"Everybody can write, and everybody can sing."

A Musical Journey Wednesday Oct 14, 1998

Jon Bartlett

Jon Bartlett, former Society President and former editor of the Canada Folk Bulletin, which merged with this Society’s Newsletter to become the publication you are reading, gave the following presentation to members of Vancouver’s Folk Song Society last year. Needless to say, your Calgary-bound editors were not present, but we knew a good thing when we saw it, and asked Jon to turn on a tape recorder, if he wasn’t doing it already, and to send us a copy. Not as much fun as being there, but as close as we—or you—can come.

In editing this, I resisted the temptation to provide more closure than actually occurred (the evening drifted off into munchies, socializing and singing) and have left an inconclusive ending, pointing to the future. It seemed only fair to give Jon’s wife Rika the last word, given her prominence in Jon’s activity and her threat that she will not offer a similar biographical evening in the future.

It is perhaps sad to note that despite the considerable efforts of Jon and Rika, of Phil Thomas, of Dorothy and Homer Hogan of Maple Sugar (see Bulletin 33.1 for Dorothy’s account of their activities with the late Graham Townsend), and many others from the early 70s onward, few Canadian doctors yet know any Canadian songs.

Thank you. I’d like to start off by recommending this process to everyone here. You put your life on the table, and you think, "Now, what have I done?" and "Why’d I do that?" You go through a process of re-evaluation of what you’ve been doing. I have, for my pains, a whole bunch of old diaries, going back to 1958. So, I’m poring through these diaries, trying to straighten my memories out, to see whether my memories are correct, and they are pretty much correct. Of course, when I read the stuff in the diaries, I wonder, "Who is this person?" I don’t know who they are, so far back.

I thought that what I’d do is to start off chronologically, so you can get a sense of where much of this stuff comes from. And then start talking about some themes, maybe, things that I share with a bunch of people in this room. I’ll start off with where I come from.

I was born in London in 1946 and moved to Sussex when I was about seven, eight. I was in Sussex until I was about 18 and then went back to London until 21, when I came here. And that’s the story of my life, apart from trips from here—to Australia for a year, to the States for a year. But I haven’t lived anywhere else in Canada. It’s Vancouver and New Westminster, which have been my home since 1968.

I’d like to say that I came from a family which sang, but it really didn’t, though it should have done, since both my mother and my father had nice voices. My father would sing things like

When father painted the parlour, you couldn’t see pa for paint...
You never saw such a blinking family so stuck up before.

And my mother would sing occasional verses from hymns or, I think, popular songs, but not of her era, of her mother’s era. I think she’d picked up these fragments from my grandmother. As I say, they both had fine voices, but they didn’t pass on any songs to me.

Apart from one, actually. One complete one, which is

There is a happy land
Far, far away
Where they have ham and eggs
Three times a day
Oh, you ought to see them run
When they see the farmer come
Cutting slices off their bums
Three times a day.

But that doesn’t qualify as much of a repertoire.

I began to sing in the choir when we moved to Sussex. High Anglican church choir. So there was a lot of stage business, which you didn’t get in the lower orders. Cassocks and surplices, and lighting the candles and putting the candles out, and processions. There was no ringing of bells, but there might just as well have been; it was one of those churches. I would sing there on Sundays, Morningsong and Evensong. And I recall how nice Evensong was in the late summer, with the light coming in the windows. And twenty people in this church, which was, essentially, a fourteenth century church. Sunday morning was the parade of the classes, with the highest classes at the front and the lowest classes at the back. But Sunday evening was just more democratic. There were people who would only come to Evensong; it was much friendlier.

I did all the boy soprano bits; the vicar would be Good King Wenceslas, and I’d be his serf, carrying all his ...
Right?

Bring me flesh, and bring me wine....

I can see a cartoon of this poor little kid, standing there with all this.... [Laughter]

My singing history started with the Aldermaston marches in 1962. Beginning in the 60s was a very strong anti-bomb movement in Britain, called the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It was quite a widespread movement: it included a huge number of church people; it included much of the Labour Party; included a big segment of the trade union movement, and then various odds and sods like the Woodcraft Folk, who were a sort of Communist Party Boy Scouts, and the Communist Party itself, and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. What united them all was a campaign to abolish the British unilateral deterrent. The British bomb, not the American bomb. The British bomb, which apparently had a British finger on the trigger, so you wouldn’t have to rely on some kind of President to press the button. Our own Prime Minister could do it. If he could be awakened in time. The Campaign started in '61, and it was running right, well, to the early 90s, I suppose. Maybe the end of the Soviet Union finally killed it.

Starting in '61, there was a march from Aldermaston, which was an atomic weapons research base, in Berkshire, I believe, coming out of Slough. It was just immense.

Throughout the march there were little bands, groups of people with guitars and banjos. I don’t recall seeing any people with fiddles. And it seemed to me that they were all Scottish. It seemed that the Scottish were the best people at organizing that kind of stuff. There is a record that Folkways put out—I’d like to track it down—that had a bunch of these things on it. They’re real ephemeral. If you don’t catch ’em, they’re gone. And this part of our social history disappears on us unless someone’s there to record it or write down the songs.²

I began to get a notion of the Scottish folksingers who sang Scottish folksongs. Also on TV at the time, Robin Hall and Jimmy Mcgregor were on every night, shortly after six, singing on a program called Tonight. It was like a magazine format, and they sang one song every night. With Robin Hall sitting on a stool and McGregor playing guitar, and them just singing things like "Nicky Tams" or "The Day We Went to Rothsay-o."

