We've all been aware of the Raging Grannies for some time, I hope. Most of our cities now have a chapter: a recent issue of their newsletter, the Grannie Grapevine, listed 36, from Vermont to BC. (Calgary's is called Church Ladies for Choice, presumably because few of them are of Granny age yet.) Last Fall, I was listening to CBC's Morningside when Peter Gzowski interviewed Alison Acker, along with another widow who was not wasting her years. Ms. Acker discussed her work with the Grannies (among her many other activities) and sang a Granny song, which I was delighted to hear, since the local outcry against French nuclear testing has been nonexistent (and, besides, the Cole Porter tune is so great that any excuse to sing it is welcome):

I get no kick from champagne.
Things that go pop!
Make me wish France would stop
Blowing holes in the bottom of the sea:
I get my wine from BC.

I wrote Ms. Acker, both for permission to use the song and to request that she write an account of the Grannies for the Bulletin. She responded with a stack of songs, some of which we've included here (others are available in The Raging Grannies Songbook), and the promise to write the article we publish here. She noted, "...we just hate anything smelling of uplift and a high moral stance. And don't apologize for not being able to pay. We manage just fine, though we do have occasional impulses to go rob a bank instead of merely picketing it."

Alison Acker has travelled in and studied Latin America, and you will find her byline in a number of venues, ranging from literary anthologies to The Canadian Forum. It's an honor to have it on the pages of the Bulletin.

For more Granny songs, we highly recommend the Songbook, published by New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In addition to 102 songs, this nicely designed volume includes photographs and essays by a number of Grannies. New songs, along with (sometimes hilarious) news of Granny activities, are regularly presented in the xeroxed newsletter, Grannie Grapevine, which seems to be published by the different chapters at different times. We suggest you write to the Edmonton Grannies (8902 -120 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1X5) or Victoria Grannies (#5, 851 Wollaston Street, Victoria, BC V9A 5A9). [GWL]

For the last nine years, gaggles of grannies in outrageous hats have been making headlines by singing uninvited and out of tune. They are the Raging Grannies, the terror of politicians and the delight of irreverent groupies from coast to coast in Canada and in the US.

Though they would hate to be termed "traditional," their origins indeed go back centuries to the tradition of the licensed Fool, whose job it was to poke fun at the court and even at his master, using satire as a corrective to the general adulation. Add to that the tradition of minstrel, and you have the Grannies, who like to be thought of not as mere entertainers but as Guerilla Singers. Yes, they do accept some invitations for gigs—especially if it involves food—but they prefer to go where they are not wanted, breaking through security lines and invading offices with the insouciance of dowager duchesses.

They turn up regularly at city council meetings, at demonstrations, on national radio and TV and now even on Japanese TV, where short videos of the Victoria Grannies protesting logging practices appear as "spots" in the middle of baseball games.

How did it all start? Nine years ago in Victoria, a dozen women who had been active in the peace movement got together in Bess Ready's living room. All had survived the menopause and the Cold War, were becoming grandmothers, but had no wish to turn into nice little old ladies. They were tired of campaigns run by men and tactics that reduced their activities to writing letters. They were frustrated by public apathy about peace and environmental issues that they felt strongly about. They wanted to speak out and be heard.

Though they were all workers for peace, they embodied what mystery writer Dorothy Sayers once said:

Time and trouble will tame an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force.

They were angry and convinced that it was right to rage at the wrongs of this world—hence their choice of name. But if they wanted to push, they certainly did not want to preach, hence their choice of the granny image, both to draw attention and to soften up the public.

And before they ever thought of singing, they headed for the Salvation Army thrift store to buy basic granny gear: pink running shoes, clothes in any colours that clashed, and enormous hats to be decked with fruit, flowers, butterflies, and feathers.
The attire was a front; it gave them courage. Since then, individual grannies have developed individual styles, from lady-of-the-manor to a biker granny in black leather, denying the myth that all older women look and act alike.

Now they had a new image for protests but nothing to do except stand there and shout, until Jane Mackey, local songwriter, joined and convinced them that anyone could sing, even the tone-deaf. So began serious practice sessions, with warm ups and vowel exercises and exhortations to sing like Noel Coward. Jane lasted barely a year, frustrated by their unprofessional attitude, but it was her songs that launched the Raging Grannies' career: the "Uranium Tango" and "Radioactive Country Gardens," the "PCB Rag," "Beneath the Nuclear Umbrella," "Take Me Out to the Clearcut," and a song for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, when it became known that CSIS had been investigating local protest groups. When Mackey bowed out of the Grannies, Alison Acker became a primary songwriter for the Victoria contingent.

Most of Jane's songs—and all of their later songs—used well known melodies, for the simple reason that the Grannies had a lot of trouble learning any tune, let alone a new one. It had been agreed from the start that nobody would be excluded from singing just because she could not sing. Some Grannies have actually tried voice lessons, without any noticeable sign of improvement.

