

Reviews

Edited by John Leeder

Website

Mike Tod (co-creator/interviewer), Gillian McKercher (co-creator/director/producer). *The Calgary Collection.* gillian@thecalgarycollection.ca; thecalgarycollection.ca

What is folk music? That's the question young ethnomusicologist Mike Tod was asking when he set out to document folk music making in Calgary a couple of years ago. Not surprisingly, he came to the end of this eight-part documentary with no solid answer – and many more questions. The one that might best sum up his journey into the local scene is: Why don't we know more about Western Canadian folk music?

Teaming up with filmmaker Gillian McKercher, Tod endeavoured to piece together a glimpse into how questions about folk music affect performers. Does their understanding of it structure their songwriting or repertoire choices? How do they go about securing gigs, or making money? Can they call themselves folk musicians if they don't write topical songs, or if they refuse to perform for free? How might folk music in Alberta have distinct characteristics or themes? And how, in this era of commercialization, can we distinguish pop from folk?

The documentary takes the shape of eight vignettes, each focused on a single performer. The film crew went into singers' homes, and captured not only an intimate performance and lengthy interview, but also charming shots of the participants' art and music collections, instruments, family photographs, and pets. In using this unified aesthetic vision across the vignettes, they've created a final effect that is one of individuality within uniformity – and that is matched in the singers' diverse opinions on the subject of folk music.

Tod turned first to his colleagues Nathan Godfrey and Robbie Bankes. The three emerging singer-songwriters have their own solo careers, performing on the house concert and café circuit of Calgary while further developing their technical skills in individual ways, and occasionally joining forces to stage folk music events in the city. As such, they best represent the young generation of folk musicians: taking advantage of the possibilities offered by online research tools and recently digitized folk music collections, the musicians are turning to treasures of the past for their inspiration. Rather than following the folk revival predilection for writing original songs, Godfrey,

Bankes, and Tod are more often resurrecting forgotten gems. Some are better-known, like the tunes of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, while others are coming from obscure collections of field recordings made by earlier generations of folklorists.

Offsetting the relative youth of these three performers are three well-known longtime Calgary musicians, each also in their own episodes: John Leeder, Tim Rogers, and Barry Luft. These three, shown playing both their own material and that of collections amassed over several decades, represent an extant but oft-forgotten folk music attitude: that one should play only when it benefits a community of like-minded people. Commercial imperatives and individual glory were hardly the concern of these performers; instead, they consciously sought out local folk songs ignored by Albertans when they moved to the province. Or they remain selective about gigs, or maintain weekly jams with fellow folk musicians who have no motivation other than keeping the music alive. The filmmakers have also set up these particular performers as tradition-bearers with a lesson to pass on. For example, Rogers suggests that the best way to know when a song has entered into a social group is when it has manifested as multiple versions: "The Little Old Sod Shanty" began its life in Eastern Canada as "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane", and became many other versions, including "Mansion by the Bow". Yet none of the singers, no matter how rooted in "tradition", have any illusions about how important commercialization is in transforming our notions about song transmission.

The most obvious disparity in performers might be in Spencer Jo and Matt Masters. "I'm a company," says Masters, speaking from the rehearsal space in which he conducts all music-related business. "I'm not just a folk musician." While he balances original songs against a rotating collection of Alberta folk tunes, Masters may best represent the varied set of skills a musician requires in order to function in the new folk music environment. Treating singing as one of many jobs he must do, Masters stands in stark contrast to Spencer Jo, whose politically informed commentary is inspired by punk and influences like Billy Bragg. Jo maintains a view that folk music must challenge dominant modes of thought and entrenched systems of power before it attends to any commercial purpose. As such, his criteria for song, and gig, selection is informed by the potential for his participation to have a wider purpose: "I listen to modern-day folk

music, and if I'm not offended, slightly, it's not for me. I don't think that it should be soft and pretty, there needs to be a real important thing behind it."

