The *song* is the important thing, *not* the *accompaniment*. The *accompaniment* *is* to the *song* *what* a *frame* *is* to a *painting*: *very nice to have, but not essential*. If you want to show off your stuff on the guitar, *play* an *instrumental*. Don’t let a bunch of fancy picking distract the listener from the words and *melodic line* of the *song*. It *took* Alan Mills a long time to get this seemingly simple idea through my head. After all, hadn’t he hired me as his accompanist because I was a good guitar picker? At that time, I was so taken with the guitar that, I realized only later, I was singing folk songs only as an excuse to play the guitar. Al changed all that.

I first met Alan Mills in 1962. He was in Toronto on his way to do a University concert in Windsor. Merrick Jarrett, who was accompanying in that concert, invited me up to Al’s hotel room to meet him and to sit in on one of their rehearsals. I thought this very kind of Merrick as I had long known Al’s work and had admired him as a CBC radio personality. What I didn’t know was that Al was looking for a guitarist who was free to travel, and that this was a plot to get Al to hear me play. Apparently he liked what he heard, because shortly afterwards he engaged me as his accompanist for concert tours away from his home, Montreal.

When the personality of the singer *overpowers* the song you are doing folk music *a disservice*. Use your musical and *dramatic skills* as a *bridge* between past and present, between the original singer of the song, and today’s audience. If you want to make like Tom Jones, *get into Pop Music*.

I travelled with Alan Mills from the Spring of 1963 to the Summer of 1967. In every Province, from St. John’s to Vancouver, we did shows in community halls, universities, schools, service clubs, folk festivals, radio and TV studios—and always Canadian folk songs, both English and French. Al was in demand throughout the US as well: in schools and universities he presented Canada in song to people who knew next to nothing about our country, but were eager to learn. A month-long tour of the eastern arctic in July of 1967, Centennial Year, was our last adventure together. By airplane, canoe and dog-sled we visited Eskimo settlements along the western shore of Hudson’s Bay and on some of the islands of the arctic archipelago. We were both fascinated with the country and the wildly different attitudes and lifestyles of the people, both native and immigrant, whom we met there. In every community we visited, the entire town would turn out to meet our plane and to make us feel comfortable and welcome. The response to our music was always enthusiastic. We returned to Montreal bearded and booted, and full of an exuberance that only such a once-in-a-life adventure could produce.

*Use your intelligence and musical taste to construct an accompaniment that gives a song a "costume" that is appropriate to its time and place. Sure, "Greensleeves" and "The Tennessee Waltz" are both 4-time dances, but you’ve got to think Renaissance lute for the one and Boom-chink-chink flat pick for the other.*

Alan Mills was born Albert Miller, of a Jewish family, in Lachine, Quebec, and grew up during the Depression in Montreal. He was a police reporter for the Gazette as a young man, but spent much of his time singing bass for many groups around Montreal: synagogues, churches, operatic productions. His first tour was with a group of English folk and art-folk singers, John Goss and His London Singers. Singing folk songs of the British Isles with Goss awoke Alan’s interest in folk music in general, and later in Canadian folklore in particular. One morning on tour, while vocalizing with his powerful, rumbling bass voice, Al cried out, panic-stricken, "My God, I’ve lost my low C!" Bert Whitehead, a member of the group and a Yorkshireman, replied, "Pity the poor bugger what found it!"

Sing it the way you’d speak it. *Don’t let the rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment impose on the words stresses and false phrasing that distort the language of the song*. For example, in the song "The Water is Wide," if you use a regular *accompaniment*, as most people do, the guitar forces you to sing: "The water is wide, I can’t cross o’er and neither ha-a-ve I wings to fly...." with the word "have" stretched out many beats longer than it needs to be. And that word is not even an important one in that line. Better to emphasize "wide" and "wings." The only way to do this is to throw out the regular rhythm of the accompaniment altogether and use the guitar freely, to emphasize the natural flow of the words, and to fill in...
the gaps. It’s much harder to sing and play that way, but worth the effort to learn.

When I first heard that Alan Mills was Jewish, before I met him, I presumed that he, like many others, had put that aspect of his background well in his past, and had forgotten it. Not so with Al; he spoke Yiddish, performed Yiddish and Hebrew songs, and made a delightful recording of Jewish folk songs with Raasche, a singer for Los Angeles. Al delighted in Jewish culture; songs, tales, humour both bitter and sweet, good food, and tea in a glass.

Al was the first performer in Canada to popularize our folk songs in both English and French, and is the only Anglophone I know of who has been accepted by Francophones singing their own songs. This was because of the obvious love and respect he had for French-Canadian musical culture. He had a weekly programme which was heard all over Canada for 13 years over the CBC Radio Network. He made dozens of records of folk songs for both adults and children in English and French, and published a number of books on the subject. His song "I Know an Old Lady (Who Swallowed a Fly)" is known by everyone in North America and probably the rest of the English-speaking world.

A song that has lasted for years and has been passed down from parent to child for generations must have something about it that speaks to us in a significant way right now. Poor songs just died along the wayside, and we’ll never know about them. The oral process of transmission is a very subtle and sensitive editing technique although the people who take part in it do so for the most part totally unaware of their role in the process.

One of Alan Mills' frequent companions in concert was fiddler Jean Carignan. Although Al knew that Johnnie would steal the show with his fiddle, he felt strongly that the public deserved to hear this little man play the traditional tunes of French Canada, Ireland and Scotland, which he plays like no other person alive. Alan was angered that Jean, the greatest traditional fiddler in the world, had to drive a taxi in Montreal in order to live.

Al was totally dedicated to folk music, and had little patience with people who used it only as a way to break into Show Biz. I remember, during the "Folk Boom" in the mid-60s, expressing my admiration for a folk group who were becoming popular; Al said: "I guess they’re pretty good performers, but they don’t care much about folk songs. When this wave is over, they’ll get into whatever becomes popular next, probably country and western." I didn’t believe him at the time, but he proved right.

Al was a "square"; he knew it and never tried to change it. He came into folk music by a different route from many of us in the field today. That is, as a trained singer with a background as a serious concert artist. Most of us come via the musically semi-literate strummer’s route, and build from there, for better or worse.

Alan Mills loved a good joke, could curse with the best, enjoyed a drink, smoked only cigarettes. He took life and work seriously, and was devoted to his wife, Bernie, one of the warmest people I know.

I am indebted to Alan Mills both professionally and personally. I learned a lot about music and song from him, as well as about life and people. My feelings towards him are a mixture of apprentice to master, friend to friend, and in some subtle way, son to father. He is a permanent member of my internal Board of Advisors.

Al had an expression he used when confronted with stupidity, bungling or dubious motives: I won’t put up with this; life is too short. He never had any children ("Not for lack of trying," he’d say), but he left a large legacy of printed and recorded material as well as many people whom he inspired and guided. I am honoured to have had a small part in that life, too short, but well used.

[Eighteen years later, Bram comments:]

The quotes which I ascribe to Alan Mills in the article are intended as summaries of some of the important lessons which he taught me and are not to be thought of as literal, word-for-word transcriptions of actual speeches. In that connection, I suspect that the reference to Tom Jones came out of my head and not Al’s. Presuming that is the case, I regret the dismissive tone; although Mr. Jones's style is not my style, it has taken talent, intelligence and perseverance for him to achieve the success that he has enjoyed.

I am indebted to Alan Mills for a huge number of songs in my repertoire, many of which have found their way onto Sharon, Lois and Bram recordings. Following is a record by record list of songs that have come to me out of Al’s repertoire: