There's no room for doubt in my hay-seed, range bred heart, it's partly due to occupation, but being a cowboy is mostly a state of mind.

Loosely interpreting Charlie Russell's sentiments on the subject, I'm sure glad cowboys don't eat grass; Sort of proves we are at least part human. (I'm not so certain about people in general, and politicians in particular.)

Now to the real purpose of this letter. THANKS for including my poem in your worthy publication. "Wendicundo's Vision" is in good company, and I'm sure the old man would have been pleased to smoke the pipe with most of the characters whose works were also included. Perhaps (like myself) he would think of them as brothers.

Also, (I believe this can be said for all the cowboy poets) THANK YOU for your interest in, and appreciation for the cowboy poetry movement. It's always a great feeling to know we have helpful friends.

Until our trails cross again best wishes,

Harvey Mawson
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Reviews / Comptes-rendus

Roy Johnstone, Rolling Waves, No. JR001. Roy Johnstone, RR#1, Bonshaw, P.E.I. C0A 1C0. (Also available from CSMT Mail Order Service.)

In reviewing this tape, I fear I may be accused of damning with faint praise, although that is certainly not my intent. Roy Johnstone of P.E.I. is a fine fiddler with a very clean style. The restraint he shows in embellishment is entirely appropriate and allows the listener to concentrate on the beauty of the tunes rather than on Johnstone's obvious technical abilities. The tunes have been selected with some care and provide a very nice mixture of tempos and musical forms. Moderate tempos seem to suit Johnstone best; his playing tends to lose clarity with increased tempo, and (to my ear, at least) his vibrato is not sufficiently broad to make slower tunes as effective as they might otherwise be.

Johnstone is accompanied on all cuts by Grady Poe on guitar. Poe's playing is interesting both rhythmically and harmonically; he both avoids the standard "boom-chuck" guitar accompaniment and ranges far beyond the ordinary in his selection of chords. Lennie Gallant provides competent, if uninspired, bodhran drumming on many of the more up-tempo selections.

I found the two sides of the tape rather unevenly balanced, with the second side being much more to my taste. The tunes here are played in a more relaxed style, transitions in medleys are smoother, and the balance between fiddle and guitar is a bit more controlled. Particularly fine are "Monaghan's Jig" (a bit reminiscent of "Kid on the Mountain", but in 6/8 time), a very pleasant version of "South Wind", and the medley "Ciaran O Raghallaigh/Martin Wynn's #2". The final medley on this side begins well, with Skinner's "Hector the Hero", but loses crispness with its transition to faster reels.

The playing on the first side is a bit less assured and lacks some of the lilt and drive of the second side. One cut in particular, a medley beginning with "Lament for Sir Harry Lumsden", has very awkward transitions between the tunes. (Some medleys are made effective by successfully combining tunes in unexpected and unusual ways; in this case, I suspect that the reason the transitions are rather forced is that the tunes just don't go together very well.)

On the whole, this tape contains some very fine fiddle playing, and interesting arrangements of pleasant tunes. I'm sure Roy Johnstone has it in him to produce a terrifically exciting recording. This isn't it, but it certainly augers well for future efforts.

Michael Pollock

In 1985, five musicians with distinctive musical backgrounds and styles met on a farm in rural Quebec, at North America's only bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy festival, and the result was the formation of a new, innovative and exciting band, Ad Vielle Que Pourra, which has become popular among folkies in the past several years.

It is quite possible that one might need to understand French, or have at least a PhD, to figure out all the subtle puns, word-plays and double entendres in the titles of the songs and tunes in Ad Vielle Que Pourra’s repertoire; even the band’s name is a subtle pun on a French phrase which means "come what may". But one doesn't have to be French to enjoy their saucy, often ribald and naughty music: delightfully spicy, often unusual to the point of difficulty of description.

Daniel and Luc Thonon, Alain Leroux, Clément Demers and Gilles Plante play a variety of instruments, including diatonic accordions, fiddle, Flemish pipes, guitar, and the ancient vielle-a-roue, the medieval wheel-fiddle, what we call the hurdy-gurdy, which has been described as "a cross between an out-of-sorts bagpipe and a tuned buzz-saw", from which instrument the group partially derives its name.

Ad Vielle’s music is a reflection of traditional French musical styles, but with an innovative approach to taking old French instruments and placing them in unusual settings. Their blend of Southwestern French, Breton and Québécois music forms a delightful mosaic of new and exciting sounds that really cannot be categorized. In the world of traditional French music, accordions play waltzes from Paris, vielles play bourrées from the countryside, Flemish pipes play polkas from Flanders, and the bombarde, Brittany’s oboe-like secret weapon, plays gavottes and An Dros. But in Ad Vielle’s hands, all these rules go out the window, and the results are pure musical joy. All on one album we find a trio of delightful waltzes from Paris, several suites of Breton gavottes and An Dros, and a number of songs, which range from a warning to French girls to beware of their male counterparts, to a song about an old miser who loses his money to hungry mice, to a Breton song in honour of salty stockfish, to perhaps the album’s most interesting cut, a dying 19th-century Breton bard’s set of curses against the vices of the modern world. Again, many of the titles are so subtle that a working knowledge of French is necessary to know, for instance, that in one piece the Breton word means "get close to" and in French means "avoid". The dance tunes are done with excitement and flair, the vocals with tight and sprightly harmonies, and the resultant mixture is musical mayhem which defies anybody human to refrain from tapping his or her feet.

First there was Eritage, then La Bottine Souriante, and now we have Ad Vielle Que Pourra; this their first album, and a very exciting one, is a joy to hear; they have been a well-kept secret in Quebec, but a lot more folks on both sides of the provincial border will discover their intoxicating music!

