

John Leeder: Canadian Homemade Music

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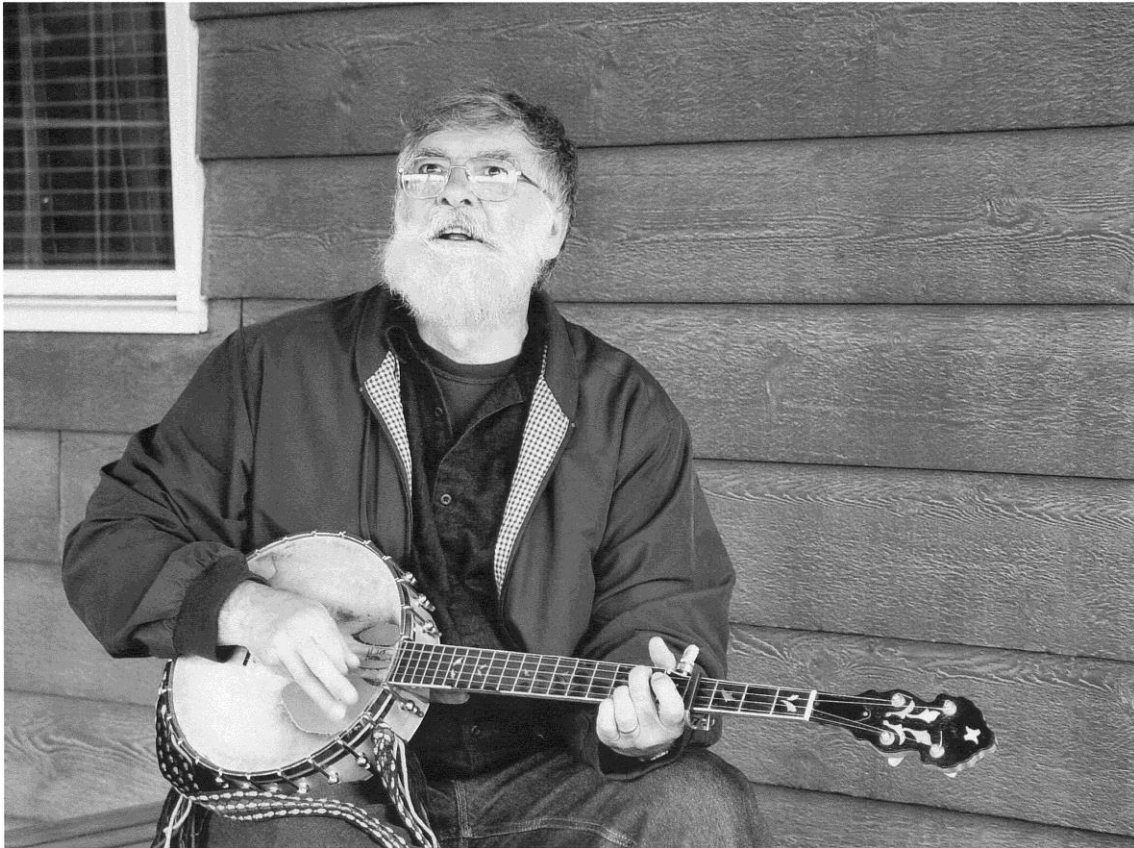


Figure 1: John Leeder. Photo courtesy Lawrence Christmas (www.lawrencechristmas.com)

Sitting in the corner at the back of the Calgary Folk Club, a far ways from the stage and well out of the spotlight, you can find a man with a large white beard listening to the evening's show while volunteering at the merchandise table, a humble position for someone who has little by little slowly built a long and proven track record in the Canadian traditional music community. More comfortable playing banjo in his living room than on stage, he can be timid, quiet, sometimes a little awkward and underspoken. When he does speak, however, you quickly realize there is a vast amount of knowledge and experience waiting to be passed along. His name is John Leeder, 71 years old, and he is sometimes referred to as "Father Folk". He is a towering figure, a lumberjack-looking man clad in flannel, who actively documents and disseminates North American traditional musics. In an effort to learn more about John, his history and views on the current state of traditional music, I have decided to write the following feature on his life.

John Leeder was born in May 1943 in Orangeville, Ontario, to Gerald (Gerry), a teacher in the fall and steamboat officer in the summer, and Muriel (Jessie), an elementary school teacher and homemaker. On the edge of the small village of Inglewood, John grew up with music in the home. "I can remember my dad sitting down, taking the instruments out after supper, just 'cause we didn't have television or anything like that, that was normal." His father's only two rules when it came to music: no playing for money, and no playing where there was alcohol served. His mother, an avid listener to traditional music, introduced him to Edith Fowke's radio program and a few ballads she learned in her youth. It was the era of local square dances on Saturday nights and church gatherings on Sunday mornings. "Between the church basement, the community hall and the school, those were the main public spaces where gatherings would happen."

