Letters

Thank you for the wonderful article by Vera Johnson. It brought back many memories of seeing Vera perform at festivals, &c., in Ontario.

Jim Hanmore
Victoria Harbour, Ontario

A friend from back home sent me a copy of the book An Unfinished Conversation: The Life and Music of Stan Rogers, which is how I got your address. After living in England for six years, I am really beginning to miss the music and people and places.

I am most interested in learning songs about the Great Lakes, but also Canadian labour and trade union songs. Do you help members with specific interests to get in touch with one another? [Absolutely—by printing their letters and addresses. Readers: write to Peter, OK?—JL]

Recently, I have started going to a weekly folk club in north London. An amazing place! About 50-60 people show up, and they are a mix of everything from 80-year-old Irishmen to teenage hippies. I am also learning just how much music migrates back and forth across the Atlantic. For example, last week’s featured act was a fiddler from the Shetland Islands, and some of the reels she played reminded me a lot of Cape Breton—which seems pretty obvious. But these same musicians also adopt and adapt tunes from Canada and the U.S.

Peter Saracino
Flat 3
77 Addiscombe Road
Croydon
Surrey CR0 6SE
UK

With regard to the review of Canada: A Folksong Portrait/un portrait folklorique (see p. 46 of this issue) Sam himself might need introducing. The article on him in the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada (pp. 525-26) is a good source. He was born in Montreal in 1930, is described as "impressario, producer, record producer." He, as Folkways Records’ Canadian rep., produced about 100 LPs. The Folksong Portrait of Canada package selects from 37 of them. Vancouver’s Barry Hall has three items from his LP The Virtuoso Five-String Banjo.

The last Bulletin was very good. I guess the cover needs finalizing one. Thirdly, I personally like the design of the old logo (and I don’t subscribe to the "appropriation" concerns of some people), and I’m somewhat nostalgic about parting with it (the logo, not specifically the name). For those reasons, as long as the name change hasn’t officially been finalized, I expect we’ll continue to use the image. I guess you’ll be able to tell from this issue’s cover whether the situation has changed by press time. —JL]

I am writing this letter for two reasons: to compliment you on your very fine CSMT Bulletin and the Canadian Folk Music Journal. I have been out of the country for most of this academic year, but copies were waiting for me on my return home even though my membership expired last December. I took out my subscription during the time I was writing my MEd thesis, which I wanted to entitle Folksongs in Action, but since that was not "academic" enough, I was more or less assigned the daunting title Folksongs: A Cross-curricular way for Enhancing the Teaching of Canadian Cultural Literacy in Elementary Schools. Isn’t that awful and a sure way of putting people off using any ideas that may be enshrined therein? The main body of the thesis consists of folk songs from the Atlantic Provinces and how they can be integrated into teaching concepts in Social Studies, Language Arts, &c. Each song has background notes, a musical analysis, the musical notation, solfege, and the words. It could actually be useful to teachers and could even promote our uniquely Canadian culture to children who, for the most part, have little knowledge of their cultural heritage. I have since written a brief "History of Canada" article using folk songs for the excellent US publication, Folk Songs in the Classroom. At least our neighbours to the south will know some Canadian folk songs!

My second reason for writing is in relation to the article by Sheldon Posen in Volume 21 (1993) of the Journal, "The Beginnings of the Children’s (Folk) Music Industry in Canada: An Overview." It is interesting that the word "folk" is in parenthesis. I am curious to know how this author defines "folk" music? The 1955 International Folk Music Council defined folk music as "the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the traditions are (i) continuity that links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulses of the individual or the group; (iii) selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives."

The songs of Sharon, Lois and Bram, Raffi, &c., whom Mr. Posen refers to in his article, are indeed in the "folk" style, and may become the folk songs of tomorrow should

Phil Thomas
Vancouver, BC

[We had not ditched the old logo as of that issue for several reasons. One is that the name change was still in progress, as at that point, to our knowledge, the new name had not yet been approved by the Canadian government. Secondly, the designing of a new logo for the new name had not yet been completed, although the committee was getting closer to finalizing one. Thirdly, I personally like the design of the old logo (and I don’t subscribe to the "appropriation" concerns of some people), and I’m somewhat nostalgic about parting with it (the logo, not specifically the name). For these reasons, as long as the name change hasn’t officially been finalized, I expect we’ll continue to use the image. I guess you’ll be able to tell from this issue’s cover whether the situation has changed by press time. —JL]
they "stand the test of time." They often reflect the times in which we live and put events, &c., into perspectives that children can "handle," and I appreciate and laud this service, but at the present time, can these songs truly be called "folk songs" in the traditional sense? What would an ethnomusicologist say?

