

# Reviews/Comptes-rendus

## *Books*

**An Unfinished Conversation: The Life and Music of Stan Rogers.** Chris Gudgeon. Toronto: Viking, 1993. 217 pages.

Canada badly needs books about Stan Rogers. Little has been written about Stan since his death in 1983, and much of what has been written is ill-informed. Which is no surprise; Stan was never part of the mainstream music industry, and most mainstream music writers of the time were oblivious of the folk music scene, if not actually patronizing or contemptuous of it. As a result, not much was written about Stan while he was alive, and now that he's posthumously being recognized as a songwriting genius and a major influence in Canadian music, current writers who weren't part of the era have little to go on in getting the feel of the times and Stan's part in them. Most of what has been written about Stan since his death (with the exception, of course, of the *Bulletin's* tributary issue) has been written by outsiders for outsiders, and it shows!

So it's about time that a book-length work of substance appeared. But this long-awaited milestone turns out to be a disappointment, showing the marks of too little research and too much acceptance of informants at face value. Not that it's without its merits; it serves as a worthwhile introduction to Stan's life and work for those who are meeting with him for the first time. It's a valuable treatment of Stan's early years and influences, including the early part of his musical career—people who know Stan as a performer but not as a person will find much to fascinate them. There's a collection of photos which are likely the most complete assemblage available outside of Stan's family. (Not that the pictures are numerous or artistic—there'll never be a Stan Rogers coffee table book! But it's documentation never before seen by most of us.)

So what are the problems? Why do I leave the book feeling unsatisfied with the portrait of Stan Rogers painted by Chris Gudgeon? For one thing, there's just too little meat on the bones here—even less than appears at first glance. Perhaps in an effort to give background to the Canadian folk music scene of the '70s and early '80s, Gudgeon has included numerous thumbnail sketches of various Canadian performers of the time, with quotes from them concerning Stan. Trouble is, many of the quotes are not very illuminating, many of the performers were not really part of Stan's world (for example, Stompin' Tom Connors), and, whatever the author's intention, the technique gives the impression of padding, to take material sufficient for a healthy magazine article and plump it out to book length, as well as name-dropping, to bolster the author's credibility.

And credibility is in question here. For one thing, the author presents a one-sided picture of Stan Rogers as a person. The dark side of Stan's nature, which most people who had dealings with him will attest to, is barely hinted at. In a passage which neatly manages to insult Canadians and Americans at the same time, Gudgeon writes that Stan "was an immediate hit with American audiences [because]... his personality was probably better suited [to] the American temperament. Like it or not, Canadians tend to be compliant and polite, two adjectives rarely used to describe Stan Rogers. On the contrary, he was brash and demanding, which is exactly how Americans expect talented people to behave." However, any stories of "brash and demanding" behaviour recounted in the book are of the "lovable scamp" variety. The Stan Rogers who could set fire to a stranger's Cadillac

as a political statement, the Stan Rogers who could take a chair to someone he was angry with, even the Stan Rogers who loved good food and drink and was good at sticking others with the bill, is absent from these pages. Gudgeon refers to the "Saint Stan" phenomenon, and by implication distances himself from it, but he has in fact seated himself firmly among the hagiographers.

Another matter barely touched on is the litigious estrangement which developed after Stan's death between his wife, Ariel, and the rest of his family, and this raises another question concerning the book. Garnet Rogers, Stan's brother and musical partner, probably the richest potential source for information concerning Stan's music and life, especially in his last years, has stated publicly that he was never consulted by the author. (This despite a passage in the acknowledgements thanking Stan's parents and Garnet for "all their help.") The quotations from Garnet were presumably obtained at second or third remove. At the same time, Stan's wife is relied upon heavily for quotes and information. Are we dealing here with an Authorized Biography? Or just an insufficiency of research? Whatever the answer, it's one more deficiency which contributes to the incomplete picture of Stan as a human being presented here. My son (who was 10 when Stan died, and barely remembers him) tells me that he learned more about Stan Rogers's personality from the brief commentary accompanying the songs in *Songs from Fogarty's Cove* (the songbook published by OFC Publications) than he did from the 134 pages of text in *An Unfinished Conversation*.

This book in fact duplicates the efforts of the songbook by including in an appendix the lyrics of most of Stan's songs (but without music). A second appendix includes a Stan Rogers discography (not including the early years, but only the records available at present), as well as a scattergun listing of Canadian traditional music records and those of contemporary artists either presumed to be influenced by Stan's music or having some tie-in with the book's theme, or... well, for some the connection is obscure, but they're good records, and it's good to let people know about them. Also included is a nice mention of CSMT, which has already gained us a number of new members. It would have been even nicer if our address had been correct!

This book, despite its shortcomings, is important by the mere fact of its existence, and should be in the collection of anyone who takes an interest in folk music in Canada. Let's hope that healthy sales point the way for other enterprising writers and publishers. Unfortunately, the need for a work of substance on the life, times, career and personality of Stan Rogers remains unmet.

*John Leeder*

Dan Yashinsky. *The Storyteller at Fault*. Ragweed Press, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. 1992. 63 pages.

It is perhaps not too unreasonable to speculate that one major cause of the positive status of the storytelling scene in Canada is the excellent work and efforts of the Storytelling School of Toronto, and one of its major contributors to this effort is Toronto writer and storyteller Dan Yashinsky. Several years ago, through his years of toil and effort, one of the most innovative story collections was published, *Tales for an Unknown City, Stories from the 1001 Friday Nights of Storytelling*, documenting the various elements of the storytelling scene in Toronto itself through its diverse tellers and groups of individuals making up this city's unique mosaic. Now Yashinsky has combined his talents both as a writer and as a raconteur to produce *The Storyteller at Fault*, and although ostensibly written for children, this delightful storyteller's fantasy can be enjoyed by both young and old alike.

Yashinsky tells the tale of a storyteller who is about to be executed by his king because the monarch is afraid his yarnspinner is getting too old to remember stories and wishes to replace him with an artificial construct who will be a memory holder and will never forget stories within its being. In order to save his life, the king's own teller tells the monarch one final tale in which a number of stories are cunningly spun, one each evening, in the same manner as the Arabian Nights Entertainments. In this effort, Yashinsky draws upon his knowledge of world folk literature to tell a group of stories from such diverse sources and places as Scotland, Norway, Uganda, Israel, Japan, Persia, and Portugal, among other countries of the world.

