Reviews

A POTPOURRI OF CANADIAN "CELTIC" RECORDINGS

“Celtic” is in quotes for a reason. Despite being a “much-misused phrase”,* in Canada today it’s a handy term to describe groups who play mostly in the style of British revival groups, even if some of their music doesn’t come from Ireland or Scotland or Wales or Cornwall or Brittany (or Cumberland or Galatia or Galicia, for that matter). So I hope we understand each other when I speak of “Canadian Celtic music” – please, no outraged letters.

None of these recordings is particularly recent. In some cases the groups may not even be still extant. However, their music does not have built-in obsolescence, the recordings never had wide distribution, and they’re all still available through our Mail Order Service. Each has something special in the way of a newly-written song with an historical flavour. So our readers deserve to know more about them.

OREALIS, Orealis UR-4-56. 3861 Hôtel de Ville, Montréal, QC H2W 2G6.

A Scottish lead singer, an English-Canadian multi-instrumentalist and a québécoise synthesizer player. Where else would that sort of group be put together but in Montréal? Let’s hope all cultural blendings work as well as this one!

Almost all the music, even that written by the band members, has a Scottish flavour. Kirk MacGeachy puts a dandy tune to “Glasgow Peggy” (Child 228), followed by his vigorous “Hobgoblin Reel”; his dreamy air “Elgo!” blends nicely with the song “Dream Angus” (credited as traditional). Kirk’s song “MacDonell of Barrisdale” (featured in the BULLETIN, 22:1, p. 4) is a fine slice of Scottish history which would not be out of place in the repertoires of Scotland’s top folk groups. Better give this one a listen, lads!

Jim Stephens as composer contributes a pleasant jig “The Scotsman on the Loose”, and his playing on hammered dulcimer, bouzouki, tenor banjo and tin whistle is not to be faulted. (I guess the hammered dulcimer stands out for me because so few people master it.) Renée Morin fits the synthesizer into traditional-sounding music as well as anybody I’ve heard – it’s never tasteless or gimmicky.

Only one track is overtly Canadian: fittingly, a set of Québécois tunes, “Québécois Reel/Reel de Chicoutimi/Gigue de Terrebonne”, with assertive hammered dulcimer taking the lead. The Scottish material will not be unfamiliar to fans of that genre, but none of it has been done to death, and the interpretations are fresh. It includes songs by Burns, “Ca the Yowes” and “Soldier’s Return”, and tunes “Sleepy Maggie”, “John MacKenzie’s Fancy”, “York Reel” and “Calum and the Princess”.

Orealis’s second recording has since been released but hasn’t reached us yet; we hope to be able to tell you about it soon.

UNDER THE MOSS, Raking the Coals, Orca OR 001. 3737 Oak St., Vancouver, B.C. V6H 2M4.

This is a record which I listen to over and over despite some features which are not to my taste but are likely strengths for others.

Let’s get the negatives out of the way, for starters. This is a West Coast group, so they have to be eclectic – it’s in their birth certificates and the air they breathe. So we get a muddy, unfocussed instrumental called “Muscular Hoof” to end the album, leaving us with an impression of not much of anything. Better to finish with something tight and strong! We also get a mediocre song called “Anyway [sic] the Wind Blows”. John Hough sings it well, but has little but clichés to work with.

Speaking of John Hough, he sings lead on all the

songs and has the most distinctive voice I've heard this side of Stan Rogers! For me, this flavour gets in the way on traditional material such as "Fhir a Bhata", "Star of the County Down" and "À La Claire Fontaine", but leaves me wanting to hear more. I hear that John has left the group since this record was made — anyone know what he's doing now and where he can be heard?

The song which best suits John's voice is written by another band member, Patrick Smith. It's "Gold-Dust", the tale of B.C.'s famous train robber, Bill Miner. Devotees of the classic western film "The Gray Fox" will appreciate this other slant on the outlaw's career — and it's a good strong tune in its own right.

Victor Smith contributes the instrumental "Raking the Coals", which gives the album its name. For me the instrumentals stand out in general: mostly Irish, mostly lively, except for "Sueños de Angelita", sweetly played on the harp by Susan Scott. The fourth group member, Patrick Smith, plays lots of instruments, and ably; in fact nobody, including four guest musicians, puts a foot wrong instrumentally.

In sum: an intriguing mixture in which I expect most listeners will find lots to like.


