

Heritage Music: A Primer

Jack Godwin

What It Is

Heritage music is a contemporary expression of one of the oldest forms of entertainment. Long before our modern era of textbooks and exams, people learned their history from wandering singer/storytellers called troubadours. These itinerant entertainers traveled from community to community spreading traditional lore in the form of stories and songs. Through their efforts, locals developed an awareness of the past and an appreciation of their heritage. Of course this wasn't "mandatory school," so the troubadours had to hold their audience by making learning fun. Their stories had to be gripping and the music infectious.

Modern heritage entertainers endeavour to provide historical context for their listeners through a similar interplay of stories and songs. The story hooks the audience's interest and the song either completes or complements the story. We all listen with more interest after a singer introduces a song with an explanation of how it came to be written. That performer is providing context for us and it invariably enhances our appreciation of the song. Heritage entertainers do this throughout their shows.

The Way It Works

Depending on the chosen heritage theme of the performers (some possible themes might include "the cowboy life", "the fisherman's way", or "opening the West"), each song is introduced by an historical anecdote that hooks the audience on an emotional level. In the case of The Kettle Valley Brakemen, we specialize in western Canada's steam rail era. Our topics include what might be expected: railway construction stories, train wrecks, robberies and brave derring-do by railroaders, but we also cover ghost train sightings, on the job pilfering, construction camp prostitution, and even feminism. In fact we Brakemen may have in our repertoire Canada's only feminist train. The stories can be dramatic, humorous, shocking, or all three. An original song follows each tale, employing styles that include gospel, folk, blues, rock, and bluegrass.

Why It Works

Generally speaking, people who pay money to attend a heritage music performance are adults. There are no heritage mosh pits. There comes a time in our lives

when we seek a connection with the past. This doesn't usually happen in our hormone-charged teenage years, but curiosity about our past becomes more important to us as we mature. While many audience members are drawn by their own memories of the steam rail era, the big attraction is the historical context that the show provides. Also, we live in a world where "reality" has a very strong appeal. When a movie begins with the words "based on a true story," we tend to care more about it. Anything that expands our sense of "how we got to here" may not help us understand where we're going but it's desirable nonetheless. Of course humans have always regaled each other with stories, but stories that inform as well as entertain are doubly valued. When songs that accomplish the same goals are included, the combination makes for a very powerful entertainment package.

The Audience Rules!

Neil Young entertained in Kelowna, B.C., in the spring of 2009. He walked on stage, picked up his guitar and sang six of his hits before looking up and bellowing "Hello, Kelowna!". The crowd cheered wildly. Neil had noticed they were there! This author has attended jazz performances where artists perform in a semi-circle so the musicians can see each other but some present side or back views to the audience. During the preparation of this article, a friend described a concert Bob Dylan gave in Winnipeg where he sat at a piano facing his band—not the audience—and performed for 25 minutes then left the stage without acknowledging that the audience was there at all!

This focus on either "the star" or "the music" is the antithesis of heritage entertainment, where the main goal is to involve the audience by developing interactive elements through storytelling and by encouraging group participation. Think Pete Seeger. Everyone who entertains children knows the value, indeed the necessity, of this approach.

The Kettle Valley Brakemen woo our audiences from the moment our show starts. Since I'll be spinning the stories, I introduce myself at the beginning of the show and explain that—besides applauding wildly—the best way they can indicate their enjoyment of the show is to shower the band with \$100.00 bills, but the second best way is to sing (or hum) along whenever they feel like it. Often the segue from one song

to the next story includes an opportunity for audience participation. Our audiences often include a fair number of present or past railroaders, so we work to create opportunities to involve them. Also, every Kettle Valley Brakemen show ends with a rousing sing-along number. Our goals are entertainment, education and involvement. One measure of our success is the number of people who approach us following a show and want to tell us their own train stories.

