Review

Stan Rogers: "Northwest Passage" (Fogarty's Cove FCM 004: Fogarty's Cove Music Inc., Woodburn Road, R.R. #1, Hannon, Ont. LOR 1PO).

Most enthusiasts of traditional music in Canada seem to regard Ontario songwriter Stan Rogers as something special - certainly different from the familiar stereotype of the introverted wimpy soft-rocker which the word "songwriter" often implies. After a couple of false alarms, Stan's new album is out; it's about western Canada (mostly), and it's sure to have widespread appeal. The songs, as always, have strong melodies; the lyrics are well-crafted and the technical production lives up to producer Paul Mills' very high standards.

There are a few standouts, which will no doubt join the likes of "The Jeannie C." at the top of the Rogers song pile. "The Field Behind the Plough" is a beautiful and eloquent song about the frustrations of prairie grain farming, and "Free in the Harbour" and "The Idiot" are contrasting but equally fine songs about east-west migration, the latter appearing to borrow heavily in style from the southern English "folk rock" bands of the seventies.

On first listening, this album is universally appealing - you could play it to your maiden aunt and she would like it. On further playing, a few things start to emerge, some good and some not so good. "Night Guard", for example, emerges as a super song, possibly the best on the album, about modern cattle rustling. It is slow to surface mainly because it is clothed, so to speak, in Nashville "duds". I found myself struggling to ignore the country-rock treatment in order to appreciate the song. Sure the subject and the style appear to go together on paper, but in practice a fine set of words is blurred by over-arrangement. I know this is a predicatable criticism - I make it a lot - but it is just too easy and too much fun to pile instrument upon instrument on a song. Rogers knows his songs inside out, mainly because he wrote them, but if he wants others to really appreciate his poetry, he has to avoid the temptations of a studio full of excellent session men and avoid playing musical games with the song. Incidentally, this is not intended to be a condemnation of the session men, who do their job well, and neither is it criticism of Stan's two regular side men Garnet Rogers and the now-departed (the band, not this world) David Eadie. These two know the songs and treat them, in most cases, with the tender loving care they merit.

Stan Rogers has always written well on subjects outside of his personal experience. This is what makes him different from your average guitar-toting navel gazer. Occasionally, though, one wonders if Rogers himself really appreciates the distinction. "Northwest Passage", the opener and title track, has a phenomenal chorus which will knock your socks off, but in between one discovers that the song is mostly about Stan Rogers, not Franklin. I'm afraid that the description of our hero as "this tardiest explorer", presumably driving his Chevy van along the Trans-Canada, is a bit hard to take. Probably no-one will notice, though; they will be too busy singing the chorus. Another one which suffers from being too personal is "You Can't Stay Here", which seems to be about resisting the advances of a groupie. Shades of the moral majority and old-fashioned values here - absolutely laudable, but a bit like showing your clean laundry to the public... ho hum.

It is difficult to be critical of this album, because I know everyone is going to like it for its technical excellence, for Stan's great voice and for its musical sophistication. I just hope that a few undiverted souls will judge "Northwest Passage" on its songs. Most of them are superb, and the few flaws I have mentioned cannot detract from what is generally a good album from one of the best song craftsmen around.

- Ian Robb