Mullingar, houseband of the Kelowna Folk Club for many years, started out as a pub band, and make no bones about it: they include several "old favourites" such as "Mary Mac", "The Overlander", "The Dutchman" and "Will Ye Go Lassie Go" on their album. I for one would have liked to see the space given to fresher material, but let's not be too harsh. Songs get done to death because they're good songs that effectively say something to a lot of people. Clichés become clichés because they're true. And there are lots of people out there to whom these old standbys are new and wonderful.

But don't get the idea that it's all chestnuts here. Mullingar includes a couple of original songs, and as well the group were the first, to my knowledge, to record Stan Rogers' material after his death. They deserve credit for not being intimidated by the canonization movement — Stan's work should be in people's mouths as well as their hearts and museum cases. "Barrett's Privateers" is such a strong song that it's easy to sing well, and the boys don't let us down.

As for the original songs, it was a treat for me to find another song about Canada's pioneer steamboats, a topic on which I've written myself (BULLETIN, 18:4, December 1984, p. 11). Bob Farmer's "The S.S. Minto", about a steamer which plied the Arrow Lakes in the old days, gives the album a good strong start. Unfortunately it's followed by a weak instrumental, "The Blarney Pilgrim/Merrily Kiss the Quaker's Wife". Great tunes, but the mandolin lead falls down on the execution end. More time in the studio was needed — I'm afraid the band settled for less on this one. But "Smokin'" Pete Kerr lives up to his nickname on fiddle on a trio of reels, "Reconciliation Reel/Timour the Tarter/Big John McNeil", and blends beautifully with Garth Vickers' flute on "Fanny Po'er". Garth does lovely double-tracked whistle on the "aire" "For Ireland I Won't Say her Name", which the band follows with spirited reels, "Loch Laven Castle/Sleep Soon In The Morning".

The other original song included is John McIntyre's "2-4-D Blues". A topical song concerning using toxic chemicals to try to eradicate water weeds in Okanagan Lake, it's raggy and fun, but with a sting in its tail. John wrote an ecological song before ecology got trendy, and his name goes down on some list of pioneers somewhere.

Forget the imperfections — the album has some great moments.

John Leeder
DOUG McARTHUR with GARNET ROGERS: 
Snow Goose SGS-1116C.

Doug McArthur’s new album with Garnet Rogers is a very creditable effort. The picking is always craftsman-like, and occasionally inspired. The songwriting, while never memorably melodic, is generally dense and muscularly lyrical. And the whole business is beautifully recorded.

The set opens with a sly speculation on what would happen if an excavation for a new shopping mall in England were to unearth the crypt where Merlin the magician has been slowly recovering from his wounds at the hands of King Arthur, waiting for the day the nation needed a powerful wizard to spring forth and save her. Merlin meditates in punchy, almost cinematic images which easily sustain repeated listenings. The lyrics are perfectly couched in a lovely, layered string chart with a successfully medieval-sounding guitar-synth hook and lots of spacey, pitch-bending little ornaments. It’s perhaps a minor blemish that the string tracks raggedly continue just far enough past the logical end of the tune to make you think Rogers the musician momentarily got the best of the otherwise good judgment of Rogers the producer. This could have been easily fixed in the mix, but then, it’s tough to be objective about your own stuff.

“Break the Law” is a tale about Ontario farmers driven to arms by the threat of foreclosure by villain Toronto bankers. Unlike many tunes on the album, this one actually has a chorus with a singable hook, although the guitar lines are a little too wimpy to support the rebellious sentiment being attempted. McArthur doesn’t sound terribly convinced either. Maybe it’s only because his voice is thinner in its upper range and the tune should come down a tone or so. Maybe it’s because this song sounds so disingenuously 60s. That “the world lies to you”, usually quite seductively, came as such a rude surprise only to that postwar North American generation that had never known any hard times. This little playlet might well succeed in front of a white collar audience of that generation, perhaps out of nostalgia for the seemingly clearcut issues and radical chic outrage of those freaky, heady days. But this tune is about as rebellious as raisin bread, and it’s very hard even to suspend one’s disbelief, let alone muster a clenched fist and a hearty “Right on!” for the embattled family farm.

