

## Is There Still Traditional Music in Canada? Part 2,347

*In which our intrepid reporter (Lorne Brown) finds the answer to the question: Do people still sing the old labour songs?*

At 7:45am on an already hot and muggy day your fearless writer is descending the very long escalator in Toronto's Sheraton Centre. A plate glass window at the top of the escalator looks out onto a courtyard of impressive greenery. If I could see out the north wall – which I can't – I would be looking directly onto Nathan Phillips Square and Toronto's famous City Hall. We are a stone's throw from the corner where the old Eatons store looked across at the old Simpsons store. In other words, we are as downtown in Toronto as we can be.

The Sheraton Centre is one of those impressively expensive Toronto hotels, a four-star hotel in fact, which features two and a half acres of waterfalls, gardens, and terraces. It's a far cry from the union halls of old, think I, as I head to the conference registration desk. The Sheraton Centre is hosting the Canadian Auto Workers' Collective Bargaining and Political Action Convention, July 12-14, 2005. It also happens to be the twentieth anniversary of the CAW, the largest private-sector union in Canada. (Back in 1985, the CAW emerged from the old UAW, the United Auto Workers.)

For all these twenty years, the Canadian folk group the Travellers has been entertaining at these conferences. (See *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*, 36.1 (Spring 2002) for an interview with Jerry Gray of the Travellers). Today was to be no exception.

And so I stepped up to the media registration desk and received my official media representative lanyard with my name on it to wear around my neck. Along with Cathy Melville, who is the managing director of The Storytellers School of Toronto and who had kindly agreed to help me today, I descended yet another long escalator. This one led from the concourse level down to the convention floor level, making me wonder if the CAW were really an underground operation. Sorry, bad pun. We walked through the doors onto the convention floor. It is a huge room; I could put my entire house in it and it would hardly be noticed. Long rows of tables are set up for the delegates; the

CAW's Peter Kennedy told me there would be perhaps 1,250 of them.

At the far end of the hall there is a stage. On the stage are several rows of tables for the head table folks. Behind is a very impressive mural of Canadian autoworkers at work making an automobile. It was commissioned for an earlier conference in Quebec City and now makes its appearance at all large CAW conferences. It appears on their website and on printed material as well. High on the wall at each corner is a television screen so that folks at the rear of the room can see the speakers on stage. To my right, in the corner under one of these screens, the Travellers are performing a sound check. "Who let this motley crew in?" I ask, pointing out that they don't have official nametag lanyards around their necks like I do. Joe Hampson explains that Motley Crue is performing somewhere else today. I soon realize that, as a media rep, I have a front row seat to all that's going on, complete with my own pitcher of water.

There are only a few straggly delegates in the hall; it is, after all, just a little after 8am. Two young children are sitting at a table, with their father in the row behind them. Trusty tape recorder and mic in my hand, Cathy behind me with pencil and notepad, we descend on the father, whose name is Mike Faubert, local 4270 in Ottawa. I ask if labour songs are still an important part of unions. "Well, on the picket line they certainly are," he replies. "They help people along, make sure they go a little better. The Travellers have a great tradition; every convention I've been to they've been here; they've always supported labour. They're old school but good school!"

David, eleven years old, is already a seasoned convention-goer, so I ask if he knows the old union songs. "Nope," he says, but allows that he likes that kind of music. Nine-year old Martine, David's sister, has also been to other conventions, although she hasn't heard the Travellers before. She likes their music, but when I ask her if she knows "Solidarity Forever" she shakes her head, "No". Mike, the father, kind of shakes his head in disbelief; he's sure they know "Solidarity"! He then says, "I'm glad you didn't ask me to sing some songs; I'd be

embarrassed.” I quickly thrust the mic under his nose and shout, “Everybody sing!” We laugh.

Since the CAW has been a strong advocate for daycare in the workplace, it has provided daycare for this convention. Two large rooms on the fourth floor have been reserved, along with a large staff to look after the little ones, from infants to pre-teens. Several field trips have been arranged, so later David and Martine will be going to the Ontario Science Centre and the Toronto Zoo, among other places.

The sound check over, the Travellers wander out to a foyer, and I wander out with them. Aileen Aherne tells me, “My day usually starts at 8pm; this 8am stuff is hard to do.” Drummer Don Vickery and I reminisce about old Kensington days. I spot Jerry Gray, the banjoist, making a set list. He points out that the conference runs on a very tight schedule: at precisely 9am it begins, so he wants to build a set that culminates right on time with “Solidarity Forever”. “Do you all know the words?” I ask innocently. He assures me they do.

