Crack!

In which Lorne Brown talks with Jerry Gray of the Travellers and we get to listen!

Jerry Gray's home, in what used to be known as North York, Ontario, is all hardwood floors and light. A piano sits in front of the window; on it are four exquisite ceramic statues of the Travellers. We sit at the large dining room table, the scene, I suspect, of many a lively gathering. Jerry is an energetic and enthusiastic person, pounding the table for emphasis as he speaks, his smile lighting up the room as it does so famously on stage with the Travellers.

He continually leaps up and dashes off to bring back a yellowed newspaper clipping, or an old photo. I begin to think that this house is a repository for a huge archive on folk music related items until he informs me that most of his material is already in the archives in Ottawa.

He mentions his son, James Gray, a member of the popular group Blue Rodeo. "Ah," I say, "Now my daughter will be impressed. She was so-so about my interviewing a Traveller, but to be interviewing the father of a Blue Rodeo member – wow!" Jerry laughs, and said –

But let's listen in on this conversation. I'll get back to the Travellers when it's over.

Gray: When he *(his son James)* joined the group ten or fifteen years ago, the first thing they asked him was, "Do you do drugs?" And he didn't, which was fine, because they travel across the States a lot and you just couldn't afford to get stopped. They're a pretty straight-ahead group; they get involved in causes.

Brown: Now my daughter will be more impressed. (Laughter)

G: I speak to my contemporaries and I say my son is in Blue Rodeo and they say, oh yes, politely, but then a day later I get a call after they talked to their kids and they say, Blue Rodeo! *(More laughter)*

B: Do you find that people don't understand the symbolism in a lot of the old songs that you and I just take for granted?

G: I don't think people really know ... take the song "Sixteen Tons"; when it came out in '52 or '53, the song was so significant of the coal mines of west Virginia and Kentucky, it so epitomizes the story. It just seemed to be like a country song. But "I owe my soul to the company store" just throws it all. It's the story of the mines of the twenties and thirties when the company ran the town, the mine,

and the store, and instead of money you got scrip which was to be used only at the company store. At the end of the month you were always in debt to the company store. There are a great number of songs that are significant like that.

B: Oh a huge number.

G: I think a lot of people don't know the significance of songs. And they don't know of how songs came of struggles. Folk songs really ... there aren't that many songs about happy periods; folk songs are about tragedy, sad stories, unrequited love, mainly about tragedies. That's what I grew up with in my milieu.

My parents were part of a left wing organization and we were involved in labour causes. The first song I can ever remember singing was "Hold the Fort!"

B: "Union men be strong!"

G: Union men be strong. Was a hymn, crossed the ocean, came back here as a labour anthem.

B: I have a few theories in my own mind why people don't understand the significance of some of these songs and I wonder if you have, too.

G: There's an age thing. People now think it's just ancient history. The folklorist will look a little deeper. Of course, the music business has changed. We who have been in it this long know how it ebbs and flows. In the big renaissance of folk music in the sixties they were writing songs about instant history, about events that were taking place. In the older times it used to take years for a song to go twenty miles down the road. A song about civil rights in the sixties got instant play on television and the next day everybody's singing it. In my experience, now that I'm teaching a bit, people are fascinated by the stories behind the song. There's a song the Travellers do about the RCMP shooting three miners in the back in Saskatchewan in 1933. Nobody now even knows about that event. They said the miners were attacking them, but all the bullets were in their back. It's things like that, where the historical context is so important; it's not just a good song.

B: Yes. I'm a storyteller, and to me the lyrics of a song are so important, and the story of the song. Everyone of these songs, you could spin a whole story around.

G: That's right! You set the table for the event that happened.

B: I get the sense now that people don't listen to the lyrics of a song like they used to. Even popular music that teens like – and I may be dead wrong about this – is somehow in the background and they don't have the same concentration on the lyrics.

G: I don't think so, either. I think the lyrics were very important. It's one of the reasons for having this hootenanny. A hootenanny was a throwback to when everyone knew all the words to the songs. And you sang them, with gusto and with feeling because you understood the words. That's the legacy of the fifties and the sixties. Now, civil rights songs are relegated to history texts, and if the history texts don't teach it – that's what I love to do when I go into schools, like you say, we set the table and give the whole story why the song came out that way and why the words are like that, and then you sing the song. Wow! The words take on a completely new meaning.

