Editorials

Our apologies for this issue’s lateness. One of us [GWL] moved at the end of the summer, and one of us [GWL] started a new job, sort of. Rather than put all the work on one of us, don’t just mean the extra month we’ve taken! However, we’ve been working on it for a long time, and we don’t just mean the extra month we’ve taken!

HELP! In March of this year, we received an interesting letter from Debbie Swartz, in which she referred to an essay on African Canadian music from Nova Scotia, written by her late uncle, Marvin Burke. Burke was a folksinger in Montreal during the 60s, and later worked in Halifax as a social worker, ultimately with the Nova Scotia Commission on Drug Addiction and Alcoholism. Unfortunately, Ms. Swartz did not include a return address on her letter, and in another class act, we managed to lose the envelope. We have been trying to locate her, with no success. Do any readers know of either Ms. Swartz or her uncle?

Just to set the record straight—in the last issue, we complained that the National Archives of Canada had not responded to our request for photographs of Alan Mills. In fact a response came just as the issue went to the printers, regretting that they had no photographs of Mills. We thank them for their attention to our request, but we are still disappointed that earlier decades of Canadians did not bother to document their own culture. Need we say more?

Vera Johnson called our attention to a mistake in the previous issue, not alas, a typo: being unaware of the well-established British actress Patricia Roe, we [GWL] typed her name in as Roe. Roc starred in the vehicle which served as Mill’s “fling” at film, Son Copain. Since one of your editors [Glew!] likes to consider himself at least a part-time film buff (and full-time know-it-all), this is a trifle embarrassing.

We reprint the following from the Vancouver Folk Song Society’s 3/4 Times. Whimsical as the tone of the item may be, there is food for thought here, particularly taken in conjunction with considerations of neo-liberalism raised by Murray Luft’s updating on the Latin American New Song movement.

[The latest edition of The Digital Tradition] arrived last week at the Post Office, and got no further towards me until I’d paid $8.50 GST and Canada Post “handling charges.” Somewhat miffed, I called, first the GST people, and then the Customs people, because someone had decided that the “value” of the package was $50.

Now, in my opinion the 5300 songs it contains are worth a lot more than that, but I was curious and also furious—curious as to how someone had arrived at that (suspiciously) round number, furious that these people had considered that it had any commercial value at all (since, you remember, that it’s not a commercial product, but only for free distribution).

I had nothing but help from the people I spoke to, but the law is as that of the Medes & Persians, promulgated upon the planet Thor V and unalterable, undiscussable, unappealable. There are no provisions for “free” stuff. Every product has “value” which can be put into dollars. I demurred. “What about a letter from my old mum?” (ah—no value, except if it’s written on parchment); “What, then, about a floppy from my old mum?” (the value of the floppy itself—what, 10¢?).

What, after all, is value? It’s somehow connected with a) ownership which is itself often connected with b) creation. Folk music proper has lots of b) and no a)—the process by which folk music is transmitted makes it impossible to assess who did what to the song as it passes through the mouths and ears of the community. And yet this age has been nothing short of obsessed with the question of ownership, couched, when it comes to what is called, in surely one of the best oxymorons of the era, “intellectual property,” in the language of the law of copyright (a word which first appears only in 1767).

I suppose with commercial products we can all have a good laugh—who has not seen the likes of the following, picked at random from a recipe for black bean sauce: P.C.™ G-R-E-E-N G-O-U-R-M-E-T™ NATURAL CHOICE™ CHICKEN? But when it comes to what is unownable, folk music in its proper sense, it’s time to draw the line. Gershon Legman wrote some great pieces back in the Sixties on the subject: “Who Owns Folklore?” and “Folksongs, Fakelore and Cash,” both of which we reprinted in the old Come All Ye, come to mind; but perhaps it’s time for a bit of an update.

—Jon Bartlett™

The Digital Tradition is an online songbook, available through the Internet. It is also available in disk form, free of charge (you merely send them the necessary disks). It contains words and music to hundreds of songs. [GWL]

Late-breaking news flash! Apparently copyright got the better of The Digital Tradition and it is off the line. Sic transit gloria technomundi....
It didn't start out to be a CSTM fundraiser. Rather, it was going to be a family-and-friends gathering in the Rocky Mountain foothills. In Alberta, it is possible to reserve a "group campsite" in the provincial government forest reserve, and have exclusive use of it for your group for an evening, or a weekend. Marge and I planned to book a campsite, stay there for the weekend and invite lots of family and friends to come out from Calgary, share the weekend and split the cost. We particularly hoped to get the Pine Grove campsite in the Jumpingpound Creek area of Kananaskis Country, as my tune "Pine Grove Waltz" was inspired by a campout there. In earlier years, various folk music groups in the Calgary area, including the Calgary Singers' Circle, the Rocky Mountain Folk Club and Celtic Folk, had held musical camping weekends. The tradition had died out, perhaps when costs rose. Anyway, Marge and I decided to host a weekend ourselves rather than under organizational auspices.

But it turned out that to rent a group campsite you had to be a group. The easiest group to hand seemed to be CSTM. We went ahead and applied for the site in CSTM's name, and happily our application was successful. Then it seemed only proper to invite all the Calgary-area CSTM members as well as our own friends, many of whom are involved in Calgary's folk music scene. The cost for the weekend looked steep for a private couple in advance, but we decided to pass the hat, hope for the best and, in the unlikely event that there was a surplus, donate it to CSTM.

