

TIMELINES

by Judy Dyki



Reviews

James Keelaghan. Timelines. Tranquilla Music, TM-1, 1987 (distributed by Valerie Enterprises, Woodburn Road, RR #1, Hannon, Ontario, LQR 1P0) [record and cassette available from CFMS Mail Order Service, \$10.00 members, \$12.00 non-members].

All too infrequently there emerges a singer and songwriter whose songs bear the mark of rare inspiration and fine craftsmanship and whose performances communicate an uncommon emotion. James Keelaghan is being watched with much excitement amidst predictions that he is Canada's "fastest rising star" on the folk music scene. While Timelines perhaps does not capture the engaging style of his live performances, it is a masterpiece of clean studio recording which presents the poetry of Keelaghan's own songs, his impeccable selection of material from other writers, and tasteful instrumental arrangements on all pieces.

Keelaghan is a storyteller, with his songs drawing from real events, real people and real emotions. A degree in history from the University of Calgary explains Keelaghan's penchant for narrating historical incidents through song, always humanizing them by relating the stories through the eyes of one participant. Many critics and observers already have made the comparison to the songwriting of Stan Rogers. While in several interviews Keelaghan did not deny Rogers' influence on his own writing, neither has he consciously copied Stan's or any other songwriter's work. Instead, his own solid, lyrical style has been fine-tuned during his many years of performing, and is in top form on this album. Keelaghan's expressive tenor voice is the ideal vessel for conveying the full depths of his songs as well.

Six of the ten selections on Timelines were written by Keelaghan alone or co-written with mandolin player Kathy Cook and Vancouver guitarist Stephen Fearing. "Jenny Bryce", probably the best-known of Keelaghan's songs since Garnet Rogers' recording on his 1986 album The Outside Track, is a gentle love story written in a traditional style. Keelaghan's liner notes claim the song was written following a conversation held with his mother concerning the conditions for women under the reign of Peter the Great. The dramatic "Fires of Calais" describes the evacuation of British troops

during the battle of Dunkirk as seen from the perspective of one civilian fisherman. The plight of the Canadian labourer during the "On to Ottawa" trek in the 1930s – and in recent history as well – is the subject of the powerful "Boom Gone to Bust." The wistful "Sea for the Shore" hints at the trace of regret felt by a sailor at giving up his life on the sea for the love of a woman on shore. The song is followed by the lively instrumental "Stephen Behind the Eight Ball" (this reviewer won't give it away – you have to buy the album and read the notes to get the explanation of that title). "Lost," the last of Keelaghan's songs, deals not so much with specific time and place as with some decidedly universal emotions.

Keelaghan's fondness for historically-based songs guided his selection of other material to round out the album. Peter Bellamy's "Roll Down", taken from his monumental folk opera "The Transports", is a rollicking shanty which nonetheless relates the story of the transporting of British convicts to Australia in the 18th century. The traditional "Follow Me Up to Carlow" is a vivid description of Ireland's battle of Glenmalur in 1580, and Tony Kaduck's "Railway Tune" is a wry tale of a 1910 railroad disaster. Finally, Vic Bell's "Snap the Line Tight" recounts the obstacles faced by log salvagers on the West Coast.

The level of musicianship on Timelines is extraordinarily high. Keelaghan himself is an accomplished guitarist, both on 6-string and 12-string; his technique was refined by several years of touring as backing musician for Margaret Christl as well as by much solo performing. Mandolin player Kathy Cook, already mentioned as co-writer on several songs, provides spirited performances on most pieces and has her moment in the spotlight with a cleanly-picked "Morison's

Jig". Jim Morison (no relation to the jig!), a familiar figure on many Canadian recordings, provides solid bass accompaniment, and Ron Casat with his trusty Yamaha DX-7 offers tasteful synthesized backing. Special mention should be made of Spirit of the West's Geoff Kelly, John Mann, and J. Knutson, who contribute some rowdy harmonies on "Roll Down".

Keelaghan often has been called "one of Calgary's best-kept secrets". This title can no longer apply, as Keelaghan continues to captivate audiences at more and more clubs and festivals and since, at the time this review was written, the first pressing of Timelines has been sold out. May the secret continue to be told!