The sea and tall ships seem to be potent images for McArthur, and he uses them quite effectively on “Isle Madelaine”, a waltz accompanied only by acoustic guitar and fiddle. The playing is excellent and the instrumental tracks are beautifully positioned around the vocal in lush, spacious reverb. Slick enough for downtown! And darned if Doug didn’t write an appealing melody, too. The title is a little confusing, though. The liner note says the tune was inspired by campfire stories heard during an island-hopping voyage off Nova Scotia, and Doug pronounces the name as “Isle Madeleine”, or one of the Magdalen Islands off Cape Breton. But if that’s the place he means, then the title is only the most obvious of the embarrassingly frequent typos and incorrect lyrics throughout these liner notes. Mercifully, no one is credited for the jacket design, but the folks at Snow Goose Songs and Valerie Enterprises ought to realize that even your average Guns ’n’ Roses album contains cleaner copy than this.

In “The Siege of Toronto” McArthur takes a stab at expressing the big-time paranoia he observed in the security measures surrounding the G7 economic conference held in Toronto in 1988. He was expecting maybe a Shriners’ convention? Forget this song. The two-sentence liner note expresses the idea about as well as the lyrics do. Rogers plays a shuffle feel on his Strat here, with a little help from his trusty digital delay, which he later repeats on “Ships at Sea” and “Wino Breath”. Must be his all-purpose “walking down the city street” groove. It works fine as far as it goes, but on “Wino Breath” especially, the tonality of it comes distractingly close to a parody of Mark Knopfler.

The ballad “Bullwhip Jack and the Silver Bell” is among the warmest, most deeply felt, most convincing vocals on the album. It is the story of a crazy French Canadian McArthur once worked with on a railway gang in Northern Ontario. Jack assumes the mythic proportions of a John Henry, and the little silver bell he would ring as a signal to the men to down tools becomes a symbol of an all too fragile freedom within the system. McArthur really “gets down” here, pushing all the right buttons to send a shiver up your spine. Dave Essig contributes some perfect dobro-like slide guitar.

“There Is a River” is McArthur at his wistful, melancholy, enigmatic best, with some haunting, prairie-flavoured double bowing from Rogers.

“Bank the Fire” is a title looking for a song. Some-
how the smoke from Doug's woodstove starts him thinking about freedom again and how he lost it when he lost his lady love, but these notions never seem to get tied together. This is the only tune in the set to feature backup harmonies, possibly because it's one of the few with enough of a hook to warrant them. It is also, thank god, the only one with a bass line. As excellent a singer, songwriter, fiddler, guitarist, producer and arranger as Rogers is, he should maybe spring for a bass player next time out.

McArthur loves to write parables, the broader the better. In "Thief in the Night" a young girl who disappears with a band of gypsies is glimpsed 30 years later as a crazy gypsy lady, living in a cabin near the requisite graves and wondering where her young body went like a thief in the night. In the final verse, a more modern girl, possibly modelled on a groupie at a Doug McArthur concert, is admonished to "Change you're [sic] style, get into something" before her youth and beauty fade too.

"Ships at Sea" has some marvelous imagery: a Toronto streetcar "lit up like a liner at party time"; a bar girl in high heels as a tall ship that turns out on a closer look to be a rusty tramp; a wino with a "deep salt thirst" as a battered, leaky lifeboat; and a mugger as a shark who steals McArthur's wallet at knifepoint, although that last might be impossible to bring off in the face of the Brecht and Weill standard "Mack the Knife".

The tune called "Black Eyed Susan" is lyrically just another rumination on lost love, draped in McArthur's favorite maritime imagery. But what a killer acoustic guitar line! Rogers really outdoes himself, and McArthur's vocal responds in kind. If this really was a first-take jam, as the liner note claims, these guys are so tight you couldn't see light between 'em. Excellent stuff!

McArthur really stretches out vocally on "Wino Breath", from a holler to a whisper, but there might just be some unconscious burlesque here. The tune is a homily about a folksinger, preoccupied with his own affairs, who ignores a wino on the street. Walking further along, the singer remembers his own years lost in wine and regrets having passed his brother by. He returns to the wino, only to find him dead. Then, wafting in on a suspiciously hokey string synth cloud come the angels of death, "... great big buggers with big red wings". I love it! It's like a classmate nudging you in the ribs in church. But then the moment passes and the tune concludes with complete Sally Ann sobriety. Go figure. Although the jacket photo and some of McArthur's liner note comments indicate that a sense of humour giggles within the man somewhere, this is as close to it as he gets on this album. The doctor prescribes frequent doses of Nancy White, Randy Newman, Lyle Lovett, Oscar Brand, Shel Silverstein, Dave van Ronk, Loudon Wainwright, Ray Stevens, Jim Stafford, Roger Miller, Spike Milligan et al., so that McArthur can cultivate his funnybone.

