

The Man Behind the T-Shirt and Irrepressible Grin:

In Memory of Duck Donald

by Hal Doran

Hal Doran is a producer of CBC's "As It Happens." He is a former business manager of the Winnipeg Folk Festival and was a very close friend of Duck Donald.

"Winnipeg - Duck Donald, a well-respected bluegrass and country music performer, died here Sunday after suffering a stroke at the home of friends.

Donald, 32, of Winnipeg, described by friends as one of the best mandolin players in Canada, toured North America from 1974 to 1979 with performer, Cathy Fink.'" (The Toronto Globe & Mail, April 24, 1984.)

I've put off writing this piece for as long as possible. There are at least three reasons for that. First, it's almost impossible to sum up someone's life in just a few words, especially someone like Duck, who crammed so much into such a slight frame and such a short lifetime. And then, there's the emptiness, the sense of loss that is there everytime I, and a great many other people, still feel everytime we think about him. As well, for better or worse, I make my living as a journalist, and I'm torn between a "personal" account and a need to provide an "objective" viewpoint. What follows is a bit of both.

To a lot of folks, Duck was just a skinny boy with long blond hair streaming out from under a weathered leather cowboy hat, who played great mandolin, and who always had a funny story to tell. I'm leaving out, of course, the big, wide grin right below the bushy moustache, the T-shirt (always) with something weird or silly (usually) written on it, and a cigarette, just being lit - or extinguished. To many people who saw him perform, he was just a good ol' boy, who liked his C & W, loved his bluegrass . . . and his beer, who drove a pickup, and generally fit right in there with your red-neck image, eh?

Duck kind of liked that image - he put some effort into it - and there is some truth to it - but there was a lot more to Duck Donald than that - a whole lot more.

Some are unaware that he loved the written word, both prose and poetry. He cared passionately about William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot, about Walt Whitman and Alan Ginsburg and Dylan Thomas - about all writers who could make words sing. He was also widely read in philosophy, from the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Gahan Wilson, and Edward Gorey, to the thoughts of Hegel, Kirkegaard, and Kant. He could stay up all night, talking about mysticism,

both Eastern and Western, and the mysteries of the human spirit, and how all that related to the hell-hound that was on Robert Johnson's trail.

It amused Duck to play up his most outrageous, ignorant red-neck image with people whom he found pompous or phony, and then slip in a perfectly appropriate reference about how the particular topic under discussion was analogous, if one accepted a dialectical analysis of history, to a particular part of Eliot's "Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." This, of course, was also the Duck Donald who enjoyed using his extensive collection of racist, sexist, and generally disgusting jokes at the most inappropriate times and in the most inappropriate situations. The motivation was more or less the same as that which prompted him to be erudite when he was least expected to be: he enjoyed shaking people up. In fact, he was neither a racist nor a sexist, and didn't really much like people who were. On the other hand, he didn't much like people who preached ideologies and -isms, and in general, were holier than thou.

Duck recognized that humour and music were two of the greatest weapons the average person has against the hypocrisies and hate that separate human beings from one another. An example, (one of many): He was perhaps the only person on earth who could go up to Odetta, in front of large groups of folkies (at the Vancouver Folk Festival, I'm told) and ask, "Odetta, what is the difference between black people and snowties?" He was, perhaps, also the only person on earth who could tell her the answer, "Snowties don't sing when you put chains on them," and not manage to earn her undying enmity.

Another thing you might not know about Duck is that he had a facility for languages - perhaps part of that natural mimic's ear he had. He had a fairly wide vocabulary in Yiddish. He could also speak fluent French - not the stuff you learn in high school - but Quebec working-class joul. Both were products of his childhood in Montreal. During the recent, or I guess I should say, ongoing, language debate in Manitoba, it sometimes amused him to phone up a government MLA who favoured entrenching French language rights

in the province to berate him for his stand, and then, when the MLA became indignant, to switch into French to press his argument.

Not that life was always a barrel of laughs for Duck. Often, humour for him was a way of dealing with those things that made him angry and bitter and sad. And more than anything what made him angry and bitter and sad was the natural capacity of people on this planet to treat each other without consideration, without fairness, without decency, without humanity, and without caring.