Periodically, they invite an expert to give them lessons in voice production. They have even tried advice on choreography, but they continue to resist any attempt to form them into either a choir or a chorus line and still start the cancan on opposite feet.

"As pure entertainment, they are a bomb," said the local music critic. This was proven when they came in third out of three contestants at a Sierra Club contest.

Nevertheless, most media love them. The Victoria Grannies have been featured on PBS from Seattle and on CBC's Man Alive TV program, on Front Page Challenge, and Lifetime. They have sung for Peter Gzowski four times and have made headlines in local and national media, notices in US newspapers, and, now, spots on Japanese TV.

Media attention obviously comes not from the quality of their singing but from their inventiveness. The Grannies have presented their briefs (panty hose on a line) to the provincial parliament, have launched their Anti-Nuclear Granny Armada in the peace fountain on Capital Hill, have applied to enlist in the army during the Gulf War (promising not to fight), have been arrested, and served time in jail to protest clearcutting of Clayoquot Sound, choosing their very best hats for court appearances and using their jail time to teach satiric songs to fellow inmates.

Attention-getting actions may catch the press, but it is their songs that make their point. For instance, they have become adept at appearing before local meetings, singing their message and getting it written into the record, whether it be a water board hearing about logging or a politician's meet-the-people event. They shadow visiting politicians who seem totally confounded when faced by older women in hats who gate crash their carefully screened photo opportunities. And how can you prove that their songs are not as innocent as they seem?

For instance, organizers of Conservative rallies for Kim Campbell in 1994 couldn't find ways to keep out a troupe of blonde-wigged Kimettes in legal robes singing, I'm a Tory, Out for glory, And I'm not afraid to show a little skin.

Even worse news for politicians has been the eruption of Raging Grannies right across the country. First came the Salt Spring Island Grannies, then Gabriola Island, two groups in Vancouver, another on the BC Sunshine Coast, and then Grannies cropped up through the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes, and even in the US. Since the Grannies refuse any attempt to create an organization—even their annual get-together is an Un-convention—they send off the Granny Songbook to anyone planning to form a new group and tell them to go ahead, trusting that they will preserve the irreverent Granny image.

Most of the other groups sing better than the original Grannies. Some, indeed, originate from local choirs, but they follow the same songwriting procedure of having one or two main songwriters and then allowing every member to have input so that the result is very much a product of the group.

In 1993, the Gabriola Island Grannies produced a song book with contributions from groups across Canada. The Grannies also share songs through a quarterly newsletter, the Granny Grapevine, but most groups prefer to write their own songs in their own style about local as well as national or
international issue (like the French nuclear tests in the Pacific).

Some are less satiric than others. The Victoria group is regarded as the most outrageous, possibly because of such subject matter as safer sex, the drop in the male sperm count, or the issue of post-menopausal women giving birth. But all groups are finding the hardening economic climate a great inspiration. In fact, the nastier the realities, the more active Grannies get. Groups are constantly recruiting younger members, believing that you don’t have to be an actual grandmother so long as you share a common concern for the future. There seems no chance that the Raging Grannies will fade away or become complacent with success while they find so much to sing—and rage—about.

A Gaggle of Granny Songs

Rockabye, Baby

Rockaby, baby, your mum’s feeling great.
With menopause over, it’s still not too late.
Birth after 60—it’s the in thing to do;
It makes me feel young, and who cares about you!

They told me a face lift would be just as good,
But it wouldn’t make news like gray motherhood.
Now science can boost my hormonal drive;
I plan to have twins in two thousand and five.

The Family Jewels (Oh, What a Beautiful Morning)

When so many of us got breast cancer,
No one seemed in a rush with an answer.
But wouldn’t you know that they’re raring to go
Now that research has shown why the sperm count is low.

Chorus

If your lover has trouble performing,
Remember we gave you a warning.
If you want to be fruitful and to multiply,
Fish him out of that lake and make sure he’s quite dry.

Chorus

Chorus:
Watch out for those blobs in the water,
Polluting in spite of the rules.
They’re not just a hazard to nature,
They’re threatening the family jewels.

We’re the Women (I’s the B’y)

We’re the women who did the work
So men could get the credit.
We said, "Leave it all to us,"
And wished we’d never said it.

"Leave the dishes in the sink.
You sit down and rest dear.
I can do the clearing.
I can do it best, dear."

Chorus

We’re prepared to do the work,
But we want more than credit.
Equal pay for equal work.
We’ll sing until we get it.

"No, I don’t mind staying late.
I’ll type another stencil.
Can I get your coffee now?
Let me sharpen your pencil."

Chorus

"I’m sorry that the baby cried.
I’m sorry she upset you.
I’m sorry she threw up on you.
I’m sorry that she wet you."

Chorus