

Canadian Folk Music in the Late Twentieth Century

The Canadian folk music revival continued, with ebbs and flows, during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It has been called a time of festivals and famous names, but there are four main aspects to this ongoing story. There was a burgeoning of institutions, especially the folk clubs and folk festivals that provided an infrastructure for the folk music scene, mainly in the big cities. The work of scholars of traditional music continued, whether they were working independently or for such organizations as the CBC, the National Museum, and a few universities, such as Memorial, Laval, and York. Many artists, too, still sang and played traditional songs or, like Stan Rogers, created new music that was clearly 'in the tradition'. The careers of big name artists such as Gordon Lightfoot who had become well established in the 1960s expanded further, but several of them continued to perform as headliners at folk festivals, although others drifted into the commercial rock and pop music scene or, like Ian Tyson, into country & western. A host of new artists emerged, some of whom performed traditional songs solo or in folk-rock bands, while others were singer-songwriters with a debt to traditional music who continued to employ an acoustic playing style.

We can begin by looking at the institutional infrastructure of the revival, examining the function of festivals such as Mariposa, Winnipeg and Vancouver by means of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* piece on "Folk Festivals" and the articles on individual festivals.¹ Exploring the history of Mariposa can be done through the previously-noted Usher and Page-Harpa book *'For What Time I Am in This World': Stories from Mariposa*² and Sija Tsai's useful account in *Canadian Folk Music* titled "Mariposa: Surface Sketches of a Wandering Festival."³ One of the most useful articles in *Stories from Mariposa* is Debra Sharp's "Mariposa: How Times Have Changed."⁴ There is quite a wealth of other articles in *Canadian Folk Music* on folk festivals in the late twentieth century. As examples we may cite Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat's "The State of the Art: The Folk Revival in Canada,"⁵ Ken Bloom's "The Performer at Festivals,"⁶ Greg Brunskill's "Winnipeg Folk Festival 1986,"⁷ Michael Cooney's "Some Thoughts on Folk Festivals,"⁸ Gary Cristall's "The Function of Folk Festivals,"⁹ Anne Davies' "Calgary Folk Festival,"¹⁰ Lanie Melamed's "Big Festivals Don't Work...At Least for Me!"¹¹ and Ken Persson's "Edmonton Folk Festival."¹² Those are just a few – there are many more.

Parallel to the folk festivals were the folk clubs. You can find in the pages of *Canadian Folk Music* periodic reports on the activities of certain clubs, too many to notice more than a few here. For example, Tony Montague discussed the history of the Vancouver club in "Spanning the Revival: 20 Years of the VFSS,"¹³ Caroline Parry reported on "Christmas at Fiddler's Green" (Toronto)¹⁴ and Sandy Greenberg gave a brief account of the Harbour Folk Society in Halifax.¹⁵ Others include James Prescott on the "Calgary Singers' Circle,"¹⁶ Warren Sparks on "The Kelowna Folk Club"¹⁷ and Ian Robb and Vince Veness on the humorously-titled "The Old Sod Folk Music Society."¹⁸

It is also important to examine the key role played by the CBC in furthering Canadian 'national' music and multiculturalism, topics discussed by Gilles Potvin in "The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian Folk Cultures."¹⁹

We can briefly take note of some of the scholarly advances made in the collecting and study of Canadian traditional music during the last three decades of the century. Edith Fowke published *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* in 1973,²⁰ and she subsequently brought out a revised edition of *Canada's Story in Song as Singing Our History*.²¹ Similarly, a new edition of *Songs of Work and Freedom* appeared as *Songs of Work and Protest*.²² And *More Folk Songs of Canada* was reprinted as *Folk Songs of Canada II*.²³ In 1980 Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat released the first edition of their cross-Canada survey *Songs and Stories of Canada*.²⁴ Neil Rosenberg's edited collection *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* was an influential work of a general nature.²⁵ In 1994 Rosenberg also wrote a provocative article titled "The Canadianization of Newfoundland Folk Song; or the Newfoundlandization of Canadian Folk Song."²⁶

