Now that I’ve escaped unscathed from editing this publication and have found a safe haven looking after the reviews section, it’s time to put on paper some ideas that float to the surface concerning what reviews are all about, especially in the current Canadian time and place. Prospective writers may get some sense of what we look for in the BULLETIN - I may even start to figure out what I’m doing myself: And prospective writers we want! Don’t wait for an invitation; in fact, we’re glad to get even unsolicited reviews provided the subject has significant Canadian folk music elements.

It’s trite but important to remember that a review is one person’s opinion. A reader’s views may differ (and even the person whose work is reviewed may disagree...), and we would welcome readers’ comments with significant things to say about a review. We would not welcome comments based on personal preferences or tastes ("How can this person possibly like something that I don’t like?"), so sending us this sort of letter would be a waste of your postage. But please feel free to respond to anything of substance which you see in a BULLETIN review.

How do I decide who gets to review a particular item? I look for someone who: is knowledgeable about that kind of music involved or will be able to say worthwhile things about it from a fresh perspective; can express her- or himself well in writing; is likely to be able to produce a review within a reasonable time; is at "arm’s length" from the artist; and probably will like the particular item. Will the last point be controversial? Probably. But I think we’re at a delicate point in the development of Canadian folk music in terms, of recorded “product”. Cassette technology with its reduced costs has made it possible for developing performers to record earlier in their careers than in the past which results in more recordings by less experienced people. We should be encouraging high standards on the part of recording artists, but we should not be driving away purchasers with overly harsh criticisms of albums which may have redeeming virtues. The days of "He’s made a record, so he’s fair game for whatever anyone cares to say about him," are fading. On the other hand, a reviewer’s job is not to promote sales of the product (even though it may be for sale in our own Mail Order Service), but rather to give readers an honest assessment of its virtues, and to use its shortcomings to illustrate pitfalls which other artists should avoid. The needs of the prospective buyer in finding out what he or she is likely to enjoy, the needs of the artist in getting his or her material to the prospective audience, and the needs of the folk music community as a whole in getting better and better recordings from artists, must all be taken into account.

To expand a little on the “arm’s length” point, an unsolicited review might be a one-sided promotional job from a friend of the artist. I have no way of knowing for sure, but must trust my instincts and the good sense of our readers. I expect I’ve been wrong in the past, but not often. I hope. And when I select a reviewer I try to choose someone who will appear to be unbiased as well as actually being so. And, of course, a reviewer who has some connection with the artist should say so at the outset - it’s still possible to write a fair review in those circumstances.
Thoughts on Reviews

As you can see, finding the ideal reviewer for any particular item is not an easy job; couple this with an increasing volume of folk music books and recordings coming to us for review, and some inertia on the part of writers and past editors (myself included), and we have quite a backlog of items which have not yet been written about. One of my goals over the next few issues is to clear up the backlog. I don’t think our music goes obsolete (quite the contrary), and I don’t think our primary responsibility is to get a review out in a hurry so as to boost sales (much as the artists might wish it otherwise:), so I think it’s perfectly valid to write about stuff which is a few years old. Of course, more reviews will mean shorter reviews - but I think the essence of a performance can be captured just as well in terse phrases and incisive comments - probably better!

Which conveniently segues into another topic: the heavy (or light) hand of the editor. In the past you’ve seen reviews of wildly varying lengths in our pages. This is likely to continue. I encourage writers to find their own style and to take as much space as they need to express their views. I will slice out redundancies. I will fix spelling, grammar and punctuation (unless it’s obviously non-standard for dramatic effect). In some cases I’ll replace a trite word with a more colourful one. In some cases I’ll change a construction where the author ended up saying something other than what he obviously meant. Being an editor by profession, it’s easy for me to fall into the house style of my employment, but I try not to be obsessive about it - consistency is all I ask, really. (Of course, Editor Whidden has some say in the final published version as well.) And I promise: I will never change a review because I disagree with the author’s opinions.

Enough philosophy, then. If you know of a recording or book which the rest of the country should know more about, please contact us or send a sample to the Mail Order Service address at the front of this issue. If you’d like write for us, with all the glamour, notoriety and free records that the job entails, or if you know of someone whose arm we should be twisting, please get in touch with me at the address below:

John Leeder
224 20th Avenue
Calgary, Alberta
T2M 1C2