The EthnoFolk Letters 12
Revival And Tradition

Dear Judy and CSTM\SCTM People,

"I'm a revivalist," Doc McConnell told us, "but my daughter's a traditional folk performer." Doc McConnell, singer, banjo player, storyteller, medicine show revivalist, was one of the many colorful characters we met in Tennessee and North Carolina in the early '80s. Born in Tucker's Knob, Kentucky—"so small we couldn't afford a town drunk, so we had to take turns"—Doc had discovered folk music in the '60s revival and had become a professional performer. By the time we met him, he was performing with his grown-up daughter Hannah, who had learned music from him in the home. In later years, I have often thought of this line, for as Andrea and I discovered folk music, and performed it for other people, we never really stopped to take account of what effects it had in our own family. Yet it seems, our revival has become our children's tradition.

When Andrea and I came to Canada in 1967, we both had been involved in folk music. Andrea had been in contact with Celtic traditions in the Isle of Man; I with agricultural folklore through a grandfather raised in Lincolnshire who believed in witches, and a strong regional tradition through my other grandfather who would occasionally produce music hall stories and songs from his Geordie ancestry in northeastern England. Both Andrea and I were brought up in industrial cities with strong local traditions, though we were at first largely ignorant of these.

Despite these tenuous influences, our first inspiration to perform came from becoming professional folksingers, initially for adult audiences. My first performances were of blues and spirituals; Alan Lomax books and broadcasts introduced me to American folksong before I had really been aware of English material. Andrea, a little younger, was inspired by the songs of Joan Baez and the Watersons. We met through performance when Andrea hired myself and colleagues from the local folk society. Gradually we began to perform again, socially, and at occasional public venues.

Arrival of three daughters (Jane, Penny and Lucy) was taken in our stride. They heard all the music we played from records: jazz and classics as well as folk. As they grew up, we looked for songs that would serve their special needs. At that time there was little available for kids—Raffi's Singable Songs, which came along in 1976, represented the only Canadian material and was supplemented by a few kids' records by Pete Seeger. There were fewer children's records out of the English tradition available, then as now. We were soon singing to and with our own kids and began to write our own songs to fill their needs better, and to provide material that directly related to their own lives.

Gradually, our group Brandywine became an absorbing professional sideline, and rather accidentally we began our 20-or-so-year career of folk music in Alberta schools, at festivals and on TV. Gradually there was more material; we went to hear other performers that came by and continued to acquire books and records. Although songs from the tradition were rare, we did begin to find stories in the communities we sang for and began to use those as well in performance.

It was natural for our kids to sing—and we and they took it for granted that they should. They delighted in songs about themselves and other kids, in nonsense, in story times, in harmony and rhythm, in jokes or silly stories. I used to sing in the car on long journeys (no radio in those days) and one holiday the kids insisted on learning from me the Scottish ballad "Mary Hamilton." My version had already been compiled from many different published ones; since I simplified the dialect for the kids, their version is also unique. (It remains a favourite song, and when they are together appears spontaneously in full harmony.)

One day, Penny (then around seven or eight) came in from making snow angels and announced that she had written a song. "Clouds are beautiful! Clouds are nice! Some clouds are white/White like mice," she sang. Simple but delightful! We adopted it into our repertoire, and (with a counter melody on the whistle) eventually recorded it on our second album. The kids came with us on the road until they were too old to take out of school, met...
all our musical friends and visiting performers, and were accepted at our singers circle, where the rule was that they could stay up as long as they behaved themselves—and they often sat in the circle and contributed themselves. As the festival scene developed, they would always be part of the audience.

With the teenage years, peer pressure transmogrified their musical tastes, and for a while the Bay City Rollers and Donny Osmond competed for space on the record player with our favourite music. The folk years had been nice while they lasted, we figured, but were bound to end sometime.

However, the kids readily performed with us when we began to do shows for the Fringe theatre and Chinook Theatre, and they all sang on our first recording. Always voluntary, their involvement exposed them to the discipline necessary to put a show together.

Perhaps as a result of this involvement, in high school their interests turned in various ways to drama—Jane to acting at Arts Trek; Penny to backstage work with the school drama club; and Lucy (who acted a multitude of parts in "real life," early earning the family nickname of "Sarah Bernhardt") also acted and danced with her school in provincial competitions. Our musical and other careers were moving ahead of their own momentum, but rarely involved the kids any more.

As they grew up into adulthood, found careers and partners, it has been fascinating to see that the background in tradition—the new tradition we had found and created—has emerged in different ways.

