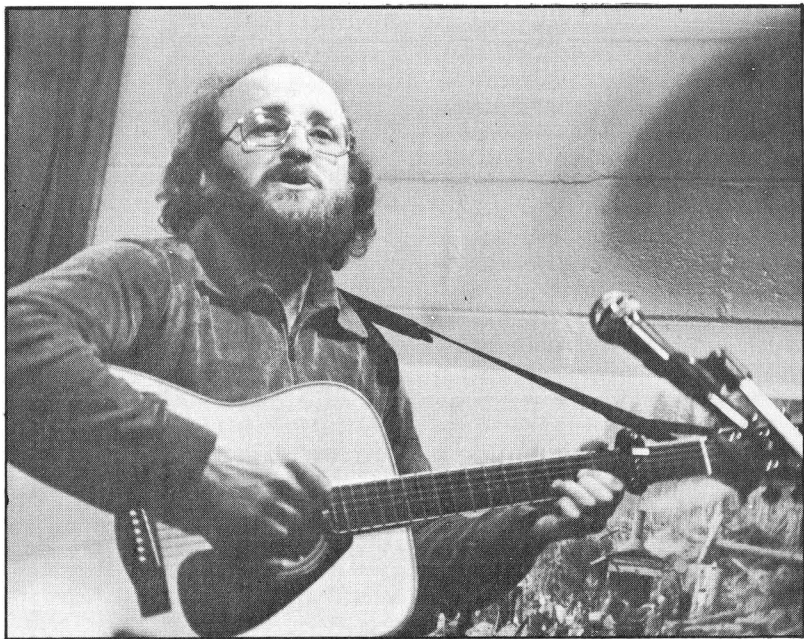


INTERVIEW



Hank Pickett

JOHN MURPHY

Many of Canada's best "revival" singers have emigrated from the British Isles, and they have brought with them their experiences of British folk clubs and their British repertoires. Such a one is John Murphy, a teacher in the New Brunswick school system, who's been a Canadian since 1974. When John performed at the Vancouver Folk Song Society's

Green Cove Coffeehouse (which his sister Dee is involved in organizing) we took the opportunity to ask John about his background, his changing repertoire, his involvement in the Canadian folk milieu, and about the Folk Club he started with others in Saint John in 1975.

Jon Bartlett

FOUNDING THE CLUB

CFB: I'd like to start out talking about the Saint John Folk Club: how did it get started?

JM: Well, I arrived in Canada about three and a half years ago, having come from a folk club in London, and I was quite eager to find people to sing with and share folk music with, and I spent my first year in New Brunswick more or less singing to myself, and slowly making friends, but I never really came across anybody who seemed to be sharing my kind of music. I was interested in traditional folk music and I saw little evidence of New Brunswick traditional song around Saint John, but that wasn't to say it wasn't there—I was just not meeting the right people. So it began with a little advertisement in a newspaper, asking anybody, desperately, if they'd be interested in getting together and perhaps forming some sort of group that would share folk music. I called it a folk club: "Interested in a folk club in Saint John?", I think it was, and my telephone number. And from that, we had an initial meeting. I had about ten or twelve phone calls—really curious phone calls, some of them, because there were some people who had their idea of what a folk club was, and there was me, and we had some strange conversations over the phone!

CFB: What kinds of ideas did you have as to what a folk club was?

JM: Well, I suppose I was thinking of what I had just left in London, where people would come together on an evening, once a week, and there would be performers and listeners. It would be a fairly structured thing, on a concert kind of

basis, where we'd try to get people from outside Saint John to come in and bring in their material as well as hearing one another, and what we could do. But I soon found out that my experience was so totally different from all those other people in Saint John that I talked to.

CFB: What was their impression of what a folk club was?

JM: The word "coffeehouse" was something I hadn't come across in England, and I think several people came with an idea of something that had happened in Saint John a few years back, where a lot of people came together (I think at one time it was in the hundreds) in a room, where coffee was served, and which was very loosely structured: people would get up and do their thing.

CFB: More like an "open-mike" structure?

JM: Right, very much so. Which was different, very different. Anyway, we got together initially, these people that phoned me up, and we talked. It was embarrassing for everybody, because we were miles apart. I said what I'd hoped it would be, and I got a lot of blank looks from everybody else, who thought that it wouldn't work in Saint John. I soon began to realize, "Well, this is not where we have to start; we've got to start from where we're at." We arranged to meet the next week, anyway, and some people came back and some didn't; the guy who came along thinking that I was going to conduct a barber-shop thing didn't come back, because he soon found out that I wasn't into that.

CFB: When they came back again the following week, did you get together and sing, or did you talk?

JM: I think there were about six or eight people there the second time around, and we sat in a circle and we took it in turns to sing our songs to one another. That was really good—those early meetings were really nice. There was the beginnings of people really learning.

CFB: This was when?

JM: This was in October, 1975.

CFB: And where did it go from there?

