

# SPANNING THE REVIVAL

## 20 YEARS OF THE VFSS



Photo: Henk Pikel

A pearl of a summer's evening in the month of July; from the little white clapboard Lutheran church in Kitsilano—a church which has known no congregation for many a year—the sound of voices in full swell. Have the absent faithful returned at last? Listen closer. As the chorus ebbs, a voice like a force-ten foghorn cuts the air:

**But the best of intentions they  
never go far**

**After thirty-two days at the door  
of a bar,**

**I tossed off me liquor and  
what d'ye think?**

**That rotten old bleeder had  
doctored me drink. . .**

It's not the spirit of Luther's elect

### *Dancing at the VFSS "retreat".*

that sways the singer, but the spirit of Johnny Canuck, and John Barleycorn in the nutbrown bowl, strongest of them all. For this is the unlikely stamping ground of the Vancouver Folk Song Circle, and on this particular evening it is celebrating its twentieth anniversary at full blast.

Twenty years of meeting continuously every first and third Wednesday of the month, the longest run of any active Canadian folk club, largely spanning the course of the folk revival. In the process, the Vancouver Folk Song Society (VFSS) which grew out of the Circle has acquired a unique fund of experience—and learnt some

insights, if not answers, to questions such as:

What is the basis of a successful folk club? What are the threats, internal and external, to its survival and healthy development? How can a club interact within a local community—and evolve its own sense of community?

Understanding the past provides us with a better grasp of present tendencies and potential, as patterns shift and recur; or in plain talk, “You can’t know where you’re going unless you know where you’re coming from.”

This article is offered in the belief that such hard-won experience may be of use to other clubs and people involved with folk music, in Canada as elsewhere, and if it is to avoid being no more than a yes-man’s potted history of the VFSS, I must necessarily view the Society from a positive but critical perspective.

In the late fifties the folk scene in Vancouver consisted of a few concerts and hootenannies, a couple of coffeehouses and restaurants which served as meeting places for early enthusiasts—but no regular live clubs. The influences were varied, mainly American (Ives, Guthrie, Seeger, the Weavers) yet there was already an awareness that Canada had its own traditions, and the effects of the British revival and singers and writers, such as Ewan McColl and Bert Lloyd, were beginning to be felt. Two such musically mottled bands emerged around 1959, looking for places to play regularly: the Tree-toppers, and their friends and rivals, the Highriggers. The ‘Toppers founded the Ballad and Blues Club which

lasted a year or so but eventually faded. In reply, the ‘Riggers, who included Phil and Hilda Thomas and Al Cox, called a concert for themselves at the Alma YMCA in July. It drew such an unexpectedly large and enthusiastic audience that they agreed to repeat the concert and, as the response grew rather than diminished, the Highriggers decided to hold regular meets every two weeks, on the first and third Wednesdays of the month. Other singers and musicians were invited to contribute and a loose structure gradually evolved, with the Highriggers as ‘residents’, Al Cox as M.C. and Jeannie Moss as convenor, taking care of the logistics, from the arrangement of seating to the provision of refreshments during the break.

It was Jeannie’s efforts, by unanimous consent, that held the Circle together in those early years; and any successful club must rely on the loyalty and diligence of such behind-the-scenes volunteers. Though chiefly unsung, their contribution is crucial.

No money was asked for at first, until the Alma Y demanded a fixed rent. The solution was to pay it in a lump by establishing a Society and charging members an annual fee (five dollars then as now). Thus the beginnings of the VFSS occurred not so much by design as by force of circumstance.

The Society continued meeting as the Circle with minimal changes in format and content through the ‘sixties. Before the evening began, anyone wishing to perform put their name on the ‘list’, to sing or play three pieces when their turn came—a

procedure that has remained. The Highriggers withdrew from prominence, and an increasing number of singers and musicians were attracted and came to form a hard core of regulars.

The attitude at this time was characterised by a minimum of structure and a maximum of accessibility to different musics. This open-ended quality made for an extremely tolerant and supportive atmosphere in which newcomers, or members who had not hitherto felt confident enough, were encouraged to get up and 'do their thing'. Phil Thomas regards this eclecticism as particularly valuable, providing an element of surprise at every meet—the occasionally dire mingles with the delightful, or, as Paddy Graber, another life member of the Society puts it, "everyone fits in somewhere, everyone is given a chance to try their wings and still maintain their dignity, come what may."

While each new club will evolve its own particular character, all should remain accessible to new faces and fresh influences. The closed-shop attitude sometimes encountered, the narrow stance that rejects the background and culture of people from differing traditions, is destructive to the founding spirit of the folk revival. The cultural plurality in which we now live can only be denied by playing the ostrich and/or fantasising a new and non-existent purism.

