"...that particular creative outlet..."

Grit Laskin
interviewed by John Leeder and George W. Lyon

We had the chance to chat with Grit Laskin this January when he played at Calgary’s Rocky Mountain Folk Club. Laskin may be the Renaissance Man of folk circles: he’s a singer, songwriter, preserver of old songs, picker, instrument builder, Piper, lately novelist, and — did we leave anything out? Needless to say, all of these activities interested us; Grit was most anxious to discuss Borealis, his new venture with a trio of veteran folkies. We wish them well; such a recording company is definitely needed here.

This season, Grit has become the first instrument maker to receive the Prix Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Crafts. Only one prize is awarded per year, and the award reflects his activities in the crafts community, as well as his splendid work as a luthier.

Special thanks to Stephanie White for assistance with transcription and editing. She’ll think twice before volunteering to help us out again, we betcha!

IT’S SO SUSTAINED, YOU’RE IN THAT WORLD FOR SO LONG…

GL—What does your yearly activity consist of?

I’m a guitar maker first and foremost, that’s what I do for my living, and so any musical ventures are weekend jaunts, or evenings — I’ve never in my life done something like a week tour.

But, guitar making. If I’m not out of town, I’m in the shop six days a week and whatever evenings are required. Although, now, with Borealis, the Borealis recording company that we’ve started, myself, Paul Mills, Bill Garrett and Ken Whitely, that’s taking about a day a week from each of us. But we expected that, plus odds and sods of times here and there. But it averages out to about that.

We knew we’d have to give it that time, and we’re doing it for no money at this point. We’re hoping maybe, five years from now, when some of the people who’ve invested will have a chance to get a return on their money, we might also think about finally taking a bit of money out, depending on the bank balance. But our first goal is to get it up and running, and solid, as a viable thing. So that’s taking some time.

Other activities, you know, the recording, and playing music. I’ll be going back in the studio again next fall, to do another record. And a novel came out in the spring, but my time is so occupied now that I’ve started on the next one — you need really large chunks of extra-curricular time — where there’s nothing else in the way — to write fiction. So, the way I wrote that one, after all the planning and thinking which is usually more time than writing the first draft, it was three months of nights to write the first draft. Almost nothing else going on. Maybe once every ten days I’d stop and spend a whole night doing paper work that was piling up and get it out of the way.

Basically eat dinner, go up and write till it was time to go to bed. And that’s the way I manage. I’d love to get back to it. That’s a wonderful hobby.

Once you’ve got yourself in your own fictional world — sometimes it can happen in half an hour, sometimes it can take two hours to stop the brain thinking of all the things you need to think of in the day and fall into it; and all you see in your mind’s eye is the world you’ve created and you want to just keep going. And now I understood why writers would go to the South of France and rent a cabin to write a novel or whatever because every distraction is annoying, everything becomes annoying. You learn to hate the phone, and everything else, you know, it’s crazy.

GL—Where does this come from? It came out of the blue to me that you were writing fiction; have you done it before?

Yeah, writing has been there for a while. In early ‘88, the winter of ‘88, I had a book on instrument makers come out; that was the first writing project I ever tackled, and that was more for showing the instruments and the makers than a challenge in writing. That was the first book I did. I started writing stories and the first one was one that created myths around the woods used in folklore — just a children’s story. I showed it to an agent and said what do I do with something like this? And she passed it on to an agent that dealt with juvenile stuff and to my surprise she loved this story, so I let her represent me. That encouragement got me writing more stories, and all of a sudden these short stories were taking 60 pages, and this and that. Then my wife, who teaches primary school, had me read a lot of young adult novels, saying these are younger kids stories, so I did write two young adult novels, neither of which got published. The agent liked them, too, but couldn’t sell them. So this one was actually number three.

