

Powell River BC: The Enjoyment Band Plays On

Martin Rossander

Looking back over my 78 years (June 1995), it seems that I have centered on music as a medium of communication for a purpose. As a teenager who struggled through the great Depression of the 1930s, I was imprinted with the need for social reform. Poverty in the midst of plenty was not really acceptable, I didn't think. In the years following there were movements and theories that caught my fancy. These I expounded, with little evidence of success, or so it seemed. One finally discovers that one cannot inject wisdom into the world with a grease gun; if one has any wisdom to spare it has to be served and shared, not as wisdom, but in casual form of good will. It must come from the ground up, not by trickle-down process. Music is a good medium for this; it need not be perfect, it need only be delivered with good intent.

I was in Victoria recently, to visit my niece and her husband, Joy and Cam Finlay (well-known bird watchers, book writers, and wildlife habitat protection activists), and though they are not musically involved themselves, they insisted on taking me around to pawnshops, &c., in search of a better violin. After testing the squeaks on several \$2,000.00 ones, we arrived at Ward's, where top price was \$400.00. The one with the nicest color finish was also one relatively free of squeaks too. At 10% discount, the clerk included a reed tuner, bow and durable case. As an unplayed instrument new of Slovakian manufacture, its response gets better with each gig.

The band plays on, much like statehood where the players are forever being replaced as each party or premier fades out, but the vehicle rolls right along with identity of its own. The Enjoyment Band has more cohesiveness than any national or political structure, and I do believe the key is that the band performs free of charge, refusing offers of payment; on that basis there is less need for any established band player to want to close the door on a newcomer novice or singer along that might breeze in from the audience.

In the few short years that I have fiddled with the Enjoyment Band, there have evolved many changes. Wear and tear and age have taken two banjo players; Alzheimer's took out a drummer; romance and a summer cottage took out a pianist; illness cancelled out a piano accordionist. Somehow the open door policy that sort of sneaked into place has filled the blanks so that there will be enough players to come up with two bands on the 30th, 2:00 pm, at two different shut-in homes. The Extended Care is the last stop before the undertakers. The Olive Devaud residence is for the dependent ones still kind of mobile.

From my vantage point in the Band, I see the workings of Time, the great leveller, on the people I've known here. Rank and title have dissipated; that one-time arrogant foreman and long-suffering laborer sit side by side in their respective wheelchairs to receive the same food, care, and entertainment. One wonders, while fingering the notes of "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," or "Silver Threads among the Gold,"

or some lively railroading number, which chapter of anyone's life tells the best story? One hundred years from now it won't much matter anyway. The care workers are very sensitive and loving. I tell their "clients" how fortunate they are to be here "where no work or decision making is required. Isn't that what we always sought after during our working years? I certainly look forward to not having to make my own bed. I still pay taxes, too. Lucky you!"

It's sometimes fun after the regular players put away their mandolins, horns, guitars, &c., to play violin accompaniment with a resident that likes to sing. I once worked with this particular fellow on the spare gang at the paper mill (1948-49). On a dreary day we might be digging a ditch or loading paper onto ships at the wharf. Bill Harris would burst into song, a most unlikely behavior in a culture that practices work as a burden, a hardship to be endured in return for payment and survival. Bill's stuff is from the 30s and 40s and earlier; it may be time for Bill to go to his room, but just the one more number—"Old Man River," "Donkey Serenade," "Ramona," "Wagon Wheels," "Gold Mine in the Sky," "Girl of My Dreams," "Spinning Wheel," "Souse of the Border," "La Golondrina," &c., &c. Bill usually manages to keep a group of fellow residents about him for banter and verbal jousting. It's great to see, once in a while, someone or several, rise up out of their wheelchairs and cut a bit of rug. The attendants are very good at helping these "old folks" up onto the floor to cavort a bit, and there are those rare occasions when someone doesn't need any help.

Music and rhythm provide a medium, a bridge for relating to people, some of whom I'd have no thoughts with in common politically, economically, religiously or socially. With the practice that I get from two, three, or even four gigs a week, my playing does improve, I do believe. In a star-oriented society, even at local levels, when playing in a band one's errors and squeaks pass off for harmony or are drowned out in the cacophony. Our band functions without director or boss (although appointments are funnelled to one person); each instrumentalist goes at it with vigor. Coyotes howling in chorus have better finesse, for each does not howl continuously. Our band has trouble easing down so as to not drown out a singer, and seldom do we feature each instrument in turn. Maybe that's the price of spontaneity.

Last Sunday we were at a museum event, the day before at a Seniors' bash, a recent Friday at Shut-ins home, and Saturday night coffee house at Log Cabin. For the coffee house we feature a specific entertainer, followed by a jam, when old and new versions of music merge. Tuesday after a funeral and reception we played for a group that meets under the direction of Mental Health. Fridays at one or other of the rest homes, or both, Psychiatric Riding Club, Multiple Sclerosis, the Legion, Seniors, and a few others that I can't even remember without checking my calendar, and summer

time every Saturday and Sunday at the Open Air Market. Almost to the point that a break would be very welcome.

