A Chat with

Was there ever a time when I didn't know the name Wade Hemsworth? Likely I first heard it in conjunction with "The Black Fly Song," probably sung by Alan Mills on his radio program or Edith Fowke's. Certainly when Merrick Jarrett used to sing the song in the Toronto coffeehouses of the '60s, I didn't need to be told the author's name. Later on, I heard other fine songs, such as "The Wild Goose" (sung by a Toronto teacher with whom I did a practicum), "The 'I'm Alone'" from Rika Ruebsaat and Jon Bartlett, or Lynn Laft's rendition of "The Log Driver's Waltz," and it was no surprise to find out that they were written by Wade Hemsworth. But, aside from the treasured 10-inch Folkways album (Folk Songs of the Canadian North Woods, FW 6821) from which I learned "The Shining Birch Tree," I didn't know Wade Hemsworth as anything but an omnipresent songwriter who managed to captivate my imagination with songs that captured what I saw as the essence of Canada. Of his continued presence as a participant in the Montreal folk scene I was unaware—me he was a name from the past.

Now that shadowy presence has acquired a voice and a personality for me. At the age of 79, Wade Hemsworth has emerged as a respected figure on the national music scene, through various appearances on television and at festivals, through Hugh Verrier's book The Songs of Wade Hemsworth (reviewed in the Bulletin, 25:3 (1991), p. 9), and most recently through the release of a CD with the same title (reviewed in this issue).

It was nothing less than a thrill to take part in this interview with someone who has been part of my life at second remove for so long—and it was even more exciting when Wade Hemsworth turned out to be a warm, genial, personable and accommodating man, with infinite patience for the questions we whipped snappers directed at him. We've changed little of the wording of the interview, to retain the flavour of Wade's speech as much as possible. Read carefully and, just as we did over the phone, you'll see the twinkle in his eye...

—JL

John Leeder—When were you in Newfoundland during the war, was that the first time you heard Canadian traditional songs sung by traditional singers?

Yes, although don't forget that Newfoundlanders were not Canadians at that time.

J—Some of your songs sound traditional, and some don't. Were you using traditional models consciously?

Yes, of course I did. You have to have models. Traditional music doesn't follow a standard major or minor scale, but uses varying scales. And I'm like that. But most of it is simple stuff.

J—The folksongs on the Folkways recording, where did those come from? Did you learn them from specific singers or from books?

I learned them from books. At that time there was a woman in Nova Scotia, Helen Creighton, who picked up a lot of things, some of which were Newfoundland, some of which were New Brunswick/Maine, because you couldn't tell the difference in those days. Yes, and I picked them up. And of course, I've been in the woods, I've talked to lumberjacks and such.

J—Were you writing songs during that period, or did you write songs later about that time? I'm thinking particularly of "The Blackfly Song," of course.

"The Blackfly Song" I wrote after I came back from the woods in Labrador. I was in Labrador, not North Ontario. Of course, there was no difference.

George W. Lyon—So there's an element of poetic licence there, shifting provinces.

Oh, well. Poetic licence, I suppose. But I was in North Ontario, too. What's the difference?

J—Was Black Toby in Ontario or Labrador?

Ontario. Actually, I wasn't with Black Toby, but there was another expedition.... And I was writing a song; I wasn't writing literature.

J—How come so long between recordings?

I'll never know. I am not a person who's gone out to make a big name of himself. I have made a name, obviously, but—it wasn't my business. I was working in the city for many years.

J—Had you any thoughts of being a career musician?

No! I did lots of professional work when I lived in Montreal, and Toronto. But, no, I didn't want to make a living that way.

G—I've always been impressed by your musical sophistication.

"My Mother Is The Ocean Sea" in 5/4, for example. What prompted you to write in 5/4?

I'll never know, except that I liked it. I liked to experiment around with various things, and the song, well, it grew, and....

That song was in a movie about lobster fishing and such, down in Nova Scotia. And I thought I'd do it that way, that's all. That's the best I can say.

G—How did you become aware of that time signature?

It's easy to become aware of it. I think the best example would be that fellow in the States. He wrote in 7/8.... Good jazz musician.

G—Dave Brubeck?

That's the guy.

But of course, one plays around. If you look at some old English songs, you see things in 5/4. Or 7/4. They vary.

J—Often people made up the tunes and then found out later what the time signature was.

Probably. They sang them the way they wanted to, and then it turned out to be 5/4 without their even being aware of it.

G—You began with tenor banjo lessons?

