Books


Written primarily as a showcase of recipients of the East Coast Music Awards, Rock, Rhythm and Reels focuses on the breadth and wealth of musical talent that dwells in the Atlantic provinces. A coffee table styled book, this is a celebration of the music, musicians and culture of Atlantic Canada. Individual artists and groups are placed in the spotlight and given space to tell their history, while biographical notes, discographies, reviews, contact information, &c., are provided. What emerges are 47 vignettes which tell a tale of the musical life of Eastern Canada.

Aptly enough, this work focuses on the many divergent sounds to be found on Canada’s Eastern shores. While there is the customary nod to the Celtic traditionalists such as Ashley MacIsaac, Great Big Sea and the Barra MacNeils, it is the less commercially known artists covered which makes the book such a delight. Having recently come across the fine fiddling talents of Roy Johnstone, it was a pleasure to flip to a section devoted to him and read some interesting tidbits. Not to mention that the discography and address will have me looking for more of his work. It is also interesting to read the perspectives of Mi’kmaq performers and of gospel groups as to how they fit into the larger musical scene.

Other parts, such as the feature on Matt Minglewood, make one realize the wealth of talent that has come to some degree of influence and commercial success in the multi-dimensional Canadian music scene. And, considering how long Stompin’ Tom has been making music and the number of times that Dutchie Mason has crossed this country singing the blues, newcomers such as Mary Jane Lamond and Sandbox certainly have come out of a long history of talent. Maybe that’s the point: music is such a cultural way of life in Eastern Canada. All the personal histories are good reading. The little asides are of interest also. For instance, one can discover how jake came to choose their name, learn about how Lee Cremo won two thousand dollars by playing "O Canada" at Expo ’67, and read about how Damhnait Doyle was electrocuted while playing in an undisclosed seedy nightclub. There are plenty of short tales which will ensure that you never get stuck in a casual conversation.

Rock, Rhythm and Reels, overall, is quite well done. Books of this sort interest me. It is something which can be casually flicked through from time to time, and books that can be used for reference have their utility in a shopping catalogue kind of way. Ragweed Press should be commended for putting out such a fine snapshot of the musical community of Eastern Canada.

–Oisin McMahon


Every region of Canada has its own traditional folk culture, but Cape Breton Island has been more successful than most in promoting its heritage for tourism purposes, as well as in providing a launching pad for folk-based entertainers to achieve national and international stardom. Whether or not this is a relevant aspect of traditional music (and there are sure to be opinions both ways), a book by a person who was intimately involved in the development is bound to provide many fascinating insights into the process.

A Journey in Celtic Music is not an autobiography, nor is it a history of the "folk revival" in Cape Breton, although it deals greatly in both. Rather, it’s a collection of chapters on various aspects of the author’s involvement with traditional music in Cape Breton over the years. Each chapter could easily stand on its own as an independent article; they’re arranged in what seems to be no particular order; necessarily, this approach creates some repetition, but not enough to become annoying, I found. It also left me with the sensation of having experienced a scattered learning experience rather than a cohesive whole.

The first chapter briefly tells of the author’s childhood in St. Mary’s Channel and the Big Pond region, and the place of traditional music in it, with fiddlers’ sessions and Gaelic songs in people’s homes, including his own. This is one of the shortest chapters; I expect there are readers in addition to myself who would have liked to know more about this period; after all, the grassroots tradition from which the revival grew is surely all-important. However, a later chapter chronicling the life of MacInnes’s father, fiddler Dan Joe MacInnes, obviously the
The author's hero, fills some of this gap, providing insight into Cape Breton fiddlers' approaches, attitudes, styles and milieu. (A small criticism of this chapter is the use of fiddlers' terms without explanation for non-fiddlers—for example, what's a "cut"?) I found this the most satisfying part of the book, perhaps because MacInnes makes a real effort to get inside the mind of a person whom he greatly admires, rather than simply chronicling the subject.

The author was part of The Sons of Skye, a musical group which applied '60s "folk group" esthetics to Cape Breton music, mingling vocal and instrumental aspects which had traditionally been separate disciplines. Although not a career group, the Sons of Skye performed outside Cape Breton, including touring Scotland, and made one recording. MacInnes doesn't claim to have influenced today's commercially successful groups such as the Rankins and the Barra MacNeils (he mentions that both family groups were already active at the time), but certainly The Sons of Skye foreshadowed their current approach and must at least have set up some signposts for them. One chapter documents The Sons of Skye's career in some detail.

Other chapters provide: a history of the Big Pond Summer Festival from its usual, almost slapstick beginnings to its current status as a fixture on the Cape Breton scene for over 25 years; "Connections"—reminiscences of the author's other involvements as a concert organizer, researcher and teacher; the backlash effect on the root culture of measures taken to achieve commercial success. (Margaret Bennett's review elsewhere in this issue deals rather incisively with these issues.) However, MacInnes chooses to touch on these questions only peripherally, and is content to provide lots of factual material in documenting aspects of the rise of the Cape Breton musical and cultural industry.

It's a rare North American who hasn't heard of alternative singer/songwriter Sarah McLachlan and country/pop artist Anne Murray. The two Canadian women's voices have graced countless radio stations and CD players across the continent during the singers' careers. As two of the country's most popular music artists and media darlings, Sarah McLachlan and Anne Murray have been placed on international pedestals by their adoring—and sometimes obsessive—fans. Authors Judith Fitzgerald and Barry Grills chronicle the artists' lives and successes in the unauthorized Quarry Press biographies Building a Mystery: The Story of Sarah McLachlan & Lilith Fair and Snowbird: The Story of Anne Murray.