JM: Well, for about three months we met like that, where the group stayed fairly small and we made very little effort to advertise the thing, but we tried to contact the people that we knew who might be interested in coming along. It seemed to stay fairly small, until that Christmas, when we felt that we had got together enough to do something, to open the thing up more. We had our first concert at the end of January 1976, and we had Ned Landry, who is a colourful local fiddler (though with a national reputation) along as our special guest, and God! People came from all over the place and it was a chaotic evening. We had structure there, but there were so many people who wanted to perform. It was a real high.

CFB: So you found out that there really was a hunger for folk music in Saint John?

JM: Yes. All sorts of people came, from high school kids singing Bob Dylan songs, to a Mrs. Robichaud, who was eighty-three and who played the fiddle and danced. It was a really super evening, but it didn't stay like that. At our weekly meetings, more people arrived, and the circle got bigger, but, strangely enough, we still

stayed in a circle; it seemed to work for us, and we still have it. It seems to be a good shape for people to get into, to share things, to sing together.

CFB: How many people are you getting out to the weekly meetings?

JM: Twenty-five to thirty on a regular basis.



Hank Pickett

CFB: And most of those participate as singers and performers?

JM: About half and half, probably: there are a good few people who come along to listen. A few collectors, which is always nice to have, people to whom you can say, "Do you know where that song came from?", and who can give a lot more depth to the whole thing.

CFB: What other kinds of things does the Saint John Folk Club do now?

JM: We have a monthly concert now, a regular feature on the last Thursday in each month. We bring in

somebody to do the meat of the evening, and we have resident singers as well. That's our main structure, the weekly meeting and the monthly concert. Other than that, we've started a newsletter, which I think is really important: I didn't realize how important until we'd actually got it off the ground. It really kept people together. People weren't turning up on a weekly basis: the nucleus was there, but other people would drop in only occasionally, and I think we lost a lot of people that way. Now the newsletter provides information on what the club is doing, and what's coming up, and even people who had moved away from the area would write to us and say, "Keep us in touch: we're really keen to find out what's going on."

TAKING IT OUT TO THE WORLD

CFB: You also did some concerts last summer for the city as well.

JM: Yes. The Recreation Department have approached us two years running now and we've been performing in the City Market, which is really fun, because that's taking the music right out into a real situation. The City Market at lunchtime is a fantastic place—it's an exciting place, just to walk through—and to actually perform in there was a challenge. We were really appreciated by the local stall-holders and we made a lot of friends, too: a lot of people came along to the club as a result.

CFB: In terms of getting people performing in the Market, do you feel that there's been a growth of singers and musicians through the Club's activity, that people have

come out of the woodwork, or improved?

JM: Oh, very much so. Getting the Club out into the city and getting it involved in community activities has put us in touch with a lot more people who are genuinely interested in folk music. Just before Christmas, we were invited along to the jail, to do a concert. Originally, I think they'd scheduled some choir or other to go along and sing, and then changed their minds and decided that it was perhaps more appropriate to invite us. And that was a really interesting situation, with a hundred guys inside. When we walked in there, it was their recreation hour, and there was all this rock music on transistor radios and televisions: it was very overpowering and very frightening. We thought, "Is it going to work?" Perhaps it was because they were a captive audience in more ways than one, but they really did respond to it. I think we've learned a lot from one another in that way.

THE COMMUNITY'S VIEW

CFB: What do people in Saint John think of as folk music?

JM: I find that the influence of country music in the Maritimes is very strong, and folk music tends to be understood that way. I'm still having to sort out my personal feelings about that.

CFB: In that sense you have to bridge the gap between what *you* might think of as folk music and what *they* think of as folk music.

JM: Yes.

CFB: Is there, say, a rural or a Saint John tradition of fiddling, square-dancing or singing, like for

instance that in Cape Breton?

JM: I think Saint John is perhaps not typical of the rest of the province. I think traditional folk music would still be found in the rural areas—witness the Miramichi Festival, which is still very much alive. In Saint John, I don't know: I don't know what the reasons for its seeming absence would be. Perhaps it's that the turnover of people in the last few generations has been so rapid. The patterns of the community have changed, but perhaps it is only more hidden and less public than it used to be.

OVER THE WALL WITH THE CLANCY BROTHERS

CFB: How did you get into folk singing?

JM: Well, I come from a London-Irish background, and I've always been encouraged to sing: I always seem to have got involved in musical things at school and college—I've always had a love for music in that way. Perhaps the family background has influenced me more in the kinds of folk music that I feel happiest with and enjoy most.

CFB: Which is what?

JM: Irish and English music.

CFB: And how has the family been influential in that regard?

JM: Well, I had a very colourful Uncle Paddy, who sang his head off, and I always enjoyed Christmas parties when he seemed to have an incredible repertoire of songs, Irish songs. I don't remember consciously sitting down and learning any of his songs, but I secretly admired him in that way. The Christmas party was always so much of a sharing thing,

because of the music—it was super to sing along with him.

CFB: When did you actually start singing folk songs yourself?

