

"That's what folk songs have always done...." an interview with Bob Bossin

Bob Bossin met with the Bulletin editors one Sunday morning in June. He was in Calgary to attend a wedding, the festivities for which included a sweat lodge ceremony (in lieu of a stag party), which Bossin had attended the night before: an example of the community activity which features so strongly in his conversation. After transcribing the interview, we edited it somewhat, removing some repetitive and tangential material and reordering it. This version was sent to Bossin, who reworked it drastically while travelling to the NDP convention as part of Svend Robinson's team. At one point he found that it was necessary to rewrite some of the questions to make them suit the answers better! (This is one reason we have removed our individual attributions from the dialogue.) He continued to send revisions up to two weeks before our final pasteup.

The singer's painstaking concern to find the best expression of his ideas provides an interesting counterpoint to the image he sometimes enjoys playing with onstage, of the wild hippie, as in his hilarious anecdote about being interviewed by CBC upon the 1991 victory of his old friend, Bob Rae, and the Ontario NDP. Whether or not he himself used all the drugs that Rae passed over, as he claims in that routine, in fact Bossin is an extremely intelligent and thoughtful artist, qualities we believe are demonstrated in the substance of this interview, as well as in its genesis.

Since you are a banjo player known for your political songs, it seems a good guess that Pete Seeger influenced you.

What I do is similar in many ways to what Pete has done, but I don't do what I do because he did it. Undoubtedly the path is easier for me to go down because he cleared the trail. But I never modelled myself after Pete. I don't see much similarity in our music. There is more similarity in our subjects, and even more in what we don't take for our subjects. He didn't write and sing because there was a market niche for some song or subject and neither do I. We're folksingers, he long before me. And there are not a lot of modern folksingers, at least by my definition.

Which is?

Folk music is the music that rises naturally from a community. As a definition, that may not be airtight, but I see it like this: Making music is an absolutely natural thing to do, as natural as running, as natural as speaking. I can sure see that in my daughter, who is two. People just sing. And left to our own devices, we'd sing about anything we'd talk about. People have always sung their protests, just as they have sung their love. They made up songs about their friends. About tragedies, controversies, work. They made up songs for weddings, played songs for the dance, made up a tune and dedicated it to someone on their birthday. If people in the community were talking about something—cutting down a forest, putting in a highway—they sang about it too.

But that natural music-making dropped off as the music industry took over and inserted itself between the makers of music and the consumers of music. Songs became commodities you purchase pre-fab. In order to have music, we by and large think that we have to pay Sony. *Real* music is the stuff you

have to buy a ticket to hear. They hooked us, made music slick and mass-produced, and replaced the music that comes naturally. But the natural thing is to be singing in our own way about our own subjects, including lots of subjects that now get weeded out by the censorship of the marketplace.

That's what folksingers do; they still sing those other songs. That's what Seeger has done, and that's what I do. We're throwbacks. We are professional folksingers, which is almost a contradiction in terms, though not quite. Because while we do sing for money, we don't create the stuff for the money. If I wasn't being paid I would still write and sing pretty much the same songs. I don't think "Oh, here's a song that could really get popular" or "Here's a song that I could sell to so-and-so." I know there are people that write that way. In fact, they write some really nifty stuff. But I'm not one of them. I write about the things on my mind, which are the things on the minds of people in my community.

What got you started in music? What got you started as a career musician?

Singing was like breathing. I just sang, we all did. My dad used to sing as he walked around the house, and my mom did, too. I was also raised around show business. My dad was a booking agent, booking acts into night clubs in southern Ontario. We went out to lots of clubs and shows, and my dad would bring the entertainers home for a meal. So show business was a pretty natural milieu for me.

I started performing in school shows as soon as I was old enough to do it. I did imitations—Ed Sullivan and the like. And took great joy in it. You see, I was a terrible athlete; maybe that's why I started to perform. It was something I had a knack for, as opposed to catching a ball, for which I had no talent at all.

So that was the beginning. Playing music came later. In fact, I got *Ds* in music at school. But I listened to music, the pop of the day. The radio in the kitchen would play, "Hummin'bird, hummin'bird, sing me your song" and "The wayward wind is a restless wind" and "Have you talked to the Man upstairs, 'cause he wants to hear from you?"—pre-rock and roll pop music. The music Anne Murray revived on Crooning.

Then, I think it was 1954, the radio changed and, all of a sudden, there was "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley And His Comets, and shortly after that, the early Elvis records. And, boy oh boy, they were something! They just rocked, they touched me, they were rebellious. I wanted to be like Elvis and, at the age of nine, I asked for a guitar. I didn't get an electric guitar, because you needed an amplifier too, and my parents didn't want to spring for it. They thought I wouldn't stick with it. So I got a \$20 Serenader.

That's where it started, rock and roll on the radio and G, C and D7 on the top three strings of the Serenader. I begged my dad to take me to the touring rock and roll shows that came through Toronto. I saw Fats Domino, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, The Platters, Elvis.

But then, very quickly, as I recall, rock and roll turned bland. For maybe three really good years, it was wonderful, raunchy, rebellious music—Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, people like that—and then suddenly it was "Sixteen candles make a lovely light, but not as bright as your eyes tonight." Industrialized music pitched to a generic teen market. Pat Boone singing "Long Tall Sally" in a squeaky clean voice.

Then in '59, when rock and roll was at its nadir, I heard "Tom Dooley." It stopped me in my tracks. This was a song that seemed to be about something. Was it a true story? Were these real people? I was fascinated. Musically, as sung by the Kingston Trio, it was dreadful. But it hinted at a story, and I wanted to know the story.

So I went to see the Kingston Trio when they came to town, and, during the show, they said, "There's a group coming up that you are going to hear a lot about, called Peter, Paul and Mary." And, sure enough, a few months later, Peter, Paul and Mary came through. They were certainly a step up, musically. From there it was a short step to Ian and Sylvia, who were genuinely good—their music still stands up today. They opened the door into real, not-commercialized folk music. People like the Reverend Gary Davis. If they passed through Toronto, I went.

So I fell into folk music. It was really very easy to do because it was this unique moment in music history when folk was a craze. It had nothing to do with the actual folk elements

of the music, and was probably anathema to it, but folk was on the radio and in the clubs. The Mariposa Folk Festival started. I must have been all of 14 or 15 when I went to Orillia for Mariposa and, oh, it was a thrill!

So there was a sea of folk music to swim in, and I did. I stopped listening to pop music and never really started again.

How did you get into music as a career?

The real impetus was political. In the late '60s, early '70s, so much was happening all over the world. The Viet Nam war was on. Paris, Prague, Columbia University all exploded in '68. The killings at Kent State were in '70. Canadian campuses were less turbulent—we are Canadians after all—but it was probably the most exciting moment of the

century to be around the university, and I just had the luck to be there. We really thought we could change the world. We were naïve, but in our naïveté we threw ourselves into the biggest issues of the time with such passion and energy. It was a wonderful time to be 20 years old.

Meanwhile, the hippie culture flowered. What was really at the core of the hippie movement is subject to different interpretations, but there was certainly a rejection of bourgeois values. So I found the hippie culture exciting too—though I was never innocent enough to be a dyed-in-the-wool flower child.

The hippies brought with them a whole new batch of music. Music was sacred to that movement—as it is to all political movements. Everything from the Beatles, clearly LSD-influenced, to the Jefferson Airplane ("We are all outlaws in the eyes of Amerika"). The music wasn't just music, it was the voice of our rebellion.

And I thought, in 1970 (at the ripe old age of 24), if I have a gift, it is to take ideas and cast them into plain language, to create a kind of folk expression of an idea. So I thought I saw a useful, socially responsible role for myself: I could use folk music to express some of these alternate, socialistic ideas and, in that way, reach young people already keen on changing the world. Naïve as hell, but there is also something sweet and admirable in that seriousness of purpose.

And, as it turns out, that is precisely what I've done. It has proved to be enormously more difficult than I thought.

I have influenced a lot fewer people than I dreamed about. And I have had to find alternate routes to do so. I think had I known how tough a road it was going to be, I might have been wise to choose a different career. But in fact my path has been quite straight.

So that was what I decided to do. There were, at that



Young Bob Bossin meets Pat Boone.

Photographs courtesy Bob Bossin



Beyond the first 3 strings....

time, a lot of free music festivals, along with the free clinics, food co-ops, and such. We had really taken charge of our own culture, in a way that hasn't happened since, at least on as broad a scale. So I started playing publicly. Pretty soon I met Marie-Lynn Hammond, and loved her voice. Jerry Lewycky, who was a violin student at U of T, joined us on fiddle, and that was the beginning of Stringband. We played lots of little gigs, we played on the street, and slowly we got better. Then Ben Mink replaced Jerry on fiddle, and there we were, with our hat in the ring as professional folksingers.

The rebelliousness of rock music and of the movements of the '60s seems to have been key for you.

Yup, I think I'm just a natural born rebel. Before rock and roll and the '60s, I was attracted to the beatniks, the rebels of their day. I remember going to the House of Hamburg on a Sunday night, I doubt I was more than 12 or 13. The House of Hamburg was a Toronto beatnik hangout run by jazz pianist Clem Hamburg. It didn't open until 10:00, and I had to be in bed at 10:00, but on Sunday nights it opened early, and I remember going for the first set. I doubt that I got anything out of it—except the ambience of people who rejected the bourgeois conformity of the era.

That was always important to me. *The Catcher in the Rye* was a very seminal book, both in my life and in the culture of the '50s—Holden Caulfield complaining about "phonies." That just rang true. And so did Elvis singing "Blue Suede Shoes" or "Hound Dog" or "Milkcow Blues Boogie". It wasn't phony. In that way I suppose it was itself a kind of folk music.

Were you a red-diaper baby?

No. My family on both sides were Jewish. On my mother's side they were reasonably well off, business people, decent but straight. My father's side of the family was livelier. They grew up in poverty. Several were writers. One of my aunts was a communist. One time I said something about her being an anarcho-syndicalist. She said, "Anarcho-syndicalist? Are you crazy? I was a communist, a communist! I wouldn't touch those people; I wouldn't be in the *toilet* with those people!"

So, there was some pinkness in the extended family, but not a lot. I really don't know why my sympathies were always left, but they always were. My dad was conservative, poli-

tically, and my mom was apolitical. But the whole Bossin clan always fought injustice, one way or another. Perhaps it was a natural response to the anti-semitism that they had all experienced, although I never paid attention to that myself.



Stringband 1971: Jerry Lewycky, Bossin, Marie-Lynn Hammond, Gary Snider

You said your first performances as a kid were comedy. Were you ever a stand-up comic with a guitar?

Only recently and then not really. In the mid '80s I wrote myself a one-man musical comedy called *Bossin's Home Remedy For Nuclear War* in which I played a snake-oil salesman who had bottled the antidote to nuclear war. I sold 9000 bottles of the stuff over the three years I did the show. I am very proud of that show, of the way it mixed music, comedy, and community organizing. But the lasting legacy of it for me was that I began to construct all my

shows theatrically. Folksingers are notoriously casual about their shows. My brush with theatre people, like Peter Froehlich and Simon Webb, taught me just how much power was available on stage, if you set your mind to using it. So I took the comic introductions to songs—which lots of folksingers use—and developed them into full monologues, pieces in their own right. I started using slides and even used a flash pot for awhile. I would also have sections of what was, effectively, left wing stand up comedy, but as my show has evolved, that has gradually disappeared again. The politics is there, but not the stand up.

The show I do now is pretty unique—at least I don't know anyone else who combines the elements I do: songs, stories, characters, slides, protest. I cross back and forth between comic and serious, between personal and political, but—and this is the thing I like most about my show, if I may admit to liking my own stuff—I *mean everything I say*. The show bites because I bite. There is not a lot of political comedy that has genuine bite. I think it was John Gray who said of *Double Exposure* that they have this unique brand of political comedy that would be perfectly at home at a Tory convention. Mine wouldn't be.

So, I suppose I have done some "stand up with guitar." I actually toyed with the idea of trying the comedy clubs as venues. But they are such miserable places; they really seem to cater to the worst in people. I never got around to the experiment, and I'm not sorry that I didn't. Life is too short.

When did you get into banjo?

In the early sixties. Dave Guard of The Kingston Trio played the banjo. It was pretty easy to pick up after playing

the guitar for a few years. But then I put it aside and lost interest in it, which is something that always happens with me. I'll put an instrument aside for a few years, then I will switch back.

Hearing John Hartford made me pick up the banjo again. He came to Mariposa with Tut Taylor, Norman Blake and Vassar Clemens the year they recorded the *Aereo-Plain* album, around 1970. My jaw dropped! Here was somebody using the banjo to write songs. Hartford picked up the cadence of the instrument in his lyrics, and I thought, "Holy shit!" So I dusted off my banjo and wrote "Daddy Was A Ballplayer" and "Did You Hear They Busted The Fiddle Player?".

You have your own banjo style; where does it come from?

I tend to like instruments for their colour. Truth be told, I'm no hell as a musician. I'm OK. But I use instruments and styles for their character. There's something about the sound of a fiddle that contains its history, contains all the places and circumstances fiddles have been played. Or a mandolin, or a concertina.

The banjo has always struck me as the musical equivalent of playing hookey. It's such a funky sound. I'm talking about the timbre of the instrument. (Except for those super-ringy Gibson Mastertones. I don't really like the ambience of bluegrass banjos, never have.) To me, the sound of a banjo says *gone-fishin'*. I mean, if you want a beautiful, resonant tone, why play a banjo? Choosing to play something on the banjo is like dipping your mouth harp in water.

I can tell you more about my banjo style, which is kind of unique, but I expect it is of pretty specialized interest.

Try us.

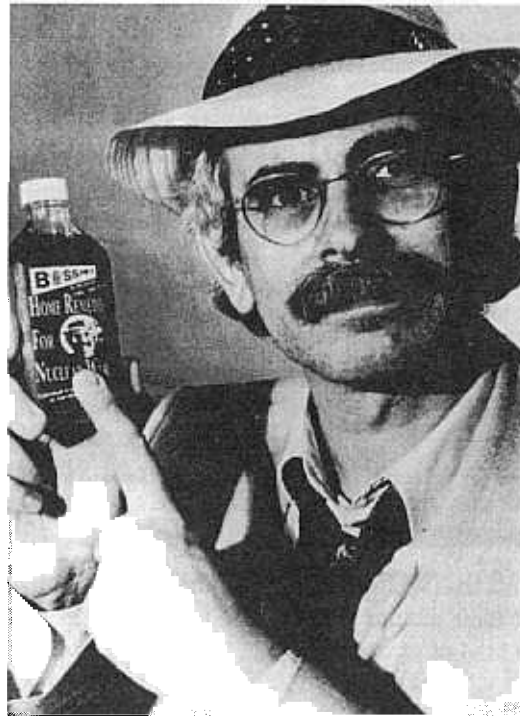
Pretty early, I learned to frail. I always loved its thunky, percussive sound. But then the last few years I started playing more complex rhythmic variations though still with the feel of frailing. To do that I started to sneak in the odd upstroke. Frailing is all downstrokes. Somewhere along the line I started leaving out the thumb notes, which, in frailing, is every third note. I've kept the frailing rhythm, more or less, but took the thumb out. So it became a kind of strumming, but a very percussive strumming with a lot of holes in it.

One of the things I've realized about music is that the rests are just as important as the notes. That's one of the distinctions between a beginner and somebody who is really working with their instrument. The person who is really working the instrument uses what is not there to set up what is there. Then you vary what is there: sometimes you play a single note, sometimes a two-note harmony, sometimes a

three-note harmony, occasionally a full six-string strum—as opposed to the strum-a strum-a strum, untextured sound of someone starting out. You use staccato, dynamics, the ring of the instrument, every texture you can get your hands to produce to tell the story.

So what I started doing on banjo was in some ways going back to plain old strumming, but with attention to texture and punctuation. That's the style of "Sulphur Passage," and that's the style of "Love in Seven." ("Love in Seven" is a real oddball. It is in mountain minor tuning and is not quite in 7/4 time. When we came to record it, Buff Allen, the drummer, charted it out, after trying in vain to make my chart work, and discovered bars of 5/8, 6/8—all kind of stuff that to me was just emphasis, just part of the tune, part of the banjo-ness of it.)

So that was the evolution. And then I switched back to guitar again, and started evolving my guitar playing to pick up what I had been doing on the banjo. I'm sure there are people who hear what I'm doing now and just hear strum strum-a strum, and figure, "Bossin's losing it." But I like the sound, myself.



Back in the 1970s, when Stringband was in its heyday, you used slogans like "Thoroughly Canadian" and "God Save the King." There was a twinkle in your eye, but were you also consciously trying to represent Canadian culture in song?

Absolutely, though the consciousness grew out of the experience, it didn't precede it. I always liked something Doug Fetherling said about Stringband in *Saturday Night* magazine, back before it became the right wing fan mag it is today. Fetherling said, "They search relentlessly for what they think is a Canadian Sound. Not finding it they have perhaps invented it." We definitely did set out to find and write and sing songs that reflected the particular lives of people in different corners of the country. That was a unique thing to do back then. I like to think that we helped clear the path for those who are doing it now, and there are a lot of them. By singing "Dief Will Be the Chief Again" we opened a door, we gave a kind of permission to sing about our own particularities.

Of course in some ways the border between the US and Canada is a false distinction as far as music goes. The rise of sheet music had the same effect either side of the border. Or the rise of the player piano or of radio—the various industrial interventions that turned music into a saleable commodity. The commercial society, the capitalist society, has marginalized folk music, the natural music of a community, both sides of the border. In fact community itself has been marginalized. We—Stringband—just went back there for our music. The particulars were Canadian because we were.

You have certainly written some clearly Canadian songs. Do you have favourites?

Songs are like children, you love them all in different ways. "Daddy Was a Ballplayer" has a special place, because it was the first one I wrote that had its own voice, that didn't sound like anyone else. "The Maple Leaf Dog" is another like that: no one else would ever have written that song. They were also songs that people responded to. They played a role in Stringband's little history. On the other hand, I've also always liked "Look What's Become of Me," in part because no-one else did.

I am proud of the compactness of expression in some of the songs: "Newfoundlanders," "Tugboats," "Dief," "The Casca and the Whitehorse Burned Down." I like the way they paint their picture with such simple-seeming strokes; then the song kind of extends its meaning beyond itself. The meaning sort of vibrates out from the song's little three-minute world. "Madelyn's Lullabye," on the new album, is like that. There is really a lot going on in there, about family, about love, about social class, even though it is a really simple song.

I like "Ya Wanna Marry Me?" because it is so much my own personal love song, although, ironically, it is also one of the most popular of my songs. Whenever it is played on radio—which isn't often—I get calls and letters from people who want copies. I think they respond to the fact that the song is both sweet and realistic about my own marriage—that rings a bell. "Lunenburg Concerto" was like that, too, personal as can be, and, because of that, personal to other people too.

"Lunenburg" and "Satchel Paige" are probably the richest, deepest, most emotionally complex ones.

And then I am really happy to have written some of the overtly political songs like "Show Us the Length" and "Sulphur Passage." They have played their own small part in changing the world. "Show Us the Length" has literally been sung round the world, despite virtually no airplay (for reasons that are obvious if you know the song.) Its success has been completely outside of the commercial stream. I am always hearing from people who heard it in some far off place, who sang it themselves in some school show or at some protest. Someone sent me a tape of it being sung at a women's music festival—in Japanese!

"Sulphur Passage" is starting to have the same kind of non-commercial, hand-to-hand success. It really is playing a part in the struggle to save the forests, first in BC and now in lots of different places. The video is so powerful, and it is being seen in different countries, in schools, at film festivals, at conferences. It really encourages people to fight on. It

brought tears to my eyes, the first time I saw it, and I know it affects a lot of people that way.

How did the video happen? You didn't write the song with a video in mind.



Stringband late 70s: Bossin, Ben Mink, a prominent fan, Alan Soberman, Marie-Lynn Hammond

Never dreamed of it. The way it all came about is quite a tale. In fact it indicates just how powerful the folk process can be.

"Sulphur Passage" began humbly enough. It actually began with a mistake. I was sitting around, strumming the banjo aimlessly as I sometimes do, and I accidentally dropped a beat. I thought, "Hey, I like that." So I kept doodling with a tune around the figure I had stumbled on, and then, just to mark the rhythm so I would remember it

the next day, I made up a sentence that fitted the tune—which is what I do since I am not very good at notation. The sentence I made up was, "Come you bold men of Clayoquot, come you bold women."

That was not an entirely random choice of words: the fight over Clayoquot—some of the last old growth temperate rain forest on the west coast—was on my mind, as it was on the minds of hundreds of people. I wasn't sure about the line—was it too archaic-sounding? was it a bit pretentious?—but I kept on at it. Eventually I had written a call-to-arms, an invitation to join the logging blockade that was going on at Sulphur Passage in Clayoquot Sound. That was 1988.

Over the next five years, public opposition to clear-cutting Clayoquot just kept growing. Finally, in the spring of 1993, the government announced its decision: they would save a quarter of the forest and clear-cut the rest. The shit hit the fan. That summer, over 800 people were arrested. I don't think Canada has ever had that many people arrested in a protest campaign. Of course I was there, standing on the make-shift stage (it was the roof of a Volkswagen van) singing "Sulphur Passage."

In the fall, the protesters went on trial. The first judge was extremely unsympathetic and gave out sentences much harsher than this kind of symbolic civil disobedience usually draws. Grandmothers were going to jail for months. Once again, many, many of us were outraged.

That fall I went into the studio to record, so I called a bunch of BC performers to see if they would join in on "Sulphur Passage." Of course, Bryan Adams and Sarah McLaughlin didn't return my call, but Valdy, Raffi, Ann Mortifee, Stephen Fearing, Rick Scott, Roy Forbes and Veda Hille did. They felt the same way I did about Clayoquot, the same way thousands of people did. That's what I mean by the power of a folk song. Yes, I wrote it, but it expressed the

real, pressing concern of the community.

Then Nettie Wild, the documentary film-maker, heard about the recording session, and she said, "I bet I could get the crew to film it, if you can cover the film stock and the sushi."



1982: Dennis Nichol, Bossin, Calvin Cairns, and Marie-Lynn Hammond in an uncharacteristically Dickensian situation.

Photograph by Gwen Kallio

After that, a couple of factors conspired to help us out. The first was technology itself: Lots of people, including the protesters at Clayoquot, have video-recorders. The handi-cam has democratized film-making. Groups like the Sierra Club can easily collect aerial footage of the clear-cuts. And so on. So we suddenly had access to documentary footage that would have cost thousands of dollars just a few years ago.

The second factor was the sheer quality of the work of the artists involved. Though outside of the mainstream spotlight, most of us had been honing our craft for 20 years. Given the chance to use it, particularly in aid of something we cared about, look out! Just listen to Roy Forbes's lines, or Rick Scott's, or Ann Mortifee's. We had hot tracks, and good track records. On the basis of those we got a small grant from Videofact, MuchMusic's foundation for encouraging the development of new music videos. (Ironically, when we finished, MuchMusic didn't put *Sulphur Passage* in rotation, as we say in the rock video biz, but, God bless 'em, they came through when we really needed them.)

So Nettie and her editor, Paul Lievesley, worked night after night, using the skills *they* have honed over 20 years, and the result was the video that has now won awards in Mexico, South Africa and the States, and been shown in Belgium, Japan, Brazil and so on.

More important than the awards, is how many people have seen it. We stumbled into this whole quasi-underground network that was perfect for *Sulphur Passage*. Environmental film festivals, for instance. Who goes to these things? Who wants to watch hour after hour of toxic tragedy? And yet people do.

Then there was TV. I've lost track of the number of TV networks and cable stations and shows that have aired *Sulphur*

Passage, but there are dozens of them. Once again, we have been bouyed along on a back eddy of the forces of technological innovation. TV has changed. It is still, in the main, the pervasive propaganda tool it has always been, but around its

edges, it is now a democratic tool as well. There are lots of community outlets, from Vision TV and The Women's Network to the local Rogers Cable station, and thanks to the channel changer, a program is just about as likely to get seen on one of those stations as on CTV. While it was frustrating that MuchMusic couldn't recognize the quality of what they had—I think they were blinded to it by watching too many hi-tech, lo-heart videos—it didn't matter, there were lots of other outlets.

Including a whole new network completely out of the hands of the stations: people passing around videos they care about. Those are the most important audiences: the people gathered at environmental meetings, in schools, in living rooms. Without any fanfare or publicity, we've sold some 500 copies of the video, and people don't buy them to leave them on the shelf. I know there are people who dismiss this as "preaching to the converted," but to me, those are the most important people to encourage, because they are the ones who carry the ball, who are going to work long into the night, who are going to apply all the skills that they have developed over years, just as we did recording the song and making the video.

So "*Sulphur Passage*," inspired by the actions of a few local citizens fighting a seemingly quixotic battle against a giant corporation, is now inspiring people in similar struggles in countries thousands of miles away.

Meanwhile back at Clayoquot, the story has its own happy ending. On July 7, 1995, the BC government announced, effectively, the end of clear-cutting at Clayoquot Sound. We won! Of course we have to remain vigilant, but we won! It took 15 years. I happened to be around that particular fight from the beginning. I remember the first meeting: seven of us, sitting around a picnic table in Tofino in maybe 1980, won-