Building a Mystery's problems begin even before the first page is opened: author Judith Fitzgerald doesn't deliver what the biography's title promises. Instead, she gives readers almost as much information about herself as Sarah McLachlan, and devotes only 24 of the book's 213 pages to Lilith Fair, McLachlan's all-women summer tour of North America. One can't help, then, but be disappointed by Fitzgerald's efforts. At times, the book reads more like a travel diary than an unauthorized biography. It begins when the author's work begins, literally, starting out as a documentation of her road trip to Halifax, McLachlan's place of birth. From there, Fitzgerald travels around the country, visiting the significant places in McLachlan's life. One gets the impression the reader is simply along for the ride.

And what a ride it is! Fitzgerald is ambitious in her attempt to touch on all that makes McLachlan an alternative rock superstar, but the end result is a book that's crammed with bits and pieces without any real focus. It complicates matters that the author interjects her own opinions along the way, and uses annoying and dated expressions like "anyhoo" and "You got it, Pontiac." It seems she's trying to connect with a younger audience, but her strong presence soon becomes overwhelming.

The chapter titles—cleverly named after McLachlan's songs—reveal the book's flurry of activity. Fitzgerald begins by tracking down McLachlan's birth mother and adoptive mother and squeezing out of them the bit of information they're willing to offer. She then takes a plodding look at the underside of the music industry, documenting her discussion with McLachlan's lawyer who forbids her to contact the subject of the book. Finally, she chronicles the artist's recordings and year-by-year rise to fame, borrowing heavily from previously-published articles and interviews.

The most interesting and well-written part of the book comes when the author explores the chilling story of Uwe Van-drei, an obsessed fan who sent McLachlan hundreds of flowers and romantic letters from 1992 until his suicide in 1994. It's unfortunate that Fitzgerald doesn't devote equal attention to what is arguably McLachlan's most impressive work to date: the creation of Lilith Fair.

Through this mishmash of information, the author satisfies readers' curiosity for the less important, yet perhaps more interesting, details of McLachlan's life. Readers learn, for example, that the snake-like imagery in McLachlan's album artwork, posters and T-shirt designs is derived from her teenage nickname: Medusa, given to her because of her long, curly hair (Mc-
dusa was a mythic goddess with snakes for hair and an icy stare that could kill a man). They also learn the driving forces behind McLachlan’s songs, which reveal her intense and sometimes political nature. Her song “Hope,” for example, was written after she visited the Pacific Rim and witnessed young Thai prostitutes being sold to Western tourists. “Possession” is an equally personal song: McLachlan wrote it from the perspective of a stalker, in an attempt to understand obsessed fans.

Unfortunately, most of Building a Mystery’s contents have been documented elsewhere, so ardent fans aren’t likely to glean any new information from the book. In the end, then, there’s no real “mystery” to Fitzgerald’s biography: it’s simply a regurgitation of facts about Sarah McLachlan, presented in a less-than-memorable way.

If readers can get past the cover photo of Snowbird—which features a 40-year-old Anne Murray in a hot pink miniskirt with spiked blonde hair—the worst is probably over. The 1986 cover picture is not only goofy because it’s out-of-date, it’s also an odd choice for a book that focuses heavily on Murray’s private and decidedly unflashy life.

Overall, Barry Grills’s biography seems to suit Murray’s personality: it’s distinctly Canadian in its focus on the artist’s Maritime roots, and its writing style matches the wholesome quality that many fans have come to associate with her—she’s the girl next door, Canada’s very own “snowbird.” Indeed, it’s almost an afterthought that Murray has won more Juno awards than any other Canadian, or that Barbra Streisand is her only real competition for best female pop singer in the world. Grills buries this kind of information in the biography’s final pages, and the end result is a book that lets Murray’s personality shine her accomplishments.

One gets the impression that the warm and straightforward singer—nicknamed “Barefoot Annie” from her barefoot days in the 1960s Singalong Jubilee television program—would approve of Grills’s decision. Certainly, readers benefit from his choice to shy away from the superstar’s superstardom, and concentrate on the woman behind the voice. What comes through in Snowbird, ultimately, is that Murray is for real: she’s a mother, wife, businesswoman and performer who, like the rest of us, is doing her best to juggle multiple priorities.

Grills effectively examines Murray’s love/hate relationship with her position in the spotlight and how she once acquiesced to the demand that she look the part of an international star (hence the hot pink mini). In the end, however, Murray chose to stay true to her tomboy-at-heart self. Part of her return to her roots meant dropping out of the spotlight—an act she achieved quite successfully in the 1970s, when she married creative director Bill Langstroth and had their first child. In hindsight, it was a wise decision: the media would have likely chewed her up and spit her out if they’d known about her romance with the then married—with-children Langstroth.

Of course, the media had other juicy bits to ponder at the time, such as Murray’s sexual orientation and bizarre stalker. Grills explores both these issues with sensitivity. He respects Murray’s heterosexuality, noting that other journalists have refused to believe that the former phys. ed. teacher is anything but a closet lesbian (with a really, really good cover). He’s equally sensitive, without being sensationalistic, to the fact that Murray has been stalked for more than two decades by a Saskatchewan farmer who suffers from erotomania, a condition that leads him to believe that Murray is secretly in love with him.

