

A Special Folk Festival: Calgary's 25th Anniversary

Writing this on a decidedly autumnal day (later on it snowed – on September 8), I'm looking back six weeks to summer-time and the Calgary Folk Festival. It was hot when our daughter Fiona arrived in Athabasca from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, to pick us up for our summer trip out west; it was even hotter once we reached Calgary – in fact, apart from a short rainshower early on Thursday evening, not a drop fell throughout the weekend – and it was hottest of all when we reached our final destination of Nelson, B.C., to attend our youngest daughter Rhiannon's wedding to her friend Luc. It was quite the summer for the Gregorys, but both Folk Festival and wedding were highly pleasurable events.



Rosaleen Gregory at a main stage concert

Calgary, of course, was celebrating its 25th Anniversary. We have been attending for several years now, lured not only by the promise of great music but also by the beautiful site on Prince's Island with the Bow River flowing past and providing welcome rest for the eyes as well as cool waters in which to paddle or even swim when the heat gets to you, not to mention the many trees which provide blessed shade around the edges of the main stage area and at practically all the workshop stages.

This year the Gregorys were privileged to obtain interviews with five performers – Raylene Rankin, Susan Crowe, Steve Coffey, Martyn Joseph, and Allison Russell (of Po' Girl) – so I will give a general overview of the Festival first and then focus in more detail on these five.

First I will get a few critical remarks off my chest. To treat basic functions first, I was not the only festival-goer to be heard lamenting the long line-ups at too few Portapotties. Maybe Calgary did not expect the sold-out crowd it actually got. However, time wasted standing in line means less time spent discovering new musical experiences, even if it does sometimes provide some light relief. I recall one occasion, when I was about twelfth in line, overhearing a woman up front confiding to her companion: "No, I never leave it to the last moment". "Really", I thought as I stood, legs inelegantly but I hoped unobtrusively wrapped around each other beneath my sarong, "Really, some people are altogether too virtuous", then, as the full meaning sank in, "You mean, she's holding me up *and she doesn't even need to go?*" Well, enough on that: my argument is simple: more Portapotties = less time spent standing in line = more festival-goer contentment. I rest my case.

My next criticism is also a common one. Musical "bleeding" from one workshop to the next is a problem for all music festivals. I appreciate it is not an easy one to solve but I contend it is important and needs more attention. After watching both Susan Crowe and Martin Simpson gallantly struggling on with their respective concerts while trying, like the rest of us, to ignore the joyous thumpings and blarings emanating from the neighbouring 12-piece band, I feel sure that this issue should be a priority with all music festival organisers. Of course it affects solo artists most, many of whom have written songs with a meaningful message or have a unique interpretation of someone else's composition. And among solo artists it affects most of all those who choose to sing *a cappella*, which goes for many singers of traditional ballads and folksongs. It is no use straining to sing your stories (which is what most traditional ballads are) or pouring your heartfelt emotions into receptive ears if no-one can hear enough of the words for it to make sense. Moreover, it is downright rude – not of the neighbouring band, whose right to play its music is just as legitimate, but of the festival organisers – to subject serious musicians to these tribulations; it almost makes one think that their music is valued less, just because it may not seem such an obvious crowd-pleaser.

And that brings me to my final criticism, which also extends beyond Calgary to all festivals that I have attended over the last 25 years in Alberta. Controversially put, where is the folk music in folk music festivals? More coolly put, why can't we have

more traditional folksongs and narrative ballads from the British Isles? I'm not asking for an exclusive diet of Child ballads and traditional songs (though I bet I wouldn't be the only person to attend such a gathering!), only that there should be a higher percentage than at present, when you can usually count on the fingers of one hand the traditional singers at a folk music festival and perhaps extend to two hands the number of traditional songs performed. This would include, for example, Great Big Sea's performance of traditional sea songs or Sinead O'Connor's haunting *a cappella* rendition of "As She Moved Through the Fair" at the Edmonton Folk Festival a few years back – given that we are agreed that Sinead is not known *primarily* as a traditional singer, although in recent years she has indeed gone back to her roots, with some noteworthy results. Nor am I saying anything about folk festivals outside Alberta, as I have not yet been to any. From my brief visits to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, I suspect strongly that matters are very different there – though I went to no festivals as such, traditional music had an obvious and valued presence in both these provinces, and of course there are good historical reasons for this. I am also prepared to concede that at this year's Calgary festival I personally may have missed some singers who perform traditional songs – Dick Gaughan, for example – because of time spent interviewing performers or, neither of us having a cellphone, trekking back and forth to the media tent to check up on progress in setting interviews up. But this doesn't alter my main thesis.