The Songs

Melodies:

The old-time troubadours used to set their songs to existing popular tunes. In the past century this process continued with modern troubadours such as Woody Guthrie setting “The Good Ship Reuben James” and “This Land Is Your Land” to tunes he heard from the Carter Family. The latter melody was adapted for a Canadian version by The Travellers in 1955 and later used for the satiric “This Land Is Whose Land” by

The Brothers-in-Law, a song recently recorded (with some additional verses) by Vancouver heritage performers Fraser Union. Similarly, Marion Try Slaughter, recording as Vernon Dalhart, utilized the tune of an 1865 folk song entitled “The Ship That Never Returned” for his hit version of “Wreck of the Old 97”. This same melody was later used in the late 50s folk revival by The Kingston Trio to record “M.T.A.” and by The Chad Mitchell Trio in 1961 for their song “Super Skier”. Copyright law must be respected but if there are at least two well-known songs using the same melody—well, I reckon it’s fair game.

The vast majority of Kettle Valley Brakemen melodies are original, but in that same troubadour spirit we have utilized the melody from the traditional “Ridin’ On That New River Train” for our singalong show closer “Ridin’ On That Kettle Valley Train”. Unlike the non-heritage original, whose verses didn’t have anything to do with trains, our verses describe a trip across the Kettle Valley Line from Hope to Midway. See below:

“RIDIN’ ON THAT KETTLE VALLEY TRAIN”

By: Jack Godwin

Chorus:

Ridin’ on that Kettle Valley Train
Ridin’ on that Kettle Valley Train.
That old steam train that brought me here
Gonna roll me away again.

Our journey starts by chuggin’ out of Hope,
Our journey starts by chuggin’ out of Hope,
We’re chuggin’ out of Hope, up the Coquihalla slope
Our journey starts by chuggin’ out of Hope.

(Full lyrics available at www.kvbrakemen.com; recording on the CD *Early Tracks*)

On our *Train Talk* CD we have adapted the traditional melody “Rollin’ Down To Old Maui” for our navy work song “From Sea To Shining Sea”.

Lyrics:

Heritage songwriting as a genre is really outside the scope of this article, but a few remarks may be apposite. Beyond clarity of diction and the need to hook the audience emotionally, there are some commonly used tricks of the trade.

The song lyrics must be articulated clearly (no Tom Waits imitators need apply), and contain relevance for a modern audience. History for history’s sake isn’t enough. Obscure references and language—unless explained in the accompanying story—should be avoided. Keep the story line simple and understandable. Fortunately, there exist songwriting “hooks,” including mystery, shock, humour, drama, and sex (titillation, nothing blatant), that always work—especially in combination—when constructing heritage music.

Generally speaking, popular songs advance their story via verse lyrics while the chorus or refrain remains constant, providing the lyrical

hook that is all most folks can remember from any song they hear. (As in, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose...lah lah lah lah lah”.) Devices that make the song flow appealingly are the use of internal rhymes and alliteration.

Another technique common to narrative songs is that the chorus contains both hook lines and lines that change, advancing or enhancing the story. Those readers with more salt than pepper in their hair might recall a 1950s pop culture tune sung by Johnny Cash entitled “Ballad of a Teenage Queen,” that made effective use of this technique by having part of the refrain move the song forward.

Below is a Kettle Valley Brakemen tune from our *Early Tracks* CD. The song is based on

an incident recorded in Barrie Sanford’s classic work *McCulloch’s Wonder: The Story of the Kettle Valley Railway*. Sanford relates that at one point during the building phase of the Kettle Valley Railway the “powder monkeys” (those doing the blasting) exploded a charge into a giant nest of rattlesnakes. The first that the “gandy dancers” (those building the line) knew of this was when very angry rattlesnakes began falling out of the sky all around them. I have never related this story to an audience without a shiver of revulsion running through the room. There’s a changing third line to each chorus. The goal here is to provide variety for the listeners and to play on the shock value of poisonous snakes dropping from the sky. Our song is called “Rattlesnake Rain”.

RATTLESNAKE RAIN

Jack Godwin

I was...Gandy-dancin’ on the KV line, layin’ track on the eastside hill
Where the rock was hard as a hooker’s heart an’ winter’s chill could kill
We faced some nasty weather, poundin’ that main line down,
But the scariest storm we ever faced came down with a rattlin’ sound.

