

LETTERS

I have long been dubious about the self-congratulations of the Calgary "Folk" Scene—to discover these given national airing forces me to make a dissenting statement.

It is true that there are large numbers of people here who perform with acoustic guitar and banjo, and larger numbers who are pleased to listen to them. Many of the latter also amuse themselves with these instruments at home. It is also true that many of these performers feature songs from oral tradition in their repertoires, in some cases almost exclusively. But all of that is not enough to justify so much talk about a "thriving" "folk" scene, at least not in the way I use those words.

If you refer what goes on here to Alan Lomax' dictum that *style* is the essence of folk music—i.e., that performance style carries information as much as do melody and words—you get a quite different impression of the situation. For the most part, once "folksingers" in Calgary get beyond the beginners' ineptness, they seem to have no other goal or guideline but hotshot technique, with more in common with the Kingston Trio and the Limelighters than it does with the Copper Family, Jeannie Robertson, Tom Brandon, Clarence Ashley, Dock Boggs, Fred McDowell, Blind Willie McTell, or whatever specific performer or tradition might be applicable.

I know, I've stepped on an old argument, and maybe I'm just as tired of it as you are. But I didn't start it, and it has never been effectively answered. I am aware that I myself first became interested in folk music after reading a *Time* article in 1963, and after seeing Theo Bikel on TV, and after hearing a neighbor's Joan Baez records. So, yes, I agree that popularization has its uses. But it must be also noted that it has its limitations, and it's a plain lie to ignore these limitations.

It's a fact that Dock Boggs, for one, created his music out of a totally different esthetic than did the Kingston Trio, whose esthetic was not so different from those of the Four Freshmen or Bobby Darin. To those schooled on the esthetic of the latter, it's an obvious conclusion that Dock Boggs (not to mention Roscoe Holcomb, but I've even heard it applied to Jean Ritchie)—that Dock Boggs CAN'T SING.

You must learn to understand any sort of beauty, if you are to enjoy it, and what I say is

that the pop-folk tradition does not create any real bridge of understanding from one esthetic to another. I'm afraid that it does worse than that—that too much of the public, having been informed that their Gordon Lightfoot records or the performance of "Coulter's Candy" that they heard last night at the Goodtime Party Hat Folk Club is Folk Music, then assume that the standards applicable to Lightfoot or the GPFC are in fact the standards of Folk Music, and, therefore, they were right to assume that Dock Boggs can't sing. I am sure that for every instance of someone who discovered folk music through the Kingston Trio, there are dozens who go through *that* pattern instead.

And, ultimately, my real bitch is the use of the word "folk", in all of this. The word has a halo effect that is most unfortunate. All other things being equal, I most often prefer to listen to folk music rather than to pop or classical music; for me, oral traditions produce more interesting, peculiar and profound music than do popular, commercial traditions. But oral traditions never exist uninfluenced by pop and classical traditions and I myself have moods that can only be satisfied by the classical music of Bartok and Coltrane. And, finally, any songwriter of any genre, would not find it easy to beat "Stormy Weather", "September Song", or "Mr. Tambourine Man".

I suppose it is a fashion of sorts to despise pop music, or perhaps it has to do with certain democratic connotations of the term, "folk music", but, damn it, a song stands on its own two feet, or not at all, and calling it "folk" gives it nothing. "Sir Patrick Spens" is an acknowledged masterpiece of the English language, and it would not gain or lose an iota of value if Irving Berlin or Xaviera Hollander proved to have written it; a good pop song gains nothing by being mislabelled a folk song, and a bad one will not be saved by that term.

Am I wandering from the subject of folk music in Calgary? No. There has been at least one store in town that specialized in folk music records, for at least three years; yet two weeks ago, I wandered into one of the larger chain stores, and found nothing but Carly Simon, James Taylor, Randy Newman, &c., records in their huge "folk" slot. None of these performers, to my knowledge, has ever referred to themselves as a folksinger. If the "scene" is so great here, why hasn't the public gotten the message?

Calgary's "folk music" clubs fill a need here, obviously, but it seems to me that that need is, essentially, the need of a large number of young adults and married couples for watering places

that do not have the particular associations of discos, night clubs and country and western taverns. The need is *not* for folk music, performed in any variety of traditional idioms, with respect and love for the traditional performance values or context of that music.

I am also dubious about the value of serving beer at “folk” clubs. Beer draws audiences, sure, but it doesn’t draw audiences that would necessarily sit through Almeda Riddle or Harry Cox or Robert Pete Williams, and the audiences that would like to hear those performers (or performers who work out of or emulate their traditions), will gladly attend without lubrication. (This, of course, is a small group.)

I wonder if beer’s foamy presence isn’t largely responsible for what seems to me to be a peculiarly Calgarian phenomenon: the identification of “folk music” with “good times.” I know of few more stupid concepts: OF COURSE folk music is about good times and jollity, so is any music or any art. But so is any music or art about pain, fear, loss, boredom and hatred. This “good times” crap-ola is just another reason why you can expect not to see Roscoe Holcomb, Robert Pete Williams, or any of a variety of performers, in any of Calgary’s “folk clubs.” They just wouldn’t fit. I don’t understand any reason to be particularly pleased by the demographic breakdown of an audience (or “healthy cross-section”)—I would like to see more of Calgary’s residents more responsive to and more understanding of more kinds of music. If I attend a concert and the hall is full of nonagenarians, toddlers, or just people my own age, I couldn’t care less, *if* the music *moves* me, to laughter *or* to tears.