Without belabouring the issue further, let me say that I've never been to a folk festival that I didn't enjoy, and my musical tastes are catholic, but I do not think folk music festivals should be allowed to call themselves such if they don't increase the percentage of traditional music of British origin, including narrative ballads, Child or otherwise, that they offer to their (after all) predominantly English-speaking audiences. To the argument that most people are bored by 29-verse *a cappella* ballads, I would say (a) How do you know? They can't be bored if they've never had a chance to hear them, and (b) I am not, I'm sure, the only person to find, for example, the self-indulgent instrumental noodling of certain bands considerably more tedious. We all have different tastes, which is why musical variety is so important, but those of us who have emotional roots in the British Isles and who, on an intellectual level, can unhesitatingly assert the indisputable right of traditional British folksongs and ballads to be called "folk music", have for too long been short-changed. Calgary, why not be the first to lead the way?

After the brickbats, the bouquets. To return briefly to bodily needs, a big round of applause for the ethnic and other food outlets, whose tempting aromas lured us away from our own picnic lunches to sample their offerings. This year we enjoyed generous vegan burritos from the Veggie Café and delicious green onion patties from Joy's Caribbean Foods, but we could have sampled from more than a dozen others.

Also many thanks to the friendly people at the media tent, who set up for us what turned out to be five very rewarding performer interviews and always seemed, despite the heat and the inherent difficulties of their job (all those artistic egos!) to be unflappable, efficient, and actually enjoying themselves.

And finally, thank you to the festival organisers who provided us with so much musical pleasure, from which I will now select some highlights that I thought worthy of noting at the time.

Thursday evening was dominated for me by the Warsaw Village Band, six musicians whose energetic repertoire combines traditional Polish folk music with modern instrumentation, using violins, dulcimers, cellos, hurdy-gurdys and drums. It included some exciting traditional mountain singing known as "bialy glos", shrill, loud, clear vocalising capable of being heard over distances. No argument that these people were performing traditional music, at least part of the time, but some of their impact is probably lost to those whose Polish is not up to snuff. We were sorry to arrive just too late for the first band on, Fiamma Fumana, a quartet from the Romagna in Italy, but later on Taj Mahal gave us blues with energy, and crusty, sharp-witted and sharp-tongued "living legend" Stompin' Tom Connors rounded off the evening with his down-to-earth, unsentimental Canadian songs.

Friday evening we were on site in good time, so we did not miss Ruthie Foster's inspiring blend of gospel and blues, followed by Nashville's country-influenced Caitlin Cary, New York's jazz/blues/soul musician Olu Dara, a Scottish band called Shooglenifty whose electronic experimentation left me cold, Southern blues and rock music from the North Mississippi Allstars and, finally, Newfoundland's Great Big Sea, who were successful if predictable showstoppers – great party sound with not a lot of traditional folk left that I could hear, but a few strands did find their way through. Incidentally, we wanted to interview at least one of the members of Great Big Sea, but the media tent told us they don't grant interviews any more, to anyone, it seems. Too famous, I suppose.

As you can see, four out of six of Friday's acts were from south of the border. The MCs for this evening and on Saturday, however, were a duo called Bowser and Blue, from Montreal (and before that, from England, although Blue was raised in North America). Either my age is catching up to me or it's just my English sense of humour, but I really found these guys very funny (whereas much Canadian humour, even after 34 years in this country, leaves me still waiting for the joke). Bowser and Blue have something of Monty Python in them, and you can't go wrong with that.

Saturday morning saw us attending the United Kingdom? Workshop featuring Andy White from Northern Ireland, Dick Gaughan from Scotland, Thea Gilmore from England (an exciting new talent), and Martyn Joseph from Wales. Fine songs from all, especially Martyn Joseph's tough "Working Mother" (about a prostitute who tries to keep knowledge of how she earns a wage from her two young sons), and tender "Cardiff Bay", a song of love to his own young son. Dick Gaughan sang an interesting (traditional?) (18th century?) song advocating peace between English and Scots – the title of which I did not catch, but it may have been "Both Sides the Tweed".