Robert Rodriguez

Penny Sidor, *Past Lives*. Penny Sidor, 311 - 1171 East Georgia St., Vancouver, B.C. V5L 2B3. (Also available from CSMT Mail Order service.)

Penny Sidor is to be commended for giving us a cassette consisting entirely of traditional songs sung in traditional style. So few singers nowadays have the gumption to buck the trends and come out with the genuine article -- thanks, Penny, for reminding us that showbiz and glitz are not essential constituents of our music!

Most of the songs on *Past Lives* are Canadian, or Canadian versions of British songs. All are sung a cappella -- there’s not a note of an instrument to be heard anywhere. Studio augmentation is minimal to non-existent. Penny obviously has a voice more than equal to the songs, but she doesn’t try to blow us away with vocal tricks. She keeps her presentation clear, crisp and simple, letting the songs tell their own story. No dramatics here -- artistry doesn’t get in the way of communication.

Which doesn’t mean Penny has set an easy task for herself! Many of the songs she’s chosen are real toughies. Gorgeous, intricate melodies weave through solid lyrics in such songs as "The Plains of Waterloo" (O.J. Abbott’s Ontario version) and "Willie of Winsbury". The "big ballads" are here, in the person of "Yarrow" (Child 214) and "Lady Isobel and the Elf Knight" (Child 4 -- the version popularized by Pete Seeger, originally collected in Nova Scotia), and are treated with proper respect. Penny resists the temptation to overdramatize "The Flying Cloud", not easy given the stark horror of its tale of piracy and slavery. Less formidable and less well known songs like "Tarry Trousers", "The Star of Belle Isle" and "The True Sailor Boy" vary the program’s moods, rhythms and themes.

I can’t find many things to fault in Penny’s presentation, aside from a couple of minor points. The fadeout at the end of "The Flying Cloud" I found jarring -- the sole reminder of recording technology on the album. Also, I guess I’m used to hearing "The Cutty Wren" as a robust chorus song: I missed the harmonies, and found it a bit thin as a solo. These quibbles aside,
the production is tasteful throughout.

We need more of this kind of album around! I hope it's well supported by purchasers (that's a hint -- our Mail Order Service handles it), and I hope lots of other singers are paying attention. It is possible to make an album of traditional English-Canadian songs without compromising!

John Leeder


I first encountered Willie Thrasher in the late 70s. Performing at an all-Native concert at Calgary's Glenbow Museum, he appeared to be a self-conscious adolescent, introduced as the Inuit Bob Dylan, a role he seemed to relish. A few years later, appearing on a similar (though considerably more vernacular) program at the Native Friendship Centre, he was handsome, lithe and comfortable in his mini-stardom. Then I heard a rumor that he was dead.

Good news -- the usual reliable sources were once again wrong! I recently found this tape, which, though undated, seems to be of recent vintage. The cover photo suggests that the young singer has had some years of hard learning. His voice also shows a bit of wear, but it has a charming gravel, and Thrasher seems to be well in control of it. When he slides into an old time falsetto, he can produce a haunting vibrato; he uses the effect sparingly, and the first time it appears (on the first cut, "Indian Lady").) the effect is startling.

Some listeners may wish that he was more sparing in his use of vocables, the familiar "Hey-ya-hey," but it seems to me that this objection overlooks the continuity between Thrasher's work and Native tradition. While not all of the songs in this collection have grabbed this listener, in many of them Thrasher does find authentic points of contact between older Native song styles, country and western, and both hard and soft rock traditions. Someone once wrote that the art of jazz was the art of playing a tune over and over until variation couldn't be avoided; the same principle can be applied to any African-American genre, and it might also be said of many Native traditions. In several songs, especially "I Am Inuit," Thrasher finds a rhythmic confluence of European, African, and Native American musics that was previously best charted by Redbone in the 70s.

"I am Inuit, Inuit, Inuit"
"I sing Inuit, Inuit, Inuit"
"I dance Inuit, Inuit, Inuit"
"I pray Inuit, Inuit, Inuit"

evokes the repetition of "Get A Job" as well as of the Jamaican "Pressure Drop"; the song's layered opening, drums & hammered-on acoustic guitar chords followed by an electric lead is reminiscent of both "That's All Right, Mama" and "Subterranean Homesick Blues." "The Unity Song" is "Hey-ya-hey" repeated four times to a slow rock beat, with minor chords and a fuzz-guitar solo. The drummer on this and the other cuts skillfully intimates Native drumming with no D.C. Scott-ish throb-throb-throbbing; unfortunately sidemen get no credit.

I'm only vaguely familiar with the music of Kashtin, but I believe I hear some influence from this unexpectedly successful duo, and perhaps Thrasher's "We Believe In Native Music" is a reference to that phenomenon. I shouldn't leave the impression that Thrasher's songs are all vocables. Over half of the items here are stanzaic and lyric. These range from the relatively stereotypical "Little Indian Boy" and "Inuit Child" (the latter featuring a Dylanesque harmonica solo) to the truly personalized "Indian Lady" and "Pow Wow." Some of the lyrics of "Uvungank Inuit" are in Thrasher's native language.

Incidentally, if anyone would like to scoop this writer, an article on Sunshine Records Ltd. would be very useful. Ideally, this would include some interviewing of the company's management, to give some sense of their scope and history, but even a comprehensive review essay would be appreciated by many of us who have only a vague sense of the company's catalog, past and present. I've thought, off and on, of doing the latter, but other commitments will probably not allow me to complete the chore.

George W. Lyon

Canadian Society for Musical Traditions
La Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales

Formerly: The Canadian Folk Music Society, est. 1957
Autrefois: La Société canadienne de musique folklorique, fondée 1957