## Solidarity Forever

Ralph Chaplin

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run, There can  
 be no pow-er great-er any where be-neath the sun. Yet what force on earth is weak-er than the  
 fee-ble strength of one, But the un-ion makes us strong.  
 Sol-i-da-ri-ty for ev-er, Sol-i-da-ri-ty for  
 ev-er, Sol-i-da-ri-ty for ev-er, For the  
 un-ion makes us strong.

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,  
 There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun,  
 Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?  
 But the union makes us strong.

CHORUS: Solidarity forever, solidarity forever, solidarity forever,  
 For the union makes us strong.

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,  
 But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel could turn,  
 We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn

That the union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,  
Greater than the might of armies magnified a thousand fold,  
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old,  
For the union makes us strong.

The Travellers head back to play some light jazz while the delegates assemble. Cathy and I wander back in; more and more people are filling the seats. I speak with Rick Reaume, who has been to all twenty CAW conferences. “I listen to the Travellers every morning and every lunch [during the convention]. I enjoy it,” he says. “I believe these [old labour songs] still have a role today. They play a valuable role. In gatherings like this, peaceful demonstrations, Labour Day walks, absolutely.” I ask if people still know the songs and can sing them. “Some of us do! Some of the newer ones might not be right up there with it. If they come to enough of these, they’ll catch on. I’ve heard the Travellers here, I’ve heard them in Vancouver, I’ve heard them wherever I go. Somebody likes them here!” he laughs, “They keep coming back! I’ve heard Pete Seeger. We have a great union singer in our area: Len Wallace, he plays the squeeze box, plays labour songs at all our events. In fact Len’s put out a couple of CDs. We use him quite a bit in the Windsor area.” I ask if there are songbooks. “I’ve seen some sheets, maybe by the CLC [The Canadian Labour Congress]”.

Al Kay has been to these CAW conventions since his Ottawa union merged in 1999. “Of course!” he says when I ask him if people in the union still sing these old songs. “Not so much the younger members; they need to be taught that. A lot of us old guys, we know all the old labour songs. A lot of the young ones ... they don’t teach this kind of stuff in the schools.” How did he learn the songs, I asked. “Through education. Through the union.” I was later to learn that “educationals” are a part of the union: workshops, training sessions, etc.

The union is mostly men, as might be expected, but there is a goodly number of women. I spot Joan Calbertson, who likes the Travellers. “I like the older (songs),” she says, “of course age has something to do with it. The newer ones are nice; I’ve heard a few newer ones when I was up in Port Elgin with the hip-hop type of thing.” (Opened in 1988, the CAW Family Education Centre is a huge 48-acre site outside Port Elgin

on Lake Huron, with spacious grounds and buildings.) “I do prefer the older ones. They seem to have meaning. To me. You get to know them and you go to different educationals and you have the songs. Once you hear them, you join in the melodies. On picket lines we do it, especially. A lot of the people on picket lines aren’t the younger ones. The younger ones are looking just for money; the older ones are out there to look for benefits and things like that. The younger ones aren’t usually too many on picket lines. You’re gonna find the old, steadfast people on the picket lines that understand.

“I’m a facilitator with CAW; I teach with the WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario) so I’m in Port Elgin a lot. More than I’m at these things. We usually [sing at] the closing of the CLC [meetings and at] CAW educationals ... each class puts on some kind of a song or a skit at the end. So we will have tapes and that there and they will pick up the older songs and use them in a skit that works in with the classes they took. We do that every year. It’s a nice idea.”

Antonio Depelino, from London, Ontario, is at his second CAW convention. The music is “good”, he says, “I like it.” Chris Kulbaba, Local 27 in London, says he knows the old songs. “Absolutely. I’ve been a student of music, listening to all different kinds of music. Rather enjoy music, been to Port Elgin a number of times. The old labour songs still survive in classrooms and on the picket lines. Absolutely. They’re good songs ... they seem to imbue a certain amount of emotion. You know, you might tap your toe, you might nod your head, you might take the words in. They’re good songs, good music. Timeless, really”.

The Travellers have now been introduced officially, and have launched into their morning programme. “Hold the Fort!” is a rousing beginning. There are more and more people on the floor now, talking in small groups, some standing and clapping along.

# Hold the Fort

Philip P. Bliss

C F

We meet to - day in free - dom's cause and

C G G7 C

raise our voi - ces high; We'll join our hands in

Amin D7 G D7 G

un - ion strong to bat - tle or to die.

C F

Hold the fort for we are com - ing, Un - ion men be

G C F

strong, Side by side we bat - tle on - wards,

C F G7 C

vic - tor - y will come.

We meet today in freedom's cause  
And raise our voices high;  
We'll join our hands in union strong  
To battle or to die.

