

Canadian Traditional Music: The Contemporary Scene

We now look at the available secondary literature on developments on the Canadian folk music scene during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and survey the state of the movement today. An examination of the lists of artists billed as performing at so-called folk festivals across the country suggests that there is now considerable confusion about what should be included under the rubric 'folk music.' Most festivals include headline rock or pop artists, heavily feature 'world music', and otherwise cater mainly to singer-songwriters. If there are any traditional artists, they are usually foreign bands on tour, often from Ireland or Scotland. The one thing one tends to look for in vain is traditional *Canadian* song, and anything one does find usually comes in folk-rock format from Newfoundland.

Nonetheless, there remain a handful of folk festivals that have not abandoned traditional music, and just a few that actually feature it, such as the Burin Festival in Newfoundland or the Princeton Traditional Music Festival in BC. And there are still many Canadian folk singers whose repertoire is predominantly traditional in nature, such as Mary Armitage, Jon Bartlett, Anita Best, Moira Cameron, John Leeder, Rika Ruebsaat, Simon Trevelyan and Paddy Tutty, to name just a few. There are also various venues in which do-it-yourself folk music can be found. They include other smaller semi-commercial festivals such as Water Valley in southern Alberta where you will find a mix of traditional music and singer-songwriters, some (but not all) folk clubs, house concerts, and singer circles.

If one takes a sub-genre, such as traditional balladry, the number of skilled exponents with large repertoires is not huge, but they include such excellent singers as Anita Best, Moira Cameron, Margo Carruthers, Rosaleen Gregory, Eileen McGann and Paddy Tutty, to again name just a few. Narrative songs that tell stories about the lives of people past and present are still being written, and the best of the old ones are still being sung. Balladry may be a specialist activity, but it continues to exist and flourish, even if in a modest way. Moreover, there are also many singer-songwriters whose compositions are often clearly "in the tradition." We noticed a number of such artists in the last section, but there are others who have come to the fore more recently, including Dave Baker, Maria Dunn, David Francey, Catherine MacLellan, Sid Marty, and John Spearn. One new trend that has emerged in the early twenty-first century is "heritage music," a variant on the nationalist folk music of earlier decades but one that focuses on particular historical events, sites, individuals, or other

Canadian or regional phenomena, such as Louisville, the Kettle Valley Line, train robber Bill Miner or nurse Edith Cavell.

Our survey of the secondary literature, with an emphasis on articles that can be found in CSTM publications, thus begins with an inquiry into the continued existence of Canadian traditional music. It appears to be alive and well, although increasingly relegated to the margins of the commercial popular music industry. It has once more become predominantly a form of do-it-yourself vernacular music, a minority interest, and a niche market, if a market at all. Ignored by the mainstream media and even most folk festival organizers, it stubbornly refuses to lie down and die. In a 2005 issue of *Canadian Folk Music* Lorne Brown asked the question "Is There Still Traditional Music in Canada?"¹ His answer was a qualified yes. Scott Henderson examined the Hamilton music scene and concluded in "'This Ain't Hollywood': Identity, Nostalgia and the Role of Culture Industries in the Hamilton Music Scene" that it hasn't been totally commercialized by any means.²

Lorne Brown's positive answer reflected in part his conviction that labour, political and topical songs still have a role to play in contemporary Canadian culture as we face a combination of governmental austerity, high inflation and environmental degradation. The Raging Grannies are one group who have fearlessly carried on the tradition of protest folk music. Two articles about them can be found in the pages of *Canadian Folk Music*: Alison Acker's "The Raging Grannies"³ and George Lyon's "The Raging Grannies Sing for Medicare."⁴ Another revival singer with a sardonic wit was Bill Sarjeant, a mainstay of the Saskatchewan folk scene. In 2000 Dave Spalding wrote an article about him in *Canadian Folk Music* titled "Bill Sarjeant: Singing from Sheffield to Saskatchewan"⁵ and followed it up two years later with a reminiscence of Bill as a singer and as archivist for the Canadian Society for Traditional Music.⁶

In British Columbia, where traditional folk music appears reasonably alive and well, thanks at least in part to the Princeton Traditional Music Festival, Phil Thomas was one of many singer-instrumentalists immersed in the vernacular music of the province, and his legacy is still carried on by Stan Triggs and by the duo of Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat. Another BC musician 'in the tradition' was Laurie Postans, until his death in 2011 a member of the group Sassa-nach Rebellion. Known to everyone familiar with the B.C. folk scene, he was probably largely unknown to anyone outside the province, and provides a good example of a skilled instrumentalist and singer song-

writer who mixed traditional music and original songs with a regional flavour composed in a traditional style. Postans was the beneficiary of a good retrospective article in *Canadian Folk Music* by Mike Ballantyne, titled “Laurie Postans: A Musical Journey, 1943-2011”⁷

