Comptes Rendus / Reviews

Gallaher, Bill and Galbraith, Jake. *Home to the Island*. Cassette album 1991. *Gallaher and Galbraith, #4 - 1275 Pembroke St., Victoria, B.C. V8T 1J7.*

Here is a new Canadian folk album that will be listened to frequently by anyone lucky enough to possess it. During my third or fourth hearing of it, I realized that I had discovered one of those few special items that will travel with me wherever I go — until I wear out the tape.

With its striking melodies and finely-honed lyrics, *Home to the Island* is a worthy candidate to be described as Vancouver Island’s answer to the indigenous folk traditions of other regions like Newfoundland or Nova Scotia.

What is it that I like so much in this spectacular song cycle?

One answer is perhaps the richly satisfying effect to which composer/lead singer Gallaher has used our Vancouver Island history. "Shadow Boats" (about rum-running) and "Three Dollar Dreams" (on the turn-of-the-century coal mining boom) have power of lyric and melody to stir the blood. The title song, "Home to the Island" — the nostalgic pining of an islander in Winnipeg exile — is an evocative paean to our soft, warm marine paradise on the west coast.

Yet the Vancouver Island focus alone is not this album’s only attraction. In fact, one or two of the best songs do not have an island setting at all. "The Ballad of Ginger Goodwin", for instance, is a rollicking tribute to one of the B.C. mainland’s pioneering labor heroes. It’s great stuff! I like its wild, militant rhythms as it tells the story of how the Law gunned Ginger down, and then Ginger’s supporters "closed Vancouver down"! Another non-island song that is nevertheless a gem is "The Highwayman" — a delightful gallop through Alfred Noyes’ famous ballad.

Gallaher’s own lyrics, fine-tuned to the precision of first class poetry, are provocative. At first hearing some specific lines had a revelatory quality that sent a tingling through my scalp. In my favorite song, "In Ireland", I am much taken by the neat little philosophical observation (rendered in a haunting Celtic scale) to the effect that

*Though life is mostly froth and foam,*
*Two things stand in stone —*
*Kindness in another’s trouble,*
*Courage in our own."

And, as for the thrumming lines of the rum-running song,

*Like shadows we ran in the night...*
*... and it wasn’t for the money,*
*or the rum or the whisky —*
*It was makin’ those shadow boats run!*

if Gallaher ever writes a chantey that more effectively stirs me to try my hand at lawbreaking for fun, the police ought to come and take him away!

The polished elegance of all the songs in this album stands in contrast to the roughness and the raggedy-edged quality that is a deliberate effect in some folk groups. To my taste, the quiet wistfulness and gentle poignancy of *Home to the Island* are a deeply satisfying achievement.

Perhaps the ultimate criterion on which I base my liking (or my dislike) for any album of songs is the writer’s degree of success in imprinting his melodies on my resistant brain. Some folk albums amuse me while I am hearing them, yet half an hour later I cannot whistle a single bar from any cut on the record. Gallaher’s lively themes are the opposite — during the past three weeks, I haven’t been able to stop humming them.

*Philip Teece*


The liner notes for *Emma Lake Live* state: "The excitement of live performances can never be matched by studio recordings." Live recordings are usually justified by the suggestion that records of concert performances somehow contain more "energy" or "excitement" than comparable studio recordings. Since sound is all that can be recorded on tape, it is difficult to imagine how "energy" and "excitement" can be either captured or transmitted. It is certainly true that the interplay between a performer and his/her audience can produce moments of rare genius; this is particularly true for musical styles that involve improvisational skills. It must also be pointed out, however, that live performance recordings can never match studio recordings for technical values and overall performance quality.
All performers vary in the skill with which they perform, thus some performances must be better than others. (Even highly-skilled artists have good performances and bad performances. Virtuosi simply have fewer bad performances, and the difference between their good and bad performances are less pronounced than for us mere mortals, who tend to have good days and really awful days.) The technical aspects of live recording limit the number of performances that can be taped, and many performances (such as the concert that gave rise to *Emma Lake Live*) are one of a kind. Unless a large number of such recordings can be made, it seems unlikely that a particularly excellent recording would result form any given performance. Many performers who elect to make live recordings get around these difficulties by recording a number of live performances and choosing the best version of a tune or song from among these alternatives. (Note that even this process will not result in a "best" version in the sense that it represents a definitive performance, but only the "best" among the recorded versions.) In addition, "live" recordings are frequently enhanced in the studio to correct deficiencies, adjust balance, edit out audience noise and so forth. The extent to which such modification renders a recording "live" is debatable, and will in any case vary from instance to instance.