So that’s where I got my first idea of song as a way of influencing people. That and all the shouting, the chanting that went on—every year I’d end up at Hyde Park with [Whispers] no voice at all from the shouting.

The next thing which affected me was something my sister brought back from the States. She worked for BOAC, and she went to the States in 1964 and came back with a Bob Dylan record. Up until then, I’d been listening—I didn’t like pop music, and I tried to like classical, but I really couldn’t get off on it because I didn’t like the people who liked classical; it was sort of a class thing.

WOMAN’S VOICE: Reverse snobbery, Jon.

I’m not sure what it was. But I fell in with a guy was listening to R&B, some black stuff—Howling Wolf, people like that—and I listened to this stuff. I’m going to play you one cut from this Dylan thing which she brought back. It changed my perception of American folk music. I’d been thinking it was Burl Ives-y.

[Plays "Hollis Brown" and passes around James Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, with photographs by Walker Evans]

It seems to me the pictures illustrate the song. Most of the pictures are in the South because this is James Agee, but it seems to me that the same sort of situation held on the Great Plains up to the Dakotas in the Thirties. This was a land which could not properly be farmed, and it should never have been farmed, certainly in the ways in which it was farmed. But the greed of the opening of the West, and all of the stories that are associated with that. People coming out, thinking they were going to escape poverty by becoming farmers.

I found in this music an unsentimental but very angry music. Something which spoke the truth. That song still moves me...
because of its construction, because of its content. When I think
that it was written by a 21-year-old, it’s really quite astonishing.
There are absolutely classic, Beowulf lines in there. What’s that
one? "Way out in the wilderness, a cold coyote calls." I mean,
it’s just a classic Beowulf line, the way the syllables work: four
beats, caesura, alliteration. It wasn’t artifice on his part. It just
sort of came naturally. It doesn’t sound forced or precious.

Also it sounded black in the same way that when I first
heard Randy Newman, I thought this was a black guy singing.
He’d got the language so exactly right. And I could not connect
the picture on the cover of Dylan’s record [Columbia CI2105
The Times They Are A-Changing] with someone with that ex-
pience. This is not an experienced face. It’s a wonderful
picture, but it’s not, in a manner of speaking, the person who
made the song.

So I began to be interested in that kind of stuff. I listened
to this album and the one that came after, and after that I could-
an’t connect with Dylan any more. Shortly after, a girl friend of
mine introduced me to Joan Baez, and I was similarly impressed
with Baez because, again, there was a seriousness there which I
hadn’t heard in American folk music before. Burl Ives and Pete
Seeger—there was a sort of sentimental narrowing of life. But I
found her stuff to be moving, her early stuff, particularly.

I’d heard some British stuff which would parallel this. The
other thing, of course, is the album covers. When you’re 16 and
17, you’re moved by album covers.

[Plays "John Riley"]

The first album is the British cover. This is the American
cover [Vanguard VR9078 Joan Baez Volume One]. What I
liked about the cover is that here’s a person who isn’t even
looking at the camera. It was underplayed, and that really
 appealed to me. It wasn’t some big entertainer. The notes on the
back, also, are demanding. They’re not pop notes. They’re notes
which say, "This is a serious, worthwhile thing to think about,
to know about, to sing about." It wasn’t like, her favorite color,
as one was getting on pop stuff.

It was a liberation to discover that one could take folk songs
seriously and that there was a body of material which I’d never
come across. One or two, I think I’d heard, but most of it I’d
never heard before. So it was for me, an opening of the door.

She mentioned beside one of the songs, "Child 15," and I
thought, "What is this ‘Child 15’? Is there some big book about
children? Henry Martin’s a child? He’s a pirate!" I couldn’t
work out what the connection was. It didn’t say anywhere what
Child was. Of course, he’s the guy who made the big collection
of all the ballads and put numbers alongside. So people now talk
about Child 15 or Child 20, "The Cruel Mother."3

So the influences on me from the States was Dylan, in the
political dimension, and Baez from a traditional point of view.
It wasn’t until I got to a folk club, which I did in ’65, though
I think I got to a couple earlier—the Heart and Hand, in Bright-
on, I was there for a few times. But the club that I first started
going to regularly was the Springfield in Brighton. And the two
residents of the Springfield were Jack Scott and Terry Master-
son. Terry’s still there. Jack Scott’s here; he’s in Ladner; he’s
writing novels. He’s writing all these Arthurian ... he’s that
guy. It was from them that I got my first repertoire. As one
does, when one starts to sing—one finds someone and starts to
steal stuff from them.

They were very good. They were very well matched as a
pair of residents. They would sing four or five songs on a
Friday night in the pub, and there would be a guest, a paid, pro-
fessional guest—I don’t know, "professional,"—and a few floor
singers, who would sing one or two songs each. And everyone
would join in. The Springfield was a wonderful, wonderful
choir. These guys would all get together and sing these thirds
and sixths and ninths, and whatever else, just making a big, fat
sound. It was just delightful to listen to. And it always shocked
the guests, who weren’t used to that kind of support.

When I left in 1968, I was interested in folk songs. I had
sung—in fact, I looked through my diary, tomorrow is the 33rd
anniversary of my first singing. Fifteenth of October, 1965, was
when I first sang in a club.

MAN’S VOICE: Do you remember which song you sang?

I sang "Solidarity Forever," which I had learned at a Young
Socialist weekend school on the Common Market, the EEC, a
year earlier. I don’t know why I chose that. That’s not a British
song; it’s an American Wobbly song. Again, you wonder how
people pick things up.

So, I came to Canada. Oh, we should do a Waterson song
because, before I came to Canada, the songs that I was interested
in listening to came from groups like the Young Tradition and
the Watersons, and Lou Killen, who’s also here, he’s down in
Bellingham, and Tommy Armstrong and The Iron Muse. The
Iron Muse [Topic 12T86] was an album of industrial folk songs,
mostly from the north, and then following that was an album put
out on the work of Tommy Armstrong, who was the guy who
wrote "The Durham Lockout," his most famous song [Topic
12T122 Tommy Armstrong of Tyneside]. The lockout occurred
in 1893. The songs are sung, on the album, by Lou Killen,
Johnny Handle, and a whole bunch of northern singers. Those
are the things I was listening to. Here’s one of them, one of the
Watersons’ songs. It’s called "The Holmfirth Anthem," and
every line repeats, so you can sing along.

[Sings with recording]

A lot of this stuff makes a fine noise, but if you start taking
the text apart, you realize that there isn’t much content there,
and if there is any content, you’d probably disagree with it. Be-
cause a lot of it has to do with killing small animals, chasing
them to death across fields. They were very big on hunting
songs, those guys.

Before I leave the question of England, I want to raise one
of the biggest questions for folk singers. At the time, certainly,
I thought about the question of stance. It’s one thing to sing
songs about working on the levee, as many Americans did, but
for a Brit, A) you’re not American, and B) you’re not black. So
what are you doing, singing these songs? So, you say, OK, do
what Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger say, learn some English
songs and sing the English songs. Well, OK, what kind of En-
glish songs have you got? Well, we’ve got the songs of peasants,
of farm laborers. We’re not farm laborers! We’re no more farm
laborers than we’re blacks or Americans. A bit closer to home.
Or you can say, Let's sing some mining songs. Well, we're not miners, either. We don't go down in the mines in the summer break. Or drive steam engines.

So we began to realize that there was a conflict in terms of the classes. We were essentially middle class, university educated, or at least grammar school educated, people. And the sources of the songs were the lower levels of what passes for a class structure in England. Working class people on the one hand, or farm laborers on the other, who certainly wouldn't think of themselves as being working class, but nonetheless were. This is where the songs came from, and the people singing these songs were not these people, who mostly held these songs in contempt. They wanted to hear pop music; they wanted to hear "Rock Around The Clock." It was the middle class kids who wanted to hear this folk music. And also wanted to sing it and had to confront that question of how to sing this song with any kind of feeling? How can one put oneself in the position of the singer? A problem which didn't get resolved for me in England and in fact has never really resolved itself.

I came to Canada in June '68. I had a job here in law, doing essentially criminal law, which, for the firm I was with was essentially drug trafficking and impaired driving. My job was to get these guys off or to do my best to get these guys off. There's all kinds of nimble legal ways of explaining away why you're doing this, to justify yourself. Everyone's entitled to a defense. People are innocent until proved guilty, blah blah blah. But when you ask a client for a retainer of $25,000.00, and it turns up on the desk the next morning in single bills, you ask yourself, "Is this guy really a bricklayer as he says he is in this statement here?" No, he probably isn't a bricklayer. There's something else going on here that I can't ask about. It wouldn't help me if I knew the answer, anyway. Those kinds of things encouraged me to leave the law, which I did a year and a bit later. I went back to Vancouver City College, and I never went back to law, and I never regretted it after about a week of being out. I realized how far I had come from the people I had been knocking around with.

I was living in a co-op then, on Stephen Street, which I had encountered quite by chance. I was down on Kits Beach a week after arriving here, and I met a fellow called Jim Willoughby, who played the autoharp. He used to sing "The Chastity Belt," and that enormously long, "One Night In Alexandria." He took me to a Bahá’í meeting, and he also took me to this co-op. I moved into the co-op, and I met Paddy Graber there. And Paddy told me about the Folk, and so I went to the Folk when it was in the Alma Y in July '68. A month after I got here. So I've been with the Folk ever since. Many people I've heard were in town three, four, or five years before finding out there was such a thing.

And among the first people I connected to there at the Folk were Murray and Kirstie Shoolbraid. And I joined their group, the Ad Hoc Singers. We sang at hospitals, and we sang at prisons and schools and wherever we could get away with singing. Here's picture of the Ad Hoc Singers. And here's a song we used to sing, "The White Cockade."