Our youngest, Lucy—living at a distance—has married a young man who has been part of our circle almost since his mother brought him to our concerts as a kid, and they are bringing up our grandchildren on our recordings. Our grandson Dyllan (5) sings to us over the phone "Don't Jump Off the Roof, Dad," and "My Baby Has Gone Down the Plug'ole"—cockney music hall songs from our repertoire.

Our second daughter, Penny, married a guitar player in a wedding which featured our fiddler friend Calvin Cairns, and songs from Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat and other folkies. Penny has of her own volition taken up the penny whistle (taking lessons from local performer Patrick Smith, who is much better qualified to teach her than I am), and she now plays occasional duets with me. Her son Tosh (2) is named after the reggae singer Peter Tosh and is as responsive to music as his mother ever was.

Most surprising has been our oldest daughter, Jane. After apparently settling into a career in publishing, she headed off to teach in the Czech Republic. After three years, she was fluent in Czech and had developed a flourishing side career as a singer, performing what might be loosely described as Anglo-Czech ethno-fusion something or other, in company with a talented Czech guitarist. In the Czech Republic, they travelled widely, achieving some popular success.

Back in Canada, she then completed a two-year music program at Selkirk College in Nelson. This is a community-oriented course is taught by, and creates, musicians able to hold their own in the commercial world of popular music, including rock, country, blues and jazz. As well as music, they are introduced to the business of being a musician, recording, &c. Graduation involves a half-hour recital, and although Andrea was tied up, I was able to get to the presentation (by bus, plane and ferry). She performed last of three excellent performers, and it is I hope not just fatherly pride to feel she stole the show—she was certainly the only one of the students to do original material. Perhaps more surprising was the number of resonances her program had for me.

Opening with a solo chant written last summer on a Pender beach, Jane continued with two songs originally written in the Czech republic, accompanied by guitar. For her jazz section, she chose a duet version of "Strange Fruit," the dark song about lynching that Billie Holliday made famous—and not even knowing that I used to sing it before she was born. She continued with "Waly Waly," the ballad which has become a folk standard, and which Andy and I have sung for years. With an audacity that I had never aspired to, she continued with a song in Icelandic—a country I visited more than thirty years ago.

Lastly she blew us all away with a collectively improvised version of the story of the "Seal Woman's Sacrifice" that Andrea tells so well. In this performance, Andrea’s narration had been transformed into a sung version of the story, and my guitar accompaniment had been replaced by a group collective improvisation for percussion, guitar, bass guitar, piano, and alto sax. While the folk feel was preserved by the words and the recurrent chorus, the music was rich in complexity, the sax and piano providing a jazzy feel quite new to this traditionally-based piece, venturing into polytonality as the piano "became" the storm—it was almost as if Charles Mingus had become engaged with a folk story and its music.

Jane knows only our version of the story, itself a collation from original versions from the Isle of Man and performance by Liam Clancy and Tommy Makem; theirs in turn came from Gordon Bok through who-knows-what sources to the rich tapestry of Celtic seal legends and ballads. Technically there should perhaps have been a few copyright attributions along the way, but to a folklorist, all I could see was a powerful recreation of a traditional story; a story become song and interpreted in a musical framework that is both ancient and richly contemporary, and of which all the performers were just carriers of an evolving ancient tradition.

What role music and other traditions will continue to play in our children’s lives, we do not know. But we have become aware that—largely unconsciously—we have created a new tradition that our daughters have adopted and in part are developing further. "We are revivalists," we can say with Doc, "but our daughters are traditional performers."

—David A.E. Spalding

Pender Island, BC
As a fiddler, I am always looking for media outlets that are willing to market old time and folk music. When I found out that CFCR-FM 90.5, a community radio station in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, was looking for volunteers to host their music programs, it seemed like a good idea to create a show for people like me who were looking for places to share their music. I became involved with CFCR-FM in late November 1996, and by January 1997 I had my own weekly show called Country Crossroads, airing on Thursdays from 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM.

In the one year and five months since it started, many local and international artists have graced the Saskatoon airwaves with their talents, such as fiddlers Natalie McMaster, Calvin Vollrath, John Arcand, Donnell Leahy, Dean Bernier, the Saskatchewan fiddle/piano trio known as the Cleavers, Saskatchewan bluegrass groups the Baler Strings and The Wild Flowers, and many more.

