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Three Dollar Dreams
by Bill Gallaher,
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Three dollar dreams kept them down in the mines,
Down underground where the sun never shines,
Down underground drilling dirty black seams,
Of diamond hard coal just for three dollar dreams.

They came from the lowlands, those hungry young men,
And England's Black Country they'd not see again;
They were travelling light—some travelled lean,
With nothing but three dollar dreams.

And they sailed the great oceans, through the gales of the Horn
Where many a man wished he'd never been born,
And all that they hoped for, and all of their schemes,
Were nothing but three dollar dreams.

..concluded on page 16.
Wallace is right to suggest that the denigration of the accordion after World War Two was to a large measure a rejection of the ordinary working people who'd taken the instrument to their bosom as an orchestra in a box. Appropriately, Wallace favors a full, chordal sound, though he can also whip off a single-line melody with considerable speed and invention. I like the way he hears tunes.

There is, I should note, a square touch in virtually all of Wallace's playing that I've heard. Unless he's got a trick or two up his sleeve, I don't think I'd want to hear him tackle "Volver, Volver," "Laissez les Bon Ton Roulet," or "No Woman, No Cry." He doesn't seem to have that kind of swing in him. But that's not a criticism. Flaco Jimenez, the Chenier Family, and Rod Stradling can cover the African- and Latin- bases. Wallace works in an esthetic that I think also has a right to be preserved and developed.

That European-North American esthetic, with its unforgotten 19th-century roots, was an esthetic of earnestness that will seem to many to be sentimental. Wallace's own songs would seem more at home in the old People's Songs Bulletin than in some more contemporary venues. The title cut from the new issue is a virtual manifesto, delivered to a lively rewrite of a well known renaissance French dance tune. (I said his music was square, but I didn't mean it was dead or dumb! I'm especially fond of Wallace's own march, "Mackenzie's Foray," which he wrote to imagine what the 1837 boys would have fifed on their way to that defeat.) To be suggesting at this point in the century that the united people really might ultimately triumph over defeat requires some courage, perhaps not for threats against one's life in this country at this time, but certainly for the scorn that is so often (and both cheaply and thoughtlessly) delivered to those who take something seriously.

Wallace's performance forms a seamless whole, convictions, choice of instrument, handling of rhythm, vocabulary, and vocal style. I don't know how he records, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he eschews overdubs—the vocals sound like a man lifting the weight of an accordion as he plays. He means what he says, he carries the tune, he's got a pleasant voice, but he doesn't have a lot of time for (or probably interest in) melisma, which is getting overdone in some quarters, anyway, to my taste. There are moments when a quaver enters his voice, one that sounds unplanned, as though he's about to give out. But that's rare.

Len Wallace offers a voice we need to hear.

--George W'Lyon

...continued from page 3.

And those young men went down in the mines every day
But old men came out, as their dreams slipped away;
Only a working man knows what it means;
To be living on three dollar dreams.

But dreams are for young men; they're still dreaming yet,
While old men just take anything they can get;
And often a glass or two eases the pain,
Remembering three dollar dreams.

"Three Dollar Dreams" is found on Gallaher & Galbraith, Home to the Island (see review, 25:4, p.46). The liner notes tell us: "There was a time when the coal miners of Vancouver Island thought that if they could earn three dollars a day, it would be a fair wage. By the time they got it, as usual, it was a little too late. Unions were a natural result of these elusive dreams."

Bill tells me that the song is based on a book of the same title, an early history of coal mining on Vancouver Island, written by an Islander named Lynn Bowen. Bill recommends the book highly and notes: "Lynn's title was too good to be restricted to a mere book, and songs, of course, are an excellent way of getting the information out to a wider audience. I also figured it was a good way to call attention to a fine book that should have a larger readership." J.L.