

## An Interview with Rick Fielding

### September 20, 2003

*Canadian Rick Fielding is one of those folk musicians who can pick up just about any instrument and make incredibly beautiful music with it. He was rescued from a career as a bar singer by Folk-Legacy Records' Sandy Paton, who recorded him on his label, and convinced him that he could have a career in his first love, his love of folk music.*

*Rick's love of folk music came from his opportunity to hear the legendary folkies who passed through Montreal: Pete Seeger, Sonny and Terry, Oscar Brand, the Weavers, the Clancy Brothers. Now, he is somewhat legendary himself.*

*On a fall morning, just after a wild wind the night before had swept through Toronto knocking trees*

#### **The interview:**

*Lorne: I understand that you were born and raised in Montreal.*

Rick: I was born in Toronto, moved to Montreal when I was about a year old, so it's easier to tell people I was born in Montreal.

*Do you speak French? Are you bilingual?*

Not any more. I used to be ... if I went to Montreal now, by the second day I'd be communicating pretty well. I just don't use it. I'm in the situation an awful lot of Anglophones are in – you know, you don't use it, you lose it.

*You got interested in folk music. I'm curious to know if there was one special moment when you were a kid, or was it just a gradual accumulation that got you interested in that kind of music?*

Oh, there was a special moment, all right! Her Majesty's Theatre in Montreal – so you know how long ago it was when it was Her Majesty's Theatre – dark hall, one crappy ElectroVoice microphone, a guy hit this chord and sang, "The water is wide, I can't cross over ..." Game over. And that literally was game over for anything else being prominent in my life, except perhaps baseball. My schooling was a complete waste of time after that. I was probably about fourteen years old.

Seeing Pete Seeger play "The Water is Wide" ... just the style that he played on the big Stan Francis

*over, I sat in Rick's living room in his little home in the Beaches area of Toronto, not far from Lake Ontario. A handmade banjo hung on the wall and his guitar was propped up by the chair. I sat on the couch and set up my recorder on the coffee table, on which was a book about John Jacob Niles. Rick sat in a big chair by the window; outside, the traffic on Kingston Road sped by.*

*Rick's battle with cancer made him thinner than the last time I saw him, and he was sporting a beard I hadn't seen before. His voice was as rich as ever, and we settled into some good conversation. Good crack, as the old folk used to say.*

*Lorne Brown*

12-string guitar with a dropped D tuning, a G run coming down ... I went out of that theatre with my life not being the same. I wasn't that familiar with Pete Seeger; I'd heard a number of the Folkways records, 'cause I used to go and pick things up at the music-lending library, but to see him live! – took a friend of mine down, and my friend was very much into the Kingston Trio who I thought were commercial crap, and I didn't like the shirts they wore as well. And besides, I saw myself at that point ... I was becoming political.

I was an inveterate reader, a real print junkie, and discovered that despite always getting failing grades in everything in school I was a speed-reader. And reading was something that I enjoyed. I just became a kind of encyclopedia; by the time I was seventeen or eighteen I knew so much – everything I read I remembered. And I'm not sure if that's a good thing. Much of that was folk music related stuff. I knew what gauge strings Lead Belly used on his 12-string – stuff like that. So I started playing ... no idea I would end up making my living at it.

*You weren't playing an instrument before you saw the concert?*

I don't remember playing an instrument. What I do remember is shortly after going to Archambault's Music (*Lorne: a century-old downtown Montreal music store*) and buying a Harmony plastic banjo and Pete Seeger's red book for \$1.65, and shortly

after that getting a Goya G-16 guitar, which I took the nylon strings off and put steel strings on, so the neck of that didn't last for long. Then I remember getting Lead Belly on Folkways records and saying, "I don't know what this is. I've never heard anything like it. I want this so badly." And then discovering you could get a 12-string guitar – an awful one – and talking my grandmother into paying \$49.50 to Archambault's Music for a 12-string guitar. The last thing was a cheap Kaye mandolin. Then I had my arsenal until I got thrown out of high school – literally thrown out. Those instruments and a baseball glove were my life.