JM: I think when I was at college I started picking up the guitar and I met a few people who were singing contemporary songs. I was very influenced by the Clancy Brothers, when they were in their prime. I developed what I thought was a very professional pseudo-Irish accent to suit "The Beggarman" and songs like that! I enjoyed their stuff at the time, and that got me going.

CFB: So you grew up with folk music around you and then really got into it yourself during the revival.

JM: Yes. I think probably the most serious influence was going along to a folk club. There was one quite near to where I lived in south London, in Croydon. It was a small folk club that was very Irish and very traditional, mainly because the girl who ran it was that way inclined; she was from Dublin and she did some kind of work at the Singers' Club in London and managed to get all sorts of people along to our little club through her contacts—I really used to enjoy that weekly Friday evening at the folk club in Croydon.

CFB: What kinds of songs are you singing now?

JM: Still quite a lot of Irish stuff and traditional things. Quite a few of them are songs that I enjoy because they've been given to me by friends and have not been gleaned off of record albums. Some unusual little Irish ditties, which I think are quite colourful and remind me of Uncle Paddy. I enjoy singing those, and I really enjoy singing what I think are

quite significant contemporary songs like John Pole's work.

CFB: Your experiences in England obviously made a very strong impression on you and you came to Canada with certain expectations. What's your feeling about the differences between folk music in England and folk music here?

JM: I think that it is very difficult to compare the two, because the influences here are so different. My initial idea of the kind of folk club that I would have liked to have seen in Saint John is so different from what it has turned out to be. I learned that I can't impose my background on these people. They are so different and their background is just as legitimate as mine. I have just as much to learn from them as they have from me.

DEVELOPING THE CANADIAN MILIEU

CFB: John, you're a Director of the Canadian Folk Music Society, which says that you're obviously concerned about folk music in Canada; how does that concern relate to the kind of music you play and the kinds of activities you're engaging in?

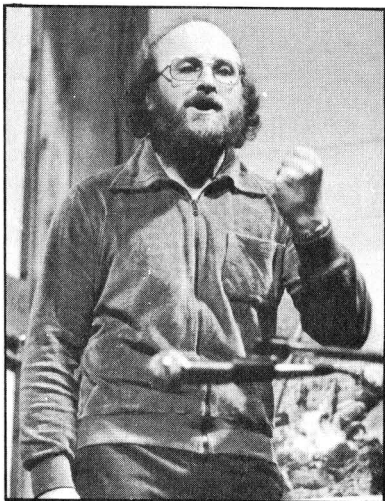
JM: I think the repertoire that I have at the moment reflects what I've done and where I am at the moment. The fact that I'm now involved in the CFMS represents where I'd like to go. I don't intend giving up everything that I've learned and plunging into something new, but I feel that there is obviously a culture which, if I'm going to live in Canada, is very relevant to me. Canadian folk music is really worth getting involved in and really trying to help develop.

CFB: Do you feel that that music is not visible enough in this country?

JM: Yes, certainly in New Brunswick and particularly in my area. There could be a lot done to advance the cause of New Brunswick folk music. I think that probably no one has as yet got their teeth into the job: it requires work and it requires people's commitment. The whole Acadian scene in New Brunswick is fantastic, and is, or should be, the envy of any folk enthusiasts in the English community. We haven't got that kind of thing in Saint John.

CFB: What kind of folk music *do* you hear on radio and television?

JM: In New Brunswick? Well, we have "Ryan's Fancy", who I think still have a series of Newfoundland Irish stuff; a lot of Irish, canned Irish stuff like that. As far as I can recollect there's been no attempt by any of the television stations to uncover New Brunswick folk song.



Nola Johnston

We've been approached several times by the CBC and they've come along to record what we're doing at our concerts, which is, I suppose, something towards the cause.

CFB: Is there on the CBC in New Brunswick a lot of locally generated programming, which could allow growth in that area?

JM: To some extent, there is. And there are some good people, too, in Fredericton and Halifax who are sympathetic towards giving this kind of music some exposure, which it doesn't seem to have had in the past.

CFB: We were talking earlier about the role of your newsletter in helping form a folk music community in your area. How do you think that can be done on the national level?

JM: I think to some extent through the Canadian Folk Music Society, in attempting to co-ordinate activities across the country. I think one of the most encouraging things which is happening right now here in Vancouver is the *Canada Folk Bulletin*, which is going to put people in touch

with one another at long last across Canada. I'm looking forward to my first copy!

CFB: But there is work to do, too, on the local level.

JM: There is. There are some interesting people around at the Club who are writing their own songs; singer-song-writers, writing local songs, like Jim Clark. He's had some exposure recently on CBC, and his kind of songs are in evidence, and there are other people, too, like that. One of my wishes and perhaps one of my personal motives for being involved in the Saint John Folk Club is to try and uncover local folk music again. Up to now all my energy has gone into the actual mechanics of helping run the Club—but there are songs here about Saint John, about the kind of people that live in Saint John and about the history of the place which really interest me personally, and I would like to see the Folk Club having a role in trying to bring that kind of music back to life again.



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