"Chella" is a pretty instrumental for guitars and thunder shower. The electric guitar is volume pedalled or gated to remove the attack from each note so that the track sounds like horn or keyboard sweetening. Nice touch! Even if the thunder shower is a storebought effect, Rogers and engineer Dan Brodbeck have got it perfectly mixed so it sounds right at home. A propos of matters technical, the review copy of the cassette contained three oversaturated sibilants, two in "Bullwhip Jack" and one in "The Unnamed City", which remained apparent when played on four different systems.

Finally, remember when most albums had a dozen songs? Ten or even eight seem to be the commercial rule these days. McArthur and Rogers give us 13! "The Unnamed City" is a meditative, deeply felt song which McArthur's liner note says makes him think of his mother. Rogers contributes some excellent, almost classical sounding strings here which fit the mood exactly.

-- Joe Wilderson
REGINA AMID THE SHOWERS

For any organizers of an outdoor folk festival, the lead-up weeks must involve not only much hard work but also much prayer — hard work in organization and prayers for fine weather. Last year, when the Regina Folk Festival celebrated its twentieth anniversary, the briefest of thundershowers presaged a generally fine weekend. This year? Well, the weather wasn’t exactly disastrous, yet decidedly it didn’t help much.

Taking matters in sequence, we must begin with the Friday evening concert. Its program was not very well planned, for the first two performers had overmuch in common. Roberta Nichol, so ebullient and vigorous in her club performances, seemed overawed at being on the main stage to open the festival; nor did a quick flash of costume and the support of instrumentalist Bob Evans help much. Two of her songs — “Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues” and “Ladybird” — showed what she can do, but in general hers was an uncertain set which didn’t come across well. Cathy Miller, the writer of so many original songs, produced quite an array of them — from “Jingo Jingo the Pink Flamingo” through “Rainbow in Regina” to “Superwoman” — without ever establishing any strong rapport with an audience unusually conscious of the threatening weather. The Montreal group Orealis achieved something of a breakthrough, however, with their strong rhythms. Kirk MacGeachy’s Scottish love song “Oh Angeline”, the Bobby Sands tune “Back Home in Derry”, the traditional “The Trooper and the Maid” and some spirited dulcimer playing all earned the group good marks in my books, but I could have done without that keyboard.

Storm clouds were massing by then and lightning was flashing, but only a few raindrops fell. Stephen Fearing is always a lively and versatile performer, his material including mostly his own songs — I liked “Blind Horses” — but also the Hank Williams song “Lonesome Whistle”, which evoked nostalgia among some listeners. Yet the high spot of Friday evening was unquestionably — and properly — supplied by the last performers, The Grievous Angels, from Toronto, with their big acoustic sound. Their material incorporated songs of social protest (“Which Side Are You On?” and “The Kremer (Canimex) Mine Song”), Ontarian nostalgia (“Grand Narrows”), patriotic songs — sort of! — (“This Land of Ours”), a French-Canadian traditional song (“Ah! Si mon moine voulait danser!”) and the very best version I’ve ever heard of Blind Willie Johnson’s old gospel song “If I Had My Way”.

A downpour soaked Regina overnight, and recurrent light showers plagued the early Saturday workshops, cutting the audience. Indeed, Geoff Butler said that at the Accordion to Me workshop (hideous pun!) the word should have been “audience”, since it wasn’t plural! Because of morning rehearsals with my own group, I arrived only at 1:00 p.m. and chose to attend the lively Jigs & Reels workshop, in which Geoff’s accordion again figured prominently and John Krozynski’s fiddle was particularly enjoyable.

A half-hour concert by The Pockets — Sue and Al Bond and Randy Ruppel of Saskatoon — was a display of splendid vocal pyrotechnics, giving life to even the most banal of songs. I heard only part of the ensuing workshop, L’amour et les amants, since this was tuning-up time for our group before our half-hour concert.

By then the weather was briefly benign and we had a good audience, who seemed to like us. We can justly claim to have given the first predominantly traditional performance, with three Scottish fiddle tunes (“Farewell to Whisky”, “Welcome, Whisky, Back Again” and “By the Hush” — although the latter is set in the U.S.A. and was written by an Irishman, it was collected in Ontario!) and one English industrial song (“The Sheffield Grinder”), plus a much newer English song in traditional vein by Jez Lowe (“I’ll Never Get Home”) and a Stan Rogers song (“Lies”).