So all this writing was going on, plus in between that, a publisher that did exist in Toronto, Lester & Orpen Dennis,
who had the plug pulled on them in a sale of companies that owned them, the year they had two Governor General's awards. They had commissioned me to write a book about all guitars and how they make sound—anyway, big expensive book, nine months of work, then the plug was pulled and went down with most of my advance, which was due when the manuscript was accepted, which was one week before the plug was pulled.

All this writing happened, and then this novel that got published was right after that, and that was about three years ago. More than three years ago. And then by the time I sent it around myself, because this isn’t a young adult novel, but the protagonist is ten years old, and got rid of these elements, those elements, that character, change this, she could sell it because it’s an interesting character study and all this stuff. But I didn’t want to do it, so I sent it around myself, and it finally got picked up. By the time it got in the chute and into production, three and a half years passed.

So, after that book—I haven’t done any writing since—I thought my song writing days were over. Because they were few and far between, and even when I’d get ideas, I would scribble on a piece of paper and put them in the back flap of my briefcase and forget them. I would consciously not pursue them, and I’d figure, well, I needed my creative outlet that way for that amount of years, maybe now it’s going other ways. By “country,” I mean the rootsy country, the other side in the country. He leases a lot of US country masters and releases them there. Even though I like a lot of what he does, it’s all sort of on that edge. There’s some good regional labels out on the east coast—Atlantica and all that stuff, but they only look at regional performers. Festival stopped being a record company. You know, on and on it goes. There was Duke Street, Boot Records in Toronto, and they’re gone—or, rather, Duke Street has now gone commercial. There’s lots that have come and gone, and then there’s the independents, people releasing their own stuff.

So we haven’t got a Green Linnet, we haven’t got a Folk Legacy, we haven’t got a Sugar Hill, we haven’t got a Rounder, you know, haven’t got a Red House—all these American labels that cover the spectrum of folk music.

OUR GOAL IS GETTING FOLK MUSIC TO FOLKIES....

GL—And that’s what you’d like Borealis to be.

We want to cover the full spectrum. Absolutely: folk music right from the very traditional up to pushing the boundaries and everything in between. From the blues, and the Celtic, and the song writers, and the country, and the bluegrass. By "country," I mean the rootsy country, not the new country. We decided the folk festival of our dreams—the eclectic folk festival of our dreams—is what we see for the label. To make it in this market you have to do a bit of everything. But do it with quality.

We’re already swamped with stuff, and we haven’t even said we’re looking, you know? We have a number of goals, and one of our main ones is to be viable enough to promote the music. That’s the point. To connect to distributors not just out of Canada, but off-continent, to market it in different ways, to not depend on the mainstream record stores. Because we’ve had good conversations with sales reps from Festival who go to HMV and the Sams, and the battles they have just getting them to take stuff out of the catalogue! It’s the usual thing—"Well, we’ll take a few of this and that," stick it at the back of the store on a shelf where nobody finds it and a month later says, "See, it didn’t sell!" We’ve tried to talk with them about ways we can help that with folk music. We’re looking at all kinds of things—point of sale displays for folk
music where it gets floor space, to marketing to craft and gift shops.

GL—Hasn’t the record business been virtually taken over by the large companies now? At one time Calgary had one or two record stores that were run by people who were interested in odd corners of music, and now that just doesn’t exist, except for one classical store.

There’s room for sort of a folk-roots-blues-maybe world music store. There’s some of them in the States, but Canada could have some. One day, if Borealis grows the way we hope, things like that are not outside the scope of what we’re planning. We’d open something, if we have to.

We don’t have that much investment; and we didn’t want to saddle ourselves with so much debt that all we’re doing is servicing it. All the people that support it—they’re all in the folk community—that’s where we went to, it’s a private thing. And we need enough percentage, always, of the people who are out there performing, like Eileen McGann or J.P. Cormier. When there are times when it’s—I don’t know—that incredible fiddler from Chicoutimi who you really think the world’s got to hear, but you may lose money on it, we’re determined from the beginning not to abandon that side. But it can’t be constant, or we won’t be viable, and we couldn’t do the promotion that we want to do. I mean, I’m not talking about a million dollars of promotion, but right from the start we’re budgeting five grand for every record, just in promotion. Which is just a start. That’s all we can spare and every year we’re planning for it to grow.