In some ways, the book’s 50-plus pictures tell the artist’s story. Arranged in chronological order, the photos show “Little Miss Snowbird” growing up from girl next door to New York diva, and back again. The most recent photos are particularly telling: Murray’s easy smile and straightforward stare show a now-confident woman who conducts her life on her own terms. This point does not escape Grills, whose continual references to Murray as mother, wife and performer extraordinaire are well-meaning but leave the reader feeling, well, a little inferior. Not everyone, after all, can raise two children, maintain a happy marriage, be an assertive businesswoman and win a Grammy year after year. Murray is in control, absolutely, but perhaps Grills needs reminding that it has taken her 50 years to get there. Fifty years, and some sacrifices along the way.

In spite of his occasional cheerleading, the author does well in making this 213-page biography an interesting and worthwhile look at the life of a superstar. In short, Snowbird confirms what most Canadians have always suspected of Anne Murray: she’s a genuinely kind and likeable woman who’s committed not only to her fans, but also to her country, family, and self.

—Janice Oakley
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Recordings

Mary Jane Lamond. Suas el! 268 842 000-2. A & M Records, 1345 Denison Street, Markham, Ontario L3R 5V2
Various. A Tribute to the North Shore Gaelic Singers: Traditional Songs from Cape Breton Island. BRCD 0005. B & R Heritage Enterprises, PO Box 3, Iona, Nova Scotia B0A 1L0

Questions of Taste and Aesthetics: The Gaels’ Perspective versus a World View of Gaelic Singing

Reviews of sound recordings (CDs) may be based on any number of criteria, but, unlike this review, they usually reflect the taste, musical knowledge and/or experience of one individual. Experts in the industry’s “sales and distribution” departments might not agree on how to classify recordings such as the two albums considered here: are they “World Music” or “Folk Music”? Or is there any difference? It all depends upon how a minority language such as Scottish Gaelic is regarded—to the seventy (or so) thousand speakers in Scotland, it is the language of their people; to the rest of the country, or to the world, it may sound “foreign,” strange, exotic—anything. The old debate over “the esoteric-exoteric factors in folklore” is not worn out...
yet, as may be evident from this discussion of two CDs, A Tribute to the North Shore Gaelic Singers and Mary Jane Lamond's latest release, Suas e!

The North Shore of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, stretches from St. Ann's Bay to Wreck Cove; the Gaelic Singers were a group of men from that area who "sang together for most of their lives." Of the 13 tracks on this CD, ten were recorded between 1974 and 1976 and the other three in 1986, the year when the original LP was issued. Almost all the singers were "up in years" by then, yet they had a vitality in their singing that would make any Gael wish that they could live on forever. On either side of the Atlantic, anyone connected to their generation feels an instant nostalgia for the day of the taigh cèilidh ("the visiting house"). When Gaelic songs, stories, fiddling, piping and dancing were part of any evening's entertainment. But these days are past, especially in Gaelic Scotland.

The North Shore Gaelic Singers were best known for their repertoire of orain luaidh, the work songs used during the process of "fulling" hand-woven woollen cloth. English-speakers call them "milling songs" in Eastern Canada and "waulking songs" in Scotland. The front cover photo of the CD shows how the luadh operated: while it accurately depicts a typical milling, it does not truly represent the all-male voices of the North Gaelic Shore Singers.

Although the luadh was an all-female activity in Gaelic Scotland, and there is no known record of when men began to take part, the sound made by these men is as authentic as any Gaelic voices ever made. Their singing is so deeply and firmly rooted in the traditions of their forebears that listening to it from the Hebridean side of the Atlantic evokes the most powerful response imaginable to language, place and culture. Unlike other reviews I have "dashed off after a couple of listenings," this one should not, I feel, be based upon the isolated opinion of one reviewer who happens to have been brought up in Gaelic Scotland (the Isle of Skye) and who also had the privilege of hearing the North Shore Gaelic Singers in Cape Breton during the early '70s. If it were, I could go straight to the point—I love every single track of this CD! But what of the reactions of other Gaels in the "Old Country"? Just when our minority language seemed at its most fragile, we now have a Gaelic revival, and, since any new recording can influence the listening public, it is of vital importance for Gaels to have a say in the matter. Scotland now has nationwide Gaelic radio six hours a day, and I, for one, can credit the BBC for my first introduction to the singing of Canada's Rankin Family and Mary Jane Lamond—but not the North Shore singers.

My "test" (for both CDs) consisted of taking a "demo" of all the tracks, approximately three verses from each, playing a tape of them to "consumers," with the request "Tha mi ag iarraidh ur beadh" ("I'd like your opinion"). The intensity of interest expressed in the North Shore Gaelic Singers would be more impressive on video than when translated onto this page. More questions were directed at your reviewer than asked by her: Who are they? Are they still alive? Where were their people from? Can I hear all the verses? Where can we get this tape? The general consensus was most movingly expressed in one oft-repeated phrase: "Tha iad cho Gaidhealach, cho Gaidhealach." ("They are just so Gaelic, through and through.") Since Gaels in Scotland tend to be notoriously critical about anyone claiming to represent their language or culture, no higher praise could be offered.