It was about 1914 when Dad built a new log house with a plank floor; it was approximately 24 by 40 feet; as was the custom, the building of any new structure called for a dance.

It was a warm fall evening for the big occasion and I remember the people coming from miles around with their horses and buggies. The music for the dancing was made by neighbors and relatives who brought their instruments and contributed their talents without previous practice. This quickly assembled orchestra consisted of my Mother on the piano, Uncle John Garrela with the slide trombone, Dad on the cornet, Guernsey Mills who was a neighbor about 2 miles west of us played the violin, Charley Hiskey another neighbor who lived northwest of us had the big base [sic] horn and Mr. Chris Haring also played the violin. What music they made! While strains floated out over the still night air, I remember the dancing and especially the young couples talking and strolling arm in arm among the parked buggies. Of course I was much too young to know what being in love was all about at that time. Lunch was served some time during the late evening and I'm sure everyone had a great time.

--p216, FROM THE BIGKNIFE TO THE BATTLE (Gadsby, Alberta)

A SCOTSMAN IN CANADA

by Alistair Brown

Dick Howe. A Scotsman in Canada. RMFC 87-01. [available from CFMS Mail Order Service, \$8.00 members, \$10.00 non-members]

They say that Glenn Gould gave up live performance for the studio because conditions were often less than the standard he felt was necessary for his music. More's the pity that many folk performers, too, feel the urge to rid their recordings of any trace of what makes their live presentation work. The result, especially with first albums, is too often a sterile showcase which does little to demonstrate the stagecraft which has brought the singer this far.

That isn't the case here. Thank goodness for Dick Howe, and his new cassette release, A Scotsman in Canada (RMFC 87-01)!

This cassette, actually featuring a Scottish-Canadian born in Burma (too complicated a title, I fear), is an engaging collection of club favourites, performed by a man who is a popular resident at one of Canada's premier folk clubs: Calgary's Rocky Mountain, popularly known as "The Rocky". As the title suggests, the music is drawn from both Scottish and Canadian traditions. Included are such gems as "Harbour Le Cou", "Fareweel to Tarwathie", "Flower of Scotland", and "Tramps and Hawkers", interspersed with a number of tunes played by guest musicians, including Rocky favourites Ian Robb and Grit Laskin. Dick sings the songs in a straightforward, no-nonsense way, with uncluttered arrangements as befits both the songs and the context in which they are meant to be heard. What we have here, in a studio production, is in fact the essence of a club album. Dick has encapsulated the special atmosphere that is The Rocky, despite the absence of audience participation and between-songs banter. In fact, to those of us who've been there, this album tells much about what makes a good club work. In a word, it's not the featured acts that keep bringing the people back, it's the warmth and cam-

THE TWENTIETH REGINA FOLK FESTIVAL

by William A.S. Sarjeant

eraderie brought by residents like Dick: singers with strong voices, a good rapport with the audience and, above all, the right repertoire to get the paying public involved in the entertainment.

A word about Tim Rogers' liner notes. The folks at the Rocky take their music as seriously as their social life, and the notes to this cassette really are exemplary. Running to 20 pages, they include a very complete biography of the star of the show (only Dick's dental history is missing), a history of the club, thorough notes on the songs and tunes, prepared with the assistance of Murray Shoolbraid, and a glossary.

I recommend this album. It doesn't break any new ground, but it does take you back over the old ground of one of Canada's best clubs again and again. If the experience is new to you, it will encourage you to go looking. You can thank singers like Dick Howe for their contribution to folk music and folk clubs. As Tim Rogers says in his introduction, "Dick has played a major role in shaping the manner in which the music recital has been turned into a warm and important social event."

More!



Walter [Michelson] and Raymond Lutman would dance the Red River Jig, and they made quite a pair - Walter weighed one hundred fifty pounds and Ray about two hundred forty.

--p150, LAND OF HOME AND DREAMS
(Grimshaw, Alberta)

We Saskatchewanian folk music fans can take a proper pride in that our own annual Folk Festival is the oldest continuously running festival in Canada, and one of the most venerable in North America. From small beginnings back in 1968 has evolved an annual gathering that, though now very much bigger, yet contrives to retain a small-festival atmosphere of friendliness and relaxation that makes it enjoyable with spectator and performer alike.