One problem with *The Calgary Collection* is the absence of non-white and female performers, which means its producers run the risk of perpetuating the white, middle-class hegemony that has been the face – and behind our understanding – of folk music for the last half-century. This sometimes has the effect of negating the documentary's central line of questioning. Though the issue is somewhat alleviated by the presence of a new generation of folk musicians alongside the elders, a more diverse collection of artists might have better represented contemporary Calgary, a city that is not easily holding onto its uniformly white, conservative identity in the face of a diversifying population and left-leaning city government led by Naheed Nenshi. Luckily, Tod and McKercher have secured funding for a second "season" of *The Calgary Collection*, debuting in November 2014, which consists mainly of participants who are not of the white, male singer-songwriter persuasion. They have also turned the raw material into a feature documentary, which premiered at Festival Hall, and showed at the 2014 Calgary International Film Festival.

The creators of *The Calgary Collection* have done much to shift common perceptions of the city, of music and culture in Alberta, and of what it means to make folk music in the 21st Century. They have approached a difficult subject with style and authority, challenging all of us to look at modern, urban folk music through their unique lens.

Gillian Turnbull, Toronto, Ontario

Book/CD

Sherry Johnson (guest producer), Beverley Diamond and C.K. Szego (producers). *Bellows & Bows: Historic Recordings of Traditional Fiddle & Accordion Music from Across Canada*. 2012. 156 pp. ISBN 978-8-88901-438-1. Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media and Place (MMaP), School of Music, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 230 Elizabeth Ave., St. John's, NL A1C 5S7; www.mun.ca/mmap

...it is a fascinating idea – trying to prepare a small but potent summary of the state of fiddling in Canada, made up of articles from people who are living with, working with and in many cases are themselves fiddlers. Although that was the original hope, it quickly became clear that rather than a summary, all we could realistically do was make an interesting collage of brightly coloured

bits, leaving an awful lot of grey areas in between – this from sheer lack of information. (Lederman 1985, 2)

In the above-quoted introduction to a special issue of the *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* (1985), fiddle scholar Anne Lederman rightly notes that scholarship on Canadian fiddling, at the time when she was writing, was in its infancy. In the preface to the same issue of the *Bulletin*, Tim Rogers notes that the special issue should be seen as a preliminary review that stimulates further research and is "eventually replaced by a publication that is thoroughly representative of the incredible richness, breadth and quality of fiddling in Canada" (1985, 1). Nearly 30 years later, *Bellows and Bows: Historic Recordings of Traditional Fiddle and Accordion Music from Across Canada* provides fiddle researchers and enthusiasts with a comprehensive update, complete with hard-to-find recordings of Canadian fiddlers and accordionists (and a few other instrumentalists and vocalists) who have made a mark on Canada's accordion and fiddle scenes.

Bellows and Bows is comprised of over 150 pages of written text and 64 audio tracks on two CDs. The 26-page introduction provides readers with a general history of the accordion and fiddle traditions in Canada – a history that begins with the music brought to Turtle Island by Canada's first European settlers and ends with a discussion of contemporary trends. This introductory section is the most comprehensive overview of Canada's fiddle and accordion scenes available to date, providing a rich entry into the social and creative complexity of the evolving traditions and making it an invaluable resource for those interested in learning about fiddle and accordion music in Canada. The subsequent sections of the written text provide more detailed discussions on each regional tradition, following a province-to-province, east-to-west-to-north format that replicates the movement of European peoples across the country.

The written text is supported by three to seven recordings of fiddlers and accordionists (with the occasional inclusion of other instrumentalists and vocalists who have contributed to the scenes) from each provincial or territorial region. Short biographies of the performers, along with descriptions and/or brief analyses of the tunes, add further context and encourage listeners to focus on various aspects of style. Since the recordings were chosen largely for their historical significance, they are not always of the best (or clearest) quality. However, it is in part this aspect of the recordings that makes the collection significant, giving listeners access to field, personal, and other recordings that were difficult to find and listen to before

this release. Recordings by better-known fiddlers (who generally produced high, or higher, quality recordings) are purposefully omitted from this collection, since they tend to be much easier to obtain.