Now to the songs: The opening song is a milling song, as are tracks 2, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11. Characteristically, it begins with the beat of the hands on the table, sustained throughout the song, while the men rhythmically thump the cloth to mill it. The traditional themes of orain luaidh are reflected throughout—love, hope, despair, heartbreak, rejection, war and all the accompanying emotions are thumped out on the boards. All are typical of songs from Gaelic Scotland, though there is one major difference—the waulking boards in Scotland were restricted to women, whereas in Nova Scotia men were at liberty to join in.

Though the songs may not be known to many Scottish Gaels, yet there is a familiarity in all of them, as they reassuringly conform to the oral-formulaic pattern of orain luaidh, with floating lines and motifs throughout. As in Scotland, most are by unknown composers, the products of many generations of singers. Two milling songs deserve special mention: track 8, "A’ Mhòrag ‘s na Horo Gheallaidh," is attributed to the poet Alexander MacDonald (b. 1700, approx., d. 1770, a relative of the famous Flora MacDonald). This is probably not so, as not one of the 12 verses sung is the same as any in MacDonald’s song "A’gus ho Mhorag" (also a different title—see John L. Campbell’s Highland Songs of the Forty-Five, in which are 47 verses). While there are similarities in the central theme ("Mòrag" was one of the code names that referred to Prince Charles Edward Stuart), the Cape Breton song is more likely to be a product of oral transmission, and may even be one of the Jacobite songs that was in circulation before MacDonald composed his. Track 2, "Oran Shep," is a song that laments the loss of a beloved dog. With its elegiac motifs, it sounds ancient enough to have been composed for Fionn’s legendary dog Bran, even though "Shep" was more likely to have been named after the dog made famous by Elvis Presley.

Track 6, "Tè Bhan’s an Dachaidh Luachrach," is a lyric love song with an interesting combination of Gaelic verses set to the melody of the broadside ballad "The Girl I Left Behind" [sic]. In Scotland this might be regarded as unusual, yet we are soon reminded, in track 10, that borrowing tunes is nothing new: "O’Teannaich Dlùth..." is sung to the tune that can be heard all over Gaeldom, better known in the rest of Scotland (and the English-speaking world) as "Barbara Allen".

Track 12, referred to as a "hymn," though it is actually a "Paraphrase," demonstrates the style of congregational singing typical of Gaelic Presbyterian churches. It is led by the late Malcolm Angus MacLeod, who "precents" (lines out) while the others follow. And finally, the only song in English on the CD is the last one, "Tribute to the North Shore Gaelic Singers," composed and sung by Buddy MacDonald. It is of a style similar to "alphabet songs," in that it carefully includes all details relevant to the subject. At the same time, there is an almost prophetic irony in the fact that the song is not in the language of the group to whom the tribute is so fittingly composed. Like the "consumers" who took part in this modest survey, I would love to play it again and again, and regret only the passing of the
singers. My sole criticism of the CD is that the notes, attractive and informative though they be, would have been all the better if translations had been included.

In considering the second album, Mary Jane Lamond’s Suas e!, we are aware from the onset that this is an entirely different genre of CD. To begin with, it reaches reviewers accompanied by a powerful publicity pack—press-agency biography, quotes from critics, glossies, website address, the lot. Gaelic needs this, and Gaeldom can, and should, learn from this fine example. Mary Jane Lamond has to be applauded for taking the initiative in placing Cape Breton Gaelic song on the international stage.

The first question to arise is "How does it fare?" Measuring success is at best difficult, especially when it brings up further questions as to what enjoys most success—the singer, the songs, or the culture to which they belong.

Before summarizing the views of the "panel," it may be useful to have some background to the culture from which Mary Jane Lamond draws her material. While Cape Breton has enjoyed a wealth of Gaelic song tradition as ancient and vibrant as any in Scotland, it has had considerably fewer opportunities for media coverage and virtually no place on world platforms. There have been several archive projects (Helen Creighton, John Lorne Campbell, John Shaw and Jim Watson take us from the 1930s to the 1990s), but, compared to the number of Gaelic records produced in Scotland, gems from Cape Breton such as the North Shore Gaelic Singers are rare. Until a few years ago, when the Rankin Family took to the road (in the wake of Scotland’s Runrig and Capercaillie), nobody in Cape Breton seems to have had the foresight to “go for it big time” till Mary Jane Lamond stepped forward.

Having spent her “formative years... moving between Quebec and Ontario,” Mary Jane’s interest was sparked by summer visits “down east” visiting her grandparents. As an adult, she learned Gaelic at St. Frances Xavier University, where she also made the best possible use of the song archive, working through the Gaelic collection from which most of her material is drawn. The end product, the CD, demonstrates the advantages in being “city wise,” especially when dealing with issues of image and marketing, but to the “panel” there was concern for certain aspects of production. Why, for example, does the native-born Gael remark that Mary Jane’s singing has more in common with the vocal techniques of Talitha MacKenzie (a fine singer from New York who makes her home in Scotland and has a successful career singing Gaelic songs) than the North Shore Gaelic Singers? I suspected at first that the major criticism from the older generation might be the addition of innovative, modern backing, but no—I was quickly put in my place. The “oldies” surprised me by positing that it was a good thing to bring Gaelic song into the modern day—"After all, Runrig [from the Isle of Skye] and Capercaillie [from Argyll] have blasted their loud music out of the biggest speakers in Scotland." Then what’s the difference? “There never is any doubt that they are singing in Gaelic and that they are Gaidheach—Mary Jane Lamond’s Gaelic is quite good—very good, in some of the songs, but listen, you can’t make out a word of that one [Bòg a’ Lochain, track 6]. Mind you, others are quite clear.” (I would single out tracks 2 and 10 as having the best diction, in particular her convincing introduction to the song, spoken with clear articulation.) As with Talitha’s striking performances, however, the main reservation is that the overall results do not strike the Gael as coming from the tradition. Nowhere is that more evident than in track 4, "È Horo," where the sound Mary Jane produces in the second and fourth lines of each verse is completely foreign to any Gael, yet it is this very track, with its convincing bagpipe backing (what could be more Scottish?), that seems to be most popular among non-Gaels.

