The Life of a Troubadour
by Vera Johnson

"What an interesting life you must lead," people say to me enviously. "How lucky you are."

True, it is an interesting life. January & February I spend touring through the U.S.A., giving folk services at Unitarian churches and fellowships and house concerts for folk societies. From March to the end of May I'm in Britain singing in the folk clubs. In June I come back to Vancouver, visit some of my family and do a little office work. July and August I'm travelling across Canada, again giving folk services and concerts. At the beginning of September I head across the Atlantic for another three-month's stay. Then it's back to B.C. in December, to do some more office work and celebrate Christmas.

It's interesting, but it's also hectic and frequently exhausting. And luck doesn't enter into it. I do all my own booking, which involves a tremendous amount of correspondence and plain hard work.

Don't think I'm complaining. I love the life and wouldn't trade it for any other. To help you understand why, here are some of the highlights from a short period in 1973.

It started out with a bang on January 1st when I gave a concert in Seattle at the home of my good friend Dee Raible. Our hostess was absent - stuck out on one of the San Juan Islands and unable to get back because of strong gales. We all had a fine time nevertheless. The next night we had an even better time at the Unitarian Fellowship in Olympia. There was a big crowd and the response to my
songs was tremendous.

The next day I wrote a song about Dee. Sang it for her daughter Debbie, who loved it. When Dee came home, sang it for her. She cried. I cried. Then we piled into her car and drove to Edmonds with that mad wonderful ceramic sculptor Ben Sams in the back seat. The carburetor was acting up; the motor coughed as we struggled up hills in unevenly spaced lurches. Snow began to fall. But we made it. Small crowd, didn't sing very loudly but seemed to enjoy listening. By the time I finished, snow was thick on the ground and still falling. We limped home. Tried one hill, couldn't make it, but found one with a lesser grade and varoomed triumphantly into the garage.

Next night Ben came with us again, this time hugging a big Sony tape-recorder and mikes. Small crowd again at Lake Forest, but this time such good chorus singers we had a great time. Back to Dee's to listen to Cheech & Chong and Lightnin' V. Hopkin.

Saturday I travelled by bus to Yakima and the next morning gave a service for the Unitarian Fellowship. Monday off to Portland where I did five one-night stands; I had a calamitous experience at East Rose Church. In the middle of a song, toward the end of the concert, a machine head broke, so I couldn't tune the bottom string. However I managed to get through the last few songs and next day my cousin's husband directed me to a music store and a friend, Lyle Dobson, drove me there. As we got out of the car he said, "There's one of the only two good restaurants in Portland."

I said, "No, the only two good restaurants here are L'Auberge and Genoa and my cousin's husband owns both of them."

"Those are the two I meant," Lyle said. We were right outside L'Auberge but I hadn't noticed.

In the music shop a very pleasant young man found a Martin machine head and replaced the whole deal for me for only $1.50. In Eugene I was interviewed on TV and sang one song about my mother, "Marion". I had no sooner finished it when somebody was on the phone wanting the words. That made me feel good.

The weather in Portland was fierce - freezing rain that made the footing precarious. And I thought I was heading south into sunshine!

I travelled to San Francisco by bus - a long, wearying trip. Faith Petric, the doyen of the San Francisco Folk Music Society was in Europe but I had arranged to stay at her place. The night I arrived Rosalie Sorrels was at Freight & Salvage. Rosalie and I had been room-mates at Mariposa in 1971 and I wanted to take in her gig, but was just too exhausted.

Next day, Sunday, I gave a folk service at the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Church in Walnut Creek (church packed, great responsive crowd - wonderful morning!) and a concert at Faith's that night. A disaster - only eight people showed up!

From there I went to Carmel to sing for Joe Broadman's school, then to Monterey to stay overnight with friends. A terrible storm rattled through the canyon, shook the house all night long, knocked down the power lines.