I myself am a musician in Calgary. There are musicians I respect here, including some “folk” musicians. It may be that eventually a genuine body of interest in folk music will develop here. I may be overly pessimistic. But it will take more than the good time atmosphere that prevails now to create it.

*George W. Lyon
Calgary, Alta.*

I would like to commend you on your article describing the folk scene in Alberta. I believe you did a fine job highlighting the major developments, particularly in Calgary.

There is, however, one very important aspect of the folk music activity in Calgary that didn’t really come through in your review. This is the countless numbers of “livingroom singers” who are the real folk scene in Calgary. These are people who love to sit around and sing songs, play guitars, banjos or what have you just for

the plain fun of it. There are numerous groups of people who get together on a casual basis just to have a good old-fashioned singsong. Some are extremely accomplished musicians who choose not to perform in public; others are just learning. They are all united in their fondness for spontaneous, homemade music. There is a love and attitude of “let’s enjoy our music” among these people that is hard to describe. This is a predominantly underground activity, based on groups of friends getting together whenever the urge strikes, hence it’s hard to really know it’s going on. These “livingroom singers” represent a very real grass roots musical tradition, and as such, by virtue of their support of the visible folk outlets in town, represent what folk music is really all about in Calgary.

The Continuing Education classes which teach guitar, banjo, autoharp, mandolin and assorted other courses (there has even been a Canadian Folk Music course!) are usually filled to overflowing year after year. The growth of the folk clubs in town also attests to an exceedingly large population. Folk music is seen as something to be enjoyed, something to get involved in. This feeling for music is clearly conveyed in the Calgary audiences who are noted for their enthusiasm and tolerance of almost all musical forms—from old style traditional singing to contemporary singers/songwriters.

I’m not trying to suggest that “livingroom singers” are unique to Calgary; in fact, everywhere I’ve been in Canada I’ve found it. What I am saying is that the visible folk outlets described so well in the Alberta issue of the *Bulletin* are only the tip of the iceberg. What supports these outlets is a large group of people who love to sing and enjoy folk music. These are the true folk musicians and singers in Calgary.

*Tim Rogers
Calgary, Alta.*

I was surprised to read in the article on folk music in Alberta that “coffeehouses can tend to become ghettos of folk ‘buffs’, but with a bar you attract a good healthy cross-section of the public.” We at the Cafe Domingo take exception. It is the club’s format, in terms of the variety of musicians performing from concert to concert, that provides the “good healthy cross-section.” I just don’t agree that a bar is the reason for a club’s success. One comment the Cafe Domingo often gets from its musicians is that they really enjoy the feeling they get from the attentive audiences at the club. But it is not only the performer who is affected by playing in a place with a bar. What about the people who are seriously interested in listening to the music?

My experience is that all too often, towards the end of the night, the band has to compete with the audience. I hope those clubs that provide a bar are successful—but I also hope that your comment about coffeehouses turns out to be false. Coffeehouses can provide a good atmosphere for all concerned and don't need to become 'ghettoes'.

*Brad Welk
Cafe Domingo
Saskatoon*

The version of "A La Claire Fontaine" ("Fendez le Bois") has been faithfully presented by Rika Ruebsaat in the *Bulletin* (I-3). However, my Quebecois friends who sing it cite it as being one of the few sung in the Quebec repertoire which retains sexual connotations used in popular language between husband and wife, or lovers. "Fendez le bois" (split the wood) and

"chauffer le four" (heat up the stove) do not refer to chopping wood! But they share some language with parlance in the United States relating to pregnancy ("she has one in the oven").

*Andy Melamed
Montreal*

First of all, congratulations on the *Bulletin*. Love those graphics! Now down to business. A shiny, new hurdy-gurdy (the *vielle a roue* variety, of course; no monkeys involved) has arrived at my door, and I'm left here all alone to try and learn to play. Perhaps your readers could put me in contact with other players or point me towards a how-to-play book (in English).

*Steve Sellors
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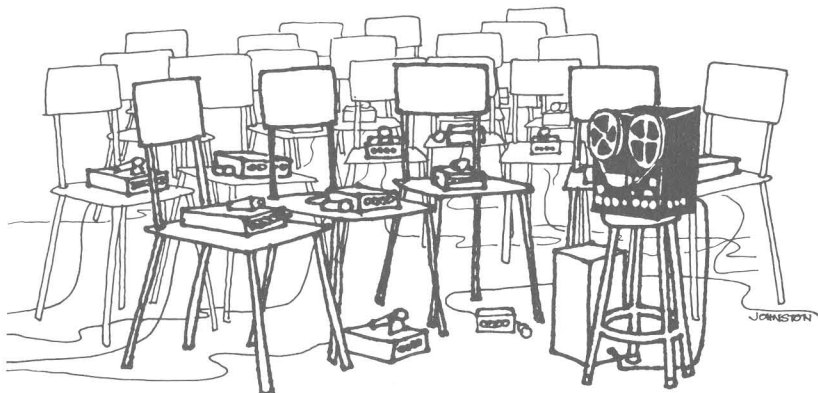
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