We took in three excellent concerts during the day on Saturday. First, Martin Simpson, whose guitar wizardry never ceases to arouse awe and despair in lesser guitarists such as ourselves. Martin gave a splendid performance, including some tracks from his recent CD, *Righteousness and Humidity*: his renditions included Blind Willie Johnson's "I Just Can't Keep from Cryin' Sometimes", "The Devil is Partial to the South" (Burwell), "John Hardy", "Love Never Dies" (about an encounter with a former guitarplayer at an Arkansas truck-stop), and two Bob Dylan classics, "Boots of Spanish Leather" and a blistering performance of "Masters of War", inspired by the recent publication of the U.K. Hutton Report, which concluded that "no-one is to blame" for faulty intelligence leading to England joining the Iraq war.

Lunch-time brought us the Rankin Sisters' main stage concert, from which I remember in particular a wedding song "Heel to Heel and Toe to Toe" and Raylene Rankin's beautiful performance of "In the Faces of Our Children (We Rise Again)". Later on Saturday, after we had had a chance to interview Raylene, we heard her and her sisters Cookie and Heather again at a workshop with Spirit of the West, Tony McManus and Martyn Joseph, where they performed an *a cappella* Gaelic milling song in harmony.



Susan Crowe

Susan Crowe also gave a concert on Saturday. I did not know Susan's work before, but the discovery of this very courteous and professional singer-songwriter's well-crafted, structured, quiet but deep little songs was for me one of the highlights of the festival. In her concert she included several of the songs from her 2003 CD *Book of Days* (reviewed by Fiona Gregory in a recent issue of this magazine), including the courageous and humorous "Fell Back Up (Again)", "(The Sun and Stars Don't Shine Like) Love's Pure Gold", the gentle lullaby "Same Old Moon", and one of her very best songs, "She Said No", which evokes the end of a relationship where one partner wants to continue and the other is in denial – denial of the future and attempted denial of the past (or if you look at it the other way, it is the first person who is in denial, refusing to accept the end of the affair – there's always a multitude of layers in Susan Crowe's songs). More on Susan, as on Raylene, later – let's move on to the Saturday main stage evening concert, where we unfortunately missed Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir because we were interviewing Susan Crowe at the other end of the festival site – a pity, but I've heard them many times before and know what a great, invigorating show they would have put on.

Linda Tillery was followed by bluegrass/country/gospel singer from Missouri, Rhonda Vincent, and her group The Rage, Mexican Los de Abajo's energetic Afro-Latin music, bluegrass "living legend" Earl Scruggs, Vancouver's Spirit of the West (as with Great Big Sea the night before, this was energetic, multi-instrumental dancing music without much of the traditional Celtic folk influence left), and, finally, Michael Franti and Spearhead – hip hop in the cause of social justice. Well, I said my musical tastes were catholic and I have to admit that although I didn't particularly take to Michael Franti and his group at last year's Festival, this year I was quite won over by

this charismatic, inspirational purveyor of political awareness. Clearly the audience felt the same as more and more rose to their feet and stayed there, swaying and clapping through a long set which didn't seem long at all. Well, I guess I know now how people feel at revivalist meetings. Joking apart, Franti's message is articulate and to the point, and if he can get more young people socially and politically aware, tuned in to compassion rather than greed and acting accordingly, he gets this sister's vote any day. We went home through the Calgary streets chanting "All the freaky people make the beauty of the world". Amen to that.

Much of Sunday we were kept busy interviewing, but we made it to a morning workshop featuring Po' Girl (Allison Russell, Trish Klein (formerly of Be Good Tanyas) and Diona Davies), The Mighty Popo and Scott Merritt, which was rendered memorable for me by Po' Girl's brilliant rendition of Leonard Cohen's French Resistance song (written, actually, by Anna Marley), "Le Partisan". Allison Russell's thrilling voice dominated this dynamic, hard-driving version, sung alternately in English and French and backed up by Trish Klein's vocals, violin, guitar and bongo drums. The song, for anyone who doesn't know it, tells of an old woman who hides a Resistance worker at her farmhouse in occupied France and dies at the hands of German soldiers rather than reveal the fugitive's whereabouts. It also tells of courage, iron determination, and unquenchable love of freedom – it was one of Leonard Cohen's best performances and Po' Girl certainly did justice to it.



