

## Bill Sarjeant Singing from Sheffield to Saskatchewan

Dave Spalding

In 1995, Bill Sarjeant and I made a month-long exploration of fossil footprint sites in Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. Both paleontologists, our primary purpose was to pursue research on Tertiary mammal tracks, while a secondary aim was to visit many colleagues and see notable dinosaur sites in the same region. We have since published a couple of joint papers on our discoveries, and Bill has several others in print or in press in collaboration with other colleagues. Fabulous weather and stunning fossils were only part of the trip, however; in many ways the music was equally memorable. Not only did we hit Albuquerque on an evening when John Renbourn and Robin Williamson were on tour, but we gave our own repertoires an unprecedented workout. During the many days travelling together in rented cars we sang incessantly. We took turns to lead songs, joining in where we could, and in the four weeks we never repeated a song. We also talked over old times a bit—music, geology, friends and books—for at that time our friendship dated back almost forty years.

William Anthony Swithin (Bill) Sarjeant was born in 1935, and raised in the industrial city of Sheffield, England, an only child. His parents, Harold and Margaret, had met at art college, and worked in industry and a solicitor's office. They were not wealthy, but had an unusual breadth of interests for their period and class, were widely read, and possessed of an unusual sense of humour. At the time I first met them they were unlike any other adults I had ever known, and they immediately adopted me among the many friends of Bill's who popped round on Friday for fish and chips, and knew them as Mother and Father Sarjeant.

After education in local grammar schools, Bill entered University of Sheffield to study geology. Three years later in 1956, as Sarjeant entered graduate school, I arrived in the same department as an undergraduate. We both had some background in classical music, but at this time popular music was saccharine and trivial, and did not appeal to either of us. I turned up with a beat-up old dance band guitar with a horrendous warp on the neck, and a small repertoire of American folksongs from white and black traditions, picked up from distant rumours of the American folk revival. If I introduced Bill to jazz and folk music (as he claims), he in turn widened and deepened my knowledge of fossils, and we have shared these (and many other joint interests) ever since.

Guitars were taken along on student field trips, where in the evenings we often wrote parodies of well-known songs reflecting the novel situations we found ourselves in. For those who doubt

the reality of collective improvisation as a source of songs, it is interesting to recollect that such songs as "Sixteen Rocks," and "Prof Moore prostrate on the floor" were true collaborations, of which Bill and I were joint authors with a fluctuating (and now uncreditable) group of fellow students. More serious music was created during term time as various groups of musicians were put together to express the fluctuating talents and interests of our fellow students. This was the short-lived era of skiffle, led by Lonnie Donegan (then guitarist with the Chris Barber Jazz Band), who would inspire us with interval sets of Leadbelly songs. Everyone who wanted to play joined in (so there were more guitars than chords).

Many of us doubled in small blues/jazz ensembles, usually led by our friend Brian Fearn's clarinet, and including my piano and Bill's guitar. In these ensembles, we performed at student dances, during parades on the public rag days, and in holes and corners of university buildings for our own amusement. Bill too struggled with guitar and piano in these groups, and was to buy and try many instruments, but ended up happiest with a collection of harmonicas that came to encompass all possible keys.

For Bill and me, collaborations were not just musical; we worked together in what is now known as the non-profit sector. At the University Bill edited the newspaper *Darts* while I edited the literary magazine *Arrows*, each contributing to the other's pages. We also shared editing duties in a new journal started by Bill, the *Sorby Record*, for the local natural history society that had first brought us together. Both participated in creating a new society, the Peak District Mines Historical Society, a pioneer organization within the then new field of industrial archaeology.

With the end of school in 1959, Bill and I were geographically separated for a while, as Bill began teaching, first in high schools, and then at the Universities of Keele and Reading, while I spent a few years in museum work in eastern counties. We retained contact, however, and whenever possible took geological field trips together abroad, visiting various bits of France, Germany and Iceland. A guitar was normally part of the luggage, and we sang our way from Mediterranean to tundra. Bill became a fanatical butterfly photographer, and I remember many a spectacular landscape foregrounded by Bill bending to photograph some unsuspecting insect.

