Jim Payne is a traditional singer from Newfoundland. He is also an excellent songmaker (see "ASARCO" and "So Long" in this issue) and very involved with the issues that concern his native province. Early last summer, Jim toured the country, stopping in Vancouver, where Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat interviewed him.

Tony Montague

CFB: Can you tell us something about your musical background and roots in Newfoundland?

JIM: I come from a musical family, and I was subjected to a lot of singing. My father sings, my uncles and aunts sing, and my mother and her sisters play the organ. My grandmother has a beautiful voice—like a lark. My father was a logger and he used to sing logging songs that they’d made up in the woods. A lot of them were just lyrics that they’d put to a popular tune and there were a lot of traditional songs, well-known Newfoundland tunes that were going around. When I was growing up there were always a lot of parties around the house. A friend of my father’s would come in with a button accordion, and his wife played spoons and they both sang beautifully. You’d get a song from most everybody whether they could sing or not, and then there’d be somebody who’d get up and dance. I was always around for this, and started singing round about the same time I started talking.
In a community the size of the one we lived in there would probably be several families who were musical. My family was a little exceptional in terms of the number of people who could do something musically. This was on Pilley’s Island which has a town of about five hundred people. Not many people had TV or radio and that was, I think, one of the reasons why Newfoundland cultural traditions have survived as long as they have, because people had to provide their own entertainment. So people learned to play instruments and they sang and told stories and did magic tricks or whatever.

CFB: Is there a significant difference between the folk and traditional music that’s to be found in St. John’s and the smaller communities in Newfoundland?

JIM: No, I wouldn’t really say there is. St. John’s is a funny city—it’s made up of two sections: downtown, the working class part of the city, and the outlying suburbia. In terms of a folk scene, the pubs there are great. There’s probably up to a dozen that will have a local folk performer playing. People sometimes sing along and they almost always clear away a few chairs and dance. I’m probably one of the only solo traditional performers—there aren’t many who play professionally. Most of the traditional music scene doesn’t happen in bars, it happens more in people’s homes, mainly in the kitchens. Most native Newfoundlander know some traditional folk music. I lived in Toronto for a while; there’s lots of Newfoundlander there and they really stick together. You find a lot of the same things going on as back home, except that the music has become a lot more commercialized. You get people like Harry Hibbs and that crowd who are doing Newfoundland music with a Nashville twang: button accordion and steel guitar. That doesn’t happen in Newfoundland, not even in the bars, though there are maybe three or four bands on the island who might play that kind of thing at some of the “smart” places.

CFB: What’s the relationship between the Folklore Department at Memorial University and the folk clubs in St. John’s to folk music in general in Newfoundland?

JIM: I don’t think there’s much connection between what’s happening at the folklore department and what’s happening on the folk music scene in terms of the spread of folk music or the way it’s played. I don’t know if the folklore department has a clear idea of what it’s trying to do. Most of them are not native Newfoundlander, and to me, they seem to be trying to grab everything up as fast as possible and stick it in the archives and go off to the States where they can show it off. The folk music clubs play a somewhat more prominent role because they’re in the heart of the city. All sorts of people come in, many from the folklore department. You get people who sing songs they only half know but then you get some older people who come in and play a few tunes. After a festival in St. John’s the club is great because you get so many singers and musicians sticking around afterwards.

CFB: Has there been what we would term a “folk revival” in Newfoundland?

JIM: In some respects it’s similar to Quebec—the music was always there,
but you didn’t hear about it, until the younger people started getting back into it. For myself, I heard a lot of traditional music when I was a kid, and then I got turned off by it for a while. I was into a lot of other kinds of music, and then I got back to traditional music, I guess because that’s where my musical roots are. It’s a process that’s happened to a number of other musicians in Newfoundland. Figgy Duff was the first band to start doing that, about five years ago. It’s starting to happen more now because the people who are playing are young people who are out and around more, in the bars, trying to make a living by playing music. Traditional music is certainly playing a more prominent role and it has a lot to do with the new sense of nationalism that’s in Newfoundland.

CFB: It seems there hasn’t even been a generation gap as regards the traditions.

JIM: Exactly. You can get songs from your parents and from your own childhood sometimes. One of the problems I’ve had with urban living is that people tend to hang around with their own age group. You don’t get any kids or old people, whereas in a small community in Newfoundland you have the whole range, and every day you interact with children and with people eighty or ninety years old. It’s really enriching—you learn a lot, and not just songs, either.

CFB: Why do you think the traditions have been maintained in such a healthy state in Newfoundland—is it because of the ‘village’ structure of the province?