Bellows and Bows is, in many ways, an exemplar of what this kind of collection can and should be. Although guest-edited by Sherry Johnson, it draws on the expertise of numerous scholars and performers, allowing for nuanced descriptions of the regional scenes. The collection, furthermore, quite successfully highlights the social complexity of the traditions. This is achieved through the inclusion of recordings from a variety of contexts – from house parties to fiddle contests to radio recordings – that showcase a variety of groupings – from soloists to large groups to fiddlers or accordionists playing with woodwinds or brass. The laughter or, alternately, clapping included at the ends of some tracks further points to different levels of formality, highlighting ways in which the music is embedded within a social community.

The authors also do an admirable job of highlighting the diversity of the musicians, styles, and influences that make up the fiddle and accordion traditions in Canada. Notably, many women are included; this is especially remarkable since there has been little research on women in the fiddle and accordion traditions.¹ Equally interesting is the inclusion of Górale fiddlers and Ukrainian fiddlers – often overlooked or under-represented in discussions of Canadian fiddling – and tracks that demonstrate the influence of popular musics. While the collection distinguishes between the fiddle and accordion styles found across the country, the authors tend to emphasize the importance of musical sharing within these traditions, and are unafraid to include discussion of contemporary changes.

While *Bellows and Bows* provides an excellent introduction to the traditions, it is ultimately an overview that represents the current state of research on fiddle and accordion music in Canada. Consequently, there are some notable omissions (e.g., the discussion of radio is limited to the eastern provinces, and the inclusion of female musicians is limited to just a few regions; these exclusions are, however, reflective of the lack of available research). The style analyses that accompany the tunes are, moreover, sometimes too vague to aid in distinguishing between styles (e.g., the analyses of the tunes from Manitoba miss some of the most important aspects of the styles – aspects that would help distinguish the styles from all the others in the collection²). This is, of course, a limitation imposed by the scope of the project. Yet it means that the collection may be of more interest to the casual enthusiast than the music scholar. It is also worth noting that the collection does not include a bibliography. While the footnotes provide the information

needed to find a source, it is sometimes difficult to find the full citation. If one were to use the collection, for example, to prepare a class on fiddling in Canada or North America, a full bibliography (perhaps divided by region) would be an excellent resource. Of course, this collection may not be the place for what would be a lengthy bibliography; this might be a project for someone else.

Preparing a summary of Canada's fiddle and accordion traditions is truly a fascinating and, perhaps more precisely, challenging endeavor. While *Bellows and Bows* does not – and cannot – provide readers with an overview that is “thoroughly representative of the incredible richness, breadth and quality of fiddling [and accordion playing] in Canada” (Rogers 1985, 1) due to lack of available research on certain aspects of the traditions,³ it provides readers with a much-needed update. Certainly, the state of research on Canada's fiddle and accordion traditions can no longer be considered “truly pathetic” (Lederman 1985, 2); over the past 30 years, the work of the numerous scholars and performers, many of whom are included as authors in this collection, has brought new light to the traditions. *Bellows and Bows* has successfully brought this research together to create an interesting and much-needed overview of some of Canada's most beloved music traditions.

Monique Giroux, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Works Cited

Lederman, Anne. 1985. Introduction. *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 19 (3): 2–4.

Rogers, Tim. 1985. Preface. *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 19 (3): 1.

Notes

¹ A short footnote in the collection lists the notable exceptions (Johnson 2012, 133).

² For example, to me the most interesting aspect of “Homecoming Waltz” is not just a general asymmetry – of which there is little in this tune – but the inclusion of a bar of 4/4 in a waltz purported to be the last *dance* tune of the evening. In contrast, the most interesting aspect of “Drops of Brandy” is not that it is in 6/4 instead of the 9/8 of its predecessor, but rather that the time signature changes throughout the tune. And finally, while most listeners would recognize the “Indian flavour” (i.e., the stereotypical representation of Aboriginal music) in “War Bonnet”, the aspects of this track that make it an excellent example of the Red River style (such as the phrases ending with short eighth notes, the overall detached articulation, and the

piano motifs marking the ends of phrases) are not noted.

³ It should be noted, however, that Sherry Johnson completed a significant amount of new research for this

project, in particular for the historical overview and the sections on Northern traditions.