To answer your question, I don't think people are concentrating that much on words. Mind you, there are a lot of younger folksingers who are writing beautiful lyrics about events of now. I hope that the audience can see through the façade of the rhythm and beat of the song and get to the meat of the song, but I fear that they don't all the time.

B: And those stories don't show up in history books. One of the great things about folk music is that they tell the history of the people, what really happened.

A CD compilation of the Travellers' Columbia years – 1960-1966 –was released on Sony Music in 1998 and is readily available in music stores. It has excellent liner notes by Juno-nominated Rob Bowman.

G: When you get an opportunity to set the stage for a song, it's just perfect ... you see the audience, especially if they're young, just rapt with attention, "Oh, I never knew that!"

B: That's one of the things you've always done with the Travellers, you've been able to tell the stories.

G: That was the first tenet we had emblazoned on us, that we wanted to teach Canadians about Canadian songs. The only people doing it were people like Edith Fowke, who did a marvelous job but in a very esoteric way. What we tried to do was take the "Poor Little Girls of Ontario" and set the stage for it, or "Donkey Riding" and tell people about it. A donkey was an engine. People said, "Oh, I never knew that!"

The history of the songs has always been important to us because they're the history of the country.

B: The history of the people.

G: Of the people of the country. Definitely.

B: You were talking about your early days. Where did you grow up?

G: I was born in Toronto at College and Spadina.

B: I thought so! You know, Kensington is an area that is very dear to me. I was principal of the Kensington Community School for years.

G: That's my old area: I grew up there. I was born where the El Mocambo *(famous as the tavern where Maggie Trudeau met the Rolling Stones)* was, 464 Spadina. On the third floor. I stayed there for five or six years and I went to Lansdowne Public School and then my parents moved to Manning and Bloor, but the same district. In those years - I mean it was the war years when I was growing up – there were no new housing projects being done, so I stayed in the same public school for seven years and then the high school in the area for another five years, and people just didn't move.

B: What school was that?

G: Clinton Public School, and then I went to Harbord Collegiate and it has the most marvellous alumni.

B: Frank Shuster went there, and Johnny Wayne. Willie Zimmerman. The Oola Boola Club.

G: Willie Zimmerman ... yes, he was the president of the Harbord Club. He's about eighty-six now.

B: Have you been to their little museum?

G: Yes I've been there. I've been part of the Harbord Club ever since its inception. As a matter of fact this is my year, the 50th anniversary of my high school graduation. So I'm on the committee planning it. I've always been active in it. My wife says I live in the past and I guess in a way I do. But those were marvelous years.

That was the crucible out of which I grew. I had a foot in two communities, the general community but also the left-wing community. And the left-wing community was really the folk song community of the time. In the same way as in New York City in the forties it was the Weavers, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, it was Oscar Brand. It was the left, or ultra-left, sub-culture that was promoting folk music.

I grew up and I always thought the music of the left was folk music. I didn't think anything other than that. I listened to Pete, he's what turned me on to the banjo ...

B: Turned you and a few others ...

G: And a few others! With my banjo, you know, there were no teachers in Toronto, there were no teachers in Canada for the 5-string banjo. I picked up one in a pawn shop and I couldn't find anyone to give me lessons, so I got one of the first copies of Pete Seeger's "How To Play the 5-String Banjo" and I learned by listening. The group gave me three months to get ready.

B: The Travellers were already in existence, sans banjo?

G: The only instrument player we had was Sid Dolgay, who played the mando-cello, a nice warm instrument. He'd played previously in mandolin orchestras, again of the left. A Ukrainian left-wing organization, the Jewish left-wing organization. He was the only one we knew in the United Jewish Order (UJO) who knew how to play anything. So he adapted his playing sort of guitar-like.

After a year of this I saw Pete at a Labour Day rally in Toronto and, my mouth was open, the power that was created and generated by that banjo. I can still picture him singing "John Henry". So I went out and I bought a banjo and he'd just written the book, so I got the book and painstakingly went through it. The group gave me three months because we had a television show coming up in 1955 to get ready for that. And I did!

And that was the first airing of "This Land is Your Land". We did that on a show called "Pick the Stars", which was the talent show of the day. We got through the quarter-finals; the semi-finals we beat out Rich Little – whatever happened to Rich?

B: I don't know. (Laughter)

G: We got to the finals and we were runner-up. Which was fine.

B: Who were you runner-up to?