Steve Coffey and the Lokels

For a change of pace we took in the workshop concert given by Steve Coffey and the Lokels. This Calgary-based, five-man band led by singer-songwriter Steve Coffey (of whom more later) play kitchen table, prairie-inspired music which Steve himself refers to as "Country Grunge". Banjo, harmonica, electric and acoustic guitars, mandolin, bouzouki, accordion and drums back up wry little songs and evocations of western Canadian life mostly

penned by Steve. At the workshop concert he performed seven songs off his latest CD *32 below Sessions*, of which I remember best the Dylanesque "Cottonwood Road", Steve's mother Lorraine Thomson's old-timey number "Steel Guitar Waltz", "Fondly Remembered", an account of a trip back from Regina in a blizzard, and "Raising Grace", a song written for Steve's teenage daughter.

In the afternoon we did get to Po' Girl's workshop concert, which provided more excellent performances by this very talented young trio of women. Standouts were Allison's song "Corner Talk", about homeless Vancouver street women whose deaths were not discovered until six years later, the traditional "I feel like I ain't got no friends", "Sweet Child" ("Sweet child, sweet child, No more shall you weep, child, No more shall you cry"), a tender lullaby revealing that Allison is a great whistler as well as an awesome singer, "A Road Less Travelled", and "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" However, this concert, like the morning workshop, had one performance that stood out from the rest, a song written by Allison Russell after she'd finished reading Billie Holiday's autobiography. I think it was called "What Sad Old Song?" but an old friend in the audience caught sight of me and came up to say "Hi", which prevented me hearing the introduction. I came back to consciousness when Allison was already in full swing and my very first thought was of Billie Holiday, evoked by the dynamic way in which Allison was using her own expressive voice. This comparison is a huge compliment to pay a young woman still in her twenties, but my hunch is that Allison Russell is a performer to watch. Billie Holiday is clearly one of her primary musical influences, she is learning fast, and she has, to my mind, depth of character as well as technical ability.

Sunday evening's main stage concert began with England's Thea Gilmore's hard-hitting, sharp-edged songs delivered in a strong, warm voice. I suspect Thea was a discovery for a number of this year's festival-goers, and I hope we shall hear more from her. Colorado's blues-singing Corey Harris followed, then Youssou n' Dour and the Super-Etoile de Dakar loosed Senegal's always electrifying African band and lead singer on an appreciative audience. True to habit, Calgary provides a rip-roaring finale (Michael Franti) on Saturday night when late festival roisterers can do less damage to Calgarians already retired to bed when the show closes; on Sunday the finale is deliberately kept low-key in the knowledge that most people will have to go back to work on Monday. So our four days (well, two days and four evenings) of sun-drenched musical experiences wound gently

down through Lucinda Williams' ("Car Wheels on a Gravel Road") country-tinged songs of love and loss to Sunday's final performer, James Keelaghan. Keelaghan is now a highly professional singer-songwriter with many serious, meaningful, evocative and well-crafted songs at his back. His lyrics are history made contemporary, not just a calmer-downer for people to go home quietly after, but the counterpoint to Michael Franti's emotional impact, reminding us that to make the changes that matter you need intelligence as well as passion, reliable information as well as slogans.

Interviews

We originally intended to structure our interviews around the influence of traditional music on the respective performers, but this rather narrow focus expanded to include influences of whatever kind our interviewees chose to mention. Which is fine, because it's always interesting to hear what sources of inspiration other people have found. So here, just in the order in which we interviewed them, are five of Calgary 2004's performers.

Raylene Rankin

Raylene Rankin needs no introduction to Canadian aficionados of folk music. As the Festival programme points out, "Raylene, Heather and Cookie Rankin and brothers Jimmy and John Morris Rankin formed the Rankin Family band in 1989. Since that time, the group has sold over two million records and earned five Junos, as well as numerous East Coast and Canadian Country Music Awards". The death of John Morris Rankin in 2000 put an end to the Rankin Family band as such, and since then the sisters have pursued separate paths, coming together again on occasion to work their musical magic at festivals and other venues.