[Sings]
here about logging camps, many, many people have had that experience. And shared the songs, or at least shared the experiences in the songs.

So there was that to be said for Canadian folk music, in particular the stuff that Phil Thomas had collected. It spoke to where people lived. It was possible to sing Canadian songs without feeling as alienated from your music as you would have been, had you been singing in Britain and singing about coal mines. Or maybe even in Australia and singing about sheep shearing. That wasn’t the thing that university students did, either. Again, there’s that class division.

I came back in ’72 from Australia, and Murray had been working on putting together a magazine. He had been instructed by the AGM, the one that I missed, to put out a magazine called Come All Ye. And nothing had been done, and when I arrived back, I was in on the ground floor of the Come All Ye. And this is what came out. A little magazine, and we printed one of these things every month. Typed them out on a big typewriter with a big carriage, typed them out on two pages, on an old Gestetner stencil, and then cranked them around. Interleaved them—we had this old press—pressed ’em down. So this is how they came out. One every month. And this went on for, what? six years? This is the first volume—up until 1977.

It covered a wide range of stuff, but there was no discipline involved, in the sense that we were not bound to do Canadian music. We did everything. Those of you who know Murray Shoolbraid will know what a wide range of interests he has. Editors after Murray were me, and Peter Barkham, Diane Campbell, as she then was (Rosemary Campbell now), she was there for a while. Essential way there was a crew of people who every month would hammer these things into covers and tape. We used Gestetner until, I think, about two wheels. And he had not been able to bring order to this. So my shitball-counting skills came to the fore. I had to arrange all these. So what I did was, I was like a clerk with a whip. He had the ideas, and all I did was to sort of push him and say, "You have to do this. Don’t do that." And "How interesting. This is what I want you to do." And he would do it; it was great. And the result was that all the tapes got transcribed, and they are here, the 550 pieces in this collection, and they’re in Victoria now. We dubbed from his tapes to proper archival tapes, all recorded at standard speed, standard index cards, and so the whole collection is in Victoria now, so it’s lodged where it’s safe, in the Oral History Division of the Archives.

WOMAN’S VOICE: Is the BC book one part of that, then?

I’ll come on to that, yes. This is the Phil Thomas Collection. It’s all here. Take a look at that.

So that was the first part of my work with Phil. After that I went off to Victoria to work with Rosemary Campbell in a project called Rowan Oak. She was singing in the schools in Victoria. The summer of ’73. The NDP were in. I remember because we made proposal to Eileen Dailly, the first NDP Minister of Education, to fund a project. We knew nothing about where the money was. We assumed that the minister had this bucket of money. And we worked in the spring and the summer, working in the schools of Victoria, singing traditional Canadian stuff. I began working in my mind, What are these songs about? What reflects our lives to this, or How does this relate to me more than the mining songs from Britain?

And came a little bit closer to an answer. Because I began to get the idea into my head that it was a context question. The songs needed to be contextualized. And that’s what I began to do with the songs in Come All Ye. I began to shake the text a lot more, to see what was in it. And to find variant texts, to see whether there was a story there that I could pull out, to find out what the songs are really all about. I did it at a fairly naive
level, a fairly primitive level. If I went back and did that stuff again, I would shake it a good deal harder than I shook it then.

I was singing with Diane and with a fiddler, and Frank Holden from Newfoundland. We used him later in the radio broadcasts. The following year we were singing in the Folk, a fellow came in who was from Expo '74, which was going to be in Spokane. He was looking for some hosts for the Folklife Festival, which was going to be a part of the whole thing. And he hired me and Rosemary, and Utah Phillips, Bruce Phillips.

So the three of us were hosts for the whole summer. Down at this island of sanity—we regarded it as an island of sanity—the politically correct island [Laughs]—unlike the rest of that vile site. The whole thing was predicated upon recycling, but of course there was so much disposable stuff there. They didn’t even plan any sort of central commissary for plates and knives and forks, which they could have done. They didn’t; it was all paper. So—mounds and mounds of garbage.

Where we were for the summer. So when I left in the fall to go back to school, I was finishing up an honours degree in labour history, Larry Hanks took over my spot. When I was there, somebody suggested to me that I become a professional singer, and I was arguing strongly against that. There didn’t seem much point in doing that, but nevertheless, the idea lodged itself, and I began singing more and more quasi-professional gigs. In Gastown, I was singing and making some money; not enough to pay the rent, but it was still for pay.

In '75 I went down to San Diego, and that’s when I became, as it were, professional. I began making my living making music. I began singing shanties. I’d always sung shanties, but I began singing more shanties. While I was down there, there was not very much singing going on in San Diego. There was a lot of instrumental—a lot of bluegrass. There were really fine instrumentalists, but there was very little singing, and the singing people were mostly those we disparagingly referred to as “coffin acts from the 30s.” Lou Curtis had dug up people who had made a couple of records in the 30s and then disappeared. Lou found them again and put them on the stage, and that was really the only singing there was.

We were singing outside in this wonderfully shaped concrete roof, with a little shanty group that we sort of taught, and then gradually it got to be a hundred, 200, 300 people—like singing in a monstrous bathroom or something. It was absolutely wonderful. People walked out of there, having heard themselves sing nicely. They liked their own singing! And so when they walked away from that they were going to be singers! And that was just great!

