

The Back Page welcomes articles of opinion. This month's contribution is from Lorne Brown.

Snatches, Catches, Fragments, and Ditties

I have a seven-month old grandson named Rowan. When he was four months old, I got into the habit of singing this little ditty to him:

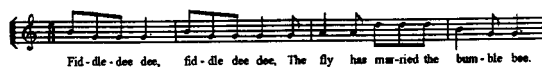


*Mitty, Matty, big fat hen,
 She laid eggs for gentlemen,
 Sometimes nine and sometimes ten,
 Mitty, Matty, big fat hen!*

The effect was magical. His little face would light up and a huge smile would appear. It didn't seem to matter what else was happening at the time, the effect was always the same. I began to try this when he was crying – something he seemed to be almost constantly doing. Same effect: the crying stopped, the face lit up, the huge smile appeared. It was magical.

I use the word magical on purpose because, as we know, these old rhymes and chants are distantly related to magical incantations of old.

But I found myself pondering these little ditties, snatches, catches, glees, fragments, whatever you want to call them, and thinking of their place in the world of song. For example, I often find myself singing:



*Fiddle de dee, fiddle de dee,
 The fly has married the bumblebee.*

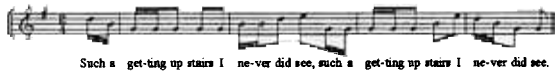
It's a wonderful way to use an f-word without using the f-word, if you know what I mean. I sing it a lot.

These little gems are tiny, perfect songs. For the most part, however, they never get sung on a stage. They don't get recorded on CDs. But they're wonderful, and I decided to write a paean to the little song fragment.

For example, for my first grandson, Caymen, when he had just reached the stage where he could

The Back Page

actually crawl upstairs, nervous parents and grandparents hovering below to catch him if he tumbled, I would sing:



*Such a getting upstairs I never did see,
Such a getting upstairs I never did see.*

It got so that if he were climbing the stairs and I was preoccupied and not paying attention, he would stop and wait expectantly for me, until someone shouted, "Sing him his going-up-the-stairs song!"

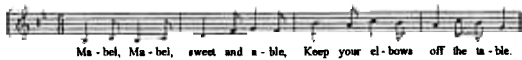
I used to follow this song with the poem from Mother Goose:

*Up the wooden hill to Bedfordshire,
Down Sheet Lane to Blanket Fair.*

Among spoken fragments I say frequently is:

A fried mosquito and a black-eyed pea, which is from the song about the wooing of a mouse by a frog. It's a phrase I use a lot – "What are we having for dinner?" "A fried mosquito and a black-eyed pea."

When I was a child at home and inadvertently put my elbows on the table during a meal, the family would burst out with:



*Mable, Mabel, sweet and able,
Keep your elbows off the table.*

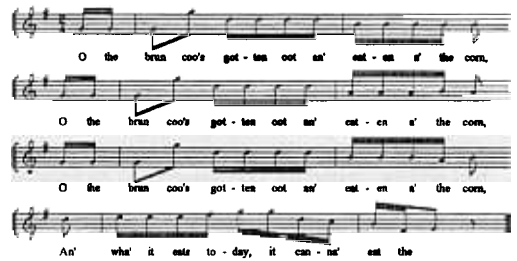
to the tune of Dvorak's "Humoresque", which I thought was terribly cultured and sophisticated. (The rhyme, that is.)

Oh, my, there are all sorts of these little fragments coming back to me now as I write this.

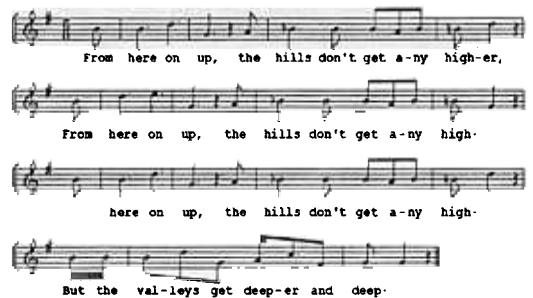


*Why do Scotsmen leave the country?
Why do Scotsmen emigrate?
They are following the whisky
Being exported crate by crate.*

Another Scottish one, good practice for those glottal stops. You know, instead of saying butter you say buh-er:



*Oh, the brun coo's gotten oot an' eaten a' the
corn, (3x)
An' wha' it eats today, it canna' eat the morn.
Sung to the tune of Miss MacLeod's Reel
Or this one:*



*From here on up, the hills don't get any higher,
(3x)
But the valleys get deeper and deeper.
How about:*



*There was an old woman who lived by the hill
And if she's not dead she's living there still.*

