

## Lettres/Letters

I have retired from academia (brain science) to make a second career relating traditional songs to social history. I want to collect as many songs as possible related to drinking in the British Isles and America (1550-1900), then relate the main themes to nation, era, social class or ethnicity. I have nearly finished my first large comparison: some 500 drink-related songs from Ireland, Scotland and England from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.... My next step is to cull Irish-American folk songs about drink—especially from men's work groups, including cowboys, lumber camps, railroads, sailors, &c. I imagine that the Irish preoccupation with fighting begins with the "faction fights" about 1800, but it's remarkable how long the theme persists in the US (and I assume Canada). Can you think of anyone who has written about Canadian-Irish songs? I have only one relevant journal reference: Colin Neiland, "Irish Influences on Newfoundland Song", in *Canadian Folklore canadien*. I also have a reference to Edith Fowke's lumbering songs. I often recite "Silver Jack," from the area of Michigan where I grew up. One of his famous brawls was with the French-Canadian Joe Fournier, who had two rows of teeth, and would bite off a piece from the bar to intimidate his opponents.

Of course, I am interested in any drink-related pieces, and will have to peruse whole collections, as I've done with the British Isles material. I might try to pay a library assistant to peruse Canadian collections not easily accessible nearby. I've found reliable undergraduates here who would work for \$12/hr. to locate and copy songs. If anyone comes to mind, please do let me know how to reach them. My progressive multiple sclerosis limits my travel, so I use funds normally budgeted for travel.

One trip I will have to make this fall is to the Library of Congress. Is there a comparable national archive of folksong in Canada?

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*[Perhaps readers will have some tips for David. He'll surely want to approach the National Archives in Ottawa, the Department of Folklore at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and possibly our Society's archives at the*

*University of Calgary Special Collections. Some of Edith Fowke's material is at York, the British Columbia Folklore Society is building up an interesting collection, and I suspect there's scads of stuff in Quebec, if your net extends into French!*

George Lyon's review of my new recording, *Earthly Concerns*, was such a glaring (and surprising) misunderstanding and ultimately a misrepresentation of the record that I am compelled to break my own rule of non-response to reviews.

Before I respond to some specific criticisms in his review, let me state the following: This recording has a theme—*Earthly Concerns*—and that theme is embodied most strikingly in the three "conversation" songs that form the nucleus of the record, as the album notes make plain. These three songs, "Earthly Concerns," "Hi, Sal, Have You Checked Your Email?" and "The Two Centuries," are conversations with the past, present and future, respectively. Nowhere in Lyon's lengthy review were any of these songs named or discussed. The record's overarching theme was never once mentioned or referred to, despite its being unambivalently evident in the song subjects, their introductory notes, the cover art and the title itself. From the start, then, it's clear that the reviewer is not paying any real attention to the recording.

The first song under discussion, "Fast And Loud," is interpreted as a criticism of contemporary musics. Discussion of that point rambled on for almost as many paragraphs as are given most of the other record reviews in the publication despite the fact that that aspect of contemporary culture is not mentioned, not referred to, not implied, simply not a part of what the song is about. The song's introductory notes spell out the subjects under discussion: "the popular media, politics and sex"; the song lyrics are not obscure. Why Lyon chose to insert his own subject matter into the song, then proceed to disagree with this phantom position, is simply beyond my comprehension.

The phrase, "fast and loud," in both the title and the song itself, is my way of summing up the ever increasing speed of our modern world as evidenced most obviously by the editing pace of visual images of film or TV, and the shallow sound-byte news phenomenon. By choosing the word "Loud," I intended both of its common meanings: vulgar and rude/high volume. Read the lyrics and you'll find both meanings unambiguously employed. Paying attention to the lyrics would also have shown the verse to be made up largely of short, three-word lines, sung very briskly, epitomizing the hurried pace of information.

