



Stan Triggs on Clay's Wharf, Vancouver, 1962, "... where I lived for a year in a float-house ... below Granville Street bridge before the yuppyfication of the area." Photo by "Nagaga," Vicky Haig-Brown, Triggs's neighbor at the Wharf.

"Stanley G. Triggs, Accompanying himself...."

George W. Lyon

When the Society's Mail Order Service began to sell off its vinyl catalog some months ago, I rushed over to see what they had in the way of Folkways Canadian LPs that I might have missed over the years. I knew that it was now or never—or, at least, it would be LPs now or later it would have to be carefully made cassette packages from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington (who took over the company when founder Moses Asch died), which somehow lack the cachet of real, big, black records. I knew that there were some essential field recordings that somehow I'd managed to miss, so I came away with a stack of those fat old Folkways packages (they always *felt* like the best deal in records, didn't they?), among them one I'd never heard of, *Bunkhouse and Forecastle Songs of the Northwest*, "Sung by Stanley G. Triggs, Accompanying himself on the mandolin."

The mandolin turned out to be a tiple (three strings per course instead of two), but no matter—I didn't even notice that at first. I didn't look at the notes, but put it on while I was puttering about the house, and the first song, "The *Oda G.*," stopped me short. *That's where Bossin got it!* I'd always assumed that the Torontonian-turned-BC-island-resident had written it himself.¹ It was one of those phonograph moments we've all had, when we rush over to the jacket (booklet, when it's Folkways) or disc label, impatient to learn the true source. There it was: "This is one of my own songs about the oldest tugboat still working on the coast." *Who was this guy?*

The first page of the booklet was graced by two photos, one a portrait of an extremely handsome and earnest young man, the other a still life with tiple against a bareboard wall also hung with a hunting knife, pocket watch, harmonica, books, gewgaws, and other photos. All photos, and the liner notes, were credited to Triggs himself.

From the notes I learned that Triggs was born in Nelson, BC, in 1928, and that he lived the sort of youth that many people (Bob Dylan being a notable example) wish they'd had.

"Ever since I was small I've had a great love for life in the 'bush,' and all through the last years of high school I had only one thought in mind: to escape the rigid confinement and monotony of school life and get a job in a logging camp. This I did and have led a some-what shiftless yet adventuresome life since. I have worked in logging camps, construction camps, with Forestry crews, survey crews, and railroad gangs. I have been river-driver, trapper, packer, lookoutman, fire-fighter, powder-monkey, animal trainer, deckhand-cook on tugboats.... Each job brings new faces, new friends, and sometimes new songs."

It's through the latter, of course, that we come to know Triggs. Not only does he know (and create) a great number of songs, he sings them with authority and delight. His vocal style in 1961, when this LP was recorded, was the sort of

nasal tenor popularized across North America by Hank Snow, though the accompaniment was much more downhome than anything Snow had used for many years at that point. The songs themselves were a mixture of Triggs's own compositions, songs indigenous to BC (to one extent or another), and several of those familiar songs that have crossed and recrossed the line from commercial issue to folkloric transmission: "The Wreck of the Number Nine," "The Blue Velvet Band," "Brown Eyes," "Moonlight and Skies," and Wilf Carter's song about the Mad Trapper, Albert Johnson.

Two songs, "The Homesick Trapper" and "Lookout in the Sky," were poems by trapper Harold Smith, for which Triggs wrote tunes. I recently spoke with Triggs, whom I located with the help of Phil Thomas, and he told me that he'd taken over Smith's trapline when he died and found the poems stuck into cracks in the log cabin.

Over the phone, Stanley told me that, like so many other North American musicians, he started on the mouth organ (which he calls his "natural instrument"); when he was 12 years old, he traded some *Big Little* books for an accordion. He took up the guitar when he was 17, and by the time he made the LP, he was happiest with the mandolin.