Chorus:

Rattlesnake rain, oh rattlesnake rain
Why just the thought could drive a man insane.
You better look up boys, if you hear a rattlin’ noise
It’s a most unusual scare, havin’ snakes fall from the air
Rainin’ cats and dogs—OK, but poisonous snakes—no way!
Y’better look up boys, if you hear a rattlin’ noise
Oh save me from the pain of rattlesnake rain.

Verses:

We were blastin’ Little Tunnel, above Naramata town, when
The charge blew a great big rattler nest an’ snakes come a-rainin’ down
Oh the rattler’s shy and peaceful...if he’s left alone,
But the surest way to get him mad is to go blow up his home!

Chorus

Coulda sold a few umbrellas with them rattlers rainin’ down, and...
They sure were in an ugly mood, by the time they hit the ground.
I really couldn’t blame them though, for coilin’ to attack
The folks who left them homeless blastin’ out that KV track.

Chorus.

I’ve seen rain in the tropics, pourin’ in a sheet.
I’ve seen rain in the wintertime, peltin’ down as sleet.
But I hope I never, ever, experience again
A downpour quite as scary as that blasted rattlesnake rain.

Chorus.

Note that the changing line (chorus 1) is also the concluding one. This is because—as the last notes of the final chorus are being sung—our bass player shakes an egg to provide a rattlesnake sound. (On the CD we use the sound of a real rattlesnake). This effect gets the audience members laughing while they're applauding (never a bad thing).

Heritage Songs vis-à-vis Folk Songs

As already mentioned, there are train songs such as “Ridin’ On That New River Train” that aren’t really about trains at all. A significant distinction between heritage songs and folk songs lies in the informational component of heritage music. To illustrate this difference, here are two songs about the building of British Columbia’s railway The Pacific Great Eastern or P.G.E. Both songs use humour to make the point that the building of this railway was a long and frustrating experience. Both are whimsical, alliterative and each has a highly singable refrain.

THE P.G.E. SONG

by Keith Crowe

(Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat, *The Young Man From Canada*,)

The P.G.E. Song

Keith Crowe

Voice

Up in that far north coun try where the skies are al ways blue, They're wait ing for the
hap py day when the P. G. E. goes through. The squaw fish will be squawking and the moose will start to
moo, The griz - zly bears will grizzle when the P. G. E. goes through. Oh, Lord! I
know my toil will end, When I hear that whis - tle com - ing round the bend.

Up in that far north country where the skies are always blue
They're waiting for the happy day when the P.G.E. goes through.
Oh the squawfish will be squawking and the moose will start to moo
The grizzly bears will grizzle when the P.G.E. goes through.

Chorus:

Oh Lord, I know my toil will end
When I hear that whistle comin' 'round the bend

Verses:

They say that all the members of Urquhart's survey crew
Will be working on the extra gang when the P.G.E. goes through.
Bill Herlihy, he's got a gal, her name is Buckskin Sue
They're going on the trap line when the P.G.E. goes through.

Chorus

The hornets build their little nests up in the spruce and pine
They love to sting the axmen who are chopping out the line.
So if the railroad bends a bit, like railroads shouldn't do
Just blame it on the hornets when the P.G.E. goes through.

Chorus

Now while running lines on snow shoes the snow got very deep,
Old Ab Richman he dug a hole, crawled in and went to sleep.
The snow blew in and covered him but we know what to do
We'll dig him out in spring time when the P.G.E. goes through.

Chorus (twice).

THE FAMOUS P.G.E.

Jack Godwin

(Kettle Valley Brakemen CD *Train Talk*)

(In...) 1912 she was started, 1912 she was started
With a glorious future charted, the famous P.G.E.
Oh profits were predicted for the famous P.G.E.
P.G.E., P.G.E. what can the meaning of those letters be?
P.G.E., oh P.G.E. Provincial...Great...Enterprise—whoopie!

By '22 she was rusted, the dream was re-adjusted
Tax payers were disgusted with the famous P.G.E.
(There was...) Little sign of progress on the famous P.G.E.
P.G.E., P.G.E. what can the meaning of those letters be?
P.G.E., oh P.G.E. Pretty...Gloomy...Effort—I agree!

By '32 she was busted, now rusted and busted
But a fortune was entrusted to the famous P.G.E.
(She was...) A sink hole for money that famous P.G.E.
P.G.E., P.G.E. what can the meaning of those letters be?
P.G.E., oh P.G.E. Promoters...Get...Everything—I see.