*What was the inspiration for the mandolin?*

Probably general ... by then I was also listening to bluegrass. Old time music. I was just piling the whole shebang in there. The other thing, too, is that in Montreal you could go once a week to see a folk artist that was important or interesting or whatever. Just randomly, say, I could go to see Theodore Bikel on Saturday, on Sunday night go to see Sonny and Terry; the next week it would be the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. The next week it would be Oscar Brand. The next week it would be Eric Darling. The next week the Weavers. Pete Seeger, who wasn't with the Weavers then. I saw some people I've become great friends with because of the Internet forty years after the fact – Eric Darling and Frank Hamilton. Montreal then was a marvelous place to go and see music. I'm sure all those acts came to Massey Hall and probably the Fifth Peg in Toronto as well. You could, and I did, go and see all of these people.

*How long were you in Montreal?*

I got thrown out of high school; I failed three grades and my parents were pretty panicky. They got me a scholarship to art college in Ontario (*Lorne: Ontario College of Art*) and my father retired at the same time from a pharmaceutical company. So they moved up here when I was eighteen or nineteen, I guess, and I'll be darned if I didn't make a complete hash of art school and got thrown out of that after half a season. Once again, it was strictly because of the music. I wasn't overly stupid; I just didn't show up. I would get on the bus with my banjo and instead of going down to art school I would just go down to the docks and take the ferry over to the Island and sit under a tree and play banjo all day! (*Laughs*) That was kind of my life!

By the time I was twenty-one or twenty-two, my dad had passed away. Living with my mother it was becoming painfully obvious that I had to earn a

living and I had absolutely no way of doing so. I had no discipline whatever. No training. My skills were that I could play a bunch of instruments. Now, I could play exceptionally well at that point. But that, and a dollar, would get you a ride on the subway.

*Were you self-taught?*

Absolutely.

*So you had a big decision to make: what were you going to do?*

I wouldn't have been able to make a decision like that if you hit me on the head with it. My mother forced me into getting various jobs – the Bank of Montreal, Gulf Oil, what disasters! I knew how to go out and buy a suit and tie, and I knew how to do interviews. I don't know how, but I knew. I would go in and, in desperation – I'm talking about this very flippantly now, but it wasn't flippant at the time because you're suddenly twenty years old and you have no way of earning your living. I would say, "I'd like to join a company and grow with it and be part of a team ..." Truly bullshit. And I'd get the job, even though I had no education. They'd overlook the fact I was considered a bit of a discipline problem in high school. Did you ever hear of a truant officer?

*Oh, yes.*

Well, the truant officer went after me a lot; I made an art out of missing school, forging sick notes, stuff like that ... But anyway, I'd get these jobs and I'd hold on to them for, I dunno, I was in a mailroom for two months. Eventually they discovered I'd be giving everybody the wrong mail. If you don't have the attention span to do a mailroom job properly ... then I'd work in a stockroom. I remember working in a stockroom at the corner of College and Bay – I was in this little room, supposedly for eight hours. I was to count up credit card boxes that were delivered in the morning and taken out by truck that night to deliver them to service stations. A lot of times they'd have long cardboard tubes with calendars in them, I remember, and I would go in in the morning and my job was to count all these. Well, I learned in a couple of days that the amounts were likely to be somewhat similar. So I just made up the amounts in a couple of minutes, saying, "Oh, well, there's 12 352 yesterday, therefore today there's 12 605."

I learned to juggle. So I would sit there, up against the wall, juggling credit card boxes. I got very good

at it. Then I would juggle these calendar tubes. By the second week I brought my 12-string in; I'd sit by the wall and I'd play. And then I'd bring my banjo in. And then, one day, I got caught. I'm laughing now, but at the time it wasn't funny. I make a lot of jokes about these things now, but at the time ... I was not a wise ass, I was humiliated. So I was back to absolutely nothing. Zilch.

One night I was at the Steeles Tavern – I had played at Mariposa, and occasionally little freebie folkie things, open stages at the Riverboat, hootenannies, stuff like that – but it didn't occur to me you could make a living. Every person doing that had a day job. Schoolteachers, taxi drivers, or they lived off their girl friends, or something like that. One night I saw Alan MacRae at the Steeles Tavern and I would almost always get up and sing a couple of songs. The owner came over and said, "Ricky, I'd like to hire you. I'll pay you \$165 a week." So I became a professional musician.