Regarding the third verse, Lyon decides that I am proposing only "family-values" sex and "not much beyond the missionary position." Here again, the points of the verse, especially when heard in the context of the song's theme, were missed by a country mile. Point One: Fast sex. The verse says, *Don't rush, take your time, achieve greater pleasure by doing so*. Point Two: Loud (read: vulgar) sex. Yes, I admit I'm not into chains and whips or whatever a listener might assume I imply by "sleazy" sex. Does that only leave us with Lyon's "missionary position"? Not if you listen to the song. It says your fingers are primary—greater—giver of pleasure. Allow them to do it, to "linger, delay, dawdle, caress." Not a single syllable of the lyrics sets any limits on the techniques of mutual pleasure in a loving coupling.

It's at this point that Lyon first hurls the dreaded curse of preachiness. An avoidance of preaching is a strong rule of successful songwriting. I'm in complete agreement with Lyon on that point. But in a song which, through the course of four verses, just describes—almost journalistically—observed realities, then concludes by describing a personal response to it all ("getting out..."), I fail to see evidence of preaching.

The preaching issue surfaces again in Lyon's description of the only other song discussed at length, "The Most Amazing Thing In The World." Lyon is familiar with a fair amount of my songwriting; he should know that in my repertoire are dozens upon dozens of songs which stir strong emotions by dint of the particularities of the stories they relate. Given that knowledge, my perhaps naive assumption about a thoughtful reviewer like Lyon is that he might bear in mind my previous songwriting "successes" and my experience, and ask himself: What is Laskin trying to do here? By condemning as failure the "distance" from the subject instead of giving me the benefit of the doubt and looking closer at all aspects of the song, he appears to miss the point again.

The point of the song is not the horrible events that this little girl endured. The point is her innate optimism that, so far, has not been defeated by some of the worst things that life can dish out. My goal, despite Lyon's wishing for it, was not to describe the lives of her abusers, but to contrast different sides of her enduring spirit with the various abuses. Quite consciously, I wanted the very grisly events to be conveyed not by the specifics of the lyrics but by the understated language, described from an outsider's point of view. The opening verse of each verse pair does just that. Then, the contrasting verse in the pair moves the lens closer, painting the image of the girl's reaction—but still in understated language. This is repeated for each of the three abuses she endured until I've described what she tasted, saw and felt—all *body* senses, reflecting the fact of all the abuses initiating with her physical person. The music as well was quite intentionally "lightweight" to help contrast and make more poignant the terrible circumstances.

Again, the point of the song was the phenomenon of the girl's strong spirit—the title and the chorus keep reminding you—yet Lyon condemns the song for not having different intentions.

A final error, which Lyon states twice, is that the lyrics describe the girl as "unsinkably buoyant, luminous with courage," a state of being he finds hard to swallow. The lyrics actually ascribe those qualities not to the little girl but to "...the heart that beats, in this little girl." A world of difference, in my mind at least. I was attempting to summarize, in the concluding coda, the source of the girl's strength of spirit. And in describing the state of one's emotional heart—a non-physical construct—I'm baffled that words like "luminous" and "buoyant" in aid of the image strike Lyon as comical.

Lyon makes one reference to the song "Resister," whose theme he agrees with, though he wishes I'd used a term other than "virus" to describe neoconservatism. In the context of the lyrics, a medical term like virus was the only word possible. I describe a "persistent strain" of disease that we "breathe in" and has a physical manifestation that "shrinks the heart and thickens

skin." It's a virus we have to "resist." The metaphor is vivid and consistent. If I didn't describe it as a virus, I'd have to write a different song.

Lyon did speak accurately of my admiration for Sondheim and Jacques Brel—brilliant songwriters who have much to teach us all. Where Lyon gets off track is in claiming I place myself in their milieu, particularly musical theatre. Let me state here and now: I could never hope to be another Stephen Sondheim. That man is a genius with high-level training in musical composition and thus brings a degree of complexity to his work which is far beyond me. So it seemed pointless at best to compare me to him and Kurt Weill and, of course, to find me wanting.