Back to San Francisco, had a visit with Rosalie, gave a concert for the Marin County Folk Music Club. Delightful old home remodelled by architect John Barger. Beautiful vegetarian meal in my honor - green peppers stuffed with barley and herbs, cheese guiche, etc. Great concert, wonderful crowd. Back to Faith's and got in on tail-
end of the regular San Francisco FMC gatherings. All kinds of music all over the house. Bluegrass in the basement. Traditional British songs in the living room. Bawdy songs in the kitchen. Finger-picking guitar in a bedroom one floor up. It probably went on until 4:00am as usual but by that time I was hidden away up in the attic, catching up on my sleep.

Next day I met Malvina Reynolds and we took part in a demonstration against Nixon's inauguration. Then to a friend's for dinner and a song-swapping session. And another gig that night at the Coffee House, the Seventh Seal. Little pay, but a rewarding night. Stayed overnight at Malvina's.

Sunday, another folk service, this time in Santa Rosa. The response was sensational and the building packed. After a wine and cheese luncheon, back to San Francisco, then Berkeley for a visit with relatives and another house concert. Only 20 people but we had a good time. A French boy drove me to Malvina's to spend the night.

By this time I was really worn out, but fortunately was able to catch up on my rest the next three days at Faith's home. Two of the residents, Hoyle & Burl, like myself are involved in folk music and also ardent scrabble players. Playing with them I was able to achieve a life-long ambition by making four seven-letter-words in one game! It will probably never happen again.

Then I headed farther south to Los Angeles. Last year I travelled this leg by bus - took 12 hours, cost $18.50. This time I rode the champagne flight of Western Airlines. We made it in one hour and they poured free champagne all the way. And it was $2.00 cheaper than the bus!

After visiting friends in L.A. and giving services in Hemet and Redlands I carried on to Phoenix (visited friends and relatives) and then to Dallas. Stayed in near-by Irving with a Unitarian friend who is a flight engineer with Braniff airlines. He has a trampoline in the backyard and Budweiser beer on tap in the kitchen. And an enormous hairy dog called Pfeiffer.

Spent two pleasant weeks there. Sang for the Dallas Folk Music Society one night - a great evening. Gave a folk service. Did some cycling and had a lot of fun cooking. Sang for a young people's group at the church - another good evening. In fact, everything was wonderful except the weather.

Unexpected development - two women's groups from the First Unitarian Church of Dallas got in touch with the National Women's Political Caucus being held in Houston and arranged to send me there to sing my "Women's Liberation Blues". Drove into Houston in a blinding snowstorm.

Diana Wilson - a tall gorgeous blonde with a brain - persuaded me to visit a special radio station run by volunteers (it must be a pretty progressive outfit, they've been bombed twice) where I sang and talked for 1½ hours for the benefit of tapes, then an evening show for half an hour and just made the 5:00 flight to Dallas.

February 13th I was on the bus again and travelled right through to Fresno. The night before I cooked a special meal in honor of my departure - fried mushrooms, steamed potatoes, eggs foo young, green peppers stuffed with rice and cottage cheese, baking powder biscuits. It was beautiful but there was enough left to feed an army.

I was dead by the time I got to Fresno, but managed to resurrect myself after a few hour's sleep. Stayed with Harry Hart of the Central California Folk Music Society who had arranged a concert in
a hall. Pathetically small audience - about 18. Not very good chorus singers, but at least appreciative listeners. We went home and watched a movie about the Mafia where John Cassavetes took them all on, but lost, alas. It was a bad night all around.

The next day I caught a bus for Vancouver - 24 hours non-stop. Plunged right back into office work and answering mail and making travel plans. February 25th I was travelling again, but only as far as Seattle, to give a folk service in Kirkland. And on March 2nd I was back in London, recovering from jet lag and preparing a program for my first booking in Birmingham.

The folk scene in Britain is a complete contrast to that in North America. The distances are shorter, the clubs spring up like mushrooms in every village, the chorus singing is usually good and occasionally fantastic, the traditional singing is incredible - but that's another story. Some time I hope to tell you about it.

--Vera Johnson