

# FOLK MUSIC IN THE PRAIRIES



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*The Traditional Folk Trio: l-r Jocelyne Legault, Hugh Hendry, and Bill Sarjeant.*

*An article from one of our Saskatoon correspondents, an earlier version of which originally appeared in Folk Review, a publication out of England. Thanks to Fred Wood, editor of Folk Review, for permission to reprint.*



When one becomes acquainted with the rich heritage of British folk music, one is initially struck by its variety and diversity. However, with

increasing knowledge there comes a growing awareness of the common threads weaving English, Scottish, Irish and even Welsh songs and tunes together into a single colourful fabric. The same stories are told, in different words or even different languages. Certainly there are nowadays strong American influences, a sort of musical skin-graft that has taken quite well on some areas of healthy flesh beneath; certainly folk

music nowadays integrates with 'art songs', medieval music, popular songs and rock, so that boundaries have become hard to make. Even so, there is an essential underlying unity which makes it possible for a single singer or musician to comprehend—or to believe he comprehends—the whole fabric of British folk song.

In the Canadian Prairies, it is far otherwise. This was one of the last areas of the world to receive white settlement; its towns and villages still have many of the elements of pioneer communities, both good and bad. Among the good elements are an innate friendliness and readiness to absorb newcomers into the life of the community—an attitude refreshingly different from the distrust of 'foreigners' so evident in many English villages. Among the bad features are an unawareness of history and a belief that all change is for the better, so that good stone or brick buildings are cheerfully torn down to make way for new 'ticky-tacky' erections; and indeed there is a seeming unawareness to certain types of ugliness so that, whilst residential districts are usually most attractive, the commercial areas are hideous in their utter heterogeneity, a-bristle with advertising signs and cocooned with pendant wires.

There is a fervent, almost feverish desire for culture—culture recognised as such, culture with a capital 'c'. Opera is a genuine passion with some, an affectation with many; amateur theatre groups are numerous and creditably active and professional theatres are beginning to be established (maybe five so far in the three Prairie provinces). Energetic symphonic societies prop

up the shaky finances of a few orchestras and Yamaha violin classes stridulate with the fervent efforts of mothers and children. This enthusiasm is endearing but, at times, depressingly uncritical; almost any theatrical or symphonic performance, however mediocre, is likely to receive the sort of standing ovation appropriate only to a truly excellent one—and the excellent ones get no more.

The radio and television networks have a curiously amateurish character which is likewise both endearing and irritating. The chatty local stations, clogged though their channels are with banal advertisements, somehow have a cheeriness quite lacking in their British equivalents. CBC, the national network, is quite likely to announce the news and produce instead a blast of martial music or a windy gust of French opera; or there may be dead silence for a few minutes, followed by a mid-sentence connexion with the eastern Canadian news-reader. Whatever happens, do not expect any apology or explanation; hitches that would produce abject writhings by BBC announcers are so regular as to occasion no comment here! The University stations have disc-jockeys stumbling cheerfully through their introductions. 'This is by a guy called Saint-Saens (pronounced in the most English fashion!)—I guess he was a Frenchman or somethin'—but, though probably not beginning at the scheduled time, excellent music or first class talks will eventually reward the listener to these stations.

How does folk music fit into this context? Well, folk music is culture with a small 'c'; there are no estab-

lished authorities to follow and your average Albertan or Manitoban does not know how he's expected to deal with it. Moreover, folk music is something like an old building — maybe it's getting in the way of progress, maybe it ought to be torn down, discarded, replaced with something more up-to-date. Let's forget it and switch on the radio . . .

In any case, just which sort of music is one talking about? There is no unified tradition here; how can there be, when as many settlers came from the Ukraine and Roumania as from Britain, when sizeable contingents came from Germany, Scandinavia and Iceland, from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, from Hungary, Greece and Italy, from China and Japan? And somewhere underneath all these strata is the buried bedrock of the native Indians; they were never numerous in these northern Prairies, they have been smothered by numbers and partly absorbed by intermarriage; but they are still present and still have their own music.

