

What's the Life of a Man?

Traditional

Barry first heard this song some years ago on a recording by the X-Seamen's Institute, but the version he recorded last year was pieced together from a variety of sources during the subsequent period. Edith Fowke recorded a version with a different melody from Mrs. William Towns, in Douro, Ontario; this is to be found on Folkways FM 4005, *Folk Songs of Ontario*. Her notes to that recording include this interesting comment: "This song is unusual because of its strong philosophical tone which is quite free of religious references. Many moralistic songs circulated in Ontario during the last century, but most of them clearly pointed the path toward heaven. The realistic acceptance of death implicit in these verses seems more akin to ancient Greek than to Christian philosophy."

Chorus:

What's the life of a man any more than a leaf?
A man has his seasons so why should he grieve?
Although in this world we appear fine and gay
Like the leaves we must wither and soon fade away.

As I was a-walking one morning at ease
A-viewing the leaves as they hung from the trees.
All in full motion appearing to be
And those that were withered, they fell from the trees.

If you had seen the leaves just a few days ago,
How bright and how beautiful they all seemed to grow
A frost came and bit them and withered them all
A storm came upon them and down they did fall.

New verse by Barry Luft included on the recording:
Now a man is like a leaf near the last autumn day
Revealing full colors while bearing decay.
Yet a man has a charge on the journey from seed:
His story to honor and calling to heed.

New verse by Dave Watts—not on the recording:
But the life of mankind is the life of the tree
It grows in the roots, in the branches, the leaves
Although, when they fall, it may seem that it's gone
In the seasons that follow, we see life goes on.



What's the life of a man an-y more than a leaf? A man has his sea-son, so
why should he grieve? Al-though in this world we ap-pear fine and gay, Like the
leaves we must wi-ther and soon fade a way.



On the previous pages, Barry Luft appears at left in the photo on the left; his father is in the front row of the photo on the right, wearing a tie.

Singing circle after the recording session. Left to right: John Leeder, Larry Hanks (with guitar), Joe Adams, Dave Watts.

Photos courtesy Barry Luft.