

Songs of the Iron Trail

Luft, Barry, and Tim Rogers with Grit Laskin. *Songs of the Iron Trail: The Canadian Railroad Experience in Song*. Sefel Records SEF 831 T01. 1983 (Available from: CFMS, Stock no. R037; \$10.00)

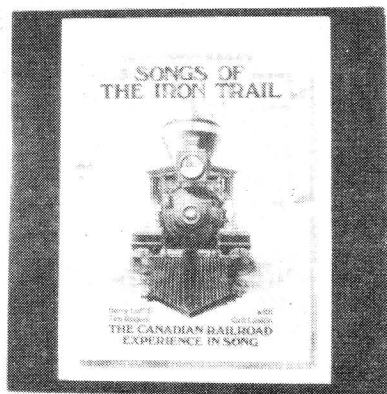
It's surprising, actually, that a railroad album like this hasn't been done before in this country. The railroad has been even more important to Canada, in a way, than to the U.S. In the early days, it was enough simply to *promise* a railroad to keep western provinces interested in Confederation. And it was railroads, rather than wagon trains, which were the primary Canadian vehicle west, bringing not only settlers but order all at once to the frontier west of the Great Lakes. Nowadays, railroads are more a matter of freight than people, but the romance of cross continental passenger rail travel still exists, and the acrimonious debates over the Crow Rate which periodically rock parliaments are reminders that the age of rail is still upon us.

All of which should have been reason enough why Tim Rogers, then President of the CFMS and editor of its *Bulletin*, was ripe for inspiration when Edith Fowke sent him a song called "The CPR Line" (which *she* had got from Pierre Berton). Rogers had already collected one or two other railroad songs himself, but it was Edith's song that got him hungry for more. He suspected that there were many around that hadn't got into published collections or even archives, so he took the next step. He wrote personally to those whose business or avocation was collecting folksongs, and sure enough, the railroad songs began to trickle in. Soon he had enough for an article in the *Bulletin*, and an appeal for more — which also arrived and were published and more appealed for. Eventually, Rogers built up a collection of some 70 titles. It was a critical song mass, as they say, waiting for an album to happen.

It took another chain of events for that to come about. Rogers happened to be talking with Richard Johnston, Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Calgary, about the train song articles in the *Bulletin*. Johnston asked whether Rogers actually sang any of the songs and Rogers allowed as how he did. They agreed that the songs would make a good album, one that would be especially appropriate since the Glenbow-Alberta Institute was about to open a major exhibit entitled "The Great CPR Exposition."

A few days later, Johnston phoned Rogers to say that he had arranged an album audition for Rogers with Arpad Joo, conductor of the Calgary Philharmonic. Within two days, Rogers, along with fellow Calgary singer Barry Luft, were singing songs like Wilf Carter's "Hobo's Song to the Mounties" to Joo who sat, head back, eyes closed, his

face a mask of silent concentration. "Zero affect," as Rogers later put it. After four numbers, Joo sat up, beaming, and said he loved the songs and would recommend them to Joe Sefel, owner of a small record company bearing his name that specialized in classical music.



Sure enough, a call came from the Sefel studio shortly afterwards, and a week later, Rogers, Luft, and bassist Patty Rogers had laid down all the basic vocal and instrumental tracks (no pun intended). For some extra musical texture, they flew in Toronto lutenist/musician Grit Laskin (of the Friends of Fiddler's Green) and in a day and a half he had overdubbed the required harmonies. Finally, Roy Warhurst added his string fiddle to several of the songs. Then came the packaging: the Glenbow allowed Rogers to use their superb CPR exhibit poster (a painting by Dennis Budgeon of an old-style steam engine coming full tilt at the viewer, seeming to burst through a giant passenger ticket) for the cover and inner label, and the whole thing was ready to be sold at the Glenbow gift shop soon after the CPR exhibit opened. The album was launched, in fact, with a Sunday afternoon concert at the Glenbow, featuring (what else?) Canadian train songs.

The eleven songs on the album were selected with an eye towards geographic, chronologic, and stylistic variation — a true sampler of the 70 items Rogers had collected. He was looking, he says, for good songs that fitted the album's performers. The songs are more or less chronologically arranged, beginning with accounts of early track laying work crews (including a rare complete version of "Drill Ye Tarriers Drill"); followed by the adventures (or plights) of riders on various lines around the country ("B.C. Rail," "Hudson's Bay Line," "P.E.I. Express"); then, sagas in which the trains are not the main subject so much as a necessary adjunct to it (the romance of "The Railroad Boy," the sad farewells to loved ones back east in "The Prairie Harvesters' Song"); and finally through several train wrecks — one near Halifax ("The Wreck of the Evening Mail") and Ottawa ("Train Wreck at Almonte").

The older, more "traditional" songs feature Barry Luft's clean, spare singing; Tim Rogers provides sensitive renderings of the more modern, country-tinged numbers. Grit Laskin's adeptness on instruments normally associated with English traditional music yields some nice surprises on a record devoted to Canadian railroad songs. "The Railroad Boy," one of the prettiest arrangements on the album, will make some ears perk up when Rogers' dulcimer is blended with Laskin's Northumbrian smallpipes.

Whether it is a reflection of the compiler's tastes or scholarship or both, the songs on this album, to my ear, have a distinctive, Canadian flavour to them (even with the American authorship of one of them). The songs are decidedly *un-show biz*. There are no major figures or memorable characters — a John Henry or Casey Jones — and no tight, dramatic tragedies, like "Wreck of the Old Number Nine" or "Wreck of the Old 97." Instead, the songs are of the traditional episodic sort, full of tiny vignettes of individuals and events (like logging "monicker songs"); or generalized accounts, straightforward descriptions, cute satires. Even country singer Wilf Carter's "Hobo's Song to the Mounties" is more an abstract social statement than the kind of hobo-and-train song Jimmie Rodgers was recording around the same time.

In all, *Songs of the Iron Trail* is a thoughtfully compiled, well performed album that shows the importance of a body of song in conveying the impact of a major cultural experience on the life of a nation.

- I. Sheldon Posen