G: Peggy and Pat, Irish singers, they had a nice act. He passed away tragically four years after. There was an operatic tenor on the show, too. We're

How many readers still have the original Hallmark recording sold at Eatons?

the only remnants left from that show.

B: Except for that fellow Rich Little.

G: Wherever he is.

We toured with Rich Little in the early seventies throughout Ontario, on behalf of a cigarette company. Cigarettes weren't that much of a bad word in those days. Our drummer, Don Vickery, his wife was sort of the promotions manager for the agency. We went on tour with Peter Appleyard; it was marvellous.

B: Speaking of Don Vickery ... In the Kensington School we had a beautiful library with a fireplace, and every Friday afternoon I brought someone in to perform for the kids: a storyteller, a folk singer.

G:That's hands-on learning; I love it.

B: Pat Riccio's Jazz Quartet was a regular, every year; they just loved playing the library. Don Vickery was the drummer. When you were in Hugh's Room I was talking with Don and he remembers that time with great affection.

G: Don's been head instructor for the jazz programme in Humber College since they started. He was at the Montreal Bistro last week. Don plays with everybody; he was the house drummer for many years at the Royal York's Imperial Room. Over the years we've picked up great musicians. I guess that's why the Travellers have remained, our

ability to take other jobs, other gigs, but always come back. The Travellers always takes precedent over the other gigs.

B: Fifty years, that's very impressive.

G: It really is; we started off and said, well, we'll take next year and see what's happening, and there was always a next year. Every year it's been like that. The last three years ... in '99 Sony re-issued the Best of the Travellers CD and that just gave us a rebirth. I was on the morning show with Peter Gzowski, and that's what prompted the people at the Film Board to say, "Here's a story that nobody know about." The wheels started turning and we said, let's get going. I'm sixty-eight now, Ted *(Roberts)* is sixty-eight, Joe's *(Hampson)* a little older, Don's a little younger, but we're still making music and able to make music. The feedback we get from people is that we sound just as good as ever, so we'll keep going till the audiences tell us no. The Owen Sound Folk Festival was absolutely remarkable; we closed the show up there, the place was packed and we got a standing ovation and no one ever gets a standing ovation at Owen Sound.

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In our heyday of the early sixties everybody knew us. But that's forty years ago and there's two generations that have grown up that know nothing about the Travellers. When we play now it gives us the opportunity to tell the stories of the songs that people know but don't know the background behind them. They're not going to get it from anywhere else. So that's what we try to do. Take one year at a time and now it's fifty! If it ends tomorrow that's great; I've had a wonderful, wonderful ride.

B: The year '67 would have been quite a year.

G: '67 was fantastic. Actually, the '67 year started in '64. The Centennial Commission had been set up and in 1964 they opened the Confederation Auditorium in Charlottetown, where the Fathers of Confederation met in 1864. The Queen came; there were four acts: David Broadfoot, Portia White, someone, I can't think of their name, and the Travellers. The kick that I have is that all the other three performers have been nominated for the Order of Canada and the Travellers have not. It's one regret that I have.

At that performance we were invited by Prince Philip to go to England. So we went and did two separate tours. In 1966 there was Festival Canada, a group in Ottawa, charged with liberating funds from various ministries to make Canadians aware of their heritage. They got people to perform concerts in places that would never have the funds to hold the concerts. So, first we kicked off a tour in Ontario with Catharine MacKinnon. Then Festival Canada subsidized us: seven dates in PEI without playing Charlottetown or Summerside. I dare anyone to name seven PEI communities besides Charlottetown and Summerside! We did New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. One gig in Quebec. Two, actually, Man and His World. A tour of Saskatchewan, a big tour of the North West Territories, which was a landmark tour. We did thirty concerts in thirty days. We'd fly in, do the gig, fly back to Yellowknife.

B: When you listened to Pete Seeger sing all those years ago, you never dreamed you'd be travelling the world and Canada.

G: Not at all. You know, the seminal event of touring folk music in Canada was prior to the Travellers, a group called The Folksingers. Seven women and myself. In 1952 we went across the country by train, boat to Victoria, then we worked one-nighters back. Singing mainly Yiddish songs, world songs, some Canadian songs. I kept a diary that year, of all things, and I still have it; it told all about the tour.

'67 was a marvelous year; we had more gigs than Bobby Gimby with his Ca-na-da song!

B: Do you have any recollections of Wade Hemsworth?

