

Reviews/Comptes-rendus

Wendy Berner. *Just (?) Desserts & other savoury tales*. ISBN 0-9698964-0-9. Box 65071, North Hill PO, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 4T6; \$14.00 postpaid.

During a visit to Calgary in July 1993, this reviewer was very fortunate to attend an informal storytelling swap. One of the tellers in attendance was Wendy Berner, who told "The Singing Bone," a version of the "Juniper Tree" story collected by the Brothers Grimm and a narrative cousin to such well known ballads as "The Two Sisters" in theme and scope. Berner has been a professional teller for a number of years, and her activities and accomplishments in storytelling have been varied and numerous. She has travelled the length and breadth of Canada, performing at festivals and other venues, conducting and organizing workshops on storytelling and related

areas, and generally promoting the venerable art wherever she has gone. She has worked for CBC radio, both as performer and expert observer of the storytelling scene. Her activities, however, have not been limited only to Canada. She has travelled throughout the world, telling and sometimes collecting stories in Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and other South Pacific islands. And last, but certainly not least, Berner has issued her debut cassette of tales and stories, and her first recording gets high marks from this writer, based on its content, manner of presentation, and general overall quality of professional quality, and the more one listens to this

cassette, the more one gets the sense that Berner knows what storytelling is truly all about.

The cassette begins with the title piece, also known as "Tiger and Hare," a south Asian variant of the Aesop fable, "The Lion and the Mouse." In this tale, as well as a number of others on the recording, the dominant theme is that cleverness, wit, and wisdom are not necessarily to be found in those with physical strength and authoritative power, but can just as easily be the attributes of the small, the weak, and the non-descript members of both the animal and human world. It should be mentioned here that, with the exception of one Scottish tale, the remainder of the stories Berner tells come from Siberia, eastern Europe, Jewish traditions, China, Japan, and the Indian subcontinent. In "The Price of Garlic," a tale from China, a wise and clever judge shows just how the search for justice can be interwoven with ingenuity to ferret out a garlic thief: the tale is enhanced by the addition of the *pipa*, a Chinese lute, ably played by Calgary musician Zhang Jin Jin. In "The Cuckoo," a Nenets tale from northern Siberia, Berner tells the poignant story of a mother driven to desperation and misery by disobedience and cruelty of her children.

The most curious tale of the recording, and one of my personal favorites, is "Waka-Gaeru Mizu," a story from Japan, in which an elderly couple discover a literal fountain of youth, and bizarre consequences accrue from this discovery. In her brief but thoughtful liner notes, Berner attests to the impact this story has had on her from childhood, when she first heard this tale.

Side Two commences, after a few seconds of the sounds of the Atlantic Ocean, with a Scottish story entitled "The Ròn," which is a Celtic word meaning "seal." In this tale a fisherman learns a valuable lesson in the true meaning of life and the harmony of nature from a wise and intelligent seal and changes the course of his life forever.

One of the more intriguing pieces on the cassette, and again one of my personal favorites, is the selection Berner cleverly titles "The Survival Suite," a trio of brief tales which once again show how cleverness and wit help a fox, a jester, and a carpenter out of three very tight spots in which their necks are literally on the line. All three are from the Jewish traditions of eastern Europe and the Middle East; I especially enjoyed the tale of Yossel the carpenter. In these three anecdotes, the lion, the sultan, and the thief, in every real sense of the word, get their just desserts. Berner's fine vocal techniques come across in the tale of how Yossel cleverly outwits the thief, a true tale of charm, wit, and humor.

The last tale on the cassette is "The Innkeeper's Daughter," a version of a well known riddle tale found throughout Russia, eastern Europe, and many other regions. This tale has been popular with storytellers in recent years, with its emphasis on a plucky and clever heroine who not only outwits the judge, or in the case of Berner's version, the landowner, in a contest of riddles but also teaches him a valuable lesson in male humility and proves her worth and equality in every sense of the word. Berner told this old chestnut so well that I wanted to hear it several times again.

Berner's voice is strong, and yet it has a gentle aspect to it, and this duality comes across so nicely where modes vary greatly from tale to tale. This comes across, from the sadness and despair of "The Cuckoo" and "Waka-Gaeru Mizu" to the comic humor of "The Price of Garlic" and "The Survival Suite." The extra delightful touches Berner adds to the stories—including several fiddle interludes by Paul Finlan and the *pipa* accompaniment to the Chinese tale—certainly increase our enjoyment. There are no cute gimmicks with this cassette, no extraneous interjections to interrupt the listener's enjoyment of these wonderful and delightful tales. Wendy Berner is a fine storyteller who will be around with us for a long time to come, and I, for one, am very pleased with that prospect, very pleased indeed.

—Robert Rodriguez
New York City, USA

Ian Robb. *From Different Angels*. FAM 01. Fallen Angle Music, 285 Spencer Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 2R1

For more than twenty years Ian Robb has been one of eastern Canada's most well-respected singers of traditional and traditionally-based folksongs. His first recording for the esteemed American label Folk-Legacy was made as a joint venture with Margaret Christl with instrumental backing by Grit Laskin. That was back in 1976 on Folk-Legacy FSC-62, and I see that Grit, along with a number of other master musicians and singers, is still associated with Ian on Ian's new CD release, *From Different Angels*.

With the release of this new recording Ian has had the opportunity to bring together divers aspects of his eclectic repertoire as well as showcasing some of his performance incarnations.

I particularly liked the first track, "The Santa Fe Trail," on which Ian was accompanied by Ann Downey and Shelley Posen who, all together, make up the trio *Finest Kind*. On this

and on a number of other tracks, and on a variety of instruments, the noted and popular Ken Whiteley is added. The song is reminiscent of those sung by Joe Hickerson, and its smooth arrangement and execution compliment its simplicity and tunefulness.

It is good to see the 18th century English pastoral song "Farmer's Boy" being kept alive by another singer. It became something of an anthem amongst country folk until its popularity was done to death by a lifeless, strict meter, music book arrangement of it being forced upon schoolchildren (by lifeless, strict meter, music teachers) in England earlier in this century.

This potential for strict metering unfortunately still remains with performances of the song today and here, perhaps, Ian might have removed himself a little further than he has done from this ongoing problem.

The four instrumental tracks are performed in sets as *The Old Sod Band* which plays for contra dances and is made up of Ian with Philip Murphy, Doug Hierlihy, and the multi-instrumentalists Ann Downey and Tim Cutts. These tracks are brilliant and demonstrate Ian's very tasteful English concertina playing to perfection. The tunes are fun and deftly played, and include some interesting examples of stops, slides and intricate counterpoint.

Two examples of Ian's song writing are included, the wonderfully irreverent "Garnet's Home-Made Beer" and the very singable "They're Taking it Away." A number of people are undoubtedly more familiar with "Garnet's Home-Made Beer" (to the tune of "Barrett's Privateers") than with Ian himself, although a recent and substantial whack of air-time for the song on the *Max Ferguson Show* (Saturday mornings on CBC FM) has probably done much to alter this imbalance. Both of his songs are sung in company with *The Friends of Fiddlers' Green*, the "house band" that evolved from the Fiddlers' Green folk club in Toronto back when the world was young. Here the Friends are made up of Ian with Alistair Brown, Tam Kearney, Lawrence Stevenson, Grit Laskin, and

the late David Parry, the sage voice immortalized at the end of "Garnet's Home-Made Beer."