Yes.

G—How long did you keep the lessons up?

I guess about three years. When I was a teenager. I
Wade Hemsworth

When we wrote to Wade Hemsworth last year, indicating that we’d like to have something from or about him in the Bulletin, we did not know that a new recording was in the works, a significant event in Canadian cultural affairs, especially because it’s only the second in a career that’s lasted a half century.

Hemsworth is not an obscure songwriter, but he is a neglected one. One is shocked at the few references to him in the periodical press. The Canadian Periodical Index shows only three prior to 1993, and there is no entry on him in the Canadian Encyclopedia (at least not in the print version). Inevitably, the mavens (and wannabes) of popular culture express surprise that one can be important with no charted hits. But, then, there’s something happening here, and most of us don’t really know what it is, do we, Mr. Jones? I wouldn’t be surprised to learn of individuals, perhaps even communities, whose knowledge of Canadian song begins and ends with “The Blackfly Song” or “The Logdriver’s Waltz.”

Hemsworth may not have ever been properly interviewed; certainly there has been nothing of any significance published. The chat John and I had with him this January was constrained by our phone budget, which is nonexistent. So this, like the others, raises more questions than it answers. Is there anyone in Quebec prepared to do the job properly? We’d love to read it. We love even better to publish it! -OWL

G—You were accepted into the community as a player?
I was hardly in the community, but—of course, of course, I played with them. Sure. I could do it as well as they could! And one keeps on learning. It never stops.

G—Was there any awkwardness in those days between European and African Canadians in Montreal?
No. These boys and girls were students, and they were wonderful dancers—and they weren’t all black. I know a man in Calgary right now, who, you look at him, he’s absolutely white. He was a calypsonian, a Trinidadian. He has black in him—but it doesn’t matter. There were white people there, too, and they were just as good as anybody else. And they were all mixed up, all mixed up. Very free.

G—You wrote “The Story of the I’m Alone” as a calypso.
Yes. I first heard the story from Pierre Berton on radio. What a tale! And I read the biography of Captain John Randall. And of course, I made it with the West Indian beat because of the locale.

G—So you’re a multicultural Canadian from a long ways back.
Oh, heavens, yes. My background is roughly North American and all that implies. Old Yankees from the States after the revolution, and Irish and Scotch and whathaveyou. My wife is a Jewish girl, and I love her. [Feminine laugh in background]

J—Can you name people who have influenced your songwriting?
Well, certainly, as has been noted, I picked it up from Burl Ives. And, I mean, the influence in that kind of music....

And I could name a West Indian for you. He’s a Calgarian, Loic Sceheult; that is a French, Breton, name. Very Celtic, as the name implies. He lives in Calgary—Trinidad was a big deal in the oil business; now Calgary is. Many West
Indians went to Calgary for just that reason. I don’t know that he does calypso now; he’s a businessman. I know as much about music as he does now; I just learned from him. He was one of the people in Montreal.

G—The pick you use—wire twisted over your index finger to allow both up- and downpicking—so reminiscent of the sitar pick. Did you get the idea from Indians?

I got the idea from an Indian guy, yes. He showed me how to make them. He just made them of copper and wound them around in a few minutes, but I couldn’t stand that because the things wore out in no time. So I got some piano wire of a certain gauge, I’ve forgotten what, and I made them myself.

G—How did you happen to meet a sitar player?

Well, I lived in a big city! I lived in Montreal, and I was interested in the music that was going on. As a matter of fact, a professor of mine, when I was studying construction and all the implications and complications of steel construction and concrete and that, he was an Indian fellow, and he knew about these things, and I made connections.

And went to concerts given by Indian people.

Mind you, I used to play with just my fingernails. I gave up being a fancy classic guitarist. With a little bit of the old classic technique. I don’t play a steel string guitar, I play a nylon string guitar.

I—Do you hear much folk music nowadays?

Oh, yeah. I know lots of people around here who play and sing. Right here in Morin Heights. Frankly, I don’t know what it means any more, because pop music and folk music are merging, as you know, and the very concept is changing.

G—Are you performing in Québec?

Performing from time to time. I’m not regularly performing. For god’s sake, I’m 79 years old, I can’t sing the way I used to!

G—Any chance you’ll ever tour out of the province?

Who knows? Qui sait? I suppose one could say there is a chance, a very slim one.

I’m still writing songs. But I just wait for them. I’m a very slow guy, and when all this publicity about the CD is over, I plan to bear down some more!