

Ed McCurdy—*Ave atque vale*  
January 11, 1919—March 23, 2000

*Where do you come from?  
Where do you go?  
Where do you come from,  
Cotton eyed Joe?*

These, of course, are the age old questions that have kept philosophers, theologians, scientists and historians busy for years. They are also part of the song *Cotton Eyed Joe* which served as Ed McCurdy's theme song on countless radio and television programmes in the 40s and 50s during his days with the CBC. I involuntarily started singing it when I heard of Ed's death in Halifax on March 23 this year. The philosopher Santayana once said, "There's no cure for life and death save to enjoy the interval." Ed did his best to enjoy the interval, although his last years were hard on him.

I remember him sitting in front of a group of grade eights in the north Toronto school where I was principal, a group who considered themselves cool. He stared them straight in the eye, and then announced, "I've done drugs, I've done alcohol, I've done it all. Let me tell you, it's no fun and I know what I'm talking about." In that instant he gained their attention; when he started to sing, he gained their respect.

I guess a lot of us could say that Ed gained our attention and our respect. Maybe we heard him on the radio, maybe we had one of his many recordings. A lot of today's performers of folk songs talk about their McCurdy records and how much they learned from them. Once while he was performing on stage, Joan Baez, then at the height of her fame, walked out and sat at his feet, just to be close to him.

McCurdy was born January 11, 1919, in Willow Hill, Pennsylvania, the last of a dozen children. Even as a boy he enjoyed singing and music. He listened to all kinds of music: jazz, church music, Bach, blues.... By age 14 he started taking singing lessons. By age 19 he was singing hymns on the radio in Oklahoma.

He had a powerful baritone voice, and I suspect he harboured a secret wish to sing opera, *Rigoletto* in particular. He once sang the beginning of *Rigoletto's* great aria *Pari Siamo* to me. To the best of my knowledge he never performed opera, but that great voice was his meal ticket to a life on stage—singing, acting as master of ceremonies, burlesque (performing with Sally Rand!) shows, theatre, acting, radio, television, the works.

In 1946 he came to Vancouver and hosted a CBC radio programme. In 1949 the programme and Ed moved to Toronto, and in 1952 he made his first recording: Ed McCurdy: *Songs of the Canadian Maritimes*. It was while in this stage of his life that he met an attractive young dancer. Beryl has been his wife for over half a century, I reckon, and they have three children.

By the folk boom of the 60s, Ed was at the height of his career. He hosted Tuesday night jam sessions in New York's Bitter End coffee house. He'd recorded at least twenty albums

of folk music and children's songs, and his six albums of erotic songs brought him even wider audiences. He always loved the bawdy ballad, and had a great repertoire of them.

This repertoire stood him in good stead. Once, in between recording sessions for the CBC, he had a short break. He dashed to the CBC cafeteria in its old Jarvis Street building, but it was packed. No seat anywhere. Ed immediately started singing the bawdiest ballad he knew (which must have been pretty bawdy!) at the top of his not inconsiderable voice. Many people immediately cleared the room; Ed sat down and ate his lunch and then dashed back to the recording studio.

It's possible that at that time in his career he was the most recorded and best known folk singer, with the possible exception of Burl Ives. (Ed admired Ives's work, telling me once that some of Burl's recordings were "pure poetry.") Pete Seeger considered Ed one of the best folksingers around. The young Bob Dylan opened for him. He gave a recital at Ontario's Stratford Festival, ending with "Twinkle Little Star," commenting that there was a big difference between being childlike and childish, an observation that has remained with me ever since.

But life is passing strange. The new folk movement overcame Ed and swept by him. Maybe people thought his guitar playing was too simple. His voice too trained. His repertoire too traditional and not protesty enough. That he was too eccentric, too identified with bawdy material. I don't know why. He performed less and less, and his recordings went out of print. In the 70s his health failed him, and in the 80s he moved to Halifax with Beryl. He took up the habit of drawing large, stylized birds, one of which hangs proudly on my wall at home.

Fifteen or so years ago I phoned him in Halifax, inviting him to participate in the Toronto Festival of Storytelling. He readily agreed. I met him at the airport, guitar case in his hand. In my living room, we worked on a set we would do together. I suggested that I'd play "Cotton Eyed Joe" on my recorder and he would sing it. I started playing it in C, a comfortable key. "Too low!" he thundered. Grabbing another recorder, I started playing it in G, far too high a key, in my opinion. His voice cut loose, my windows began rattling, and I realized G was the right key after all. I've never forgotten the moment.

In our set at the festival, he sang the traditional Canadian folk song "Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle." It was extraordinarily beautiful, and I was awed by the intelligent use of his voice. "They don't make songs like that anymore," he announced with regret. "Oh yes they do!" cried several young people in the audience, and I was struck by the chasm that exists. The chasm between the traditional and the new. Ed was not an authentic traditional singer—he was after all an urban

singer of traditional material. But he loved the traditional ballads and songs, and I think he never fit into the singer-songwriter pattern that became so popular.

Still, he wrote some beautiful songs. One simple one I find myself singing often at night as I gaze up into the stars:

Countless stars are in the sky,  
Have you ever wondered why?

...  
Floating out there in the sky,  
Have you ever wondered why?

One night in 1950 in a Toronto hotel he started to write a love song about a dream, and the next thing he knew, it had turned into an anti-war song. "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" never got played on the radio or printed in school song books, but it travelled all around the world. It was Ed's most famous piece, but many young people didn't know he had written it; some thought it was traditional! And, I'm pleased to report, it's actually in some school songbooks today. In his homemade cassette recording *Ed McCurdy: Thoughts After Sixty*, recorded by his son in New York in the 80s, he has a stirring rendition of "Strangest Dream," complete with a children's chorus. Toronto's classical music radio station plays it every November 11. In the summer of 1999, Ed had serious abdominal surgery, complicated by pneumonia and congestive heart failure. I phoned

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him after he finally came home from the hospital, and he talked to me from his bed. He started to sing the great old ballad "The Three Ra'ens." The voice was unmistakable, but the lung power was gone. Within a few short phrases he had to stop.

And now he's gone. When Canadian ballad singer Moira Cameron heard the news up in Yellowknife, she started to cry. "I think it has something to do with feeling there's not enough of us younger balladeers replacing the older ones," she said. "Doug Wallin, another great ballad singer, also died this week at the age of 80. Thank God these two have been amply recorded, so that people like me are able to continue their music. But for all that I revere these balladeers, I'm not convinced I am adequately carrying on from where they leave off. I am awed by the legacy these people leave. It saddens me no end to think that the people who are listening to me sing ballads may never know the awesome power and magic in the singing of people like Ed McCurdy, Ewan MacColl, Pete Bellamy, and others." So, we who are left, we who love the traditional ballad and folk song, are left to carry on, however inadequately. We've had a great mentor.

*Where do you come from?  
Where do you go?  
Where do you come from,  
Cotton eyed Joe?*

## The Centrefold

Fiddler Magazine, PO Box 101, North Sydney, Nova Scotia B2A 3M1; <FiddlerMag@aol.com>; <www.fiddle.com>.

If you love fiddles, fiddlers and the music they produce, you might be interested in picking up a copy of *Fiddler Magazine*. Regardless of the type of fiddle/fiddlers you like, I'm sure you will find something in this magazine that will suite your taste. In the issue I have in my hands, there are articles about Athabaskan fiddlers, New England fiddler-allers, classical bluegrass, and Ireland's Maire O'Keefe.

*Fiddler Magazine* recognizes and acknowledges the international and diverse appeal of the fiddle. Each article is like a song, taking on the flavour and history of the music it is describing. Lots of attention is paid to authenticity. The interviews and feature are done in good taste, with interesting and reliable information provided. A nice medley of the past, present and future fiddlers is included in each issue. If you are a non-fiddler who is just looking for an entertaining read on the scene, you will like the magazine. It is not bogged down with specific information that is relevant only to players and does not make a whit of sense to anyone else. However, if you are a fiddler, you will appreciate the tunes and practice tips in every issue.

The reviews in the back of the 'zine are written by reputable people who are trustworthy and know what they are about. The regular departments feature a comprehensive range of things

having to do with violins, making 'em, how to play 'em and where to go to play 'em. They also have a lovely *In Memoriam* section for fiddlers who have passed away in the last year.

I always feel like part of a larger fiddling community when I pick up an issue of *Fiddler Magazine*. It is an international gathering place for fiddlers to share their tunes and stories.

The only negative thing I have to say is that, because it is published in the US and is a specialty magazine, it is quite expensive (\$8.60 Cdn per issue). Although it's worth it, I wonder if Canada could come up with a cheaper alternative if we only put a little rosin on the bow and started scratching away.

—Keitha Clark

When the Winter 1999/2000 issue of *Fiddler Magazine* arrived, I noticed that the envelope bore a Cape Breton return address, but thought only that they had a new distribution deal or something—until I turned to the "Note from the Editor." Turns out that editor Mary Larsen is now Mary Holland, having married fiddler Jerry Holland and moved the magazine's operation to North Sydney. So Canada has gained a new world-class folk music magazine, and they're planning on publishing a special issue, in addition to their regular schedule, on Cape Breton fiddle music.

—JL