

Back to the Source

by John Leeder

Words change their meanings with time. The word "folksinger" doesn't call to mind the same images as it might have 50 years ago. (The same could be said for any number of words, such as "nice", "awesome" and "gay"...). There's no point in clinging to former usages when "English as she is spoke" has left them behind. If the language no longer expresses what we want to say, we have to adopt different terms, or invent new ones.

One thought struck me (after the fact, of course!) concerning the recent membership survey, whose results appear in the June issue. In queries concerning the types of records people are interested in for the Mail Order Service, "Revival Singers" and "Traditional Singers" were listed as separate categories. Yet "revival singers" sing much traditional music, more or less in the traditional way. So-called "traditional singers" have learned their songs from their own families, communities, etc., through oral tradition. So-called "revival singers" sing many of the same songs, and the same sort of songs, sometimes learned from print, but more often from records and via oral transmission from other revival singers. Many of the same processes are taking place to transmit the same or similar songs. The distinction between "revival singers" and "traditional singers" is becoming more and more artificial -- might this blurring of boundaries have affected members' responses to the survey?

(Digression: I personally was heartily pleased to see "revival singers" in a virtual tie for the lead with "singer-songwriters". Not that there should be any competition between the two -- both have their own validity, and many singers fall into both categories. But the results indicate the growing awareness of and respect for Canada's traditional songs among folk music enthusiasts -- a healthy trend, as far as I'm concerned.)

We need a new word to describe what we're now calling "traditional singers". June Tabor in a radio interview on "Simply Folk" recently supplied the term "source singers". This term fills the bill for my purposes -- perhaps others will find it useful as well.

At no time in Canada's history has so much source music been made easily available to folk music enthusiasts in recorded form. Virtually every record of Canadian source singers currently in print can be readily got hold of through the CFMS Mail Order Service, as well as other suppliers. Many out-of-print records are being transferred to cassette, getting them back in circulation without the ruinous costs of uneconomic re-pressing in disc form. New cassettes of source singers never before available to the public are being produced through the CFMS Special Projects Fund and elsewhere (such as Tom Kines' project). The upgrading of cassette technology has provided the answer, in the folk music field as in other non-mainstream music areas, to getting non-commercial music into the hands of people who want it.

Do people want it? The survey results place "traditional singers" respectably close to "revival singers" in terms of people's perception as to which kinds of records are most appropriate for our Mail Order Service. In record sales to date, "source" records are virtually tied with "revival" records. Numerous proposals and suggestions are reaching us concerning material for the cassette program -- most of them dealing with source singers, either as reproductions of out-of-print recordings or as new compilations

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from archives and collections. These facts indicate to me that source music is no longer the "poor cousin" in Canadian folk music circles. We may in fact be seeing the beginning of a sweeping change in Canadians' awareness of their musical roots.

Until recently a bizarre situation has prevailed in our music due to Canada's social changes (e.g. the shift from rural to urban life) and the economics of the music business. Most of us, even those of us who profess an interest in folk music, have never heard the music in its original setting. (I'd venture to guess that most readers of this article -- most members of the Canadian Folk Music Society -- have never sat in the kitchen or living room of a source singer and listened to a song being sung in its native style and habitat!) Most of us first heard our Canadian folk songs performed by revival singers, many of them heavily influenced by folk music of other countries or by the performing ethic of the commercial music business. This tends to distort our perceptions when we do hear source music for the first time. (I'll always be grateful for having heard traditional singers early in life, in a respectful and appreciative context, so that, when the time came, I could evaluate, say, the Kingston Trio in terms of O.J. Abbott rather than having to evaluate O.J. Abbott in terms of the Kingston trio!)

CANADIAN RIVER MUSIC

4106 TYLER STREET, AMARILLO, TEXAS 79110, U.S.A.

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We have to set aside our revival-imposed standards and listen to our source singers with new ears. We must keep in mind that most of our available recorded material was derived from field recordings whose purpose was to collect the music for study rather than to provide entertainment for the public. Many of the older recordings were made with equipment which is rudimentary by today's standards. Many of the singers were recorded in their later years, when their voices were full of experience but not fresh and young. Despite these drawbacks, many magnificent performers were captured by the collectors and have since found their way onto records and cassettes. It's important to remember, too, that our source music was never intended as a passive entertainment vehicle. It's not background music -- even on record, it demands the involvement of the listener. It has to be

listened to, not just heard -- but there are rewards for the listening, as rich nuances of style, lyric and melody reveal themselves as readily on the fifteenth listening as on the first.

Canadians are once again coming into the position of being able to get in touch with our own traditional music in its native state, and to apply this understanding to our cultural life as a whole. The music has always been an implicit underpinning to our way of life and approach to the world -- now we're able to get explicit about it. We need to re-educate ourselves about our roots, to saturate ourselves in the sounds and values which for so long have been lurking beneath the surface of our national consciousness. It's getting easier to do, as source music becomes more and more readily available. There is no reason why, in the long run, Canada's traditional music in its native state cannot become an overt part of the life of every person in the country.