

# A Conceptual Canadian Blues Festival

## *some hot peppers from midwinter*

I had early lessons in marginalization. As a little boy, I was fascinated by the culture of Native Americans and Canadians, a preoccupation which is less common than one might think. Among the kids I shared a block with, *army* was considered the grownup, acceptable game, and anything else was likely to be called *babyish* (a word I don't suppose I've heard spoken for nearly two quarters of a century). Cowboys tended to be passé; in the rockin' 50s, the codes of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, not to mention the latter's relatively delicate good looks, left their machismo suspect. Of course, if I'd fastened upon them, at least I'd have been interested in *white people*. The slander that was laid on me was, "George wants to be an Indian when he grows up." Think about it—not only did I have to defend my choice of obsessions, I had to defend myself against the claim that I didn't understand that I *couldn't be* an Indian, even if I wanted to, which was not how I framed my interest to myself, in any event.

I'm remembering this tonight because I'm asking myself how much truth there was in the comment, later made about some of us—white boys who began to play the blues during the 60s—that we *wanted to be blacks*. Perhaps in this case there was a bit more to the charge. After all, Norman Mailer in *The White Negro* said as much of hipsters in general. Exoticism? Primitivism? Racism, even? Probably there was a degree of all this.

Some years back, when I was reviewing a cassette by Ken Hamm for the *Bulletin*, it struck me that in the 90s we are as far from the 60s as the 60s were from the 30s, when many of the greatest original blues were recorded. This might be considered from a number of angles—for starters, can 90s people understand 60s people any better than 60s people understood 30s people?—but what really strikes me is that with each passing year, the era of John Hammond, Dave Van Ronk, and so on must surely have become mature, as did that of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Mississippi John Hurt, and Kokomo Arnold, and with each passing year, the age differences among those musicians will become less significant.

There have been white players of blues, if not from the year the idiom was created, at least since shortly after. *That* age difference really is trivial. (I've always been fond of the comment reportedly made by Jack Teagarden to Louis Armstrong when they first met, "I'm an ofay, you're a spade. Let's blow.") Some of the earlier white blues players apparently did want to be black (read Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography, *Really the Blues*, if you don't believe me), but this definitely cannot be said about Roscoe Holcomb, for example, whose music is as bluesy and as white as they come. Or about Sam McGee, or, um, early Gene Autry, or Mac Beattie or Johnny Mills's daddy.<sup>1</sup>

One might argue (and I'm sure someone has) that the blues is the musical genre that defines our century; didn't British composer, Michael Tippett, entitle his autobiography, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*? If nothing else, the blues is certainly an essential form in North American music. And Canada is in

North America, and the blues, we should all recognize, is in Canada. To refresh your memory, some months ago we published Dave Spalding's review of a set of recordings by Jackson Delta, a mostly acoustic blues trio from Peterborough.<sup>2</sup> In that review, Dave commented on the prevalence of American places and themes in the material before him and asked, "Don't Canadian situations inspire blues players?" As I set that issue up, it struck me that this might be the excuse for a special issue some time. When Rick Fines, of Jackson Delta, responded with some valid, intelligent thoughts on the matter (*Bulletin* 30.4, December 1996), John and I confirmed the plan.

What follows does not pretend to be exhaustive or definitive, nor should a reader assume that it is based upon exhaustive research on our part. We've thrown out some lines (and dragged in a disappointing number of rubber boots), quizzed ourselves and some acquaintances, and, in the time that we had available, have gathered the following songs for your perusal. Peter Narváez serendipitously offered the interview with Carlos del Junco which accompanies these songs.

Not all of these are currently available on record (we've let you know when they are). This may present a problem for readers who do not read music. On the other hand, Dave Ray (12-string playing member of Koerner, Ray, and Glover—remember them?) once faced a similar problem when he discovered Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*, in which he found one, maybe two, verses—and no hint of the tune—to Barbecue Bob's "Freeze to Me, Mama." This was obviously a tempting item for a young 60s boy looking to rediscover his body as well as the blues, but this was some years before blues reissues were plentiful (and I'm not aware that that song ever did make it to vinyl), so he just wrote his own tune and made up some more verses. It can be done.

We don't claim that this selection represents the writing of Canadian blues players, that it makes a large statement about the role of the blues in Canada or about the role of Canada in the blues; nevertheless it is interesting to note that some aspects of Canadian life do fit comfortably in the blues idiom. One concern that we had in choosing these songs is that they did have to please us, and had the medium not suited the message, I doubt that we would have enjoyed them enough to encourage others to begin to sing them.

Some readers may wish to argue about the degree of Canadian content in some items. One might say that Ken Whiteley's "Come A Little Closer" (or his "She Makes Her Own Way" from the last issue) isn't particularly Canadian. I myself sometimes wonder whether the nice-guy image Canadians like to suppose that they have is really justified. It can't be proven, either way. It's still a good song, it *was* written by a Canadian, and when he was asked whether he'd written any particularly Canadian songs, he offered these two. A similar discussion might be made about Johnny V's "Ain't Gonna Dust My Broom No More." I requested the song because it seemed to us to have

that *je ne sais quoi* that seem to make Whiteley's song distinctively Canadian, though we really did try to keep *je ne sais quoi* to a minimum—the discourse of the blues is already too full of "if-you-don't-get-it-I-can't-tell-you" rhetoric.

But you can't argue about "Black Fly Moan," "Fishing Grounds," "Snow Plow Blues," "Canada Goose Blues," and "Northern Ontario Blues," to name five very different sorts of blues, ranging from city to country and from a fairly dark Mississippi sort of sound to a lighter, raggy feel, and from very

funky to something as smooth as Bob Wills ever did in his Las Vegas period. By the same token, Sid Marty's "Dryland Blues" has had some of its minor angles smoothed a bit—the blues here is mediated by the Fred Neil influence—but it's still a blues at root.

We offer you nine songs by nine singers with nine different personalities.

—George W. Lyon

<sup>1</sup> Isn't it interesting that Johnny V had Sonny Rhodes sing his daddy's song on the CD? Apparently he felt that the bridge between generations was stronger than the gap between the races or nations!

<sup>2</sup> By the way, when Dave volunteered to review Jackson Delta, I was a bit surprised, knowing him primarily as a singer of British and Canadian folk songs. John told me that Dave began his performing life in the skiffle boom in Britain during the 60s, which meant that he played blues and related material. If I were going to attempt to defend the proposition that the blues is the music of this century, I might use Dave as an example. (Or Big John Campbell—check out his "Walking Dog Shit Blues" on page 15!)

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We'd like to recommend to you the fine Canadian blues magazine, *Real Blues*. It used to be called *West Coast Blues Review*. We're having trouble finding it on stands in Calgary, a problem we hope will be temporary, but we understand that not only is well distributed in the larger market south of the border and in Europe, it has become accepted as a premier periodical in the field. Editor D. Robertson writes, "We try and focus on 'authentic blues' and cover the whole realm of blues, soul, gospel, zydeco and R&B with features on many obscure artists and rare recordings." Rates are \$30.00 per year in Canada, \$30.00 (US) in the USA, and \$45.00 (US) per year overseas. They publish six issues each year. Write *Real Blues* #302, 655 Herald Street, Victoria, BC V8W 3L6. <reblues@ampsc.com>