Most important academic works, however, were of a more specialized character, limited to a particular subject or region such as Newfoundland. Starting with that province, we've seen that Kenneth Peacock's *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* had been published in 1967,²⁷ followed by Maud Karpeles' *Folk Songs From Newfoundland* in 1971.²⁸ Sheldon Posen and Michael Taft reported on "The Newfoundland Popular Music Project" in the 1973 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.²⁹ One follow-up from this was Taft's *A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1904-1972*.³⁰ In 1981 Gordon Cox's *Folk Music in a Newfoundland Out-*

port was published by the National Museum of Man,³¹ and a few years later Genevieve Lehr edited *Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook*, which included the fruits of her collecting with the fine local ballad-singer Anita Best.³² And as just one example of academic scholarship we can mention Gerald Pocius' influential article on Newfoundland folk customs titled "The Mummers Song in Newfoundland: Intellectuals, Revivalists and Cultural Nativism."³³

For the Maritimes, notable publications included Helen Creighton's *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick* (1971), which featured the repertoire of Angelo Dornan,³⁴ and her autobiography *A Life in Folklore* four years later.³⁵ In 1979 the National Museum reprinted her collaboration with Calum MacLeod on *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*,³⁶ and 1988 saw the publication of her collaboration with Ron Labelle, *La Fleur du Rosier: Chansons folkloriques d'Acadie*.³⁷ Edith Fowke edited *Sea Songs and Ballads from Nineteenth Century Nova Scotia: The William H. Smith and Fenwick Hatt Manuscripts* in 1981.³⁸ Randall and Dorothy Dibblee's edition of *Folksongs from Prince Edward Island*³⁹ increased public awareness of the folk music heritage of that province. John O'Donnell, the expert on Nova Scotia mining songs, edited a collection of material sung by the miners' choir that he directed, *Men of the Deeps*,⁴⁰ following this in 1992 with *'And Now the Fields Are Green': A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada*.⁴¹

The first volume of Marius Barbeau's grand project of printing all the Quebec folksongs he had collected over the decades, *Le rossignol y chante*,⁴² had been issued back in 1962, but it was twenty years before the second, *En roulant ma boule*,⁴³ appeared and another five before *Le Roi boit*⁴⁴ saw the light of day. Madeleine Béland and Lorraine Carrier-Aubin's collection *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers*,⁴⁵ published in 1982, complemented Barbeau's work. Between 1977 and 1984 Conrad Laforte's magnificent five-volume *Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française* was published by Presses Universitaires Laval.⁴⁶

Moving on to Ontario, Edith Fowke's *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* was published in 1970,⁴⁷ but it was over two decades before her book on LaRena Clark followed in 1994.⁴⁸ Fowke, however, was not the only important collector/scholar working in Ontario. Germain Lemieux published his two-volume *Chansonnier franco-ontarien* in 1974/75.⁴⁹

In the West, Tim Rogers produced his pioneering *A Survey of English Language Music of the Canadian Prairies and Foothills* in 1975⁵⁰ and three years later provocatively asked in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* "Is There an Alberta Folk Music?"⁵¹ He contributed

his important article "The Three Westernmost Provinces: A Call for Some Much-Needed Research" to *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* in 1985.⁵² Dave Spalding's discovery of "What We Sang Down On the Farm: A Forgotten Manuscript on Western Canadian Singing Traditions" appeared in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* in 1985.⁵³ Jon Bartlett introduced "The P.J. Thomas Collection of British Columbia Folk Songs" in a 1976 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Journal*,⁵⁴ and the first edition of Phil Thomas' *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* was published in 1979.⁵⁵

We next focus on certain artists whose performances and recordings were at least partially concerned with popularizing Canadian traditional music, and who thereby helped maintain in existence older regional musical traditions, whether they came from Newfoundland, the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the prairies or British Columbia. We find introductory articles from the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* on such individuals as John Allan Cameron, Clary Croft and Allister MacGillivray,⁵⁶ and on four groups, Figgy Duff, the Barra McNeils, the Rankin Family and Rawlins Cross.⁵⁷ To explore more deeply the contributions of two individuals, both Nova Scotians, in greater depth we can read Clary Croft's personal memoir "Carrying the Tune: The Personal Reflections of a Traditional Music Popularizer"⁵⁸ and Chris McDonald's article on "John Allan Cameron: The Godfather of Cape Breton's Celtic Music,"⁵⁹ both of which can be found in *Canadian Folk Music*.