The typical thing with independents, as you know, you put all your money in the music and the recording, and then you’re dead broke, you’ve borrowed everything you can, and you have a record release and then you play some gigs, you send to a few radio stations, to people you know, end of story. No distributor will pick it up, and it’s rare that even an outfit like Festival will take some independents. They are picky; they won’t take everything. And most distributors won’t talk to independents because they have a catalogue of 500 titles, and they can’t make 500 phone calls every time they need stuff.

We’ve realized in talking through all this that we needed a catalogue right away. So we took over most of what Ken put out on Pyramid Records, which he had no time or money to promote, and my previous record, and a new one that just came out from Ken and Chris, all original blues, that’s as eclectic as their Bluesology record—it’s very entertaining, even for non-blues fanatics like me. And we wanted at least two new acts outside ourselves, signed, before we would even announce ourselves to the public. Eileen McGann and J.P. Cormier were them, so on November 15 [1996], we officially launched ourselves.

We’re continuing to look. Every year we’ll release four new records; that’s our minimum, so there’s a new one from J.P. coming; Eileen’s traditional record, which’ll be out in the spring; Bill Garrett’s recording again after a jillion years, and we’ve also taken over J.P.’s first record—which was mostly a fiddle record. Eileen’s Journeys has come to Borealis as well, and David Parry’s last record he did, of Robert Service stuff. Do you know about that record? Fantastic record.

We’re already making connections through craft shops and gift shops, so by late spring we’ll have 15 titles. If you go to Stratford, Ontario, or whatever, or in the North, there’ll be just general gift and craft shops for tourists. They’ve got these displays—you might have seen them—with these pine boxes that you listen to samples of music? It’s more environmental or new age these days, but—

JL—Quasi-Celtic?

—yeah, or quasi-Celtic—but the people who started it, Holborne, don’t do New Age, they do environmental music. Another one, Solitudes, copied them, and did New Age stuff. They want to expand into folk music. They came to us, and they like us—we’re one-stop shopping because we’re going to have an eclectic mix of stuff. And we already have a bit of a catalogue, and they wanted to start off with that, with a dozen titles and see how they go. They are outside of the record stores, but they have gold and platinum sellers—50,000, 75,000, 100,000 sellers, through these markets! But you don’t hear about them because they aren’t on the charts and not on the radio; they don’t get the press.

GL—So their sales don’t get registered?

Well, they’re registered enough to get their gold records! You go into their offices and they’re plastered with them, and who ever heard about them unless you buy this stuff? They figure if they can’t sell 10,000 each of a copy of a folk record, they are falling down on the job. And they’re not just in Canada; there’s all these other markets, and I’ve seen their stuff all over—they go into the North, they go into the US, they go into Army bases in the States. Army bases! When there isn’t a war on, these people—families on Army bases—have nothing to do on a weekend. They did a test run that just knocked their socks off. Someone told them they should do this and they thought, "Army bases, what on earth are they talking about?" So they did three of them, their biggest display thing—they have everything from 12 titles showing
people attend folk festivals, at least the big ones showing attendance figures, and it’s incredible! Like, many hundreds of thousands!

And we know the typical scenario. If you’re not a dedicated folkie, you go up there with your family, hear this music that just connects to you, and it’s just really enjoyable, and you love it, and you go home, and you go to the local record store in the mall trying to find this stuff because you didn’t bother picking up something at the festival record store. They don’t have it. When you ask about ordering it, it’s, “Well, I don’t know, this stuff takes weeks to get here.” The whole body language of these counter clerks says, “Don’t make me do this; it’s too much trouble.” Then they open up their newspapers, all the record reviews are jazz, classical and pop. Folk music does not exist, in any way. So after a while it fades, and fans get on with their lives and the kids’ problems and school and work, and they forget about it, and you’ve lost them. That’s happened to all of us, you know?