Most of the tales are traditional in origin, although Yashinsky freely uses his skills as a writer to make needed adaptations to account for modern phrases and settings. Personal favorites include the Japanese "Master of the Tea Ceremony," in which a gentle soul teaches a proud samurai the meaning of humility, "The Bird Color of Time," an unusual retelling of how the wren became king of the birds, and "The Silent Prince," itself a frame story using several tales within its plot to tell how a clever princess managed to make a hitherto silent prince speak his first words. Perhaps the most cunning tale in this collection is "Ali the Persian's Bag," which can only be described as a pure flight of magical whimsy extraordinary. Yashinsky skillfully and cleverly manages to carry the reader to the tale's ultimate conclusion (the reader will have to discover the ending for him- or herself), and thus shows quite ably how a writer's touch can enhance even a good traditional tale even more. This small but nonetheless worthy volume is fantasy, adventure, magic, hope, and good storytelling all rolled into one delightful effort. Dan Yashinsky proves just how good a storyteller he truly is.

*Robert Rodriguez*

Tim Borlase (editor and compiler). *Songs of Labrador*. Goose Lane Editions, 469 King Street, Fredricton, N.B. E3B 1E5; co-published by Labrador East Integrated School Board, Mailbag 3021, Sta. B, Happy Valley—Goose Bay, Labrador, Nfld. A0P 1E0. 214 pages.

A while back a friend loaned me a real collector's item: a mimeographed volume of songs of Labrador compiled in 1982 by the East Labrador school board. I was surprised at the initiative and resourcefulness shown by a small school board in producing such a valuable work.

If I was surprised by the first edition, I'm amazed by the second, which came over the transom shortly afterward. This is a handsome, professionally-printed, well-designed book containing a wealth of songs supported by photos, drawings, reminiscences, stories, and tidbits such as folk medicine and a listing of the names and trapline locations of trappers. The book is nothing less than a time capsule of the Labrador culture, and the East Labrador school board deserve high commendation for producing it. Other school boards should be looking at this project as a model for presenting a region's own way of life to its younger generation.

About 140 songs are included in the volume, grouped under the headings "The Big Land", "The People", "Young' Uns", "Furrin'", "Jiggin'", "Hard Times", "Songs of Faith" and "Ballads." Some of the songs are taken from the MacEdward Leach collection, while many others are locally written, and likely not available in print anywhere but here. Authors and composers are credited where known. There are songs in Native languages as well as English. The music transcriptions are hand-drawn but very clear and appear easy to follow. The print job is nice and crisp, easy on the eyes (much better than the mimeograph of the first edition...). The book is spiral-bound, so that it will lie flat, for easy usage—but I wonder how it will stand up to heavy use in schools.

Although the book is presumably intended for scholastic purposes, it's a fascinating read for anyone. It would be a valuable asset for anybody interested in the Labrador way of life as well as its music. Congratulations, East Labrador Integrated School Board, you can be proud of making a worthwhile contribution to the cultural heritage of Canada as a whole as well as your own region.

*John Leeder*

Kaye Pottie and Vernon Ellis. *Folksongs of the Maritimes*. A Maritext Book. Formac Publishing Co., Ltd., 5502 Atlantic Street, Halifax, N.S. B3H 1G4.

Given the wealth of written material on Canadian folk music in general, and on Maritime folk music in particular, can a new entry in the field be distinct enough to persuade consumers to part with hard-won dollars? In the case of *Folksongs of the Maritimes*, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" This splendid wee volume has a number of features that recommend it, and the development of these aspects demonstrates the marketing savvy of the book's authors/editors and publishers.

Most of the book is made up of material collected throughout the Maritimes by Helen Creighton, representing three principal folk song traditions: songs from the British Isles, Acadian French songs, and Afro-American songs. Many of the songs are well known, but the versions here are distinctive variants from the Canadian Maritimes; thus, even the timeworn favourites are of potential interest to the serious student of folk song and folklore. As well, the authors/editors have wisely included previously unpublished material from the Creighton collection. (At the words "previously unpublished", hardcore collectors begin to salivate and reach unconsciously for their wallets.)

The target audience for this book is not, however, those in the academic folk music circle. As the very readable introduction makes clear, the collection has been compiled and organized in such a way as to make it of maximal use to school teachers. (A teachers' guide to the book is available from the publisher.) The songs are arranged in approximate order of difficulty, and each is accompanied by a tone set showing the range and scale employed. Thus, a teacher could easily select songs that will challenge but not unduly frustrate almost any group of students. The diversity of the material would also be a benefit in planning a series of music lessons—using specific songs, a teacher might prepare lessons on major and minor scales, modes, different time signatures, and so on. (Using Canadian folk songs in Canadian schools in this way is consonant with the pedagogical principles of Zoltan Kodály.)

The production values of the book are very good. The music is printed in very black ink on white, low-gloss paper, and the notes are large and well-spaced, making for easy reading by individuals of varying capabilities and in diverse lighting conditions. The melody is presented in a straightforward fashion; rhythmic subtleties that might confuse student performers can, of course, be added at the discretion of the more accomplished singer. Basic chords are included with each song. Although full piano accompaniment is lacking, a competent pianist could fake something fairly easily, and the chords will be more than adequate for accompaniment by guitar, autoharp, etc. (The same features that make this book ideal in the classroom would recommend it to members of singers' circles where enthusiasm perhaps exceeds musical expertise.)

This book should be a staple in school libraries throughout Canada. Its content makes it a valuable resource from a cultural and historical standpoint, and the presentation of the material makes it a wonderful pedagogical tool for music instruction. I wish

it had been available to my teachers years ago; perhaps I could have cut my musical teeth on "Nova Scotia Song" instead of "Bendermeer's Stream."

Michael Pollock

### *Catalan Traditional Music Publications*

Revista d'Ethnologia de Catalunya 3: Música Tradicional 1 Fenomens Sonors. Barcelona, Departament de Cultura, Generalitat de Catalunya, 1993.