What I *am* trying to do is allow the Sondheims and Brels of the world to influence me, alongside Leon Rosselson, Stan Rogers, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, Si Kahn, Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, traditional ballads, and countless other song sources. Out of all that, I like to hope that with a portion of my writing I'm producing a successful blend of the kinds of folk music I love with a satisfyingly more demanding "theatricality." Lyon may feel I am a songwriter/musician "in transition," but in my mind that's a description of creativity at its best.

Now of course, after all my explanations, Lyon is still welcome to disagree. What I was unable to let pass was his disagreements being based on false observations and, thus, erroneous conclusions.

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*[We occasionally have to wrestle with whether or not to respond to angry or disapproving letters. Other publications, some of which allow the original author the last word, have never given me a satisfying guide. When a publication does let the author kick back, I frequently feel like she's been given an unfair advantage; nevertheless, sometimes when the format does not permit that, I find that I wish to hear what the original writer would have said. I don't think there's much point in this case in getting into a "Yes I did/No I didn't" routine. One point in Laskin's letter with which I do agree: that to be "in transition" may be termed "a description of creativity at its best." Though I stand by everything I wrote about *Earthly Concerns*, "creativity at its best" applies to much of Laskin's work, and I attempted to make my regard for his work clear in the review itself.—GWL]*

I present a two-hour folk and acoustic radio show here in Perth, Australia, and have recently discovered the joys of traditional Canadian folk music; however, I am finding it difficult to obtain material to air on my show... I was wondering if it's possible to be mailed any sampler or promo CDs that I may showcase on my show, and would be grateful if you could assist in this regard.

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I am desperately trying to secure information on the folk singer Roy Bailey for either a book project or, more likely, a series of independent magazine publications, with a working title of "Leaves from a Tree." I am looking for stories, articles, reviews, festival/gig adverts, photographs, literally absolutely anything and everything to do with the great man himself.... I hope you agree that a musician as important to the folk scene, not only within these shores but also internationally, as Roy Bailey surely deserves something in print to celebrate his vastly important contribution over the years....

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I truly enjoyed David Spalding's *EthnoFolk Letter* and the reviews of current French recordings from Quebec, but the centrepiece of issue 32.4 was your interview with Max Ferguson. When I am north of the border, I have always tried to listen to those enchanting Saturday morning musical adventures. Listening to his show was like finding one of those lamps you read about in folk stories; you rub it, and presto! off you go, and what follows is anybody's guess. As someone who has been involved in radio work for years and years, I can truly appreciate an eclectic show, and Ferguson knew how to raise musical electricity to a noble art form. You never knew what he'd play next: Nancy White singing Spanish Civil War songs, a Scottish band playing Brazilian rhythms, a Napoleonic march poking fun at Belgians for eating black sausages, a Winnipeg trio singing rare medieval French winter solstice pieces, or a Child ballad from the Ottawa Valley.

And now, here's a plea for help. For several years, I have been involved in a major project, to recast Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* on the American frontier, circa 1880. A wagon train is heading from Missouri to California, and 30 of its passengers will each tell two tales on the way west. There will be a prologue, 60 stories, interludes between the tales, an epilogue, copious notes and bibliographical references aplenty. I thought it might be a nice touch if there were several Canadian members of the train, so any ideas or suggestions on possible characters to join the train on its westward trek will be more than welcome and appreciated. Ideas have included a Métis trader, a railroad surveyor or a former Mountie, but any other suggestions will be gratefully entertained. I would especially love to hear from folks familiar with Canadian western history circa 1870 to 1900, as well as the songs folks on the Canadian prairie might have sung. This of course covers the Riel years, a part of Canada's history that has fascinated me for years. So here's hoping you good folks up north can help, and meanwhile, continued best of luck and good fortune to the *Bulletin* and its co-editors, now and always.

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