So, we know they’re out there. Our goal is to get the music to them. Plus the normal venues that do it already—festivals, at the club gigs. We will work harder at making sure the music follows the performer, where they’re going, and using the record stores in the town they’re playing. And get our musicians on our label out playing where we’re trying to get their music. So, we’re going to work with some agents and things like that to get performers into Europe, into the southern states and things like that, where we know there’s a market for them, where I might actually consider taking a week or two weeks to do a tour during a holiday period. We’re looking at kind of hitting on all fronts—that’s what we can do.

The whole point is collectively, with our experience, some effort and a little bit of money, to try and do for folk music what hasn’t been done. And we are calling ourselves a national label because we will be looking right across the country. Right away, we didn’t want more white guys from Ontario to be the next signings on the label or everybody’s going to dismiss us like a bunch of guys having a mid-life crisis.

Anyway, that’s why we chose Eileen. We’re really delighted. She’s been fiercely independent. Rounder was after her, just while we were talking to her; other people have made offers through the years. She ideologically liked what we were doing, and we also saw that it could work for her. Every deal’s going to be unique. She’s still going to have Dragon Wing Music, so it’s going to be a partnership with her company, but internationally it will be a little stronger with Borealis. And we hope that down the road other people like the James Keelaghans, or the Connie Kaldors or people like that who are solidly in the touring folk scene—we might win some of them over as well.

So, Eileen, different music out in Calgary; we looked east; we’re talking with some people from Vancouver; we’re talking to some people from Quebec. Our eyes and ears are wide open at the Folk Alliance—looking closely, to start the discussions, so that as we add artists and titles, people will see it begin to take shape, that not only do we look nationally but also at the whole spectrum of folk music. So we’re talking with people who are way out there on their inter-
prettations of music and also looking at field recording stuff. It’s all on the table, and we’re not dismissing it, even if we have to say, "We can’t yet—we’ve got to get our cash flow up."

GL—Would all of your offerings get that sort of placement? I’m thinking of some of the places I’ve seen those shelves; I can imagine somebody punching up something like Eileen McGann’s “Man’s Job,” or your song about the Free Trade deal, and storeowners freaking.

Well, you know, first of all, it’s low volume, but if that’s what the music’s about, there’s people who like that stuff, and why wouldn’t they be the people buying—

GL—Often business people don’t like it. Do you foresee that as a potential problem?

No, I don’t think so. I think that just as there are places that may not want folk music, they’d rather keep the environmental music—they know their market, so the Holborne group won’t be able to sell folk music, but there’ll be plenty that can. I mean, you go out east, I was at the Lunenberg festival last summer, and every gift shop in town has Stan Rogers’s stuff and all the performers we know there are everywhere, not just in the record stores. There’s plenty of controversial stuff there, and nobody objects.

We’ll slowly grow, and we have lots of plans for the future when it gets to that point, but our goal is also that it outlives us, that it isn’t something that’s fly-by-night or something that feels it has to become commercial. So, lofty goals…

GL—What are the obstacles in creating a Canadian Green Linnet or Red House? Is it more difficult to run that kind of operation here because of the demographics? Population? Geography?

Sure, population, because instantly you don’t have as big a market. And even performing—with a population spread out more, there’s long gaps in touring. New England’s a bit like Britain, where you have every little town with a community centre. Although Southern Ontario is really expanding—all the little towns all around Toronto within an hour and a quarter’s drive—there’s all kinds of regular concert series—it’s really blossoming. There really is a wave happening. You know it’s serendipity in a way that it’s happening at the same time that we’re starting this. It’s going to be beneficial for us to get our foot in the door. In the Toronto Star, this very week, is an article all about how roots music is becoming so very popular—roots of all kinds of different musics, and all kinds of clubs and bars around town that weren’t folk music, but have mostly acoustic music. And if you’re listening to one after another, after another, after another acoustic versions of those musics, it’s just very interesting.