*So, you became a professional musician.*

Yep. I started playing Steeles Tavern, learned a huge number of songs, not all of which were songs I necessarily liked. I shouldn't say that: my tastes then were much suckier than I thought they were. Sometimes now I look back on an old repertoire book from that period and I see Andy Williams songs, I see Johnny Cash, I see Glen Campbell – I basically was doing what it took to earn a living.

*That's what the people wanted to hear.*

Yes, Roger Whittaker, stuff of that nature. What I know is that I was pretty successful at it, but not in the way that a couple of my friends were who were pretty lousy musicians. It took me years to realize, there was a huge resistance on my part, that I had a real attitude towards the audience. I wasn't a drinker, number one, so consequently I got a reputation: I could keep people in a club for four sets an evening. There's this great dichotomy going on there – that meant, basically, that I'd become very good at something that didn't interest me as much as something else. I would almost rather have driven them away with ballads and old time stuff!

*Laughter*

I see through my booklists there'd be three Dylan songs in a set, a John Prine, there'd be two John Denver, whatever ...

*The music must have kept you going. You were in other jobs which didn't interest you. In a certain*

*sense this job didn't interest you because of the material, but somehow or other the music kept you going.*

The music and the fun of travelling. I travelled a lot. I travelled the States a lot. Played a lot of hotels with good buffets, met a lot of girls, so that was fun. Just kept doing it. Rarely would I get asked to play a festival.

*Why would that be?*

Ah! Because in those days playing a bar was the kiss of death. Not any more. It took many, many years for the folk hierarchy to come around to recognize you actually had to earn a living. In those days there were jobs for folkies while they played traditional stuff. You drove a cab, one of the last jobs available was bike courier. Low rung jobs that songwriters and folkies would do.

It wasn't until I was in my thirties that I started phasing out the commercial bar work. I still earned my living at it, but not as much of a living. By the time I was thirty I was earning a lot of money as a solo performer, but I was going in a direction that I just couldn't take. I got out. By the time I was forty it was definitely split between being in the folk music scene where I was most comfortable and teaching. I definitely had to make a transition.

*Sandy Paton helped you there.*

He did more than help. I'll tell you. Were it not for Judith Laskin I wouldn't have played at the Woods, were it not for the Woods I wouldn't have met Sandy and Caroline Paton. They said, "We love what you do. Will you be on our label?" I said, "My god, I'd be honoured." Which I would. I'm a great fan of Folk-Legacy Records over the years. That was really nice; what happened was I started playing in the States.

For the better part of seven or eight years, I'd go down and do four gigs, then back here because I was teaching in the early part of the week, and I was doing the radio show Acoustic Workshop (*Lorne: an hour-long folk music program on the University of Toronto's radio station CIUT*) for the last fifteen years. Most of the time I was back by Monday night to do the radio show; occasionally somebody filled in for me. That became my work. Ninety per cent of it was in New England, because of the influence of Folk-Legacy Records.

I did an album with Borealis who were basically my friends in Toronto; I have two-thirds of an

album ready to go and then I got sick and I didn't feel like going and doing more recording. There's lots of stuff in the can. It would be the most traditional album I've done so far – just about everything on it is very traditionally based.

But the big turning point for me was Sandy and Caroline Paton; they gave me credibility in New England. I'd been around here for so many years, you're just an old shoe, basically. People would say, "Oh, yes, we know him, he's fine, play my requests." You go to a completely new area, which I was doing every third week, and you go as a completely brand-new quantity. You have no baggage, but you have all the skills you've learned. Say the Washington Song Circle.

If you went down to the Washington Song Circle where they didn't know you from Adam, and all of a sudden you stood up and sung a nice ballad, you were confident and you knew how to start the damn thing and finish the damn thing and tell a story in between, and they'd be saying, "Now where the hell have you been?" And you'd say, "Oh, I've been up in Toronto," and I go out to St Catharines, and they'd say, "Ohhh! Why haven't we heard of you before?" "I've been around Toronto for thirty-five years, that's why." So that's pretty much the performing story.

