

A Song Ended Too Soon

by Emily Friedman

I was standing in the lobby of a downtown Winnipeg hotel, minding my own business, when a very large, nearly hairless individual resembling the Great White Whale lumbered over, lifted me bodily off the floor (this is not easy; I am not a tiny person), and roared, "I just wanted to thank you for that great review of *Fogarty's Cove!*" It then enveloped me in a crushing bear hug, thus beginning one of the dearest of all the friendships of my life. It was so dear, in fact, that I never pointed out to Stan that I had tried to introduce myself to him earlier, but that he, upon learning that I was a Yankee, had brushed me off. He was then in the last throes of one of his periodic bouts of anti-Americanism.

One of the key aspects of his character was that he was fascinated by excess, and sometimes, in certain situations, he would give in to it. These included eating, drinking, sitting up all night singing, and putting his foot in his mouth. One of the ways in which Stan thought most often was with his mouth, and it got him into trouble. Being physically imposing and often tactless would have been bad enough; being physically imposing, often tactless, compulsively honest, and possessed of a particularly weird sense of humor could make you quite unpopular. Stan was an easy man to like, and many people did; but he was also an easy man to dislike, and many people did that, too. There were a great many people who did both, with justification. The tragedy of it is that there were — and now, always will be — far too few people who understood that underneath that bellowing exterior lurked the heart of a cream puff. His love-hate affair with the extreme, I think, was one key to his artistic spirit. That very fascination with excess led him to a search for limits. And, in the intense discipline of songwriting, Stan

found a way to merge his nearly cosmic genius for perceiving, interpreting, and expressing the human, and especially the Canadian, experience with his flair for the dramatic, the shocking, and the overpowering.

If you were around when one of these pieces was written, you knew that they always surprised him a little. If someone whom he respected gurgled appreciatively over a new song, Stan would flash that gold-toothed grin, look a little sheepish, and adopt an "aw, shucks" attitude that was entirely genuine. You see, Stan — and good for him! — knew exactly how good he was. He just wasn't always sure how he did it. The songs came forth, often, so quickly that the entire process took on the air of spiritual possession. He knew where they came from; he often was unsure of how they got here.

We are left with so much. We have inherited a body of music that accomplished what he wanted: to establish Canada as a force in contemporary folk music, to create a Canadian school of songwriting, to extend the reach of Canadian folk music over the border and across the sea, and to forge an image of the nation he loved that was, although romantic, more accurate than any that had existed before. He completed his trilogy of Western, Maritime Eastern, and Great Lakes song projects before he died. He had, in his continuing love and respect for the traditional music that preceded him and from which he drew so much inspiration and power, recorded an album of those old and hallowed songs as well. And he had cut a pathway for other Canadian writers and singers to follow, to continue across the bridges he had built.

And, despite the fact that some of us will never quite get over this, the grief and the rage will relax their grip, in time. What will happen then is that his friends and

fans will gather together for a drink or two, and the stories will be told. Remember the time when he was extolling the virtues of nearly raw steak to an audience, and a woman stood up and protested that he should show more interest in vegetables? Stan took up his full, puffed-out, intimidation pose and roared, "MADAME, DO I LOOK TO YOU LIKE A MAN WHO EATS VEGETABLES??"

Remember the tee shirts that read, "SAVE AMERICAN SHIPPING — STOP BARRETT'S PRIVATEERS," or, after the band had, once again, been turned away at the border, "FREE STAN ROGERS"? Or when he and Gordon Bok finally met, after the cultists had been hard at work trying to spread word of a nonexistent feud, and they proceeded to circle around each other, roaring and growling, until they both collapsed with laughter? Remember when, asked to provide some music at a post-festival party, he showed up with an electric guitar and starting belting out "Mustang Sally"? Oh, my friends, what if he had been a shepherd in Latvia and we had missed him entirely?

So, if you are going to remember him, remember him with joy as well as with tears. He thoroughly enjoyed being alive, being a singer, being a writer, a husband, a father, a brother, a son. He loved his audiences and friends as much as they loved him. He was irreverent, iconoclastic, enormously funny, and a scamp. Do not canonize him as Saint Stan, as some are trying to do. Do not weep that he is gone without celebrating the fact that he was here. He would never have wanted to be a source of sadness. He wanted to be, and he was, a source of song. Remember him in death, than, as you knew him in life: as one who cared passionately, and who, despite the fact that he did not always understand the source of his wisdom, was willing to share it with us in a beautiful and enduring form.