Música de Tradició Oral a Catalunya, Vol. I: Documents Testimonials-Recerca Directa. Ed. Josep Crivillé and Ramón Vilar, Barcelona, Fonoteca de Música Tradicional Catalana, 1991 (2 LPs or 2 CDs with 106-page book in Catalan, Spanish, English and French.)

Fulls de Treball 2/1. Reus, Carrutxa, 1991.

El Món de Joan Amades. Departament de Cultura, Generalitat de Catalunya, 1990.

Cançoners Tradicionals del Baix Camp i El Montsant. Gabriel Ferré et al., Reus, Ed. Alta Fulla.

Rasquera, Cançons de la Tradició Oral. Salvador Palomar and Salvador Rebés, Reus, Carrutxa, 1990.

El Flabiol Tradicional (and other instrumental titles), Seminari d'Ensenyament dels Instruments Tradicionals, ed. Joan Moliner et al., Mataró, Els Garrofers, 1992. ...and many, many other titles of books, journals, booklets, sound recordings and ongoing or new projects. These are simply a few of the materials produced since 1990 which have found their way, often unbidden, to my bookshelf.

Originally, I was going to review only the first title, as a copy was sent to John Leeder for that purpose. I decided to just mention the sound recording (second title), which was sent to me by the Fonoteca last year, then thought it would be a pity not to include some other recent and impressive publications. The difficult part is stopping!

Apart from one volume of *Revista d'Ethnologia de Catalunya* having been sent to John, and my own personal and professional interest in Catalan culture, why should the latter be of interest to CSMT members? First, because it is another culture, and forms part of our general interests. Linguistically, because Catalan is so close to French, it is easier than some other languages for Canadians, especially French-speaking, to read; and some French and Catalan oral traditions have common roots. Because historical tensions between Catalunya and the central Spanish government have some parallels with the history of Quebec in Canada, it is particularly interesting for us to see how the Catalans have dealt with investigating and promoting their culture and language. Even the name is of interest to our Society: the Generalitat publishes through its "Centre for the Promotion of *Popular and Traditional Catalan Culture*" (my emphasis, with no comment). Finally, the sheer volume and quality of recent Catalan (and Valenciano) publications is impressive and demands attention.

The basic strategy behind the publications seems to be to concentrate on Catalan culture (though not to exclude others), while moving, through the questions it poses, to more universal issues. While *El Flabiol* is part of a series of instruction manuals for traditional Catalan instruments, for example, the *Revista*... includes such articles as "Between Music and the Sound Message" (Jaume Aiats) and "Anthropology and Nihilism, or, What is Postmodern Anthropology?" (Manuel Delgado).

Collecting and publishing documentary recordings is a central aspect of Catalan work. The Fonotecas in both Barcelona and Valencia produce well-documented recordings from their archives—in fact, of interest to CSMT is the fact that Ramón Pelinski of the Université de Montréal regularly works with them. Groups such as Carrutxa in the town of Reus (about 100 km south of Barcelona) collect, perform, study, publish and otherwise disseminate traditional culture (they sponsored my own performance in Reus this past September). Three publications listed above are produced by Carrutxa or its members.

*El Món de Joan Amades (The World of Joan Amades)*, while it contains no music, is a lavishly produced homage to Catalunya's great folklorist, Joan Amades (1890-1959). The 336-page volume is brimming with photographs, reproductions and a catalogue with detailed commentary of an exposition related to Amades' work. I regularly use Amades' monumental *Folklore de Catalunya: Cançoners* as a reference for both research and performance.

I have not included here the many printed and recorded publications about and/or of children's music, but this is another field in which Catalans excel (see my obituary for Xesco Boix (1984), *Bulletin* 18:4, p. 35). Only one article in this volume of the *Revista*... deals with children's music (Gabriel Ferré i Puig), but both research in children's music and performances for children thrive in Catalunya. Several publications, and sponsored events, also focus on dance, human pyramids, papier-mâché "giants" and other lively and venerable aspects of Catalan traditional culture.

The *Revista*... includes summaries in English of each article, and the LP/CD set includes English and French translations, which often leave much to be desired. Particularly for the *Revista*... summaries, I kept having to refer to the Catalan to understand what the English meant! I would recommend clearing this problem up, as it jars with the otherwise professional level of the publications.

If you are interested in learning more, write to the Departament de Cultura, Centre de Promoció de la Cultura Popular y Tradicional Catalana, Portal de Sta. Madrona 6-8, 08001 Barcelona, Catalunya, Spain. You can write them in English or Spanish.

Judith Cohen

## Recordings

**Stan Rogers. Home in Halifax.** FCM 010D. Fogarty's Cove and Cole Harbour Music Ltd., 23 Hillside Ave. S, Dundas, Ont. L9H 4H7

The purpose of this CD was not immediately apparent to me, despite its merits. It's a recording of a live concert, released 11 years after the artist's death, and all but one of the songs are found on studio-made recordings which are probably more easily available now than they were when Stan Rogers was alive. Granted, Stan always took great care with his live performances, so a concert album is not a great deal inferior to a studio production in his case. It's not particularly superior either. Aside from some of the patter, and the song "Sailor's Rest" not recorded elsewhere by Stan, the recording doesn't offer anything that the previous releases don't have. So if you already own all of Stan Rogers's records, there's no point in rushing out to buy this one, unless you're a completist collector or have a lot of nostalgia for Stan's live performances.

On the other hand, if you're new to Stan Rogers's music, this would be a great place to start! Live concerts were a strength of Stan's, unlike many musicians, and he always delivered a high-energy show, whose intensity and mix of seriousness and fun are captured admirably here. The set list includes most of Stan's best-loved songs, covering the high points of all his records except the last one. Many of these songs are now classics of Canadian music, and how better to hear them than sung to real people by the man who wrote them and happened to be a consummate interpreter of them as well?

The humour in some of the song intros is a bit lame, and I question the wisdom of including them. Since the concert was in Halifax, I guess we can forgive Stan for poking fun at Albertans, but the world's morris dancers have every right to rise up in wrath!

In addition to the song lyrics, the accompanying booklet includes a short biography of Stan and a somewhat longer description of the circumstances under which the concert was staged and the process of bringing the recording to fruition 11 years later. There's a discography of Stan and one of his brother Garnet, a rarely-seen photo (which may be the best ever taken of Stan) and short notes on the other sideman, Paul Mills and Jim Morison.

This recording has been nominated for a Juno award; while I'm sure there's some sentiment involved in the selection, nevertheless it's a strong recording which is fully capable of standing on its own merits. It's more than just a nostalgia trip (although it does that job for me). Stan Rogers is an important figure in Canadian music, and this recording documents him at the peak of his powers.

*John Leeder*

**June Baikie and Kelly Russell. A Celebration of Heritage: Songs of Labrador.** Pigeon Inlet Productions, P.O. Box 1202, Station C, St. John's, Nfld. A1C 5M2

Let me say at the outset: I like Newfoundland music. I have thoroughly enjoyed Pigeon Inlet recordings of Newfoundland performers in the past. I don't, therefore, think that I fall prey to parochial biases in presenting a sharply critical review of this recent Pigeon Inlet offering.

*A Celebration of Heritage* represents a special project to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the town of Northwest River, which is near Goose Bay in Labrador; this endeavour was supported by the Canada Council and the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. This is not a recording of time-tested traditional music of Labrador, but a collection of 15 new songs specifically written for this project by June Baikie.

Consider the songwriting process. A songwriter worthy of the name can produce a fine song on a topic that moves or inspires him/her. It is also possible, of course, to take a more workmanlike approach and tackle an assigned topic. Many quite presentable songs have been made in this way. How many people, however, would be able to come up with a complete album of songs written in such a cold-blooded fashion? Baikie has certainly succeeded in writing songs about Labrador life and history, but for the most part her lyrics seem contrived and awkward. The worst of them (and this says quite a lot) have the "written-in-twenty-minutes-between-periods-of-a-hockey-game" feeling that characterizes the least impressive of Stompin' Tom Connors' prodigious output. (Before anyone starts howling, I like Stompin' Tom, too! A little bit. Sometimes...)

Various aspects of Newfoundland history are given Baikie's treatment; few of the stories are particularly compelling, probably because they are written in a flat narrative style that does not engage the listener. I don't think this is because the stories are inherently trivial, or because the material is unfamiliar to those outside Labrador culture. Little-known and apparently trivial stories can be successfully presented in song: Stan Rogers's "MacDonnell on the Heights", for example, highlights a relatively obscure bit of Ontario history. Material outside the listener's experience can be set forth in a manner that speaks to all listeners: "The Shantyman's Life" has a poignancy that is appreciated even by those (like myself) who have never felled a tree. Unfortunately, the lyrics on *A Celebration of Heritage* never allow the outside listener to make connections between his/her own experience and Baikie's statements of Labrador history and culture. After listening to this tape several times, I have no feeling for the stories and themes Baikie explores—I just don't care about any of them. I was especially surprised at my lack of empathy for

Baikie's song "The Square Dance on Saturday Night", since Saturday country dances are a big part of my life. I can't help feeling that, while Baikie has been to such dances, she either has missed the magic of the gatherings altogether or simply has no ability to express in song what she has experienced.

The tunes to which the lyrics are set are generic "folky" melodies; that is, they are agreeable enough, but uninspiring, and they tend to sound vaguely like other songs that you can't quite put your finger on. Some of the tunes might well be more enjoyable if presented by another singer. Baikie's voice is, to put it bluntly, not pleasant. The timbre is weak and breathy, intonation is shaky, and, above all, Baikie seems unable to convey any intensity in her singing. It is not uncommon for songwriters to have somewhat idiosyncratic singing styles (Randy Newman and Dory Previn come immediately to mind), but this is forgivable when they have outstanding material to present, and when they interpret their own material in a particularly compelling way. This is not, however, the case with *A Celebration of Heritage*.

The saving grace to the entire effort is the musical accompaniment, arranged and performed by Baikie's brother, Kelly Russell. Russell turns in his usual stalwart effort, multi-tracking a dozen different instruments, although he stumbles badly on the cartoon-stereotype introduction to "The People of Sheshashiu." I was frequently disappointed when instrumental breaks were over and Baikie began singing again. Normally a skilled accompanist will not draw attention from the principal performer, but in this case the vocal performances are so lacklustre that it is hard to imagine a competent accompanist who would not upstage Baikie.

Who might use this tape with profit? My first thought would be that teachers might find it a useful starting point in discussions of Labrador history and culture. Unfortunately, the liner notes are so sketchy that listeners outside the culture would not be able to make much sense of some of them (what, for instance, is a "Height o' Lander"?). In any case, students (in Labrador or elsewhere) need to be exposed to better music than this tape can boast.

Michael Pollock

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*I, too, will have to begin with a disclaimer: Michael Pollock is one of my dearest friends, someone whose judgement I respect highly. I should also note that the following reaction to his review of June Baikie's A Celebration of Heritage will begin with a brief recounting of a piece of mildly obscene folklore: whoever would find it offensive might prefer to begin a few paragraphs down.*

On a Texas school playground in the early Fifties, I encountered a poeti-fable in which a man from the city attempted to impress a country man with a bit of verse:

Between your eyes  
Your beauty lies  
And that's what makes  
My spirit rise.

Having recited this, the city man exclaims, "Ah, Shakespeare!" The country man comes back quickly with

Between your thighs  
Your pussy lies  
And that's what makes  
My dickie rise—  
Ha ha! Snakeshit!

I'm afraid that the anatomical geography was lost on my unprecocious grade two imagination, though I certainly was aware that, along with whoever told the story and whoever else was listening (I seem to remember gathering in a circle), I was engaging in forbidden behavior, and I remember vividly the youthful perception of the thrill of the forbidden, so I probably learned something that affected my later sexual development—not entirely beneficially, I suspect.

It was also a double-edged lesson in poetics. On the one hand, I was taught here that country people were foolish, and that aesthetes were perhaps even more ridiculous. This may sound like post-deconstructionist theorizing, but I remember having these reactions rather vividly. After all, Ernie Kovacs was showing us the pathetic idiocy of Percy Dovetonsils and his ilk on prime time TV, and there has never been a place or time where it was easier to learn to despise rustics than Texas during the Fifties.