*Emma Lake Live* is a live recording in a very true sense. It is based on single recordings of a series of one-time-only events: the instructors' concerts from the 1990 Emma Lake Fiddlers Camp. The players (John Arcand, John Kushneryk, Bob Montgomery, Gordon Radu and Calvin Vollrath) are all first-rate performers, most of them championship fiddlers of one sort or another. The repertoire on the tape is quite varied, including (if the liner notes are to be believed) many tunes that have not been recorded previously. The presentation of otherwise unavailable material makes the tape of particular interest to any fiddler wanting to expand his/her own repertoire.

Most of the playing is what I would call "competition-style": straight, clean playing, without extensive variation in the tunes, and with very straightforward accompaniment. Unfortunately, while the accompanists are talented, the lack of variety in the backup gives much of the tape a sameness that makes it difficult for the casual listener to enjoy. Those who use the tape to trigger reminiscences of their participation in the Emma Lake camp, for who want to learn some of the fine tunes that the tape contains, will not have such complaints.

The sound balance on the tracks varies widely; since this is a one-time-only event, it is impossible to do a second "take" to correct this unevenness. The balance is quite good on some tracks, but overall the backup (in particular the piano) tends to be overemphasized. This emphasis is hardly justified, since the accompaniment is generally restricted to rhythmic chording, without anything that could reasonably be called an "arrangement". Gordon Radu's tracks in particular are muddy, although his playing is very fine. John Kushneryk's selections have a bit better balance than many of the others, although the fiddle on "Durang's Hornpipe" seems to have been poorly miked and sounds quite muddy. John Arcand's playing is featured extensively (he plays on nearly half the tunes on the tape), and he has composed many of the tunes as well. His playing is very strong and rhythmic. I was particularly impressed with his ability to pull interesting ideas out of that hoary old chestnut of the concert circuit, "Big John McNeil."

The "star" of the tape is clearly Calvin Vollrath. He contributes to over half the tunes (including some flashy duets with Arcand) and his playing is responsible for nearly all of the genuinely interesting and exciting moments that *Emma Lake Live* has to offer. This is probably because Vollrath's range of material is more varied than the rest, including a two-step, a terrific hornpipe medley and a jazz standard ("Lady Be Good"). It is perhaps significant that the cuts that feature Vollrath as solo fiddle have by far the best balance of any on the tape (although Vollrath's fiddle has a rather thin sound in places), as well as the most interesting accompaniment work. Vollrath approaches his tunes in a different fashion from the other players on the tape: rather than presenting a single version of the tune, he includes lots of variety, and in fact rarely plays a tune through twice in exactly the same way. While I appreciate that this amount of variation and improvisation is not generally a feature of traditional fiddling, there is no escaping the fact that such variety makes for more exciting listening. A particularly good example of Vollrath's ingenuity and technical ability is found in the final cut on the tape, the oft-requested "Orange Blossom Special." I confess that my heart sank when I saw this tune on the tape index — frequently the piece is played so quickly that it degenerates into a rhythmic exercise, or it is used only as a vehicle to demonstrate a fiddler's cleverness in imitating train sounds. Vollrath actually manages to do new and exciting things with the material and to play cleanly and clearly even at breakneck speed. I usually hate "Orange Blossom Special," but this is the only track on the tape that I felt compelled to listen to twice through, just to catch all the ideas that Vollrath tosses out so effortlessly.

*Emma Lake Live* will probably have a restricted audience because of its specialized nature, but in spite of the inherent problems with live recordings, the tape is certainly worth a listen by fiddlers looking for new tunes or new approaches to old ones.

*Michael Pollock*

Ken Hamm. *Floodtide*. North Track Cassette (No number). Ken Hamm, Box 285, Cedar, B.C. VOR 1JO.

Many years ago, I reviewed Ken Hamm's first record, *Ken Hamm and Friends*, for a Calgary newspaper, less than enthusiastically, I'm afraid. I remember taking particular exception to a Charley Patton ragtime ditty which was to my ears bowdlerized both lyrically and musically.

But that was many years ago. It seems to me that we passed a significant milestone in 1990: that year was exactly as
far past John Hammond's first recording on Vanguard as Hammond's recording session was from the date of Robert Johnson's classic recordings. I think there may still be reasons to prefer, in many cases at least, the music of the old masters, and certainly to note that there are musical, social and atmospheric differences between the two traditions, but the point is that, preferences and prejudices aside, there is now an established tradition of white city boys (many of us now well into our forties) living with and playing country blues. The tradition may include appropriative and gauche elements, but many practitioners of the idiom have committed considerable portions of their lives to developing their art, and though fortunes have passed through a few hands, most hippie blues boys would have done better to take up another genre or even a trade.

