The Alberta Liquor Control Commission carries a number of brands of scotch that are not available in Ontario. One of these - Talisman - became the constant companion of the hours that Stan and Garnet spent at our house, usually sitting around the dining room table - usually talking about some aspect of music. It was here that the decision to change my middle name to "(no relation)" was taken. So too was it here that I began to discover the tremendous depth of knowledge that Stan had acquired about traditional music. Be it through his family, early contact with Fiddler's Green or his very careful attention to other performers at festivals and clubs, he had an amazingly deep feel for and understanding of traditional music forms. I believe that it was this knowledge, interacting with his incredible creative talent, that produced some of the finest songs to have come out of the Canadian folk music revival. To develop this point it is necessary to look briefly at the history of the revival in our country.

The singer songwriter has been the major performer type in the Canadian folk music revival. He or she has dominated the stages of our festivals and clubs, the microphones in our recording studios and the coverage in our press to the extent that the usual question of a Canadian performer is "what kind of stuff do you write?" I suppose our zest in seeking out "new frontiers" is, in part, responsible for this. Another factor is our well-noted "cultural inferiority complex" which leads us to value the artistic expressions of other groups, thereby devaluing our own older traditions. Whatever the reasons, the newly-penned song is valued over the traditional and the writer is the pre-eminent agent for its performance.

Gordon Lightfoot was the first Canadian to achieve international acclaim in this role. His songs, speaking to a generation of Canadians growing up in the midst of atomic and information explosions, took a very first-person singular attitude to writing songs, relating feelings from the perspective of the writer-performer.

In the early mornin' rain, with a dollar in my hand,
With an achin' in my heart, and my pockets full of sand,
I'm a long way from home, and I miss my loved ones so.
In the early mornin' rain, with no place to go.

For the most part his songs were searching for universals of expression (characteristic of most popular music) in an effort to reach the largest possible audience. Feelings and emotions, expressed rather openly, were the fundamental currency of Lightfoot's craft. The words contained a hint of the blues, but the performance style and music were strictly non-blues with little or no improvisation being a part of the clean, acoustic accompaniment of his earlier albums and concerts.
Only in very limited places did Lightfoot come into contact with traditional music. For example, “The Canadian Railroad Trilogy” and “The Edmund Fitzgerald,” spoke to Canadian historical themes, and “Bitter Green” functioned as an update of the traditional “broken ring” cycle. Overall, though, his music - and the majority of his lyrics - were not shaped by traditional motifs. There is little in Lightfoot to mark him as distinctively Canadian. To hear him at a festival would not define his country of birth.

Of course, Lightfoot wasn’t the only creative force during this period. There were numbers of other Canadians active, but he was the one who “made it.” He also was the one who had a profound effect on the next generation of songwriters in Canada, defining the performing style and, for most, the songwriting approach.

Enter Stan Rogers! To be sure, he was influenced by the “Lightfoot model.” In fact, he started out in the “first person singular” (some say navel-gazing) school of songwriting. But as he honed his craft things began to change. Instead of adopting a self-descriptive perspective in his songs, he began to write in a narrative format, adopting the point of view of another person. He maintained the first person singular grammar, but adapted it to narrative stories about others.

Come all ye lads draw near to me, That I be not forsaken. This day was lost the Jeannie C, And my living has been taken. I’ll go to sea no more.

A most interesting style of songwriting emerged from this synthesis of first-person and narrative formats. The result was a special kind of story-telling that became Stan’s forte and trademark.

There is more, though, than the combining of a narrative perspective with the current first person idiom. Stan was very conscious of the kinds of images he wanted to create in the imaginations of his listeners. He oftimes would start his writing by listing the images he wanted to portray in the song, and would draw from this set as he constructed the story. In this list would appear numerous traditional cliches and images. For example, in the first verse of “The Jeannie C”, above, the “come all ye” is a traditional opening motif for Broadside ballads, and the “I’ll go to sea no more” is the refrain from an old shanty. He consciously chose traditional and Canadian images as he practised his craft of story-telling to music.

Yet another departure from the styles of those who preceeded him was the people he chose as narrators. They were all Canadians, all “honest working Joes”, all representatives of what he called the backbone of our country. Be it the Maritimer working in Alberta (e.g. “The Idiot” or “Free in the Harbour”), the victim of cabin fever in the north (e.g. “Canol Road”) or a seasoned deck hand on a Great Lakes freighter (e.g. “The White Squall”) the narrator chosen by Stan was a Canadian. The story told - always in a most compelling way - was about this man’s experience. It was inevitably framed in a Canadian and traditional format. As his craft developed, so too did the vividness and distinctiveness of his narrative imagery.

His familiarity with traditional sounds became evident in his heavy use of the DADGAD guitar tuning (e.g. “Harris and the Mare,” “The Mary Ellen Carter” and many others). In fact, I’m not sure if he ever tuned his 12-string guitar in anything but DADGAD. This tuning recalls Celtic sounds with its use of drones (D in the and we have listened too long to timid base chord), and it’s tendency to shy away men.” Stan was not timid - and I think we from major thirds in the formation of chords should listen very carefully to what he (there is no F sharp in the base D chord), had to tell us.

All of these things combined in Stan’s creative cauldron and what came out was a collection of great songs. He built on Lightfoot’s legacy by adding some distinctively Canadian images and sounds. He reshaped the singer-songwriter role to include aspects of traditional music. He created some of the finest songs written by contemporary Canadian composers. We can only hope that his legacy goes beyond his marvellous songs and recordings by pointing the way for the next generation of songwriters in our country. No greater compliment could be paid to him than to have someone build on his achievements to the extent he did on the generation that preceeded him.

Several things were certain in the extended rap sessions that took place in our living room. The bottle of Talisman would become significantly lighter for sure. Typically, too, the conversation would come back to the theme that us Canajans seem to have difficulty realizing what a wonderful culture we have. I can see Stan growing very animated and curse our penchant for not wanting to celebrate ourselves. His brash aggressiveness is clearly showing in the vehemence of his oratory. I sit back and recall Bruce Hutchinson’s words in “Unknown Country” - “for we but DADGAD. This tuning recalls Celtic are young, my brothers, and full of doubt, sounds with its use of drones (D in the and we have listened too long to timid base chord), and it’s tendency to shy away men.” Stan was not timid - and I think we from major thirds in the formation of chords should listen very carefully to what he (there is no F sharp in the base D chord), had to tell us.