

## The Centrefold

It seems that we're not the only ones giving some thought to the question of reviews, and the degree of negativity that is acceptable in them. (See our editorials in 33.1, p.2 *et seq.*) In the most recent issue of the Scottish folk music magazine *The Living Tradition* (#35, p.5), reviewer Alex Monaghan responds to a couple of letters which (reading between the lines) appear to have complained vehemently about some relatively minor matters. He says, in part:

... I would point out that the majority of reviewers are expected to be authoritative on a wide range of styles..., to restrict themselves to two or three hundred words in describing an hour of music, to produce reviews at quite short notice, and to do all of this for free. Some even attempt to be original and entertaining, at no extra cost. It is not surprising, then, if a portion of reviewers eventually go insane and lose control of their faculties to the point where they make factual errors and use subjective language in their reviews. A plea of diminished responsibility would seem to be justified in such cases.

While this does not totally mirror the *Bulletin's* review practices (for instance, we don't expect every reviewer to be knowledgeable about every kind of folk music, but try to match CDs to individuals' areas of expertise; our length constraints (if we have any!) are less defined; we don't always expect as fast a turnaround, as we don't attempt to keep on the cutting edge of the folk music recording industry), nevertheless Mr. Monaghan's comments give insight into the conditions under which our reviewers, like those of other magazines, operate.

Next door to Alex's letter, editor Pete Heywood adds some thoughts of his own, under the title "Who Would Dare to Judge?":

... Who would be a judge or a referee! Some people are brave enough to do it and most of the time they seem to get it right. Dealing with reviews is one of the least satisfying aspects of my job. We are genuinely trying our best and will continue to do so...

...Send in your albums for review, after all the effort this is the least that you should do to promote it, but please do not invent all sorts of conspiracy theories if it either doesn't make it to our pages or the review is not to your liking. Please don't presume that if it isn't published that we don't like your work. We all quite like folk music actually and as most of what we receive is considerably better than my modest talents, we are more often than not impressed with the results. We will

listen to ideas and criticisms and try to take them on board. We will also try to explain our policies as best we can.

More forcefully, Ian Robb, in his column "The British North America Act" in *Sing Out!* (44.1, p.100), takes the gloves off:

...In some magazines you will rarely see a negative review. Reviewers sometimes appear to bend over backwards to be nice to an artist, to find something positive and encouraging to say about the inconsequential and forgettable piece of dross that has been sent to them. This is a classic example of doing the wrong thing for the best of reasons. Nobody likes to destroy a musician (unless, of course the musician is arrogant enough to deserve a good thrashing). Negativity is anathema to our cooperative, nurturing, communal culture. It just doesn't fit well with folkies. Well sorry, but at the risk of being called an asshole, here's a different view. If you think your work is interesting enough to record your own CD, unleash it on the public, try to make a buck off it and send it out for review, it's time to peel off that delicate porcelain skin and replace it with armor plate, because you are now fair game, buddy. As is anyone who publishes anything.

...I can't help thinking that people who present themselves as reviewers have some obligation to use both edges of the sword. If they don't, ultimately their own credibility will suffer...

The folk media are not there primarily to serve the artist, and they are not a collaborative or subservient part of the recording industry's advertising or promotion strategy. In most cases, the exposure these people offer to our music is a huge return for the few dollars it costs us to send each of them a CD. In short, they owe us no obligation beyond that of being honest and not shirking the responsibilities of a credible critic. If they receive fewer CDs from disgruntled musicians as a result of living up to these obligations, that's not necessarily such a loss.

Ian is speaking from a musician's point of view, while Alex wrote as a reviewer and Pete as an editor. Pretty well covers the spectrum, although recent experience suggests that not all musicians are as hard-nosed as Ian about the place of reviews in the scheme of things. As far as the *Bulletin* is concerned, as Pete says, we're trying our best and will listen to ideas and criticisms and "take them on board." We all could do worse than take on board the above insightful comments. [JL]



"A la Claire Fontaine" is known and sung by every one. "On n'est pas Canadien sans cela," says Mr. Gagnon.