G: I accept Wade for the fine composer that he was. We recorded about five of his songs. The best one we've ever done is ...

B: "The Wild Goose".

G: "The Wild Goose". That's my best banjo solo; I don't think I can duplicate what I played forty years ago! I don't even know how I did it. Wade wrote the songs about his actual experiences, and they are so typical. Wonderful songs. And not appreciated, I'm afraid.

B: Did you have much to do with Alan Mills?

G: Not too much. We did a couple of radio shows with Alan Mills. A wonderful gentleman. Bram Morrison was his accompaniment for many years when he was touring. I think we brought Alan Mills to the first Mariposa, it may have been the second. We brought Jean Carignon as well, and Jacques Lebreque. Alan's was the voice that sang, "It's time to sing a little and laugh a little and play a little ..." Do you remember that?

B: Oh, I certainly do.

G: He was the voice of folk music.

B: He had an incredible repertoire.

G: A wonderful repertoire – the guy who really researched the songs. He wasn't that much

of a dynamic performer; I guess the trouble was he didn't play and needed an accompanist.

B: And yet traditional musicians, they didn't accompany themselves.

G: Of course not, that's right. One radio show we did with him actually won a Peabody Award. He was in Montreal and we were in Toronto, so that was a problem. And then Alan died tragically – I guess he wasn't that young because he'd been around for so long – certainly prematurely. Bram cut his teeth working with one of the legends. These were the legends of the time, Alan Mills, Edith Fowke. Edith didn't like the Travellers at first.

B: Oh, I would assume she didn't, for sure.

G: We were the complete antithesis to what she believed. Everybody has to sing a song unaccompanied. We sort of brought her over to our way. We were very close friends with Edith and Frank, and we'd say, "Look, these songs are going to be relegated to songbooks, nobody's gonna hear them unless somebody popularizes them." We did virtually every song in her book.

B: Edith was quite a character,

G: She was steadfast in her way, but without

In 2001 the NFB released a controversial documentary on the Travellers called "This Land is Your Land". The film contains some fascinating archival material, but unfortunately concentrates on some personality differences within the group.

her there wouldn't have been the vast repertoire of songs. She wrote the liner notes for several of our albums, including the '67 one of labour songs. She wrote that book ...

B: "Songs of Struggle and Protest"

G: Right. I looked back at that book because of the course I'm teaching and I said, "My God, Out of a hundred songs in here I probably know ninety-eight."

B: Do you know Dan Heap?

G: I know of him; we've never met.

B: He (MP-NDP for Spadina) was a guy who knew a lot of labour songs. He's an Anglican priest, a worker priest, he and I were friends. He and I would swap labour songs back and forth. He's the guy who knew even more labour songs than I did.

One day they decided to hold an outdoor festival in Kensington and Dan came to me and said, "Why don't you and I sing at it?" I said, "I'd be glad to." Now the MPP for the area was Larry Grossman, who went on to become leader of the Ontario Conservatives. Dan was NDP to the core. I don't know whether you knew this, but Larry played the banjo.

G: Yes, he played the 5-stringer.

B: He used to come to Kensington and play for the kids.

G: Oh, terrific!

B: So I phoned him up and said, "What do you think about singing with Dan and me at the Festival?" There was silence, and then he said, "Yes!" So the three of us sang together.

G: Larry was something. In his later years when he was sick I sent him a copy of some of the Travellers' songs – he used to come to our concerts – and I got a wonderful note from him. You know, even though we're NDP oriented, we got more work out of Bill Davis's Tories than we ever did after the NDP came into power.

B: And Bob Rae(former Premier of Ontario) was so musical.

G: We were talking about people who knew folk music. In 1968 we did a rally for the retiring of Tommy Douglas in Ottawa. Big huge place like Maple Leaf Gardens. We were on the bill, and also on the bill was Pierre Berton. I get nervous before a performance and I started singing some union songs. All of a sudden Pierre says, "Do you know the 'Talking Union'?" And he knew every single word of the song. And I'm amazed.

B: Well, he is a great Seeger fan.

G: Yes, he is.

B: What about your connection with Seeger?

G: The Travellers started as an offshoot of a youth singing choir all of whom grew up on these left-leaning songs. We all cut our teeth on the Weavers and their Spanish Civil War songs- *(Sings "Venga Jaleo")* and all those stirring songs. The Weavers played the Casino theatre and we marvelled at this wonderful folk group. We snuck into the Casino – we were pretty young – and then Pete came to town for the Toronto Labour Council and they did a big rally at the CNE *(Canadian National Exhibition)* and I went down to see. We sat down with him afterwards and brought him to Camp Naivelt, and he said you should start a quartet, it would be a more portable group than a big choir. In many ways, the Travellers were started in the shadow of the past Weavers. Three men and a woman. In Toronto of the time you had the Four Lads and the Four Aces.

We brought Pete to Toronto at a time when he couldn't get much work. We sponsored a concert with him in '57. We've had a long history with Pete.

He's the one who first taught us "This Land is Your Land", but it really didn't make that much of an impact on us till Guy Carawan came through a couple of years later. He told us nobody heard it in the States because Woody's songs were all blacklisted, and that night we sat down and wrote the rough draft version, which was pretty bad at first.

We started singing it in 1955. Believe it or not, the song had not been copyrighted until 1956. In '58 Pete came to us and said they've set up the Woody Guthrie Foundation; would we mind if we signed over all the rights to the Foundation to help raise Arlo? So we signed an official agreement handing it over to the Guthrie Foundation. I think it now goes to the Huntingdon Foundation. There's one proviso: whenever it's used in Canada it has to say, "Canadian words by the Travellers". Probably Sid Dolgay goes back closer to Pete; they're more of the same age.

B: What was the most stirring event you ever sang in?

G: Probably the most stirring event was in 1975 with the Toronto teachers in Maple Leaf Gardens. The Travellers sang "Solidarity". It was the most stirring event in all the years we've been through. 18 000 teachers sitting there, 3 000 teachers in the lobby – the first time the teachers association became the teachers' union – and they're on their feet. I've never seen a more militant group, and after that they marched out of there and marched to Queen's Park, singing. And I said, "The power of music!"

We were interrupted by the phone ringing, and then spent the rest of our time together pouring over old newspaper clippings and song sheets from the forties. But the phrase "The power of music" kept ringing in my ears.

The Travellers have been singing together for fifty years, a remarkable achievement by any standard. They've sung in all ten provinces and in ten countries. They've sung on picket lines, ice flows, concert halls, street corners, church basements, schools, hockey rinks, and in front of 250 000 people on the lawn of the Peace Tower.

The Canadian Folk Music Bulletin *salutes them. The power of music, indeed.*

The original Travellers on record were Sid Dolgay, Jerry Goodis, Jerry Gray, and Simone Johnston. The present-day Travellers are Aileen Ahearne, Jerry Gray, Joe Hampson, Ted Roberts, and Don Vickery.

Jerry Gray is presently teaching a course in the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies called "Canadian Folk, Protest, and Labour Songs

Exciting News!

Lorne Brown

It is not often that I've been able to give my Ontario Government much credit. But here is a case where I may.

Some of us may know of The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, a valuable programme. It teaches parents with infants all sorts of rhymes, tickles, songs, and stories they can use with their children to develop a love for language and music. Traditional Ontario singer Kathy Reid-Naiman, who does extensive work with young children, was asked by Glenna Janzen of the P-CMG to make a CD of the favourite songs selected by programme leaders across Ontario. They came up with twenty-seven dandies, and Kathy, with the help of her daughter Hannah and the indefatigable Ken Whitely, made a treasure of a CD called *A Smooth Road to London Town*.

Elsewhere in this *Bulletin* I have mentioned Kathy's earlier CD: *Say Hello to the Morning*, which I consider among the very best children's CDs I have ever heard.

Now for the amazing part. The Ontario Government's Early Years Plan came up with the idea of sending *A Smooth Road to London Town* home with every newborn baby for the next two years. They also wanted it in French, so Kathy and Hannah went back to the studio, reversed roles of lead and backup singers, and happily obliged. The French CD is called "Savez-vous planter des choux?".

From March 31, 2002 on, every newborn baby in Ontario will be sent home with the appropriate CD, English or French, and assorted other goodies.

What a fine way to foster a love of language and a love of music!

***The Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* salutes Kathy, Hannah, Ken, Glenna, and, yes, the Ontario Government. The Early Years Plan part of it, anyway.**

You can contact Kathy Reid-Naiman at:
http://www.interlog.com/~ragged/rbr.html
and learn more about the Parent-Child Mother Goose Programme by contacting Glenna Janzen at
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