The early 1960s saw a folk revival for North America and a move for John, to attend the University of Toronto and Toronto Teachers' College. Frequenting the American-style coffeehouses, self-consciously counterculture folk venues that were flourishing in Toronto at the time, exposed him to local and touring acts. "I used to go to the Bohemian Embassy; they had Hootenannies. It was a place for poetry, theatre, and they had folk music once a week as well." It was there that he discovered his love of old-time, non-commercial music. The stage hosted well-known singers, such as Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Ian Tyson, as well as lesser-knowns and unknowns. His show attendance was almost always in the capacity of an audience member, very seldom as a performer. "Very occasionally [would I get up to play] ... once or twice. I was battling nerves at the time. A couple of times I got up at the Embassy and did a few numbers. But I wasn't doing a lot of performing ... I was doing a lot of playing, but not performing." John carried this nervous disposition throughout this life, but it has never kept him from actively participating in the community.

A move to Calgary in 1974 was followed by decades of service at various folk clubs, organizations, and communities. "When I arrived, the Calgary Folk Club was in existence. I started making some phone calls to see if there was folk music going on ... learned about the Calgary Folk Club, house concerts, things like that. I started going to the Rocky Mountain Folk Club and asked to volunteer there ... so I started hauling chairs for the Rocky." He would work the door, set up tables and chairs, whatever was needed of him, until the late '70s, when he was called upon to be the house master of ceremonies. The role required John to step outside of his comfort zone, regularly speaking on stage in front of a large group of people. I noted that it seemed to be a common theme in his life, being reserved and quiet, tending away from the spotlight. Is it fear? "Oh, just nerves. That's just my own personality. A few crucial times I didn't say no and found myself emcee at the Rocky for quite a few years, which got me out of my shell for a bit. But it doesn't come easy, it's something I've had to learn over the years ... especially with the performing stuff. It's something I've had to learn, it doesn't come naturally." John also served as the Canadian Folk Music Society's secretary, under Tim Rogers, from 1982-1984, and took over as President after Tim's departure in 1985. John is currently the Honorary President of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, and is the Review Editor and Proofreader for *Canadian Folk Music*.

John has long been an advocator of homemade music, or music for enjoyment's sake, that which is

not intended for performance. It hearkens back to his boyhood days in Ontario, when his father would bring the instruments out after a meal, or his friends over after a week of work, and play music in the home. It's a style of sharing that is dwindling today; it's much more common to click on a computer than pluck a banjo, it seems. When John does get out of the house for a performance, it is rare and carefully selected. "I only play three or four shows a year ... always [at least] one at the Water Valley Music Festival. But I don't perform a lot, and I'm usually performing for audiences that are carefully selected. I'm not gonna go down to the Ranchman's, or the neighborhood bar, 'cause I know that's not going to be a comfortable experience." John goes against the unspoken message in our culture that, to be a worthwhile musician, you need to be performing. As far as John is concerned, you can be a worthwhile musician who chooses to place emphasis on music in the home rather than outside of it.

It seems that the traditional or roots music community John is a part of is thriving in today's culture, especially here in Calgary. Calgary has, per capita, the most folk clubs in North America, a booming economy, a large audience for the material, and a growing curiosity about our own traditions as well as others. John agrees: "I think there are a lot of people doing a lot of work. Either professionally or as volunteers." It would appear that Calgary is fertile grounds for the folk music enthusiast, but one thing John would like to see improve is the variety of venues in the city. "I'd like to see more places for traditional music in Calgary. There's been large venues and small venues and not much in the middle. There should be a real range of places for people to play; large, small, and in-between. I'd just like to see opportunities for people to get to the music, for people to hear the music; that's what it's all about." The Calgary Folk Festival's Festival Hall and the National Music Centre's new venue over the King Eddy Hotel should prove to be two steps in the right direction to fill this "middle of the road" void.

John Leeder is a voice for the Everyman. He goes against the common idea that, to live a fulfilled life in music, one has to seek attention or sell a lot of CDs. Decades of service and many songbooks later, he closes with a decisive statement. "I like the phrase 'everybody can sing; anybody can play'. I think a lot of people are discouraged from singing because we've developed a professional class of singers, and people who aren't in that class figure they can't sing. As far as I'm concerned, almost anybody can sing." The ideal proves true: anyone can sing, even the man sitting in the back corner.