He was a good friend to many, many people; always there when you needed him; always willing to walk that extra mile; always came through in the crunch. And for that, he never sought any praise, or public acknowledgement, nor, sadly, in all too many cases, did he ever receive proper thanks. Whether it was someone Duck had known for years, or someone he had just met in a bar, or a kid who was coming for music lessons ending up with some personal counselling as well, Duck always had time for people.

Duck served on the board of directors of the Winnipeg Folk Festival during some difficult and turbulent years. Many times, when severe factional disputes threatened an irreparable split, it was Duck Donald who quietly mended the fences. He oftimes created the coalitions which kept things going. Mitch Podolak, the festival's artistic director, like all highly creative people, has his stormy side. Perhaps better than anyone who ever served on the festival board, Duck Donald recognized that side of Mitch for what it was - a temporary tempest - and could get beyond that to work with Mitch. He helped keep other people working with Mitch and get the job done. The festival, ultimately, was the reason Duck settled in Winnipeg. He was as passionate about the festival as he was about most things.

But his main passion was music. He loved all kinds of music, as long as it was honest, and inspired and true. He knew and liked Bach and Beethoven. He was a fan of Glenn Gould, and saw more clearly than most the parallels of spirit and discipline that exist between baroque and bluegrass music.

He also liked it when Chuck Berry made Beethoven Roll Over. And when Bruce Springsteen, like Duck, discovered he was Born to Run, Duck knew he had found a kindred spirit. And then there was jazz and jugband and big band and Western swing, and of course, cajun and country and gospel.

Duck loved all music, without consideration of category, as long as it measured up to his one basic standard. He believed that all good music must put a fire in your belly, a passion in your heart and a stirring in your soul. He believed that all music worthy of the name could move people -and tell them something that was true.

That was why bluegrass music formed the core of Duck's creative existence. He began his musical career as blues harmonica player. That skill, and his affection for the genre, stayed with him throughout his life. It gave him the insight which helped him understand what Bill Monroe meant when he spoke of the high, lonesome sound. And when he first heard a recording by Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, Duck's life became transformed. He became an excellent flat-picking guitarist, before going on to master the instrument with which he was to have the main love affair of his musical career. When Duck played the mandolin, he played with an intimacy, an intensity, a skill, a discipline and - a passion - which defined everything that was important to him in life. Although Duck was one of the most articulate men I've ever met, he could never put into words what he could make that mandolin say for him.

I first met Duck Donald in the Autumn of 1973. Cathy Fink and I were sharing a medium-sized flat in Montreal, in the "student ghetto" near McGill University. I had known Cathy from student days through our mutual interest in folk music. Duck was in the midst of a divorce, of getting out of a marriage which did not allow enough room for his music, out of a job (managing a high-fashion women's clothing boutique) he didn't really like, and out of a high-rise home he didn't really feel he belonged in anymore. He met Cathy through the hoots Chuck Baker ran (still does, as far as I know) Sunday nights at the Yellow Door Coffee House. He was working a day job in the shipping department of a garment

factory and playing guitar and harmonica at night, mostly with the Bobby Cussin Bluegrass Band. Bobby played mandolin and sang lead. Duck played guitar and sang high harmony. The Bobby Cussin Bluegrass Band had two other guys in it, and they did mostly traditional bluegrass, with some more modern influences from the Greenbriar Boys and Country Gentlemen thrown in. Duck's guitar, then, I believe, was a Harmony Deluxe, from a pawnshop, in a three dollar cardboard case, and it was forever going out of tune.

Duck wanted to play full-time, so he left his day job, moved out of his furnished room, and moved onto the couch in Cathy and my living room. He and Cathy started working out some things together. She was still basically doing a solo, with a fair bit of original material worked around Joni Mitchell and Richard and Mimi Farnia and Judy Collins tunes. Duck played backup guitar on his old beatup whatever, and they sang in subways - a really great show, by the way, with set-lists and everything - and eventually, Duck saved enough to buy a Martin D-28!! - with a hardshell case!!