Most of these groups are struggling hard to maintain their identity and preserve at least something of their cultural inheritance. In the west, Prime Minister Trudeau's emphasis on bilingualism isn't very popular; why choose French as a second language here in Saskatchewan, where people of French descent are vastly outnumbered by Ukrainian-speakers and German-speakers and where indeed, arguably, more people speak Hungarian, Italian or Greek than French? Why worry about Québec, anyway? It's as far away as Buglaria is from London, after all. Western Canadians naturally resent

the attempts of the national Government to foist a bicultural system upon them; here the feeling is all for multiculturalism. Sizeable provincial government grants are awarded annually to help the various components of our ethnic patchwork — Roumanians, Icelanders, Hungarians and (most of all) Ukrainians—to preserve their cultural inheritance.

So there are folk festivals, ethnic evenings and 'fests' at which different national groups display their heritage. Whether all these people will succeed in their endeavour to keep their heritage alive is not so clear. Older people are carrying on the traditions in which they grew up; children, and teenagers still young enough to be dragooned, are also participating. But where are the young adults—the people in their late teens, their twenties, their thirties — the people who, above all, should be displaying their energy and doing their courtship in such dances? A few are there, but not many; most are instead using their energy in dancing to rock groups and doing their courtship at drive-in cinemas. When they are more elderly, will they in their



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turn take up these traditions, preserving them as if in cultural aspic, as rituals to be maintained but not to be altered? Or will all be forgotten, when the generations who grew up in these traditions have faded away?

And where, above all, is the folk song of these countries? Folksong of any kind is rarely heard at these cultural festivals. Is it considered unfit for public performance but continuing in private gatherings, or is it dying because uncomprehended? The latter seems most likely; many of the young dancers can neither speak the language of their parents nor comprehend the social background of their songs.

Since the language that has taken over is English—an English with a different accent and a sprinkling of Americanisms, but still English—then surely the British tradition, if any, ought to be flourishing. There can be no question that many fine songs were brought here, from Europe and from eastern Canada. Since Saskatchewan is the archetypal Prairie province, let us consider the collection *Folk Songs of Saskatchewan* (Folkways FE 4312), assembled by the British-born collector and folksinger Barbara Cass-Beggs. It contains songs from the Cree, Sioux and Assiniboine Indians; songs from the French-speaking halfbreed trappers, the Métis (including that lament for their lost empire, 'la Chanson de Riel'); and songs brought over from eastern European peoples. The bulk of the songs, though, are appropriately in English. Some come direct from the British tradition ('Barbara Allen' and the ballad parody 'Henry my Son');

some are variants of songs from eastern Canada ('A poor lone girl in Saskatchewan') or the United States ('O bury me not on the lone prairie' and, remarkably, 'Lakes of Pontchartraine'). But there are also songs born on the struggle for existence in the Prairies, all of them humorous: 'Flunky Jim', 'E.P. Walker' and the valiantly cheerful song of the Depression years, 'Saskatchewan, the land of snow'. Good songs, all of them; yet they are not taught in schools, nor readily found in songbooks; and I have met smalltown Saskatchewanians who had never even heard the song 'Saskatchewan' till I sang or played it to them.

The French-Canadian folksong tradition is living and developing; but it has no place here in the Prairies. Over in the Maritimes, too, there are good audiences for singers performing old and newer sea-songs and ballads. And, it must be confessed, there is a recognized form of Canadian folksong familiar right across Canada, that has good following here in the Prairies. It stems from a small group of contemporary singers, mostly located in the east; most familiar of these are Gordon Lightfoot, whose simple melodies and pregnant lyrics have real individuality and charm, and the husband and wife duo Ian and Sylvia Tyson. Here in the west we have (or had, till she migrated to California) a truly original singer in Joni Mitchell, who was born in Alberta and grew up in Saskatoon and whose subtle tunes and often truly poetic lyrics have brought her a deserved international fame.

Yet this music has little indeed in common with traditional folk music.