*You teach music.*

I love to teach music. I've been teaching stringed instruments – actually not just stringed instruments – the teaching is the same whether it's bagpipes or banjo. I've been doing that for a lot of years. Without the teaching I couldn't get away with just playing where I chose to play, that's for sure. There's nothing else I'd do.

*You do some leatherwork.*

Ha! I forgot about that! Yes, I make stuff. I wanted a case a dozen years ago and found out it was going to cost me about thirteen hundred dollars. The guy who did the leather work said he'd teach me for fifty dollars. Which he did. So that's loads of fun. I still haven't made a guitar case for myself. But ... I probably made two hundred straps for people. Straps and wallets and that kind of thing, that's loads of fun. I like that. Simple straps, some are really elaborate.

Trying to think if there's anything else I do as a living. Yes! I used to do a fair amount of freelance illustration – cartoons.

*So you got a little bit from art college after all.*

I got a little bit ... No. Nah, actually now that I think about it I got nothing from art college except a lot of dressing down in the office of the headmaster.

*You have a huge passion for folk music. Traditional music. Over the years you've accumulated an absolutely fascinating archive of records, pamphlets, and books that I would find myself drooling over... Tell me about your collection.*

Glorified packrat – that's about it.

*I understand your mother was a musician.*

Both my mother and my father were very good musicians. My father played clarinet and may have been in jazz bands in the 1920s. My mother played accordion and was a big star in Toronto in the '30s and early '40s. Through the war. She had her own show on CKEY. Dorothy Fielding. Had her own big band. Probably did Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw music, stuff like that. They all were good readers. I read a newspaper article that said Dottie Fielding had gathered the prettiest gals and the best music readers in Canada. So there you go.

*So there you go.*

My father apparently had rigged up lights to go on and off on the various bandstands, so he was more handy than I am. But neither of them played after I was born.

*So you didn't have music in your house?*

I shouldn't say that; we always had a piano and an organ. The phonograph got played a lot. An awful lot. I'll be humming along to something now and I think – what year did this come out? I look it up and it came out when I was two years old and I know every word of it. I was able to remember stuff; my mother played a lot of classical music. She would tell me stories – make up stories – to go along with the record. She'd play – I don't know – Rachmaninoff's Concerto in C# Minor and she'd make up a story of Russians galloping over the steppes.

*Quite clever!*

Yes.

*So they loved music. Now I'm just reading into this, and maybe I'm completely wrong, but maybe they realized from their own careers in music how*

*difficult it was to make a living and were worried about your doing the same thing.*

The truth of the matter is, I don't think – now I may be wrong – but I don't think that either of them would have thought I had any musical talent whatsoever. I certainly didn't demonstrate anything. The other thing too is: when I did start playing it was stuff they would barely call music. They would hardly call what Woody Guthrie did music. Had I started by being serious, I didn't take music lessons, didn't learn how to play the piano, how to read music, was nothing but a pain in the ass when it came to studying. All of a sudden I get a banjo and they never see me again. I'm sitting in my room with Big Bill Broonzy records playing over and over and over again on my little Seabreeze record player. That ain't what they would have called music.

*Interesting. How old were you when your father died?*

I was about eighteen; we had just moved to Toronto and he had a heart attack.

*So he had no idea whatsoever of your going into music.*

No; I was struggling in art school.

*And your mother?*

I was about twenty-six, twenty-seven ... I was well into it. She would come to the Moorings or the Royal York if I were playing there. She was very casual about it. I don't remember her ever saying, "That was good, Rickie, that was nice." It was just – she would come down with a friend or my aunt; she'd be critical. Although she was a great musician, she was what I would call a narrow musician. She came straight out of classical, first, and then pop music. Her idea of music would have been much more jazz oriented than what mine would have been.