Personally I do not dislike the recordings mentioned by Mr. Posen, and I have used quite a number of the songs with my own students, but there is always the danger of this kind of music becoming a somewhat trite "bandwagon" source of making a fast buck. A true folk song, as I have said, will stand the test of time, and will forever link the present with the past.

Yours very sincerely,
Jan C. Gomersall (Miss)
St. Stephen, New Brunswick

I thank Miss Gomersall for her interest in my article and welcome her questions about it.

I must say that I purposely avoided using set definitions of the term "folk" or "folksong" in my article, and I prefer not to get entangled in them now. Since Miss Gomersall asks, however, I will say that the term "folk" in my title is meant to signal readers that I would be focusing upon music produced by the likes of Raffi or Sharon, Lois and Bram, rather than by Sesame Street, say, or Walt Disney. My justification for using that term rests upon the knowledge that the performers in question by and large came out of the North American folksong revival of the 1950s and 1960s; that they recorded song materials that, at least initially, consisted of what had come to be generally accepted as "folksongs," even by the scholarly community (many were gleaned from Folkways recordings by Pete Seeger or from printed collections such as Alan Lomax's Folksongs of North America); that the singers performed the materials in settings and in a style that had come to be labelled popularly as "folk"; and that they quite consciously chose to perform those particular materials in that particular manner for children because they felt that children derived special benefits from them.

I put that pesky word "folk" in parentheses in the title because I, too, recognized that much of the material produced for the children's market in Canada since the 1970s has more or less moved from the traditional "folksong" repertoire and "folk" performing style. By retaining the term "folk" but qualifying it with parentheses, I hoped that I might simultaneously convey a sense both of the industry's origins and of its transition since.

As for Miss Gomersall's questioning whether the show tunes, pop songs, or newly written materials that are recorded by children's performers nowadays "can truly be called folksongs in the traditional sense," I have to agree with her inference that probably they're not, but I also have to say that the question in the end leads more into the realm of esthetics than towards of the kind of analysis I prefer to do.

The danger for folklorists (I cannot speak for ethnomusicologists) of being bound up in, or bound by, definitional issues became abundantly clear to me while I was living in the Ottawa Valley village of Chapeau, Quebec, during the 1970s, conducting fieldwork for a dissertation on local singing traditions. I remember one night in a farmer's kitchen, I sat across from one of the community's great singers, Loy Gavan. It was our first extended encounter. He treated me to classic traditional songs he had learned in the lumber camps, such as "William O'Brien," "Henry Green," and the spectacular "The Boy That Wore the Blue." He sang a nostalgic Irish lyric, "Will My Soul Pass Through Ireland," he had learned from a woman friend while blueberry picking. He sang "McCool's Camp," a song he had composed with his chum Victor Downey some thirty years before, about their experiences in a logging camp. They were classic songs, the kind folklorists dream of hearing from such a singer, in such a setting.

Then Mr. Gavan said to me, "And another grand song—no doubt you saw the show, South of the Border." I was nonplussed. What? He couldn't be talking about Gene Autry, not after all that other stuff. I blurted out, unbelieving: "'South of the Border—Down Mexico Way?'" "Yah," he replied matter-of-factly. Recovering, I said, "I never saw the show—I've heard of the song." With great seriousness, he said, "Oh, Lord save us, if you ever saw that show, you'd come home and eat a lunch and go back again." I laughed, still off balance, and asked if he had really learned songs from that movie. "Well," he said, "Victor Downey—the fella that he and I composed the song about McCool, eh?—we come down one night, you know, to watch that show, you know, South of the Border, at 7 o'clock. And we went to the show 7 o'clock, we come back and ate a lunch and went back at 9." I had to laugh. He continued: "You never saw a nicer show in all your life than that. You know all the words to that?" Meaning "South of the Border," the title song of the movie. I honestly told him I did not. "Well," he said, "I'll sing it for you." And he did, the version he and Victor Downey had pieced together while walking home from the movie four decades before. Singing that song, I discovered later, was one of the ways Mr. Gavan publicly remembered his friend, who had died tragically young.

Over the twenty-odd years I knew Loy Gavan, I found that he had a voracious appetite for songs and an eclectic taste in satisfying it. I learned to take it in stride when he sang, in any order, a long traditional logging ballad such as "Foreman Young Monroe," a pop song learned from a 78 recording such as "Wait Till We Get Them Up in the Air, Boys," an Irish ditty such as "Paddy McGinty's Goat," and the 1970s radio hit, "Knock Three Times on the Ceiling If You Want Me." He cherished them all, setting no moral value on any of its origin—although I once heard him say, "By God, the old songs are the best, eh?"

