The song writer said “The Times They Are a Changin’” and that could easily be a title or theme for this State of the Art report from Ontario. Old and established activities have passed, some are faltering and new ones are beginning to emerge. The evolution of the folk scene in any locality or region seems to parallel, in fact, some aspects of the folk process, with its changing emphasis at different times and places. So we probably shouldn’t lament the passing of old traditions. They simply point the way to new forms and ideas.

Ontario

by Tom Siess

This is clearly the case in Toronto, which has exerted enormous influence throughout the Province for many years. The Mariposa Festival, which long dominated the scene, seem to be clearly an event of the past, although it may be reborn in a new form and probably on a smaller scale, sometime in the future. In the meantime, there will be another Toronto Festival in its place, on June 16 and 17 on Olympic Island. The Mariposa organization, however, is clearly not “of the past”. After some recent difficulties, the organization seems to be stabilizing and improving. They have developed and implemented an important deficit refinancing scheme which has attracted significant community support, and hopefully there will soon be a major decrease in the deficit. Over the past year, the books have been balanced, and the membership and donor base is up significantly. In the meantime, a number of new endeavors are becoming established in their own right. Mariposa Sunday family concerts are an important element of this development, as is Mariposa in the Woods. After a second successful year, the latter has been described as going from strength to strength. Plans for a third year are being made now, to be held Aug 15-19, 1984, probably at the Woodland Trails Conference Centre and Camp at Aurora. There is also likely to be a winter workshop along the lines of Mariposa-in-the-Woods, and the Spring Tune Up is once again planned. Finally, Mariposa Country Dances, though not formally a Mariposa program, are attracting large and enthusiastic audiences.
Still in Toronto, Fiddler's Green continues as a major influence, and is now holding its regular performances on Sunday evenings. There are a number of other establishments which regularly feature folk performers, such as Albert's Hall, Cafe on the Park and Free Times Cafe. The Celtic Music Society is open weekly at the New Windsor House, and there are several underground coffee houses such as Fat Albert's. The New Trojan Horse Cafe is a collective which emphasizes political and social expression.

In London, a similar evolution has taken place. Change of Pace, which for many years featured primarily singer-songwriters no longer provides entertainment, although names long familiar through Change of Pace keep showing up at several of the local bars which book performers. The Cuckoo's Nest, suffering from declining audiences and "burn out" on the part of its organizers has also opted for a new direction. Instead of weekly performances, several concerts will be put on during the year, with the first, featuring Joe and Antoinette McKenna, already having been a great success. Regular house concerts and sing arounds are also planned. But while the regular club is gone, it has left in its wake a whole host of "offspring" including several Morris teams, three country dance bands, and at least one monthly country dance. There was a weekend long dance workshop in November, with the likelihood of another in the Spring, as well as a music workshop with Marshall Baron. Finally, the Home County Folk Festival still continues to be a strong force on the local and regional scene, after another extremely successful year.

Ottawa seems to be experiencing a different kind of evolution. At present, folk performers are heard primarily through the Acoustic Waves Concert series at the Great Canadian Theatre Company or at periodic concerts and house concerts arranged by the Old Sod Society. The latter is moving, however, toward a more regular series and is developing more community support and a more formal organization. Perhaps this will fill the gap left for performers by the changes some other clubs have instituted.

Across the province, the regular festivals all seem to be continuing in a fairly stable fashion. Owen Sound certainly gets better each year, and reports from Sudbury and Thunder Bay also indicate successful events this year, and a continuation of the community and volunteer support that makes them possible. Hamilton's Festival of Friends also appears to be on a solid footing, as are the Killaloe and Clarendon Blue Skies festivals. There are also some signals that a group in Kingston may be planning a local festival.

The most significant festival-related activity seems to be the move to hold a Conference of festival organizations. A preliminary meeting was held in the early summer, and all those in attendance were pleased with the exchange of ideas. Hopefully future sessions will result in identifying more effective ways of collectively lobbying government for festival support. Clearly, there are many people interested in this development and, at minimum, it can serve as a clearing house for festival planning and organizing ideas.

Finally, dance continues to be an important new development across the province, with Toronto, Simcoe, Peterborough, and London being the leading centres. It is significant that there were 15 participants from Ontario at English Week at Pinwheels Camp in Massachusetts, with another four at English-American Week. Besides that, three members of the faculty at Folk Music Week were from Ontario and it is rumoured (on good authority) that Alistair Brown, from London, will be Chairman of that week next year.

So, the folk scene in Ontario is changing. Long established institutions have, indeed, passed and I suppose we should, in a sense, lament their passing. But, by and large, they have been replaced by new structures and activities, revealing that the process is very much alive -- just like the tradition in which it is rooted.