His Folkways autobiography carries him into Vancouver, where he joined the burgeoning folk revival there. Although he moved away in 1965, his influence in Vancouver remained. His byline is found, often as photograph source, in the *Canada Folk Bulletin*, published in Vancouver by Rika Ruebsaat and Jon Bartlett, as well as in old issues of this Society's original newsletter. He appears as a backup vocalist and accompanist on Phil Thomas's recording, *Where the Fraser River Flows* and other songs of the Pacific Northwest (Skookumchuck SR 7001, OP, unfortunately), and his song, "The Wreck of the *C.P. Yorke*," was included in Thomas's collection, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*.

Vancouver's Green Cove Coffeehouse, founded in 1985, was named after another tugboat ballad, "The Wreck of the *Green Cove*." By the time the coffeehouse came into existence, Triggs had left Vancouver, but the song was remembered. Jon Bartlett notes, "We named the coffeehouse after his song, because the song was known and sung, and it was a BC theme, tho', truth to tell, I don't suppose anyone there had ever met him, with the exception of ... Phil Thomas and Al Cox...."

Last May, he briefly updated his biography for the early '60s:

In the Fall of 1962 I hitchhiked across Canada as others were doing in droves (but not so many in October, when I decided to depart) and spent the winter travelling to coffeehouses in Toronto and Montreal with side trips to small towns like Hamilton, St. Catherines, Kitchener, North Bay, and Ottawa. The going rate, all over, was five bucks a

gig. One of my favorite spots was the *Black Swan* in Stratford: a warm-hearted manager and staff and good audiences.

I had great times in Toronto, too, with fond memories of the *Bohemian Embassy*, a great three-story loft where I once sang till four in the morning to a very appreciative audience. I was lucky, of course; people didn't expect polished acts, or I would never have gotten in the door. It was all very casual and relaxed; people were interested in the words, the story. I never did do well in Montreal; somehow things didn't click.

When he settled in Montreal, it was to work in photography. Since 1965, Triggs has been the Curator at the Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History at McGill University. After 28 years with the Archives, Triggs retired in June, 1994. Triggs takes pride in the institution, to which he's given a great deal. (He wrote three books on William Notman, as well as the entry in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* on this photographer upon whose collection the Archives was built, and has co-authored other volumes.) On the phone he bragged of the 700,000 images in the Archive's collection. During those three decades, he'd cu-

rated 56 exhibits. Retired? When I spoke to him last summer, he'd returned as a volunteer to mount "one last show."

Music has understandably had to wait during much of this time. All of his children play guitar and sing, and he speaks proudly of his wife's "beautiful voice," though she doesn't accompany herself. With retirement, Triggs has begun to play with a friend in Hemmingford, where he lives south of Montreal.

It's all for fun, as it always was. Phil Thomas referred to Triggs as "a genuine foc's'le singer," who had to be "prevailed upon to record his music." A trifle romantic, perhaps, but Triggs certainly never expected to make money from music.² "That's all I was doing, having fun." A '70s item in the CSTM Archives confirms this; catalogued in file 3.83 (430/88.11) is a note he included with his dues payment, apologizing for the tardiness of the remittance, and commenting briefly on the financial life of a folksinger.

But he certainly did have fun, and he made fun for others. And his recorded music and the songs that live continue to increase the pleasure of those who, like me, discover his music as the years pass.

¹Bob Bossin's performance of "The *Oda G.*" is on *Bossin's West Coast: Songs of Canada's West Coast*, Nick C4, from 1986. OP, unfortunately.

²"But this is true. I did actually make up the four tugboat songs while sitting in the foc's'le and the galley, or working on the deck. When I made up 'The *Oda G.*,' I was painting the bulwarks, as it says in the song!"

"When someone suggested I send a tape of my songs to Sam Gesser, the Canadian representative for Folkways, I expressed surprise and disbelief that anyone could possibly be interested in recording them. But I gave it a try anyway. The tape was made in Vancouver, in Douglas Gyseman's living room with Barry Hall playing guitar accompaniment. It took three hours to complete." —Stanley G. Triggs, May 17, 1995



"Singing at home has always been what I loved best—or with a small group of friends at an anniversary or birthday or on a camping trip, &c.—car singing, too, is great." Hemmingford, 1976, photo by Eric Doubt.