We've been taught many times to despise the poetry of rustics. In her account of Ontario folk poetry, which received critical responses similar to those Michael has pronounced upon Baikie, Pauline Greenhill denounces, rightly, both W.A. Deacon's *The Four Jameses* and Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks*, two parodies of folk poetry, the former taking the form of false encomia to genuine local poets, the latter a parodic invention differing from my childhood fable perhaps in its degree of subtlety, certainly in its lack of sexual content. The issue is not whether or not Deacon or Hiebert are funny. I've heard a lot of racist and sexist jokes that were very funny, indeed. Humor has power—it can carry a load as well as it can pack a punch.

We are taught by all of these sources to expect local verse to be bad—it shouldn't surprise us when we find what we are looking for! In fact, many contemporary literary critics avoid making value judgements at all, for fear that the process itself is necessarily invidious to those outside whatever club happens to be in favor at the time. It seems to me that we *can* attempt to sort out more successful performances from less, which we have to do if we are going to offer any sort of meaningful praise. Performers themselves typically feel that one item or rendering is more successful than another, and this evaluative process is

important in the learning of any activity. Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves exactly *what* we are judging and *by what* (whose) standards.

It may be easy for us to forget that what is for us glorious tradition once was considered as vulgar and stupid as my childhood memorate, as the four Ontario Jameses, as Sarah Binks, and as some may find June Baikie. Michael refers to "time-tested traditional music," a concept which reveals the esthetics of the earlier days of folkloristics as thoroughly, I suppose, as my own esthetics reveal my contemporary bias. Most of what gets called "folk music" nowadays will not enter any tradition in the same way that the old stuff did, and this may be true of Baikie's songs as well. It is worth nothing, however, that not only is Baikie herself certifiably close to the roots (if I may revive that poor, tired word) of Newfoundland song, she is quite able to imitate the *form* of that tradition. Ironically, this is part of what disturbs Michael, I think.

His complaint about Baikie's tunes—that they are pleasant but neither unique nor striking—is echoed by his judgement of her "flat narrative style." Michael finds that Baikie's songs do not draw him to their stories, which he finds a fault. This is a complaint that is often made about folk music. Perhaps we ought not to assume that esthetic values are universal.

Several of Baikie's songs, such as "The Story of the Grenfell Mission," exhibit an expository poetic technique, in which the sort of tropic wordplay we are accustomed to equate with "poetry" is absolutely ignored. (Greenhill found imagery and metaphor to be uncommon in Ontario folk poetry.) In "Grenfell Mission," Baikie rhymes the story of a medical mission in the boonies, an important story for rural people. This is out of fashion, surely, and no one is required to enjoy it. Of course, if others do enjoy it, we might want to ask why.

One of the delights of this recording is that we are offered songs on many topics. There are songs about ancestors and contemporaries, songs about hunting regulations, about intercultural difficulties between Native and European Newfoundlanders. "The Square Dance on Saturday Night" is a present-day moniker item, representing a genre widely popular among English-speaking communities. "My Hairy-Leg Boots" echoes "The History of the Boots," by Albertan Joe Adams (published in the *Bulletin* 25:4, Winter 1991.), as well as "Hangin' in the Barn," a common item of western nostalgia, about a worn out saddle, which occurs in a couple of incarnations. Listeners with any environmental leanings ought to appreciate "No Skidoos for Me":

But what do you do when your engine is through  
And you're miles away from your home  
When the spark plugs don't last and you run out of gas  
You stand there and freeze to the bone.  
No skidoos for me  
Sparkplugs and fanbelts won't do  
Engines might bust, but your dogs you can trust  
They want to get home same as you.

I can see readers of the Hiebert/Deacon school interpreting the last line as more ingenuous than it is. As Stanley Fish and others have pointed out, reading irony can be tricky, but I think it's simply unfair to deny that ordinary people can make fun of themselves, even in the midst of an earnest comment.

Looking again at Michael's remarks on "The Square Dance on Saturday Night," I'm tempted turn the cynical tables on him and ask if he prefers Bill Staines's "The Roseville Fair" to Baikie's account of a Labrador dance. I could argue that the former is cornball, hippiedippie sentimentality, both in words and tune—I could say I've been to a lot of Saturday night dances with Michael and had a lot of fun, but not necessarily any "magic"—I could, but I won't, since I rather like "Roseville." But I'm not sure that I like it as much as Baikie's song, which has a snappier tune and doesn't talk about everlasting love (which doesn't come for free at a folkie dance). However, by naming real people, the song makes me feel that a real dance is being recounted:

Uncle John Montague steppin' 'er down  
Sandy is swingin' the teacher around  
Matt Bresher (??) is up there, shakin' the floor  
He can't bear to sit still no more.

In fact, remembering what our dances in Calgary are usually like, I'm really surprised that Michael didn't feel the resonances of Baikie's Labrador dances:

A bunch of new people are ready to drop  
They're laughin' so hard 'cause they got all mixed up  
Once in a while you can hear a loud bawl  
As some girl is swung 'cross the hall.

Unlike Michael, I find Baikie's voice to be sweet and generally in tune, though not strong. Lacking strength, Baikie tends to wobble in the middle of long notes, a typical failing of untrained singers. I use the word "failing," simply because it will trouble many potential listeners, especially those who have not listened widely to field recordings. She seems to sing from the head and throat, rather than from the chest, much less the whole body. This is not an uncommon singing style, though it has gone out of style in most of North America since the various permutations of *bel canto*, music hall, and other stage-based vocal techniques came in. Before the performance of song became a matter of reaching many people in large halls, there was no need to produce the volume that must be taken as the primary characteristic of what most folks would call "good singing." (This is not merely a

diachronic, intra-European controversy. Classical Indian singers, among others, have developed sophisticated techniques that are not based upon the requirement to be heard far away. They have other requisites and other delights—and they, too, are commonly said to "sound bad" by outsiders.)

