

Letters

Thank you for the wonderful article by Vera Johnson. It brought back many memories of seeing Vera perform at festivals, &c., in Ontario.

Jim Hanmore
Victoria Harbour, Ontario

A friend from back home sent me a copy of the book *An Unfinished Conversation: The Life and Music of Stan Rogers*, which is how I got your address. After living in England for six years, I am really beginning to miss the music and people and places.

I am most interested in learning songs about the Great Lakes, but also Canadian labour and trade union songs. Do you help members with specific interests to get in touch with one another? [*Absolutely—by printing their letters and addresses. Readers: write to Peter, OK? —JL*]

Recently, I have started going to a weekly folk club in north London. An amazing place! About 50-60 people show up, and they are a mix of everything from 80-year-old Irishmen to teenage hippies. I am also learning just how much music migrates back and forth across the Atlantic. For example, last week's featured act was a fiddler from the Shetland Islands, and some of the reels she played reminded me a lot of Cape Breton—which seems pretty obvious. But these same musicians also adopt and adapt tunes from Canada and the U.S.

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With regard to the review of *Canada: A Folksong Portrait/un portrait folklorique* (see p. 46 of this issue) Sam himself might need introducing. The article on him in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* (pp. 525-26) is a good source. He was born in Montreal in 1930, is described as "impresario, producer, record producer." He, as Folkways Records' Canadian rep., produced about 100 LPs. The *Folksong Portrait of Canada* package selects from 37 of them. Vancouver's Barry Hall has three items from his LP *The Virtuoso Five-String Banjo*.

The last Bulletin was very good. I guess the cover needs catching up with the name change to CSTM. (*cf.* ICTM [International Council for Traditional Music]). I was surprised to see the red issue still using CSMT in September!

Phil Thomas
Vancouver, BC

[*We had not ditched the old logo as of that issue for several*

reasons. One is that the name change was still in progress, as at that point, to our knowledge, the new name had not yet been approved by the Canadian government. Secondly, the designing of a new logo for the new name had not yet been completed, although the committee was getting closer to finalizing one. Thirdly, I personally like the design of the old logo (and I don't subscribe to the "appropriation" concerns of some people), and I'm somewhat nostalgic about parting with it (the logo, not specifically the name). For these reasons, as long as the name change hasn't officially been finalized, I expect we'll continue to use the image. I guess you'll be able to tell from this issue's cover whether the situation has changed by press time. —JL]

I am writing this letter for two reasons: to compliment you on your very fine CSMT Bulletin and the Canadian Folk Music Journal. I have been out of the country for most of this academic year, but copies were waiting for me on my return home even though my membership expired last December. I took out my subscription during the time I was writing my MEd thesis, which I wanted to entitle *Folksongs in Action*, but since that was not "academic" enough, I was more or less assigned the daunting title *Folksongs: A Cross-curricular way for Enhancing the Teaching of Canadian Cultural Literacy in Elementary Schools*. Isn't that *awful* and a *sure* way of putting people off using any ideas that may be enshrined therein? The main body of the thesis consists of folk songs from the Atlantic Provinces and how they can be integrated into teaching concepts in Social Studies, Language Arts, &c. Each song has background notes, a musical analysis, the musical notation, solfège, and the words. It could actually be *useful* to teachers and could even promote our uniquely Canadian culture to children who, for the most part, have little knowledge of their cultural heritage. I have since written a brief "History of Canada" article using folk songs for the excellent US publication, *Folk Songs in the Classroom*. At least our neighbours to the south will know some Canadian folk songs!

My second reason for writing is in relation to the article by Sheldon Posen in Volume 21 (1993) of the *Journal*, "The Beginnings of the Children's (Folk) Music Industry in Canada: An Overview." It is interesting that the word "folk" is in parenthesis. I am curious to know how this author defines "folk" music? The 1955 International Folk Music Council defined folk music as "the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the traditions are (i) continuity that links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulses of the individual or the group; (iii) selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives."

The songs of Sharon, Lois and Bram, Raffi, &c., whom Mr. Posen refers to in his article, are indeed in the "folk" style, and may become the folk songs of tomorrow should

they "stand the test of time." They often reflect the times in which we live and put events, &c., into perspectives that children can "handle," and I appreciate and laud this service, but at the present time, can these songs truly be called "folk songs" in the traditional sense? What would an ethnomusicologist say?

Personally I do not dislike the recordings mentioned by Mr. Posen, and I have used quite a number of the songs with my own students, but there is always the danger of this kind of music becoming a somewhat trite "bandwagon" source of making a fast buck. A true folk song, as I have said, will stand the test of time, and will forever link the present with the past.

Yours very sincerely,
Jan C. Gomersall (Miss)
St. Stephen, New Brunswick

I thank Miss Gomersall for her interest in my article and welcome her questions about it.