Track 6, "Bòg a’ Lachain [sic]" is a strongly rhythmic dance tune, popularly known on both sides of the Atlantic as "Ciamar a ni mi ’n dannsa direach." The majority of the "panel" singled out this track as causing most concern: "Is she singing Gaelic?" asked one elderly listener. For the non-Gael it may not matter—the sound is exciting; the reviewer from America’s Sing Out! comments that "her diction is gorgeous." While the Gael’s insistence on the relationship between language and rhythm may be difficult to understand, this track could serve as the ideal example of why it matters. Consider the following simple parallel in English, which can be conveyed in a childhood game: Can you guess which familiar nursery rhyme has this rhythm?

Dum-dah da-durra-da
Dah-durra-durra dah-dah

If you guessed "See-saw Marjorie Daw," you would be right.

Had I given you "dah-dah dah-dah" and told you the answer, you might be irritated that I gave you the wrong clue and spoiled the game—more like "See-saw Mah-Daw." Basically, this is what happens in Mary Jane’s rendition of the song. Most interesting, however, is Ashley MacIsaac’s fiddle break, for the song becomes instantly recognizable as he hits every single syllable of the words, and his playing elicits the comment that "the fiddle speaks more Gaelic than the singer." Ashley doesn’t claim to speak Gaelic—he has “the odd phrase” from childhood—but he has grown up hearing it, has drunk in its sounds and rhythms from birth, has absorbed its melodies from infancy, thus his playing reflects generations of Gaelic tradition.

There can be no question whatsoever as to the quality of Mary Jane Lamond’s voice—clear, strong, melodic, and a "good voice" by any standards. Reviewing the "voice" is easy—it has lasting appeal. But reviewing the CD raises some searching questions: What makes a "good singer" in any tradition? Clearly it is more than a "good voice." Consider for a moment the gravelly sounds of some technically "bad voices," such as Lee Marvin, Marlene Dietrich, Rod Stewart—without exception, they’ve all "got what it takes." Then, is it good diction or the ability to communicate that delineates aesthetics? There are some singers who, even on an "off night," can rise above any number of voice cracks or cigarette rasps and still move the audience to tears by a performance that touches the heart and reaches the soul.

In any art form, "aesthetic acceptability" is difficult to define; it is an intangible, almost indescribable feature of any musical genre. In Scotland there are Glasgow (and Stornoway/ Dundee/Inverness) country-and-western singers who will go over a storm at the local club, but none of them will "make it" in Nashville; there are blues enthusiasts who learned from Big Bill
Broonzy, but nobody in America is going to be taken in. Yet there are very acceptable features of all of them, and it may even be worth the efforts of a few of them to spend more time listening to the real thing—not records or CDs, not archive recordings, but the very heartbeat of the culture.

Track 9, "lù ò ro hiù ò," sung by traditional source singer Margaret MacLean ("a patient and generous teacher"), may prove slightly confusing to most listeners. No doubt its inclusion serves to add authenticity to the complete repertoire, but it is actually at odds with the rest of the CD and with Mary Jane’s own statement that "you have to be solidly based in the traditional culture but I believe in experimentation. I don’t have a problem integrating such disparate elements as long as the music stays true to its roots." To the Gaels who also long to remain true to their roots, there is no problem either; but they worry when they cannot identify the roots. In stark contrast to the Gaels’ nervousness, the reaction of non-Gaels is confident: for example, one of the "panel," a Frenchwoman who makes her home in the Inner Hebrides and works hard to promote all things Gaelic, declares Mary Jane to be the best she has ever heard—

"We play her non-stop; kids at the Gaelic school just love her and are learning her songs." Presumably they incorporate the "new vocal technique" produced in track 4—and that is enough to terrify native-born Gaels whose songs and singing styles have withstood centuries of oral transmission.

Anyone with a serious interest in studying Gaelic song must be prepared to start with "native singers" such as the North Shore Gaelic Singers, so that they first understand the importance of the "blas," as Gaels say ("the very taste of it"). A final word from the "panel" must be a response to my first question: "What enjoys most success—the singer, the songs, or the culture to which they belong?" Unanimously, the success story belongs to the singer; while the songs enjoy uneven elements of success, there is fear in the reactions of the culture—already fragile, it suffers another blow: "People will think that that’s what Gaelic singing is supposed to sound like."