By '45 she was a joke, but a most expensive joke
Runnin' from nowhere to nowhere, the famous P.G.E.
(You could go from...) Nowhere to nowhere, on the famous P.G.E.
P.G.E., P.G.E. what can the meaning of those letters be?
P.G.E., oh P.G.E. Prince...George...Eventually—we'll see.

By '56 she was done, amazing everyone. But...
A little late to celebrate, the famous P.G.E.
(She was...) Forty years behind schedule the famous P.G.E.
P.G.E., P.G.E. what can the meaning of those letters be?
P.G.E., oh P.G.E. Please...God...Enough—finally!

The differences here are that the refrain in “The Famous P.G.E.” changes in each verse, providing a different definition of those initials that were used at each stage of railway construction, and—unlike “The P.G.E. Song”—the heritage song actually gives the history of the railway’s construction.

The Joys of Performing Heritage Music

For those readers who might desire to perform as heritage entertainers, here are some ideas gleaned from much trial and error. First, you don’t have to write your own songs. You can seek out the interesting informational nuggets surrounding your favourite Canadian history songs, develop them into brief anecdotes with a coherent theme and start telling the world about yourself.

Begin with museum curators, entertainment coordinators for seniors’ centres, and program directors at large seniors’ living accommodations. Seniors are a rapidly expanding percentage of Canada’s population and they are most receptive to heritage entertainment. Museum curators exist to spread heritage—if they are enthusiastic about their job, they are instant allies. As non-profit societies museums can usually get free advertising for performances and your show will bring locals in the museum door. This, curators crave. But make sure that you have agreed beforehand on the performer/venue split of the gate.

Another focus for marketing is any group having a specific interest in the heritage theme you’ve chosen. Mark Twain said that the best audience in the world is one that’s well informed, well fed, and slightly drunk. The Kettle Valley Brakemen got our start by performing as after dinner entertainment (in wineries) for groups of cyclists on multi-day treks of the Kettle Valley Trail. Mark Twain was right!

Of course for those who write their own songs, heritage performing is pretty close to heaven. You are invariably playing your tunes for an appreciative, attentive audience. One of the factors that make it easy to recruit other musicians to join you is that you are almost always playing in concert.

In the experience of The Kettle Valley Brakemen, taking your original heritage CDs to the local music store can be frustrating. If it is accepted at all it gets put in the “folk section”

(bottom shelf at the back of the store). However, if you circulate your CDs to museum gift shops (where they’re always looking for appropriate product), they may get displayed up near the cash register and people who see them in that setting are much more likely to be buyers. Of course the worldwide web, which is eroding the monopoly of big record companies and big media outlets, is your friend. No matter how narrow your heritage niche, interested people will find you.

The Future of Heritage Music

There is no federal minister of folk music, but there is one for Heritage. Each province also pays lip service to the value of increasing heritage awareness. A saving grace is the fact that heritage entertainers celebrate the uniqueness of a region and tourists are eager to soak that up.

Heritage festivals are easy to arrange, highly popular and becoming more numerous. The blending of stories with songs can make radio coverage a problem, but Stuart McLean intersperses songs with his stories and Garrison Keillor’s *Prairie Home Companion* used a similar approach with success. In the future, when the history of Canadian heritage music is written, the name Kerri Gemmel will be among those most hallowed. For the past five years Kerri has been hosting a radio show called *Ballads of a Blind Man* on station CJHR (HR for heritage radio) in Renfrew, Ontario. Each week she picks a theme, researches the history and intersperses appropriate music throughout the story she tells. Her show is wildly popular throughout the Ottawa Valley and she has promoted the music of many artists who would not otherwise get airplay. A true believer in “the cause,” she and her show’s sponsors have been thriving since she took heritage stories and music to the air. She regularly receives the same sort of feedback that heritage performers get following a show.

In short, people love having their history presented to them in an amusing way. The “two-fer” of learning while being entertained is very appealing. Canada’s population is aging and there exists a polite, receptive, CD-buying public out there, eager to hear the story of our country’s past. It’s a fast-growing market crying out to be served.