Recordings

Hungry Hill. *Ride*. CRCD026. Magnum Opus Management, 79 Ponderosa Dr., Whitehorse, Y.T. Y1A 5C5; www.magnumom.ca; www.hungryhill.ca (new addresses, not on packaging); www.jennylester.com

If you follow Canadian bluegrass, you probably are familiar with Jenny Lester, the vocalist, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist. Some years ago she partnered with John Reishman to form the band Bluegrass Signal. More recently she has performed and toured with the band Hungry Hill. It is fair, I think, to say that Ms. Lester is the frontperson for Hungry Hill, the best-known member. But Hungry Hill is more than Jenny Lester and a group of unknown accompanists – it comprises a group of accomplished and seasoned musicians who play equal roles. In addition to Jenny Lester on fiddle, guitar and vocals, the members are: Nadine Landry on bass and vocals; Ross Nickerson (well-known for his banjo instructional workshops and videos) on banjo; Bob Hamilton on vocals, mandolin and resonophonic guitar; and Mark Thibeault on vocals, guitar and reso guitar. The album *Ride* was released in 2007, and it is definitely worth a listen. The singing is outstanding, particularly Ms. Lester's vocals, and the picking is first-rate. Furthermore, all the songs are originals, and there is an excellent balance between fast numbers and slower and more nuanced songs or tunes. The album opens with "Ride", a nicely-arranged up-tempo song about splitting up. It is followed by "Ain't Got No Sugar Dad Now", a bluesy song that bravely states the singer's independence of, well, sugar dads. Several well-executed songs about rural history are "Gopherville" and "Crooked Log Cabin", and "Broken Spoke" seems to articulate a philosophy of life. "When My Time Has Come" is an excellent gospel song that I really like, and "Shining Moments" is a medium-tempo waltz about a departed (dead?) loved one. "What Would You Say" is a rollicking statement about longing for an absent loved one. Rounding out the album are three instrumentals, two driving tunes led by the banjo ("Roundhouse" and "Yukon Drive") and a moody slower tune featuring the resonophonic guitar, "Fi's Blues". Altogether, this is an album worth including in your library.

Michael Corcoran, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

The Once. BCD204. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M5A 1W7; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com; theonce.ca

The Once. *Row Upon Row of the People They Know*. BCD212. Borealis Records (addresses above)

The Once is a Newfoundland trio that breathes new life into both iconic folk repertoire and recent standards through their creative arrangements and captivating performances. Consisting of Geraldine Hollett, Phil Churchill, and Andrew Dale, their first two recordings showcase their strengths as versatile performers and collaborative musicians. Their self-titled album presents their interpretations of a dozen traditional songs, and covers such as Leonard Cohen's "Coming Back to You" and "Anthem". The CD's 46 minutes of music spans a wide palette of performing forces, including the addition of Mark Neary and Elliot Dicks for "Anthem". Four songs showcase their three-part a cappella signing, while other themes address the sea, matters of the heart, and military desertion.

Their second album, *Row Upon Row*, shows their passion for Newfoundland-focused traditional song and their expanding range of influences and emotional intensities in their performance. *Row Upon Row* has ten tracks and spans 38 minutes, of which eight tracks feature their own arrangements and collaborations that include additional strings and vocalists on select tracks. Their rendition of Queen bassist John Deacon's "You're My Best Friend" is quite lovely. While I may lack the courage to explain the double entendre of "My Husband's Got No Courage" to my young nieces, I do enjoy the energy and the varied accompaniments that the group infuse into these songs. Having been to Beaumont Hamel (France) twice, I truly appreciated their "Valley of Kilbridge", paying homage to the Newfoundlanders lost during the Great War, especially since the only other recording of this song that I have heard was a MacEdward Leach field recording of Jacob Noseworthy of Pouch Cove (<http://www.mun.ca/folklore/leach/index.html>).

It has been a pleasure to learn of this trio. Their websites include sample audio and video from these recordings, an extra song, "Clohinne Winds", and a listing of their recent activities (<http://theonce.ca/site/music/> and <http://www.myspace.com/nowtheonce>). Given the strengths of their performance on these recordings, I will strongly consider their third album, *This is a*

Christmas Album, as a stocking stuffer next holiday season.