*We've heard about Pete Seeger. What other influences were there on your playing and singing?*

Let's see now. There were no Canadian influences until I moved to Toronto and started to go down to the Riverboat and to Mariposa. I tell you: I wish I had paid more attention to Don Messer and his Islanders. Boy, have I become a huge fan! I wasn't much of a fan when they were first on, but I became a fan afterwards. But there were people who came down to the Riverboat – David Rae was a terrific influence on my guitar playing. Every

week Bram Morrison would come down – he was older and more polished. Not a great guitar player, but he worked out of old-style ballad tradition. Straight. And I appreciated that very much. I really liked Bram. There was another guy named Roger Renwick that you won't know of. I have no idea where he came from. He was so trad. May have been English. He brought the songs of Wade Hemsworth to us. I never saw Wade until six years ago; got him to sign my little 10" Folkways album. I wasn't overly influenced by Joni Mitchell; I thought what she did was kind of boring. I wasn't big on singer-songwriters. I liked someone like Tom Rush more than somebody who just wrote their own songs. I liked people who worked out of a tradition. I think it's very telling that in the last few years – like, three quarters of what I do is traditionally based and a quarter is probably stuff I have written. I'm amazed that only rock-based singer-songwriters get hired at any festivals any more. Can you name a traditional act that's surfaced in the last five years?

*I was going to talk about that ... how folk festivals have changed, and where traditional music is going.*

Inside the living room. Which is fine.

*Which is not all that bad.*

Not bad at all; I'm not one of those people, because I've kinda lost my livelihood – that ain't my fault and it's not the music's fault. I don't expect to be able to earn a living playing traditional music. We've already discussed this afternoon how few people give a shit what we're talking about. I'm loaning you two books, one about Lydia Mendoza, the great Mexican singer and player – did a lot of traditional music, and an interesting diary of someone who worked with John Jacob Niles. There's been very little written about Niles – if there's twenty people in the world right now who care about John Jacob Niles I'd be surprised. But you're a ballad singer so you should care a little about him.

But you're absolutely right; there's just not enough people who care. And if there were, and I was back playing on a regular basis – I can make traditional music fairly interesting to a mainstream audience, but I don't always like to have to do that. I know the tricks because I'm an ex-bar singer. But I'd rather do the material straight. Much rather. I guess if I asked what was the last traditional act to get on mainstream festivals, I'd say Arnie Naiman and Chris Coole, two banjos. But they only get

asked on rare occasions to play at any festival, and it could be a freebie. The answer: they set their own gigs up, the way I set my gigs up.

*You know what is different? Storytelling festivals. I don't know if you've ever pursued that. Storytelling festivals are interested in traditional singers whose songs tell stories. People who like to sing ballads, like Moira Cameron up in Yellowknife, Paddy Tutty in Saskatchewan, people like that, do get into storytelling festivals.*

I know practically nothing about storytelling festivals. But that sort of Anglo-Saxon tradition, non-rock, you'll find it strictly inside the living rooms. Song circles. The Washington Folk Singing Group, it's underground, Pinewoods, the Woods, here, it's all underground and don't expect you're going to make a dime out of it. It's amateur music, which to me is the way it should be.

*Well ... it's gone full circle.*

Yeah, it has.

*That's how folk music was; I don't think it was ever intended for the stage. But it got onto the stage but now it's back to its roots.*

I was just going to say: one of the things I find fascinating is: I'm a diary-o-phile. I love hunting down people who kept diaries. I just finished reading seven or eight books on Samuel Pepys, the English diarist, and he went out every night of the week to the coffee-house to listen to folk music. The 1650s. He talks about the songs. He was a lecherous old sod and had a longtime affair with two of the women who sang in the coffee-houses. It took me two readings to understand why he was out every night! Anyway, he loved the music and would make notes of it. Kept a pennywhistle in his pocket, played it all his life. Talked of hearing the brand new ballad of Barbary Allen. This is great – it gives a context that in 1650 that was considered a new song. It probably wasn't new, probably around for a hundred years or more in various forms but to him it was new in the City of London. I love stuff like that. In a sense, that kind of music that I love has returned to its roots.

The interesting thing is that they would combine the dancing and the singing, and you know you can't do that today. Ne'er the twain should meet.

*There's a bit of a mixture of that in certain places. Do you know Charlie Cares? He moved to Paris, Ontario, and started up a really interesting series*

*of traditional music concerts, and they have a festival which includes contra-dancing. And sometimes, depending on who's performing in the concerts, people get up in this little, wee cobblestone church, and they dance*

*But you know, I'm a storyteller, and in the storytelling community we have these great discussions. I think storytelling was done in the fish huts and round the kitchen table, and I wonder about it on a stage. However, Dan Yashinsky reminds me that Homer performed his epics on the stage of the day.*

Absolutely.