One reason I have long bristled at the use of the term "folk music" to refer to most of what is presented at "folk" clubs and festivals is that it tends to suggest that the esthetics one brings to a performance by, say, Stan Rogers or Anne Murray are applicable to, say, Tom Brandon or June Baikie. 'T'ain't so. By the Rogers/Murray standards, Brandon/Baikie don't cut it. Of course, there are standards by which Rogers, Murray—virtually *anybody*, for God's sake!—can be shown to be inadequate.

One of the saddest musical moments I ever experienced occurred when I passed by a room at the U.S. Pavilion at Man and His World, Montréal, wherein the great Ozark balladeer Granny Riddle was singing. With me was a lady of rural Texas heritage, and she looked in and said, "Well, she's not too good, is she?" This Texas lady had been listening to too much Dinah Shore and Loretta Lynn, I'm afraid. She had been Coca-colonized, alienated from an esthetic that was once her birthright. How much we are threatened with cultural homogenization is a hotly debated question in the postmodern academy. Some scholars doubt that it exists or is a serious concern, but I've seen it happen, and I don't like it.

Sources:

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Greenhill, Pauline. *True Poetry: Traditional and Popular Verse in Ontario*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.

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George W. Lyon

*[Offered the opportunity to respond, Michael offered the following explanatory paragraph.*

In fact, I like the lyrics of "Roseville Fair" even less than those of Baikie's "Square Dance on Saturday Night." "Roseville Fair" isn't about dancing at all; it is about a particularly gooey, starry-eyed type of romance that is entirely outside my experience. Baikie's song is at least about a real dance, but it deals with the dance as a social phenomenon and mentions the actual dancing only obliquely. The "magic" that George seems skeptical of is, for me at least, the oblivion that occurs when the boundaries between the music, the dancers and the dance dissolve. I'm not sure that this has ever been dealt with properly in song.

*Would anyone else care to enter this controversy?]*

Kathleen Yearwood. *Dead Branches Make A Noise*. VOTT 630. Box , Egremont, Alberta, TOA 0Z0.

I first met Kathleen Yearwood through a high school coffeehouse in about 1973—when I had long ceased being a teenager myself. She was young, earnest, apparently rather innocent (and Christian, if memory serves), sweetvoiced and talented. Most people are talented, despite our prevailing capitalist myths of excellence; I'm not going to further that myth with some jive claim like, "But I *knew* Kathy was different...." She was young and earnest and talented, and I lost touch with her after the coffeehouse went defunct.

Alberta's a small place, though, and from time to time I'd run into her or to people who knew of her. She went off to Montréal and spent time with some avant-garde musicians; I read in *Musicworks* a review of some project she did while she was there. She's been back in Alberta for a while, working mostly out of Edmonton (I think). She played at least one Calgary gig that I was aware of a few years back, but I missed it. I heard her interviewed on the radio, supporting conjugal rights for fellows in the slammer, and I suspected she may have paid some heavies since I knew her. One of her songs that I'd admired back in the early 70s had a chorus which ran, "Do something today that will make or break you." Perhaps she's taken her own advice.

However that may be, I ran into this cassette in a store, and of course I couldn't resist it, especially since it seemed to have a couple of Child ballads and a Burns song on it—not exactly what I thought she'd been up to.

Whatever she's been up to during the last two decades must have included either singing lessons or a lot of attention to her voice, because I find it quite spectacular. She has a surprising range (though I've gotten cynical enough in my old age to suspect that some of those squeakers *must* be electronically assisted!), which she uses well: i.e., though I might occasionally feel she might have done better to back off on the dramatics, I never get the impression that she's showing off her cords, as is usually the case when folks have a lot of vocal chops, especially in this era of baroque melismatic overkill (as by the so-called new traditionalists in country and western and by almost any honkies who currently sing soul music).

I'll admit that I was a bit frightened of the tape—I wanted to like it, but I was afraid it'd be another sort of Kreative Kiddie project, performance art for people who don't know art but do know what they think they are supposed to like.... Some might hear elements of that here, but I don't. I hear someone who's working very hard to convey some deeply felt life experiences.

Not to say that every item on the tape works—most of the verses to "o 'kanada," her song on prison issues, seem to me to be only slightly developed metaphorizations of obvious statements. Sometimes earnestness is not its own reward. At the same time, the sprightly and singable chorus goes a long way to undermine what some might see as heaviness.



I don't know where she got the cassette title, but she may be referring to the ballads she offers—which her intense (though playful) renditions prove to resonate quite meaningfully to her, though the world that produced them is long dead, though they will never again be transmitted in the old, informal way. Ballads on the tape are "the fush song" ("fush" is "fish," I take it—it's a version of Child 12, "Lord Randall") "the twa sisters" (another old chestnut, Child 10), and "young Johnston." The latter is not so well-known, Child 88, which recounts the brief career of a medieval psychopath; Yearwood's version is mysterious and frightening and wisely makes no attempt to sort out causation or meaning. By contrast, the humorous, atonal (that's putting it mildly!) setting of Burns's "red red rose" makes a point that I'm not sure I grasp, though perhaps I can *feel* it. I've called it humorous, but it's an intense performance, too, and maybe that blend is exactly the point.

On my first two listenings, the most moving (read that "disturbing" if you like) song is "gynecologue," the best song about abortion I've ever heard: "The gynecologist's table / my first institutional rape / I've been in love many times / ... everybody likes babies / nobody likes a dead baby / but I want an abortion / nobody says the word / they all call it surgery / I call it a lobotomy / ... Why won't they talk to me?" Ultimately she demonstrates very clearly why the choice has got to be the woman's, at least until some sort of utopian revolution occurs: "First you are a sex factory / Then you are a baby factory." As usual, influences abound in the piece, including some striking bottleneck work which reminds me of a variety of south Indian vina which is played with a glass slide.

"coulee" is an evocation of an unnamed badlands, probably based upon Alberta's Palliser Triangle, but just as probably meant to evoke your choice of dreadful futures. Stylistically, it reminds me of some post-Schoenberg European music, but also, strangely enough, Rodgers and Hammerstein. This one features some of those extremely high notes I referred to earlier. (The *really* sweet ones, though, are on "Crowfoot.") "witless peregrination" covers something like the same turf, though it's less adventurous musically; it could almost have come off a disc by Quicksilver Messenger Service or some other psychedelic Frisco band. It's got a nice solo by Campbell, on alto or soprano sax—the latter, I think.

