This Magazine Column Still Lacks a Clever Title

Old Time Country: The Magazine of Traditional Country Music is published quarterly by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi, USA 38677, the same university that publishes Living Blues. To get Old Time Country in Canada, send them $14.00 a year, which sounds like a bargain to me. The journal has some connection to the Jimmie Rogers Memorial Association, but generally the focus is on the music of the era that began with Rogers, not with the music of the era at which he was centered. I mean, it’s about old time Country Music, more than it is about Old Time Music. You’re more likely to encounter Bashful Brother Oswald than Dock Boggs here, though, to be fair, the most recent issue included a feature on Riley Puckett, as well as reviews of discs by Uncle Dave Macon and Mike Auldridge. The not-always-implicit apologies that accompany reviews of books on Tin Pan Alley and Pete Seeger suggest that the magazine appeals to readers with perhaps an unfortunately narrow range of interests. It’s hard to imagine that a serial that specializes in any antique North American music with significant rural roots might have readers who are not "familiar with the late Muddy Waters, who is known as the Godfather of the Blues."

Nevertheless, the magazine’s own turf is an appealing one, and the articles and accompanying photos are most often fascinating. Recent issues have included some Canadian content: Martin Rossander’s "Old Time Music in Big Hill Country: The Thirties" (7.4, Fall 1991) and my interview with Wilf Carter, "We Shook Hands" (8.2, Summer 1992), a reprint from the BULLETIN (June 1987). They’ve also accepted my study of the CFCN Old Timers for an upcoming issue. Finally, editor W.K. McNeil is looking for a regular Canadian correspondent on the subject of historic country music in Canada. Any of our readers feel capable of tackling the job? It seems to me that one important way to fight back against undue cultural influence from south of that border is to represent our own heritage somewhat more aggressively than we do, on both sides of the border. They say that Canadian stuff don’t get no respect until it’s made it in Britain or the States—well, here’s a little corner where we can get some of that international attention.

"Old time music" is a tricky term. In western Canada (and possibly in parts of the U.S., notably the northern Midwest, as well) it refers to European flavored dance music, waltzes, polkas, kolomaykas (if you’re in that neck of the prairies), played by ensembles that are often heavy on piano accordion and saxes. In the southeastern U.S., that music is foreign, in at least a provincial sense; there, "old time" refers to banjo/fiddle music, the genre that developed into bluegrass, though, of course, as time passes and memories become shortened by sound bites & MTV, it’s difficult for some folks not to think of bluegrass as "old time." That’s one of many controversies that surface regularly in The Old Time Herald: A Magazine Dedicated To Old-Time Music.

Appalachian old time music is of course familiar to Canadians, indeed, most banjo players and fiddlers, not to mention guitarists or mandolinists, started with some variety of that genre. Many in Canada’s diverse folk music community will recognize the names of editor Alice Gerrard and associate Bill Hicks. Gerrard has performed in several aggregations, notably in quartets and duos with Mike Seeger and Hazel Dickens; Hicks was for many years fiddler and singer with The Red Clay Ramblers.

The Old Time Herald features articles on such notables as Tommy Jarrell, who, until his death in 1985, was a national treasure and who, along with Fred Cockerham, passed on the North Carolina traditions of banjo and fiddle to more than one younger generation; Darby & Tarlton, recording figures from the Thirties, whose work may sound "old fashioned," today, but constituted a new wave in its day as surely as have Reba McIntyre or Dwight Yoakum in ours; and Gerry Milnes, a scholar/collector/musician, staff folklorist at the Augusta Heritage Centre at Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia, one of the younger generation which learned from Tommy Jarrell and still listens to Darby and Tarlton.

Although the music of the southeastern region of the continent gets most of their attention, Old Time Herald cannot be accused of parochialism. Issues
in 1991 included coverage of contradancing (a New England tradition), African-American harmonica players DeFord Bailey (whose blues harp playing opened the Grand Ol’ Opry for many years and who must be considered a figure in two worlds), and Chicano fiddler from New Mexico, Cleofes Ortiz. Other areas covered include the folk music revival (always a controversial subject!), practical matters for professional musicians and bands, and portraits of such events as the Galax, Virginia, fiddle contest. Old Time Herald features lots of beautiful photographs beautifully reproduced on slick paper, and a few tunes, songs, and tips on playing. Four issues in a year will costs $18.00 U.S. Write P.O. Box 51820, Durham, North Carolina, USA, 27717.

Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine can be justly considered the source of virtually all other folk music publications; true, it was preceded by People’s Song Bulletin, which was staffed by many of the same people (Pete Seeger being the only one of these still on the Board of Directors), but the Bulletin was relatively shortlived (and lucky to have had any life at all during those McCarthy days), and Sing Out! has now blasted through three decades. It’s had its share of growing pains; for a period during the early 80s, it appeared to be a dicey matter whether it would last much longer. Then, in the late 60s, at the tail end of what some of the folks there call the Folk Scare, editor Irwin Silber got some grandiose ambitions, expanded the magazine, and tried to get it on the stands; not a bad idea, perhaps, but he overestimated the public’s interest in genuine folk music (or even in good imitations or fascinating extensions), as, indeed, he overestimated the Now Generation’s commitment to left wing politics.

Make no mistake, politics has always been a central concern with Sing Out!, though how significantly this affects any specific articles or issues varies with different editors and writers. Currently, it seems to me, the politics are relatively mild; not necessarily an improvement, in my opinion, though you might like it better that way. But most of those involved in the magazine are involved in social and political activities, and such matters do find their way into the magazine.

As, for instance, in the current issue, which features Raffi on its cover; he’s made Sing Out!, not for his children’s entertainments, though that phase of his career is respectfully considered, but for the environmental advocacy in his current songwriting. Also featured in this issue are cowboy singer and researcher Katie Lee and the singing Fisher family (Ray, Archie, and Cilla) of Scotland. Canadian performers are not overwhelmingly present in Sing Out!, but neither are they ignored. Ian Robb writes a column ("The British-North America Act"), and Vancouver Folk Festival honcho Gary Cristall is on the Board, so the magazine never forgets us entirely.

In addition to Robb’s frequently controversial column, Sing Out! offers a songwriters’ column ("Courting The Muse"), Pete Seeger ("Appleseeds"), storytellers ("The Endless Tale"), and other columns, including what sometimes becomes a depressingly lengthy obituary ("Last Chorus"). The review sections, especially of recordings, are fairly extensive; I presume they receive just about everything, since they’ve been around so long. During some years (remember when Bob Dylan was booed off the Newport stage?), the letters column was a virtual (and entertaining) battlefield. Sing Out Corporation, P.O. Box 5233, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA 18015-0253. A year’s subscription will run you $21.00.

G.W.L.

When I was sixteen, there was a big dance at the Police Detachment, and I felt sick when I looked at four men playing Poker. They were wealthy stockmen, sat at a long heavy board table. There were two revolvers on the table and some pretty hot words. I think the women were so disgusted that anything like this should be allowed, it never happened again. I am sure most of us were nervous and expecting to hear a shot any time.

--Bella Chappell, Prairie Grass to Mountain Pass (Pincher Creek, Alberta)