*But in many ways I think storytelling is not at its best when you're standing up on stage doing your thing; it's at its best back in the living room.*

Well, if I could just interject something. I agree with you. One of the reasons that it's not at its best on a stage (and I'm talking about a folk music stage) is that it's sandwiched in between musical numbers. Somebody gets up and tries to create a mood in five minutes before Blackie and the Rodeo Kings come on.

*It's an interesting parallel to talk about. Where does storytelling fit in an age that is very technological; we're anti-technology. Where does traditional music fit in? There are times, I have to admit, when I get despondent about it all, but there are other times when I'm very optimistic. Even though, on the radar screen, traditional music, storytelling, ballad singing, the stuff you and I are really passionate about, don't appear on the radar screen, but gosh! there's a lot of it going on!*

*I don't know how you feel about it. Pete Seeger is very optimistic.*

He's optimistic about everything. He probably goes through all sorts of depressions; he just makes sure nobody hears him say that. He's very high on people; I'm not. I go up and down like yourself.

The bottom line to it, though, is, at its best it's still a tiny group of people who can be stimulated by this. I remember sitting in a song circle in Waterloo, Ontario ...

*Jack Cole's house?*

Probably. I think so. I was thinking to myself, well isn't this nice! Everybody's enjoying themselves tremendously. I really enjoyed it. Most song circles have a nice feel – to me, that's what it should be.

*Talk to me about the Mudcat Café.*

That's a fun folk music site: [www.mudcat.org](http://www.mudcat.org). It's a good discussion group; people all around the world. You can get into some chats with some very interesting people. It's a chance to meet people like Jean Ritchie, Art Thieme from Chicago, Frank Hamilton, ex-Weaver, they have a tremendous knowledge and they love to talk, Sandy Paton from New England. It's great fun, and I'm not a computer person.

*Do you have any advice for the budding folk person who doesn't know where to turn?*

Absolutely. We're talking folk music, not singer-songwriter. If you're a singer-songwriter, go to any one of fifteen or so bars in Toronto and hone your craft. Avril Lavigne did that. If you're interested in folk music, it's as near as this Friday; find a song circle. How do you go about finding a song circle? Well, do a tiny bit of hunting. Call up Rick Fielding. Call up Lorne Brown. It's underground. But there's no longer a real underground as long as there's the Internet. No matter how tiny a thing is, you can find it on the Internet. You'll find it. It may take a week but you can do it.

Go to some place featuring folk music, even if it's someone you never heard of. Everyone there is connected in one way or another to something. It won't take you long to get connected.

Once you get underground, it's vast. It's absolutely vast. Get a subscription to your magazine, *Canadian Folk Music*. Get a subscription to *Sing Out!*

I probably wasted twenty years of my life playing bars. I'd have been much better off to teach music, which was more fun, and play folkie things. I would have gotten a lot more folkie festivals and stuff like that if I hadn't always been out of town playing bars.

*Let's go back to that teaching thing for a moment. You said it didn't matter, string instruments, bagpipes, you had a way of teaching music.*

What instrument have you never played?

*I've never played a mandolin.*

Okay. *(Here Rick got up and fetched a mandolin from his vast collection of instruments hanging on walls, standing in instrument stands, stored in their cases, all perfectly in tune and ready to be played.*

*He showed me a chord, made sure I fingered it properly, and while I kept a basic strum beat, sang a song which I accompanied. He then taught me another chord, and sang a two-chord song for me to accompany. Then a third chord, and sang another song. So, within a few minutes, I was accompanying – albeit simply – almost any song you wanted.)*

That, literally, would be the first five minutes of an hour session. The rest of the session, I'm going to sit there, head back, and sing songs and you're going to play with me. By the end of that hour you're a mandolin player.

My whole approach to teaching is to get you enthusiastic enough so you learn to play the instrument on your own.

*And you have a lot of students.*

Indeed.

