I recently received the May edition of the Summer Solstice Festival newsletter, and caught the tail end of a raging argument, triggered by an article written by Owen Sound Festival director Tim Harrison. Tim, it appears, resurrected that hoary old question, “What is folk music?” and the resulting bombardment of letters gave the newsletter an “initiation into one aspect of the politics of folk—pardon me—music festivals.” In his rebuttal Tim does a very nice job of demolishing various attempts to be over specific in defining folk music: from the idea that folk music is essentially politically motivated—“ask any Celtic fiddler how capitalism is related to his fiddling,” to the notion that real folk music should be simple and easy to play—“the music any people play will be as simple or as complicated as they choose it to be, within the scope of their musical knowledge.”
This whole issue illustrates something that may seem strange all the time—that one reason why the whole folk music scene in Canada is so fragmented is that the various practitioners of the art are talking about totally different things when they talk about folk music. That is why I am glad to see the proliferation of folk festivals all over the country. These gatherings of musicians and enthusiasts are doing something that all the discussion and argument will never do. While the purists try to promote their own narrow point of view, singers get together, listen, swap, absorb what they like, discard what they don’t, combine the categories, create new ones, and break down barriers, just as folk singers have done for centuries.

Controversy apart, I like the idea of club newsletters. They can be as plain or as artsy as you like, and are a very effective way of maintaining communication and helping to book performers too. They also foster a sense of belonging to a club, and provide many non-musical regulars with a role. We exchange newsletters with several clubs in N. America and Britain, and I would say we have gained greatly from the experience. Watch for some more on newsletters in a future article.

Some ideas for your consideration, and, hopefully, your response. Is folk music better served by the coffeehouse-type establishment or by the folk club? By coffeehouse, I mean a restaurant or cafe, run as a business, and featuring folk music every night, or at weekends. I find some inherent weaknesses in this type of operation, the first being overheads. Maintaining a permanent establishment, paying a manager and staff, and perhaps providing a return on the owner’s investment all represent a considerable challenge in a business not known as a lucrative one. The need for financial stability often leads to decisions more in the interests of self-preservation than the promotion of good music; a succession of good commercial performers reinforcing the public’s (and the media’s) idea of folk music, and an unwillingness to take risks. Several times I’ve heard of established performers being refused gigs because they hadn’t played the town before. Of course if the coffeehouse does not make these wise business decisions, then it will probably fold, and that is doing folk music a disservice too.

Coffeehouses often try to overcome this problem of playing too safely by saving their featured performers for the weekend, and setting aside nights for more esoteric branches of music, such as traditional folk music, bluegrass, blues, jazz, etc. This, however highly motivated, only serves to further fragment folk music, and leads to the situation discussed earlier. Another problem is that of identity. Is the purpose of the place to serve food and drink, or to present folk music? Of course you can do both, but which is more important? Do the audience see the performer as a pleasant addition to the refreshments, or vice versa? Is food served during performances? Do seats around tables, half of which are turned away from the stage, encourage talking during sets? Is the performer the reason the audience are there?

One alternative is the folk song club. A group of enthusiasts rents premises on a weekly basis, presents a featured performer, (and floor singers) and serves coffee, tea, or pop (no beer in Ontario; you might get drunk and attack the singer) and whatever foodstuffs the health inspector will allow, at the break,—no identity crisis there. The low overheads mean a higher percentage for the musician. Advertising can be surprisingly cheap. A non-profit organisation has access to a great variety of resources closed to the coffeehouse. The club can operate on a much broader base. A good club organiser will find a great number of talented people willing to help a non-profit club “for the cause.”

This, I admit, is a rather general view of both types of operation. There are many varieties of organisation promoting folk music, many of which are extremely successful. Much depends on local conditions, the attitude of the press and radio stations, and the personalities and enthusiasm of the people doing the work. I’d be interested in your comments.

Some news and gossip: Ian Robb and his band Hang the Piper (CFB vol. 1 #6) now augmented by Grit Laskin and Seumas McGuire, have just completed an album with Folk Legacy. (only in Connecticut? Pity.) It should be available in September, and judging from some of the material I’ve heard so far, it should have at least as great an impact as Ian and Grit’s last Folk Legacy album with Margaret Christi, “The Barley Grain For Me”. Word is that Grit will be recording a long overdue solo album this summer, with Stan Rogers’ record company, Barnswallow—not before time. Speaking of Stan, he will soon be releasing an album, reportedly of traditional music, also on the Folk Legacy label.

While on the topic of records, have you noticed how many Canadian folk artists record on Folk Legacy, Philo, and Front Hall Records, all excellent labels, but all from the States? We had the makings for a while of a good Canadian folk label, in Dave Essig’s Woodshed, now absorbed by T.C.D.’s Posterity label, who don’t
seem too interested in performers of traditional music. With U.S. imports costing at least $2 over the domestic price, it would be nice if some of these performers could record at home without having to resort to the old do-it-yourself label.

Coming up this summer, in Toronto, will be Green Fiddle Morris’ second annual Morris Ale on August 25 and 26. This year they are expecting teams from London, Buffalo, Ann Arbor, Mississauga, and elsewhere. David Parry of Fiddler’s Green, and the instigator of those unforgivable Mummers’ plays, will be presenting some mediaeval drama at the U. of T. on August 4, 5, & 6 with the “Castle of Perseverance”. In addition to the play will be a fair, with dances, side shows, food, etc.

Club organisers please note several important tours coming our way from Britain this fall. England is sending us Martin Carthy, Alistair Anderson, Vin Garbutt, & Dave Surman, and from Scotland are coming Cilla Fisher and Artie Trezise, Bully Wee, and Iain McIntosh. There is also a rumour that Archie Fisher will be coming over soon as well.

Alistair Brown