

Records 'n Kids

Canadian Childrens' Records

by Sandy Byer

Editor's Introduction: The emergence of Canada as a world leader in the production of quality recordings for children is a most interesting and important phenomenon. It signals the existence of a very real need, not only here, but in the English-speaking world. It also has provided an outlet for numbers of folk-oriented musicians to ply their trade full-time. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we now have a marvellous collection of Canadian made childrens' recordings.

In the next few issues of the Bulletin we hope to run articles about Canadian childrens' recordings. For starters we have a lovely general introduction written by Sandy Byer. In addition we have included a preliminary listing of available recordings. Subsequent issues will present discussions of the movement by participants, as well as comments from some of those effected by it - e.g. teachers and parents. Watch for them!

There has always been an odd smattering of children's records available in Canada put out by such artists as The Travellers or Sharon Hampson and Michel Chocquette, as well as products from the U.S.A. put out by Pete Seeger, The Babysitters, Walt Disney and The Muppets. However, the present boom in quality children's recordings began in 1976 when Raffi, a performer of adult and children's music, released his now classic recording, "Singable Songs For The Very Young." Raffi did not find great interest from established record companies. In order to make "Singable Songs For The Very Young," he took out a bank loan and founded Troubadour Records. By heading his own record company, Raffi was able to exercise complete artistic control, as well as direct his own career. Unable to find commercial distribution he promoted the record by himself wherever he could. It became a favorite at nursery schools and Kindergartens, Raffi eventually found commercial distribution, the record went on to sell over 200,000 copies, and is still going strong. What Raffi was able to prove was that parents would be willing to spend as much for a quality children's recording as they would for an adult record for themselves. He also proved that there was a strong commercial market for children's records. Sandy Oppenheim and family also released some records at this time which sold well. However, the next big push came when Sharon Hampson, Lois Lilienstein and Bram Morrison along with Bill Usher, while performers with Mariposa In The Schools, pooled their talents to become Sharon, Lois and Bram and in 1978 produced their classic "One Elephant, Deux Elephants." They also found it necessary to start their own



company, Elephant Records, and collected money from 20 investors. The record was a great success and amply rewarded its investors. By 1979, Raffi had released 3 records; Sharon, Lois and Bram had released two records; Mariposa In The Schools joined the forces of eighteen performers, including Sharon, Lois, and Bram, to put out the successful "Going Bananas." Sandra Beech released "Chickory Chick;" and Ann Murray found gold with "There's A Hippo In My Tub." The proliferation of children's records proved that the children's market was strong, and that some people could make a great deal of money. This encouraged many more performers to go into the record business. 1979 was also the year that the Canadian recording industry chose to recognize children's music and gave their first Juno award for children's records. Each year since the number of children's records produced in Canada has multiplied exponentially. Those performers willing to heavily promote their records with extensive touring have generally found financial rewards, though some have been more favorably rewarded than others. Raffi and Sharon, Lois, and Bram have gone on to make more records and achieve greater success. Both of their companies also handle a few records put out by other artists. The majority of children's records today are not put out by major record companies. Most performers still create their own companies and find the necessary funding wherever they can. Performers then look for commercial record distribution so that their records will be

available across Canada. A complete listing of records put out by artists in Canada will be found elsewhere in this section.

There are scores of records now available in Canada covering a wide spectrum of artistic views, ranging from excellent to terrible. However, this phenomenon is pretty much restricted to Canada. It appears that no other place in the world has the amount of activity generated for quality children's music as there is here.

What do I mean by quality children's records? Many of the performers who produce these records have put a great deal of thought into what they are trying to do. Many have worked for years with children in schools and libraries and know what kind of material appeals to children. Many of the songs have been "child-tested" hundreds of times before being committed to vinyl. Thought has been put into the different kinds of songs presented on each side of the record and the flow from one song to another on each side. Most of the records have children singing on them which encourages the children at home to sing along. As many of the performers have come out of the folk community, a good deal of folk songs are included on these records. Canadian folk songs from the English and French communities, American Folk Songs, British folk songs, West Indian folk songs, etc., which reflect the multi-cultural traditions of Canada, can be found. The vast majority of these records are designed to appeal to the three to eight year old, particularly as this represents the strongest commercial market. However, older children have been known to listen and enjoy and best of all mothers and fathers have been found to sit down and spend time listening, singing, and playing with their children. Care was often taken so that these records could be played hundreds or thousands of times without the parents going crazy. Although most of these records were not created primarily for schools and libraries, teachers and librarians have found these records incredibly useful. Many performers were sensitive to these needs and included instructional material such as words, music, action directions, etc. Canada can be truly proud of these records, which are now beginning to make inroads in other countries. Children, parents and educators in such diverse places as Los Angeles, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; Lim Rick, Connecticut; Southampton, England; and Jakarta, Indonesia are enthusiastically responding to Canadian children's records. Since the children's market has proliferated, and the economy has suffered, sales of records are not as great as they once were. However, there is still room for creative ideas and presentations, and new "stars" may be born at any time.