And that was the second element which clicked for me. The first question was that of context. And the second question was that of performance and the importance of performing in the right place and in the right manner. Not the professional setup with somebody on stage singing to a paying audience. That relationship I didn’t like, and I never have liked it. I was always looking for a way of changing it somehow or organizing so that people would have a better time. I never liked being in anybody’s audience. I didn’t like paying money to see somebody. I’m not comfortable at any concert. Even Ewan and Peggy—I went to see them once. I don’t go to concerts; I just feel uncomfortable at them. I’d much prefer a singing circle or a campfire or that kind of stuff.

At this point, I was still working by myself, pretty much. Rika was working in the same field. She was working in Canadian folk music. In '76; Rika and I began to work together. For me this was a real opportunity to discuss all these contradictory ideas I had in my head about music, about folk music, about whether it was OK to be professional, what was the purpose of singing, was it merely to make people happy? What did the songs come out of? What kind of social background? For what purpose were they sung? Were they sung to change people’s minds, in terms of content? So Rika and I would have these long, long, long discussions, chasing these ideas all over the block. I don’t think well by myself; I think well by talking things out with people. For me, that was a real salvation. I could work my way through the ideas, and I think it worked for both of us.

Rika: I think the conclusion that we essentially came to was that we wanted to be facilitators and animateurs, in the French sense of the word, so that the singing—you with your shanty singing and us with the work in Canadian schools—that for us, the ideal situation would be that our dissemination work would create an awareness of the history and an enjoyment of the songs which would no longer require us to go and be professional singers.

So in a sense we were teachers.

Rika: Yeah. Facilitators.

So that began to make sense, that our job was—particularly when we heard stories about people going off to China and being sung to by a bunch of Chinese doctors. "Now, can we hear the traditional songs of your country?" And the Canadian doctors were going....

Rika: "Happy Birthday."

"Happy Birthday." That was it.

I think now I would think about this more deeply, but at the point there, we said, "They don’t have the songs. Let’s give them the songs." I think now, that there’s some other blockage going on there. People don’t want to.... I’ll come on to that. But at the time, it was a question of the availability. So we said to ourselves that our job ought to be to find ways in which we can make the stuff available to people. Available in the simplest form.

We began a whole bunch of projects. We gave workshops in schools, we gave workshops to teachers, workshops to professional associations from Ontario west. Didn’t actually go east of Ontario. We did some stuff around Sudbury and Thunder Bay.

We would write to a school board, and we would say "We can do this for you, and this is what the cost is. Are you interested?" We’d do this whether it was Sudbury, whether it was Prince Rupert, or whether it was Langley. It was the same thing;
the school board would have to find the money if they wanted to have us.

RIKA: Sometimes the French department....

Yes.

RIKA: Sometimes the Social department or the Music department....

We were doing this work, as it were, to pay the rent. We were going away for a week or so, coming back and doing another newsletter—Rika was doing the newsletter at the time, and I was doing Come All Ye. We also had a series of radio shows called Folk Circle on Co-op Radio. We were also working to set up a folklife festival in Vancouver. [Plays part of Folk Circle]

Rika: Today's show is going to be a special on field recordings. Field recordings, for those of you who may not know what they are, are recordings in the field. A trusty folksong collector goes out into the wilderness or into the urban wilderness and collects songs from traditional singers, people who sing the songs because they grew up with them, not because they are professional singers or instrumentalists, as was the case in the last piece you just heard. I remember the first time I heard a field recording; I was about 15 years old, and I was very interested in folk music at the time, but I'd only heard things like Ian and Sylvia, Peter, Paul and Mary, people like that. And this friend of mine had a record of an old black woman singing a song, and there was this sound in the background. I said, "What's that sound?" And they said, "It's her sewing machine." She was sewing while she was sewing on her sewing machine. I thought, "That's weird." And it completely changed my whole conception of recordings....

We worked on this area in the radio shows and through the stuff we were writing for the newsletter and Come All Ye. We also worked on a thing called Canadian Music in the Schools.

There was a federally funded project for schools on the east side of Vancouver. Again, we tried to contextualize the songs, to put the songs into some place where they could have some meaning, organized around such themes as settling or logging or mining or fishing. And then we got the possibility, with a fellow called Gary Marcuse, and we began to work with him to put together a proposal to do some radio shows for the CBC to play in the afternoon slot they used for school broadcasts. If we could get that, we could find some way of putting together the songs with some contextualized stuff behind it....

This is an excerpt from Logging in the West. All the shows were 30 minutes long. The guidebook, which we also wrote, called Songs and Stories of Canada. This is for grade 5, grade 6. [Plays excerpt. Sings along to "Grand Hotel," sounding a bit like a younger Lou Killen.]

I can still sing it in that key! [Laughter]

Again, the purpose of this thing was to contextualize the songs, to give kids some notion that the song doesn’t come out of Los Angeles or New York or is written by a songmaker, but is made precisely at that point, made by the guy who comes back from Vancouver, having been robbed, or made on the boat going back to work, or arising out of the everyday life of the people who shared those experiences. That’s much easier in Canada; I don’t know how you’d approach that problem in England. I don’t know whether there is a solution; maybe there isn’t. But in Canada, it seems to me, there’s a way through there, of people finding themselves in the song.

