The campaign manager removed the words from the wall and thanked me for the effort. My friends from the Singers' Circle phoned to offer condolences. It was no use. “Ben’s Revenge” was dead.

In February 1989, Lyn called and asked for the second verse of “Ben’s Revenge”. She wanted to perform the song at Teacher’s Convention the following day. I told her I’d get back to her with the second verse. Then, to make good on the promise, I sat down and wrote it. History had proven that “Ben’s Revenge” was not the right title. So I changed it to “There’s Gold in Them Thar Pills”. And here it is.

Rona Altrows

THERE’S GOLD IN THEM THAR PILLS
(née “Ben’s Revenge”)

Words © 1989 by Rona Altrows
Music: “O Canada”

Fast off the mark
He left the pack behind,
Sailed for the gold
In nine point seven nine.
Eat your heart out, Carl,
You are hist’ry now;
Join the mass of common men,
For there’s not a soul
In this whole wide world
Can catch up with our Ben.
Mark well my words:
Canada, get set,
Next year he’s bound to run it faster yet. (repeat)

Well, maybe not –
The truth made children cry;
Ben says he’s clean
But test results don’t lie.
Mister Dubin, sir,
What is coming next?
Will this scourge on sport be stopped?
Will our legacy
To this nation’s kids
Be the pills our athletes popped?
Mark well my words,
You who compete:
Gold turns to rust when minds and bodies cheat. (repeat)

Comptes-Rendus

Reviews

EILEEN McGANN: Elements, Dragonwing Music
DRGN 111

Eileen McGann is one of those uncommon Canadian singers who can effectively traverse the musical boundaries separating traditional from contemporary song. She has been a welcome performer lately at folk festivals across Canada, and this, her first record, is equally welcome.

The presentation of the songs is elaborate – sometimes a little overly so, I feel. Six singers provide backing vocals, at different times or in groups together; seven accompanying musicians are featured, among them Grit Laskin, Ken Whiteley, Garnet Rogers and David Woodhead, in addition to Eileen’s own guitar. Yet in general, despite its complexity, the accompaniment is not so over-obtrusive as is the case on too many other records nowadays.

Eileen’s songs fall conveniently into five groups. Three tunes are traditional. Her unaccompanied version of “My Lagan Love”, that mysterious and bewitching Irish song that mixes reality and fantasy so elaborately, is splendid. Her version of “I Live Not Where I Love” is good, but I fervently wish that she hadn’t chosen to repeat its first verse at the end, since that, for me, transforms a properly climactic conclusion into a mere anticlimax. In contrast, the 16th-century variant of the traditional “Riddle Song” merits unreserved praise.
Eileen’s own composition “Isabella Gunn” might well also be a traditional song, for it tells an effective story in classic style. Indeed, I believe that it will enter our tradition (as is already happening with Stan Rogers’ “Barratt’s Privateers”, for example), and that as years go by, awareness of the song’s recent origin will soon be lost. And that is a considerable compliment!

There are two songs – or rather, one poem set to music and one song – about canoeing. The poem, “Canoe Song at Twilight”, published in 1914 by Laura E. McCully, well deserves to return to popularity in Canada and is charmingly set, while Eileen’s own “Temagami” is spirited and expresses very vividly the joy of life outdoors in the Canadian north.

The remaining songs are all Eileen’s compositions. The reflective “Sands” is a New Year’s Eve meditation. Being a geologist, my response to this tune was perhaps made too negative by the songwriter’s implicit misunderstanding of the action of waves on beaches, but sometimes too much technical knowledge can cause one to suffer aesthetically!

It is a paradox that while strength of feeling aids the writing of love songs, similarly strong social or political beliefs tend to produce poor songs whether or not the beliefs are clearly expressed. Eileen’s remaining three songs are all expressions of passionately held views, and it does not surprise me that the one in which they are expressed obliquely succeeds so much better than the two in which they are set forth directly. “The Power and the Need” is written in a style to which, in my view, she is not suited and has not mastered; it fails wholly. My feeling is more equivocal about “Her’s to the Men”, not because of an equivocal response to its message, but rather because the song is too much of a sermon. The borrowed tune is lively, however, and I suspect it may prove popular among enthusiasts for her message. By far the most effective song is “Man’s Job”, where the verses provide such a striking counterpoint to the choruses. The message there is perfectly evident without needing to be heavily underscored.