We want to lobby a bit with some of the presses like the Toronto Star to get folk music covered. Once every two months you get a review of roots performers. So yeah, to answer your question, definitely it’s easier down there, I think it’s just a bigger population that enables it to happen.

GL—But is it possible to reach a larger proportion of this population?

We’ll try, but we couldn’t depend on it. We knew from the start if we were depending on the Canadian market there’d be no way we’d succeed. So, it’s getting into the States, getting into Europe, getting into Britain, getting into Asia—absolute necessities and priorities. We’re working on it, and it’ll happen. And we can have discussions with distributors because we have a plan. It’s amazing that they’ll talk to you right away in open discussions. And with four of us, the four partners, one of us can always have the chance to go off to this event, where all these independent distributors are, in the States or in France or whatever; go to Britain and talk to these people. It’s not all one person, and we’re all equally committed.

GL—Good luck!

Well we need luck—it’s always luck, but so far, so good. We got noticed by Billboard; the November 30th issue, the Canadian page, was an interview with Borealis. We were delighted. And we’ve got a publicist regularly working with us, so we’re trying.

GL—It’s all pretty time consuming.

Well, that’s what I say. Normally Tuesdays we have our 9:30 meeting and go till about 2, and then there’s lots of other phoning and stuff in the daytime, so I work at night to make up for it. It’s my baby, and if you believe in it, you have to give it some time. And in the end it’s helping to sell my music, too. I’m benefiting in a side way. It’s using up time, but I can afford it, or I wouldn’t have done it. We need more time—we’re giving all we can and already could use another person, but we can’t afford it yet.

**EVEN WITH HUMOUR I TRY TO MAKE A POINT…**

**GL—You were saying that you didn’t write songs for a while and then all of a sudden the songs started to come in again. Do you have any thoughts on why that might have happened?**

Well, obviously I had an innate need for something to come out that particular creative outlet. If I wasn’t writing books or stories, it started coming out in the songs. In my opinion, my songs are much more literate now, better songs, I think. There’s all kinds of songs that fit all kinds of circumstances, but they’re satisfying things to write now. And I think they’re better because of the prose writing—maybe I’m a better self-editor.

In addition, there is the honed craft of a beautiful traditional ballad, which I always say is an influence—there’s lots of lessons in song writing to be learned there: the conciseness without losing any of the drama. Songwriters like Stan Rogers or the McCarrigles sometimes write songs that are beautifully simple but have the impact of a ton of bricks just with simple language and how careful they are with it. Or, you know, I love a lot of Sondheim. Some of his are just absolutely brilliant. That’s why he’s not as popular as Rogers and Hammerstein. Some of his stuff is too intellectual, but brilliant story-telling. All of his songs are one-act plays. In context they’re even
The way many people interpret them, they don’t get down to really connect with the human beings that went through these tragic things, and that somebody wrote about it close enough to the time to feel the power of it. We’re so jaded, but when somebody does it, boy, that’s as moving as anything from Sondheim or anybody else.

So that’s what it comes down to—that’s how I sum it up for people. Even if it’s my own personal music, if it’s jazz, or it’s Broadway or whatever it is—if I see it done with passion and a real belief, an honest and heartfelt belief in the music their performing, then I’m listening. I’m open and I listen to it. You know you can see an old fiddle player and this is his whole life, and you can just be moved to tears. I would never dismiss traditional song because I’ve seen the power of it when it’s done well, and done with real heart. But there are lots of people who are out there and really popular, and even friends. Their performances are enjoyable and nothing more. They don’t move me.

GL—I know what you mean. I’ve had people refer to me as a folkie, and I don’t always take it as a compliment because much of the folkie scene is just like that. Lots of people hear bluegrass, for example, as something to stomp your feet to and be happy, but for me bluegrass is that intense pain in Monroe’s voice.