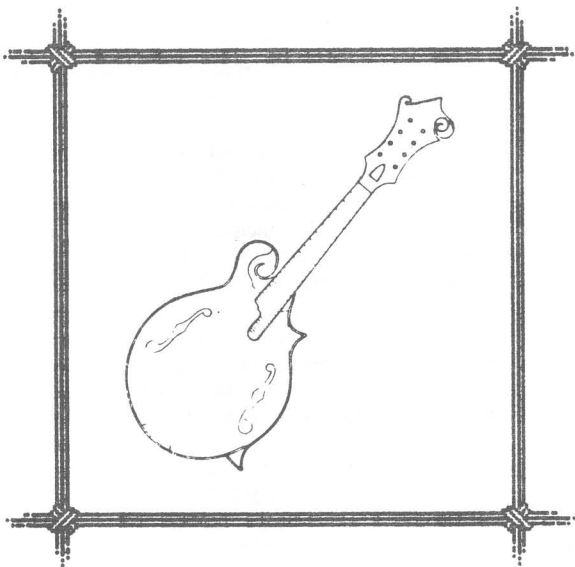
From there on, his life became better. He and Cathy started working with various combinations of people on the Montreal folk scene (including Kevin Head and Jane Lombard, in a group called "Devil's Dream," and Liz Tansey, in a group called "The New Original Baltimore Boogie Band.") The mix now included a fair bit of Carter Family, Hank Williams and some early Waylon Jennings. And Cathy, while continuing to play guitar, mastered the dulcimer.

One thing led to another and he and Cathy set out on a Western tour. It took them through Winnipeg just in time to audition and get hired for the first (1974) Winnipeg Folk Festival. After making their way across the prairies and spending some time in the American Northwest, they decided to set up shop in Winnipeg. They liked the feel of the city, the people, the music scene, the festival and it seemed an ideal geographic location from which to tour North America - almost smack dab in the middle.

They enticed me to move West to manage their affairs -I'd had about enough of being a union shit-disturber in a univer-

sity library anyway - and I immediately discovered that those winds do indeed blow cold way out there. Nevertheless, what followed was five of the best years of my life. With no great help from me, Cathy and Duck managed to tour all the way from the tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands and Faro, Yukon, to North Carolina and Tennessee and just about everywhere in between. The music now was old-timey country duets, an art form no contemporary performers understood better, or put across with more enthusiasm or authenticity, than Cathy and Duck - hereinafter known as C and D (as most of us referred to them).

Among the duet acts who influenced C and D, and whom they helped popularize to new listeners were the Delmore, Louvin, Osborne, Stanley and, of course, Monroe Brothers - not to mention Bill and Earl Bollick, the Blue Sky Boys.



We spent a summer touring every tiny town in Southern Manitoba, on one of the last "Opportunities for Youth" grants, with Peter Paul Van Camp (also known as Randy

Woods, another old Montreal friend) and Brian Glow, a magician. We did country fairs, old folks homes, performances for children. It was all wonderful, in the tradition of turn-of-the-century travelling medicine shows.

In her spare time, Cathy drove everybody crazy practicing her banjo out on the balcony. A page a day of Bill Keith's banjo book. Over and over and over. But, when I hear her play today, *it sure was worth it!* Meanwhile, Duck was quietly learning mandolin. First, a roundbelly. Then, finally, his own (converted for left hand) Gibson Lloyd Lohr F-5 copy.

In between the constant touring, C and D developed one of the finest programmes for bringing traditional country and folk music to schools that anyone has ever come up with. There are undoubtedly a lot of kids who first learned about a Jew's harp from Duck Donald in Grade Five who are now paying customers at folk festivals all over Western Canada.

C and D recorded three albums. The first, *Kissing is a Crime* (Likeable 01) was recorded by Richard Thomas (the deep-voiced, silver-bearded "Ben" of the Swift Meat commercials) in a log cabin (literally) north of Toronto. Their second, *Cathy Fink and Duck Donald* (Flying Fish 053), was a more conventional recording and perhaps their best. *I'm Gonna Tell* (Likeable 02) was a children's album, with Peter Paul Van Camp. The first two were produced by David Essig (currently host of "Six Days on the Road" on CBC Radio, produced by Bill Garrett, who preceded Duck as Cathy's sometime backup guitarist in Montreal days) - a good friend a great mandolin player, and like Cathy, a Maryland native. (Information about obtaining copies of these recordings is available by writing Box 7306, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A. 20907.)

In 1979 Cathy and Duck split up. Cathy returned to the States, where she continues to perform and tour. Her first solo album, *Doggone My Time* (Rooster 120) reflects a lot of influences from the C and D period. It was recorded at Bias Studios in Virginia, one of the leading bluegrass recording studios in the U.S.A.

Duck continued to live in Winnipeg, with his wife Maxine, whom he married in 1979. He worked with a variety of people, including guitarist, fiddle-player and singer, Darcy Deaville, who, with bassist Dave Harvey, had formed a bluegrass/country band with C and D the last year they were together. John Weir, an incredibly talented instrument maker from Winnipeg, who is also one of the undiscovered singing and playing talents of that city, was a founding member of the Duck Mountain Bluegrass Band with C and D. John LeClair, a fine guitarist and singer, and Tom Janzen, a wonderful musician, were two of the main people with whom Duck played in the last couple of years.

Duck also found time to co-produce Hounddog's album *Every Dog Has Its Day* with Dave Essig, and to work in one way or another, with most of the fine bluegrass and country players in Winnipeg. Some of these included banjoist Gene Bretcheer, fiddler Reg Bouvette, and pedal steel player Wayne Link. There are a lot of people whom Duck touched with his music, and who's music touched Duck whom I'm not going to have time to name. If you like the kind of music Duck liked, you already know them, or will.

In addition to performing, Duck continued to teach - one of the many passions of his life. He also continued his association with the Winnipeg Folk Festival until late last year, and worked for a time at Home-Made Music, Winnipeg's folk-lore centre.

In the last couple of years, he was ill. Perhaps for longer than that. Some people said it was just that he drank too much (sometimes he did). He maintained there was more to it than that. After spending six weeks in Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg earlier this year, the verdict, after a lot of tests, ended a period of medical indecision which had gone on for some time. The verdict: "systemic lupus erythematosus." It's a weird and ugly disease which affects your immune system. Among other things, it can screw up major internal organs, lower your blood clotting time, cause lesions on internal organs, including your brain and sometimes bring on arthritis. Lupus is characterized by red blotches all over the body, and is caused, they think, by some kind of virus. It is

often long-dormant before it makes its unpleasant effects known. In a kind of ironic twist of fate that Duck would have appreciated, it was not this disease which killed him, at least not directly. Instead, doctors who did the autopsy say a congenital aneurism, a weak blood vessel lurking in his brain since birth, just popped, and did him in one night. He was 32 when he died. He left a wife, a father, two sisters, and a brother.

In another ironic twist of fate Duck would have appreciated in a country song lyric, April 22, 1984, the day of his death, was three years to the day since his mother passed away.

I haven't really spend all that much time here talking about Duck's music. Though I once made my living as a music reviewer, I've never really felt that sort of thing worked as well as it could. Because, after all, it was just words on paper. I presume you haven't read this far if you haven't heard Duck play in person, or on record, or over the air. Or, if you haven't done that, then hopefully you're willing to search out some of his records or maybe even buy a mandolin.

A final word: Duck Donald was one of the smartest people, and certainly the most talented musician I've ever known. He could have made a lot more money with his encyclopaedic knowledge of music, and his incredible versatility as a performer. He chose not to - not because he might not have enjoyed having to worry a little bit less about the rent money each month, but because he wanted to play bluegrass music, if he was to play anything, and he was not willing to compromise on that. Not all that many people in this country were willing to listen to the kind of music Duck wanted to play. So he didn't make a lot of money from doing what he loved.

It's good to remember, now, that other people feel the same way about their music as he did. They, too, might not make a lot of money. But if they are willing to hold on to their passion - if they are not willing to sell out for a quick buck, or, indeed, for anything - they will die as Duck did, knowing he lived out his own life, ultimately, the way he wanted. It's good to remember, now, that some people are still willing to take that chance today.