A stormy morning and turbulent afternoon skies on Friday, June 10th, did not seem to augur well for the weekend; and indeed the first concert was interrupted by thunder, lightning and a brief downpour that drove away quite a few spectators. However, more came back for the later performances and we had a sunny but blessedly cool Saturday. The Sunday skies were cloudier, but the rain politely held off until Monday morning, when all as over. Consequently, a good time was had by almost all.

Not quite by all, however. The Harbord Folk Trio from Toronto were on stage during that brief thunderstorm and, though they went on with their performance undeterred, could not hope to overcome the distractions. Paddy Tutty, Saskatoon's foremost traditional singer, lost her voice and managed only one song, though her musicianship was unimpaired and her performance was enjoyed. Rambling Jack Elliott, one of the greatest of living American folk musicians, fared worst of all. He had performed magnificently at Saskatoon's Broadway Theatre a few days earlier - his exquisitely-conceived and haunting performance of "The Buffalo Skinners" will live long in my memory - but his Regina appearances must have been a nightmare for him. Though he too had virtually lost his voice, he sang huskily and played doggedly during an afternoon workshop under C.B.C. television cameras. His stage performance was further blighted by the clamour of a wedding carillon from a nearby church, and was understandably curtailed. It is to be infinitely regretted that the festival audience did not have the pleasure and privilege of hearing him at his best.

There were minor mischances also. The Chilean group Mama Lljajta had suffered the mishap of breaking the armadillo shell that served as soundbox for a

charango, but managed very well on their variety of other instruments. The Saturday morning workshops had the noisy background of the Shriners parading with drum, fife and much other noise along one side of Victoria Park and then back along a second; and sound checks on main stage interrupted the afternoon traditional workshops tiresomely.

Workshops at folk festivals tend often to become miniature concerts; and so did many at Regina, the one entitled "That's Ridiculous!" drifting along so irregular a course as to be indeed ridiculous. High credit, therefore, accrues to David Essig for his lucid exposition of the history, structure and style of playing of that remarkable instrument, the Korean kayakum, and to the participants in the "Banjo Bonanza" – Gary Walsh, Lesley Schatz, Keiran Wade and Tom Goodkind – who did indeed demonstrate the character and the stylistic potentials of their instruments in a lucid and informative fashion.

At the other extreme, I would award very low marks to the several performers who were sufficiently inconsiderate of their audiences to repeat, in the workshops, the same songs we had heard from them on main stage, either with exactly the same verbal introductions or with no explanation at all. This was marginally justifiable only in the single instance of the "Freedom Fighters" workshop, which was being televised; in other instances it was quite unjustifiable. I could identify the particular sinners, but will not.

Also meriting dispraise was Henry Geraghty's decision to introduce, into his "Blow it or Squeeze It" workshop, his fiddler colleague from Tip Splinter, solely because that gentleman was shortly to take a flight back east. Such actions show an entire misunderstanding of the aims of workshops at festivals – and certainly it threw that particular workshop so wholly off balance that it quite failed in its educative purpose. Maybe, at future festivals, a clearer differentiation might be made between what are truly workshops and what are mini-concerts, the workshop participants being sent clearer guidelines?

The traditional component of the Festival, though affected adversely by the mischances reported above, was reasonable; but, as it proved, the number of Canadian traditional songs that were sung was disturbingly low – indeed, I can recall only a handful. In contrast, contemporary Canadian folksong was strongly represented; in fact, four Saskatchewan songwriters – Noëlle Hall, Brenda Baker, Larry Wahl and Jan Knowles-Brian – were given a workshop of their own, as well as being featured in several others.

Predictably enough in our day, the audience

tended to respond mostly positively to the groups that were loudest in volume: blues singer Amos Garrett; the folk-based but (nowadays) essentially rock-style Spirit of the West; the Washington Squares, transforming folk and blues songs into '60's-style anthems; and songwriter Andrew Cash and his group, who have moved over almost wholly into the rock idiom. Yet the Irish group Tip Splinter – well, Irish in musical style, if not in ethnic composition! – was justifiably the highspot of the Friday concert, while Bruce "Utah" Phillips captivated all with his yarns, his social messages and his brief musical interpositions. Great stuff!