A good first record, then, and one which deserves to be the first of many.

William A.S. Sarieant

GARNET ROGERS: Speaking Softly in the Dark

Life is full of pleasant little surprises. Like an old friend you haven’t seen for years unexpectedly shows up at your door clutching a bottle of 12-year-old scotch. Or the editor of this BULLETIN sends you a copy of Garnet Rogers’ latest album to review.

Gladly!

Speaking Softly in the Dark is its title, and – make no mistake about it – this is a mixed bag of tunes that at first seem to have been plucked randomly from the air. In fact, Rogers himself expresses some concern that the mixture may be too “bizarre”, but adds that it all “fits together” for him. It did for me too, as 45 minutes of musical statements on the vagaries of the human condition.

“Dear Grandfather”, a Rod MacDonald tune, is the opening cut, and is powerful enough to grab you by the heart and pull you into the rest of the set.

It seems that everyone these days is putting music to the wonderful poems of Australia’s Henry Lawson, and Rogers is no exception. There are two here, “The Sliprails and the Spur”, and “After All”. Neither measures up to the exceptionally beautiful “Outside Track”, the title song from his last album, but they’re very pretty, nonetheless, and if Lawson were still alive I’m sure he’d be delighted with the collaboration.

There are songs here of love, both satisfied and unfulfilled. “The Unfolding” is a fine set of lyrics marred by a mediocre melody that would’ve fallen flat were it not for the richness of Rogers’ voice. “Goodbye Again” is an achingly beautiful song of understated yet heart-wrenching sadness, and is one of the album’s finest cuts. Written by Mary Chapin, it left me wanting to hear more of her work.

And there are songs from the heyday of folk music: a superbly effortless performance of Steve Hayes’ “Like a Diamond Ring”, and a stunning rendition of Phil Ochs’ “Crucifixion” that is a triumph of voice and instruments.

There’s even a thundering gospel song, “Hallelujah! (The Great Storm is Over)”, if that’s your bag, and a couple of violin instrumentals. One of these is Sarah Baughan’s sorrowful “Lament for Henry Chapin”, and the other is “McArthur’s Farewell to the West”. A
Some of the songs were, for me, failures. "Gun-smoke and Whisky" is under-explained in the rather slim sleeve notes, and contains too many inscrutable private allusions. "Ashfields and Brine" I found confusingly ambiguous, while the last two lines of "The Shipyard Apprentice" run too much counter to the mood of the rest of the song. "Silver Coin", a poem set to music, likewise comes close to textual inscrutability, while "All That you Ask Me" is too sententious for my taste.

Despite the fact that a couple of the cuts fall far short of perfection, this is, in every way, a fine album. Kudos have to be given to Greg Roberts, the engineer, for the high quality of production, but it's Rogers who does everything else, and most of the instruments heard are played by him. Even the arrangements are his, and show him to possess a fine, sensitive ear when it comes to the presentation of a song. (I know a couple of artists who could use his gifts in the studio.) This talent is enhanced by one of the richest, warmest, most powerful voices in folk music today.

Bill Gallagher

ARCHIE FISHER: Sunsets I've Galloped Into...
Valerie Enterprises SGS 1114

The title of this record echoes its prevailing mood, which is one of nostalgia and wistfulness. How one enjoys it will depend on how one responds to that mood. The early stages of a love affair, hand in hand with one's lover, might be the best time to listen to it, when the recurrent sadness of the lyrics could induce a creamy sentimentality and the proper mutual comforting. Immediately after the ending of such an affair would be the worst time; and, long after that ending - I'm not so sure.

Not all the sadness is for lost love. Some is for past times ("Yonder Banks" and "The Cuillins of Home"); some for a dream that ended untimely ("Bill Hosie"); some for a life squandered in hard but unrewarding labour ("The Shipyard Apprentice"); and some for a lost landscape ("Ashfields and Brine"). One song, the traditional "I Wandered by a Brookside", runs against the prevailing tone of sadness by beautifully recounting a moment of fulfilment of love. Another, "The Great North Road", is an exultation on returning to a lover.

