

RETROSPECTIVES

RAMBLES THROUGH ONTARIO

This summer Rika Ruebsaat and I were on a month-long tour through Ontario and the western provinces. This gave us an excellent opportunity to talk personally with people we'd been corresponding with over the past year. The first ten days we spent in Ontario: the following is Rika's impressions of the folk music activities we encountered in that province.

Jon Bartlett

As we flew into Toronto, we dove into a brown haze which hit us like a wet blanket as we stepped off the plane. It seems that every time we visit Toronto we hit the grasiest weather of the year.

Toronto is the home of Tam Kearney's Fiddler's Green Folk Club, one of the longest-running, most reputable folk clubs in the country. Unfortunately, my experience there was a far cry from what I had expected. Even though I've been there before, the building always surprises me. The club is in a run-down old house belonging to the YMCA. The performance space is a tiny L-shaped room with the stage located at the junction of the two arms, and with room for a maximum of about seventy people on metal chairs, in rows. The audience started dribbling in at about a quarter to nine, and shortly after nine, the evening began to a house of twenty-eight. The atmosphere was pretty dismal, and I kept thinking how much nicer it would be to pack it all in and go to the pub. Why is it that a club in English Canada's largest city which hosts Mariposa, one of the biggest folk festivals on the continent, can only attract twenty-eight people? Surely there are more than this number in the city of Toronto interested in folk music. During the breaks we talked with Tam Kearney about it. Tam is the "benevolent dictator" (as he calls himself) who began the club about eight years ago and who has been running it ever since. I don't know whether his indispensability has anything to do with the club's ups and downs—perhaps when Tam is down it affects the whole club—but something seems to be amiss. Tam said that the poor turnout was partially due to the weather; partially due to the fact that the club has been in limbo for a few months since it was supposed to move but hasn't done so yet, isn't sure whether it will and so cannot do much advance booking and publicity; and partially due to a declining interest in folk music generally. When a city the size of Calgary can support five folk clubs with capacity audiences on a regular basis, it's hard to believe that interest in folk music is declining.

A steel town is hardly the place you'd expect to find a thriving arts and music community, but Hamilton is the home of one of the most active arts organizations in Ontario. The evening after our night at Fiddler's Green we drove down with Eric Nagler to hear Mark Rush at the Knight II coffeehouse, part of the Hamilton-Wentworth Creative Arts Society. This society is the brainchild of Bill Owell and is lodged in two beautiful old brick houses which contain artists' studios, offices, a print shop, a darkroom, a gallery, and the coffeehouse. Knight II is a cozy space on the second floor of one of the houses, and has a small stage, a tiny kitchen, and room for about forty people seated at tables.

Mark Rust is a young performer from northern New York state, whose stage presence has the confidence and maturity of someone much older. His material that evening ranged from ballads and fiddle tunes to his own songs, all of which he shared (accompanied by Eric Nagler) with energy and enjoyment. He had obviously performed before at Knight II, because he knew exactly what to demand of the audience. He encouraged participation to such an extent that, by the end of the evening, he had everyone yodelling in two-part harmony.

Toronto has a couple of licensed restaurants that feature folk music, one of which is the Groaning Board on Bay Street. We had lunch there one day to see what it was like. If you like to smoke after eating the Groaning Board is not for you. The no-smoking rule is strictly enforced; as we were leaving, Jon lit a cigarette on his way out and the manager swooped down out of nowhere to tell him to extinguish it. The menu is overwhelming. Not only does it include fifty million varieties of "lip smackin', finger lickin' fare for carnivores, vegetarians and fish freaks", but each item is described in long, hand-lettered detail, outlining the tastiness of each dish. I was totally intimidated by the salad bar with its "hundred-and-thirty varieties of fresh vegetables, fruits, grains, dressings, garnishes, creations, seasonings, cheeses, textures, colours"...and Jon ordered a hamburger.

We went back to the Groaning Board the following evening to hear Stan Rogers, whom we had met at the Sudbury Festival last year. Stan had just finished a set when we arrived, so we sat together with him, his brother and fiddler/sidesman Garnet, and their bass player (one of the few graduates in philosophy to find employment this year). We talked about Stan's records (his second album, *Turnaround*, has just been

released on Woodshed Records), the *Bulletin* and the folk music business, until Jon and the bass player launched into a heated argument about Wittgenstein. The next set consisted entirely of a cappella songs—shanties, ballads—with lots of choruses to join in on. You get so used to seeing anonymous sidemen plunking away in the background and not relating to the audience that it was really a treat to watch Garnet leading unaccompanied songs and getting carried away by it. It was almost with regret that he picked up his fiddle again for the last set. Garnet is an integral part of the high quality of Stan Rogers' performances. Whenever Stan starts taking himself a little too seriously, Garnet pricks the bubble and brings things down to earth again. The biggest hit of the evening was a hilarious song to the tune of "Sixteen Tons", about data processing. The song really hit home with the audience of white-collar workers.