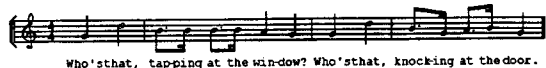
Sometimes, when I'm wondering what song I'll sing next in a concert, I'll say:

*Sing, sing, what'll I sing?
The cat's run away with the pudding string.
Do, do, what'll I do?
The cat's run away with the pudding too.*

Like Alice Kane, if I am given a fruit cake to eat, I find myself chanting or singing:

There were plums and prunes and cherries,

There were raisins and cinnamon too,
 There was nutmeg, cloves, and ginger,
 And a crust that stuck on with glue.
 There was sugar and peel in abundance,
 Built up for a fine tummy ache;
 Sure it would kill a man twice after eating a
 slice
 Of Miss Fogarty's beautiful cake.
 Oh, here's another song:



Who's that, tapping at the window?
 Who's that, knocking at the door.
 To which I might answer:

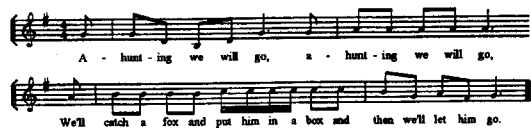


Mama's tapping at the window,
 Papa's knocking at the door.
 Speaking of questions, here's one I've sung



for nearly sixty years:

Where do you come from, where do you go?
 Where do you come from, Cotton-Eyed Joe?



Do you know this one?
 A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go,
 We'll catch a fox and put him in a box,
 And then we'll let him go.

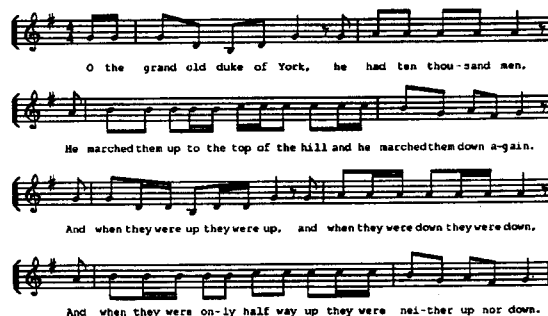
My grandmother sang a lot while she worked
 around my house. I can still see her down in the
 cellar, whitewashing the fruit cellar, singing,



Go tell Aunt Addie, go tell Aunt Addie,
 Go tell Aunt Addie her old grey goose is dead.

Today I know that this was from a longer
 lullaby whose melody has been traced back to an
 opera by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Since my
 grandma had a sister named Adelaide, she changed
 the name in her version of the song.

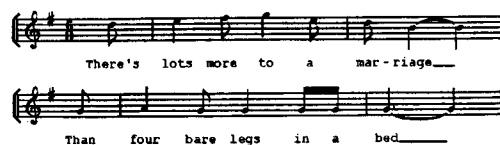
I occasionally sing one of these fragments in
 between longer pieces while on stage, and some
 people have expanded them into full-length songs.
 Pete Seeger once gathered a whole batch of these
 little snatches and put them into a wonderful
 medley that he recorded, in the fifties, for his
 Folkways album *Rainbow Quest*. I remember Ed
 McCurdy, during the Viet Nam War years, singing:



The grand old duke of York, he had ten
 thousand men,
 He marched them up to the top of the hill and
 he marched them down again.
 And when they were up they were up, and
 when they were down they were down,
 And when they were only half away up they
 were neither up nor down.

He repeated this for a good fifteen minutes,
 and the effect was powerful.

Speaking of Pete Seeger, he once set a Carl
 Sandburg quote to music:



There's lots more to a marriage

Than four bare legs in a bed.

My friend Sally Yaeger, the storyteller, loved hearing me sing "Waltzing with Bears" and she made up this little ditty which she called *The Baby Bear Song*:

*One-two-three, one-two-three, waltzing with
bears,
One-two-three, one-two-three, dance round the
chairs,
One-two-three, one-two-three, that's what we'll
do,
One-two-three, one-two-three, waltzing with
you.*

My favourite fiddler, Anne Lederman, added a beautiful fiddle section, and Kathy Reid-Naiman added another verse and recorded the whole thing on her children's CD *Say Hello to the Morning*. I deliberately will not include the music here because I think this is one of the very best children's CDs I have ever heard – Canadian, to boot – and you should do yourself a favour (and Kathy) and buy it. You'll be singing this *Baby Bear Song* too!

So, I guess there are ways to sing these fragments on the stage, but, somehow, I think that misses the point. They are tiny, perfect little gems, as I have said, and their rightful place is not tarted up for public performance, but to be sung for the singer. For the singer alone, or for the singer and one or two other close acquaintances. Sung when the singer is working, sung when the singer is dreaming, sung when the singer is laughing, sung when the singer is crying, sung when the singer is loving, sung when the singer is living.