Yet the highest points of the Festival, by intent and in actuality, were surely the performances of Buffy Sainte-Marie. Buffy is by birth a Saskatchewan Cree, yet has been too long away from the province of her birth. It was a delight to hear such classics as "Now that the Buffalo's Gone" and "The Universal Soldier", while "Star Walker" is a fantastic tour de force. Her other songs varied in quality, but were never less than interesting. The warmth of her reception will surely induce her to come again soon, and the excellence of her performances will make her most welcome.

Many other performances merit mention. Sneezey Waters' cheerful musical eclecticism brought back, for me, memories of his performance in "Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave" at what proved the very last performance in Saskatoon's splendid Capitol Theatre before it fell to the wreckers in a most regrettable act of urban vandalism. Ken Whiteley's gusty and zestful gospel singing in the Sunday morning "Praise on High" workshop and Madeleine O'Loughlin's exquisite voice, both with Tip Splinter and in workshops, remain very pleasurably in memory. Chris Lindgren is becoming one of our finest performers on harp and sings quite as well as she plays. On this occasion, I did not have the pleasure of hearing her story-telling, but no doubt the children did! The newly-formed Saskatoon duo Home Forty – Gary Walsh, formerly "Humphry" of Dumptrucks days, and Bill Conall, formally Bill Root – produced cheerful music, and one regrets that Bill's departure to Vancouver may split their nascent partnership. Among the songwriters, I liked best David Essig's older and Lesley Schatz's newer songs, while others responded very positively to the highly-politicized compositions of Heather Bishop and Rodney Brown and the cheerful irreverencies of Cathy Miller and Brenda Bishop.

Yes, there were minor problems and I have my own minor carpings; but this was overall a happy and highly enjoyable festival, a substantial achievement by

In the process, Mr. MacIsaac has retained much that we associate with Cape Breton tradition. For example, although there are usually two or more guitars on a track, the lead melody is very strong, with only soft chording (almost inaudible at times) in the background. The dense ornamentation which fiddlers in this tradition often use has been adapted admirably, somewhat scaled down to suit the guitar, but certainly with no loss of character. Even the medleys follow the traditional Cape Breton formats of strathspeys into reels, marches into strathspeys into reels, and clogs and hornpipes into reels, while jigs stay on their own. Medleys of tunes also stay in the same key, another Cape Breton convention. (The only time that this is contravened is in the polka set on Side I, polkas not being a part of the older Cape Breton tradition.) There is a great dynamic range in Mr. MacIsaac's playing which is very expressive. Occasional effects such as double guitars on the melody, short snatches of harmony (#5, Side I) and walking bass lines (polkas, #4, Side I) are all handled tastefully and never detract from the melody itself. The solo playing on the "Braes of Dunvegan" medley on Side II is especially effective and once again proves that a good melody, in the hands of a player who has inherited an evolved tradition of interpretation, needs nothing more.

I did feel that the slow air on Side II was not as effective as the dance music. Airs may need the sustain of wind instruments or bowed strings in order to bring out their potential. Also, there are minor miking problems, notably on the first cut of Side II, where the bass strings are lost while the top string jumps out. Further, the close miking throughout sometimes magnifies the difficulty of playing a plucked stringed instrument evenly. However, none of these minor problems detracts from the record's success. On the plus side, I realized when I had finished listening to the record that I had not once been bothered by fret noise or squeaky slides, so often the bane of guitar players on record. Perhaps you have a secret you could share with the rest of us?

Which brings me to another request. Although the record tells us what guitars Dave is using, what recording equipment (a four-track Teac only with a simple reverb unit, very sparingly applied, by my ear), and where each set of tunes comes from, it would be nice to know a little more about Mr. MacIsaac himself and about the process he went through in adapting Cape Breton fiddling to the guitar, since this is a milestone in the tradition. However, I know you can only get so much on the back of a record jacket. Perhaps an interview with Mr. MacIsaac would be in order?