I remained onstage afterward to participate with Suzanne Bird and The Pockets in an a cappella workshop. Suzanne sang three songs from her own repertoire; The Pockets produced more vocal pyrotechnics; and I sang a Border ballad (“The Baron of Brackley”), three other English traditional songs of a later date (“High Barbary”, “Ilkla Moor” and “The Old Dun Cow”) and an American song from the days of the Depression (“One Meat Ball”), with spirited backing, whenever appropriate, from The Pockets. It was a good end to the day, for me at least!

The Saturday evening concert began in lively fashion with the spirited music of the Chilean group Mama Llajta (“Mother Earth”). Calvin Vollrath followed up, and most of the audience greatly enjoyed his skilled manipulation of the fiddle. (Sorry, but I didn’t — just too smooth and plasticated, as if all the tunes had been
factory-produced to match one another!) Jim Payne is a favourite, and I like many of the songs he has written, but his set — even though backed by Geoff Butler’s accordion — had a random and unplanned feel. There was one excellent traditional song ("The Southern Cross") and several spirited jigs and reels, but the songs of his own that Jim chose to sing were not among his finest.

Then, with the heavens quite evidently about to open upon Victoria Park, I was one of those who fled. Indeed, the downpour washed away most of the audience. Only a staunch few remained to listen to Kris Purdy and dance determinedly in the rain to Roots Roundup.

On Sunday morning the sun shone again, although it was turning cooler. One stage was styled the "Labour Stage" and the first workshop there was Labour Day. Jim Payne compered it and sang well. I especially liked his "Oil-Rigger’s Alphabet". The Manifestos (Gord Fisch and Billy Morton) contributed solidly relevant stuff; Jim Keelaghan produced some of his elegant musical musings upon Canada’s recent history; and I added a trio of English industrial songs ranging from old ("The Brave Dudley Boys", a wry celebration of what was perhaps the world’s first strike) to very new (Jez Lowe’s splendid "Cursed be the Caller"). The ensuing workshop, Unrest and Protest, continued this theme under Stephen Fearing’s lead and featured contemporary songs almost entirely.

After that I veered away to Red Hot Tunes — yes, spirited stuff! — but I ducked behind the stage to avoid the auditory violations imposed by Ellen McIlwaine and her backing group. Her songs might have been enjoyable had the volume of the loudspeakers been cut by half. After that, the Songs I Love to Sing workshop — Garnet Rogers, Jim Payne, Joyce Stadnichuk, Suzanne Bird and Kirk MacGeachy — was a blessed release to the ears, as well as a pleasure. We Prairie Higglers ended the day onstage, along with Cathy Miller and The Pennywhistlers, striving to involve our audience in Songs For You to Sing — and meeting fair success, at that!

It had been turning still cooler by late afternoon, and the evening was thoroughly miserable, with persistent rain, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, and so cold — down to 7°C, we were told. We could believe it! The Manifestos gave matters a brisk start. Gord Fisch, serving his final year as the festival’s Artistic Director,

received appropriate special applause. Suzanne Bird sang a further selection of her gentle songs, the one about Louis Riel being especially haunting. Les Bücherons did a brief, brisk performance, with some impressive dancing over a two-handed crosscut saw, and Jim Keelaghan roused the meagre audience to warm applause with his excellently conceived and crafted songs, backed well by Kathy Cook’s mandolin and Bill Eaglesham’s bass.

After that, those who stayed in the audience were injudiciously allowed to congeal. They wanted mostly music, to liven up the bloodstream; instead, they got mostly talk. As a medical friend commented somewhat kindly, Lucie Blue Tremblay rambled on like someone on a psychiatrist’s couch and her songs didn’t compensate. As for Garnet Rogers, he recounted at undue length the inner history of his relationship with Archie Fisher (not a troubled one, despite rumour) and gave over-extended introductions to his too few songs. That was poor judgment of an audience by two performers who ought to have known better. Indeed, the festival might have ended on a low note of near-refrigeration had not all the performers been called back for the traditional festival-closing anthem.

Although the weather was marginal, it still didn’t spoil Regina XXI, but we’ll be hoping for warmer conditions and bluer skies next year!

William A.S. Sarjeant