

How Kelly Russell Spends his Summer Vacation

Brian Rusted

“You’re not supposed to be able to do that with a concertina,” says Kelly Russell when I ask how he bends the notes of a reel. A lingual nudge of air through a blues harp or the deep tissue massage of a guitar’s neck can torque notes beyond their scale, but technically there isn’t an equivalent on a concertina.

“You’re not supposed to,” says Kelly, letting the final clause drift away from the technical into the miraculous. It is a fitting way to bend my question: we are in the narthex of Trinity’s Church of the Most Holy Trinity. On the small table between us, behind the last pew are a cash box, CDs of Kelly’s various incarnations, and spiral bound copies of Kelly’s transcriptions of Newfoundland fiddle tunes. Here, it seems good things come in threes: concertina, fiddle, recitations. Several nights a week during the summer, Kelly can be found in the church breathing life into each.

Although fewer than fifty people winter in Trinity now, ten or twenty times that number are strolling, eating, viewing and visiting around the town. Some find their way to Holy Trinity snuggled into a hummock along Ash’s Lane. This doubly revived gothic church could fit inside a townie’s garage, along with pews, organ, balcony, and the buttresses of its bell tower. For 176 years it has shed light without the benefit of electricity, though Kelly has rigged a car battery to twelve volt headlamp. This break with history is not about limelight or dramatic effect. It’s about making sure the audience can retrace their steps if a distracted sun wanders from the arched windows before the show concludes. Much of the woodwork inside the church has been demurely covered with centuries of paint. Built in 1833, the church stands as an outcome of Catholic emancipation and, it could be argued, the formation of Newfoundland’s House of Assembly. The paint layers have not softened its shapes, blurred its lines, or erased its ability to assert local autonomy in the face of colonial marginalization. The walls are punctuated with boxed, plaster sculptures of the Stations of the Cross, but the dour pilgrim moments seem indifferent, unmoved by the secular performance unfolding in their midst. A handful of us have stepped out of the plump, warm, rising dough of an evening to listen to “Tales and Tunes of Newfoundland”. For the next several hours, Kelly will perform traditional music on fiddle, tin whistle, and concertina. He will talk about the six-year wait to have Colin Dipper of County Clare make

his concertina. He will explain that the difference between a violin and a fiddle depends only on who holds it: someone literate in systems of musical notation, able to reproduce music despite their remoteness in time and space from the original composer, or someone who grew up inside the music, knowing the tunes so thoroughly they can fiddle with the instrument and convince it to release the music they know it holds. He will demonstrate the difference between a jig and reel, a simple, concise matter of dance steps and beats, but a difference that never takes hold for me. It is not a technical or academic difference: it’s one that inhabits muscle and bone. Watching tunes come alive through Kelly’s hands, it seems his body has forsaken protein and tissue for a cell structure of rhythm, tunes and creative sparks of memory.

Kelly was one of a handful of musicians in the early 1970s to embody the local revival of traditional music. He cut his teeth playing with groups like Figgy Duff and The Wonderful Grand Band, and then, encouraged by the Canada Council, sought out traditional musicians to learn both their tunes and playing styles. Rufus Guinchard and Emile Benoit became the best-known of these in part because Kelly spent much of the next two decades recording them, performing with them, and transcribing their tunes for others to learn. Publishing first a biography of Guinchard with transcriptions of sixty tunes, Kelly has since transcribed and published over 450 of Newfoundland fiddle tunes. And for all that, Kelly is not just a collector or a traditional performer. Incarnations with groups like The Planks and the Planker-down Band demonstrate Kelly’s efforts to spark traditional tunes into life for contemporary ears.

The ebb of the evening’s music is balanced by the flow of recitations. Son of the late author, politician, professor, and humorist Ted Russell, Kelly comes by this honestly. The stories he performs are his father’s. The artfully reworked tall tales about a hunter who gets carried aloft by the geese he’s shot and tied to his waist, or the man who stretches the harness of his sled loaded with firewood back to his house only to have the harness shrink overnight and pull the house back into the woods where he began, are often introduced by Kelly with anecdotes that ground them in his family’s life.