I think one can learn important things—matters of local esthetics, the movement of people in a landscape, the influence of the media in the life of rural populations, the mechanics of song learning—by being aware of the different types of songs a singer such as Loy Gavan chooses for his repertoire, in terms of their origins, styles, reliance on word of mouth...
that the majority of songs found on current children's
recordings "often reflect the times in which we live and put
an indoor, midwinter one, than Calgary—a large city with all
Day One
different audiences. Otherwise the audience was sparse, not unsur-
Day Two
prisingly for a weekday daytime. Of course, there were other
tings to do at the festival, and not everyone was there solely
for the stage shows. My primary interest was the music, but
I had time to take a stroll through the exhibitors' area,
well-populated for a first-time event. Lots of clothiers, lots of
painters, plenty of other sorts of arts and crafts, and even a
few tourist ranches and outfitters had booths. I also ducked
into the film room for a few minutes, not long enough to
watch a complete movie, but at various times I caught scraps
of "The Westerner" with Walter Brennan and "Oh Susannah"
with Gene Autry, to give you an idea of the fare being shown.
I didn’t take the time to hunt up the display of historic
cowboy boots from the likes of Hopalong Cassidy, Rex Allen,
Buffalo Bill and, yes, Ronald Reagan. But the music was the
main attraction for me, that and the cowboy poetry which
went hand in hand with it.
On my arrival, a concert by Don Edwards was in
progress. I was immediately swept away! Don is a mature
gentleman with an effortless delivery, and he was singing
Leadbelly's "When I Was A Cowboy." He followed it with
Ian Tyson's song about Will James, and plenty of others,
events, &c., into perspectives that children can 'handle.' I
would prefer to leave it at that, rather than questioning again
whether these songs are "folksongs in the traditional sense."
As I learned in Chapeau, there are many types of songs—even
those that were first penned when someone decided to try and
make a fast buck—that will, like Miss Gomersall's ideal
folksongs, "stand the test of time and will forever link the
present with the past."
I. Sheldon Posen
Ottawa, Ontario

Reviews/Comptes-rendus

Concerts/Festivals

Canada's Cowboy Festival. February 3 to 5, 1995, Convention Centre, Calgary, Alberta

Day One
What better place to hold a Cowboy Festival, especially
an indoor, midwinter one, than Calgary—a large city with all
the amenities, plus a genuine cowboy tradition? There are
working cattle ranches within the city limits, and most times
of the year, if you see someone wearing a Stetson, you're in
the presence of a genuine cowboy, not the urban variety. The
world-famous Calgary Stampede, while aimed largely at the
tourist dollar, nevertheless is based on real Western traditions.
And Calgarians know how to put on a show!
The Friday afternoon audience at the kickoff edition of
Canada's Cowboy Festival boasted a high percentage of
weathered cowboy hats shading weathered faces, indicating
that the ranch families and working cowboys were supporting
the event. Otherwise the audience was sparse, not unsur-
prisingly for a weekday daytime. Of course, there were other
tings to do at the festival, and not everyone was there solely
for the stage shows. My primary interest was the music, but
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progress. I was immediately swept away! Don is a mature
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Leadbelly's "When I Was A Cowboy." He followed it with
Ian Tyson's song about Will James, and plenty of others,
some traditional, some recently-written, all tastefully sung,
with no hint of pretension. His guitar work was solid without
being flashy—my kind of performer! Don makes it look easy
—he sings more naturally than most people talk, and I was
thoroughly impressed. Waddie Mitchell was part of this
mini-concert as well, and again I liked what I heard. Waddie,
although he’s a full time professional cowboy poet and racon-
teur now, has pretty well been able to avoid overt staginess;
he’s entertaining without pandering to the crowd too much.
Some. But I did enjoy his stuff.
This was followed by a session with Alberta cowboy
poets. These folks were more downhome than Waddie
Mitchell, which was fine with me. I’m happy to see real
people writing verse about real events in their lives, and
reciting it to audiences who understand. One of my favourite
poems in this session was Morrie Goetjen's "Buckle Bunny,"
 admonishing the girls to judge a cowboy by what’s in his
heart, not by the size of his belt buckle. However, the sole
musical content of this segment was provided by Don Brestler
(also participating in the festival as a painter), who sang a few
forgettable songs that had more to do with American fantasy
than Canadian reality.
Then came a mini-concert by the Sons of the San Joachim,
a California group who sing in the style of the old Sons of the
Pioneers. At its core, the outfit is a family group (two
brothers and a son/nephew), augmented by several "illegit-
imate sons." The harmonies were tight, the pickin’ was impec-
cable, and the Sons put on a thoroughly entertaining show for
the viewers scattered throughout the large hall. Some of the
songs were from the Pioneers, many of them were original, all
were delightfully delivered, with lots of energy and
enthusiasm as well as skill.
After their set I broke for supper. When I returned, the
festival organizers were happy, as the grand ballroom was
packed for the evening show. (In fact, through a ticket mixup