

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 unsurprisingly for a weekday daytime. Of course, there were other things 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,

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 raconteur 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 "illegitimate sons." The harmonies were tight, the pickin' was impeccable, 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

in a near sellout, I almost didn't get to bring you this review.) Ian Tyson opened the show, surprisingly enough, as he could easily have been the headliner. The crowd were hungry for his stuff, and treated him as the cultural icon he has become in this area, but to me Ian seemed overly laid-back for the situation. He was playing with a small outfit (but a very able one, with Nate Tinkham on guitar and Phil Hall playing bass), and delivered his trademark songs with a curious lack of enthusiasm. And, I have to say it: Ian's mannered singing style gets in the way for me. He has great taste in songs—the ones he writes, and the ones he chooses—but I'd love to hear them sung with a more straightforward delivery. Never mind, the audience loved him.

I was concerned for the Alberta cowboy poets directly afterward. How do you follow Ian Tyson at a cowboy show? Would they be able to carry the situation? Would they be intimidated by the huge crowd? I needn't have worried. These folks are stagewise enough to be able to handle it easily. In fact, Bryn Theissen, Don Wudel and Doris Daley had the best audience rapport of the evening. As well as the wild enthusiasm generated by other groups, they also at times commanded an attentive (not restless) hush—the mark of true respect from an audience. Of course, they started things off with a sure-fire trick: *little girls!* Elise Kaufman and Brenna Daley gained the crowd's support, and Bryn, Don and Doris held it. Don finished off with his obligatory song "Dingo Dog" [see *Bulletin* 25:4, p. 16], which folks loved as always. A fine show, and I'm ashamed of myself for having been a doubter.

Ian Tyson had earlier made reference to the Old West colliding with the New, and his comments were truly illustrated by the next event. One of the sponsors of the festival was a Western wear retail chain, so naturally we had to have a cowboy clothes fashion show and a two-step demonstration. Coming after genuine cowboy culture, the fantasy was pretty lame by comparison. Then followed an auction of Western arts and crafts in aid of the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association's relief fund. This was saved from being dead boring (albeit in a worthwhile cause) by the zany antics of Don Wudel as auctioneer and Bryn Thiessen and Doug Richards as his cohorts. Somebody behind me, presumably an auction fancier, commented disgustedly, "This isn't an auction, it's a show!" Yes, and thank gawd for it! It went on too long at that, but I guess it had to be done.

Waddie Mitchell, Don Edwards and the Sons of the San Joachim came on for a "Cowboy Jubilee"—they were just as

impressive as earlier, maybe more so, with a full house to play to. Don's yodelling was the best I've heard (this from a connoisseur who can't do it himself...). Their performance rounded the evening off nicely for me, and the show ran late, so I didn't stay for the dance.

I'm assured that Canada's Cowboy Festival is here to stay. This year's first-time event turned out to be an odd combination of cultural festival, trade show and convention, but the Old West and the New coexisted well enough that I found lots to enjoy, and it appeared that most people who attended did as well. I'm looking forward to next year's edition.

Day Two

The Calgary Cowboy Festival's second afternoon was very enjoyable, with a good selection of cowboy art, silver and leather work. But my main reason for being there was the poetry and music, and I was not disappointed.

I arrived just as Bryn Theissen, the host for the set, was introducing the performers with a bit of a tale about each one. Some of the highlights of the afternoon were Morrie Goetjen's "true" tales (including stories of pulling calves on his ranch), Don Wudel's cow, dog and elephant ranch jokes, and Terri Mason's great tales of personal ranch life. (A burglar found no TV, stereo or silverware to steal, and left them money because they were so hard up! Life is more than material things.)

Others who impressed me were The Sons of the San Joachim (a reincarnation of the Sons of the Pioneers or the Riders of the Purple Sage—they were good, but could use more original material); Mike Puhallo, a very good storyteller from Kamloops, BC; Doug Richards from out Cochrane way, who I think tells the best stories, with the perfect hook on the end; Wendy Vaughan (Doug's sister), very good in her own right, telling historical tales (such as a supposedly true story of the Sundance Kid) and explaining the philosophical approach to chuckwagon racing. Tom Richardson has a fine singing voice, and did a great job on songs such as "Blue Mountain" and Tim Rogers' setting of "Two Bit Cayuse."

—Joe Adams
Calgary, Alberta

[Joe Adams is a Western songwriter and song collector who has contributed numerous songs to the *Bulletin* over the years.]

Books

Edith Fowke with Jay Rahn. *A Family Heritage: The Story and Songs of LaRena Clark*. Calgary: U Calgary P, 1994

Anyone who has listened to the recordings of Ontario folk songs collected by Edith Fowke and released on record labels in North America and Britain will be familiar with the distinctive sharp voice, exuberant singing style and rhythmic delivery of LaRena Clark. LaRena had an amazingly wide repertoire of songs, many of them learned from her own

family, some of them rare or even unique. She was also unusual for a source singer in that she took advantage of the folk boom to release records herself, around a dozen of them, most if not all now unavailable. Perhaps the publication of this long-awaited book will provide an impetus for the re-release of some of LaRena's music.