There can be more than just fiddle and bluegrass musicians that could be heard on Country Crossroads. It could be anyone from the concertmaster of the London Symphony Orchestra, a trombone trio, or Canadian stepdancing champion Chanda Gibson. You never know who could be appearing on the next show!

I am currently looking for more tapes and CDs in fiddling and bluegrass that you would like to hear played on radio; I will gladly provide airtime for you. Musicians and businesses like the idea of having a place to advertise their product to a listening audience that appreciates what they have to offer. Sponsorship for the show is going well. I hope you will consider what I have to offer.

Yours in music
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Interesting news from under the border. Sing Out!, which I often think of as our sister publication (a big sister, mind you!), has taken over Legacy Books, a distributor of scholarly and popular books in the areas of Folklore, American Studies, Social History and Popular Culture. The most recent issue of Legacy’s newsletter, Come-All-Ye, has already been produced by the Sing Out! staff, which has meant a rather improved appearance (though I don’t mean to insult the work of Lilian Krelove and Richard Burns, the previous staff).

Seems like only yesterday that Sing Out! was suffering the kind of money woes that the CSTM seems perpetually to endure. Congratulations and best wishes to them. (And perhaps they’ll whistle a little luck northward?)

To learn more about Legacy, Come-All-Ye, or Sing Out!, write Sing Out!, PO Box 5253, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA 18015-0253. You may email them: <info@singout.org>, and they have a website: <www.singout.org>.

Phil Thomas brought to the AGM in Winnipeg copies of the most recent issue of B.C. Folklore, the Bulletin of the British Columbia Folklore Society—Number 10. B.C. Folklore consists primarily, but not exclusively, of material on folklore from British Columbia and other Canadian provinces. This includes scholarly studies, reviews, notes, queries, and songs (newly-composed, as well as older). The publication looks good and is an interesting read. They offer a range of subscription fees, from $10.00 for students, seniors, and unwaged, through $15.00 for individuals, up through various steps to $500.00 for benefactors; checks should be made payable to the British Columbia Folklore Society, PO Box 312, Cobble Hill, BC, VOR 1L0. They also have a website: <www.folklore.bc.ca>, and you may email them: <info@folklore.bc.ca>.

A recent issue of Real Blues, formerly Westcoast Blues Review, also came across our desks this season, and it continues to impress. We’ve lauded this Canadian publication before, so let us assure readers that we have nothing at stake in it ourselves. Nor can we claim to be familiar with all of the several blues magazines currently available from the US. Compared to at least one of the glitzier ones that makes the Calgary newsstands (as Real Blues, alas, does not!), Real Blues is impressive in both the thoroughness and the seriousness of its coverage of the topic, not to mention their concern for economic fairness for the artists (which leads them, for instance, to refuse to review or advertise pirate recordings). As often as not, their covers and features showcase lesser known performers, and their articles invariably offer depth, at least in terms of exploring the artists’ careers and histories. They do not seem to be long on analysis, but maybe that’ll come later. The historical material they are gathering is important in itself and will probably spark insights.
for scholars and fans for years to come. At least—Thank God!—they don’t waste time on the sort of publicity release re-hash (or imitation) I’ve seen in a large number of other music magazines (not merely blues magazines).

The Mail Bag of the October/November issue includes an interchange between editor Andy Griggs and a reader, Sandra Tooze, who complains about a comment in an earlier issue, when Griggs praised a Chicago blues band for "maintaining an ‘African-Americans Only’ policy" regarding membership. Griggs’s response, I gather from at least one conversation I’ve had in Calgary, will not satisfy all readers; indeed, it seems to me a mistake to speak of the blues, as Griggs does, as one tradition. But I was impressed by the coherence of his response, and I think it is a good thing that at least one publication will go out of its way to feature obscure originators of this music. While I suppose it may be possible to administer affirmative action in such a way that it becomes reverse racism, I don’t really believe that this happens as often as the Conrad Blacks (oops!) and Preston Mannings would have us believe. In fact, even the Muddy Waters and B.B. Kings of the blues world have received far less recognition and financial recompense than the Johnny Winters and Eric Claptons. It’s worth adding to this that, from what I’ve seen, Real Blues has treated white musicians quite fairly—the review pages, for instance, seem to me to give them their due.