But the Seniors dance and clap and the wheelchairs show a bit of swing-along and the Legionnaires are thankful, and there is no money problem, no money, no director, no boss, no sheet music—always players enough show up to make it happen. And there's always room for beginners. And no booze, no rules. Maybe it's as close to heaven as could be expected.

Sometimes there is a good spinoff from the Band. A man with lots of vocal and banjo talent arrived in town, played and sang some Down East numbers with us, and then branched off to form what is now a popular Celtic group with a weird name that I can neither spell nor pronounce. Their music sure turns on the Irish, Scots, and even some folks with English backgrounds, which was evident by the cash donations that accumulated in an opened guitar case at the recent Oysterfest.

Our current banjo man, Marvin, took banjo lessons for years from a stern old country type of teacher who believed his students didn't have what it takes. But Marvin's banjo, on key and in time, adds a neat touch to our music, and fulfilment abounds.

The Celestial Beast, an assortment of pans, bottles, and widgets mounted on an arbutus branch supported on a hubcap base, started out as Rudolph—but the season faded out, and the Beast became an all year celebrity. At least two drummers have evolved from zilch rhythm to very fine tempo awareness by way of the Beast. And it certainly adds a comic touch, a talking piece and passing interest, plus a plug for recycling. At first some of our more steady players shied at this unconventional beast, much as a green broke buggy horse would shy at a locomotive, but in time all get used to something called status quo.

I am forever grateful for the accompaniment provided by Georgina Lapointe on piano or piano accordion, for both melody and bass. Very musically literate. It's kind of neat when someone that can read and know music inside out and right side up doesn't mind at all playing along with others who don't even know what key we are playing in until we reach the last note. Even then, some of the sea shanties deny that privilege. Just the same, some benefits are reciprocal. Not everyone can play the "Heel and Toe," "Lambeth Walk," "Rye," stuff like that, off the top of their head. They didn't issue diplomas for old schoolhouse dance musicians, but the

food and applause was usually rewarding and the tunes became indelible in one's memory.

When we play at the Open Air Market, there is a good flow of people going by, resting, or prepared to join in and play along, as I did at first with the Enjoyment Band, and get up their confidence, timing, and recognition. We must have at least twenty contacts to play with; seldom are all six, seven, or eight the same as the time before. In addition, we have rhythm players in wheelchairs at Seniors homes and the odd toddler at the market. We have encountered nervousness a few times at too much open door policy; who are the "real" members of the Enjoyment Band? But such problems are rare indeed; good will is the norm.

I guess that my sense of the whole thing is social transformation. Participation, not bystanders. The Open Air market allows only organic vegies, locally produced handcraft and baking. The effort is without funding from government or push from chamber of commerce. Becoming very popular. In natural setting, benches, food, coffee, visiting, music. Mexican cooking, artifacts of recycled materials. Trade: Ethnic food vendor needing help with equipment. The market management issue lunch tickets to the entertainers. Making no charge for my help, I am now provided with a helping without charge. Delicious. The idea of helping one another without too much thought of personal or monetary benefit catches on. If paradise is a goal then we have the opportunity to help it to happen without becoming a martyr or being taken for a sucker.

Actually, if it were not for betrayal, seduction, hurts and longings, we'd be strapped for music, song, and melody. It is discontent and fulfilment, sorrow, grief, and joy that gives substance to the song writers. Music is a freebie spinoff from the agonies and the ecstasies that proliferate within our species anyway. No harm in making use of a waste product.

And so the Band plays on, a sort of presence like a corporation, but not as heavy as the MacMillan Bloedel abstraction that has ruled Powell River so relentlessly by way of its payroll. Ours is a thread of identity without coercion of any kind, more of a come-hither toe-tapper that folks can identify with. Our informality would likely drive a manager or seasoned orchestra conductor up the wall. Maybe I can compare it to farming with horses: the colt, or novice, is shoved into the team and after a while becomes one of the steadies. Then it's fun instead of discipline.

Bulletin readers have met Martin Rossander before. His reminiscences about music of western Canada in the Thirties and after have appeared in a variety of venues. Here's his bibliography to date.

"Old-Time Music in Big Hill Country: The Thirties." *Old Time Country* (Center for the Study of Southern Culture, The University of Mississippi) 7.4 (Fall 1991).

"Riding the rails: A boy escapes the Depression." *Western People* (June 9, 1988).