Ted collected many of these stories in his own travels around the island as a politician in the early 1950s and then reworked them as the basis of a series

of radio broadcasts. In a style that prefigures Garrison Keillor or Stuart McLean, his stories and characters populate the fictional town of Pigeon Inlet. Through Kelly's own Pigeon Inlet Productions, Ted's imaginary community has taken on an afterlife in tape and compact disc reissues of the original radio broadcasts.

The town of Bay Roberts near where Ted Russell grew up is trying to mobilize the resources needed to commemorate Ted's achievement and make this imaginary village real. Building a version of Pigeon Inlet is thought to be an ideal way to have residents and visitors alike experience and appreciate traditional culture. Is it worthwhile now to scrape away the layers of performance and artifice that demurely cover the shape of authenticity? Is there value in highlighting the stations where moments of traditional culture cross paths with their revival in score, recording, or text? It was once fashionable to point out the ironies that layer the experience of heritage: learning traditional music from records and books, then from actual tradition-bearers, and recording them in turn for others to learn; or printed text as the end of the line for tall tales told, learning them wrenched out of their time and place through media broadcast, filtered through a literary creativity, then set afloat again in a re-performance of oral tradition.

Yet exposing the layers in this way, reveling in the contradictions that form our present experience of the past, is to be complicit with the notion that traditional culture has passed on, to think that its presence in this church on this summer evening is merely theatrical, a restored version of an imaginary past, now no longer itself. To witness only the ironies of authenticity is to stand outside them, to be a shopkeeper, an accountant, tallying the layers of simulation that mask the truths of this floating island. It is only layers of course, all the way down. Would leaving the ironies undisturbed leaven the evening's romance? Would a theatre of place still convey a sweet, yeasty flavor as you leave the church, a flavor of the land and the people who made this music, circulated these stories?

There is a memory to this site, vivid in the muscular nature of Kelly's performance, one that makes the inside and outside, performance and façade, present and palpable. Kelly grips his concertina like a baseball, a weapon, a part of his arm; he kneads the bellows like a baker, a blacksmith, his fingers prospect for landmines, precious metal. The music invades you with force, substance, sustenance. This is not about playing a tune, a jig or a reel. It is not about entertaining spectators. It is not about a traditional culture that has passed over. You cannot sit quietly in your pew and think later you witnessed something.

This is about presence, about forging a present with memory, imagination, and the bones of your ears.

Tomorrow is Trinity's annual festive day; games of chance, boat races, food on sticks. It will end with a community concert hosted by Kelly. Visiting musicians, children, students, and elders alike will stream to the stage and perform. People will step out of the audience and borrow instruments to play, each sharing and shaping a piece of tradition's presence. Never about the past, about what happened, about layers of artifice and simulacra, tradition is a messy, accidental stream of performances; a calling.

Whatever the disruptions and dislocations in our traditions, whatever the historic pastiche that folds us into illusions of place and identity, Kelly is living a future learned from musicians and storytellers. Sitting in that church, squirming to find the sweet spot in the pew, you may be surprised by the sensation of tradition working through you, how it pushes you forward, bodily into memory's present. There is no reason that these stories, these tunes should fit together, no reason they should fit together in that place, or even that you should be there listening to them, but that is how Kelly has sparked them back into time. You're not supposed to be able to do that with a concertina, but he does. He bends the memory of tunes and tales back into our present.

Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors,

Your most recent issue, volume 42:2, deserves some comment, and a very good issue it was too. Tim Rogers' piece on the music of Bill Miner was one of the best articles you have had in a very long time. As an avowed devotee of outlaw ballads, tales, traditions, and general lore, I have always wanted to know more about the western Canadian experience viz. bad men on your own frontier, and I hope there will be more of the same. In a future issue I hope to write in detail about the evolution and development of the mythology of social banditry in the US and especially during the years following the Civil War when it flourished in its golden age, so to speak. Suffice it to say that Rogers' article has given me a lot of food for thought in this area, and perhaps some further research into what happened north of the border regarding outlaws and their lore is in order.

