

# Reflections on a Folk Festival

by Bill Sarjeant

What sort of music is to be expected at a Canadian folk festival nowadays? Traditional folk song and music, certainly; and, inevitably also, those contemporary songs, performed to guitar or alike instruments, which we Canadians style "folk songs" even though in content and style, they are more often developments from the troubador's songs and art songs of past times. Folk blues, yes of course; and, by extension, urban blues also, even though these shade through grey areas into rock and into rhythm n' blues. Bluegrass and old-timey music? Yes, certainly. Country and western? Yes, it's in there too, for better or worse. Jazz? Well, one might think *not*; but traditional jazz, at least, was a folk music and is sometimes featured. Mainstream jazz? Swing? Popular music? Again, one would think *not*; but yes, these are being featured increasingly nowadays.

One friend said: "Folk music includes any music performed by people" - but even *that* definition does not work, for there remains some exclusions - opera, for example, and indeed most classical music, though the musician who performs a J.S. Bach composition on guitar is likely to receive reverent applause. Modern jazz and most rock music are both currently excluded (though I foresee a time when *old* "modern jazz" and *old* rock will become perfectly acceptable!) Oddly also, the concentration is on music of British, North American and French or French-Canadian origin. The songs and music of the other components of our much-vaunted Canadian multicultural mosaic do receive occasional attention, but this is highly un-

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equal. (Maybe the argument here is that, after all, there are plenty of multicultural festivals; why clutter up a folk festival with all those Ukrainian folk-dance teams?) All in all, it is better not to worry about the definition of "folk music," and instead, merely to sit back and try to enjoy whatever comes!

At the 14th Annual Regina Folk Festival this was easy. The performers in concert and workshop were, almost without exception, of high calibre; if one happened not to like the music of one, why then the thing to do was sit back, for the next surely would be more rewarding! Excellent organization and a particularly friendly atmosphere ensured that one was in the right frame of mind for enjoyment.

For this *Bulletin*, however, one can be more rigorous in definition; and, though one might have preferred even more of it at Regina, traditional folk music was given a respectable degree of attention. On the first concert, for example, were featured Rick Avery and Judy Greenhill, stalwarts of the Fiddlers Green folksong club in Toronto; and along with them was Charlie Maguire, a Minnesota musician whose style has grown directly from traditional roots and some of whose songs are surely destined to last long in popular memory. In the second, Brandywine of Edmonton, best known for their performances for children, showed they could sing adult folksongs equally well - Andrea Spalding's telling of the traditional Manx/Irish story of "The Seal Woman's Sacrifice" was particularly memorable - and Barde concentrated on traditional music in an unusually relaxed performance. In the third, traditional

styles were ably upheld by Meadowlark from Winnipeg and by Barry and Lyn Luft from Calgary. The concert comperes - notably Ernie Manera, the Lufts, Charlie Maguire and Australian Kel Watkins - interpolated traditional songs, stories or performances while the stages were being re-set; and Kel Watkins recited bush ballads and demonstrated string games also.

Nor was this all, for many performers whose music strayed further from the tradition included traditional material into their repertoire nevertheless. Guitarist Bob Evans, though he prefers songs of the swing era, sang "Arthur McBride" and an interesting variant of

"Brady," the Negro folksong telling of the murder of a bullying policeman. Cry of the Loon, among their stretching acres of multi-instrumental "fusion music," included as a sort of musical oasis the Scottish textile-worker's lament "Oh Dear Me!" Several of Leslie Partridge's compositions showed strong folk influences; her legend of the ghostly truckdriver "Big Jim" was an outstanding example. Joan MacIsaac of Edmonton included a Prince Edward Island song of a railway journey to Saskatchewan, "The Harvest Excursion," that belonged with the railway songs featured in *CFM Bulletin* 16.2; and finally, Fransaskoise singer Suzanne Campagne electrified the audience with her emotional and moving singing of a "Reveille!" to the Acadians in the unhappy year of 1775. Though her song was, I believe, written recently, surely it must quickly enter the French-Canadian tradition!

Traditional songs and music were featured in most of the 40 workshops, not only by the performers named above but also by Calvin Cairns of Stringband, by a Regina group called The Celtic Review, and by Hugh Hendry and the writer from the Saskatoon group the Prairie Higglers.

For those of us living in Saskatchewan, only a starvation diet of folk music is available for most of the year - a small handful of widely scattered clubs and coffeehouses, there being rarely more than one night of folk music per week even in the largest towns and, in most of the Province, nothing at all. The Regina Festival provides our one annual musical banquet. Long may it flourish!