It is silly at this point to suggest that the lifestyle that produced the blues should be treated with undue privilege. Paul Oliver has pointed out that the milieu of the early bluesmen not only was misogynistic, but was in fact a world in which distrust among men themselves was rife. Oppression may engender great music, but it doesn't promote commendable behavior or happiness. If the country blues can be translated into another world, so much the better, especially to those of us who are still concerned with social justice.

Ken Hamm has been at the blues now for well over a decade. Floodtide, his third recording, demonstrates that he's obviously been playing a great deal and listening closely, as well; his articulation is fluent and personal. He can swing, and that's still what it's all about.

Interestingly enough, the opening cut, "Waterlines," a Hamm original, is as reminiscent of southern white string music as of the black tradition that created the blues; it seems to me among the most successful cuts on the tape. I call this interesting because back when Hammond and Van Ronk and the rest of the first generation had just begun to record, Julius Lester suggested in a controversial article in Sing Out! that they might do well to approach the blues through such white mountain blues masters as Roscoe Holcomb and Dock Boggs. There's always been resistance to this idea, but it seems to me that Floodtide illustrates Lester's point quite well; to my ears, the strongest cuts are syncretistic, primarily of the miscegenation that interested Lester, but occasionally mixing elements from farther afield than Holcomb or Boggs ever imagined. I should add that, though the latter were Lester's examples, I'm not suggesting them as models for Hamm, whose touch, generally, is lighter and more danceable than either of those graveyard banjoists: his work here puts me more in mind of such entertainers as Sam McGee, Dick Justice (whose "Cocaine" is the model for Bob Bossin's "The Secret of Life According to Satchel Paige"), even early Merle Travis.

I'm not sure that intensity is Hamm's long suit. For my money, the weakest cuts are those dark war horses, "Crosscut Saw," "When You Got A Good Friend," and the Bo Diddley medley, "Can't Judge A Book By The Cover/Who Do You Love." I'm not sure what would constitute a useful reading of the latter anymore.

A more interesting experiment is Hamm's version of Wolf's "Evil," which he puts into a quiet version that sounds to me like he was thinking of Skip James. I'm reserving judgment on this. James' intensity might still be beyond Hamm. I'm not sure I've ever heard a city player who can get into it, with the possible exception of John Miller.

Whether or not they agree with my assessments, some listeners may object to the large number of old chestnuts Hamm's recorded here. In addition to those I've cited already, Floodtide offers "Keys to the Hiway," "Seventh Son," "San Francisco Bay Blues," and "Duncan and Brady." The rest of the cassette is made up of Hamm's own compositions, songs and instrumentals, which I find generally quite pleasing. In addition to the already cited "Waterlines," I particularly call your attention to the ragtime instrumental, "Red-haired Shake," with which Hamm proves that he's listened well enough to the old guys to be able to make his own statement in the dialect. "Ballad of R & V," noted to be from a play, Bay Street Line, which Hamm co-wrote with William Roberts, uses the ragtime/blues mode to tell a badman story to "Duncan and Brady," but with a difference: here the encounter is between an union organizer and a scab. (Pleasant to note that Hamm doesn't buy into the right wing political correctness that would call the latter a "replacement worker."

Hamm plays both standard guitar and National steel. The National he plays with and without a slide; he even uses it on "So Long Mamalilaculla/Jorma's Song," in a kind of New Age blending of Hawaiian slack key and other picking idioms. He's joined on several tunes by long time partner Bruce Everett, who plays various winds (harmonica, flute, panpipe) and sings harmony, as well as by western Canada stalwart Bill Eaglesham on bass guitar. Tony Michael appears several times on fiddle and mandolin. Generally I find his fiddle a little uptown, a little too bluegrass, for the proceedings here, but this isn't always the case. His mandolin fits just right; the mandolin and Everett's panpipe give "Ballad of R & V" a lovely touch of the sound of Ragtime Texas Henry Thomas — good stuff! Caroline Rine joins Hamm on second guitar on the final, pop-ballad, "Heart and Only."

I don't take back everything I wrote ten years ago, but I sure take back much of it. I hope Ken Hamm and his friends keep at this for many years.

George W. Lyon