Friday began auspiciously. Marge underwent gum surgery and had to stay home, lowering my spirits to begin with. Also, the weather was cool and rainy, deterring some people from heading out on a camping weekend. Nevertheless, the hard core campers came, the campsite had a snug shelter, and we had a pleasant music session around the fireplace. The showers began to taper off Saturday, the numbers swelled as folks came out from Calgary for the day or for overnight, and plenty of impromptu sessions sprang up among those who weren't taking advantage of the area's hiking/biking trails, canoeing and other outdoor activities. By late Saturday afternoon the sky had cleared, and Saturday night we were able to have a wonderful plenary song session around an outdoor campfire, with 30-some musicians and lots of singers and storytellers, as the full moon rose through the lodgepole pines. One person commented, "I haven't sung around a campfire in years!" The spirit carried over to Sunday—it was non-stop music during the day, as sessions sprang up throughout the campsite.

Financially, to our satisfaction, the whip-round covered the cost of the weekend, with enough of a surplus to make a not too modest donation to CSTM. My point in relating this is not just to document a grassroots musical event, but to point out that this magazine is published on a very tight budget, the organization under whose auspices it is produced is perpetually short of funds. Nevertheless, we thank all those who comprised that movement have reacted to the political and economic changes of the last decade by taking MacColl's argument to heart. Not to say that many of them were ever the archetypal "protest singers," a straw target which unsympathetic outsiders (whether right wing or merely apolitical) have always found easy to lump over: Victor Jara, for instance, was always able to produce a love song (and to sing it in a highly erotic velvet tone), and the Salvadoran group Cutamay Camones could knock out a cumbia that would get everyone on the dance floor, regardless of how many left feet were in the audience. When topical singers focussed on specific targets for musical resistance, the unsympathetic would claim that three-chord protest songs were unesthetic; when the musicians back up and scan a larger horizon, realizing, in part, that the personal is the political, they are said to be no longer political, to have "mellowed."

Many of the Latin Americans who came to Canada in the 80s have returned now, particularly to Argentina and Chile, where a degree of reconciliation may have been achieved. It's easy to lose touch with them and to forget to inquire where their talents and concerns have led them; we welcome Luft's account of the changes in the movement during recent years. But we want also to remain aware of how powerful their presence was in this country. They came for asylum and safety, but they brought a powerful cultural consciousness that enriched Canada and stimulated artists, journalists, academics, and social activists. In 1988, Gary Geddes's Cormorant Books issued a cassette of Canadian poems read by the poets themselves and set into music in Spanish by the Chilean jazz rock group Amauta—the title of the cassette was A Continental Hug (it's no longer available, alas). The poems were translated by Lake Sagaris, a Canadian poet who lives in Chile. A hug between Canada and Chile encompasses all of the Americas, and it has been salutary to our gentle nationalism to realize that we are one of many American nations, not merely a cold shadow of a particularly prominent one.
Not all of them returned. Some became immigrants and are still happily with us. But not all endings are happy. I remember one young Chilean in Calgary, who was the multi-instrumental soloist with a group named Liberación. I never met him, but we played on the same bill at a pena, and he knocked me out. I was pleased to hear his "Yeah!" at a couple of my licks. I occasionally thought it might be fun to play together, and I'm sorry we never did. He was a tall beanpole with a large afro, and he may not have gotten out of his teens. I was told that he and some friends got to playing around the weir on the Bow River, the one the signs warn people away from, and he drowned. My Canada includes that young man, though he might have preferred to go home someday.

He's Present, Presente. If you've ever attended an ecumenical, liberation theology, mass, you've heard that term, which is rather more powerful than "gone but not forgotten." I hope I never forget how electrifying it was to hear that for the first time. It was at a mass for Oscar Romero, one of the murdered priests of El Salvador, and I didn't know the procedure, so when someone came to the altar and called out, "Oscar Romero," to be answered, "Presente!" from behind me, I fairly jumped. The speaker came to the altar with Romero's name on a card, to be affixed to the rail. She was followed by others, with 'other names, all of them Present: gone, but living, as Eduardo Galeano's magnificent documentary/fiction Memory of Fire reveals the past of our continent to be yet alive, for better and for worse.

We must remember that Chile was not one of the so-called "banana republics," reputedly accustomed to violent upheaval. Like Nazism, the Pinochet obscenity was all the more shocking because it occurred in a nation which was cultured and genteel. We surely all hope that Canadian decency (and Canadian stolidity, should decency fail) will guarantee that we never suffer such events. However, our recent behind-the-curtains glimpses into at least one corner of our own military should remind us that no people are immune to violence and cruelty. Let us do more than hope that such parallels between Canada and Chile remain potential. Let us rededicate ourselves to maintaining Canada as energetic and compassionate. [GWL]

1The fact is, politics are just as valid a subject for songs as any other kind of human activity; this does not mean that a song dealing with a political subject is automatically a good song; conversely, it is not automatically a bad song. "Symposium: Topical Songs and Folksinging, 1965." Sing Out! 15.4 (September 1965): 12.

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On the cover: GWL gave himself this Peruvian ceramic sculpture to celebrate a personal rite of passage a few years back. He purchased it at Global Village Gifts, a Calgary store operating within the network of SELFHELP Crafts of the World, a nonprofit program of the Mennonite Central Committee, which describes its mandate as providing "...vital fair income to Third World people in over 25 developing countries by selling their handicrafts and telling their stories at volunteer-run sales and stores." Products available at SELFHELP stores run from the decorative to the useful and comestible.

A recent display of Peruvian ceramics at Global Village Gifts included this caption: "Poverty and inflation are the everyday realities for most of Lima's 6 million residents. Added to those hardships in the countryside are violent terrorist activity and government military counterattacks. Crafts won't solve the root causes of Peru's problems, but a fair-paying craft income at least means the artisans can put rice and beans on the table and send their children to school."