But there’s lots of people twanging away without any of that depth, whereas he was speaking right out of his soul. Folk music is more accessible, so it’s great in that way to participate in music. Its problem is with the people who really stay with the lightweight level. And that’s fine for them; they just get a lot of enjoyment out of it in their life—it’s legitimate, but, yeah, not for me.

Other musical communities have their own distinct problems—problems for jazz players who’ll come to a folk festival and sit in on guitar or bass behind someone and say, “Wow, this is so much fun! We just get to play together! And everyone’s having a great time!” They talk about the competitiveness between who is more technically adept than this person and that and never mind the intensity, never mind the rivalry. This is just folk music’s
particular problem. You get people who don’t know how to connect to the real depth of it. Only the very best do, so if I don’t find that in a performance, I’m drifting off; I’m sittin’ there, but I’m not there.

I like to hope that my performances would be the kind that I wouldn’t be bored at, because of the material and how I set it up and explain it. I like to talk about stuff. Often people don’t say anything. You’re supposed to guess where they’re coming from, like an untitled piece of abstract art, which means even the artist has no clue. Give us a clue, say something! And you know I see that’s the essence of communicating at its strongest level.

Music has the chance to be the most powerful method of communicating that we’ve got, because it goes right straight to the emotions. Right past the brain. Go past the Brain! Do not stop at the Brain! Go directly to the Emotions! For all the arts, I think, their job is communication. And when somethings’s so obscure, no matter what the art form, and it’s not communicating, to me it’s a failure.

GL—It’s funny you know as you said that I just thought when you sit down to do inlays, what do you do? You do representational art, as opposed to abstracts.

I do!

GL—There’s a consistency, isn’t there?

I think so, whether it’s in dance or music or art sculpture or—you know, when I’m moved by it, it’s melody to me.

Although in guitar it’s a different thing because my work is more realistic, where in instrument ornamentation it was generally very cartoony or else just design. Very extreme realism is never done in this medium. In the art world it’s the opposite. Sometimes abstract art can move me! But sometimes it doesn’t at all; it leaves me cold, and then it’s failed for me. Sometimes you won’t even know why, but you are grabbed by something.

When I’m given permission, yeah, for sure. I love to do that.

GL—Not only are they showing pictures of people, which is uncommon enough—not only are they people, but sometimes they are people doing things!

Yeah. When I get the chance with the customers, I want it to be a medium, not an end in itself. So that that’s my way of communicating something else.

GL—By the same token, like those of many fiddle tunes, the titles of your instrumentals tell stories.

That’s consistency, right?

GL—And I take it that abstract songs would be things like sort of Dylan’s things, that maybe wouldn’t reach you.

Yeah! No! mean, they may have powerful music, but if I can’t get what he’s talkin’ about, it doesn’t do anything for me.

GL—But “Mr. Tambourine Man,” a pretty abstract song, moves me a great deal.

Yeah, but there I think somehow there’s enough entry points for us to hang our own metaphors on, or something, or bits and pieces of our own life experiences. He’s left room for the audience there.

JL—What would be something that doesn’t?

Well, there’s not a lot of Dylan stuff that I’ve listened to over the years....

GL—Just in songs—abstract songs. There’s a whole sort of genre of fake surrealism....

The early singer-songwriters, you know, that were so personal. Lots of people out there, they’re writing stuff that’s poetry that must mean something to them but you can’t figure it out, you know, you can’t fathom what they’re after. No examples pop into my head because once I see that I recognize it for that, I dismiss it. But yes, definitely, some of Dylan.

But! Sometimes his writing is so clever that he tantalizes you and pulls you in, until you start figuring it out. And some were very straight ahead, the story was right up front, some of the early stuff, so sometimes he would achieve something that way that was interesting.