*You told me once that you were obsessed with playing music. How much would you play in a day?*

That's a good question. I'd say that it would have been unlikely since I was fourteen years old if I went a day without touching an instrument. When I was teaching, there would be five or six hours. I never practised. But I often would play ten, fifteen, twenty hours a day. I'd play and watch a hockey or baseball game on TV. So the answer to that is, yes, I play a lot.

*(Here followed a baseball conversation only baseball enthusiasts would enjoy. I must say, though, that a number of traditional musicians I know also love baseball.)*

*Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wish we were talking about while this tape is rolling?*

Well. It's no fun dealing with cancer. Not at all. It has slowed my playing down. It was a big shock. I've been in the hospital for a couple of operations. I'm dealing with chemo. This has been a very difficult time. It's made me discover and realize that for a long, long time I defined myself by my music. By being a really good player. And now I'm a barely adequate player. I don't have the energy any more, I don't have the dexterity, and it's an interesting experience to suddenly find you're defined by a tumour instead of something that just came so easily for so many years. I can't take out-of-town gigs anymore; after a seven-hour drive I won't have any energy left.

I would just want to say to anybody who is dealing with this – not to make light of it – it's a road that only yourself and anyone else dealing with cancer will know what it's about. You cannot explain it. You find resources that you didn't think you had. In my case, I find that the love of the music is stronger. I don't play as much, but my love for the music is stronger.

I know a lot of people who try to hide something like this; I try not to. What's the point of going through something miserable if you can't find the interesting aspects of it?

*At this point Heather Fielding came in, having cleaned up all the branches and leaves that had fallen on their grounds from last night's windstorm. We had some tea, and Rick led me down to the basement where he has a quasi-studio set up, and I got to browse through some of his incredible collection of old music, phonograph records, pictures, clippings, you know the kind of thing.*

*Driving home afterward, heading north from the lake, I couldn't help but ponder and reflect on Rick's statement that his love for this music is even stronger in this difficult stage of his life.*

*Traditional music has always, it seems to me, celebrated the heroic in the lives of ordinary people: the ordinary logger whose exploits on the log drive become heroic. The ordinary seaman, whose battles with the wind and the sea are truly heroic. The ordinary foot-soldier who is a hero in battle. The ordinary miner whose every descent into the dark pits is heroic.*

*Folk music resonates with us in part, I think, because we all have a certain heroic quality in the way we live our daily lives. Unsung heroics, for the most part, facing those daily commutes on packed highways, the relentless assembly line, the pressures of earning money, housework, keeping a relationship alive, the daily give and take of life.*

*And when we face cancer. Rick Fielding is a hero.*

### **A Rick Fielding Discography**

Folk-Legacy Records CD-123 *Lifeline* 1995 (includes "So Long Charlie", "Alouette/La Bastringue", "Wild Goose" & "Handful of Songs")

Borealis Recording Company BCD 119 *This One's the Dreamer* 1999 (includes "Patrick Spenser",

"Come to Lower Canada", "The Wind and the Rain" & "When We Gather Once More")

Borealis Recording Company CD BCD 158. *Acoustic Workshop*. 2004 (reviewed in this issue)

*"I'm gonna sing with the  
angels  
When my time comes  
around  
This earth is just rehearsal  
For when I'm heaven bound  
I'll be well prepared to take  
my place  
With harmony and rhyme  
And sing with the angels  
when it's time"*

## **Rick Fielding 1944 - 2004**

Rick Fielding passed away Saturday evening March 20<sup>th</sup>, after a lengthy and courageous battle with cancer.

Originally a native of Montréal, Quebec, Rick was smitten by folk and blues music as a teenager. He later moved to Toronto and in a career that spanned over thirty years toured extensively throughout Canada, Great Britain and the United States. He recorded albums for Folk-Legacy and Borealis and happily managed to finish his latest album, *Acoustic Workshop*, while struggling with his illness. Apart from touring and playing his own music Rick taught acoustic techniques on guitar, banjo, mandolin and dulcimer, and ran workshops on songwriting and professional development for musicians. He also did custom leather work, and hosted the radio show *Acoustic Workshop* on CIUT-FM 89.5.