Peter Fielding, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Third Reel. THRT 01. thirdreel@hotmail.com; www.thirdreel.ca

Celtic band Third Reel's self-titled debut album is aptly described by the band on its website: "Two rip-pin' Calgary fiddlers, a young inventive guitar player, and the hauntingly beautiful voice of a true Emerald-Isle-born singer have fallen in together and now produce true Western Canadian Celtic music." The cover art (designed by fiddler Liana Seidle), which portrays two fiddles, a bodhran, a guitar, and Celtic knots, gives listeners an idea of what to expect right away.

Third Reel includes straight instrumental tunes, songs, and a mixture of the two. While some tracks are more "traditional", others are recently composed, including the track "Believe (It's Possible)" by Scott Duncan, fiddler and backup vocalist in the band. The opening track, "Attaga Set: To the Ladies (*Trad.*), Haste to the Wedding (*Trad.*), Green Hills of Tyrol (*Trad.*)", gives the listener a fair idea of the overall sound of the album. They begin "To the Ladies" in unison, before adding some harmony fiddle. The set moves forward at a driving pace, hitting a climax during the final tune, when the band pauses and then plays at a faster, even more driving tempo, pushed forward by guitar player Jay Daniels. While fiddlers Duncan and Seidle blend beautifully together when playing in unison, I can still hear their own individual styles at the same time.

There is a wide range of styles between the different songs on the album. While lead vocalist Linda Haugh's vocals are always clear and sweet – in the style one would think of when thinking of traditional Irish pub songs – the accompaniment differentiates the tunes in terms of style. In "Tell Me Ma", the style invoked by the instrumentalists made me think of jazz musical influences, especially with the use of bass (played by Jason Valteau) and the fiddle and mandolin solos in the middle of the track. Part of this influence is due to the fiddler's style, which reminds me of jazz violinist Stéphane Grappelli. The band also accents two and four, giving the track a swing feel. In contrast to "Tell Me Ma", "Whiskey in the Jar" starts off with an instrumental introduction playing the verse and chorus of the song in a country style. This style is invoked by the fiddlers' use of slides and drones, as well as the use of popular country motifs in the fiddle solo in the middle of the track, accompanied by guest musician Errol Fischer on mandolin. Throughout this track, there continues to be a blending of country and traditional Irish musical styles.

The album also features, on one track each, Chris Daniels on bodhran and Scott Ring on whistle.

My personal favourite track on *Third Reel* is "Star of the County Down (*Trad.*), Martin O'Connor's Flying Clog (*Phil Cunningham*)". This track starts with an instrumental introduction, where the instrumentalists play the vocal melody, and then goes into the song lyrics, which are performed in a traditional Irish pub style. Between choruses and the start of each new verse, an instrumental fill of fiddle and mandolin keeps the song surging forward, with an instrumental interlude in the middle of the song that makes use of the song's melody. The song seems to end, and then the band starts up again into the tune "Martin O'Connor's Flying Clog". This track stands out to me particularly because of the arrangement (I especially liked the use of having fiddle/mandolin play the vocal melody), the clear vocals, and the driving instrumental tune at the end ("Martin O'Connor's Flying Clog").

The production of this album is very clean and professional; one can hear the technicality and skill of the entire band. The mix is well-balanced, with the listener being able to hear each of the instruments clearly, including the distinctive fiddle harmonies, and no one instrument overpowers the others.

For listeners looking for Celtic music with an original flare to it, *Third Reel* fits the bill.

Alana Cline, Toronto, Ontario

Paddy Tutty. *The Last Holdout*. PA06. Prairie Druid Music, 219 11th St. East, Saskatoon, Sask. S7N 0E5; www.prairiedruid.net

Paddy Tutty has been singing and recording traditional ballads since the 1970s. Her previous five albums, the earliest produced in the good old days of vinyl and cassette, have received wide acclaim from ballad collectors, magazines and folk music radio stations around the world. It has been a long 13 years since her last recording, but she has made it worth the wait.