By this time the British folk revival was under way, and Bill became very active with the Nottingham Folk Workshop, where he developed his *a capella* solo singing and hosted a variety of increasingly famous guests from overseas and within Britain. I was back in Sheffield, where I supplemented my scientific in-



Sarjeant and Spalding at the 1997 CSTM AGM

photo by David Querido

come as a semi-professional performer based there, part of the house group of a Chesterfield club which hosted BBC broadcasts and travelling widely with Irish singing partner Tony Irvine, while also modestly lecturing, publishing and exhibiting on topics to do with folk music. Despite heavy pressures on our time, Bill and I managed a few musical trips together, for instance to one of the early Keele folk festivals which brought some authentic traditional performers such as Jimmy McBeath, Fred Jordan and gypsy Phoebe Smith to popular notice.

In 1967 I moved to Canada, beginning an Alberta residence of twenty-four years. Bill soon visited us from a post as visiting professor in Oklahoma, and after a return to the UK (by now with his wife Peggy and oldest daughter Nicola), also ended up north of the border in 1972. For a good many years we lived in adjacent provinces; Bill in Saskatoon (where he still lives), and I in Edmonton. This was close enough to make possible several visits a year, in which we were able to share our ongoing interests in music and other matters, and our matching families, each of three daughters, were able to develop their friendships in the next generation.

With a D.Sc. before he left Britain, Bill rose rapidly to be a full professor in 1972. In Saskatoon he continued and developed his many geological interests already established. He has continued to publish on an early interest in the minerals of Derbyshire. His early research on microfossils (particularly the dinoflagellates) has now taken him around the world, and he has worked extensively on trace fossils with particular reference to vertebrate footprints and made a remarkable contribution to the history of the geological sciences. His contributions to any one of the last three of these would be a notable professional career for any academic and have attracted many honors.

With a growing family and a thriving academic career, it would be understandable if Bill's non-geological interests fell away for a while. But no; he managed to find ways of filling in his spare time. He built a notable collection of detective fiction and began to write about it for various magazines, continued his interests in butterflies and other natural history, continued his interest in historic buildings and helped establish the Saskatoon Heritage Society, pursued photography of streetcars wherever he went, and began to write fiction as well as non-fiction.

Bill has written and co-written around 20 published books, including ten volumes of earth science bibliography, one on Sherlock Holmes and a series of four volumes (of around ten so far written) of an epic fantasy. Many others have been edited or co-edited, and a full bibliography of his many articles, papers and reviews covers around 60 pages.

Supported by a University salary, Bill's passionate collecting instincts led him to build a large library of books and recordings. His larger collections in the history of geology became one of the world's great private collections in the field. These are now being gradually transferred to the University of Alberta library, and I have briefly described them in an article in the book collecting magazine *Biblio*.<sup>\*</sup> His collections include many books and recordings of British and North American folk music.

His musical interests also extended to jazz and what is now known as world music, based in part on his own increasingly wide international travels. (These are gradually being donated to the University of Calgary as an addition of the CSTM collections.) Although I have amassed a fair collection of similar material, on every visit to Bill I found it was essential to play through and discuss his new acquisitions, and I often acquired new songs for my own repertoire from these collections.

Often, too, we would organize a singing evening with local musicians, such as his colleague, Scottish geologist Hugh Hendry. (Many attendees, along with Bill and Hugh, became current members of the Prairie Higglers, the group in which Bill has now participated in for more than two decades). We would also visit the local club to hear touring performers, many of whom have also visited him and learnt from his collection. Between 1977 and 1988 Bill compiled and broadcast several local radio series using his folk collection. I often heard these on tape and sometimes was able to contribute a piece to the content from my own collection or repertoire.

When Bill and I came to Canada, the Canadian Folk Music Society already existed, but it was operated by a small group in central Canada, and we were at first unaware of it. However, the active exploration of the Canadian folk music scene by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat during their travelling days made many connections between different regions and brought the society to our attention. Bill and I both joined, and (when it was possible to get to meetings) began to participate in its operation. It was natural for us to collaborate in this area after our joint experience in societies in Britain; by this time I had active involvement in provincial and national societies in the Canadian nature field, too. While I have served a couple of terms on the board, Bill served as vice-president (1985-6) and president (1986-9) of the society, and continues to participate as its archivist, and frequently as its unofficial photographer at meetings. His photographs, articles, and reviews have been an ongoing contribution to the newsletter.