Stan Rogers was the most important figure to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while Garnet Rogers developed into a major singer-songwriter after his brother's untimely death. Stan was a hugely talented and influential songwriter, but his songs (and performances, which included sea-shanties) were clearly "in the tradition," so much so that some of his creations have been assumed by later singers to be anonymous and traditional. His work may thus be seen as an important example of how a folk tradition may be developed and expanded without losing its essential nature. Zak Morgan's article on Stan and Garnet and on Scottish singer James Macpherson interrogates the issues of tradition and identity that are illustrated by Rogers' career and *oeuvre*.⁶⁰ There is also an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* article on "Stan Rogers,"⁶¹ and several articles about him in the pages of *Canadian Folk Music*, to which Rogers himself was an occasional contributor.⁶² They included Emily Friedman's "Stan Rogers: A Song Ended Too Soon,"⁶³ Tim Rogers' "Stan and the Revival"⁶⁴ and David Watts' "Creativity and Mourning in the Work of Stan Rogers."⁶⁵

Although he was a singer-songwriter, Stan Rogers was primarily on the 'traditional' side of the big divide between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' that

emerged in folk music in the second half of the twentieth century. Some artists, of course, straddled the gap, especially those who used their music in political or environmental causes. For an introduction to contemporary folk music in this period, one can go to the general *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* article on the subject.⁶⁶ However, the genre can be divided into protest and topical song on the one hand and the more personal musings (usually about male-female relationships) of singer-songwriters on the other.

The political dimension of the folk revival was a particularly interesting component, and nationalist, protest, and topical song is evident in the work of such artists as Bonnie Dobson, Vera Johnson, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Stringband, and Stompin' Tom Connors. We have encountered some of these artists already, but Dobson, Johnson, and Stringband are new. An example of a Canadian folksinger whose songs almost all fell in the topical or protest category is Vera Johnson, and her life and work was surveyed in "Vera Johnson: Ave Atque Vale (June 13, 1920 – November 9, 2007)" in *Canadian Folk Music*.⁶⁷ Bonnie Dobson, on the other hand, became best known for one protest song against nuclear weaponry, although her albums reveal that she also sang traditional folksongs as well as some singer-songwriter material. There is an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* piece on her and also on Stringband, a group that included political satire in its mixed repertoire.⁶⁸ Humorous topical songs (and historical songs) were also the *forte* of Stompin' Tom Connors. Buffy Sainte-Marie's songs tended to be more strident, serious and hard-hitting exposés of the injustices done to Native peoples or the tragic consequences of militarism. There is an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* on Buffy,⁶⁹ and one can get a good sense of her best early songwriting from *The Buffy Sainte-Marie Song Book*.⁷⁰

The field of contemporary folk music was in the main dominated by singer-songwriters, and it expanded hugely from the late '60s onwards. The big names from the sixties all continued their careers, making important and original recordings during the next three decades, but some significant and influential individuals need to be added to this category as a result of their prominence in the later decades of the century. Three in particular stand out: Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLaughlan, and Ian Tyson (as a solo artist). Unfortunately we find little in the pages of *Canadian Folk Music* on these figures, but there are introductory articles in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, and, of course, data on their later careers in *Wikipedia* and elsewhere on the internet.⁷¹ There is also Marco Adria's *Music of Our Times: Eight Canadian Singer-Songwriters*.⁷² One can go initially to the same sources for preliminary information on the

host of new folk artists who can claim to be significant contributors to the folk movement during the last quarter of the twentieth century. They include such artists as Heather Bishop, Bill Bourne, David Essig, Stephen Fearing, Ron Hynes, Connie Kaldor, James Keelaghan, Rita MacNeil, and Ian Tamblyn, and this list is by no means exhaustive.⁷³ Again one can find regrettably little on these creative performers in the pages of CSTM publications, indicating that they weren't regarded as sufficiently 'traditional' in their approaches. Yet two questions naturally arise with regard to these artists: what did each do that was especially innovative, valuable, and uniquely Canadian, and to what extent did they draw upon older Anglo-American folk traditions, on other Canadian vernacular music (including country & western), and on British and U.S. protest and other contemporary songs?

Notes

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