The Last Song
by Paul Mills

On the evening of February 21, 1983 in the same Toronto studio where Stan Rogers and I had started work together as artist and producer some ten years ago, we found ourselves together again putting the finishing touches on yet another album. Stan’s brother and sideman, Garnet, was there, as was Jim Morrison, the bass player and fellow-giant, and our engineer, David Dobbs: five guys sharing the ever-growing excitement that this record was going to be the best one yet.

David and I were too busy playing around with some loudly outrageous synthesizer parts on the song “Flying” to notice that Stan was over in the corner of the control room, oblivious to it all, furiously writing something down on a piece of paper. When Dave and I had had enough of being outrageous, I turned to Stan and asked him what he was doing. “I’ve just written a new song” came the characteristically smug reply, “and it’s a good one!” Right. Then he went on to confess how he wasn’t too happy with one of the tunes we had recorded and thought that seeing how this was a better song, we might as well record it there and then and replace the “inferior material”.

Now, normally this sort of thing would set your average record producer’s teeth on edge. You see, record producing, contrary to the popular notion, is an orderly process — especially with your average folk album, which is usually financed by the artist’s Aunt Martha or the contents of his kids’ piggy bank — or both. In these circumstances, the producer must be first and foremost a “cost conscious” person, and must eschew the last minute whims of the artist no matter how tempting. Well, the problem was that, in spite of my usual adherence to these penny pinching principles, when it came to Stan I was always a sucker for adventure. So when he said, “Let’s record this new song I’ve just written at the last minute”, I would usually swallow hard and say, “O.K., sure”. And so it was this time too. David and I went to set up the mics while Jim and Garnet went off to learn the changes. Once everyone was finally settled in the studio, Stan asked us to quickly get our levels and roll tape — he didn’t want to rehearse this one. We complied.

What happened then was a moment I’ll never forget. In one glorious and perfect take, Stan Rogers delivered one of the most beautiful, compelling and provocative songs he had ever written — “The House of Orange”. The fact that he had written it amid the din of unrelenting synthesizer tracks didn’t surprise me — that’s just the way he was. You see, Stan always wrote songs totally in his head. Only when the song was complete would he put pen to paper or pick the strings. And it’s that last step that he was taking that evening. Once more, he had succeeded in restoring my faith in adventure and the fact that he had achieved this in one take helped to save “Aunt Martha” from financial ruin.

If I had even suspected, though, that this was the last song Stan Rogers would ever write, I might have made more of a fuss. As it was, this was simply another in a long string of astonishing and ever-improving song-writing accomplishments from a man who had caused me to expect nothing less. Once again, Stan, to quote Ian Robb, had “found the horse’s mouth”.

This was not the first time I had witnessed this sort of spontaneous creativity. Each of the five albums we did together had at least one song that was written at the last moment; and curiously, they usually turned out to be some of his best writing. One the first album, Fogarty’s Cove, it was “Barrett’s Privateers” and “The Wreck of the Athens Queen”; on Turnaround it was “The Jeannie C”; on Live...Between the Breaks, it was “Harris and the Mare”; and on Northwest Passage, the title track.

I think that the memories of these moments will always represent to me the closest I have ever come to encountering genius at work. The best of traditional folk music is a distillation of generations of improvements on the initial composition. Stan Rogers was a songwriter who possessed the uncanny ability to take a shortcut through the centuries and arrive at the final product on the first try. He sang with the clear voice of those he wrote about, and he made us all believers in the joy and the anguish of being human.