

Calling All Ballad Lovers

Lorne Brown

It was a lobster dinner in Nova Scotia. I was talking with Anita Best and Jamie Morreira. Plates of freshly boiled lobsters were being carried past us, and people were loading up at the salad bar. Anita had just finished giving a workshop at the Storytellers of Canada Conference in Halifax, I was getting ready to host a storytelling concert after dinner, and Jamie and my Ballad Project were preparing for the Lunenburg Folk Harbour Festival. Anita said to me, "We ballad singers have got to stick together."

It's one of those observations that linger in the mind. All the rest of that summer and fall I've been thinking about it: "We ballad singers have got to stick together."

As any reader of these pages knows, folk and traditional music is a sub-species of music today. For reasons that I cannot quite fathom, practically every other form of music has huge public acceptance. Boy groups or singers have sports arenas full of shrieking fans; everyone seems to have become a jazz lover; the three tenors have turned people on to opera; country music has its own TV channels; world music is big.

But traditional folk? Toronto has two million people, but the Acoustic Harvest is happy if forty souls wander in to see a Sarah Grey, or a Rick Fielding. And this for music that has stood the test of time, whose lyrics have taught me most of what I know—history, folklore, beliefs, wisdom, humour, love, courage, understatement—whose tunes "serious" composers have swiped for generations. Music that is, almost by definition, the most democratic music in the world. But if traditional folk music is a sub-species, consider the traditional ballad. Whole folk festivals can go by without one traditional ballad sung *a cappella*.

More and more, I find myself turning to the old ballad. I rejoice in the freedom of singing unaccompanied. I love how time stands still during a ballad; ballads don't fit neatly into three or four minute time slots, so you find yourself literally in another time zone. I love their language: poor in words but rich in images, overflowing with clichés but scarce of adjectives. Like many a Bible story, their plot contains violent and gruesome events. Their narrator never intrudes on the action so nothing gets between the story and the listener. There are no pious morals given at the end; the story is simply related and it's up to the listener to make of it what he will.

But I detect a glimmer of hope for ballad lovers. More and more people are rediscovering the power and beauty of the old ballad. People like Moira Cameron, Margaret McArthur, and Frankie Armstrong are releasing CDs filled with ballads. The legendary Folk Legacy Records has just released a new CD of old ballads.

A few years ago in Canada's storytelling journal *Appleseed Quarterly* I asked if there were any people in Toronto interested in getting together to sing and tell the old ballads. The ink had scarcely dried when Edith Fowke phoned me up saying she

wanted to join. Our numbers are constantly fluctuating, but a dozen of us get together on a regular monthly basis to swap old ballads, learn different versions and find out more about their backgrounds. But mostly we just rejoice in the otherworldly experience of having the freedom to sing a long ballad in the presence of attentive fellow enthusiasts.

Thus was born the Ballad Project, a Toronto-based group which plays gigs and tries to get into festivals so we can spread the word. And out there across this huge country of ours are other ballad singers, plying their craft and sometimes wondering, I'm sure, if anyone cares.

Well, yes, a lot of us care. And Anita Best said it best: "We ballad singers have got to stick together." So, I am proposing a Canadian group of ballad lovers. Just think, ballad lovers from sea to sea! I even thought of a title, *Canadian Ballad Circle*, because the initials spell CBC. (But I'm not married to that title.)

John Leeder told me I should do it through this bulletin and become a subgroup of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music. (There we are, a subspecies again!) I know nothing of the politics involved, or the procedures, but John and George and Judith are good people, and there is an organization in place. So here goes.

The first step is to get as many ballad lovers as possible together (speaking metaphorically). I use the term ballad lovers because it is more encompassing. Some of us may not sing ballads, but we can still love them. Some of us may be professionals, some of us amateurs—it matters not. If you love the traditional ballad, you qualify!

The next steps are deliberately undefined. (I'm a firm believer in starting something, not waiting around for some auspicious moment.) The direction(s) we take will evolve naturally from all our collective input. I see us acting as a support group, encouraging each other, and spreading the word. If one of us, for example, released a CD of ballads, we could all help promote it. If one of us needed information, someone might be able to help. And somewhere down the road, I see us all coming together for a Canadian Conference of Ballads. But all this is *deliberately* vague. The first job is to find each other—then we can stick together.

So, ballad lovers, please respond to me. Please spread this word—you probably know some others who might want to join. There are no fees, no contracts, no small print. While this bulletin will be a major way of communicating, there are other ways—email, snail mail, telephones, word of mouth.

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Please help me set Lord Bateman free.