I must say that I purposely avoided using set definitions of the term "folk" or "folksong" in my article, and I prefer not to get entangled in them now. Since Miss Gomersall asks, however, I will say that the term "folk" in my title is meant to signal readers that I would be focusing upon music produced by the likes of Raffi or Sharon, Lois and Bram, rather than by Sesame Street, say, or Walt Disney. My justification for using that term rests upon the knowledge that the performers in question by and large came out of the North American folksong revival of the 1950s and 1960s; that they recorded song materials that, at least initially, consisted of what had come to be generally accepted as "folksongs," even by the scholarly community (many were gleaned from Folkways recordings by Pete Seeger or from printed collections such as Alan Lomax's *Folksongs of North America*); that the singers performed the materials in settings and in a style that had come to be labelled popularly as "folk"; and that they quite consciously chose to perform those particular materials in that particular manner for children because they felt that children derived special benefits from them.

I put that pesky word "folk" in parentheses in the title because I, too, recognized that much of the material produced for the children's market in Canada since the 1970s has more or less moved from the traditional "folksong" repertoire and "folk" performing style. By retaining the term "folk" but qualifying it with parentheses, I hoped that I might simultaneously convey a sense both of the industry's origins and of its transition since.

As for Miss Gomersall's questioning whether the show tunes, pop songs, or newly written materials that are recorded by children's performers nowadays "can truly be called folksongs in the traditional sense," I have to agree with her inference that probably they're not, but I also have to say that the question in the end leads more into the realm of esthetics than towards of the kind of analysis I prefer to do.

The danger for folklorists (I cannot speak for ethnomusicologists) of being bound up in, or bound by, definitional

issues became abundantly clear to me while I was living in the Ottawa Valley village of Chapeau, Quebec, during the 1970s, conducting fieldwork for a dissertation on local singing traditions. I remember one night in a farmer's kitchen, I sat across the table from one of the community's great singers, Loy Gavan. It was our first extended encounter. He treated me to classic traditional songs he had learned in the lumber camps, such as "William O'Brian," "Henry Green," and the spectacular "The Boy that Wore the Blue." He sang a nostalgic Irish lyric, "Will My Soul Pass Through Ireland," he had learned from a woman friend while blueberry picking. He sang "McCool's Camp," a song he had composed with his chum Victor Downey some thirty years before, about their experiences in a logging camp. They were classic songs, the kind folklorists dream of hearing from such a singer, in such a setting.

Then Mr. Gavan said to me, "And another grand song—no doubt you saw the show, *South of the Border*." I was nonplussed. What? He couldn't be talking about Gene Autry, not after all that other stuff. I blurted out, unbelieving: "South of the Border—*Down Mexico Way*?" "Yah," he replied matter-of-factly. Recovering, I said, "I never saw the show—I've heard of the song." With great seriousness, he said, "Oh, Lord save us, if you ever saw that show, you'd come home and eat a lunch and go back again." I laughed, still off balance, and asked if he had really learned songs from that movie. "Well," he said, "Victor Downey—the fella that he and I composed the song about McCool, eh?—we come down one night, you know, to watch that show, you know, *South of the Border*, at 7 o'clock. And we went to the show 7 o'clock, we come back and ate a lunch and went back at 9." I had to laugh. He continued: "You never saw a nicer show in all your life than that. You know all the words to that?" Meaning "South of the Border," the title song of the movie. I honestly told him I did not. "Well, he said, 'I'll sing it for you.'" And he did, the version he and Victor Downey had pieced together while walking home from the movie four decades before. Singing that song, I discovered later, was one of the ways Mr. Gavan publicly remembered his friend, who had died tragically young.

Over the twenty-odd years I knew Loy Gavan, I found that he had a voracious appetite for songs and an eclectic taste in satisfying it. I learned to take it in stride when he sang, in any order, a long traditional logging ballad such as "Foreman Young Monroe," a pop song learned from a 78 recording such as "Wait Till We Get Them Up in the Air, Boys," an Irish ditty such as "Paddy McGinty's Goat," and the 1970s radio hit, "Knock Three Times on the Ceiling If You Want Me." He cherished them all, setting no moral value on any because of its origin—although I once heard him say, "By God, the old songs are the best, eh?"

I think one can learn important things—matters of local esthetics, the movement of people in a landscape, the influence of the media in the life of rural populations, the mechanics of song learning—by being aware of the different types of songs a singer such as Loy Gavan chooses for his repertoire, in terms of their origins, styles, reliance on word of mouth

transmission versus commercial recording, and so on. But I would never *not* look at any song simply because it was not what I thought was a "folksong." It seems to me that if I want to understand what singing meant to Loy Gavan and his listeners, or how "folksong tradition" worked in that village, I gain nothing and lose much by first deciding what a "folksong" is, then turn on the tape recorder only when one such rarefied utterance is made, and ignore all the rest.

I therefore totally agree with Miss Gomersall's assessment that the majority of songs found on current children's recordings "often reflect the times in which we live and put

events, &c., into perspectives that children can 'handle.'" I would prefer to leave it at that, rather than questioning again whether these songs are "folksongs in the traditional sense." As I learned in Chapeau, there are many types of songs—even those that were first penned when someone decided to try and make a fast buck—that will, like Miss Gomersall's ideal folksongs, "stand the test of time and will forever link the present with the past."

I. Sheldon Posen
Ottawa, Ontario