Just to show she still means business, the CD opens with a 6 ½-minute ballad from the Child collection – "Kemp Owyne", Child 34. "Kemp Owyne" isn't the longest track recorded. That honour goes to "The Famous Flower of Serving Men", Child 106, a ballad enhanced and reworked by Martin Carthy. Both of these epic story songs involve magic and the supernatural, and (coincidentally?) feature an evil mother figure. These are the only Child ballads on the recording, and have been sung by Paddy for decades, though she hasn't recorded them until now.

For those unfamiliar with her style, Paddy's singing is genuine and unvarnished, and is never at odds

with the spirit of the stories she sings. Some songs are sung a cappella, others with the wholesome strumming of an Appalachian dulcimer or guitar or the chording of an Anglo concertina for accompaniment. As a balladeer, she is very like Margaret McArthur, a much-missed singer and dulcimer player from the U.S.A., who is one of Paddy's many sources of material. Speaking of sources, Paddy has always been conscientious about honouring hers, both in performances and on her recordings. Her influences are as varied as her material. On this CD, Paddy honours England's Martin Carthy and Vermont's Margaret McArthur, as well as Hedy West (U.S.), Brian Peters (U.K.), Pete Bellamy (U.K.), Peta Webb (U.K.), Harry Tuft (U.S.), Jim Boyes (U.K.), and Norm Walker (Canada).

Sometimes I come across a ballad, or a particular rendition of one, that cuts through all the outer layers and aims straight for the heart. There is one such on this CD. "Llewelyn and Gelert" is an ancient Welsh story put to lyric form and music by fellow Saskatchewanite Norm Walker. It is an excellent example of a modern ballad, and I appreciated Norm's version, recorded on his first album, *Time-Tested Tales, Tall and True*. Paddy has sung and recorded many of his songs over the years, but she does this one so well, I wonder if it were not written with her in mind. Perhaps it is because Paddy is a specialist in singing ballads, but in her expert balladeer voice, this moving story of a heroic dog jumps out and grabs me in a way the original recorded version didn't. I am reduced to weeping each time I listen to it.

There is somewhat of a natural theme in the pieces selected for this album, in keeping with Paddy's "Prairie Druid" roots. Every season is represented. "Bringing in the Sheaves" by Jim Boyes uses the image of an autumn ritual to tell of life's interconnectedness. "The Griesly Bride", an Australian poem of a supernatural transformation, uses winter scenery to enhance the telling of its haunting tale. "The Flower Carol", set to music by Paddy, celebrates new life in spring. And "Oak, Ash and Thorn", a Kipling poem set to music by Pete Bellamy, joins Norm Walker's "Summer Solstice" in commemorating the summer season from a Pagan perspective.

There are a few instrumental tracks interspersed with the songs and ballads. The title track, "The Last Holdout", is her own composition, played on an exquisitely-toned Sawchyn guitar. In her notes, Paddy explains that the tune was written "in honour of those beautifully stubborn people who treasure their traditions in the pace of progress". This could be a description of Paddy herself. In this day and age, where becoming a singer/songwriter is endorsed by the music industry as the first, and sometimes only, recog-

nized step in a folk musician's career, ballad singing is at times a lonely specialty. There are regrettably few who, like Paddy, have made it a life's calling. It is to be applauded, therefore, when those "beautifully stubborn" traditional folk singers make their material available for future generations. A holdout Paddy may well be, but surely not the last.

Moira Cameron, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Richard White. *Sun Over Darkness Prevail: Stephan G. Stephansson Poetry in Translation Put to Song*. 172 Willow Ave., Toronto, Ont. M4E 3K5; richard_white@rogers.com; <http://richardwhite.bandcamp.com/releases>

A list of the world's great poets might include the name of Stephan G. Stephansson, a man who lived and wrote in Canada but is unknown to most Canadians. The reason? He wrote in Icelandic, a language also unknown to most Canadians.

Stephansson's home near Markerville, Alberta, is now a provincial historic site. On a recent visit, I was excited to find, in the gift shop, copies of a 1984 LP (and its re-release on CD) by Richard White of English-language versions of some of Stephansson's poems. Having seen Richard perform these songs in Calgary in the 1980s, I was pleased to find the recording still available.

