SHUSWAP COFFEEHOUSE

In December Jim Cooperman from the Shuswap Coffeehouse was in town and I got a chance to talk to him about what was happening in Salmon Arm.

One of the most pleasant things about publishing CFB is the ongoing contact we have with people interested in folk music across the country. What is especially interesting is finding the different types of people who organize coffeehouses, folk clubs, festivals and song circles. Sometimes they're university professors who lived through the Pete Seeger and Burl Ives years and have never lost their taste for that kind of music. Sometimes they're displaced Brits or Scots trying to recreate British folk clubs over here. Sometimes they're a community in Cape Breton which never calls their annual summer bash a folk festival—it's a parish festival.

In British Columbia there's a very distinct, identifiable group of people that is responsible for many of the clubs and coffeehouses in this province. In the late 60's a lot of Americans (particularly draft dodgers) and eastern Canadians came to B.C. and bought land. Now, over a decade later, many of them still live on that land in the summer and work in town (or wherever they can find work) during the winter. Whatever the conflicts might have been between these newcomers ('freaks', as they used to be called) and the already existing population ('rednecks', as the freaks sometimes called them), these Americans and easterners are now an integral part of the social fabric of many B.C. towns and one of their contributions to that fabric is coffeehouses like the Shuswap.

Shuswap Coffeehouse was started about 10 years ago, first in a church basement, then in the back of the local health food store. It began with an 'open stage' format. Audiences consisted of local 'freaks', and evenings usually ended in jam sessions or 'boogies'. In 1978 the Shuswap Amateur Theatre was founded; some of the Coffeehouse organizers became involved in it and the Coffeehouse moved to the Theatre Building. At this point, audiences at the Coffeehouse began to include people who also patronized the theatre—teachers, lawyers, etc.—rather than just the local 'freaks'. The Coffeehouse started featuring professional performers (they still have open mike nights as well) and the whole organization became much less ad hoc: they now have memberships; they want to put together a list of all musicians in the area and are organizing for a music festival next summer (a 'mini-Woodstock' as Jim calls it).

Probably very little of the music played at the Shuswap Coffeehouse could be considered 'folk' music. The local musicians play mostly country rock and the Coffeehouse is mainly interested in music that people can dance to. As Sue Unia in Kamloops put it: "It is a group dedicated to promoting music in Salmon Arm. I don't know if they stick to folk—theirs is a somewhat 'hippy-ish' society—but the music will at least remain mostly acoustic."

Rika Ruebsaat

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