Dialogue

Every now and again I get a letter from a member that is somewhat special. In November, I wrote an old friend of mine, Paul Mills, asking him to rejoin CFMS. I knew Paul as a graduate student at the University of Western Ontario (and as one fine guitar player), before he became producer of the CBC radio programme Touch the Earth. I asked him in my letter what he thought of CFMS and why there appeared to be a gap between the Society and his employer. Here is part of his very interesting response:

"On a personal level, when we first met, I was immersed in the world of academia at Western and shortly afterwards I left it. The transition to music production was, to say the least, a light-year shift in terms of head-space, and I think it was analogous to the kind of gap you're referring to: the gap that exists and will always exist, between the "thinkers" and the "doers." This was driven home to me in 1974 when I attended a Canadian Music Society meeting in Halifax. The CFMS was very much in evidence at that meeting as the subject was "Canadian Folk Music." I was just starting plans for "Touch the Earth" and thought I should "plug into" the society. What I saw there made me very angry. The academic folkies had the floor and I was basically told that the kind of folk music programme I was planning was "out of line" and "not truly representative" of the folk field. They seemed to object in particular to the fact that I was planning on playing "contemporarized" traditional music as well as recently composed music that falls into the folk category. They seemed to object to "distortion" of folk music in this way. Later that weekend a concert was given in tribute to Helen Creighton and I had to sit through two hours of multi-voiced choirs singing harmonized versions of "She's Like A Swallow" and "Farewell to Nova Scotia" which bore about as much resemblance to the original songs as I do to Robert Redford. If that's not a distortion of the folk arts I don't know what is.

I realize I'm getting a little emotional here Tim but this academic attitude and snobbery when applied to something as basically and beautifully human as folk music really sets my blood to boil. Academic endeavour in the folk field is very necessary but I think that academics have to realize that folk music is a living art form of the common man as well as being a product of antiquity.

What all of this is leading up to, as you have probably guessed, is the fact that my image of the CFMS so far has been akin to my image of the Royal Ontario Museum. I was very encouraged upon reading your letter to ex-members, however. It seems that you are not only aware of the problem but are attempting to do something about it. The kind of "bridges" you are attempting to build between the real folkies and the academics are critical. One would hope that they are true bridges and not one way streets with a toll gate at each end.
I think the more the CFMS gets involved in the performing arts the better - concerts, clubs, and yes, even radio and television shows are all important and possible. There are very specific areas in which my programme and CFMS could co-operate and I hope that we do that in the future. "Touch the Earth" presents a pretty broad spectrum, however, and the purists are going to have to put up with the Ry Cooders and McGarrigle Sisters along with the Jon Bartletts and Marg Christls."

When I tried to sit down and write him back I found it very difficult to do. First, his candid critique is very meaningful and, rather than resent what he says, we should try to learn from it and use his honest response to help us grow as a Society. If we truly wish to concern ourselves with publics other than the academics, we must answer this commentary in a meaningful way. It's only through this kind of dialogue and critique that we can hope to forge new directions for our Society and more toward fulfillment of our goals.

Here, in part, is my effort to answer Paul's letter:

"First, let me agree with you on valuing the humanness of folk music - no matter how it is defined. I agonize when confronted with discussions about "this is" and "that isn't" folk music. My experience with these kinds of discussions is that the definer is trying to carve out an area of folk music as "his," and thereby devalue everything else. Hardly a useful tactic. The critical thing is the human and real link that is forged between the singer and the listener - in all its beauty, frailty, and honesty - this is the fundamental aspect of folk music. Any argument that obscures this, either intentionally or not, should be branded as a close relative to buffalo chips.

As far as the "Royal Ontario Museum" image of CFMS goes, I believe it's a pretty accurate characterization up to a point. A good number of the early traditional folk music collectors were not performers, which led them to consider that the accumulation of an archive was all that was needed. Hence the archive became removed from an alive musical tradition. (In all fairness, these collectors tried to seek out performers to present this material - and indeed some was produced.) However, this historical quirk did have the effect of separating the music from a contemporary and vibrant musical environment rendering the music "artifact" - rather than lively and real songs. The important thing is that some of the material has been collected. Without the work of these pioneers, a good deal of it would have been lost, which would have been a shame.