And I want to finish up this presentation with one song. I’m going to ask you to sing it. I’m going to pass out these sheets. Again, this is tomorrow—tomorrow 15 years ago.

RIKA: This is the beginning and the end. You had Aldermaston marches at the beginning, and here you have the Solidarity march.

MAN’S VOICE: This was a wonderful occasion. The Solidarity organization told 'em they were going to have 15,000 people out, max., and this march, at the annual convention of the Soviets at the Hotel Vancouver at the same time ended up with 60,000 people.
Rika was chair of this rally. She had to introduce Jack Munro...

RIKA: Hard to do.

...and Art Kupe and all these guys.

We had an organization called CWAB—Cultural Workers Against the Budget, which we organized because we wanted to make sure that this movement had some cultural connections and that people could sing songs, and not the tired old songs that they had been singing, like "Which Side Are You On?" or "We Shall Overcome" or one verse of "Solidarity Forever," so we made up a whole bunch of songs, and the best songs we put on this songsheet.

[Sings to tune of "Teddy Bears Picnic"]
If you come out on the streets today
You're sure of a big surprise.
McCann, dear, if you've a heart
You may have to dry your eyes.
Some people here have hardly a cent
While fighting off an increase in rent.
So be prepared for people against the budget.

Action, time for people power,
We've had it up to here,
This government's really had its hour.
Action, time for workers all,
We're really sick of it,
This cabinet's going to have to fall.
But it won't just happen, so
We have to work like hell to give 'em the kick they need.
Let's all do it together,
And happiness we'll find
In building true Solidarity.

[Laughter all around]
That was made by Phil Hebert, in fact. I don't know whether you've ever seen Phil on TV, a white haired old guy, carpenter. He has this old car, which he parks under the trees, and it's been a rustbucket from day one.

RIKA: He thinks that not washing it will make it last longer.

I think he's probably right.
Anyway, he made that one. Jim and I made some.

MAN'S VOICE: "So long, it's been good to know you."

All right. Let's sing that one.

[All sing]
So long, it's been good to know you.
So long, it's been good to know you.
So long, it's been good to know you.
You may have been working for 25 years,
But you'd better be drifting along.

Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall.
It was Bill Bennett, paying a call.
He said, "Look at the state that our coal deals are in;
There'll have to be cutbacks; you're where we begin."

Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall.
It was Bonkers McCarthy paying a call.

She said, "You're ungrateful, why make such a fuss?
If you'd save up your money, you could live just like us."

Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall.
It was Jack Heinrich paying a call.
He said, "Here's your budget, you'll have to spend less.
You teachers can handle a little more stress."

Well, the doorbell rang, and it jumped off the wall.
My next door neighbor was paying a call.
She said, "There's a rally, we're marching today;
We'll send them a message, and here's what we'll say:
So long, it's been good to know you.
So long, it's been good to know you.
So long, it's been good to know you.
Your cutting and slashing's gone on for too long,
So you'd better be drifting along.

MAN'S VOICE: John and Rika and the guys sang that from a flatbed truck outside the Queen Elizabeth Theatre with about 60,000 people.

RIKA: Gone downhill ever since. That was the high point....
[Laughter all around]

MAN'S VOICE: Absolutely. The biggest high point was Jack Munro not being recognized at the back and not being allowed in.11

RIKA: We had our own security people backstage:
[Laughter]

CWAB Security, yeah!

MAN'S VOICE: There's some songs that you've written.

Oh, I've written many songs, but I've never put them under my own name. I use aliases. And no one spots 'em.

But, I suppose, just to tie this whole thing in a knot and throw it away, if there's anything which my mind works around, it's that question of context. I've been a professional singer, but I'm against professional singers. I'm also, in a manner of speaking, against professional songwriters; I'm not sure about that one yet. What I'd like to do is to let everyone have a say. Everybody can write, and everybody can sing. Maybe the word "write" is wrong—song maker. Certainly, when we put together the song sheet, we got ideas from all kinds of people. Who contributed what line, we don't know. And it doesn't really matter—the song kind of emerges.

So, it's a question of breaking down that hierarchy which the commercial people would like to carry on, having singers which they move from here to there, and audiences who pay them, and songwriters who get paid out of the proceeds, and the whole way in which the business works, and going back to the folk notion of having the songs arise out of people's everyday lives and being sung by nobody special. And just shared. And more and more, I see our attitude about life getting rolled over by, not so much the multinationals, but the businessification of folk music and music generally. Now they talk about an indus-
RIKA: And you're not a "singer," you're a "vocalist."

Yes, with "vocal stylings."

So, Rika and I plan to continue until we're taken out in our boxes, along that line of participation. That gives a flavor to the

try. It used to be a joke to refer to it as the "music industry."

MAN'S VOICE: It's not a song now, it's a product.