—Margaret Bennett
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Two Jam Sessions

When I was young, gramophone (phonograph) records were large, thick, fragile and easily scratched. They rotated on the turntable at 78 rpm. Most had a diameter of 10 inches (25.4 cm) and had only one track per side; this lasted between three and four minutes, according to the spacing of the grooves. However, some records were smaller—7 inches (17.8 cm) in diameter, giving only about two minutes’ playing time per side: these were sold by Woolworth’s and other "cheap market" stores. Others were bigger, 12 inches (30.4 cm) in diameter and allowing a playing time of about six to eight minutes. Even so, one needed a whole set of records to cover all the movements of a symphony or concerto, and the recurrent need to change records was tiresome. Moreover, the sleeves were dull, usually a plain shade of brown, with a central hole to allow one to see the details of the record. Sometimes they bore the names of the shop or the record company, or even a sepia portrait, but they were never attractive.

Then came microgroove—records that were less breakable, but even more easily scratched. At first, they were supplied in a variety of sizes. There were singles or extended-plays, at 7 inches’ diameter (the latter featuring usually two, sometimes three, tracks). There were LPs, usually 10 or 12 inches in diameter, with between eight and fourteen tracks, able to accommodate single, long classical pieces also, and, when in sets, even plays or operas. (The English folk music company Topic also issued 8- and 9-inch LPs for a while, but the "record-players"—the new name—did not normally have such settings, so these were soon discontinued.)

The early sleeves were also pretty boring, and exactly on the 78-rpm model. However, soon they were becoming colorful, and even attractive. It was with the 10- and 12-inch LPs that record sleeve art reached its apogee. (Indeed, some folk are now collecting LPs just for the sleeves, regardless of the condition of the records.) Such sleeves also allowed for a great deal of interesting information to be printed about the music. Moreover, for this listener at least, the playing length was ideal. Yes, one did have to change records, but not often enough to be a nuisance. In an evening, one could enjoy a great variety of music with little effort.

Though reel-to-reel tapes soon became important to musicians and archivists, they did not seriously compete with microgroove. The next change came with the appearance of the cassette tape. These provided the assets of portability and space-saving, but virtually forfeited the attractive artwork. Much less information could be provided on those little card wrappers—"J-cards"—and they were too easily lost. Moreover, tape recorders needed much more care, since otherwise the tapes might distort or the "noise" on the heads mar the music. But the duration remained about right: there is much to be said for cassettes.

And now we have the compact disc. Sleeves are a little bigger, but not enough so to allow artwork of LP standard; inserts are also usually bigger but, for that reason, even more easily separated from the CD. Asset: their virtual indestructibility. Liability (at least, for this reviewer): they go on much too long, so one tends to hear a lesser variety of music in a greater time. Yes, I know one can get up and change them, if one wishes, but my observation of friends with CD players is that they don’t. For that reason, CDs are much likelier to become an only-vaguely-heard background than was the case with earlier modes of recording.

Why this lengthy discursus? Well, I’ve been happily reviewing EPS, LPs and cassettes, for this journal and others, over many years, but they’re fast disappearing from the market. While...
the CD and, even more lamentably, the video-cassette are becoming omnipresent and omnipotent. John Leeder tells me that these two cassettes may be the last I’ll ever be sent and that, if I’m going to do any more reviewing, I’d better capitulate and buy a CD player!

Well, if this is the finish, then at least it’s an enjoyable one. Raspberry Jam is an Ontario group, first formed in 1971 as the unofficial "house band" for the Canada Centre for Inland Waters, a federal research laboratory in Burlington. It began performing in public in 1982, playing at civic events, folk festivals and many other locations.

Their first cassette, Band in the Park, was issued in 1990. It features the core members of the group—Farrell and Penny Boyce, Joanne Dear and George Macdonald. Farrell and George not only furnish guitar accompaniment but were also the writers and composers of ten of the twelve songs. Of the two songs they did not write, the multi-voice rendition of T. Van Zandt’s "If I needed you" and the effective use of the chorus on Buffy Sainte-Marie’s "Now that the Buffalo’s Gone" are both admirable.

Of the "originals," I liked best those by Farrell Boyce, simply because they were so much more comprehensible! "Sunday on the St. Clair" is a charming evocation of riverboat days; "Penman’s Combinations" an amusing side-glance at the unseen benefits that a Klondike gold miner might be fortunate enough to have; and "Energy Waltz" should gratify the soul of any committed environmentalist. However, his other two compositions—"Long Ago, Far Away, Everywhere" and "Last Snow"—were understood only after I’d read the notes provided with the tapes, and attracted me much less.

By George Macdonald’s compositions, I was each time left feeling stupid, knowing that I’d not fully comprehended them. "Nautical Vacation" is restful and vaguely cheering; "Band in the Park" oozes nostalgia at every pore; "Yesterday’s Waltz" is exhortative, yet oddly ambiguous; "Rolling Down the Road" cheerfully hazy; and "Titanic Sails at Dawn" so obscure that, as even the accompanying note by Raspberry Jam admits, "You’d have to ask George himself how his thoughts were led from the image of his dog sleeping on a rug in a warm house to a dark comment on the pillage of nature!"

By the time the second cassette was recorded (between November 1992 and April 1993), three other musicians were playing with the group—Doug Moverley (bass guitar), Peter Kuhn (fiddle) and Susan Lawrence (piano). Moreover, Farrell was playing banjo, mandolin and accordion as well as guitar, while George performed also on harmonica and penny whistle. The more varied accompaniment enriches this cassette, but I missed the vocal interplay that so enhanced the first. I am also frustrated in that there is no identification of voices on either cassette. One presumes that Darrell and George are respectively the lead singers on their own compositions, but which female voice is which—Penny, or Joanne? Both sing more on this second cassette, and one of them—the vocalist on "Like a Music Box"—has an especially fine, mature voice; but whose is it?

