



Words and Music

John Leeder, Review Editor

Books

George W. Lyon. *Community Music in Alberta: Some Good Schoolhouse Stuff!* Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1999. 156 pp.

Every province in Canada should have a book similar to George Lyon's *Community Music in Alberta*. What Lyon appears to have done is to scour the local histories of Alberta for anecdotes and photos showing how, when and sometimes why music was used in their communities.

George Lyon has been researching the vernacular culture of Alberta since 1984. He teaches English at Calgary's Mount Royal College and had been co-editor of the *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*. The book is published by the University of Calgary, but has been sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Folk Club.

In collecting this material, Lyon has wisely stayed away from labelling the music as anything but "Community Music", the music a community played. So we savour a rich stew of what some would call folk or traditional, blues, ragtime, sacred, dance music, music of various ethnic groups, Native Peoples' music, nonsense songs and popular tunes and songs. The emphasis is on community bands, orchestras and groups rather than solo performers or singer/songwriters. Many of the stories and photos revolve around the schoolhouse or church, for, as the book points out, these two buildings were "one of the first orders of the day" in forming any community.

"Community Music" covers local music from the 1890s to the 1960s but, as with local histories, the focus is on the 1920s to 1940s. An interesting feature of the photos is seeing where, and how early, some instruments were being used. Mandolins were obviously very popular with many of the ethnic groups. Cowboys are seen with their banjos, fiddles and guitars, and in an 1892 photo of a Salvation Army Band we see a guitar, a concertina, a string bass and an autoharp, accompanied, naturally, by lots of brass, drums and tambourines. We also find a hammer dulcimer, bagpipes, a faux resonator guitar, a bodhran, a tsymbaly, a bandura, and a feast of fiddles and a clutch of mandolins, amidst the more common brass, wind and string band and orchestra instruments.

Generally this book shows how important music was, not only for entertainment but also in drawing a community together after a harvest during the long winter, for church services and for

dancing at the fall fairs. As Sid Marty says on the cover, this community music of Alberta "was and remains more than anything, a music from everywhere on earth, melded and coupled to the vigorous pulse of the Alberta countryside".

The book suffers marginally from the chapter themes, which seem forced and sometimes lacking in continuity, but, that said, the subject is a difficult one to organize. This is an interesting book to browse and follow how music has evolved in the communities of Alberta. Those roots, and the shift through time, make it of interest to anyone, whether an Albertan or not. A recommended addition to the library of anyone interested in music, it is the kind of book we all can hope will be written for our own province.

*Richard T. Wright
Williams Lake, British Columbia*

Recordings

Gérald Laroche. Rubato. TIS GARS 100.
Musique Tis Gars, 546, rue Cherrier, St-Boniface, Man. R2J 0M4;
[moehogue@pangea.ca];
[home.ican.net/~mabord]

Mike Stevens. The World is Only Air...
BCD 132. Borealis Recording Co., 67 Mowat Ave., Suite 233, Toronto, Ont. M6K 3E3;
[brc@interlog.com];
[www.interlog.com/~brc]

Here are two CDs by renowned harmonica players, but that's where the similarities end. The differences are striking, in that the music contained on *The World is Only Air...* is all wholesome Canadian fiddle tunes, though to claim it as a world's first on this point seems a little esoteric. Meanwhile, *Rubato* is an offering melded out of what seems to be the confluence of new-age and Northern Manitoban Indian music. These polar differences even continue through into their individual treatments of the packaging. Mike's CD is jolly, and will have your toes tapping, while Gérald's CD is in a more sombre mood, and would be best listened to late at night when you want to empty your mind and float away to somewhere else for a while.

Mike Stevens is a bluegrass harmonica afficianado who spends most of his time playing south of the border, though he is in fact a native of Sarnia. Mike's playing of the diatonic harmonica (commonly known as the "blues harp") is technically very good, and some of the pieces he

offers are, to say the least, challenging. My particular favourites are "Big John McNeil" and "The St. Anne's Reel", whilst his version of "The Clarinet Polka" is truly a tour-de-force. His playing on "Reel de Point-au-Pic" reminded me of the style of ragtime harmonica player Robert Cooksey, whilst on "The Unreel Breakdown" I hear images of Jean-Jacques Milteau, the legendary French bluegrass player. Apart from the digital musical content of this CD, there is an excerpt from a biographical documentary. The CD booklet is also packed with detailed information, including the types of microphones used to record the instruments and even the phone number of Joe Felisko, the famous harmonica "mechanic" guru, whom Mike has had "tweek" his harps. With each track Mike has given a short description of the key of harmonica used and a brief discussion of his playing of the piece — welcome fodder to all harmonica players. There's also the promise of a tablature book to follow. Listening to the complexity of his playing, I'm not sure how simple this would be to write, and then I'm sure it would prove daunting to most players, so with a limited market I hope he isn't expecting it to be a best-seller.

Unlike Mike Stevens' CD booklet, which is packed with details, Gérald Laroche has given us virtually no personal information, but has instead used the space to provide us with some original poetry and stories in association with the music of the CD. This CD is a product of Gérald Laroche the artist, as opposed to Gérald Laroche the musician. He has forsaken his paintbrushes and has used his playing abilities on the harmonica, penny whistle, jaw harp, Indian mouth-bow and just plain breathing rhythms to paint "music-scapes". The booklet of poems and stories is, I believe, an attempt to weave the same environment as he creates live, combining narration with his music to lead people into his imagination. A valiant goal. However, while Gérald's visual paintings include much detail, his musical paintings have been performed with broad brush strokes. Though accompanying photographs show Gérald with an abundance of many and varied harmonicas, there are only brief interludes where we see his particular brand of diatonic and chromatic harmonica mastery percolate through, such as within the tracks "Automne pour Florence" and "The Wizard". A fleeting bluesy section is found "Northern Lights", and an outright "blues jam" "Last one to leave please turn out the lights" appears to be there to provide some light relief from the rest of the content. Whilst he is pictured with a chord harmonica (an impressive beast at near 3 feet long), his usage of the instrument is rudimentary (such as on "Cabin Fever"). In many pieces he relies on various rhythmic breathing

patterns, with or without a harmonica on his lips, as on "The Hunter". At times I found these rhythm patterns rather mundane — they would not be out of place in a beginner's "How to Play Blues Harmonica" book. Not that I require something to be complicated to be good, but I would have expected more intricate weavings from a player of Gérard's stature.

The production on Mike's CD very much gives one an impression of being in his kitchen with a bunch of friends (all but one of the tracks were recorded in one long session). Depending on your stance, this either enhances or detracts from the subject. I have to say that a tighter, more produced sound and the chance to re-take a couple of minor points would have suited me better. On the other end of the scale, Gérard Laroche's CD gives the impression of having had a wealth of high-tech studio time available, with a fair amount of multi-tracking, though I am assured that this is reproducible live (I hasten to add that I know this, not from info on the CD itself, but from an ancillary source). Well, a reasonable facsimile probably is producible, but only with the assistance of various electronic effects. Though I can appreciate the artistry of Gérard Laroche's offering, I am afraid it's too much navel-gazing for me, and I would have to pump for Mike Steven's CD as being the more entertaining choice for my palate.

*Peter Johnson
Calgary, Alberta*

Get Well!

Laurie Mills, who writes our bluegrass reviews, is recuperating from a brain aneurysm. His son, Matt, reports that he has stabilized and is showing signs of improvement, including flashes of his sense of humour.

All of us in the CSTM are pulling for your recovery, Laurie! Get well soon.