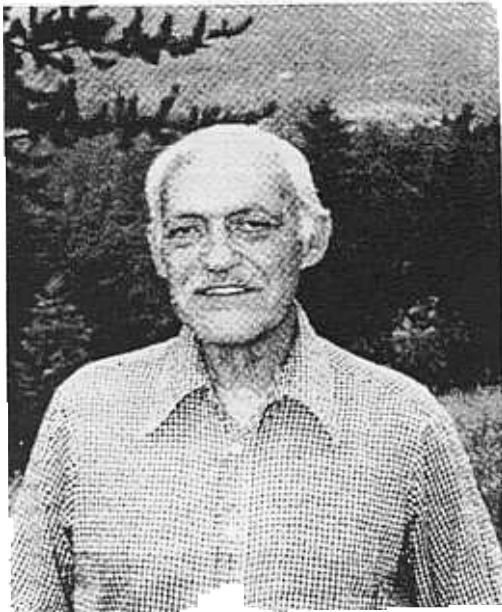
And is that not a good definition of traditional music?

LOST SOULS

The members listed below have moved without sending us a new address. Please help us find them! If you know of their new whereabouts, please let us know.

Jennifer Gregory, 9105 - 112 St., #2A, Edmonton, Alta. T6G 2C5

Kari Veblen, 50 Prince Arthur, #1102, Toronto, Ont. M5R 1B5



The I'M ALONE

Wade Hemsworth

*Remember, yes I remember well,
The most famous rum-runner of them all:
Remember, yes, I remember well,
The most famous rum-runner of them all,
It was the schooner from Lunenburg, I'm
Alone
In the Gulf of Mexico she went down
under fire
Of a Yankee cutter on the high seas
outside treaty waters.*

Chorus
*Oh, I'm alone
A long way from Lunenburg she went
down
Because Skipper John Randall wouldn't
heave to
On the I'm Alone.*

*It was in nineteen hundred and twenty-nine
When the smuggling of liquor was a
profitable pastime
Many a Maritimer didn't see why
He shouldn't turn a profit, Uncle Sam was
dry
Many a family took on style
Prohibition made it very worthwhile
To be a good Samaritan to long-suffering
thirsty Americans.*

*Now the schooner's captain was a wild
Newfoundlander
A hard-driving man, name of John
Thomas Randall,
A decorated veteran of the First World
War,
A sea-going gentleman adventurer.
From Belize, he'd take the I'm Alone
To the coast of Louisiana, and anchor
south of Trinity Shoal
Where he would meet his man and
discharge the cargo according to plan.*

*It was all clear sailing for the I'm Alone
With the profits of six or seven trips salted
down
The coastguard had bothered her a couple
of times
But Skipper John's seamanship had left
them behind.
One March morning in the wind and the
swell
She was reaching along under jumbo jib
and storm trysail
When the cutter Dexter swept on the I'm
Alone's starboard quarter.*

*Now the Dexter's captain was a very rough
man
He had sworn he'd never lose the I'm
Alone again
He ran a string of signals, saying, "How
do you do?
You know that I'll fire if you don't heave
to."
Skipper John semaphored immediately,
"We're on the high seas, you have no
jurisdiction over me!"
But the Dexter's captain sent several
volleys
Through the I'm Alone's rigging.*

*The bullets tore the booms, the sails, the lines,
Even tore a hole in the Red Ensign.
When Skipper John saw that he was fit to
be tied
At this disrespect shown to his national
pride.
The crew said, "Sir, don't you trouble your
mind -
We'll all go down together with the old
Red Ensign flyin'!"
So he signalled to the Dexter, "Shoot and
be damned to ya!
I'll not surrender!"*

*So the Dexter opened fire and it didn't take
long*

*Before her guns had stitched a seam along
 the I'm Alone's waterline
 Skipper John ordered every man to the sea
 There was water on the bridge when he
 himself jumped free.
 Stern in the air, the I'm Alone went down
 A heavy sea a-runnin', a wonder only one
 man was drowned -
 The bo'sun was the one who was pulled
 aboard the cutter
 When his life had gone.*

*That's how it happened, there isn't much
 more-
 The I'm Alone became an international
 affair
 Skipper John and his seamen were all
 released,
 The U.S. Government couldn't make a
 case.
 That kind of violence is bound to happen
 When a law like Prohibition sits up and
 begs to be broken
 And we'll still remember the story of the
 I'm Alone
 And Skipper John Randall.*