

TAMARACK is Randy Sutherland, James Gordon and Jeff Bird, who also form the "nucleus" of the group MAPLE SUGAR. This is their debut record as a trio. Some other members of MAPLE SUGAR help out on the second half of the record, which was recorded before a live audience. The first side is a studio effort.

I wish I could like this record more. It has a lot going for it. Sutherland, Gordon and Bird play numerous instruments (mandolin, guitar, tin whistle, conga drum, antique cymbals, kalimba, violin, double bass and harmonica are all represented), and they play them at least passably well. They've obviously listened to a lot of good music, have learned from it, and have incorporated what they've learned into their own playing. They've done a lot of digging, and for this record have selected many really fine tunes and songs, most of them rarely heard on record.

Unfortunately, to my mind the drawbacks far outweigh the advantages on this LP. The vocals are not up to the standard of the instrumentation, for one thing. On several cuts the singers actually wander off pitch -- I'm amazed that the tracks would ever have been released on record! In general, the vocal styles seem inappropriate to the material -- but more on that later.

The major failings, though, are philosophical. First off, the album is sailing under false colours. It calls itself "Music of Canada." The liner notes proclaim that "It represents one major branch of the traditional music of Canada, and traces its origins back to the Celtic peoples..." In fact, much of the material is not Canadian, such as Ewan MacColl's "Shoals of Herring" and many of the tunes. (The fact that old-time Canadian fiddle music developed from and was influenced by the music of Scotland and Ireland doesn't mean that all Irish and Scottish fiddle tunes are automatically part of the corpus of Canadian folk music, even if no Canadian old-time fiddler has ever played them!) False advertising!

Even more distressing, to my mind, is the fact that what Canadianness there is to this record is totally smothered by the arrangements. The notes tell us that the group "have taken oral traditions and, with respect and love, have adapted them to match the experience and understanding of their own time. The contemporary arrangements help make the music accessible to all..." The subtext, to me, is: "This is Canadian, but don't worry, we've prettied

it up to make it palatable and relevant." And the subtext is borne out by what actually happens with the music. The reality lies in the face of the "respect and love" which the group profess to hold for Canadian traditional music.

Back to the liner notes again: "Sutherland, Gordon and Bird, ... drawn to all forms of traditional music, have added an eclectic blending of blues, jazz and country traditions, often in original compositions..." That's for sure! They've trotted out just about every musical style that has ever had the adjective "folk" attached to it by the music industry, and strung them all together in a haphazard, almost random, fashion, as though the sole purpose of the record were to show off how many ways the musicians can play and the singers can sing, with little regard to how it all fits together.

Despite the group's preoccupation with Celtic music for their instrumental cuts, the influences in the song arrangements are almost wholly American. A few token British-style harmonies sneak in at the beginning of "Ferryland Sealer," but are quickly abandoned -- one more base touched, now let's get on to something else... This approach is typical of the record in general: the group never sink their teeth into anything long enough to make a lasting impression on it.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with blending disparate musical traditions. Most of us do it most of the time. Traditional communities heard the music of other cultures, absorbed influences from it and gradually, over periods of years, generations or centuries, incorporated it into their own music. But the point is that traditional singers rejected much more than they kept. They tried things, listened to the result and, if it didn't work, threw it out. TAMARACK need to put more effort into evaluating **their** end product and, if it doesn't work, throwing it out. Unfortunately, on this record the cultural blending mostly doesn't work.

"Maryann" with Bob Dylanesque lead vocals, lush guitar arpeggios and jazzy violin? "Peter Emberley" in bouncy double tempo, with bluesy harmonica? What's the point? At best, this is the kind of stuff that it's fun to fool around with in jam sessions, and should mercifully be left there. At worst, it amounts to purposeless despoilment of great music which deserves more respectful and loving treatment.

TAMARACK need to take a good hard look at what they're doing and why they're doing it - and represent themselves accordingly. They

are far from being standard-bearers of Canadian traditional music; in reality, this record reveals a trio of competent instrumentalists who need to work on their singing and arrangements and who sometimes choose material of Canadian origin as a basis for their eclectic contemporary trad-folk stylings. Their playing isn't enough to carry off an album which is fatally flawed in its basic conception. The potential for excellent music is there, though.. maybe TAMARACK's next entry will get it together.

- Jonn Leeder