Mrs. Clark is, even nowadays, unusual in being a ninth-generation Canadian. She is the daughter of Benjamin LeBarr and Mary Frances Watson. Her maternal grandfather, Edward John Watson, was of English descent, the son of a Hudson’s Bay Company factor whose wife was part Indian; her maternal grandmother, Annie O’Neill Watson, was Irish; her paternal grandfather, John Edward LeBarr, was of French descent and her paternal grandmother, Martha Ann Moore, had Pennsylvania Dutch forebears.

It was John Edward LeBarr who obtained a grant of land near Lake Simcoe in Ontario and built the house in which La Rena was born in 1917. Her father was a hunter and guide in northern Ontario and, as a child, she often went with him, hunting, fishing or following a trapline. She learned songs from him, from her mother and from her two grandfathers. When she was 20, the family moved west to Manitoba and Ontario, but kept in touch with Gordon Clark, whom she had known as a youngster. Gordon served in World War II; after his return to Canada, he and La Rena were married in 1947. Since then they have moved round Canada considerably but have continued to live principally in Ontario.

The first record of Mrs. Clark’s songs appeared in 1965 (Topic 12T140, A Canadian Garland); it was perhaps the first long-playing record by a Canadian traditional singer to appear on an English label. Most of the songs chosen for inclusion on that record were indeed derived from English traditional sources, though two (Rattle on the Stovepipe and The Rifle Boys) are essentially Canadian.
The material on this new record is less "pure" but portrays much more accurately the true repertoire of an average traditional singer, who remembers the songs that he or she happens to like, without worrying at all about their sources and affinities. All are sung unaccompanied. Six songs derive from the British tradition; The Flying Cloud, The Bonnie Irish Boy, Burns and his Highland Mary, The Ploughboy, The Faithful Sailor Boy and The Lady Leroy. The first of these, a fairly complete version of that fine story of slave-hunting and piracy, is sung rather faster than usual and without the "gallows speech" usually added at the end; it makes an interesting comparison with David Jones' version, on the Mariposa Folk Festival record of 1975 (HS75001). The last is one of the many variants of the sailors' "wish-fulfillment" songs of the girl who dresses in men's clothes to follow her sailor lover. Two songs are of U.S. origin, The Lass of Mohee, a romantic adventure with an Indian girl in the earliest versions, with a Hawaiian girl in this version; and The Faded Coat of Blue, a lament after the American Civil War. Two others are specifically Canadian, The Wreck of the Asia and a lumbercamp song, Hurry Up, Harry; and perhaps a third, an attractive lovesong called My Delia Dear.

The balance of the songs are of different ilk. The Drunkard's Daughter is typical of Victorian temperance songs, if less maudlin than many. The Baggage Coach Ahead is a real "weepie" about a husband mourning his dead wife and clutching to his bosom their sobbing baby, aware that his wife's corpse lies in its coffin in that coach; many country-and-western singers still specialise in such songs and Cockney singers too have delightedly bathed themselves in such floods of sentiment. Cast Aside is of similar genre; its title tells enough of it. Old Pal of Mine is a Jimmie Rodgers yodelling song, but it too offers its share of sentiment. Yet Mrs. Clark does not strive to overdo the sentimentality; her singing has a certain quality of no-nonsense practicality that helps redeem such materials. Even so, such songs may cause purists to blink a little; but they should not, for they represent important threads in the development of folksong during the last hundred years and accordingly merit attention.

Mrs. Clark's singing style is truly traditional and, of its genre, excellent; it deserves to be listened to by all who appreciate the real thing and do not need chunky rhythm or drooling strings to make folksongs palatable. The recording quality is inferior to that of the Topic record, for there is a distinct echo on all tracks; but this is not seriously distracting. Dr. Fowke's notes are, as always, scholarly and informative. All in all, this is a worthwhile addition to the meagre recorded stock of authentic Canadian folksong in English.

William A.S. Sarjeant

Records by LaRena LeBarr Clark.
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Songs of an Ontario Family (Clark QC903)
LaRena Clark Sings Songs of Canada (Clark LSP7026)
Heritage of Folk Songs (Clark QCS1311)
Family Legend in Song (Clark LCS106)
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