Raylene spoke to us of the natural devolution of folk music in families such as the one she grew up in in Cape Breton, performing at weddings, parties and dances. When David mentioned Helen Creighton, Raylene recalled being invited at the age of fifteen to sing on the soundtrack to a film called *Song of Seasons*, directed by Grant Crabtree. The song she sang was chosen for her by Crabtree from the Helen Creighton *Songbook of Gaelic Songs*. Later on, Creighton's book would serve as a source for persons seeking the "proper version" of a particular Gaelic song.

Raylene is not herself a natural Gaelic speaker; she worked with Effie Rankin from South Uist, who is, to obtain the correct pronunciation of Gaelic words and phrases, and found the songs she went on to sing on tapes or passed on through song-swapping sessions at parties. According to Raylene, there are only about five hundred Gaelic speakers living in Nova Scotia today, and the "big song" tradition of Gaelic ballads is not surviving well. Only in isolated pockets such as on Christmas Island at the southern end of Great Bras d'Or is Gaelic still sung and milling frolics still held.

Susan Crowe

Susan Crowe is also from Nova Scotia – born in Halifax, with a mother from Shelburne County on the south shore and a father from Picton on the north shore. After growing up in the Cow Bay area of Nova Scotia she spent many years in Toronto and Vancouver before returning to Halifax. Susan's mother loved the old country tradition epitomised by Hank Williams; her father sang English and North American folksongs and, as in Raylene's family, there was music round the kitchen table and at social gatherings. Susan herself learned piano, started writing songs at the age of eleven and began performing in Halifax coffee-houses at the age of nineteen after hearing Joni Mitchell four years earlier. Though she has returned to live in Halifax, Susan warns against romanticising a city which has its share of poverty and alcoholism and, in her words, "was built by and on war" – and yet she clearly loves both the city and its residents.

Susan Crowe's acknowledged influences and interests are wide-ranging, not a surprise from this elusive, deceptively straightforward singer-songwriter whose songs make me think of Margaret Atwood at her best – layers of perception, relationships evoked rather than analysed with courage, humour, honesty and a constant awareness both of their fragility and of human resilience and endurance. So I was not surprised to find Susan listing her current reading matter as the *Dialogues* of Plato, a lot of non-fiction, Swift's *Essays*, books about bee-keeping, books with titles such as *Soul of the White Ant*, and *Sailors, Slackers, Pigs' Eyes*, Moravian history, and Beryl Martin's *West of the Night*, nor to hear her say that she is thinking of going back to school sometime to study psychology. At one point in our interview Susan said she has great faith in human curiosity, and it is clear that her own mind is nothing if not inquiring.

One influence she mentioned constantly is the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose emotional

concentration she praised, quoting James Merrill's appraisal of Bishop as having done a "lifelong impersonation of an ordinary woman" while being, obviously, nothing of the kind. Was this the longing of the exceptional person to be invisible, to melt into the crowd; or, perhaps, the fear that no-one will take you seriously unless you appear to be "normal"? Susan is currently working on a Life of Elizabeth Bishop, not for a book, but for a one-and-a-half hour performance piece with the Halifax Aeolian Women's Choir, to take place at Pier 21 in that city. Music to correspond with the different places Bishop lived – Nova Scotia, New England, Key West, Brazil, Seattle, finally New England again – will be chosen by Susan and interspersed with passages spoken by her. Hopefully there will be a recording of this event.

I feel quite certain that I shall continue to follow Susan Crowe's career and listen to her songs, which rarely yield up their full message on one hearing. Oh yes, and she has a low, smoky voice like melting toffee, her songs, like herself, give the impression of total integrity, and she gives interviews with a rare courtesy and patience – unless she was actually enjoying herself as much as we were. I hope so, as I also hope that a woman who states "one's work is more important than one's career" will always go on writing.

Steve Coffey

Steve Coffey was born in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, moved to Winnipeg, then, when his parents divorced, came with his mother to Innisfail, Alberta. Musical influences began in his early days – his father did session work with Hank Snow and played steel guitar with the K-Z Rhythm Wranglers, while his mother, Lorraine Thomson, continues to write old-timey songs which appear from time to time on Steve's CDs. However, while his father's musical idols were Jimmie Rodgers and Wilf Carter, Steve himself preferred the Man in Black, taught himself to play guitar and wrote his first song at age fourteen.