Of the fourteen tracks on this second tape, eight are the compositions of others. Five of the six originals are by George Macdonald, and this time their message is clearer. "Red Squirrel" is very directly a lament about the environmental damage done, not just by the logging industry, but by humanity in general. (Its pairing with Wade Hemsworth’s "Logdriver’s Waltz" struck me as distinctly odd!). "Like a Music Box" is poignant and immediately comprehensible; "Memory’s on Fire" more dreamlike, with the enchanting evocation of an aura as "like a ghostly lace." "North Star Shoal" recalls a forgotten incident of history, albeit not altogether lucidly; "Innocent Bystander" contrives to be cheerful, yet poignant (and a tad confusing). The single new composition by Farrell Boyce, "The Rider," is a touching lament for a lost friend.

All the borrowed songs are well, and sometimes beautifully, sung. The words of Nanci Griffiths’ "I Wish It Would Rain" are somewhat maudlin, yet the tune is cheerful. "Satisfied Mind" is too conventionally preachy for my taste—"wealth don’t bring happiness, y’know!"—but "Sweet Bird of Youth" is a moving lament for that lost state and "Making Believe" quite acceptable. The rendition of Robert Burns’s "Westlin’ Winds" is admirable—on this cassette, the only track adorned by choruses. I enjoyed also the one traditional song on either cassette, "Lake of the Cagoma," and wonder why so good a song is so rarely sung.

All in all, these are creditable performances. Easy listening? Well, not altogether; too many tracks provoke thought or evoke sadness for that. Enjoyable, though? Yes, certainly.

—William A.S. Sarjeant
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Glen Reid. Heritage River. RRM 96SC01. Royston Road Music, RR#1, Burks Falls, Ontario P0A 1C0

Glen Reid has had a long involvement in Canadian country music. He has worked as a sideman on recordings by Blind Freddie McKenna and Stompin’ Tom Connors, and has made appearances on the TV shows of John Allan Cameron, Tommy Makem and George Hamilton IV. He is also the writer of "My Green Valleys," recorded by the Irish Rovers and most recently by the Wolfetones.

The music on this recording has a very relaxed feel. The credits refer to an unnamed studio in Toronto, but the sound could easily have been produced in Reid’s living room or some other congenial location. While the production values aren’t high, the performances sound like they are coming from people who enjoyed playing this music. Reid’s sincerity comes through clearly as well. He sounds much at home in the songs he writes and sings, and delivers them in a very listenable voice that never sounds like an attempt to be someone else. Reid is a fine picker too, and his guitar playing, as well as that of sideman Tony Quarington, is prominent throughout. There’s also some excellent fiddling banjo from Rick Fielding, and fiddling from Aaron Solomon that just plain nails the bluesier side of bluegrass, country and old-time fiddle playing.

Reid’s songs, like those of Freddy Dixon, deal with life in the Ottawa Valley. The title cut refers to the Magnetawan River, which Reid describes in the liner notes as "the lifeblood of our
"Heritage River" is a fine collection of river songs. If Glen Reid happens to play my town, I think I'll check him out. He probably won't seem much like the next big thing; I expect a modest guy with a strong vision of life in his part of the world and a passionate desire to tell the rest of us about it.

—Steve Fisher

Turner Valley, Alberta

Dave Foster. Amanda's Requests: A Sing-Along. Stormwarning Music, 1516 24 Street NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 2P9

Put together by Calgary teacher Dave Foster, Amanda's Requests features Foster on lead vocals, guitar and other instruments, Budge Burrows on guitar and vocals, Richard Harrow on bass, guitar and effects and Amanda Bartier and friends on background vocals. What Foster has assembled is a collection of 28 songs, some of which are compositions of his, which are suitable for children of early elementary school age and younger. Song titles such as "I Like to Eat Apples and Bananas" and "Beans in My Ears" give a good indication of what to expect: some fine sing- and play-along songs.

Mention should be made also of Foster's version of "Nancy's to the Lambing Gone" by the late Graham Jones [see 30.1, p. 291]. Jones, who will be best remembered as a member of the Wild Colonial Boys, wrote it about his wife, Nancy, assisting her sisters on their Alberta farm. The remaining Wild Colonial Boys, Fiona Coll and Richard Harrow assist Foster on this one.

Foster's singing and playing on this recording are quite good, as is the selection of material, but the chorus of children is mixed into the background, and in some instances it appears that they are unsure of the material that they are singing. The production values of this disc and the hit-and-miss quality of the songs make it one of the weaker ones that I have heard.

—Oisin McMahon

Calgary, Alberta


This is one of the best piping records I've heard recently. A champion piper, Calgarian Ann Gray performs equally well on the great Highland Pipes (of course) and Scottish smallpipes, shuttle pipes, and tin whistle. Her selection is very good, ranging from the anonymous (of various ages), such as "Tulloch Gorm," "The Rejected Suitor" and the magnificent "MacCrimmon Will Never Return," to "authored" tunes, old and new (Scott Skinner, besides pipers as such). Some tracks are solo, others accompanied by guitar, bodhran, bass, fiddle, as well as five other young pipers; one of the most impressive of the former is the ground of "The Park Piobaireachd No. 2." Several of her own tunes are included, all very enjoyable.