Our last afternoon in Toronto was spent consuming "barley sandwiches" with Paul Mills, producer of CBC's "Touch the Earth." The conversation did a lot to clear up east-west miscommunications. As westerners we tend to have a fairly negative attitude towards the CBC and its Toronto-centredness. The Canadian music we hear on the station is performed predominantly by musicians from in and around Toronto—very little is heard from the rest of the country. This summer a beginning was made to rectify this. The TTE crew travelled by train from Toronto to Vancouver Island interviewing musicians and club and festival organizers along the way. The result of this tour is a series of cross-Canada shows being aired all summer and into October.

After a week in Toronto we flew up to Sudbury for the Seventh Annual Northern Lights Festival Boréal. Every festival has its foul-ups, and we had our share of all of them in the first hour. Due to some miscommunication there was no-one to meet us at the airport; this turned to our advantage, however, because Jon's bag had gone on a free trip to Quebec City, and by the time he had sorted it all out we were picked up. Unfortunately, we arrived at the festival site forty minutes after we were due to perform, so we dumped our luggage backstage and twenty minutes later we were in concert. The kinks in the sound system hadn't been smoothed out—and we felt sure we were singing in one key and playing in another. Microphones died throughout the night, adding some very funny *ad lib* choreography to Jim Corcoran and Bertrand Gosselin's set, where an onstage chorus shuffled from mike to mike trying to find a live one.

I'm describing all the bad things first. In actual fact the Northern Lights Festival, in spite of foul-ups, was very good. We had performed there last year, and had left feeling very disappointed. There had been practically no traditional music among the anglophone performers, a lot of whom were electric singer/songwriters, and we found ourselves gravitating towards and spending most of our time with the francophones, where group singing and audience participation were at a much higher level. This year was a vast improvement, and all the workshops we participated in were a delight. There was a lot of interaction between francophones and anglophones; my favourite workshop was "Chanson à Répondre", where we alternated between sea shanties and ballads and Québécois traditional songs, including some bizarre harmonies from Barde, and Michel Lalonde of Lougarou. Ian Robb, an ex-Brit from Ottawa, and a member of Laylum shared many workshops with us. We hadn't met before, and we really enjoyed singing choruses on "Rolling Down to Old Maui" and on his own "What Have They Done to the Old Rose & Crown?" The high point of the Saturday night concert was Sneezy Waters' set. Sneezy is one of the funniest and most unpretentious performers I've ever met. He behaves the same before an audience of two thousand as he does in a room with three other people. His concert ran the musical gamut from Hank Williams to reggae, performed with a sleazy-looking back-up band and a sense of humour that had the audience on its feet. Following him was a single performer with only a guitar, and Sneezy skilfully and very professionally guided his screaming audience into a quiet listening mood. The "star" of the festival was probably Peter Paul Van Camp, whose characterization of the performing poet from Coshocton, Ohio, complete with bowtie, round glasses and turn-of-the-century hairdo, was flawless. He hosted the concerts, armed with his tome of poetry about squirrels, Coshocton, raspberries and other simple topics. The audience listened attentively, and participated to a degree rarely found in such large crowds. Hearing two thousand people yelling, "Yoghourt!" (from his poem "Dairy Products") in unison, or hearing the chorus of the Indiana state song, was a very funny and exciting experience, as well as being quite sobering for singers whose performances aim for participation.

From the insanity of the Northern Lights Festival we flew down to the sedate green fields and sprawling suburbia of southwestern Ontario. London is the home of the Cuckoo's Nest Folk Club, and while we were there we

visited Alistair Brown, one of the club's mainstays. The old part of London is very beautiful and we spent the hot afternoon—there had been no rain for eight weeks—sipping cold beer on the front porch of Alistair's and Rosemary's roomy old treelined house, talking about folk music in Britain and Canada and finding out about London's Home County Folk Festival coming up that weekend (July 22 and 23). The festival seems to be organized by a diverse conglomeration of people, which makes for an interesting (if not always harmonious) musical mixture. Thanks to pressure from Alistair and other Cuckoo's Nest people, this year will feature a lot more folk music than in the past. It's always a challenge to put on a music festival, partially sponsored by a city, in a city park, where you get everything from bikers to senior citizens. After a delicious supper we went to a practice of the local Morris side, of which Alistair is the Squire. Morris dancing is catching on both in England and North America and there have been heated disputes about whether women should be allowed to participate in a dance traditionally performed by men.

Some groups divide into women's and men's teams, but the London team (in spite of the fact that they call themselves Morris Men) is totally 'co-ed'. The practice was held in a member's back yard, out in one of those anonymous, dreary, treeless suburbs where the yards are enclosed by wire fences and the houses are either mock-Tudor or imitation Spanish. The incongruity of an ancient fertility dance taking place in this aseptic setting struck me as extremely ironic.

The folk community in London is an interesting mixture of people. The dance team is composed of everyone from housewives to teachers to teenagers, and even includes one of the city's aldermen. As we watched the practice I was trying to picture one of our own Vancouver aldermen prancing around in breeches with ribbons on his hat.

The next morning we left for the prairies. Our Ontario visit had been very helpful to us in understanding the folk scene there.

Rika Ruebsaat

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