However, the term 'folk' has come to be indiscriminately used as a catch-all, applied to almost any music that is acoustically based—from Neil Young to the Nepalese nose flute. Consequently, in the 'sixties, folk

clubs attracted an inordinate number of singer/songwriters, some socially sensitive and broadly appealing, but all too many of what Phil calls the "belly button crew"—navel-gazers and pisspot poets eager to foist their sorry egos on an unsuspecting audience. In reaction to such abuses of its openness, a tendency developed within the Folk Song Circle of encouraging mainly traditional musics, to provide a feeling at once of solid foundations and of a clear direction through the maze. The focus, unlike so much commercial music, moves away from the individual and his or her private and particular experience, and towards the experience and participation of a wider group, or of the company as a whole. The singer or musician tends to be regarded as simply the instrument through which a common musical heritage is transmitted, and with the emphasis on chorus songs, the divide between performer and audience is bridged. An embarrassment of introverted songsters will ultimately kill off the community spirit of a club.

This directional shift in the Folk Song Circle grew in the 'seventies, accentuated by an influx of younger members, many of them British, who were accustomed to the traditional bias and more structured format of most British revival clubs. They brought with them not only new songs and tunes, but fresh approaches to folk and the energy for launching diverse projects: there was talk of a radio show, more concerts, a 'paid-guest' club, even a festival. The executive of the VFSS were, by their own admission, not especially active at this time and the demand for a clearly structured and incorporated society corresponded largely with the

emergence of a younger generation.

The Society duly incorporated, and the advantages were considerable. Financially, incorporation gives limited liability, and the club or society becomes eligible for a range of grants otherwise out of reach. Most important, it establishes a proper democratic framework, and extends the scope of active participation available to members. The danger is that an over-punctilious approach to procedure, too much red tape beyond the necessary rules of order, will alienate the less politicised or 'organisational animals'—and tend to isolate the executive. The infrastructure should be strong and efficient, yet also supple and sensitive to feelings from the membership at large. The issue of accountability is essential; any executive should be aware at all times that they are representatives, not independent agents, although simultaneously they will give a club a sense of direction.

Annual General Meetings, despite their reports and elections, are not sufficient in themselves, being highly procedural and too staged and formal to permit the less articulate to make their views and feelings known.

The VFSS acknowledges this problem and all committee and executive meetings are open for members to attend. In addition, members have the right to call a Special General Meeting to discuss controversial issues and decisions; as for example occurred when the executive voted to charge admission to the Folk Song Circle. Some members demanded a Special General Meeting in protest and won the ensuing vote, reversing the decision of the executive. Yet these rights are rarely used and executive

meetings are not publicised in the club's newsletter. More positive, if not yet productive, has been the recent policy of holding occasional Interim General Meetings for all members to discuss broader issues of policy and matters arising.

Incorporation provided the Society with the strength and structure to appoint committees for new ventures. The weekly show "Folk Circle" on Vancouver Co-operative Radio ran for several years, broadcasting live from the studio, local concerts, interviews and shows on particular themes; but ultimately it required so much output and

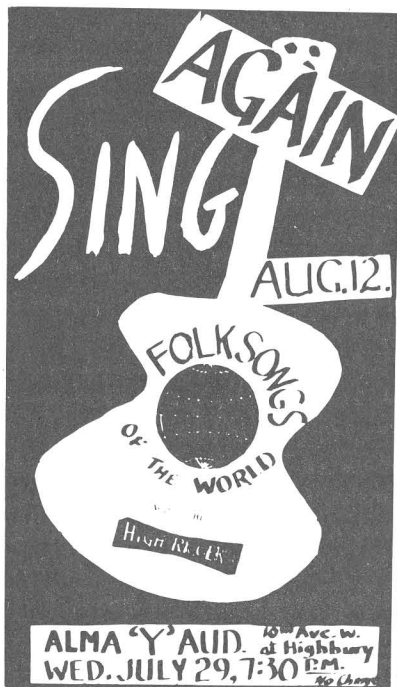


Photo: Phil Thomas

Poster for the very first and the second ("again") Vancouver Folk Song Circle evenings—Aug. 1959.

received so little feedback that it was curtailed. The prospect of mounting a local festival dwindled as it was felt the Society was not yet ready to undertake it. One project, however, succeeded beyond expectation: a weekly coffeehouse 'clubnight' in east Vancouver. The aim was to provide a complement to the loosely structured informality of the Folk Song Circle and to be able to bring professional guest performers from out of town, as well as offering a stage for resident bands and singers from Vancouver to play to a wider public. The first set is always turned over to a VFSS member as a warm-up for the evening, and gives them a unique opportunity to 'polish up their act' and present more than three songs in succession, while the two final sets are the guest's.