The public activity performance and writing, radio and public service, are all manifestations of his own deep love of folk music, and Bill is always ready with a song. It is always a treat to hear him plunge into his songbag, culled from many obscure sources, documented in his tiny handwriting in an old diary in case memory fails. Much of his repertoire reflects the odder corners of Scottish, English, and North American traditional song. British favorites of his (and mine) include our student songs, the great ballads ("The Baron of Brackley"), and comic songs from the music hall, such as "The Battle of Sowerby Bridge" and "Pretty Little Polly Perkins." American material comes from early Alan Lomax recordings and from forgotten Appalachian recordings such as Cousin Emmy and her kinsfolk ("Come All You Virginia Gals"). And his new homeland has added such Canadian material as the reworked hymn "Saskatchewan." And by the next time we manage to travel together, there will no doubt be a bunch of new songs.

<sup>\*</sup>Spalding, David A.E. 1997. Collectors Corner. *Discovering the Earth*. *Biblio* 2(11) 52-55.

## Sixteen Rocks

(tune: "Sixteen Tons"; Merle Travis, 1947 ©American Music Inc.)

(Sheffield University geology field trip, Weymouth, Easter 1957,  
by student collective including Bill Sarjeant, Dave Spalding)

1. Some people say a man is made out of mud,  
A geologist's made out of muscles and blood,  
Muscles to wield that hammer a bit,  
Blood to flow from the thumb when it's hit,

*Chorus:* You dig sixteen rocks, and what do you get,  
Another day older and dirty and wet,  
Professor don't you call me, cause I won't go,  
I got enough rocks, I don't want any mo'!

2. You go out in the morning when the sun doesn't shine,  
That thing you can't see is a fine anticline,  
You search for those fossils till you're worn and pale,  
Just one graptolite in an acre of shale.

3. If you see us coming, better step aside,  
You count as a fossil just as soon as you've died,  
One blow of the hammer and you're in the sack,  
We'll put you in a showcase when we get back.



Bill Sarjeant and Richard Johnston confer  
CSTM AGM, Calgary 1990

photo by GWL

## Bill Sarjeant A Four Decade Contribution to Folk Music

Lois A. Wooding

One can't help wondering what mysterious force of serendipity brought three folk music enthusiasts, from different, distant homelands, to the same university department in Saskatoon, Canada. But that is what happened in the early 70's when Bill Sarjeant, from England, Hugh Hendry, from Scotland, and Jocelyne Legault, from Quebec, joined the Geology Department at the University of Saskatchewan. Little did they know that they would form the basis of a folk group that has survived twenty-five years and shows no sign of immediate demise.

Bill Sarjeant had no formal musical training as a child, but through contacts during his student days, he was introduced to skiffle, jazz and folk music. There were many folk music clubs in Britain at the time, and Bill became a frequent visitor to local venues, where he heard, and met, many of the leading performers of the time. Not content to be just a member of the audience, Bill taught himself to play the guitar, performed with The Bol Weevils, a Sheffield group led by David Spalding, and had a brief association with The Sheaf River Jazz Band.

For geologists, even those in academic areas, field work is a major component of the job, and a guitar can be a cumbersome piece of extra baggage for someone already hung about with picks, shovels, rock hammers and quantities of rock-encrusted

fossils. Bill solved this problem by switching from guitar to harmonica. He was not exactly new to the instrument; in fact his first harmonica could rightly be referred to as one of the "spoils of war." In 1943 his father found an old Hohner harmonica lying by a dead German officer on the battlefield, and he brought it home for Bill as a souvenir of the war. Rust eventually rendered this instrument unplayable and shiny new C and G replacements became Bill's musical companions on his many travels.

During these early times, music was an outlet that helped offset the tension of Bill's personal life. His undergraduate and graduate studies were finally behind him, but there was the strain of launching an academic career. There was also a failed marriage, which weighed heavily upon him. In 1965 Bill met Margaret Crowe. It was a chance meeting in a restaurant. The recognition of Bill's Sheffield University scarf began a conversation that led to marriage in 1966, and with the redoubtable "Peggy" at his side, Bill's career began to show great promise. He became Assistant Lecturer, then Lecturer at the University of Nottingham, and spent a year in the States as Visiting Professor at the University of Oklahoma. While there, he had some exposure to country and western music, before returning to his