CHORUS: Hold the fort for we are coming,  
Union men, be strong!  
Side by side we battle onwards,  
Victory will come.

Look, my comrades, see the union  
Banners waving high,  
Reinforcements now appearing,  
Victory is nigh.

See our numbers still increasing,  
Hear the bugle blow,  
By our union we shall triumph  
Over every foe.

Fierce and long the battle rages,  
But we will not fear,  
Help will come when'er it's needed,  
Cheer, my comrades, cheer.

Marg Arnone is from Thunder Bay. Oh, yes,” she says, “I like these old union songs. Of course they have a role today. I think they’re inspirational, really. They raise our spirits and remind us of what went on in the past and what we need to do in the future. I think it’s so important.” She thinks newer members are singing them, unlike what some others have said. “I learn them by practising them when we come to conventions. I do have a couple of tapes I play once in a while when I’m in the mood.”

Kevin Brooke (CAW Local 88) says, “The Travellers have been here many times. If nothing else, they wake us up in the morning; it’s really nice.” I ask if the songs still have a role in unions today. “Sure they do,” he answered at once, “You listen to the lyrics closely – unfortunately a lot of people don’t – and they talk about the struggles of the past and also the future struggles that we face. Yeah, there’s history in there, yeah. And also a mix of the future. Picket lines, demonstrations, that type of stuff. Any time various locals, various unions get together, I’m sure they do [sing].”

Sharon Mitic, Local 1524 Kitchener, has been at quite a few of these conventions. “The Travellers’ music is still relevant today, absolutely. I think we’re losing ground to some of the struggles we’ve had in the past and, um, we’re going through the same problems we had fifty years ago.” (In 1935 the Congress of Industrial Organizations – CIO – was formed.) “So of course it’s relevant. It lifts our spirits, it draws our attention, and it gives us a sense of solidarity. We don’t have as many new members as we would like to have, but I think that some coming here this week will become acquainted with them.”

The Travellers are in full swing, now, and the floor is filling up. They’ve sung “Woke Up this Morning with my Mind on Freedom” and “This Land”. Delegates have been reminded that the convention starts precisely at 9am. The two corner television screens are not functioning, so many delegates cannot see the Travellers, but they can hear them. They sing Joe Hampson’s “Let’s Talk About Peace”. “Farewell to Nova Scotia” rings out, and then the TV screens finally come to life.

I talk to Cliff Pilkey, now retired from Local 222, Oshawa, but once president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) from 1976 to 1986, about the Travellers. “They’re great people,

they’re here a long time. I’ve been listening to them for twenty years. At least. At least. They’ve made a good contribution to the labour movement. They’re very supportive, so we’re very supportive of them. The music is very important today. It’s very important that our people hear the kind of music they’re [the Travellers] playing. It’s sort of a history and tradition of the labour movement. It’s definitely still being sung; they get into crowds and they start to sing. It’s a worthwhile endeavour.”

The hall is very full. At 8:45am Buzz Hargrove, the national president of the CAW, walks onto the stage and goes to the podium. He was acclaimed president in 1992 and has been re-elected every three years since. Along the way he has picked up three honorary doctorates. He is dressed in a pale cream jacket with an open-necked shirt, and he shakes a few hands and accepts a few hugs. Some old-timers from the floor, such as Cliff Pilkey, come up on stage and greet various people. There’s a lot of hugging and a nice, warm feeling in the crowd.

The Travellers launch into a union medley – “We Shall Not Be Moved”, “Gotta Go Down and Join the Union”, “There is Power in the Union”, and “We Shall Not Be moved” (again). The atmosphere is charged, a lot of people standing and clapping along. You can feel the excitement. I notice Buzz Hargrove momentarily alone by the podium and seize the opportunity. I bound up on stage and ask him a quick question, realizing that his mind is focused on the major address he is about to deliver, one which will be analyzed within the industry and in newspapers for weeks to come. “How do you like the Travellers?” I ask. “We love the Travellers. They’ve been around our union since I was a kid in the union, singing songs of social justice, of economic justice, of political justice, and they’re just a great addition. We love having them at our convention. Our people know their songs very well.”

The magic hour of 9am is approaching. With great timing, the Travellers sing “The Kelligrew’s Soirée”. Excitement is building. Sharon Michaud, now retired and sitting in the honorary guest row behind the media row, has been at every one of the twenty conventions. “This music will never be irrelevant,” she says, “Nothing changes; we still have to fight.”