Its lyrics are primarily descriptive, of emotions or scenes. They are without the directness of traditional folk song; their imagery is involute and allusive, not simple and readily comprehended. They are very much songs of their day, not songs for all time. The tunes are lightweight, without much musical or emotional range and yet attractive enough; musically they have close kinship with modern Canadian popular music. (Indeed, Canadian popular music in general—even Canadian rock—has this same lightness of touch which differentiates it from its British and American counterparts.)

All in all, contemporary Canadian 'folk song' is more akin to the music of mediaeval troubadours; it is intended for an educated, thinking audience well able to appreciate its lyrical subtleties. Thus it is essentially a music of the university radio stations and the campus bars. Occasionally a Lightfoot song may be featured on CBC or one of the commercial channels; occasionally, a visit by one of the big name singers packs a concert hall or auditorium for a fleeting evening; and an occasional hotel features the local counterparts of such singers in its cocktail lounge. But it is not an outgrowth from the folk song tradition and its popular appeal is quite

limited; personally, I very much doubt if any of these songs will be remembered a hundred years hence.

Much more widely understood and appreciated here are the 'country-and-western', 'old-timey' and 'bluegrass' styles imported from the U.S.A., with their busy banjos and their elemental emotionalism. Some radio stations broadcast nothing else. There are some home products too; Stomping Tom Connors of the Maritimes relates as little to his Province as Pete Sayers does to Cambridgeshire. Saskatoon has its 'Blackstrap Mountain Boys', named with unwitting appropriateness after the artificial mountain built for skiing alongside a local lake. . . .

The great folk festival of Canada is of course the Mariposa, held in Toronto each July and with a supporting organization which functions throughout the year, sponsoring and encouraging other folk activities in eastern Canada. Winnipeg too has its Folk Festival, which attracts to that city folksong talent from all over North America and even Britain. At neither Festival have Prairie performers been at all prominent, however.

A folk festival was held last year in Edmonton; it too was dominated by singers imported from other regions, some of whom had only little to do with even the stretched Canadian concept of folk song, and it appears to have been insufficient of a commercial success to be run again. A more valiant and sustained effort has been the Regina Folk Festival, now in its tenth year. This festival is the only one that has featured Prairie singers to any considerable degree. However, it has no strong organization behind it, as has Mariposa; its survival from

year to year has depended on the good will of a limited number of enthusiasts in the Queen City. Will it still be running, even a few years from now?

Folksong clubs are depressingly few in the Prairies and confined to the largest cities; they have not sprouted and grown in small communities, as has happened so widely in the villages and small towns of England. Calgary is fortunate in having two excellent, albeit closely interrelated, folk clubs, the Calgary Folk Club and the Rocky Mountain Folk Club, which, with their beer-drinking but well-mannered and participating audiences, approach more closely the British style of club than any others in the Prairies. Calgary is also fortunate in having several coffee houses, like Sancious, in which folksong is featured, and an excellent folk shop and gathering place in Buckdancer's Choice. In Edmonton, things are much less good; the Edmonton Folk Club flourished exceedingly for a while but died a couple of years ago; and The Hovel was swinging almost wholly to rock music before it too died. The Southside folk club started well but acquired an unfortunate reputation for bad audience behaviour that in the end deterred both audience and singers; under new management and with name altered to Southside, it has recently been recovering something of its lost lustre but appears to be swinging wholly to the booking of big-name contemporary-folk singers. The Regina Folk Guild has had a chequered career but has recently flourished sufficiently to be able to open on two weekend nights; but it is the only club in that city. In Saskatoon a Sunday night club, Caf 

Domingo, has been running for almost a year now and purveys jazz and some classical music along with its staple of folk song—but only two clubs in the whole of Saskatchewan? I know little of the Manitoba folk scene; Winnipeg has a Folklore Centre and a number of coffeehouses that have featured folksingers, but seems to have no clubs at present; and I have heard of none elsewhere in that province.

University clubs come and go on the nine prairie campuses, but only Lightfoot-style performers and blues singers hold audience attention. At the University of Saskatchewan, for example, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee got rapturous and well-merited applause, but Liam Clancy—though equally excellent—was given an unhappy time by ill-mannered and uncomprehending students.