Well, you know, sometimes even pop music. Some of Jann Arden’s stuff—there’s one she even admits she doesn’t really know what it means. Or, I hate to say it, ’cause kd lang has some of my instruments and Ben Mink’s an old friend, but some of the stuff kd lang’s putting out lately—you know? A few of the songs, it’s quite clear what she’s about, and some I can’t make head nor tail out of. It’s an incredible voice, but she’s not doing any music I can connect with. You know, songs are unfortunately an outlet for bad poetry sometimes. You
can get away with a lot of garbage. Sometimes very simple stuff can work, can be fun, and other times it can just be bad poetry.

GL—Or unnecessarily complex.

Yeah! Exactly. They’re all caught up in the sound of their own voices.

THE FRIENDS OF FIDDLER’S GREEN

JL—So how did the Friends come into the equation?

I was doing some guest sets at Fiddler’s Green, where anybody could come and do a set; you just phoned and booked the spot. By then I was playing banjo and dulcimer and writing some humorous songs as well, and Tam [Kearney] liked that right away. I wasn’t just another guitar player doing navel-gazing stuff. Because I was starting to listen to American traditional music, I was picking up those instruments. So he said, “Come and do a gig some time.” And I did one gig, and next thing I knew, he said “We’ve got this sort of group, very very loose,” he said. “Bring your guitar along some time and play,” and that was it. Came to his house and sat in—all these British dance tunes I’d never heard before, couldn’t tell where the A part ended and the B part began. I used to give them nick-names so I’d know, little instructions to myself—when to come to a stop with the guitar and switch keys or whatever, you know?

And that was it. I just started playing with them, and then I started picking up the mandolin at the same time Tam did, and other British instruments like the tin whistle, concertina and eventually the pipes, and that’s sort of all because of the group. I was only 18. It was the same year as my first year apprenticing with Jean. And I’ve been with them ever since.

JL—What’s happening with the Friends now?

Well, we’re still officially together, got a few gigs booked including a festival, only we don’t actively seek any gigs—we haven’t for a long time, but if you know we could do something with it," but nobody’s even interested because we’re all off in other things. So I’m not sure what’ll happen.

WHEN I WAS TWENTY, I HAD MY OWN SHOP.

GL—Are there any buskers that use your guitars? You say that in the song.

Oh no, not specifically, not that I’m aware of. Who knows, somewhere? There’s pipers and fiddlers busking, but more than ever you see guitarists. No, I was just thinking in general terms.

Well sometimes, performers, if they have got a free afternoon, or they’re traveling or something, they’ll take the instrument they’ve got and....

GL—How many guitars have you made now?

I have made, around, five hundred and thirty-six. I count them in my own record book—that’s why I know. The number used for identification purposes is the numerical date that the frame was glued together. It’s for insurance purposes.

I know at least who the first owner was and where it went. The person who has my five hundredth is a flamenco player, actually, who has a special little letter from me saying this was my five hundredth.

GL—Did it cost more?

Noo.

GL—Actually, I’m curious—you went to Larivee for instruction?

I apprenticed with Jean, yeah, two years.

GL—When did guitar making begin to pay your living?

Well, Jean paid me nothing the first year, so I mostly lived on some unemployment insurance—they were looser then, and then when that ran out, I made my first guitar for myself on the side and sold my Martin, and that covered my
room rent through the summer, and then Jean gave me a bit of money to pay my room and my expenses. And when I started, I had orders before I even opened the shop because people knew I was leaving Jean. I'd made a few guitars in the off hours on my own, so I'd gotten a few things that were my design—people were ordering already. I've always had orders, always.

GL—When you count your guitars, where do you begin?

When it had my name on the label alone. So I made three guitars on my own while I was still working with Jean. But the second year with Jean, it was just the two of us, and we made all the guitars, together, about half the work on each, and Jean was very generous. He kept saying, "You should be signing the labels here," and I only remembered to do that about twelve times before the label got glued in over the little centre strip, and you couldn't write on it any more. So there are twelve guitars out there with both Jean and my signature on them, and I know one of Peter, Paul and Mary has one, because somebody I know in New York who does the repairs on it has seen it. I don't know where the others are. We made about sixty guitars together in the second year.