As if on cue, the MC asks everyone to stand for “the anthem”. All rise, and the Travellers lead

the huge roomful of people in “Solidarity Forever”. Most are singing it, including Buzz Hargrove, and all are clapping along. A small parade of older, retired distinguished members comes in and sits in the honorary guest section. The whole thing is very impressive and surprisingly moving.

And then it’s all over. Or at least, that part is over; the three-day convention is about to begin. The Travellers pack their instruments and leave, Cathy and I gather up our tape recorders and notebooks and leave. Jerry Gray and I hug, the Travellers drift off to breakfast, and Cathy and I survey the now empty lobby. Many groups have set up information tables, including the Make Poverty History group, the CAW Eastern Women’s Network, Women Unite, PRIDE, Women and Power and Politics, CAW Legal Services, Workers Health and Safety Centre, the Council of Canadians, and Club 200 Youth Activities. A book stall is selling children’s picture books, including *Dim Sum for Everyone*, *This Land*, *Black Canada History*, Pete Seeger’s *Abiyoyo*, a book about Woody Guthrie, and *What Does Peace feel Like?* Adult books include some by Linda McQuaig, Judy Rebick’s *10,000 Roses*, a book on Tommy Douglas, and *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich. A CAW Conference is a big thing.

But now it’s time to head back out onto the muggy streets of Toronto. Is union song singing still alive? It certainly is in Canada’s largest private-sector union (265,000 members across Canada). Are the younger people singing them? The jury is out on that one, but from the passion I’ve witnessed from the older members for these old songs, don’t count them out just yet.

Lorne Brown

[Lorne Brown is a Toronto storyteller and ballad monger]

## Letter to the Editors

In her review of *Dear Companion: Appalachian Traditional Songs and Singers from the Cecil Sharp Collection* (Canadian Folk Music Bulletin. Winter 2005-5, pp. 20 – 23) Rosaleen Gregory makes a number of points that should, I feel, be answered or else explained.

Firstly, her ‘chief criticism’, namely the ‘deliberate omission’ of songs from the singer Jane Gentry, on ‘the pretext that these are currently available

elsewhere’. My dictionary defines ‘pretext’ as ‘a reason put forward to conceal one’s true reason’. I can assure Ms Gregory that there is no hidden agenda here. As there are over 1,600 songs in Cecil Sharp’s Appalachian collection there seemed little point in duplicating songs that were, indeed, available elsewhere. We were only asked to choose 50 songs, although in the end we managed to include 53, and I am sure that purchasers will not wish to find songs that they may already have in Betty Smith’s splendid *Jane Hicks Gentry* book.

Secondly, I am taken to task for offering an explanation behind the song title *The Foggy Dew* that Ms Gregory finds ‘far-fetched’. I am asked to supply further details. Well, let’s start with Bert Lloyd. In his seminal book *Folk Song in England*, published almost forty years ago, Bert gives a version collected by John Bell in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here the song is about a youth who, as I said in the notes to *Dear Companion*, persuades a friend to dress up as a ghost (or Bugaboo) in order to scare a girl into the youth’s bed. During the summer of 1979 I recorded the Appalachian singer Dan Tate singing a version that he called *Bugerboo* (*Musical Traditions* MTCD 321-2 *Far in the Mountains*. Volumes 1 & 2) and in the notes to *Far in the Mountains* I referred listeners to Bob Thomson’s paper “The Frightful Foggy Dew” that appeared in *Folk Music Journal* IV: 1 (1980), pp. 35 – 61. Rosaleen will find full references to early broadside versions of the song in Bob Thomson’s paper.

Finally, I am asked why I did not mention Hedy West’s Topic recording of “The Wife of Usher’s Well” in the song notes. I too like Hedy’s version, but, as the Topic LP is no longer available, I did not list it. I only tried to list recordings that were currently available.

Mike Yates. *Berwick-upon-Tweed. England.*

### **Rosaleen replies:**

No ulterior motives in omitting songs by Jane Gentry were implied in my review; I used the word ‘pretext’, which also means ‘excuse’, because I was using the word ‘excuse’ a few lines later. As to the substantive issue, I still think that *Dear Companion*, as an *introduction* to Sharp’s Appalachian song-collecting, should have been as representative of that collecting as possible. Readers not familiar with all Sharp’s informants may never get as far as Betty Smith’s fine book if they have not had their appetites whetted by an example of Jane Gentry’s artistry. *Dear Companion* had the opportunity to supply such an illustration and I regret it did not do so.

Older recordings like the Topic one of Hedy West’s “Wife of Usher’s Well” are continually going in and out of availability. In view of the very sad news of Hedy’s recent passing, it is to be hoped that someone will bring out a retrospective CD set showcasing her impressive talent and introducing her to younger listeners who may never have heard her.