Most of the music on *Dead Branches*, primarily guitars of different sorts, was performed by Yearwood herself. There is also percussion by Ken Hare and sax and violin by Ross Campbell. Kathleen does not seem to have yearned after a career as a guitarslinger, but her playing is impressive. I don't know of anyone who has done a better job of blending the fingerpicking styles of the U.S. south with avant-garde ideas—at least *as accompaniment*, though Eugene Chadbourne has done something similar on his pre-shockabilly albums, *I'll Be All Tears Tonight* and *Country Protest*.

It's perhaps not a favor to Kathleen to note that not everyone will care for this. Still, everyone who is moved by the deeper feelings of the ballads, and who might be willing to experience that intensity in other song-forms, should know about it.

George W. Lyon

Alistair Brown with Roger Houghton and Cherie Whalen. *No Idle Jest*. Prospect Records, 9 Prospect Ave., London, Ont. N6B 3A4

Good songs, a fine singer, and tasteful accompaniment—I couldn't ask for more! Not every performer could do the selection of music on this album and give it the strong sense of unity that Alistair Brown brings to it. It's a mixture of traditional and "composed" material, with the traditional themes ranging from young love ("The Bonny Labouring Boy") to drinking ("Blann's Good Ale") and composed songs as diverse as "The Gallant Weaver" by Robert Burns and "You Can't Take That on the Train" by Roger Watson.

The key to what holds this album together so strongly is to be found in Alistair Brown's warm voice, which portrays a wide range of emotions, and makes you feel as if he's right there in the room with you. This effect is strengthened by the sympathetic accompaniment by Roger Houghton on guitar, Cherie Whalen on keyboards and fiddle, and Brown himself on melodeon, concertina and harmonica. Whether he is singing the moving composition by the late Ewan MacColl, "The Joy of Living", Adam McNaughton's "Hamlet", or "You Can't Take That on the Train" (a fake vaudeville song that I'd never have known was fake if the liner notes hadn't told me), a strong note of sincerity cuts through the electronic filters of transducers, transistors and magnetic tape, right to the listener. Light-hearted songs like "Not What I'd Sing When I'm Sober" and "Bottle of the Best" contrast with the more serious "Newry Town" or Cyril Tawney's "Sammy's Bar"—Roger Houghton's guitar blends beautifully with the flow of the words on the latter. An old favourite of mine, "The Hot Asphalt", and a song I hadn't heard before, "Bringing In the Sheaves" (not the Salvation Army favourite that I thought it was when I saw the title), round out the selections, along with a couple of lively instrumental tracks.

If you like a wide selection of good songs, well sung, but this album. You'll probably want to learn some of the songs yourself, and if you do, you'll have no difficulty picking up the words. Alistair Brown's diction is perfect—this is a much rarer quality among singers than it should be, and I commend him heartily for it.

Hugh Hendry

Doug Cox. *Canadian Borderline*. MMM-CD-001. Malahat Mountain Music, Box 252, Mill Bay, B.C. V0R 2P0. Distributed through Festival Records.

It's difficult not to respect an artist who makes you wait till cut 12 on a CD for the ripe satisfaction of hearing Tony Trischka's banjo get smashed to smithereens after a stream of horribly hot licks, leaving three dobro players alone to continue a bluegrass jam in peace ("Shuckin' the Corn"). An impressive roster of Canadian, American and international musicians back Doug Cox on his first release, *Canadian Borderline*. The Calgary-born, B.C.-based dobro player, singer and songwriter performs alongside Trischka and bluegrass virtuosi John Reischman (mandolin) and Slavek Hanzlik (guitar), as well as bluesmen from north and south of the Canadian border (bassist Henry Oden, guitarists Ken Hamm and Dave Gogo).

Over 20 musicians collaborate with Cox on these songs and instrumentals, which one press release classifies as "blues, Celtic, Tex-Mex, bluegrass, and jazz." The obvious question is: How has Cox won and kept such stellar company? His instrumental competence, generic flexibility, shameless humour and honest vocals are some possible answers. The CD's title suggests another question: In what senses might the music performed and collected here be considered Canadian, or "borderline"? Evidence that emerges cut by cut may shed some light.

Cox demonstrates his technical and expressive mastery of the dobro on ten of the fourteen tracks on the album. He sings on six ("Let the Mystery Be", "Canadian Borderline", "Don't Bring Me Water", "We're All the Way", "Fool's Paradise" and "Take Back the Nation") and narrates one more ("My Father"). Six cuts are his own compositions. The dobro appears within creative arrangements. Two of Cox's compositions ("Mary Greig" and "My Father") and another cut mix Tobin Stokes's vibes (yes, vibes) in with dobro, banjo, fiddle or mandolin, lending new meaning, perhaps, to bluegrass mystic/festival producer Carlton Haney's proclamations of the "good vibrations" to be found within this circle of instruments. (Haney's various epiphanies and "vibes" in response to more standard bluegrass arrangements and performance styles are chronicled in Neil V. Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History*, pp. 205, 277, and throughout.)

Track 3, which liner notes identify as "Garry Owen/Banish Misfortune", is a duet between Cox on dobro and Victoria Symphony bassist Alex Olson. The performance is certainly their "own." They begin by setting the beat far down below dance tempo, alternating meditative solos on "Garry Owen"'s A part, creating a tantalizingly slow listening music out of the first of these two Celtic standards. The merry B part arrives at last, after Olson and Cox pick up speed into dance time. The dobro's slides get wide, wild and very sweet. They press on into "Banish Misfortune", slowing down again into "Garry Owen" just before they finish. At top speed the dobro's upward and downward note-bending is intense and percussive, which may startle Celtic listeners a bit. It is as if these two instruments and their players have awakened together into these tunes and this genre.