In this age of trad-fusion, of more and more complex arrangements, sudden key changes, rhythmic starts and stops, instruments dropping in and out every few seconds, it is refreshing to be reminded that good tunes, played by one who understands their potential, are more than enough. No gimmicks, just good solid playing. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the modern experiments in adapting traditional music for the concert stage (as opposed to the kitchens and dance halls where it has made its home for generations) or that all innovations smack of gimmickry. Some of them are brilliant and done with no loss to the music's expressive ability. My acid test, however (subjective as this may be) is always whether or not it seems that the musicians are doctoring the music because they find it essentially lacking somehow, i.e., on a gut level, they don't respect the music they're playing in its unadulterated form. Too often, the attempts at trad-fusion lose the very things that made the music great to begin with — the spirit, drive and melodic subtlety of the tradition. Thank you, Dave, for once again showing us that it is possible to use modern technology to capture, enhance and make available an intricate art form; for reminding us that one doesn't have to try to make a beautiful tradition into something else as soon as one steps in front of a microphone.

Magnificent music.



Gord Fisch, Karen Haggman, Jan Morier and the host of other members and supporters of the Regina Guild of Folk Arts who brought it all together and kept it running so smoothly. When the fiftieth anniversary comes around, I'll hope to be there to celebrate again!

CELTIC GUITAR

by Anne Lederman



The Doctor's Dance (local newspaper, September, 1920)

At Doc Roger's dance last night there was a large crowd. this was expected, as the dance was free; not to mention the glad occasion it commemorated -- the doctor's wedding. That this fact was remembered was evident in every phase and feature of the affairs; -- The lights burned brighter, the floor had an extra shake of powder on its face; so did the girls; the cornet and trombone artists had their horns polished. Sally had a new ribbon in her hair, and Hillier at the piano kept his foot on the gas pedal and let her rip. Everybody danced who could and some who couldn't. We don't want to mention names; we might get hit; but there were as many varieties of dancing as styles of hair. Some kept up a perpetual wobble as if they were itchy. Some twisted about like snakes in pain; some took the matter calmly and appeared to be walking in their sleep while others cantered all over the ball. The bride had the unfortunate function to perform of dancing with every man, and did her part like a heroine. How she learned so many ways of doing the same dance baffles us. The doctor had the happier lot of dancing with every girl, but as he had danced with them all before that was nothing new.

-p918, YESTERDAYS AND YEARS AGO
(Forestburg, Alberta)

Dave MacIsaac. Celtic Guitar. Unity Gain Records U1002 (6216 Seaforth St., Halifax, N.S. B3L1P9). [Record and cassette available from CFMS Mail Order Service, \$10.00 members, \$12.00 non-members.]

To my knowledge, Dave MacIsaac's Celtic Guitar is the first such record to come out of Cape Breton, that is, a recording of traditional Cape Breton music entirely played on guitar. The fact that it also features exceptional playing, generally good recording quality and beautiful tunes makes it a classic.

The Cape Breton tradition has been dominated by the violin since the first Highlanders set foot on its craggy shores. Cape Breton fiddling is legendary and has set the standard, to my mind, of a truly Highland fiddle style, far surpassing Scotland itself. It is famous for its intricate gracing, for its "Gaelic in the bow", for the beauty of its melodies. Although there was also a healthy piping tradition in Cape Breton (which has, unfortunately, become much scarcer in recent years), all other instruments were relegated until recently to the status of accompanists.

Even among chording instruments, the guitar is the junior partner to the piano, which has been the mainstay of the Cape Breton sound for some time. The piano has been the subject of some spectacular developments in style over the past couple of generations in Cape Breton and has begun to come into its own as a solo instrument. (There are two or three solo piano recordings available now, and more planned from Cape Breton players.) By contrast, the guitar has only recently gained in popularity even as an accompanying instrument, and rarely is heard playing the melody (John Allen Cameron may have broken the ice here with his occasional renditions on the 12-string). It has been left for Dave MacIsaac, long a session player and back-up to many Cape Breton artists (including John Allen Cameron), to wrestle with the full range of problems of adapting the Cape Breton fiddle tradition to the guitar -- its medleys of strathspeys and reels, its jigs, clogs and hornpipes and its slow expressive airs. We can only look forward to more developments like this.