

A Tribute to Graham Townsend

Al Yetman

To put it mildly, we are not pleased that both our lead articles in this issue must be obituaries, and these followed immediately by Stanley Triggs's *Hail and farewell* to his musical friend, Vincent Ierfino. Al Yetman's account of the Graham Townsend Tribute last Fall, though it presaged Graham Townsend's death from cancer, was written while the fiddler was still alive. At the very time we accepted it for publication, news came through, first of Townsend's own end, but then the dreadful deaths of Eleanor and their granddaughter. *The days the music died?* Perhaps, but the two celebrations of the Townsends' lives described on these pages remind us that music is about the bad times as well as the good, that music (as good ol' Aristotle understood) has a way of finding the good within the bad. No matter how crowded that Heavenly Band is getting, the Earth keeps producing more players. Let's honor the old, who have given us the new. [GWL]

On Sunday, October 25, 1998, at the Orangeville Convention Centre, hundreds of musicians and fans turned out to pay tribute to Graham and Eleanor Townsend, two of Canada's great old time fiddlers. The idea grew from a spark in the mind of Willis McNeilly, president of the Canadian Fiddlers' and Step Dancers' Hall of Fame. Talent from some of North America's greatest fiddlers made it a success. Over 200 showed up a day ahead of time to jam and warm up for the Sunday event. A Saturday night barn dance paved the way.

On Sunday evening, MC Larry Stacy announced the arrival of Graham and Eleanor Townsend in the rumble seat of a 1934 Ford. They drove on to the stage, past an array of photographs of Graham taken with top celebrities, including Don Messer, Tommy Hunter, and fellow musicians from the Grand Ol' Opry and around the world.

At 2:00 p.m., Graham and Eleanor Townsend made the grand entry in style, in the rumble seat of a 1934 Ford. They drove past an impressive and memorable array of photographs of Graham with celebrities, including Don Messer, Tommy Hunter and musicians from the Grand Ole Opry and throughout the world. They viewed a lifetime display of Townsend albums, supplied by Lynn Russwurm, and were then escorted to a special platform occupied only by two empty

chairs and a large arrangement of fresh flowers.

Let the show begin!

The back-up band was comprised of Phyllis McDowall on piano, Ken Deschorme from Wingham on rhythm guitar and Charlie Steinhoff on bass. The melodious sounds of a Graham Townsend hornpipe which filled the hall were played by the talented Mark Sullivan. Over the years, the audience had watched Mark grow musically from a small boy to the bright and talented young adult of today. Larry Stacy beckoned to the nod of "Let the show begin!" from Willis McNeilly.

Young Lindsay and Tyler Beckett dedicated "St. Anne's Reel" to the Townsends. Sandy MacIntyre, with his sister Mary on piano and John Alexander on guitar, played some favourite Cape Breton Celtic tunes. Sandy, before reminiscing on his 30-year friendship with Graham, gave credit to Graham for having spread the gospel of old time fiddle music throughout the world. John Alexander picked and strummed his guitar, bringing out unique sounds, including that of a kettle drum.

Good Husband and Father

Each guest musician spoke words of praise for Graham Townsend's contribution to the music world. The most important tribute to Graham Townsend came from his wife, Eleanor, who affectionately

praised him as a good husband and a great father to their son, Gray. She told of his sense of humour and positive and delightful attitude, which helped them through many trials and tribulations as he clung to his great love and passion for old time fiddling. Eleanor cried openly as she spoke of Graham's strong belief in God. After playing "Banks of Newfoundland" in Celtic style, she continued with special dedications to Graham, who had been given his own microphone to add his own one-liners.

She searched her memory for a special dedication to Graham, but could not remember the melody for the "Sir John A. MacDonald Waltz," from Graham's 1967 album dedicated to Canada's Prime Ministers. Graham, who was given his own microphone, jogged her memory with his "dom dom de da da," to the delight of 500 excited and affectionate fans.

Don Messer's Fiddle

Frank Leahy, 1984 Canadian Champion and the recipient of Don Messer's fiddle, praised Graham for having been one of the very few musicians who managed to earn a living from playing. Frank played "Amazing Grace" in many styles.

Don Reed, who performed on the Tommy Hunter show, played the "Sir Charles Templeton Waltz." He spoke of remembering Graham visiting his home and eating lemon pie when Don was only 8 years old. Ed Gyurki, seven-time cham-

pion, did his rendition of "Memory Waltz," which was followed by an awed silence. Ed referred to Graham as the "King of the Fiddle."

Graham always spiffy

Rudy Meeks, four-time winner of the Canadian Championship, commented, "In showing up for gigs, you could always depend on Graham to be there and to be dressed spiffy, not with the ass out of his pants." The crowd roared at the open and sincere honesty between two musical comrades.

The late Mel Levine was the first winner of the Canadian Open. His wife May recalled Mel getting young Graham on stage as a boy with Gordon Lightfoot, Johnny Mooring, and Ned Landry.

