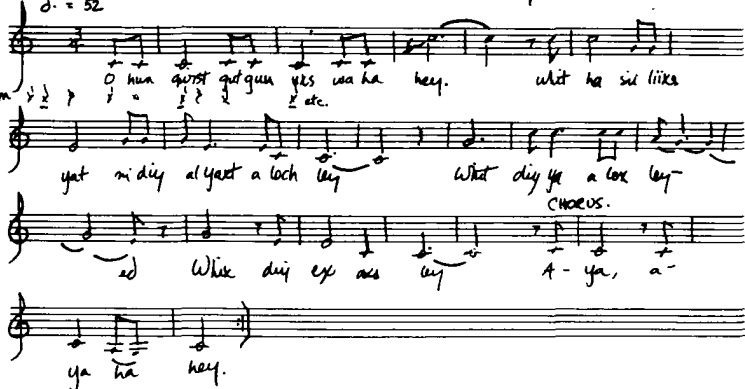
etc.

yat ni diy al yast a loch ley wlet diy ye a lox ley

ed wlik diy ey nes ley A-ya, a-

ya ha hey.

CHORUS.



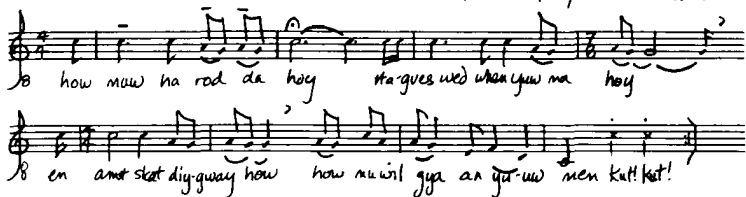
Another favourite is the so-called "Ghost Love Song," or *limx leyadit mluldg*. The text was explained to me as follows: "A man was wandering in a garden. All his children were dead. After he finished digging, he was wandering around, and heard singing. This is the way he sang it. . . . He just heard (the children) singing, but didn't see them. At the end of the song, they began to laugh. . ."18

Ghost Love Song Sung by Abel Oats, Kisqagas.
Recorded by Laura Bolethon

J = 136

to how maw ha rod da hoy ita gues wed wnan yuw na hoy

en amot stat diy-quay how how nuwint yya an yit-uw men kut! kut!



Other songs of this type describe the joys of imbibing, or feelings of longing for an absent loved one to come and share a bottle. These were sung for amusement when people gathered to dance or to enjoy home brew. The song below was recorded by Mary Johnson of Kispixok, who remembered it after hearing it on one of Barbeau's barely intelligible cylinder recordings. The singer demands "that bottle with the home brew in it so my heart will be merry" and asks for "the great big barn where they fix the home brew."19

Drinking Song

Song by Mary Johnson, Kispiox BC.
Recorded by E. Moses, 1977.

Yeh keh tik ha. Chah ha li ha. Yo ig'ing ay kay uy

ha kay ha lay ha-a hi-iy ay hiey

Of all the songs in the vast Tsimshian repertoire, Marius Barbeau loved these best, and described them in the most enthusiastic of terms:

The mountain songs are swaying and ethereal. The voices of the singers, especially the women, are beautifully lofty and lyrical in character. Like the songs of Mongolia and Siberia, they are imbued with color; color and expressiveness of the voice are an essential feature with native singing on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. These songs often rise to a high pitch and vibrate with longing and passion; then they descend from the heights like cascades of sweet and remote sound. . . . Yvette Guilbert, the famous French “disease,” who heard some of our phonograph records, exclaimed, “I feel as if I stood on a mountain top and looked at the deep blue sky!”²⁰