Yet it is the mood of sorrow for the ending of a love affair that comes across most sustainedly and clearly. This mood reaches its finest expression in the record's longest song, "Eastfield", a tour de force of a regret for times gone and love lost.

FAITH NOLAN: Africville.

It can't be easy to be a person of colour in Canada. As I was getting a feel for Faith Nolan's tape, the Marshall inquiry was being held in Nova Scotia; young black men died during high-speed police chases in Toronto; a judicial inquiry into the handling of native cases got under way in Northern Manitoba; and Japanese Canadians finally got some small, symbolic compensation for the abuses they suffered during the Second World War.

If we are going to stop treating one another like dirt, there is a need for us to understand one another on a deeper level. Africville addresses that need.
Faith Nolan sings about being a black in Canada, and she clearly knows whereof she sings. The songs vary widely in style and tempo, from blues to spirituals to jazz to soft rock to reggae. Nolan has written all the music and lyrics. She sings lead vocals on all but one song, “Mary Ann Shadd”, which is performed with sincerity and pride by a group of children.

There are good songs about black Canadian history, such as “Emancipation” and “Josiah Henson”. There are interesting songs of political frustration, such as “Divide and Rule” and “Africville”.

But Nolan really delivers when she is telling the personal story of one black woman’s struggle. “Box Factory” is a poignant song about a lonely, exhausted West Indian immigrant working in a non-union shop, and getting shot down for her efforts to stand up for herself:

I go to the washroom and let tears flow
Tired and angry at standin’ up alone
I needed money for food and for rent
The price of dignity’s the money I spent.

The most powerful song is “Marie Joseph Angelique”, a haunting piece sung a cappella, with the strangest combination of defiance and love. This is the story of a woman, born a slave, who refuses to accept her lot. She is whipped, publicly humiliated and burned at the stake. Through it all, she stands firm: “My soul is my own, for no man to keep.” I have listened to this tape many times now. “Marie Joseph Angelique” still commands my complete attention and still sends chills up my spine.

My one complaint about Africville is the absence of liner notes. It is evident from the songs that Nolan has done a lot of solid research. She has inspired me to do further reading, but I would have liked to have started with some of Faith Nolan’s own comments on the background to her songs.

This is a really enjoyable, worthwhile tape. I get a lot out of it because it combines a good listen with a good lesson.

Rona Altrows

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CALGARY HUNGARIAN SENIOR CITIZENS CHOIR, KORONGHY FOLK ORCHESTRA: Magyar Nőta Gyűjtemény/Collection of Hungarian Folk Songs, Lajos Keresztes (Editor, Instructor, Conductor), 5 volumes. Hungarian Senior Citizens Club, 1328-87 Ave. S.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2V 0W3.

The record jacket of this set clearly states the goals of the production: the focus is on preserving and teaching the songs, especially for the younger generation of Hungarians, who did not grow up with them.

The music is sung by people over 65 years old, mostly with full choir, although some songs have featured soloists. The four-piece orchestra consists of violin, cymbalom, guitar and bass. The songs appear to have been chosen with care, and are presented in unison (octaves, really, as it is a mixed choir), in an agreeably simple and direct manner.

No background information is given about the individual members of the choir, even the soloists, so it is impossible to know what their musical backgrounds are, for example, how many received formal training, whether any grew up hearing a village tradition, etc. The vocal style is more what I think of as “Western nice” than the clear, resonant sound I associate with traditional Hungarian singing; perhaps most of the chorists grew up singing Western-style choir arrangements and/or their instructor-conductor has worked hard to achieve this homogeneous, rather bland sound. If the albums are to serve instructional purposes, at least a few illustrative selections sung in a more traditional style could have been included, as well as some older genres, for example women’s laments. As well, though I understand the limitations of local resources, it would have been good to include at least a sample of other traditional Hungarian instruments, especially the clarinet-like taragota and Hungarian bagpipes.

The albums conveniently include all the lyrics. If they are aimed at Hungarians, the lack of translations is understandable – only song titles are given in English – but at least minimal information about the regional origin of each song would be helpful.