Steve Coffey is a painter as well as a singer-songwriter and musician – in fact, one of his landscape paintings is on the cover of his 2002 CD, *East of East Coulee*. He took an M.A. in Sculpture and Fine Arts from the University of Regina and has been a landscape painter for fourteen years, working currently on commissions from galleries in Edmonton, Calgary and Waterton. He finds an interplay between his painting and his song-writing, using metaphors in his songs that derive from pictures and photos he has already created.



Steve Coffey

Of musical influences Steve rates Johnny Cash the foremost, but acknowledges debts also to Merle Haggard, Leonard Cohen, Cat Stevens, Patsy Cline and the Dylan of *Slow Train Coming* and *Desire* (his all-time favourite album). Steve calls his music "Country Grunge" and pays homage to the old country sound, finding the best musicians he could for the *East of East Coulee* album and recording live to tape in a two-day session: "That's the way to get the real music". By the way, the rest of the band, all of whom join in on vocals, are currently Lance Loree (pedal steel, dobro, electric guitar, bass), Stu Mitchell (drums, bass), Dave Bauer (mandolin, bouzouki, accordion, banjo), Matt Hearne (banjo), Russ Baker (electric and baritone guitars, brush box, bass), and Steve Relf (acoustic guitar), while Steve Coffey plays acoustic guitar and harmonica as well as singing.

Steve's other source of inspiration, of course, is the prairies themselves. Living at different times in three different prairie provinces has imprinted the history and the feel of prairie life on himself and his music – wildflowers, trains, farms, mining communities – they all turn up in his songs. Though family life is very important to him – all the band members, including Steve, had children attending the Festival at the time of our interview – he has started doing some touring, solo gigs, duos and trios, and had just appeared with the Lokels at South Country Fair at Fort Macleod. Now Steve is based in Calgary we couldn't help thinking he and John Leeder, whose fine debut album *Fresh Forest Breeze* was reviewed in this magazine when it came out, might have much

in common. We couldn't remember John's phone number to give him, but we understand these two live within a few blocks of each other, so we told Steve John would be in the Calgary phonebook and left it at that!

Martyn Joseph

You remember Davies? He died, you know,
With his face to the wall, as the manner is
Of the poor peasant in his stone croft
On the Welsh hills. I recall the room
Under the slates, and the smirched snow
Of the wide bed in which he lay,
Lonely as an ewe that is sick to lamb
In the hard weather of mid-March.
I remember also the trapped wind
Tearing the curtains, and the wild light's
Frequent hysteria upon the floor,
The bare floor without a rug
Or mat to soften the loud tread
Of neighbours crossing the uneasy boards
To peer at Davies with gruff words
Of meaningless comfort, before they turned
Heartless away from the stale smell
Of death in league with those dank walls.

R. S. Thomas, "Death of a Peasant"

Martyn Joseph describes his childhood in Cardiff, Wales as "comfortable"; as a teenager he belonged to a Baptist youth group, and though he started to play guitar at age ten (the age at which he also started composing songs) and performed in local schools and coffee-shops, his early ambition was to become a professional golfer. It was only after he became a father that he read Alexander Cordell's *Rape of the Fair Country* and was radicalized by Cordell's unsentimental evocation of Wales' troubled industrial and rural past. Since that he has continued to admire this writer's unromanticized view of Welsh history while adding to his literary influences the works of Steinbeck – especially *East of Eden* – and Dylan Thomas, whom it is hard to ignore if you are Welsh. Cordell's influence is felt in Martyn's "Dic Penderyn", a folk-style ballad about the first Welsh working-class martyr, hanged in 1831 after being falsely accused of wounding a soldier; though the soldier himself declared at trial that Dic was not the man who wounded him, a scapegoat was needed "to keep the workers in their place" and discourage further Chartist uprisings in Wales. Martyn's delicate balance between the political and the personal is apparent in the song's focus on Penderyn's wife, who begs the crowd at the hanging "Lift me up, oh lift me, boys, So I can see the one I love".