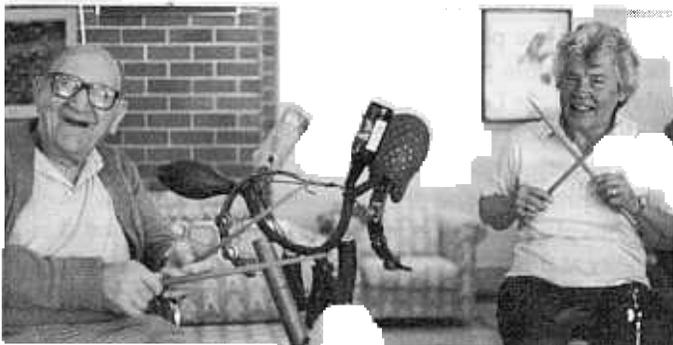
"The Dressings We Put On Our Lives." *The Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* (September/December 1986).

"A Musician's Memoir." *Fort Calgary Quarterly* 6.4 (1986).

"A Country Dance 'back in the hills.'" *The Cornerstone* (Alberta Historical Resources Foundation) 9.1 (1986).

"Martin Rossander." *Big Hill Country: Cochrane and Area*. Ed. Ellen Bryant, *et al.*, Cochrane and Area Historical Society, 1977 268-70.

Four Years with the Enjoyment Band



The Celestial Beast in 1992. Albert Thomsen (1899-1993) and Mary Adams; two people can beat the same drum just as two people can jointly milk a cow.



Easter Dinner, Moose Hall, 1993. Violin, Martin Rossander, guitar, Einer Jensen, Walter Perry, mandolin, Cliff Lennox, Beast, Molly Murphy.



Open Air Market, Summer 1994. Banjo, Marvin Henniger, violin, Martin Rossander, mandolin, Cliff Lennox, accordion, Georgina Lapointe, violin, Clint Jehrig, bodhran, Brin Wilson, Beast, Molly Murphy, spoons, Bill Lopez.



Small Business Fair, Spring 1995. Guitar, Frank Janzen, Gar Irwin, accordion, Georgina Lapointe, banjo, Marvin Henniger, violin, Martin Rossander, banjo, Lucy Zack, spoons, Bill Lopez, guitar, Ian Brownridge, Beast, Molly Murphy.

Every so often I sweep the floor. Recently a tiny piece of paper turned up near the telephone. It said Audree Carrie, phone 485-5108, which I did. The conversation went thusly:

M. Hello, Audree. Remember me, Martin Rossander?

A. Yes, I do. You once offered me a ride and forgot to pick me up.

M. Yes, I guess that's right. Have you time to answer some questions about the Enjoyment Band?

A. I am one of the original directors. I have already given you copies of the history I have in my scrap book. Do you want it again?

M. Yes, I have those photocopies somewhere, but I only want a brief, thumbnail history for a guy in Calgary doing writeups about music and the people that come together to play.

A. Gladys Cockrill was a super piano player, and she kept us on tune and in time. There were ten directors to sign for those Horizon grants which bought some of the instruments and music and stuff 'way back about 1976. That gave us our start. I am the only survivor of the ten still living in Powell River. Gladys is over ninety in a Victoria nursing home.

M. Did you know that last summer four of us went to Galiano Island on invitation to play for their Dominion Day festival? We were playing from a truck flat deck when a red haired man stopped the parade to tell us that it was his mother that had formed the original Enjoyment Band, and did we know her, Gladys Cockrill?

A. Yes, Gladys's husband was red haired, too. They had two daughters and a son.... So many of the people have left here, or died.... When Chuck Irwin died I donated a coffee urn to the Extended Care Hospital Unit for anyone to go in and have a cup. There was a small jar beside the urn for donations to keep it running. Recently I met Sonja MacLean [*piano lead for many years after Gladys Cockrill*], and we decided to clear out the Enjoyment Band savings and donate it to the Extended Care for treats and things for the shut-ins there. Have you seen the urn?

M. No, I haven't noticed any inscriptions, but the staff have offered refreshments for the band on Fridays, so I'll have a look.

A. We played for the Moose, for the Olive Devaud shut-ins, for Artiban handicapped, for Extended Care, many, many places, many, many times. If someone gave us money we'd always put it to the savings account, but we'd never ask for money. Anna Johanson was one of the ten originals; she was also our treasurer.

M. I remember the red vests mark of the band. When I first joined Sonja offered me a red vest, but I already had one.

A. Yes. White shirt, dark trousers or skirt, red vest. That was our mark. We had fun.

M. And how is your health after these many years?

A. I've got to see a specialist; my doctor ordered. Says I have large bump above the kidneys.

M. Are you sure. Maybe it's a pregnancy?

A. (Laughing) I don't believe so, but can I name you for a father on the birth certificate?

M. If you don't print it in the births and deaths column, OK.

A. I wouldn't do that. The people around here will believe just about anything. I'll see what the specialist has to say. Got to get ready now. Keep on playing and keep the Enjoyment Band alive and rocking!