

REVIEW

BUNKHOUSE AND FORECASTLE SONGS OF THE NORTHWEST

*Stanley G. Triggs, Folkways Records
FG 3569*

Stanley Triggs was born in 1928 in Nelson, B.C., a small mining, logging and railway town in the Kootenays. In his introduction to this record he says, "I have worked in logging camps, construction camps, with forestry crews, and railroad gangs. I have been river-driver, trapper, packer, lookout man, firefighter, powder monkey, animal trainer, deckhand-cook on tugboats. This is typical of life in the outdoors because jobs in one field are scarce and of short duration; when one job is over you go on to another and it's always something new." From these experiences has come the music on this album. Some pieces are traditional, some contemporary, and four were made by Stan himself.

The best folk music is that which speaks directly to people by providing a link with their own everyday experiences and concerns. Such a relationship is particularly evident in the music on this record, which is an excellent documentation and reflection of a tradition which continues today. The title gives a pretty clear indication of what you will find. Bunkhouse and forecastle songs are songs which men working together in the outdoors sing to each other in the evening after the day's work is over. Stan says of the music, "I have deliberately confined this

tape to those songs which are of my own experience and which are commonly heard in the camps today."

The music, which is simple and direct, provides a well-rounded selection within this context. Most of the songs reflect the lives of working men and their relationship to the environment in which they work. Some come from the sea; "The *Oda G.*", for example, is a humorous tribute to a tugboat Stan once worked on; "The Wreck of the *C.P. Yorke*" details an actual tragedy that occurred in 1954. Some come from the woods, such as "The Grand Hotel" which describes a loggers' spree in Vancouver. "Kettle Valley Line" is a delightful song about the habits of passengers and workers on the CPR Kettle Valley Branch line. The evils of drink are described sentimentally and humorously by "Brown Eyes" and "Sandy Morgan's Gin" respectively. There are a number of sentimental love songs, and two dance tunes, "The Lardeau Valley Waltz" and "Lake of Crimson", are also included.

In the slower songs Stan's voice tends to become somewhat constricted, but the faster, jaunty songs bring out its better qualities; it loosens up considerably, becoming much more enjoyable to listen to. All of the songs are accompanied by Stan on the mandolin, which he describes as "the only instrument for me." In some cases, such as "Sandy Morgan's Gin", this works very well, providing a complementary rhythm and intricacy of background against his voice. At other times, however, the instrument sounds a bit thin. It helps if you imagine the original

context of these songs—a bunkhouse full of men with a scattering of singers and miscellaneous instruments. In some songs, such as “The Wreck of the *C.P. Yorke*”, the mandolin seems superfluous, if not inappropriate; I would have much preferred an a cappella rendition in this case. Altogether, from a listener’s point of view, I would have like a bit more variety.

Folkways’ primary concern is, however, to get music recorded so that it won’t be lost, rather than to produce a mass-market, consumer-product. This means that the music tends to be recorded simply, as the singer or musician produces it. Presumably Stan Triggs on this album made his music the way he preferred it.

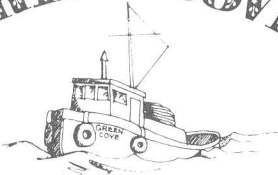
This orientation in philosophy also means that Folkways’ involvement with elaborate production methods and quality is not as high as that of the more commercial record companies. However, the recording is clear and the production in terms of comprehension is more than adequate. This record is accompanied by Folkways’ usual comprehensive booklet, which contains an introduction/biographical material on Stanley Triggs, photographs, words to the songs, and notes on all the music. It’s a shame more record companies don’t provide this kind of backup material, as it is invaluable to anyone wanting to learn a song or simply to find out more about it; I’m sure we’ve all been inundated with sometimes excellent but incomprehensible songs which appear to have emerged from a vacuum helpfully labelled “traditional”.

If you are looking for a flashy, impressive high-quality recording with elaborate production as both a means and an end, you won’t find it in this album. If, however, you are looking for a careful documentation through music of a continuing tradition—if you are interested in the music itself and where it comes from, rather than the packaging—then this is an excellent record for your collection.


Nola Johnston



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