Michael Pratt was appointed as Director of the project and after several months' search for suitable premises, the coffeeshop at the Britannia Community Centre was chosen. The advantages were its location in the heart of the east side, and the helpful attitude of the Centre staff. The disadvantage is the lack of a liquor licence and the cafeteria environment, whose somewhat aseptic ambiance is mitigated by the efforts of the Green Cove Coffeehouse committee to provide tablecloths, candles and background decor.

Lacking previous organisational experience, Michael admits he was exhausted after nine months, but the Green Cove was established, and fears that it would leach energy from the Folk Song Circle proved unfounded. With paid performers (though 'residents' play for free) and

a charge at the door, it was necessary to make the coffeehouse financially a tight ship. A very structured committee developed to deal with every conceivable issue: there is an overall Director, House Manager, Roster Co-ordinator (for volunteers), Financial Advisor, Booking Agent, and members in charge of liaison with both the Britannia Centre and resident performers.

The evolution of a core of activists and volunteers is crucial for any club—not only to carry out the various logistical tasks, but to help create a sense of identity for the club, to become involved in the evening's entertainment, leading the choruses and dancing (if any), responding attentively to the performers. To be a truly active participant as a member of the audience is a skill in itself. The risk here is of creating too *much* of a group sense, or even an 'in-crowd' of cognoscenti, so that casual visitors feel left out of the action, or that they are intruding on a semi-private party—and don't return. Similarly, there is a danger of the performers and clubs themselves becoming too professionally oriented and stressing expertise and stage presence at the expense of feeling and candour.

The VFSS is fortunate that the Folk Song Circle provides such an excellent and varied forum for the folk—from greenhorns to professionals. As the quality of performance improves among regulars and residents, it should never be lost sight of that everyone has to start somewhere—and that beginners should be able to expect a supportive home crowd.

There are other opportunities for singing and playing in still less formal

environments. After the Green Cove closes at midnight on Fridays, members head for the basement of a local house, rigged out as the closest thing to your average British pub you are likely to find this side of the brine. There is an unmatched quality in the homely seediness and even-seasoned 'grotteness' exuding from the beerstained woodwork and bare linoleum floor, the Sally-Ann furnishings and moth-eaten dartboard, which no imported 'authentic replica' (genuine fake!) of a pub with mock Tudor beams and polished horse brasses, could possibly attain. As throats are lubricated, the music begins to flow freely.

After the Folk Song Circle, in the last couple of years, the company is invited to go for a drink at the Centennial beer parlour on Broadway. By contrast, the Centennial is another cavernous watering hole with as much appeal as an airport waiting-room or a chest clinic. However, the waiters are friendly and happy to turn off the inevitable junk-box (sic) for us to start singing. Casual drinkers are knocked sideways by the intrusion of *real* voices—some move, some leave

and some join in or just listen. I recall one night when a group of young people, fresh from a game of volleyball, rushed up to sit by us, amazed and delighted: "We've never heard anything like it!" they gushed. "Live singing in the pub—unreal!"

Still more skills are fostered by the VFSS, notably a probing and critical attitude toward music and its function, leading to expression in



Photo: Henk Piket

*Resident piper, Bruce McRae.*

writing, whether for the informal pages of the club's newsletter or the more analytical *Canada Folk Bulletin*. An earlier magazine, *Come All Ye*, had fulfilled both roles but failed to attract new energy and to an extent fell between two stools. Around 1977 the *3/4 Times* was started and the CFB planned. The value of a regular newsletter, as a reliable means of publishing dates and information, and as a forum for debate and exchange of views, is clear, and was well covered by Aly



Photo: Henk Piket

*Fred Weihs*

Brown's corner in the previous issue of the *Bulletin* (Sept/Oct). With regard to the aims and structure of CFB, these were set out in early editorials, but as the first issue is now out of print it may be useful to present a summarized account. The basic aim is to promote mainly traditional (or, at least, homegrown) music across Canada by publishing a variety of appropriate articles, interviews, songs and reviews. There is an underlying desire to prompt us all to question 'just what is folk music?', and further, 'what is my/our

culture?' (another word whose meaning has been distorted, but which in essence means simply 'that which is grown', in a social sense). The *Bulletin* also seeks to be a kind of grand newsletter, an instrument of communication able to link folk clubs and societies and enthusiasts across the country and give them some idea of what is happening elsewhere in Canada.

Decisions are made by an editorial board, each member having equal input although a nominal Editor is required to present a report to the VFSS Board. While self-supporting at present the *Bulletin* was originally in part funded by the old *Come All Ye*, and it shares its office with the VFSS. The Society had been looking for an office for some years in order to make its accumulated resources available to the public and operate as a centre for information to anyone interested in folk. The office now holds a wide selection of magazines, newsletters, books, tapes and records, as well as the Society's archives, with the emphasis on music rather than folklore.

