Over the Waves

I don’t suppose anybody’s listening, but it strikes me as a bit of a drag that the CBC radio does not very often use old time Canadian music for incidental music -- stings and the like. I listen to As It Happens a lot, and one evening I was wondering why I get edgy at all the little fillers they use, dead-on imitations of Robert Johnson slide guitar licks, even Cajun accordion riffs, along with the usual studio-rock-schlock, and whatever. Some of it sounds real good. But then it struck me -- there’s no reason why it couldn’t be ten bars of Quebecois fiddle or Newfie accordion or prairie cymbaly.... It’s not like there aren’t players who could do it -- it’s not like Vacuumland is just full of folks sitting out there identifying the tag from "Terraplane Blues" and getting off on it.

I’m sure that that guitarist is Canadian, and I’m sure that the jazz players and violinists that play those stings are (mostly) Canadians, too. I’m glad they’re getting the work. It’s just that they could just decide to be a little more reflective of this particular country. But they won’t. Most of the people who produce radio are real hip -- to what was a new thrill two to three decades ago.... G.W.L.

The Centrefold

The Lead Belly Newsletter comes from The Lead Belly Society. P.O. Box 6679, Ithaca, New York, U.S.A. 14851 (Canadian subscriptions: $17.50 U.S. for one year, four issues). Obviously, it deals with the life and work of the great twelve-string maestro, blues singer and songster. It tends to feature brief encomiums to and bits of interesting (and not-so-interesting) data about Leadbelly. Issues run about -- pages and come out more or less quarterly. I’d probably be happier with more substantial articles, even if it meant they could only run one or two per issue -- in fact, I’m probably going to let my subscription lapse for just this reason. Still, it is a friendly little read, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it developed into something heavier with time.

While I’m at it, I’d like to take advantage of the informality of this column to use it to gripe about something that appeared in a recent issue. In a column devoted to comments on Leadbelly’s guitar by various luminaries, George Gruhn made this comment: "Lead Belly was not a fancy player but what he did, he did superbly well for he made every note count. He wasn’t really a flashy player; he was an accompanist rather than strictly an instrumentalist."

I get really tired of that kind of shortsightedness. One of the problems with comments on "quality" of musicianship is that so much depends upon which qualities determine quality. I don’t know of any guitarist who developed as personal and as unmistakable a style as did Leadbelly. He could play very fast, though perhaps not as fast as some who’ve had the advantage of classical training, scales and all that -- or who haven’t had their hands beaten by hard work. But there are a lot of players who couldn’t keep up with him.

What’s more important than Leadbelly’s status as a fastfingered chopsman is the fact that he developed an approach to the twelve-string guitar that was both uniquely expressive of himself as a musical personality and of the instrument’s potential.

Print junkies might want to check up on the various newsletters published by a handful of folk clubs and festivals around the country. In some cases, these will be of interest to local yokels and print junkies only; I doubt that many people in Halifax or Hull are gonna be real interested in such details as the price of knife/fork rental for the Vancouver Spring Shindig ($201.55). That datum was the hook on a recent editorial of the Three Quarter Times: The
Newsletter of the Vancouver Folk Song Society. Before all you Vancouverites drop a chunk on me, however, I'd like to say that I'm rather fond of this 2-legal-page-front-and-back-with-a-splash-of-green letter. For one thing, whoever selects (or does) the graphics has a good eye. For another, Jon Bartlett's editorial in a more recent issue, on the annual Peace March, was provocative and worth the read even on this side of the mountains. For the last thing, both the issues I've seen have dandy songs by Zeke Hoskin. I'm especially fond of "They're Not Social Credit," about you-know-who-sold-Clayoquot-Sound. It reminds me of a speech I heard recently by Texas firebrand Jim Hightower, whose response to all the fainthearted "liberals" (as they say down south), who say "we" should "stand behind a Democratic president," was, "Yeah, stand behind and push!" Whoever Zeke is, I hope he'll think about sending something camera-ready to the Bulletin.

Sound Waves is a somewhat heftier publication, with paid ads, from the Georgian Bay Folk Society, who put on the Owen Sound Summerfolk Festival. The issue I've seen features a cover article on quilting, articles and reviews that feature singer/songwriters, a reprint and updating of an article by Valerie Rogers about her career as record industry magnate (Fogarty's Cove style!), and personality columns by Owen Sound folks who wrote in this issue on the Junos and how to pick an instrument to learn to play.

Meanwhile back in Vancouver, the Rogue Folk Review is the voice of the Rogue Folk Club, which has some sort of connection to the W.I.S.E. Lounge (Hall?). W.I.S.E. stands for Wales-Ireland-Scotland-England -- so all you math majors can figure what sort of music gets featured at the Rogue Club and, consequently, on the 8-10 pages of the Review. One of the issues I saw features reviews of festivals in western Canada, B.C. particularly (of course), and these seemed to me reasonable though opinionated -- not a bad combination.

At 14 pages, Mariposa Notes weighs in as the heftiest of these newsletters, which, given the historical pre-eminence of the various Mariposa events, is not at all surprising. I was rather annoyed to note that in response to readers' queries in the Spring '93 issue, they gave several sources for lists of Canadian folk festivals, but failed to cite the special issue of the Bulletin which comes out every year. Eastern bums 'n' creeps! I did in fact find less to read in this than in the slightly shorter Rogue Folk, but other issues may be more interesting.

Here are addresses for these publications. If a fee isn't listed here, it's because none of the issues in my hands as I write have them given. At least one of these declares itself FREE, but I'm not telling which one -- it seems to me that unless you're living in the burg from which the rag comes, or unless you know for sure that you're going to go to their festival and buy a t-shirt and a lot of corn on the cob, you should send 'em a little money for printing and postage.

The Mariposa Folk Foundation
786 Dundas Street East
Toronto, Ontario
M4M 1R1

The Rogue Folk Review
Simple Eloquence
8020 Curate Wynd
Vancouver, B.C.
V5S 4K2
Subscription: $16
(U.S. -- Send $16 U.S.)

The Georgian Bay Folk Society
P.O. Box 521
Owen Sound, Ontario
N4K 5P1
(Sound Waves sent to members -- who also get reduced tickets to Summerfolk -- but the issue I saw doesn't give the price!)

The Three Quarter Times
Vancouver Folk Song Society
Jon Bartlett
342 East 8th Avenue
New Westminster, B.C.
V3L 4K8

G.W.L.