Some of the most interesting and enjoyable songs from Mrs. Clark's vast repertoire of over 500 songs are included in this book, 93 of them in all. Each song includes music (a clear, simple melody line, with chord suggestions), lyrics, and brief informal notes on matters of interest such as the meaning of the song, its background, and similar versions elsewhere. For those interested in delving more deeply, a section on sources and references later in the book lists in detail other published and recorded versions of each song and discusses its melody, comparing it to that of other songs and other known versions. Thus the general reader can enjoy the songs for their own sake, while the scholarship is not sacrificed. (I did notice, though, that recordings by present-day singers, such as Anne Lederman's version of "Rattle on the Stovepipe," are not cited.)

Despite the many songs included, this is more than a songbook. An introductory section places LaRena's music in the context of society generally ("Women and Folksongs") and describes her repertoire and her relationship with the collector. Jay Rahn contributes a section on her singing style. A second section tells us LaRena's life story and family history, very

Recordings

The Prairie Higglers over Twenty Years: Hugh E. Hendry Memorial Recording. Unnumbered dual cassette set, published by, and available from, Development and Alumni Affairs Office, University of Saskatchewan, Room 230 Kirk Hall —117 Science Place, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C8; also available from CSTM Mail Order Service. Profits go to the Hugh E. Hendry Memorial Fund at the University of Saskatchewan.

The sad death of Hugh Hendry from cancer last year ended a 20-year association with a music group in Saskatoon which started life as The Traditional Folk Trio but later adopted the name The Prairie Higglers. Hugh was a founder of the group, is acknowledged as its leader, and is described also as "its musical heart." This recording, spanning all 20 years of the group's history, is a fitting memorial to Hugh. It's also an interesting look at the evolution of an ensemble which managed to stay together and survive personnel changes for 20 years, a record not all that many outfits can boast of.

The group from time to time performed live and on radio and TV in Saskatoon, but one gets the impression that, like so many others, it consisted of people who got together to share music for enjoyment, and performed incidentally when circumstances permitted or demanded. The tracks here were recorded either in a radio studio or "on equipment of lesser quality in private homes." This gives the recording the warm, cozy feel of a gathering of friends. It also makes for variable quality of sound and of performances. Perfectionists may be uncomfortable with singers occasionally pitching songs too low or stumbling over words, and with microphone placings which sometimes augment the accompaniment over the lead singer. Those of us who participate in musical gettogethers know that these things happen in real life, and are part of the ambiance, and in small doses, as here, don't upset the listeners. The liner notes are honest about this facet of the recording. But with it

important as the source of so many of her songs. Much of this section is in her own words, transcribed from interviews. This was a treat for me, recalling the flavour of rural Ontario speech of my parents' generation and rural Ontario concerns —I wish this section could have been larger.

After the songs (by far the largest part of the book), Jay Rahn goes into more detail concerning the musical aspects of Mrs. Clark's singing and its place within English-language folk music. A brief summing-up chapter is followed by a wealth of detail: in addition to the "Sources and References" section, there's a complete listing of all the songs LaRena learned from her family, with sources for those which have been recorded or printed, a discography of her own recordings, and a listing of her own compositions and where they can be found.

This book recognizes an important Canadian source singer whose work deserves to be more widely known outside of scholarly circles. And, while the scholarship appears to this untrained writer to be impeccable, the book is "user-friendly," written in a smooth and welcoming style, and should be a boon to all of us who want to learn Canadian folk songs and understand their place in our culture.

—JL

all, the singers are proficient, and the accompaniments are tasteful, and that makes it easy to get past any technical shortcomings.

The liner notes devote most of their space to the history and personnel changes of the group in its various manifestations, again reflecting the "people-orientation" of the project. I wish space had been available to say more about the music. Most of the songs on the first cassette will be familiar to people who were listening to folk music, especially British, 15 to 20 years ago, but they'll be fresh for many other listeners. And there were some surprises for me, such as Bill Sarjeant's version of "Nellie at the Wake," a song which I knew only from O.J. Abbott's Ontario version. There's also a neat setting of W.S. Gilbert's poem "The Yarn of the 'Nancy Belle'" to the tune of "The Star of the County Down"! And I've never heard the grotesquerie and flat-out yukkiness of "Mrs. Ravoon" on record before. Perhaps no other group has dared! Harry Tuft is credited as the source; I wish I knew more...

We have to give the Higglers marks for including Canadian songs in times when it wasn't fashionable to do so. Jocelyne Legault sings a couple of French songs, "C'est l'aviron" and "La laine des moutons" in the early going. "By the Hush," "Save Your Money When You're Young," "Life in a Prairie Shack" and "The Black Fly" all show up on the second side of the second cassette.

Suitably, Hugh Hendry is represented on all but two