The rent was partially subsidised by a group of members involved in the Canadian Music in the Schools project, funded by a Canada Works grant. The venture led to workshops being run in elementary and high school in east Vancouver for kids, concerning their social and historical as well as musical backgrounds, and has been followed by a radio series, *Songs & Stories of Canada*, to be broadcast by the CBC in their educational slot this fall in the western provinces.

Though not in themselves VFSS activities, such projects are indicative

**THE FOLK SONG CIRCLE**

AT THE  
**ALMA-Y**  
10th AVE. & Highbury

**1st & 3rd**  
**WED.** OF EACH MONTH  
**8 P.M.**

SILVER COLLECTION

Another early 'Circle poster.

of the concern shown by many members, and the Society as a whole, to reach the local community and the emergent sense of roots and identity among Canadians of all ilks.

A folk club today, like it or not, functions as a cultural focus and should acknowledge certain inherent social responsibilities. Any local traditional music and musicians should be appreciated and encouraged and an attempt consciously made to give the idiom of the people back to those people and not to hoard it as the preserve of a new elite group. Easier said than done; folkies face a huge task in presenting an alternative to the multi-headed exploitation of show business and the music industry—from starswooning to cultcreation—in communities that have been sold out and saturated by pseudocultures and glib sounds beneath the smiling edifice of the almighty Buck. Folk and traditional music is not anyone's private property or investment, but a collective heritage no-one should *have* to pay for.

However, the role of a successful club is also to create a new sense of community from the music. Just as folk, moved from the land to industrial cities, continued in an altered social context to give voice to the protests, sorrows and joys of ordinary people, so the old songs, shifted to the setting of a folk club in a modern town or metropolis, persist as vehicles for the expression of collective and individual emotions and responses to the changed environment. The difference is that whereas previously these songs were carried by men and women who, for better or worse, were largely

unlettered, they are now conveyed by people who have all received a formal education—and shouldn't attempt to deny it by self-consciously assuming the ways and bogus persona of shepherdess or shantyman. There is a constant risk of folk clubs becoming at best repositories of the precious and pretentious, at worst a haven for anti-social escapist and reactionaries. In an article in *Folk News* recently, the singer Frankie Armstrong criticised this backward-

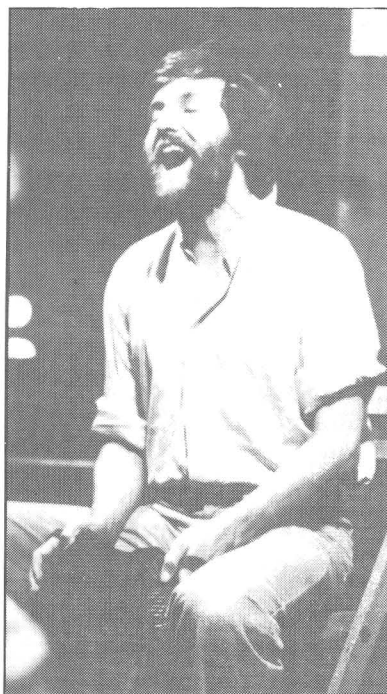
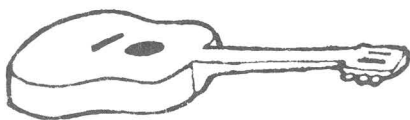


Photo: Tom Phipps

*Michael Pratt*





glancing complacency and cliqueishness, concentrating her invective on the trend toward singing songs without really feeling them 'from the inside', and on the persistent underlying sexism of a number of British clubs that will not grow up and accept social changes and realities.

A successful club is sensitive and outward-looking, just as the music is creative in the best sense, not stagnant but continually evolving. The Folk Song Circle has survived twenty years thanks to its openminded and supple stance, its lack of formality and supportive but not uncritical home crowd. It has a strong identity and sense of the social dimensions of folk with the stress continually on participation—in the songs and tunes, in the Society's structure, and in the community. There are heated controversies and clashes enough, yet these are overcome, forgiven if not forgotten, and the VFSS continues to grow. Though faces come and go, what binds us is the music. But I leave the last word to founder member Hilda Thomas: "a good club creates an awareness through the music of belonging both to shared traditions and to an emerging community."

*Tony Montague*



*Errata: On page 7 of the last issue of the Bulletin halfway down the first column are the initials JK (Joan Kuyek). She is quoted as saying, "I come from a French-Canadian line. . . ." Those initials should read PG (Pierre Germain).*



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