

In Memoriam Wade Hemsworth 1916 - 2002

Lorne Brown

He wrote a mere handful of songs, perhaps sixteen or so. He rarely gave concerts. Of the songs he did write, most people figured they were traditional folk songs and never suspected who the writer was. He was a Canadian national treasure.

I think my definition of a Canadian national treasure is very Canadian: a treasure whom few Canadians know.

Wade Hemsworth was a treasure.

Two of his songs were made into films by the National Film Board. One, *The Black Fly Song*, is sung in every summer camp in Ontario, and most of Canada, I'm sure. His songs, as the McGarrigle Sisters once said, were to Canadian music what the Group of Seven paintings were to Canadian art. His songs were the children he never had; he once said he'd send them out on their own to see how they came back.

Hemsworth was born in Brantford, Ontario in the middle of World War I, 1916, the oldest of three children. His father was a banker.

His first love, though, was art, and he studied painting at the Ontario College of Art until he graduated, just in time to serve in the RCAF in World War II. While with the RCAF he was stationed in Newfoundland, one of those serendipitous events that gave him his first exposure to traditional folk music, as well as to recordings of Burl Ives. After that, writing songs became his avocation. "Writing songs has always been an avocation for me," he said later, "And I've never gone out of my way for recognition."

After a brief stint as a graphic-design artist, Hemsworth spent time as a surveyor in the wilderness of North Ontario and Labrador. That was when he wrote *The Black Fly Song*. "I was in Labrador, not North Ontario," he once told John Leeder. "What's the difference? I wasn't with Black Toby ... that was another expedition. I was writing a song; I wasn't writing literature."

In 1952 Hemsworth moved to Montreal to work with the Canadian National Railways as a design draughtsman. While he was active in the Montreal music scene, he said, "I am not in the music business. The songs are a hobby. If I was in the business I'd be so preoccupied by the business I wouldn't be able to think about the music."

It is hard to pinpoint the "Hemsworth style" in his songs. There was a calypso rhythm to some, an old folksong feeling to others; one song was written in 5/4 time. His lyrics were in English, French, Yiddish, even Mohawk. "Well, I lived in a big city!" he said.

Merrick Jarrett recalls Wade Hemsworth. "I first met Wade Hemsworth in 1961 at the first Mariposa Festival in Orillia, Ontario. I remember

the two of us sitting on a blistering hot and muggy Saturday afternoon with him in the audience and talking folk music. I didn't see him again until about ten years ago at the Songs of Sail Festival in Penetang, Ontario. He had come out of retirement to do a performance that was nothing short of magical. Sitting in the audience, listening to this icon of Canadian folk music in his late seventies, singing songs like "The Log Driver's Waltz", "The Black Fly Song", "The Wild Goose", and other wonderful songs that have been a part of our Canadian folk music heritage for years, lighting up the stage with his performance at an age when most of us are relaxing in retirement ...

"This remarkable songwriter will be sadly missed. In comparison to other writers, he did not produce that many recorded or published songs, but so many that he did write were pure gold, and have become embedded in every folksinger's collection - to be sung, not just cold print sitting on a page of an unused songbook."

In 1977, Wade Hemsworth retired to Morin Heights, Quebec. In 1996 he released his very first CD, in his eightieth year! In 1989 his wife, painter and writer Irene Heyword died, having received long and dedicated care from Wade. Later, he married an old friend and musician Shirley Singer, who would provide him with the long and dedicated care he required after a stroke left him unable to play his nylon-string guitar.

On Christmas Day, Wade Hemsworth suffered another stroke, this one massive. He died January 19, 2002 in Ste. Anne's Hospital for Veterans in Ste. Anne de Bellevue.

"At the last portage, when I'll pack no more, let me fly with the wild goose high over north shore. The wild goose. High over north shore, and I'm going home."

Wade Hemsworth, "The Wild Goose"

My Mother is the Ocean Sea

*Wade Hemsworth, reprinted with permission

This song was written for a National Film Board production, *Sea Wind: An Approach to Marine Agriculture*, though Hemsworth notes in *Songs That His Final Singing Version Has Changed From What He Originally Performed for the Film*.

Am D7 Am D7 Em D7 Em D7 G D7 G D7 G C

Oh my moth-er is the o - cean sea. My fa-ther is the sun. Long time a-go they

G Am D7 Am D7 G C Em Am G

made me be-fore time had be-gun. A-way, haul a-way chil-dren. One sun,

Em D7 Am D7 Am D7

one o - cean.

Am D7 Am D7 Em D7 Em

Coda Oh my moth-er is the o - cean sea.

Oh, my mother is the ocean sea.
My father is the sun.
Long time ago they made me
Before time had begun.

Away, haul away children.
One sun, one ocean.

Tide waters changing by quarters of the moon.
A-wash upon the shore.
Form a salty warm sea womb
For men, distans and more.

Away, haul away children.
One sun, one ocean.

Oh such a hungry, slithering tangle
Of nameless ones a-suckling
Midst random death clutches,
Random love nuzzling.

Away, haul away children.
One sun, one ocean.

So may sun shine on ocean sea,
May we flourish by knowing.
May our mother find us
Wherever the wind's a-blowing.

Away, haul away children.
One sun, one ocean.

Oh, my mother is the ocean sea.