Obviously, I am not in a position to assess the accuracy of the translations (by a number of different translators), nor how well they capture the spirit of the original poems, nor how well the song settings reflect that original spirit. I can comment on only the songs themselves, and the performances, in the context of the recording. And I'm pleased to say that the songs have survived the intervening 30 years and still speak to the listener who is open to their '80s sensibilities.

The accompanying musicians include the late Gaye Delorme, a jazz guitar wizard, iconic fiddler Alfie Myhre (both mainstays of the Edmonton scene for many years), Jim Morrison (best known as bassist for Stan Rogers), Cathy Fink, who later achieved acclaim in the U.S., and seven others. The CD packaging merely lists the musicians' names; however, the CD includes a PDF (readable on even my old computer), with lyrics, introductions to all the songs, the musicians on each track, information on the translators and background on Stephansson himself – an excellent knowledge package originally included as sleeve notes with the LP.

Richard White sings in a clear tenor, appropriate for these songs, whose feeling is mostly lyrical and contemplative. Stephansson writes about nature, farm work, family, his adopted country and his immigrant

experience. The one up-tempo song, “En Route”, describing various train voyages, is given a bluegrass treatment, the nearest to an incongruity, but happily the instruments don’t overshadow the vocals, which would have been unhelpful for a lyric-driven recording. In general, White lets the poems speak for themselves and enunciates so that no words are lost. He even sings a verse in Icelandic, on “September Snow/Sumarhretid”. The tune for “The Exile” also stands on its own merit – it’s given a separate instrumental track, “The Exile Waltz”. The song expresses homesickness for Iceland, while the next track, “Canada”, written eight years later, is more accepting and appreciative of the new homeland.

The saddest track, “To My Lost Son”, collects three of the four poems Stephansson wrote about his family tragedy, reflecting “acceptance [and] the beauty of sadness” concerning an event all too common in pioneer days. “The Child Poet” tells of an incident when his daughter turned away his wrath for an indiscretion by an evocative description of the scene which drew her attention from her errand. “At Close of Day” starts as a straightforward bucolic description, then moves to final thoughts on the poet’s mortality, a theme which ends several of the songs.

The final song, “Evening”, White describes as most people’s “favourite” of English versions of the poems. It begins with a contemplation at the end of the workday, moves into despair at the evils of the world, then finishes with optimism:

The best that was in me for ever shall live,
The sun over darkness prevail.

John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta

Elena Yeung. *Dandelion*. 1036 Huscroft Rd., Creston, B.C. V0B 1G2; chickwhopicks@gmail.com; www.myspace.com/elenayeung

Every so often I run across an album that takes me by surprise and knocks my socks off. *Dandelion* is one of those albums. The artist is from the Kootenay Valley, in southeastern British Columbia, and she is a singer, songwriter and banjo picker. Nearly all the material on the album is written by Ms. Yeung, and it is eclectic, covering territory ranging from trains (“Train (Black as Night)”, “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer,” “Counting Cars”), birds (“Old Crow,” “Wake Up Little Sparrow”), love (“Promise of Silver and Gold”), kids (“Popcorn,” “The Flagpole,” “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer”), a weed (“Dandelion”), instrumentals (“Banjo vs. the Garden/Cindy”, “Loose Pig”, “Ghost in the Valley”), to gospel (“Gonna Build Me a Boat”). Let me focus on several. In “Old Crow” Ms.

Yeung sings about an avian inferiority complex, an unusual topic for a quasi-bluegrass album. Her “Train (Dark as Night)” is an excellent dark and bluesy number that should be attractive to other artists. “Gonna Build Me a Boat” is a terrific a cappella gospel song that she recorded with The Persuasions, the a cappella group from Brooklyn, N.Y. And who else would write and perform a song about a kid with his/her tongue stuck to a cold flagpole – visions of “A Christmas Story”? Obviously I like a lot of the material Leung has written. What about her delivery of the songs? Well, Yeung’s voice is quirky and a bit harsh, not sweet or silky-smooth, but it works well with her material. Her banjo playing is good, and she has surrounded herself with other excellent musicians.

Overall this is an original, whimsical and enjoyable album whose real strength lies in Yeung’s songwriting. I hope that better-known artists record some of her material. Highly recommended.

Michael Corcoran, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



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