Among many other examples of traditional folk artists, we can mention Moira Cameron, a ballad singer living in northern Canada, and Kelly Russell and Allan Kelly, two important figures on the east coast. David Gregory contributed “Moira Cameron: Northern Balladeer” to *Canadian Folk Music* in 2002⁸ and more recently Moira wrote “Coming Back Through Ballads” for the same periodical.⁹ Maritimes musician Kelly Russell was the subject of Brian Rusted’s piece “How Kelly Russell Spends His Summer Vacation,” also in *Canadian Folk Music*,¹⁰ while Ron Labelle wrote “Reflections on the Passing of Allan Kelly: A Master of the Acadian Song Tradition” for *MUSICultures*.¹¹

There are other younger or newer singer-songwriters who seem to have an understanding of and affection for different kinds of traditional song and see themselves as following in the footsteps of such revered figures as Gordon Lightfoot and Stan Rogers. Catherine MacLellan, well-known and well respected in the Maritimes but hardly a national figure, is a representative example of this younger generation, and Meghan Forsyth’s interview with her provides a good insight into her background and aspirations.¹² Moving further into the east coast music industry, but still strongly in touch with traditional music — in this case fiddle music — we find Ashley MacIsaac, a striking young musician whose personality exudes a radical rejection of anything that smacks of the conservative status quo. Erna MacLeod’s article “Ashley MacIsaac: Star Image, Queer Identity, and the Politics of Outing” focuses on the relationship between MacIsaac’s music and his personal and political lives.¹³

There is also the matter of folk-rock or trad-pop, for example Great Big Sea’s way of bringing a mixture of traditional Newfoundland music and the band’s own creations to a mass audience. One cannot deny that the group’s music, like that of its precursors Figgy Duff and Rawlins Cross, is firmly rooted in the vernacular music of the province. Commercial and flamboyant it may be, but most of Great Big Sea’s output is still folk music, and, as Sarah Moore points out in “Fostering Local Identity: Great Big Sea, Trad-Pop and Folksong,” it functions in the same way that much folk music has in the past: re-establishing and underlining a sense of regional belonging and personal identification with local culture.¹⁴

Heritage music is another avenue where there appears to be a new opportunity for traditional folk musicians to find a sympathetic audience. Jack

Godwin, a practitioner of heritage song about the Kettle Valley Railway in BC, gives us his thoughts on the new sub-genre and what it takes to make it work well in his *Canadian Folk Music* article on “Heritage Music: A Primer.”¹⁵ Folk songs about historical events are not uncommon in the Canadian canon, but folk heroes celebrated in song are relatively rare, despite the examples provided by Woody Guthrie. However, an exception is the train robber and outlaw Bill Miner, about whom many songs have been written, as Tim Rogers records in his two *Canadian Folk Music* articles about the man and the songs he has spawned.¹⁶ Moreover, a few singer-songwriters have consciously and deliberately written about Canada’s geography and Canadian history. Two examples are Dave Baker and Maria Dunn, while much of John Spearn’s work provides a perfect example of the ‘national song’ category. One can see in Spearn (as in Baker) the continuing influence of Lightfoot’s “Canadian Railroad Trilogy,” but his songs are often about individual Canadian heroes. He explained what he was trying to achieve in his *Canadian Folk Music* article titled “The Canada Songs Project: Music, Musings, and Memoirs.”¹⁷

The twenty-first century has seen an explosion of ethnic folk music in Canada, the result of a younger generation of new Canadians taking the official policy of multiculturalism seriously and working out their own variants on the traditional music of their countries of origin. For Chinese-Canadians there is a wealth of traditional Chinese music to be found in Vancouver, as recognised by Huai Sheng Qiu in his *Canadian Folk Music* article “Chinese Traditional Music in Greater Vancouver.”¹⁸ The same is increasingly true of Montreal, according to Kim Chow Morris in “‘Small Has No Inside, Big Has No Outside’: Montreal’s Chinese Community Breaks out/In Music,”¹⁹ while Japanese-Canadian communities have also found traditional means of cultural expression that adapt well to a big city environment, as Kim Kobayashi reported in “Asian Women Kick Ass: A Study of Gender Issues within Canadian Kumi-Daiko.”²⁰ Similarly, in Toronto the East Indian community is finding itself through traditional musical forms, as Jacqueline Warwick explains in “‘Make Way for the Indian’: Bhangra Music and South Asian Presence in Toronto”²¹ One individual performer of Indian music who has made a major impression on the Canadian folk music scene is Kiran Ahluwalia, and her perspective on what she has achieved is revealed in David Gregory’s interview “A Conversation with Kiran Ahluwalia” in *Canadian Folk Music*.²²

A parallel phenomenon can be observed in the increased confidence and popularity of aboriginal Canadian groups such as Asani and Medicine Dream. Janice Tulk wrote “Awakening to Medicine Dream:

Contemporary Native Music from Alaska with Newfoundland Roots” in a 2004 issue of *Canadian Folk Music*²³ and followed it five years later with “Cultural Revitalization and Mi’kmaq Music-Making: Three Newfoundland Drum Groups.”²⁴ Also on Canadian First Nations music-making see Elaine Keillor’s “Amerindians at the Rodeos and Their Music,”²⁵ Anna Hoefnagels’ “Northern Style Powwow Music: Musical Features and Meanings”²⁶ and Klisala Harrison’s “‘Singing My Spirit’: Aboriginal Music for Well-being in a Canadian Inner City.”²⁷

Leaving aside individual performers, it is also useful to take another look at the institutional infrastructure that has in the past supported the Canadian folk music revival. The fate of folk music on AM and FM radio seems uncertain. David Gregory’s cross-Canada survey of folk song on radio stations from Newfoundland to British Columbia concluded that only a few student and community radio stations actually broadcast traditional folk music, but that it appears to have a future in the medium of digital narrowcasting. This survey was titled “Vernacular Folk Song on Canadian Radio: Recovered, Constructed, and Suppressed Identities.”²⁸

Folk festivals also seem to be at a crossroads. The big commercial ones appear to be in danger of turning into eclectic popular music festivals, increasingly relying on ‘big name’ rock and pop artists to sell tickets. In different issues of *Canadian Folk Music* Geoff Whittall provided his observations on the phenomenon in “Notes from the Field,”²⁹ while Murray Leeder reported on the sad case of the Ottawa festival.³⁰ We can contrast the commercial folk festival scene with a rare but vibrant example of a genuinely traditional folk festival. We have already cited as an example of the latter the Princeton festival in BC, and a long article by David Gregory and others titled “British Columbia’s Princeton Traditional Music Festival” in a 2010 issue of *Canadian Folk Music* provides a detailed survey of its early years.³¹

As a case study of what is happening to medium-size folk festivals, we can also take a fairly detailed look at the Calgary festival, which used to be rather smaller than its big-league counterparts in Edmonton and other large cities. For a while it made space in the corners of its riverside site for some local performers and traditional singers. However, it has since evolved away from this blend of traditional and contemporary, local and national, into something that now approaches the standard commercial festival with its rock bands, international artists and big name headliners. The Calgary festival is examined from several angles in articles by Rosaleen Gregory and Gillian Turnbull, both in *Canadian Folk Music*. Gregory’s was a review of “A Special Folk Festival: Calgary’s 25th Anniversary.”³² Turnbull’s analysis of a later version of the same festival was titled “Some

Thoughts on the 2011 Calgary Folk Music Festival.”³³ Turnbull has also written two interesting and perceptive analyses of the Calgary folk scene titled “The Dilemma of Representation: Local Content at the Calgary Folk Festival, 1999-2009”³⁴ and “‘Land of the In Between’: Nostalgia and the Gentrification of Calgarian Roots Music.”³⁵

In conclusion, this might be the place to acknowledge a few of the most important books that have been published since the year 2000. On Quebec there was the scholarly and systematic *La vie musicale en Nouvelle-France* by Élisabeth Gallat-Morin and Jean-Pierre Pinson.³⁶ Eileen Keillor’s *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* was a stimulating overview of its broad subject.³⁷ And most impressive of all is Volume 3 on *The United States and Canada in The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, a huge, uneven, but immensely valuable work of collective scholarship.³⁸

Notes

¹Brown, Lorne. “Is There Still Traditional Music in Canada? Part 2,347,” *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne*, 39: 1 (Spring 2005), 14-19.

²Henderson, Scott. “‘This Ain’t Hollywood’: Identity, Nostalgia and the Role of Culture Industries in the Hamilton Music Scene,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 15-20.

³Acker, Alison. “The Raging Grannies,” *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 30: 3 (September 1996), 5-8.

⁴Lyon, George W. “The Raging Grannies Sing for Medicare,” *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 34.1-2 (March/ June 2000): 15.

⁵Spalding, David. “Bill Sarjeant: Singing from Sheffield to Saskatchewan,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 34.1-2 (March/ June 2000): 9-11.

⁶Spalding, David. “In Memoriam: Bill Sarjeant (1935-2002),” *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 36: 3 (Fall 2002), 1.

⁷Ballantyne, Mike. “Laurie Postans: A Musical Journey, 1943-2011,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 2011-12), 9-11.

⁸Gregory, E. David. “Moira Cameron: Northern Balladeer,” *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 36.3 (Fall 2002), 2-12.

⁹Cameron, Moira. “Coming Back Through Ballads,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Fall 2010), 1-5.

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- ¹²Forsyth, Meghan C. "'Snowbird': A Conversation with P.E.I.'s Catherine MacLellan," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 32-35.
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- ¹⁴Moore, Sarah J. "Fostering Local Identity: Great Big Sea, Trad-Pop and Folksong," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2005), 6-13.
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- ¹⁶Rogers, Tim. "Bill Miner in Song," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer 2008), 9-20. "Postscript to 'Bill Miner in Song'," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Fall 2008), 2-11.
- ¹⁷Spearn, John. "The Canada Songs Project: Music, Musings, and Memoirs," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer 2007), 1-14.
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- ³⁷Keillor, Elaine. *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.
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