Nelson Hill and Bob Carruthers from the Shelburne Rotary Club (sponsor of the Shelburne Fiddle Contest) paid tribute to Graham and Eleanor, who were basking in happy memories being relived.

Country Hall of Fame

Gary Buck, founder and President of the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame, presented Graham with a certificate in appreciation of his great contribution to country music in Canada. Murray Caulder, MP, gave a version of an old time jig, in which he "danced all around the issue."

Phil Howes said, "When I started playing, Graham said to slow it down and make it danceable. That was good advice." Eleanor taught Phil that a fiddle tune is simply "gems of musical thought." Gerry Smith said, "Graham, a legend in his own time, was already sounding like Don Messer at age 12." Cards and letters of good wishes poured in from across Canada from those who could attend only in spirit.

Who stole the show?

If anyone stole the show with off-the-cuff conversational humour with Graham and Eleanor, it was Bill Irving, an eight-time Champion winner. The laughter started as soon as Bill walked on stage and Graham said "I hope you're not going to roast me, Bill," to which Bill replied, "Graham, I'd like to roast you over the biggest spit I could find!" About almost every memory that he came up with, Bill added, "We can't talk about that here, though." Nevertheless, they did

share a few stories, from the time they rented a new Lincoln which they smashed en route from Calgary to Carman, Manitoba, to Graham plugging a jukebox at the Georgetown Legion with 50 quarters to promote their favourite song. Every story was speckled with beer and good-natured humour, and the audience loved it. They expected it. They got it.

I could feel goosebumps...

After playing "Beautiful Irene," a waltz which brought tears to some eyes and sent goosebumps up the spine, Bill began to leave the stage. Suddenly, almost as an afterthought, he stopped, turned, and fixing his eyes on Graham with an expression of sincerity and admiration, he spontaneously blurted out, "Graham, you are the greatest damn fiddler that every lived, in my books, anyway, and you sure helped me a lot." Such unrehearsed humility from one of Canada's top fiddlers!

Bobby Brown, accordionist, pianist and leader of the Cape Breton Symphony, recalled when he played piano for Eleanor when she won the Canadian Open at Shelburne. He said, "Graham is the most natural fiddler in North America." Mark Sullivan, the up-and-coming "New Graham Townsend," said it all: "Graham, it is a privilege, no, an honour to be playing with you today."

John Allan Cameron sang "Out On The Myra" and "Islanders" with his son Stewart and Tommy Ledbetter. He then dazzled the audience with "Butterfingers Medley" on his 12-string guitar.

Eleanor's brother (Jim Reed) and her sister (Jewel Eden) spoke of Eleanor's proven ability as a child to take the aggressive lead, even in games, as Jewel played "second fiddle." Jewel revealed that she is the real "Jewel" in Eleanor's "Jewel Waltz." On that note, the sisters became emotional; the tears flowed down their cheeks as Jim came to the rescue to finish up their tribute. They all hugged in family unison—a touching sight in a fraternity which we all sometimes refer to as "my extended family."

Inducted in Hall of Fame

In a touching ceremony, Graham and Eleanor were then inducted into the Canadian Fiddlers' and Step Dancers' Hall of Fame. Two youngsters, Lindsay and

Tyler Beckett, draped the Hall of Fame medallions on the necks of their heroes.

Graham and Eleanor then came on stage and played a few well-selected tunes to a standing ovation, as their son, Gray, made the piano sing to every note. The Townsends expressed their gratitude to Willis McNeilly, to the many fiddling champions who came to honour them, and to the most important group of all, the audience.

Having acknowledged the standing ovation, which the musical family had won, Eleanor played "Into the Heart of the Mountains," which she dedicated to Graham. Her tune touched the spirit of everyone in the crowd, especially when Graham lifted his bow in beautiful harmony on the last verse.

The Rafters Shook

After that, the walls and ceiling shook to the rafters as many of the great Canadian fiddlers joined the Townsends on stage to play 13 non-stop old time jammin' tunes. It was the best-sounding jam session this writer has ever heard. It started with "St. Anne's Reel" and ended with "Maple Sugar" and 1,000 swollen, smarting hands.

A white, stretched limo drove right up to the stage and whisked away the heroes to the wonderful sound of their own music.

What a day! What a tribute to two of Canada's gifts to the music world!

Epilogue

With much sadness, I must add that, two weeks following the tribute, Eleanor's Dad passed away. Then, two weeks later, on December 3, 1998, Graham passed away after a year-long battle with cancer. He died at his home in Barrie, Ontario. In the same house, on December 31, 1998, Eleanor and her granddaughter died in a house fire. Graham and Eleanor's only son, Gray, suffered a breakdown after losing his father, mother, grandfather and niece.

Farewell, Graham and Eleanor. You will be missed by many, but the lively sound of your "gems of musical thought" from my tape deck tells me you will live on forever in many hearts, as two of Canada's greatest old time fiddlers.