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Tapes deposited in the archives of the Canadian Ethnology Service, National Museums of Canada, 1977.
- 2 Barbeau recorded 57 songs at Hazelton in 1920, 55 at Kitwanga in 1924, 139 at Arrandale on the Nass in 1927, and 4 at Arrandale in 1929. While his published works, particularly *Tsimshian Songs* (American Ethnological Society Publications 18, 1951), regarding the songs were extremely helpful, the cylinder records were, as Barbeau had predicted, affected by a fungus which rendered them virtually inaudible. In Hazelton I played these songs, along with the Boulton collection, for a number of elders and was able to re-record a number of them.
- 3 Copies of Dr. Boulton's tapes are available from the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museums of Canada (Boulton Collection, Tapes 31, 32, and 36-39). Tape transfers of Dr. Garfield's cylinders 14556-8 and 14565-14572 were kindly put at my disposal by the University of Washington Archives and Records Centre (Seattle). Dr. Duff's tape, recorded at Kitwancool, 6 June 1960, was made available by the British Columbia Provincial Museum, with consent from the Kitwancool Band Office.
- 4 See my M.A. thesis (“A Developmental Analysis of Tsimshian Song Types,” York University, 1980) for a more detailed description of these song types. I have not, in the present paper, included the shamanic and secret society repertoires as they belong to separate ceremonial networks.
- 5 See George Herzog, “Special Song Types in North American Indian Music,” *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1935) 23-33.
- 6 Laura Boulton tape 37-561.
- 7 Ironically, their “low status” has contributed to the longevity of these songs. They have been maintained longer in the active repertoire than the ceremonial songs since they were sung by a more widespread group of individuals.
- 8 Moses field notes, book A, page 2c.
- 9 A local hero who has lately gained national notoriety, Gunanoot lived in the bush around Kispiox for 13 years around the turn of the century following the death of a white constable. Later he was acquitted of the murder. I have seen two references to “love/cremation” songs. Gunanoot taught this song to Mary George of Telkwa and said he composed it for his parent's cremation. Barbeau's Song 4 in *Tsimshian Songs* was described as “a cremation song by some, and love song by others. The Tahltans thought it was a Bear Lake song; but others declared that it had been composed by a young Gitksan or Nishka whose wife had died; and that, while her body was cremated, he sang this song, as he composed it, out of a broken heart.” (Barbeau cylinder 59-2-18).

- 10 Rev. Thomas Crosby, *Up and Down the North Pacific Coast by Canoe and Mission Ship* (Toronto: Frederick Clarke Stephenson, 1914), pp. 398-99.
- 11 This might account also for the fact that non-natives generally find these songs the most appealing in the repertoire.
- 12 From Laura Boulton tape 36-557 (Cylinder VII-C14-26). (Also *Tsimshian Songs*, Song 1.)
- 13 *Tsimshian Songs*, Song 2 (Cylinder VII-C10-20).
- 14 "Skeena Country," *Sound Heritage* 5 (1). Victoria: Provincial Archives of B.C., 1976, p. 21.
- 15 Boas, Franz. "Chinook Songs," *Journal of American Folklore*, 1 (1888), pp. 220 and 224.
- 16 Laura Boulton tape 32-52b. Mary George and Mary Johnson sing the song on Moses tape 32, giving it the "love song beat" accompaniment.
- 17 National Museums of Canada tape 75-3872 (Canadian Ethnology Service) and Moses tape 33. Translated by Edith Gawa of Kispiox.
- 18 Barbeau tape 60-6-12. Also on Laura Boulton tape 32-520a.
- 19 Barbeau cylinder 61-20-39; Moses field notes A4e and A9e.
- 20 Marius Barbeau, *Tsimshian Songs* (American Ethnological Society Publications 18, 1951), p. 98.

Résumé: *Ellen Moses décrit les chants Tsimshian non-solennels lesquels sont généralement des lamentations sentimentales ou d'égayantes descriptions de la vie domestique. Ils sont moins formels et moins en vogue que les chants rituels, mais continuent d'être populaire. La plupart datent du dix-neuvième siècle et sont considérablement influencés par la musique des Blancs.*

(continued from p. 30)

Résumé: *Jean Dunsiger décrit comment un immigrant Asiatique du Kenya, — un musicien amateur, — participe à deux formes de festivités pour répondre à un appel de changement dans son milieu. Elle parle également de changements survenus dans les rites traditionnels en raison de modifications apportées dans l'entourage.*

BOOK NOTES

Mercer, Paul. *Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print 1842-1974: A Title and First-Line Index*. St. John's: Memorial University, 1979. 343 pp.

Setting out to list all known published texts of Newfoundland songs, Mr. Mercer found 1500 separate song titles. Particularly valuable are his introduction which surveys the history of the published song and ballad collections and his annotated bibliography of the published sources.

Goldstein, Kenneth S., and Neil V. Rosenberg, eds. *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert: A Festschrift*. St. John's: Memorial University, 1980. 395 pp.

This varied collection of folklore articles contains half a dozen of special interest to Canadian folk music scholars: "A Codroy Valley Milling Frolic" by Margaret Bennet; "Forty Years Later: Maud Karpeles in Newfoundland" by Carole Henderson Carpenter; "Collecting Songs of Nova Scotia Blacks" by Helen Creighton; "Blind MacNair: A Canadian Short Story and Its Sources" by Edith Fowke; "The Ballad of 'John Lander'" by Edward D. Ives; and "The Early American Influence on Narrative Songs in Ireland" by D.K. Wilgus.