This interchange is worth mentioning here because controversy sells magazines. Rather than claiming that the presentation of Real Blues is racially divisive, it seems to me more sensible to consider that the publishers have carefully defined for themselves a territory, one which would be diluted without these boundaries. I don’t know whether they’ve covered John Koerner, Jack Teagarden, Lonnie Mack, Tommy Duncan, Roscoe Holcomb, or Herb Ellis—who are all white musicians with particular affinity for the blues—but those players are themselves from at least four different traditions, and few, if any, of them would have found themselves onstage together (save, perhaps, in revivalal circumstances), so I don’t know why they should appear in any one magazine. Some of these musicians and the circles in which they work have been adequately covered elsewhere, but there’ll be hoarfrost in Honolulu before you see Jimmie Lee Robinson or Wild Child Butler on the covers of Rolling Stone or many other publications, and I’ll bet you don’t even see John Lee Hooker or Slim Harpo that often on the insides of most magazines.

Speaking of covers—presumably Real Blues has not gone to full color for financial reasons, but we hope that they stick to B&W even when their cup runneth over. Looks grownup!

In Canada, you can get six issues (their annual output) for $30.00 (single issue: $5.50). Write Real Blues, 302-655 Herald Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 3L6. Write them on email: <rblues@ampsc.com>; web: <http://realbluesmagazine.com>.

I hope all the banjo players, ballad mongers, and white-blues lovers in the crowd looked at the epigraph on the cover of the November Atlantic Monthly: Music: The Dock Boggs Revival. Not in particularly large letters, it might have been lost over a very striking photo of Jack Kerouac. Who’d’a ever thought Dock Boggs would have made such a mass circulation magazine, let alone receive the sort of intellectual consideration many of us have long thought his art deserved?

Mind you, I’m not sure that “revival” is really an appropriate term—there’s been a reissue of early Boggs material, on John Fahey’s Revenant label, and author William Hogeland makes a cryptic reference to Boggs on X-Files (cryptic in that I’m not sure whether he really means it or not) but I doubt that selling as well as, oh, say any repackaging of old Judy Collins hits. However, I suppose that this revival line may have been the hook that sold the essay to the Atlantic, so let’s do our doubting in whispers, just in case Hogeland tries to sell them another one.

Whether Hogeland’s insights will all stand in a few years is beside the point. Some of these ideas have been floating around the intellectual wing of the folk music revival for a while, so they can be assumed to have some sturdiness. I’m not sure that I agree with his quarrel with those who focus on the dark side of Boggs’s musical persona, which seemed important to at least some of the singer’s contemporaries, those who liked to say, "Get out of the graveyard, Dock." No matter. It’s so sweet to see this music given serious attention that is not loaded with postmodern gobblydegook.

Indeed, part of Hogeland’s intent in writing the article is to skewer some of Greil Marcus’s empty rhetoric on Boggs (the article, "Corn Bread When I’m Hungry," is subtitled, "Dock Boggs and rock criticism," and the table of contents blurbs refers again to a revival and adds "The music criticism that comes with it is a small price to pay."). If one had a complaint with the piece, it would surely be that it consists too much of Hogeland sparring with Marcus, whose essay Hogeland refers to as the "most substantial contribution" to the notes to the Revenant set. Marcus would hardly be my first choice to analyze Boggs; in fact, his essay comes from a book on Dylan’s Basement Tapes, part of the Dylan revival of the last couple of years. (Did I really just write those words? Dylan revival? Enjoy yourselves, it’s later than I thought!)

But I agree that it is important to rescue Boggs (or anyone!) from postmodernism. Dock Boggs has long been a hero of mine, but, as Hogeland rightly points out, he’s only one hero of many in old time music. One of Marcus’s mistakes, one mistake of a certain kind of simpleminded revivalism generally, is a species of reductionism, seeking to single out specific heroes. Thus, Hogeland feels, Marcus may be making Boggs yet another representative of "rock criticism’s heroic legend, in which a rebellious white man enlivens American music by opening it to the saving grace of negritude": Norman Mailer’s hipster as "white negro," or Sam Phillips’s "white man who could sing like a black" (Elvis the Pelvis). But Hogeland reminds us, "...Boggs learned at least some of his fingerpicking style from a white man. Many white players ... credited black banjoists with having taught them to play." He might have added that some of them, including Sam McGee and Johnny Winter, sometimes downplayed the value of the work of their mentors. But if "you can’t extricate blackness from whiteness in early recorded music; you can’t extricate folk art from hucksterism, North from South, or city from country," then perhaps we simply don’t need such
byronic heroes, whatever degree of respect they offer their forebears.