A product, yeah. It's not even "a product," it's "product."
work we do in the Folk and CityFest and in the CFMS [CSTM]—to liberate this stuff from people who want to make a buck out of it. We’ve made bucks out of it, so we know a little bit about that side of the industry. We’re not totally pure ourselves. We know how the thing is made up—we know how easy it is to go back to that model, the commercial model. You’re going downstream—but we want to turn around, you know, with the salmon, and go back upstream. We want to swim upstream not go down with the market.

So, thank you for listening to this long divagation which had been no one here at all (which is kind of what I expected), would have been useful for me to clarify whether there were any straws which pull all of this together. And I found for myself some satisfaction in pulling it together, so thank you for that opportunity to research my own brain.

And Rika, who I’ve shared this work with, since ’76.

RIKA: Well, if Allen ever asks me to do this, I won’t have anything more to say.

MAN’S VOICE: Oh yes, you will.

MAN’S VOICE: So, Jon, could you just state those themes?

The first problem is the class issue. Somewhat resolvable in Canada. By the fact of middle class people doing working class work.

RIKA: I think also there’s a more democratic attitude here.

MAN’S VOICE: You said that couldn’t be done in England. Why couldn’t it be done in England?

What can’t be done in England is that the singer, except insofar as explaining it as though he were a teacher ... if you’re not adopting the role of a teacher, why are you singing these songs? And how can you call upon your own experience? I mean, ideally, I sing a song out of my own life. My life doesn’t include mining. Doesn’t include logging, either. But I’m closer to logging than I am to mining.

RIKA: I think in Canada you also have the advantage of a closer relation to the land. Even though I have never logged, by virtue of being a woman, my brother has worked in the lumber industry. People that I grew up with in small town BC worked in the lumber industry. I drive through BC; I see clear cuts. I am part of the lumber industry in BC, so that these songs have meaning for me even though it’s not my life experience. I think that that is much easier in Canada because the songs are often resource based songs and landscape based songs.

MAN’S VOICE: This is what I find so exciting about folk music, that it provides a way of expressing, it provides a way of communicating, other people’s experience that you can relate to because the music tells of their struggle, of the difficulties that they face in their lives. When you sing a song about whaling or a shanty or whether I sing “Dark as a Dungeon,” or something— learning that song forced me to learn what those miners dealt with, being oppressed by the mine owners and by the capitalist system.

But I want to go one stage further than that, which was the stage that we hit one night—do you remember this? The Anza Club, I sang a fishing song. You then got up and sang a song about your fishing experiences [Pointing to Brian Robertson]; John Lyon then got up and sang a song about his fishing experiences, and it became a conversation, with the songs acting as a link between people who had shared different experiences.

But you’re right—we can certainly contextualize it more than is done.

MAN’S VOICE: But, Jon, when are you going to write a song about being a lawyer?

The question is, Can you? Is it possible to?

RIKA: Because in the lawyer milieu, there isn’t a context in which they get together and sing.

WOMAN’S VOICE: A lot of things that have touched my heart and made me learn a song, I’ve never experienced and I’ll never experience except through the expression of the person who created that song. And yet, I’m allied in that song, not in my own experience but in sympathy with that. It’s the thought of that, and sometimes it’s the music. Or songs that men might write, but as a woman, I can only sort of imagine how that is. But it brings a richness into my life. But if I could only sing a song that I could write out of my personal experience, I would find that my life is so impoverished compared to what I can pick up through all of the beauty that’s out there. All of the struggle and all of the heroism, and all of those things.

But your own life might have elements like that that you are unaware of because you’re so close to them. When you sing a song, Rika might respond to your song about your life, which you think is mundane, dull, boring. As any logger may think, “What the hell is this bloody logging?” To us it may be dramatic. Or coal mining—dramatic. Well, it’s getting over three tons of coal every day.

WOMAN’S VOICE: But it takes me into other realms, to learn these songs. And it’s not just fanciful. It isn’t just a book study. It’s because of what’s a part of that music that’s able to take us out of ourselves. I can understand what you’re saying about the depth of it—it’s really your song....

I can sing those songs that are not in my experience and explain them, but the style of my delivery becomes then essentially didactic and teacher-oriented. Half an hour explanation and a 30 second song. You’re always trying to open up this piece. Sometimes you have to go back to the carboniferous era in order to explain to people clearly how it came to be that the coal seams under Vancouver Island are warped and twisted and have got gas, you know....
Of the people that I honor, I honor the guy who came to the Folk last Wednesday, Dick Greenhaus, who founded The Digital Tradition. 7500 songs available to everybody who wants them. A million hits a month on that site.

That is speaking to what we used to call "the folk," with no managers, no songwriters involved, as it were, apart from whatever they throw into the pot. But there's no money, and you can do what you like with it.

RIKA: We were telling him what a wonderful thing this was that he had created. And he said, "You know, the ironic thing is that, with all my degrees and expertise and everything that I have, this silly little thing that I started, just as a kind of an afterthought with just a few of my own songs, has become my life's greatest achievement!"

[Laughter]

What an achievement! Imagine there being enough people out there who want that, enough for a million hits a month.

MAN’S VOICE: Well, those are the kind of numbers you can generate on the Internet. It’s an extraordinary medium, and The Digital Traditions is the perfect thing to be on it.

OTHER MAN’S VOICE: Is there actually singing on it?