As to Michael Asch's timely piece on the early days and importance of Folkways Records, its content is as important today as it was in the years following World War II. During the 1950s, the right-

wing venom and vitriol was no less insidious than it has been in recent years, and the targets of the venom were no less visible, including the NAACP, the Weavers, Paul Robeson, and John Henry Falk, just to mention a few. The attack machine is just as relentless today as it was half a century ago, (same henhouse, different foxes), but the targets are different: environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, anti-war activists, undocumented immigrants, gay and lesbian organizations, and a host of other progressive and left-of-center persons and organizations too numerous to mention. What Moses Asch and Folkways stood for in the years after World War II is as vital today, and perhaps even more so.

The viciousness of the right can be amply seen in the daily attacks upon the new Obama administration throughout the US, many of these attacks going far beyond the pale of civilized discourse, reasonable debate, and political disagreement. Bringing the world closer together through music is as vital and important today as it was in the years following World War II, and perhaps the very impact of Pete Seeger's 2008 Toronto concert, so ably reported on by Lorne Brown, is signature testimony to the ongoing vigilance in which we all must engage in order to confront the forces of hatred, prejudice, repression, and greed prominent in today's world. Thanks to the likes of Moses Asch, Folkways Records, and Pete Seeger, the struggle goes on, and hopefully one day the light of freedom, equality, and true justice will shine all over this planet of ours.

Last but not least, I want to announce the start of what I hope will become a regular column in future issues of *Canadian Folk Music*, a new series provisionally entitled "Beyond the Child Ballads." I have long been interested in the relationship between traditional ballads and traditional tales, and because I do both, it seems more than appropriate to look at Child ballads in relation to similar stories and tales told around the world, often in places far afield from the usual places where the Child ballads have been found in Britain and North America. If one looks at the canon of Child Ballads, it becomes apparent that a number of them can be found in analogue versions around the world and have cropped up in literature, history, and oral tradition.

An English Child ballad may have its ancestry in an ancient Greek myth; a Scottish ballad tells a tragic tale which may be found in an Italian Renaissance literary collection such as the Decameron, or in an even older form, in a cycle of stories about a legendary Hindu prince from India's northwestern frontier; stories found within Child ballads collected in the Canadian Maritimes, the hills of West Virginia, logging camps in Wisconsin, or in the Big Bend cattle

country of West Texas may have narrative kindred in a Turkoman romance from central Asia, a jest concerning an eleventh-century Hungarian monarch, or a fourteenth-century Persian manuscript containing stories told by a sagacious parrot to keep a merchant's wife from violating her marital vows.

A quick perusal of the Child canon shows that analogue stories can indeed be found. A few examples are: # 4 "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight," # 10 "The Two Sisters," # 18 "Sir Lionel," # 19 "Orfeo," # 44 "The Two Magicians," # 45 "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury," # 95 "The Maid Freed From the Gallows," # 269 "Lady Diamond," and # 278 "The Farmer's Cursed Wife," just to mention a few of the more obvious ones.

I eagerly look forward to doing extensive research on story versions of both well-known and rare Child Ballads and showing just how connected traditional ballads and traditional tales are from one corner of the world to the other. After all, ballads are just another great way to tell good and memorable stories.

I wish to gratefully acknowledge that the major impetus for this idea has been Rosaleen Gregory's column, "Singing the Child Ballads." This is a section I eagerly look forward to in each new issue of the magazine, and it is because of her untiring efforts that I have decided to undertake this project. So I joyously dedicate what is to come to Rosaleen, and I thank her for giving me the idea.

*Robert Rodriquez,
New York City.*

Rosaleen writes: Thank you, Robert. Doing the "Singing the Child Ballads" column is a pleasure, the dedication is an honour, and I look forward to reading your contributions. It is certainly a fascinating subject.