Above all Rick was a giving person as a performer, teacher, and friend. He will be missed deeply by all who knew him. A celebration of Rick's life and music will take place June 5, 2004 in the Tranzac Club, Toronto.



**Rick Fielding, *Acoustic Workshop*.**  
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Rick Fielding, of course, is the talented multi-instrumentalist who has hosted a folk music program on CIUT (the radio station for the University of Toronto) for years. He has recorded two previous albums, one for Folk-Legacy, the second for Borealis. Readers of my interview with him (see p. 10) will notice that Rick mentioned that he had quite a few songs "in the can" that might get into a new CD sometime. Three years ago, Rick had recorded around nine songs for Paul Mills. Then he got ill for the first time, and the project went on the shelf. Rick recovered, but the project had sort of moved to a back burner.

In the fall of 2003, Rick was seriously ill, and it was becoming clear that this was a terminal illness.

In December, producer Paul Mills paid a visit to his old friend and asked him what he thought of reviving the recording project. "How many songs do we have?" asked Rick, and was surprised to hear there were nine. "Let's go for it," he replied. Grit Laskin of Borealis was very pleased, and the album was fast-tracked. "The sooner the better," said Rick with a grin.

Paul Mills did his usual wonders, although, all things considering, there was remarkably little new to be added. A couple of extra voices on a chorus here, some lead guitar there, a fiddle overdub here – you get the idea. Two days after that talk with Paul, Rick came into the studio and recorded the Ola Belle Reed song "High on a Mountain". He sang it, being unable to play a guitar by this time; Paul Mills did the guitar and banjoist Chris Coole added a clawhammer banjo. Rick was also able to do a bit of dulcimer playing for "The Cuckoo". There is a song in the album that was actually taped on CIUT back in 1989, believe it or not. Thanks to Paul Mills' expertise, it is practically impossible to determine which one it is, and I'm not going to tell you!

This is the most traditional of Rick's three albums. Some of the pieces come from people who influenced Rick: Ed McCurdy's "Josie", for instance, Spider John Koerner, Jean Carignan, Dick Justice, even Les Paul. The accompanying artists are a virtual who's who of folk music. Eric Darling arranged "Houston Special". Oliver Schroer, the tallest free-standing fiddler in Canada, appears on a

couple of tracks. Banjo virtuoso Tony Trischka is included. Grit Laskin, Paul Mills, Tony Quarrington, the afore mentioned Chris Coole, fiddler Dan Reed, Pamela Swan – these are all superb instrumentalists.

Amazingly, this album was mastered by the second week of January 2004, and was sent off to be ready for the final release. Mills also did the graphic design and layout for the booklet. The CD release is a story in itself. Normally, it would probably be released in Hugh's Room, with a concert by Rick and a room full of fans eager to buy the album, but by February Rick was far too ill to even consider such a thing. And so a release date was set – February 16, 2004 – and it would be held on CIUT's Acoustic Workshop program, as well as "live" on the worldwide web. So many people wanted to participate that the venue was moved to the Borealis office, the tiny CIUT studio being far too cramped (as I know too well from personal experience) for so many musicians and friends. The normal one-hour show was increased to three: 7:00 to 10:00 p.m.

Rick was too ill to attend, but his wife Heather was at the controls, as she had been for so many previous shows. Tracks from the album were played, alternated by live performances by the many guests – Ken Whitely, Tony Quarrington, Holmes Hooke, Kathy and Arnie Naiman, and many more. Tributes started pouring in, literally from all over the world (thanks to the Internet, which carried the show). Rick phoned in himself and spoke for a little while at the very beginning. As someone remarked, it's not often you get to participate in your own wake. A month later, March 20, Rick Fielding died. The words of the last song he recorded are more poignant than ever: "High on a mountain, wind blowing free, thinking of the days that used to be. High on a mountain, standing all alone, wondering where the days of my life have gone."

There are threads on the Mudcat Café (an Internet folk music site where people can "chat" to each other) that are still going strong about Rick and the launch. The CD is a wondrous thing, legendary from the moment it was released. Buy it, and you become part of a legend yourself.

*Lorne Brown, Toronto*

[Lorne Brown is a Toronto storyteller and ballad singer who once edited *Canadian Folk Music*.]