The latter cut and others create a persuasive argument for moving the dobro beyond the "borderlines" of the bluegrass and country genres, where its positions have been established, into new spots in North American (and international) Anglo-Celtic repertoires. The structure of the dobro itself allows for such inclusion. Its strings drone well, fretted or open, not unlike those of a lap dulcimer. Droning strings and reeds have long been prominent in Celtic and British folk musics. Cox and companions seem to operate on the assumption that the dobro would indeed be welcome at an instrumental family reunion to which uilleann and Highland pipes, the lingering stops that traditionalize the guitar playing of Paul Brady or Richard Thompson, or even a harmonium might be invited. (The sound of a harmonium drones hauntingly behind a recent Newfoundland version of "Lowlands Low", recorded by Anita Best and Pamela Morgan on *The Colour of Amber*, Denon ACD-9008.) By tuning the dobro to DADGAD, Cox promotes the instrument's cross-generic potential. In the notes, he dedicates the duet with Olson in this tuning explicitly to the guitar playing of Thompson and Martin Simpson.

Cox's wit unfurls gradually, climaxing in the above-mentioned smashups in "Shuckin' the Corn." The crashing banjo effects here rival a soundbite from the Indy 500, and recalled, for me anyway, the lovely auto crash spliced onto the end of a version of "Johnson's Motorcar" that was circulating over Irish radio programs in the New York metropolitan area in the mid-1970s. In the anthem-like "Take Back the Nation," Cox takes aim at Meech Lake and constitutional crises, backed up by the voices of a children's choir. There is always Emile Benoit's wordless response to the same events, the crooked reels the late Newfoundland fiddler composed and entitled "Clyde Wells' Dream" and "Meech Lake Breakdown." Newfoundland's Plankerdown Band has recorded and released these on *The Jig is Up* (PIP4-7731).

In the spirit of free trade, Cox leaps into the Tex-Mexy number "Canadian Borderline", a piece he jokingly dubs "Can-Mex" and sings in an invented borderline accent. Numerous jokes grace his CD cover as well, a black-and-white photo of the dobro standing by itself, upright, in the centre of the upside-down "V" formed by Cox's knees (I assume these are his knees; it could be a body double.) The "X" of Cox's last name falls into a particularly nutty position. Behind the dobro stretches a country road. In the left margin a smaller, cropped negative of the main photo appears. Overall, the design bears a suspicious resemblance to the covers of two Dire Straits albums, *Brothers in Arms* and *On Every Street*. On the *Brothers* cover a similar sort of guitar floats against the sky, inside a similar border; on *On Every Street* a guitar appears alongside a pair of boots, in two negative photographs, one inside the other.

Cox's voice has a rough tonal quality vaguely reminiscent of Gordon Lightfoot. The tonality is inconsistent and pretty daring, not unlike the dobro's bendy notes. Cox sings Iris Dement's "Let the Mystery Be" with a minimum of backup vocals. The performance rests upon the drily humorous lyrics of this agnostic hymn. Cox confesses that while he is a "big fan of traditional

bluegrass gospel", he feels "hypocritical singing many of the lyrics", being "unsure" of his own beliefs. Canadian Borderline also covers compositions of Neil Young, Don Williams and Juan Tizol/Duke Ellington.

In summary, Doug Cox's instrumental competence and creativity on Canadian Borderline promise to open up new territory for listeners and musicians who accompany him along his career's unconventional trail. My own wish for his next release would be to hear more unruly dobro reinterpretation of material that fits pretty squarely into Celtic and bluegrass categories. His own tastes, abilities and drives, however, are more eclectic.

Eileen Condon

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The record review column seems as likely a place as any to remind members that the 1994 Catalogue of the Mail Order Service is now available to all members, free of charge. You do, however, have to request it.

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*A barn dance at St. Barnabas Hospital, 1916-17:*

A barn dance was held during the summer, when the barn loft was empty of hay. The loft had no stairway and was normally reached by a vertical ladder. I think a temporary stairway was installed, and the whole barn was cleaned and washed. People came for miles and the loft was well-filled with happy people. There was no drunkenness or rowdyism. Miss Storrar presided with the help of some of the gentlemen. Coffee was brewed on a stove outside in a wash-boiler, and ladies brought sandwiches and cakes.

Music was provided by the Cook brothers from Glenford. One of them was Dick, a slim nine-year-old who already bore the stamp of genius, which later led him to a life of very successful violin playing and teaching at Alberta College. This barn dance was perhaps his first appearance before an audience, many of whom knew music and were astonished at the boy's rendering of both popular and classical selections. Dick was helped by his family to take lessons, including a course from Leopold Auer in Chicago, and his progress was spectacular.

Mersey Moore, *The Pathfinders* (Onoway, Alberta)

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I do remember the dances at Stratton and Christmas Concerts. My Dad played the violin and the Pfennings, who lived four miles east of us, brought their piano on the sleigh. They would come home for supper and go on to the dance where their daughter played the piano with Dad. A Square Dance I remember so well was the Dip and Dive—it was so nice to see them going across the school in such precise time like waves. The next day was cleanup time, and everyone went to clean and scrub the floors.

Irene Hall, *Borderline Memories* (Loverna, Alberta/Saskatchewan)

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Dad played for many dances and house parties. He seldom accepted money for himself for this. Dad had been a band leader of the Markerville Brass Band in southern Alberta. He played the cornet. He also played the violin.

The first instrument in the family, other than what Dad had, was a tenor banjo. Brother Peter saved dimes until he had enough for a second-hand banjo. The next was a guitar which Mom and Dad bought at Ben and Jean Thate's auction sales. We taught ourselves to play these instruments with some help from Dad. Dad learned to play violin from a correspondence course. He'd also learned how to read music. It was a real honor for me to be able to go to a dance with Dad and then to be able to help play for the dance, too. I learned to chord on the banjo and guitar.

While I was accompanying Dad on the guitar I would get so intent on watching the people dance that my timing would slow down. Dad would either shout or poke me, and with the tap of his toe or nods of his head he'd get me back in time.

One of our teachers taught us to dance as part of P.E. We'd learned most of the basic dances when one of the parents put a stop to it. They said we were going to school to learn, not to play. Even though I knew how to dance, I was too shy to accept a dance from the opposite sex. Then one night at a Blue Hill School Dance, my dad turned the fiddle over to someone else and came over to me and said, "Ella, it's time you got out and danced." He was the first gentleman I ever danced with.

Ella Bjornson Thate, *Where Friends and Rivers Meet* (Flatbush, Alberta)