Nevertheless, traditional folk music is by no means dead. In Saskatoon, long before it produced its first folksong club, a group of enthusiasts were meeting regularly to sing. Among them was Hugh Hendry, formerly a resident at Dolina MacLellan's club in Edinburgh, who for a while formed the 'Traditional Folk Trio' along with two other geologists—French Canadian singer Jocelyne Legault and the present writer (formerly of Nottingham Folk Workshop). During the last year, an excellent Welsh folksinger, Sandra Johns, has been living in this city and singing solo or with the writer; and Saskatoon has also produced its own fine traditional singer in Paddy Tutty, though sadly she no longer lives in Saskatchewan. The Saskatoon Public Library has also now twice featured

summer series of folksongs for children, organised by American singer Sara Williams; and the local University radio station, CJUS-FM, has been featuring over the last winter a programme series on traditional folk song and music, *A Song for Every Season*, produced and introduced by the writer. In Edmonton, two singers from the North of England, David and Andrea Spalding (who sing under the name of Brandywine), have gained much deserved popularity in clubs and on television. Deserving of especial praise is Diane Zinyk, an Albertan who sings Scottish and English songs with a precision and sensitivity reminiscent of such British singers as Anne Briggs and Frankie Armstrong. Though a serious road accident interrupted her singing for almost a year, her voice has lost nothing of its



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quality and she may well mature into one of Canada's truly outstanding folk singers. I know little of the situation in other prairie cities, but I am sure fine singers are to be found in each; it is a shame that the vast distances here (even Saskatoon and Regina are 160 miles apart) prevent more interchange of singers.

The high priestess and priest of Canadian folksong at the national level for long have been Edith Fowke and the late Alan Mills. Edith has numerous important books to her credit, one written jointly with Alan, and both have indeed tried hard to make the Canadian public aware that this nation does have its own heritage of songs. Alan also had much exposure on records; his songs were sung clearly, so that it is easy to learn lyrics from those records, but he did little to ornament or add vocal interest to his songs. As a consequence, maybe, many other singers of Canadian songs perform them equally flatly; indeed, I find it hard to think of any nationally-known folk singer who is truly vocally adventurous, though the Toronto group Stringband perhaps come nearest. In contrast, the singers' mastery of musical instruments often approach virtuosity. Maybe it's the U.S. influence that plays up instrumental skills and plays down vocal skills. . . .

Folk rock is only beginning to be explored here in the Prairies. One group—the Saskatoon based 'Humphrey and the Dumptrucks' — showed (despite its name!) sufficient musical skill and percipience to give promise for a while of producing a sound as exciting as (though, of course, very different from) the music of such English groups as

Steeleye Span. Unfortunately, Humphrey and his group appear now to have permanently parted company and to be developing their music in quite other directions; and I know of no other groups that are currently evolving any such music.

So, for the contemporary 'folk-singer' of the Lightfoot ilk, there is a fair following here in the Prairies; but for the traditional-style folksinger (British or Canadian), opportunities to perform are at present few and the media enthusiasm not very evident. In Britain twenty years ago, folksong had few devotees and a liking for it was considered almost esoteric, whereas now it is very much more widely appreciated and understood, widely available on record and even to be heard—in its true form and not

just as rendered (or rended!) by glee singers—on the BBC. Perhaps Canada will follow suit. At present only Sylvia Tyson's Tuesday-night programme *Touch the Earth*, on CBC, regularly offers good folk music, but perhaps twenty years from now, we may have radio stations broadcasting nothing but folksong! I would like to think so, for the media here control popular taste to a degree even greater than in Britain and, until that bastion is conquered, nothing can be won. Certainly there is a rising tide of Canadian nationalism and a growing awareness of history, even out here in the Prairies; and maybe, eventually, the search for a national artistic identity may produce a new and exciting growth from this diversity of musical roots.

*William A.S. Sarjeant*



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*"The Beginning of Better Things"*