Yes, about 4,000 have got tunes.

Editor’s notes

1 In addition to being a folksinger, John Brunner was a distinguished science fiction author, best known perhaps for the novel Stand On Zanzibar. See the letter from Vera Johnson, another folksinger/scifi buff, on page 32 of this issue.

2 Folkways 5444 Ding Dong Dollar: Anti-Polaris and Scottish Republican Songs. Thanks to Stephanie Smith, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage Archive, Smithsonian Institution, for the exact citation. The LP is of course long out of print. However, the Smithsonian Institute, which took over Folkways upon founder Moses Asch’s death, has maintained his policy of keeping all titles available, and this may be special ordered as a cassette with copies of the original liner notes, so it can be acquired. (I am not clear on which of the other LPs cited in this essay have made the cut to CD.)

One suspects that these songs were also recorded and thoroughly documented by the CIA and MI5.

3 In fact, Child 15 is "Leesome Brand." Child 167, "Sir Andrew Barton," is the same song as "Henry Martin." Child 20 is "The Cruel Mother."

4 The Vancouver Folk Song Society has been nicknamed "the Folk" at least "... since I joined in 68...." (Bartlett, November 16, 1999)

5 Indeed it was not far away. See Pierre Berton, "The Dirtiest Job in the World" (in The Smug Minority. Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1968, and probably in various anthologies, as well) for an account of a university student (Berton himself) working in a gold mining operation in the North.
6 "Frog Hollow was a community centre where there was an offset press we could use. Yes, the old Come All Ye went out nationwide, to about thirty universities, too: the list is on the inside back cover of each issue. It went originally to the Vancouver Folk Song Society membership, then we sent freebies to old membership lists of the Canadian Folk Music Society, then to clubs, then individual universities whenever I put together a letter and sent out samples. Circulation was no more than 300, but it was a good magazine with lots of very varied stuff. We closed it because of a constellation of stuff: we couldn’t do photos without a better press, we couldn’t do a better press without more money, either from higher subs or a wider cire, or ads, which meant a bigger cire, &c. Canada Folk Bulletin was an attempt to square this particular circle, but all it meant really was a hell of a lot more work! The CSTM archives have a full run (66 issues)." (Bartlett, November 16, 1999)

7 It is an interesting aspect of the folk music revival that within its ranks, bluegrass was largely distinguished by intrumental technique; I’ve always assumed that within its native community, vocal technique and the lyric sentiment were what mattered. [GWL]

8 “This was Lou Curtis’s San Diego folk festival at UCSD, which ran all thru the 70’s. ‘Coffin act’ is a bit offensive. This was a private joke between Rika and Me: Lou was interested in promoting, discovering, &c., performing acts from the 30s who had made maybe a couple of records that he as an old-timey fan had heard, and he wanted to share the pleasure he got from them. But as far as folk music was concerned, we thought it was a nostalgic throwback and not much more. All honour to Lou and all, but we didn’t think this was going to do folk a bit of good.” (Bartlett, November 16, 1999)

9 One significant product of the Ruebsaat/Bartlett collaboration is their cassette The Green Fields of Canada, arguably the best general introduction to Canadian folk music available. And it is available—through the Society’s Mail Order Service.

10 “The situation is all too typical, but specifically, ‘McCarthy’ was Grace McCarthy, belledame of the Socreds.... She was in charge of welfare, and we had a ‘Lunch with Gracie’ demo outside her very expansive house in Shaughnessy, featuring stone soup for the masses.” (Bartlett, November 16, 1999)


Wayman’s prose and poetry offers some interesting parallels (and counterpoints) to Bartlett’s folksinging career. In the Introduction to Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing (Harbour, 1983), Wayman wrote that, reviewing his own poetry as a student in the 60s, it struck him that “the subjects of my poems were entirely different than the concerns of my ordinary waking hours.... After all, this was why I wanted to be a writer: to share with other people what I noticed about the condition of being alive.” Most of our hours are spent in work; most poetry (still) concerns itself with Love, God, Nature, or even more distant (but academically negotiable) subjects like Deconstruction, Literary Theory, or Post-Wholism (a specialty on rural campuses, first documented by Sid Holt, Gleichen, Alberta).

Wayman subsequently found his way to write about the various occupations in which he has found himself (not that he has entirely ceased to write about love, nature, and other concerns), and he has been perhaps the most active supporter of other writers who do the same, gathering such anthologies as Paperwork (Harbour, 1991) and Going for Coffee (Harbour, 1981). Some artsyfartsy readers like to claim that Wayman is more of a journalist than a poet; they said that about Hemingway, too, hohum. I recommend you try him yourself: if you can’t hear the music in, say, “Marshall Wells illumination,” you might need a tympanectomy. Wayman has recently prepared a selection from his 35+ year career.

12 It’s worth noting here that, although anyone who disagrees with any particular esthetic or social criticism may cheaply yell, “Censorship,” nowhere in his discussion does Jon refer to any mechanism to enforce decisions and judgements that are clearly his own. Some varieties of comfortable liberalism seem to be no more than opportunities to avoid troubling decisions. [GWL]

13 See this month’s Editorial for more discussion of the Digital Tradition.