Martyn Joseph

Martyn Joseph's list of musical influences includes Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie, Paul Robeson, Led Zeppelin, Paul Simon, John Denver, Bruce Cockburn, Leonard Cohen, and, especially, Bruce Springsteen (whose "Jungleland" and "Ghost of Tom Joad" he admires) as well as Welsh traditional music, which he is currently in the process of rediscovering. Some of these influences can be traced in Martyn's work without obscuring his own unique voice and the stories he tells: of the "Working Mother" driven to prostitution to support her children, the schoolboy in "Please Sir" who doesn't understand why his unemployed father has lost his zest for life, the couple whose relationship is drifting apart but who never talk their problems out because one of them is always too tired ("Let's Talk About It In the Morning"). Martyn aims to create straightforward songs that are not over-embroidered: he has a passionate delivery when he sings about social and political injustice, but also a more reflective side which comes out especially strongly in a song written to his young son, "(Sunday Morning over) Cardiff Bay", which he describes as being "about continuity". The chief image is of a father with his small son, walking through the streets of Cardiff out to the Bay and savouring the intimacy of their relationship. It is as tender as any lovesong to a woman. It reminded me, somehow, of James Joyce's *Dubliners*.

Martyn's musical breakthrough came in 1982 when he sent off a cassette of songs to a company in Leeds. The interest generated by his songs resulted in tours around the U.K. and his 1987 LP, *An Aching and a Longing*. He now has eighteen or nineteen albums out – which includes some pop and rock CDs – and currently records live to tape from a studio in his Cardiff home.

Martyn Joseph's success can be gauged by his survival; a singer-songwriter needs to stand out from the crowd. If Martyn's material and style seem familiar – sincerity and a desire to criticise the status quo don't necessarily equal good music – it is clear that he has found a distinctive voice, both musically and linguistically. Most of his songs are not specifically about Wales; his characters' psychological and social turmoil often takes place in an indeterminate, usually urban, landscape. However, Alexander Cordell sent him back to his roots, and he is aware of a spiritual message in many of his songs which has little to do with mainstream religion. As with Scotland's Dick Gaughan, Martyn Joseph's love for his native Wales is clear-sighted and un sentimental, like the poetry of his compatriot R.S.Thomas, whose poem "Death of a Peasant" heads this section. Thomas, who was also born in Cardiff, worked in the 1950s and 1960s as vicar of a number of impoverished rural parishes, writing poems that are both bleak and compassionate and, like Martyn Joseph, inspired by his anger over the historical treatment of Wales and the Welsh.

Allison Russell

Allison was born and brought up in Montreal by classical pianist parents, which accounts for her ease in singing in English or French and her feeling of closeness to the *chansonnier* tradition. We had first heard her when she was part of Vancouver's Celtic folk band Fear of Drinking; when that group split up she found new musical partners in Trish Klein (formerly of Be Good Tanyas) and Diona Davies, and thus Po' Girl was formed. Previously we admired Allison as a fine singer of traditional British ballads, some of which she had learned from her Scottish grandmother, and we were interested to learn if she still sang these, as it is clear that she is currently focussing on blues and jazz singing styles, exploring new possibilities and dynamics with that very expressive voice. Allison's answer was intriguing – yes, she does still sing traditional songs and ballads, stating that she finds the ballad tradition a rich and flexible one and that it relates to her day job as a mental health worker with the Portland Society on Vancouver's East Side, connecting the intensity and

power of the Child ballads with the extreme emotional experiences many of her patients have been through.

Allison cited Leonard Cohen as a particularly strong musical source of inspiration, along with Billie Holiday and Sheila Chandra. Other influences include French groups such as La Bottine Souriante and Les Batinses, and English folk-singers Jez Lowe and Martin Carthy.



Po' Girl

Po' Girl's three members display a wealth of diverse talents: Allison sings, whistles and plays clarinet, penny whistle, bodhran and acoustic guitar; Trish Klein, who also sings, plays banjo, acoustic and electric guitars, harmonica, fiddle and mandolin, and Diona Davies plays fiddle, banjo, guitar, tuba and trombone. They returned recently from a tour of the U.K. and are returning there in October. The group has a satisfying cohesiveness, resulting in a sound that blends voices and instruments so well that the whole is definitely more than just the sum of its parts.

So successful has Po' Girl been since it was founded that it is impossible to know whether Allison Russell will continue singing and playing within the group or branch out as a solo performer. She already performs a number of the lead vocals in any case, and in fact stated at the end of our interview that she is currently working on a solo project. Allison has a voice that promises a great deal; she also has intelligence, a joyous spirit, energy and wisdom. I wish her all the best in whatever future she chooses, feeling sure that her words in the song she wrote about Billie Holiday – "you gotta sing when the spirit says sing" – mirror her feelings too.

Rosaleen Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta