

## The Centrefold

A few issues back, we gave a brief, and not particularly enthusiastic, notice to **The Lead Belly Letter**, the quarterly publication of the Lead Belly Society. Carrying on in the face of our carping, Letter editor Sean Killeen and crew have now gone into their fifth volume. The most recent issue I've seen, 5.3 (Summer 1995), includes a rather interesting interview with Lonnie Donegan, the English skiffle king, conducted and transcribed by Gary Atkinson.

Donegan seems to be a rather irascible, self-centred fellow, and if the interview is transcribed accurately, Atkinson is unnecessarily self-effacing, referring to his questions as "amateurish." When asked the reasonable question, did any of the Celtic influences in Lead Belly's music remind him of Scottish sounds from his boyhood, Donegan snarks, "... what you're doing here is you're giving me a little lecture on folk music and I don't need this. You put the questions and I'll give you the answers. I know all about folk music." One too often finds such sparks edited out of the published version of

interviews, regardless of who comes out worse, interviewer or subject. As it happens, Donegan seems to me to come out the worst in this encounter, but Atkinson likely did not know it at the time, and his courage in this presentation is commendable!

Donegan's reminiscences of musical Britain in the '40s and '50s are worth reading; Lonnie Johnson, for example, was brought to England as a blues singer, though at the time his repertoire consisted largely of popular ballads like "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," which disappointed his audience, whereas Josh White was brought as novelty singer for such items as "One Meat Ball," but largely sang blues on the concert stage when he arrived. Some of Donegan's insights and opinions, such as the role of the Weavers in popularizing Lead Belly's work and Woody Guthrie's position as a "folk" singer, are also provocative, if not always fully articulated.

The article might have benefitted from annotation; Donegan doubts, for instance, that anyone but himself ever recorded "Oh Boy, Can't You Line 'Em," but I remember that

Koerner, Ray, and Glover gave it a lovely reading in the '60s, and it seems to me that Taj Mahal recorded it a few years later. I suspect that other comments and opinions might have been complemented, supported, and/or challenged to good effect. Still, as it stands, the piece is worth reading.

Subscriptions to the *Lead Belly Letter* cost \$15.00 (US) each (you may at the same time order gift subscriptions for \$10.00), plus \$2.50 extra for Canadian subscribers. Their address is *Lead Belly Letter*, PO Box 6679, Ithaca, NY, 14851-6679 USA.

From Cape Breton comes a little newsletter which should interest some of our readers. *Togaibh Fonn*, subtitled *For Gaelic Songs & Singers*, began publishing in November. The first issue is only four pages, but one hopes that editors Rosemary and Brian McCormack, who operate B & R Heritage Enterprises in Cape Breton, will have enough response to the effort that it will grow. The first issue contains a portrait of singer Joe Lawrence MacDonald, number one of a series entitled *Keepers of the Songs*, words to the song, "Moladh Na Gàidhlig," and a variety of news of Gaelic musical events and recordings on Cape Breton. *Togaibh Fonn* promises to be a quarterly; subscriptions cost \$7.00, B & R Heritage Enterprises, PO Box 3, Iona, NS B0A 1L0.

In issue 29.1, we cited *Westcoast Blues Review* in this column. A more recent issue of this publication, 14 (December/January 1996), has crossed my desk recently, and I am impressed enough by the improved production values that it's worth mentioning again. That there is a blues revival in progress is abundantly clear in the number of advertisements in the magazine, which is certainly what makes the slick cover, well-reproduced photographs, and large size possible. (My bank account is grateful that I've pretty much moved out of blues myself and, in any case, haven't purchased a CD player—there's a lot to buy now.) Given such resources, it's a little difficult to accept the defensive, blues-as-underdog, tone one encounters from time to time in the publication, but

it's certainly pleasing to see that editor Andy "Blues Boy" Grigg is still presenting a scrappy little journal, coming down hard against both bootleg CDs and the electronic interpolation of Colin James into a performance by Muddy Waters, originally recorded 30 years ago, but rebroadcast recently by CBC.

Subscriptions to the *Review* are \$30.00, Canada and USA, \$45.00 overseas (the magazine comes out six times a year); write to *Westcoast Blues Review*, 302 —655 Herald Street, Victoria, BC., V8W 3L6.



Finally, unless we be accused of getting too easy to please in our old age (we in this case being genial GWL, compiler of the column this time around), a peculiar comment in an unsigned feature on Katy Moffat in the publication of the Regina Guild of Folk Arts (*The Guild Gazette* 14.3, February-March 1966) joins a long list of similar statements which occasionally make me wonder exactly what music means to some folks. The statement in question: "Katy studied artists like Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell. She was also attracted to some of the darker voices of the Folk Revival such as Phil Ochs." Obviously "voice" isn't meant literally here; surely no one would call that youthful tenor "dark." Metaphorically, it's just as baffling; Ochs was one of the most sanguine of his circle: "I won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone, so I guess I'd better do it while I'm here!" The darkest Ochs songs that I remember, "Lincoln Park in the Dark" and "Crucifixion," are responses to very real, very specific, very dark events in his world. Even so, that he even *cared* about the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers (the subject of "Crucifixion") bespoke a serious measure of hopefulness which many of his generation no longer maintained by that point, and which many would have called "naive." By contrast, even in many of her gentler songs, Joni Mitchell's vision can easily be read as fairly pessimistic. Listen to "The Circle Game" again. Two possibilities disturb me about the comment: first, that whoever made it may not have really listened very closely; second, that the message may be that *politics* is necessary a "dark" (difficult to understand? unpleasant? boring?) subject.