GL—Was that the first thing you set out to do?

Um, no, not exactly. I quit Grade 13 and came to Toronto to work in a recording studio, Eastern Sound, where Bruce Cockburn recorded. It's gone now. I didn't know—no one told me you could go to some colleges and get trained as a sound engineer. This is what I thought I wanted to do. So, I went, and started at the bottom as a gofer, and after six months I was being overworked, and all I was seeing here was the jingle industry, not the music world, that I quit. And that summer I was just living off my music for a few months. I met Jean at the Mariposa Festival, and he'd only been building for a couple of years, still just in his basement.

Three years maybe, he'd been building guitars, and I met him, and it was just a lucky fluke, in the end, except for the first couple of months, when he thought he was going to start to be a guitar factory and was being pushed into it by Eric Nagler, who was running the Toronto Folklore Centre. Jean wasn't really ready for it, but he found that out after a couple of months. But another person who was drinking beer and hanging around his shop and a guy who was brought up by the Folklore Centre to do repairs both started working at the same time I did with Jean, just as apprentices.

After two months he got rid of everyone else, and it was just him and me. Then when I left, he slowly, slowly began expanding.

When he left Toronto, he had about six people. So nobody had the luck of that particular working experience—he was still young, and he just worked all the time. I was a teenager. He was just divorced, and he was camped out on a piece of vinyl on the third floor of the Folklore Centre. I rented a room, and that was it. When I was twenty, I had my own shop.

I HAVE TO TELL YOU THE FUNNIEST THING....

GL—You played guitar and—where do you come from?

Hamilton. I've been playing guitar since I was about nine, off and on since the early years. But all through high school I was making my spending money by playing in local clubs. And I first discovered traditional music when one of my sisters went off to university and left her Pete Seeger and Weavers records—left the Weavers 1955 Carnegie Hall concert. I listened to that—just knocked me out, and I recorded it. I bought in my life was, speaking of Dylan, was Mr. Tambourine Man by the Byrds. On it was one traditional song, a broken token ballad, "John Riley"—I remember listening to that. Wow, what a story, never heard of a song like that! I didn't pay attention to who wrote it or what, but I just had no idea. I remember being knocked out by that song more than any other song on the whole record. I liked the whole record, but that song was unlike anything I've ever heard in my life before. A story like that, I've never forgotten it.

And because of that, heh, in Grade 12 I had my high school guidance counsellor try and find me the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, because a biography of Roger McGuinn said that's where he went! I thought—I wanna go there, that's the college I want to go to! Find it in your listings! Ah, but she could never find it. So I thought, I'll write them. I wrote "Old Town School of Folk Music, Chicago," and put a stamp on it, on it, and I found out years later when the Friends played Chicago and we were staying with Emily Friedmann, who later edited Come For To Sing—we were just sitting around after the concert, you know, just chatting and schmoozing away at her place, and she was saying, "Ah you know, I have to tell you the funniest thing, one time we got this letter from Canada, and it didn't even have our address on it!—I think we were talking about the post office or something—and it got there! You know this kid in Canada who wanted to find us didn't know our address!" I said, "Do you remember him?" And she went, "Ah! Ha ha ha!" She was there when it came! They were just a folklore centre with lessons on the side, but what did I know? Old Town School of Folk Music, you know?

1Laskin’s first album, Unmasked, was recorded on Stan Rogers’s Fogarty’s Cove label, at Rogers’s request

2Fiddler’s Green was a coffeehouse in Toronto. The Friends were a wild and loose group of musicians associated with it, who performed primarily British songs, stories, poems, and plays. They included, primarily, Grit Laskin, Jom Strickland, Alistair Brown, Ian Robb, David Parry, Lawrence Stephenson, and, latterly, Geoff McClintock. Others, such as Margaret Cristl and Stu Cameron, were briefly members of the group or associated with it.