

## Editorials

It is with great sadness that we must tell you of the death of *Edith Fowke* on March 28, from lung cancer. In addition to being a towering figure in Canadian folk music collecting, publication and scholarship, Edith was the Honorary President of CSTM, a fixture as a board member, the editor of our sister publication the *Canadian Folk Music Journal* since its inception, and a longtime contributor to and supporter of the *Bulletin*.

We had in fact already planned a celebration of Edith for our December issue, and though we were unable to hand her a bouquet before she left us, she did know that the seeds had been planted. We who put together the *Bulletin* have already had several occasions to miss her.

However, we will wait until December to say more about this. Our relative silence now does not indicate that we are not thinking about Edith. We have much to say about her, but we are saving it to put all in one place, and waiting until we are sure that we can say it well. She deserves that.

In the meantime, it seems appropriate to honor her memory with the following, which is the last poem and message to the world and to his own nation from Ken Saro-Wiwa. It was smuggled from his prison cell for the Ogoni Day celebrations on January 4, 1995. (Thanks to the Greenpeace email office in Toronto for tracking it down for us.) The blend of social concern and esthetics manifested here by Saro-Wiwa reflects the legacy Edith has left us.

Ogoni!

Ogoni is the land  
The people, Ogoni  
The agony of trees dying in ancestral farmlands  
Streams polluted weeping filth into murky rivers  
It is the poisoned air coursing the luckless lungs of dying children  
Ogoni is the dream breaking the looping chain  
Around the drooping neck of a Shell-Shocked land.

Dance your anger and your joys, dance the military guns to  
silence, dance their dumb laws to the dump. Dance  
oppression and injustice to death. Dance the end of  
Shell's ecological war of 30 years, dance my people for we  
have seen tomorrow and there is an Ogoni star in the sky.

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### *Deadline*

The deadline for submissions to give papers/workshops/ presentations at this year's AGM will be July 1.

Remember that the CSTM/CSTM is meeting this year together with the Society for Ethnomusicology in Toronto from Thursday, October 30, through Sunday, November 2, at the Westbury Hotel. (See page 9, *Bulletin* 29.4, for more details.) This joint meeting should be the opportunity for a great deal of stimulating interchange and fascinating performance.

To submit or request more information, email Judith Cohen ([jcohen@epas.utoronto.ca](mailto:jcohen@epas.utoronto.ca)) or write The Canadian Society for Traditional Music, Box 4232, Station C, Calgary, T2T 5N1. Another source for information: Beverly Diamond, Music Department, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3.

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You might find reading *Vera Johnson's* profile of *Alan Mills*, the featured article of this issue, to be a bit like a trip to the archive. Vera wrote it in 1954, hoping that she could sell it to Maclean's. That, unfortunately, did not work out. While planning the issue which featured Vera's memoirs of her own career (Bulletin 29.1), we spotted the article in a list of her unpublished writings and asked to see it. She sent it, along with xeroxes of a couple of letters that Mills and Clyde Gilmour wrote her at the time. We read it, showed it to a couple of other readers, and concluded that it deserved to be made available, as Mills himself deserved to be remembered.

For the most part, "Just Call Me Al" is presented here as Vera initially wrote it (after revisions suggested by Gilmour). The present tense, for example, is archival, and confusions may occur if readers do not keep this in mind; thus the comment that a radio show is still going on should not be taken literally. In other respects, the article may serve as a window into that not-so-distant era. The hope expressed in the article that "...perhaps a Canadian music publisher will ... risk issuing the sheet music" reflects the importance of that medium before singles and long playing records did in the piano as the major source of music in the home, and thus as the major conduit for money from the home to the music industry. Readers of my era will have a dim memory of this; I'm rather often reminded these days that many of our readers may no longer be of my era, however.

As a comparison of the article, as we publish it, to the facsimile of one of Mills's letters will demonstrate, Vera has made a few alterations to suit the singer's preferences. Not all of these, however, will be apparent; Mills felt that a few passages would trouble people, and Vera wished to honor this, so both those lines and the relevant lines from his letter have been removed. (What we've removed from the letter itself has been covered in a solid block; the crossouts are Mills's own.)

Broadcaster Gilmour, who read an earlier draft, made a number of suggestions, including the following:

...why not open with an anecdote about one of Mills' long-ago newspaper pals who complained about his singing, and who lately has put out hard cash for one of Mills' records or albums? The newsroom pest who sings around the office is a fairly familiar phenomenon, but not many of them ever become famous as professional vocalists. (Another who did: Nelson Eddy.)

But he concluded, in his letter of March 13, 1954,

Maybe you should ignore my advice and just revise the thing the way you see fit. But don't show it to Mills again before you send it in; Maclean's would cut your head off if they ever found out. And say hello to Mills for me: I'm one of his fans, too.

Writing to Vera on "Saturday" after she had received the rejection letter, Mills chided her.

Come out of your sackcloth and ashes, kid!... The article is not that important ... aside of the fee you might get out of it.... Quite frankly, I don't believe such articles do much good from a 'commercial' point

of you [*sic*]... It is nice to be 'recognized' by a national magazine, but when you boil it down to dollars and cents, it probably wouldn't sell a dozen records or books.. And this questionable benefit is hardly worth the agony of baring one's soul—or hole, for that matter—to satisfy the curious tastes of editors who have made a business out of curiosity, if that makes sense."

(The dating of the letter is itself a cause for nostalgia, for those who can remember when mail arrived quickly enough that the day's name would be sufficient. Some might even remember when it was useful to date a letter *Morning* or *Afternoon*!)

Not enough serious attention has been paid to Mills's role in Canadian cultural history. Given the ubiquity of his recordings, even after his death and after revivalist styles had moved into other directions, that role is significant. Except for the Alan Mills Folkways LPs (material on other labels either did not stay in print or was not widely distributed), for many years the only readily available sources for Canadian folk songs were books: Fowke and Johnston's *Folk Songs of Canada*, Fowke's *Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, and Fowke and Mill's *Singing Our History*. Why Mills's voice should have become the voice of Canadian balladry (most of the songs he recorded were ballads), and the effect of his prolific career upon other performers and the audiences deserves closer study. Neil Rosenberg devotes a few paragraphs of "The Canadianization of Newfoundland Folksong; or the Newfoundlandization of Canadian Folksong" (*Journal of Canadian Studies* 29.1 (Spring 1994): 55-73) to such questions, but his context is very specific—one might in a similar fashion probe Mills the anglophone who sang French songs or Mills the Montrealer who sang songs from Ontario or (less frequently) western Canada.

In addition to being "culturally important," Mills's recorded legacy is, simply, enjoyable. Ironically, while in some ways the "folksingers" of today often use vocal techniques closer to those used by the original singers of Mills's songs, their performances of these songs are heavily arranged and betray in other ways a pop-culture esthetic. Of course, there are no pounds or inches of folk stylistics, and there's no way to measure Mills against, say, Stan Rogers—and no real reason to do so, except perhaps to demonstrate that Mills has been undervalued in recent years. Anyone who'd say his trained voice and theatrical manner do not sound very "folky" might be overlooking a number of aspects of performance styles in various traditions. At any rate, it seems to me a shame that Mills's song-centered recordings are no longer easily available.

Since the last sentence was first drafted in March, we've learned that Smithsonian/Folkways is going to reissue the entire Mills catalogue on CD this summer. Needless to say, we applaud this, and we hope that libraries, in particular, will purchase these recordings, so that Canadians will continue to have access to the legacy Mills left us. (As it happens, many of these discs also help to distribute the work of Edith Fowke, who collaborated with Mills on a number of projects.) —GWL