The separation of traditional material from active performance, and the CFMS identity with this, is showing radical change now. Eight of the eleven current directors and executives of CFMS are actively involved in performing folk music - six are active performers (Charlotte Cormier, Ian Robb, John Murphy, Rika & Jon and me). All of us share a commitment to reviving our traditional music - be it Vancouver coffee houses, Calgary folk clubs, Maritime singer
circles, miners' choruses, school programmes or what have you. (You can get details of these varying commitments by reading the interviews with most of these people in the Canada Folk Bulletin.) CFMS is currently embarking on a series of projects with an eye to getting Canada's marvellous folk music into the public consciousness. These projects include: (1) preparation of a basic list of books and records of the available material for free distribution to interested people (this is not an academic "bibliography," but an easily read list of basic books); (2) preparation of a record, involving CFMS people and funding, to replace the either operatic (e.g., the RCA 9 record set) or traditional or overinterpreted (e.g., the Mills' records) versions currently available; (3) an active campaign of letters to editors and commentary on various aspects of folk music; and (4) a bunch of others that are on the drawing board. All of these projects are oriented toward "de-Royal-Ontario-Museum-izing" Canadian folk music and CFMS, by reviving the music in a sensitive and musically credible way.

In my view, the academic and snobbery aspects of CFMS that you ran into in Halifax are on the wane (or at least retired). This is not to say the academic end is being devalued - rather that the vitality of human performance and communication is being promoted in CFMS now - in addition to the other aspects. Thus, CFMS is made up of a bunch of "doers" and a bunch of "thinkers," working together.

All of this by way of saying that the bridges are beginning to be built. I hope we can continue writing and work towards a truly deep understanding of our differences. To be certain, my concern is with traditional music - not to the exclusion or derogation of nontraditional forms - but simply because the reinterpretation of this music to a contemporary audience (revival) is very appealing to me. To sing an old Alberta cowboy song to an Alberta audience and find them beginning to respect and value their heritage thereby is a truly exciting thing. Comments like "your songs make me feel special about being an Albertan," or "gosh, that takes me back to when I was a kid in Hanna" are the fodder for my involvement in folk music - not money or fame or any such material "reward." Sure it's easy for me because I have a day job and don't have to eat or starve on my performance. For me it's a hobby - not a livelihood. Because of this I have the freedom to do "my own thing" - and can focus on the revival of this material. Often the full-time performer can't afford this luxury. That it is a hobby for me doesn't denigrate my commitment - or necessarily my musical competence - it only indicates my motivation in doing it. In my case it is the love of the very human and living aspects of the folk arts that are my motivation.

I don't think you and I are that far apart on this. We both know that more often than not an E chord is followed by an A, or an E note is a "mistake" in the key of G, whether or not you're singing a traditional version of Barbry Allen or a new singer-songwriter creation. The "musical grammar" we share unites us as well as our love of folk music. It's not a simple matter of using acoustic
instruments that allows us to use the word "folk" to describe the music of a Newfoundland outport or Ry Cooder - it's the hidden grammatical rules that forge the link. With this in mind, it becomes possible to view the traditional/nontraditional (or CFMS/CBC or thinker/doer) gap as a simple question of preference - combined with motivation - no more, no less. Let's clear the decks of territorial claims (this is yours - that's mine) and get after the more important issues. To me these involve discussing why we do what we do musically - our intentions, our preferences and our criteria of excellence. Let's try to get these out into the open and find out if there is any gap whatsoever."

Well, this is my attempt to begin to build a bridge over the "gap." What are your thoughts? Are there other things we can do, or say to Paul, that will help CFMS begin a full scale assault to get our folk music into public consciousness? Please let me know your thoughts, and let's enter into an active dialogue about what we're doing.

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