JIM: It’s undoubtedly because of the isolation of what I would consider the national oppression of Newfoundland—we were exploited by Britain for hundreds of years, and then passed to Canada to be exploited again. When Newfoundlanders left the province they were laughed at and discriminated against because of the way they talked, the kind of music they listened to, the kind of customs they had, the food they ate. So they were more inclined to stick together as a group—a bond somehow just from living on the island and knowing that you live within a certain boundary, that you’re surrounded by water and that once you cross that water, things are different on the other side.

CFB: So Newfoundlanders were made to feel inferior?

JIM: Undoubtedly. Even in schools they were continually trying to impress us with the “Queen’s English”—“talk the Queen’s English and avoid all your contractions and abbreviations and slang and dropped H’s and words that other people don’t recognize.” There was definitely a big push to assimilate Newfoundland into the rest of North American culture through the mass media. But the Newfoundland people ‘outran’ that I think—they were harder to get to, maybe because they knew they had so much and they didn’t want to see it all destroyed. These days people are proud to be from Newfoundland because they recognize that Newfoundland is different, has a different heritage, a different culture, a different history of traditions from the rest of Canada, though there are a lot of similarities with, say, the people of Quebec and the Acadians.

CFB: Do you see a connection
between political and traditional songs?

**JIM:** I think almost all traditional music is political in the sense that it comes from a working class, a class of downtrodden people who cannot afford the middle class art forms, so they entertain themselves; in that respect, it's traditional. A lot of the songs express bad ideas, mind you. I've had to eliminate a lot of the songs I used to do, because I don't want to be responsible for spreading those kinds of ideas around—sexist ideas, for example. I see music as playing an important political role in raising people's awareness. People will listen to a song fifty times, whereas they won't listen to a speech more than once. A song is something that is concise and to the point, so you get a better chance to hammer the idea home. I rewrote the Woody Guthrie song "So long, it's been good to know you" to be about Newfoundland and the whole syndrome of people having to leave. Sometimes it's just brought people to tears, and they come up and pat me on the back and say, "Jesus, boy, that's right on!"

**CFB:** Are there any characteristics that tie together the songs you sing that you feel are most successful?

**JIM:** Some of the best reactions I get are from my political songs, such as the "So long" song, or the "Hard Times" song. There are different reactions; for example, when I played the "Cape Royal" song for the Confederation of Community Youth Councils, some of the people cried at the end of it, because they knew the people who were drowned in the shipwreck. The first line of "Hard times" is "I worked out in Stephenville for a year and a half" and when I played it in Stephenville, people were hammering on the table crying "Yes, boy, give it to them! You're talking about what people have lived through."

**CFB:** Is the tradition of songwriting being kept alive in Newfoundland?

**JIM:** I think it is, but we don't see a lot of it. My theory is that a lot of people are writing a record of things that are happening. I have an uncle who does that kind of thing. He's about seventy years old, he's a philosopher, a poet and a social critic with an impeccable analysis of everything that's gone on in Newfoundland over the past several hundred years. He's never had a day's schooling in his life, he's been laughed at and put down many times, yet he's the most educated man I know. Over the past two years, especially at festivals, I've been meeting people who are writing songs and poems and tunes—the first chance I've had to hear any of it. The first festival started in St. John's three years ago: the following year they held it again, along with another festival, the "Good Entertainment", and this summer there are three.

**CFB:** Do you consider the arrival of festivals as a progressive development for traditional music on the island?

**JIM:** Yes, for sure. People are going to them and really getting into the music. They're hearing songs about places they know, people they've heard of and things that they've done, many of them particular to Newfoundland. As the festivals are held in different parts of
the island you start finding musicians from that part of the island turning out, and the spectators are also, in the main, people from that part of the island. You don’t get the same crowds on each occasion—they’re local festivals.

CFB: Do you see anything threatening the traditional music that’s still happening in Newfoundland?

JIM: No, nothing that can’t be overcome at this point. The music survived the difficult period five to fifteen years ago when it started to die out because people thought “now we belong to a new country we’ve got to do what these people do.” It was really being shoved down our throats. When I was at school, for example, we were always taught that fishing, logging, and labouring were inferior occupations. We were always told to get to grade level and go to university or we’d end up in the woods or in fishing. But now things are starting to come together, to prosper. The fisheries are starting to be built up again and the whole culture is becoming stronger—not just the music. Newfoundlanders are coming to understand themselves and the situation they’re in on the island, the kind of oppression they’ve had to put up with all these years. I think the music really helps to foster a sense of brotherhood, and it helps me to get in touch with the history of the island and how people have lived. Newfoundland is home to me and I figure it always will be.

Jim Payne will be travelling across Canada this spring. Anyone wishing to book him can contact him at 44 Pennywell Rd., St. John’s, Nfld. A1C 2K9