As for the playing: it is crisp, clean and accurate. The embellishments, in particular, are very nicely done; she never stumbles or slurs them. A piper friend told me he could find no fault in the record, and who am I to disagree?

—Murray Shoolbraid

Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

Alistair Brown. The Swan Necked Valve. PC002. Prospect Records, 9 Prospect Avenue London, Ontario N6B 3A4 <alistair@skyia.com>; <www.cuckoosnest.folk.on.ca.alistair.htm>

A collection of songs and tunes, played on a variety of instruments; the vocalist, Brown, himself plays anglo concertina, button accordion and harmonica. As for the selections, some are good, others—well, they do go on a bit sometimes. The arrangements are pretty good, combining all those instruments (guitar, piano, violin, mandolin, mandola, whistle, hammer dulcimer, bass) in various ways and mostly to good effect, though more could actually have been done with this. Brown's voice suits some songs, but not all (as we can all confess). The title song, by Alex Russell of Dundee, is sung to "Ricky-Doo-Dum-Day," which we're not told about in the notes. Some of these are informative, mind you, about the provenance of this and that (a sine qua non for me).

I was pleased to see a recording of "The Magdalene Green," a real Dundee song, in an interesting version, but who needs another rendition of "A Man's A Man for a' That"? Anent
which, Brown says much of it is borrowed "liberally" from another song. Not so: the sentiments are indeed something of a versification of the ideas of Thomas Paine, as Burns admitted, while the format and tune are of course from the bawdy "For A That."

Howard Kaplan. Eleven Songs That I'm Not Planning to Release on CD During the Remainder of the Second Millenium. ITCFS001.
---. Frog π. ITCFS002. Both available from Howard Kaplan, 172 Howland Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 3B6; <hkaplan@inforamp.net>

Warning: This is not an unbiased review; I have been a fan of Howard Kaplan's music since the first time I heard him, back in the late Mesozoic. I think Howard has written some amazing songs—some funny, some thought-provoking, some sad, some strange, some excruciatingly beautiful. (I told you.)

Howard has finally made a couple of commercially available (from Howard) cassette tapes. One, Eleven Songs That I'm Not Planning to Release on CD During the Remainder of the Second Millenium, is a collection of old and new material. Some are Kaplan Klassics ("Walking West on Barton Street," about being dragooned into serving on a food co-op board, "The Baking Lesson," a cute double-entendre song). Some are new (to me, anyway). The other tape, Frog π, contains only four songs (two per side), mostly about frogs or toads. This recording contains what may be the song people request most from me—"Nogie's Creek." (Just last night I got an e-mail from someone asking where she could find that song—I was glad to finally be able to send her to Howard.)

Another warning: As Woody Guthrie said of himself, Howard Kaplan, "...don't have a voice like dewdrops dripping off of rose petals." The first time I heard Howard sing "Nogie's Creek," people were laughing. It's a very beautiful and somewhat sad song, but they weren't listening to the words.

Most people (in my opinion) are not "word people"—I hear someone say, "What a beautiful song!" I say, "The words are dumb." They say, "Oh, I didn't hear the words." I believe they hear phrases ("...whirling mirrors of my mind...", "...lonely and sad...", "...Power to The People..."), but they don't notice that the song doesn't really make sense. (It seems like, to most people, form is more important than content.) Some of Howard's songs may be diamonds in the rough—but they're still diamonds. They definitely make sense, but you have to listen.

Most, but not all, of the songs on these tapes have a leaning toward one science or other. What can you expect from an ex-psychoacoustician, or someone who uses words that big? Some of them are funny, some not. Almost all of them require involvement (listening) on the part of the listener—this is not background music.

As Howard says in the notes, his songs have too many words to make the inclusion of lyrics feasible, but one can email him for them, or watch for a website (coming soon—search on the word "Thrinberry"). I confess I found it a bit difficult to make out the words to "Low Density," even with earphones.

I lament that some of the songs I like best are not on these tapes—"Lydia's Garden," "504 Streetcar Waltz," "The Front Side of a Hare" (wonderful song—fabulous rhymes), "The Little Bag." Just like that little bugger to leave us wanting more.

—Michael Cooney
Friendship, Maine

[Howard Kaplan wishes the following made known: "If you've been listening to either of my two recent cassettes, and you think my voice sounds shrill, you may be a victim of a minor communications problem. I believe that I was once told that, even though a tape is recorded with Dolby B, it is better not to actually say so on the label. The person who may have said that is no longer around to question, but his successor disagrees with that advice. Having thought about it, I agree with the successor."

"Unfortunately, the copies of my cassettes that have been distributed so far do not have either the words or the symbol for Dolby B on them; nonetheless, the music is actually encoded with Dolby B. If you have one or both of these, please write the words 'Dolby B' on the J-card. If you have been playing the tapes with Dolby turned off, and if you have the option of turning it on, the tapes will sound much better. If you don't have Dolby, then turning down the treble can also help."]

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The CFMS expects the highest possible standards of research to be applied to Canadian folkmusic [sic] and for that we are a learned society; however [] surely we stand for encouraging the same sense, if not exact type, of diligence—respect, curiosity, love— from any would-be member and for any particular interest within a wide field. Are we exclusive? No. No more so, perhaps less so [], than other organizations that are designed to serve the special interests of bluegrass people, country and western people, pop and rock, soul and jazz people. We are glad of them and there is certainly common ground to share []; it's simply that we think we're serving the thing that is at the root of it all.