The Copper Family song, "Green Groves," and the nicely rearranged American traditional song, "A-Roving on a Winter's Night," recorded in 1967 by Doc Watson as "Winter's Night," are two more gems on this collection. The further songs that make up the CD, which is also available as a cassette, include Ewan MacColl's "The Big Hewer," sung with great conviction and featuring Garnet Rogers on fiddle, a very nice a cappella rendition of "Ye Mariners All," two of Stan Rogers' songs, "Make and Break Harbour," again with Garnet Rogers, and "The Mary Ellen Carter," and Ewan MacColl's "The Lag's Song" and the MacColl-inspired "D-Day Dodgers," featuring Chris Whiteley on unassuming trumpet.

In total, the sixteen tracks, produced by Ken Whiteley and Ian, run for just over an hour, very nice and very good value.

—Mike Ballantyne
Cobble Hill, BC

Roger Helfrick. *The Call*. Independent OLKMN1994. Roger Helfrick, 914 —23rd Avenue NW, Calgary, Alberta T2M 1T4. Phone: 403-282-5153.

The call to follow Roger Helfrick on his journey among the ancient Celts and through their musical heritage is irresistible. The thirteen tracks on the CD include five original tunes by Roger and several familiar songs from the Celtic tradition. Roger's rich baritone has graced choirs across Canada and can nowadays be heard often around Calgary—solo or with the Renaissance Singers. On this album his strong, clear vocals weave among densely-textured yet crystal-line string arrangements to create a variety of mood and atmosphere. Seldom have you heard such a confident (macho, even?) approach to "Will Ye Go Lassie." Here is some credible reason for the fair damsel to traipse off up the mountainside, and a far cry from the wussie bleatings heard too often.

Roger complements his vocals with lyrical Celtic harp and acoustic guitar stylings, most effective in the hypnotic "Éirigh Suas A Stóirín" ("Rise Up My Darling")—sung in Gaelic—and in "The Great Silkie." The latter track is rich with atmosphere while avoiding the melodramatics brought to the legend by some performers. Some very fine backing instrumentals contribute much also to the arrangement of some of the songs. An entirely new approach to the traditional "Geordie," featuring Chris Dunn's dobro and Paddy Byrne's fiddle, has echoes of "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." Roger's tribute to his childhood home, "Peace River," has a "little bit o' country, little bit o' bluegrass" feel which also adds some new world spice to the Celtic menu. "Rider From The North," in which Roger has set W.B. Yeats's lyric to music, and Roger's own "The Call" are both filled with the symbols, fears and promises of ancient mythologies. "The Call," driven

by martial drumming and haunted by Graham Jones's pennywhistle and the wailing of Chris Dunn's slide guitar is a memorable signature tune. "Down By The Green-wood Side" boasts another interesting arrangement of mandolin, dobro and electric guitar. Clearly, all involved had a great time with the whimsical "Spotted Cow."

My only reservations about this recording are, first, that depending upon the mood one brings to it, it can seem to be imbued with a little too much gloom amidst its minor keys and Celtic modalities. Second, Roger's classical training can sometimes result in a too-precise reading of the song, but a few moments with his rendition of Tommy Makem's "Four Green Fields" soon dispels any doubt about his vocal skills.

Paddy Byrne, Chris Dunn, and Graham Jones are featured on several tracks, and other contributors are Don Helfrick, Roger's brother, on guitar and Dave Foster on hammered dulcimer. However, aside from Roger's own writing, singing, and playing, the other key contribution to this album is that of Richard Harrow, engineer/co-producer/co-arranger and multi-instrumentalist. Every track bears the characteristic Harrow signature of crystal clear sound, perfectly balanced and mixed. Every note among the multi-layered instrumental backings is clear, and every track complements, ever competes with, the vocalist.

Blending elements of the styles of Loreena McKennitt and Steeleye Span, *The Call* will appeal to anybody who enjoys both classical Celtic and folk-rock music, with some distinctive western Canadian overtones.

—Pat Keenan
Calgary, Alberta

The Irish Descendants. Gypsies and Lovers. WEA CD-98237.

The Irish Descendants are gradually gathering a large and loyal following across the country. Appearances on "Rita and Friends" on CBC-TV, and CBC Radio's late "Swinging on a Star," have begun to let the country know about this group.