One of the most significant aspects of Hogeland's article (which relies heavily upon his discussions with Mike Seeger, who worked closely with Boggs for many years) is his demonstration that any commentary upon a musical culture needs to be more than theoretically informed. Thus Marcus overprices Boggs for the "clarity" of his playing, assuming that the style of many of his contemporaries, often termed by such noisy names as "frailing," "rapping," or "clawhammer," must have resulted in a undifferentiated flurry of sound, an idea Hogeland rightly dismisses with a reference to the elegant Mt. Airy, North Carolina, style of such banjoists Tommy Jarrell.

Hogeland concludes with a desire to see the old time music that Dock Boggs—and many others—played "gain the kind of committed mainstream acceptance long enjoyed by rock, blues, jazz," and other genres we all could name. His essay will certainly help that to happen. I'll conclude with a hope for the day when Canadian Forum, This Magazine, or maybe even Saturday Night will offer such carefully researched, respectful, and—most of all—insightful studies of, say, Alfred Montmarquette, Tom Brandon, Andy de Jarlis, or Wilf Doyle.

But I'm not holding my breath.

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Our Back Pages

Fifteen Years Ago
Bulletin 17.4 (October 1983). The picture of Stan Rogers on the cover heralds a tribute issue, with articles written by Ian Robb, David Alan Eadie, Paul Mills, Mansel Davies, Grit Laskin, Tim Rogers, and Emily Friedman, a photo essay, a list of Stan's recordings and writings, and Stan's final column in The Singers series. Other articles were "Christmas at Fiddler's Green" by Caroline Balderstone Parry and "Records 'n Kids" by Sandy Byer. Dave Spalding's column on children's songs made an appearance, as did songs "The True Newfoundland" (Lem Snow), "Bow Down" (an Ontario version of Child 10), and "The Pedestrian Prayer" (Jim Payne). Items reviewed were Roy W. Gibbons's book As It Comes: Folk Fiddling in Prince George, British Columbia and recordings from Jacques Labreque and Music from the Simon Fraser Collection from Paul Cranford.

Ten Years Ago
Bulletin 22.2-4 (December 1988). A response to earlier "hard times" was a triple issue—not, unfortunately, with triple content, but with a respectable batch of articles. There was soul-searching in Bill Sarjeant's "Folk Music Today: A Problem of Definition" and Murray Shoobridge's "The Meaning of 'Traditional';" GWL gave us "Folk Music in NFB Films," and David W. Watts contributed "Folk Music in Children's Music Education in the English-Speaking World"; "Two More Railroad Songs from Alberta" came from Tim Rogers. In addition to the railroad songs, Bill Gallaher's "The Newfoundland Sealers" and "Skookumchuck Camp Song" saw print. Donald Deschênes reviewed a number of LPs of Quebec instrumental music on Folkways; also reviewed were recordings André Alain: Violoneux de St-Basile de Portneuf, Anne Lederman's compilation Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba and Barry and Lyn Luft's Flower in the Snow and the book Bruce Cockburn: All the Diamonds.

Five Years Ago
Bulletin 27.4 (December 1993). This issue was mistakenly identified as 27.3 on its cover. It was sort of a theme issue, including "Jewish Languages, Jewish Songs" by Nomi Kaston, "Mir Zenen Do: Montreal Memories" by Rona Altrows, "Klezmer in Canada, East and West," by GWL, and "Two Shtetl Folksongs: 'Die Soch' and 'Der Mail Lied'" from Ghittha Sternberg. There was also an EthnoFolk Letter from Judith Cohen, an Ottawa (and Area) Folk Directory, and reviews of books "Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles: The Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands (Keith Chandler) and Whistling Jigs to the Moon: Tales of Irish and Scottish Pipers (Joane Assala) and recordings Close to the Floor: Newfoundland Dance Music and Six Mile Bridge.

Complete your collection! Lynn Whidden passed on a box of Bulletin back issues dating from her editorship, so you can now get originals of some issues which have heretofore been available only as photocopies. These include 24. 2 (Summer 1990), 24. 3 (Fall 1990) and 2.2 (Summer 1991). The cost of each issue is $3.00 for members, $3.50 for non-members; shipping is $1.50 for the first item, .50 per item thereafter. The address to get them from is: CSTM Back Issues, 224 20th Avenue NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2M 1C2.

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In general, Canadian festivals are doing what they can do rather well. The fact that they can't do what we want them to do is our problem, not theirs. Mariposa tried to do something meaningful with Canadian music last year, and discovered that nobody wanted to listen.

Ian Robb Bulletin 17.2 (Avril/April 1983)