This is a useful and pleasant set that will certainly be of great value and interest to anyone of Hungarian origin. Those unacquainted with Hungarian folklore will find numerous typical melodies, but should be warned that, despite the generous number of songs, the set is an
incomplete though enjoyable introduction to Hungarian
musical traditions.

Judith R. Cohen

TOM LEWIS, "Surfacing". Tom Lewis, Box 123, Salmo, B.C., V0G 1Z0

The art of sea shantying is often entrusted to us
landlubber types after our top teeth are afloat in beer
and our mainsails are flapping in the breeze. Actually
going out in wavy water does not usually bring to mind
the impulse to begin singing about the deeper things of
seafaring life, unless perhaps on the main stage of an
ocean liner’s ballroom.

Tom Lewis, on the other hand, is a truly seasoned
career sailor from Britain, and a refined shantyman at
the same time. He has spent his youth as few people
understand: travelling around the globe in a submarine,
and writing songs of the sea in the modern experience.

In his new tape, aptly called Surfacing, Tom touches
port on the timeless themes of a jack’o’tar’s life. The
initial yearning to go out and see the world, the romance
of the sea, exotic places, strange cultures, grog and
women are effective temptations for any young man.
Along with boredom, it’s enough to make him leave the
comforts of home and step aboard some grungy vessel,
especially if he can get paid for it too. There are always,
as Tom finds out, the inevitable setbacks, and the shant-
ymen who try in vain the remind you of them. There
are countless endurance tests for the soul, like separ-
ation from loved ones, the menace of a powerful ocean,
cramped quarters, smell and grime that you can’t wash
off. And there’s always the nightwatch, when the tug of
sleep is barely resisted by responsibility for the safety of
the ship and crew. Once in a while you might try to
console yourself with images of “sweet land” and
friendly women, who tend to congregate on terra firma.

Let me mention a few of Tom’s renditions.

“Recall” and “A Sailor Ain’t a Sailor”, something
Tom Lewis wrote when he was “only 33 and didn’t
know any better”, reveal the first irony a sailor might
face. There aren’t any sails on modern government-
issue rigs! Oh well, there’re still a few great square-
riggers to indicate the original shape of the dream, and I
must agree: standing next to a real four-masted ship by a
pier can really take your breath away.

“A Sailor’s Port in a Storm” is a raunchy tribute to
women, justifiable from the sailor’s point of view in a
way that city folk sometimes have difficulty appreci-
ing. After several months of confinement on a dirty,
wildly-pitching little microcosm of men, with salt con-
stantly blowing up your nose, even the sweet odour of
land at 20 miles can set a man’s heart aflutter. Hence the
personal dilemma.

In another of his compositions, Tom explains that
“Inside Every Sailor”, you’ll find the young man who
deceives himself with romantic visions and the old man
of experience who eventually takes those “Deceptions”
home again. “Diesel and Shale”, one of the few songs
here Tom didn’t write here, tells of the annoying fumes,
grease and dampness that permeate a submarine. Tom
Lewis really gives it the dark undertone it deserves.

To really understand the worst curse of a sailor,
you’ll have to give “Sailor’s Prayer” a good listening. I
have lived in an old international port for most of my
life and have seen what this thorn is all about. The
sarcasm in asking to “send down a dove, from heaven
above, with beaks as sharp as razors” is meant for
bartenders who encourage sailors to drink past drunken-
ness or for others who would otherwise take advantage
of the sailors’ vulnerability on land.

Enough of that – one of Tom’s best on Surfacing
might be “Landlocked Sailor”. It’s a happy wallowing
in landlubber’s paradise, sort of an extrapolation on the
old cure for seasickness: sit under a tree. He goes past
the cure to live in the trees, surrounded by them,
navigating the mountains of B.C. Having spent so much
time on the ocean, it’s like living in the paradise which
he could only glimpse before.

Most of Tom’s songs are a capella, and what accom-
paniment there is seems to enhance the impression that
he had good musicians available. This tape might not be
an elaborate harmonic orchestration of folk fugues, but
it could be the sharpest collection of contemporary sea
shanties I have ever run across. I can smell the salt. I
can almost see the navy-blue lines of a white ship with
an ensign flag over her stern. If you want to know what
the shantyman does today, you’ll have to hear
“Surfacing”.

Geoff Butler