A recent sold-out concert at the Calgary Folk Club brought out some "downhomers," who cheered, clapped and stomped their way through many of the songs, sometimes to the chagrin of the regular patrons.

Since the release of *Look to the Sea* in 1993, two members have been added to the group, and their instruments (keyboard, flute and percussion) bring a balance to the performance, to produce on stage a sound that is "just like the record."

Lead vocals, split between Con O'Brien and D'Arcy Broderick, are matched to the songs, which range from traditional to local (Maritimes) and Irish.

A surprise on the album is Donovan's "Catch the Wind." I wonder if Donovan ever thought his song would be recorded by a Newfoundland folk group 30 years after he wrote it in the early 60s!

Along with "Lovers" and "Raggle Taggle Gypsy"—hence

Mary Knickle. Who Will Take the Throne? Windward Productions, CD WPP CD-02. Valerie Enterprises, Woodburn Road, RR #1, Hannon, Ontario, L0R 1P0.

Originally from Nova Scotia, singer-songwriter Mary Knickle is now based in Toronto. Her first cassette-only release, *On the Wind and the Sea*, was firmly based in the Nova Scotia tradition, featuring an even mix of traditional and original songs. The new CD doesn't ignore either the sea ("Female Sailor," with its shanty overtones, and "Sea Fever") or the tradition (the album includes a fine variant on "Barbara Allen"), but it moves further afield as well.

There are songs here of dreams and muses, winter land-

Sheela-Na-Gigh. Knee Deep in Moon Shavings. Cassette CST 94001. Arktos, 10423-84 Street, Edmonton, Alberta, T6A 3R3.

For all the percussion and flute-type wind instruments listed in its credits, the performances on *Knee Deep in Moon Shavings* aren't as adventurous as one might first assume. The various recorders, flutes, drums and other percussion add colour, certainly, but it's really an album of a cappella songs, delivered in a high clear classical vocal style reminiscent of Joan Baez or Mary O'Hara, which will either appeal or turn off listeners, depending on how they feel about that style.

The unfortunate thing about the album is the decision to include too much tired material. Do we really need more re-

the title, *Gypsies and Lovers*—"A Walk in the Irish Rain" and the novelty song "Rattlin' Bog" comprise the "inland" part of the recording which I mentioned (tongue-in-cheek) in my review of the previous record [29:1, p. 48].

Sea songs have not been forgotten. A rousing version of Stan Rogers' "Barrett's Privateers" contrasts the beautiful "Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's"—the final resting place of a tired, aged fisherman.

The current situation of the fisheries in Newfoundland is not neglected, in the poignant "Will They Lie There Evermore?"

The variety of instruments used are well chosen, and fit the arrangements for each song. Also, a welcome addition to the CD is the inclusion of the words, although I wish more information was provided about the songs and songwriters.

In performance, the group's main object is to present music, so sparse comment is made between songs. Two standing ovations and encores at the Calgary concert showed that the group has good support from fans in the Calgary area.

—*Dave Foster*
Calgary, Alberta

scapes and castles, MicMac melodies and Christmas gifts. The instrumental back-up is quite modern, but many of the cuts retain a sense of the past, with a sax taking the place of pipes, keyboards the place of a harp. Knickle's vocal style is a little reminiscent of Loreena McKennitt, but I mention that as a touchstone rather than a strict comparison, for Knickle remains her own woman throughout.

—*Charles de Lint*
Ottawa, Ontario

cordings of "She Moves Through the Fair," "Mormond Braes," "False Night on the Road," "Three Ravens" or "I'll Tell Me Ma"? Such old war horses can work in concert, but they need a fresh perspective when put on record, and they don't get that here.

Which isn't to say that this is a bad album. It's just that it strikes me more as a good souvenir of a Sheela-Na-Gigh performance as opposed to an album that stands on its own in terms of its originality.

—*Charles de Lint*