

IAN ROBB AND THE CANADIAN FOLK REVIVAL



photo by Valerie Robb

"Hang the Piper" L-R: Terry Rudden, Ian Robb, Jon Goodman.

The Canadian folk revival is a very new phenomenon in comparison with other traditions. In Britain, Ireland and the United States, revival performers have been a significant presence since at least the late 'fifties. In Canada, there have always been a few voices crying in the wilderness,

from Phil Thomas to Alan Mills, but they have not been heard in any great number. The Canadian association with folk song has been primarily that of the folklorist in the field. We are still in the position where our major collectors, like Edith Fowke and Helen Creighton, are better

known than any performers. One might feel that this is as it should be, but in the United States, where the enjoyment of traditional song goes well beyond the scholar, there are many who are totally ignorant of Alan Lomax but for whom "Pete Seeger" is a household word.

It seems only logical that folk song must be performed to continue as a living form. Books and collections of tapes may act as historical records but the singer in action provides the heart of the song. The tradition developed in this way, and anyone who has participated in a late night song circle with a bunch of friends, whether the songs were Child Ballads or by Neil Young, knows that this is the way it will continue.

Today, however, many of us who wish to learn folksongs are not in contact with traditional singers. In any case, our orientation is not solely to live performances. Through records, the best singers can be brought right into our own living rooms. And here we have another Canadian problem. We have very few commercial recordings of Canadian singers and songs. The few which have been available were either of "art singers", who seem quite removed from the pieces they are performing, or else of traditional singers recorded in the field. Both of these can provide enjoyment to the listener and a source for the singer but they cannot hope for any popular acclaim.

Perhaps it is a sad comment on popular tastes today but the traditional singer seldom has the appeal of a revival performer, especially within the confines of a recording. The former usually lacks

the latter's understanding of the medium and is either unable or unwilling to present a similar variety of arrangements. The result of this is the incredible popularity of Planxty or the Bothy Band in Ireland among people who have never heard of Paddy Doran or Chris Droney.

This probably seems a rather involved preamble to an article which is ostensibly about Ian Robb, but it puts his position in some perspective. Canada has a very colonial history, first as a political colony of Great Britain and then as an economic and cultural colony of the United States. The result in folk song has been various young Canadian performers whose material and style best suggest the hills of Tennessee or the mountains of Colorado rather than the Qu'Appelle Valley of Saskatchewan or the Southern Shore of Newfoundland.

It is perhaps a natural bit of irony then that a British singer has done much to make us recognize the alternative. Ian began his career as a singer at the St. Alban's Folk Club where he was a resident along with Frankie Armstrong, Tim Hart and Maddy Prior. After emigration to Canada, he encountered a number of other performers of traditional British music at Fiddler's Green in Toronto. A group was formed, indeterminate in number, called the Friends of Fiddler's Green, who perform Mummers' Plays and English songs and anything else that comes to mind.

The energy of the Friends, under the forceful direction of Tam Kearney and Jim Strickland, has spawned a broad interest in British traditions in the Toronto area (most

lately in Morris dancing) but it also brought together one of the first professional groups to emphasize the performance of traditional Canadian material.

The group, Laylum, was formed by Ian, Margaret Christl and Grit Laskin, three members of the Friends. Grit is a well-known Toronto luthier, and an accomplished player of such diverse instruments as guitar, mandolin, accordion, concertina and northumbrian pipes. Margaret, like Ian originally from Britain, grew up in the Welsh choir tradition. Her first major exposure to folk music came in Toronto, where she became the sole female member of the Friends.

All three had a strong awareness of the British tradition and they brought this knowledge to the printed collections of Canadian folksong. These accumulations provide a great wealth of material but the problem is to mine it. If I may be allowed a personal diversion, I can sightread quite well so books should be a good source for my singing repertoire but it takes a very good ear to just run through a song and tell what it has to offer. On the other hand, one listen to a song performed by an Archie Fisher or a Louis Killen lets you know the potential. In Canada, we have lacked similar inspiration until Laylum.

Their record on Folk Legacy (as "Margaret Christl and Ian Robb with Grit Laskin"), entitled "The Barley Grain for Me," has had a tremendous influence on singers I know. A number who are unable to read music have learned their first Canadian songs from it. Laylum's record, all Canadian songs, reveals

many of the relationships between our songs and their English, Irish and Scottish roots. At the Celtic Consciousness conference in Toronto, Laylum and the Quebec group, Barde, showed the Irish and Scottish influence on the Canadian tradition, Laylum primarily in song and Barde primarily instrumentally.

The scope for this Canadian material, particularly mixed in with songs from Britain and Ireland, is enormous. Margaret has gone on to a solo album on Woodshed called *Jockey to the Fair*. The songs are primarily Canadian but she includes a substantial number of English, Irish and Scottish ballads as well. Ian is about to do a new album on Folk Legacy which will show a similar eclecticism, and might include some of the material which he lately has been writing himself and which shows the potential for contemporary songs in a traditional idiom.

For a number of reasons, most notably Margaret's residence in Toronto and Ian's in Ottawa, Laylum is not performing much now but Margaret's solo career is very much on the rise and Ian has been exploring new venues. He has formed a new group with two ex-members of an Ottawa-based Irish band called Wickentree. Ian plays concertina and sings while Terry Rudden plays guitar and Jon "the Viking" Goodman plays tin whistle and Uilleann pipes. Their name, "Hang the Piper", comes from an old engraving of a British officer merrily lynching an Irish piper with the pipes draped around his neck. Their first major engagement was at the Northern Lights Festival this past summer where they hopefully fared a bit better than this ancestor.

With "Hang the Piper", Ian is adding more instrumental traditions to his singing. As is perhaps natural for an immigrant, he has taken the knowledge gained from his birthplace and added the opportunities presented here, in our mixture of cultures and the wealth of seldom-performed songs. The reaction on our side should be to take the inspiration provided by him and Margaret Christl and others, and

extend the performance of the Canadian tradition. The tendency is perhaps even stronger in folk music than in other aspects of culture to constantly look elsewhere for material. The presence of such excellent British singers in Canada, who demonstrate on record the power and beauty of our own tradition, should spur all of us literally to change our tunes.

Terry Goldie

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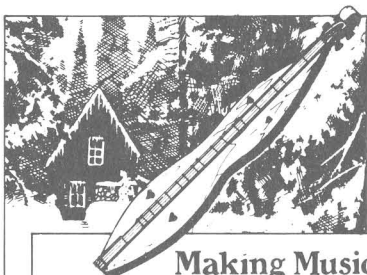
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