



George Cook: Canadian Extraordinaire

by Billy Hill

George Cook's major claim to fame is the fact that he appeared in Ripley's Believe It Or Not series as the man who has written the most number of songs in history.

It's true, George has written a lot of songs, over 45,000 of them. It's also true that most of them have the same melody line, but what the heck, 45,000 songs is 45,000 songs.

George rides this niche of fame, somewhat, in his quest around the world as an entertainer, and promoter of old-time traditional music, which just happens to be his favorite. He sings, he plays guitar, he dresses nattily, and he has a nice way about him .

So nice that he has been asked to appear three times at the National Old-Time Country Music Festival in Ravoca, Iowa, as the host and master-of-ceremonies of the rapidly growing "Hank Williams Songwriting Championship."

According to the festival producer, Bob Everhart, "we were looking for a new contest to add to our 20 or so musical events, all dealing with traditional acoustic country music, and a story I heard some years ago about Hank Williams and his relationship with his music publisher, Fred Rose. Apparently Fred Rose did not believe that Williams was writing all the songs he was singing, so he asked Hank to step into an adjoining office one day, and write a song about a house. Williams was a little puzzled at the request, but he consented, and returned about an hour later with a classic Williams' song, "Mansion on a Hill." Fred Rose never forgot the experience, and never doubted William's ability to write music after that. Hank Williams went on to become one of the best liked, and most famous country song writers of all time. We wanted to capture a little of that spirit at our annual festival, so we introduced this contest to our participants. We were a little skeptical at first, thinking perhaps no one would show up for it, but we were really surprised. That first year, when the registrants lined up at the registration booth, there were more than 100.

The rules for the contest are simple, just lay down your \$5 bill, and draw at random from the hat some sort of general subject matter. This extemporaneous writing experience has turned out to be one of the few of its kind in the world. This is not an event where you submit a cassette tape, and then six months later you start writing your song the instant you know what to write about. For most of the writers, they have about two days to finish, get it rehearsed a little, and then present it for the judging."

And, that is what George Cook, from Canada, presides over: the final song presentations, and the judging. George is quick to point out, "these new songs are not being judged by the presentation. Most of the performers have only just heard it, and they have to have their words in front of them because they have not had time to memorize them. They are not polished, and they are hardly ready to be performed, but the spectators just pack the place waiting to hear each new creation."

It almost seems like the people of mid-America are "tired" of what is being fed them in the form of country music. They really want to hear new country music, but written in the old style, and at this Avoca, Iowa, festival they get the latest in old-time song creations.

George Cook is a fine master of ceremonies, and when a song writer is not quite ready to get on the stage, George whips out one of the 45,000 songs he has written and entertains the audience until the next songwriter number is called, and the next creation is placed before the public, and the judges.

According to Everhart, who produces the festival, "each song is recorded, and placed in our safe deposit vault with dated and notarized attached evidence so the songwriter is protected until they can get their song copyrighted. We're quite happy with the turn-out and the quality of the event, and we are also quite proud to have a Canadian in charge of the event."

This festival has over 30 participating events to choose from, not just songwriting. There's guitar picking, singing, banjo, mandolin, rag-time piano, accordion, harmonica, fiddle, dobro, and just about anything connected with old-time country music is here. Even more alluring are the prizes, well over \$10,000 worth. And for the songwriters, the top five are assured of having their music published by a reputable BMI publisher. The top three writers can expect to have professional demos made of their works, and select songs are sent off to major recording artists for possible recording.

It's nice to have a guy riding the shirt-tail of Ripley's Believe It or Not, headlining a song contest at one of the best attended songwriting contests in America.

Believe it or not, you can get more information on this unique festival from the National Traditional Country Music Association, 106 Navajo, Council Bluffs, Iowa, 51501.