

Vera Johnson: Ave Atque Vale (June 13, 1920 - November 9, 2007)



Vera Johnson's mother emigrated to Canada, on her own, at the age of 16 or 17 and travelled to Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, where she worked in her uncle John Menazzi's hotel. While she was there she met and married Homer Johnson, a locomotive engineer (train driver), who had come to Canada from Boston to join the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1920 she returned briefly to England, again on her own, to give birth to Vera, her second child, and the second oldest of four girls and a boy.

Vera grew up in Regina and, as a young woman, trained as a stenographer. Although a certain part of her clearly resented having to make a living this way (see: *Women's Liberation Blues*, track 7 of *That's What I Believe*), she was nevertheless an exceptional typist with a speed of 105 words per minute when a very good speed was considered to be 60 to 80 wpm. Consequently she was able to find work relatively easily, which later proved to be a useful ability for an aspiring, professional folksinger to fall back on. Throughout the earlier part of her life Vera was ac-

tive in politics, in women's issues, and in the Unitarian Church, all of which are reflected in her songs, but she also wrote both mainstream and speculative short fiction and poetry, a very respectable portion of which found its way into print. Her abilities as a writer are reflected, to some degree, in the three-month writing scholarship that she won in 1957 to the *Instituto Allende* in San Miguel d'Allende, Mexico. By her own count, in 1995 her corpus of songs and writings numbered 274.

In 1966, at the end of a second marriage and already a grandmother, Vera decided to take her guitar and travel to England to explore the folk clubs. There, she began as a singer of Canadian and other North American traditional songs such as "Brave Wolfe" and "Wade in the Water", occasionally singing one or two of her own songs in her performances. Then in 1967 the well-known English folksinger and publisher John Pearce suggested that she perform nothing but her own songs. Vera recounts, "I was quite upset. 'But I'm a folksinger!' I protested." She

went on to say:

This proposal led me to reconsider the definition of a folksong. I knew folklorists contended [that a song] must have been written a certain number of years ago and appeared in so many variant forms, but to my mind, the important question was, 'Why was it written?' If it were written to make money for the composer and lyricist, the recording artist and the record company, then it was a pop song, even if it never made the top ten. If it were written to share a tender experience, or to arouse people's anger over a miscarriage of justice, or awaken enthusiasm for political ideals, or make people laugh at human foibles, then it was a folksong. I don't expect this argument to influence folklorists, but it convinced me. I decided my own songs were folksongs, even if they didn't fit the accepted definition.

CSTM Bulletin March 1995, p. 10.

For the next few years Vera built up her repertoire to reflect her songwriting. She extended her folk club sets to include more and more of her own songs and travelled throughout the British Isles, Europe and North America singing at coffee houses, folk clubs and folk festivals, busking, and earning the love and respect of audiences and folk musicians alike.

Of the great many songs Vera wrote, only twenty-four were recorded on her two LPs, twelve songs each on *Bald Eagle*, recorded at the Black Horse Folk Club in Amberley, Sussex, in 1974 and *That's What I Believe*, recorded at the Green Cove coffee house in Vancouver in 1978. These songs reflect her concerns for world peace and for the disadvantaged, and they touch on politics and religion with such a careful hand that her concerns are not forced upon the listener. Of the other songs, her sobering studies of social issues are offset and balanced by her humorous songs, written and introduced with a wit and penetration reminiscent of Tom Lehrer.

Vera gave up professional singing when she retired from the mainstream workforce in 1985 and for some years she devoted her time to the Co-operative Housing Federation of British Columbia. In 1995, at the age of 74, she spoke of perhaps returning to singing but, with the exception of playing the occasional song for friends, etc., it was not to happen. In the late 1990s she moved to Vancouver Island to be nearer her family. She leaves behind three daughters, six grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

Mike Ballantyne, Central Saanich, British Columbia

Last February, Arthur Caldicott, working in a nursing home in British Columbia, encountered Vera Johnson, then a resident. He did not initially know who she was, but a little internet searching led him to

realize that she was a person of significance. He mentioned to her the title of a song which he'd learned that she'd written, and she happily began to sing it at the dinner table.

Caldicott wrote of his dealings with Vera on the Mudcat Discussion Forum, opening an important and lively set of reminiscences that lasted into the summer. He may initially have gotten some details wrong, but over the many postings, the story got straightened out. His first impression was that she'd been deserted by family and community – as too many of our elders are – but this was not so. (And I'm sure that Vera would've been among the first to ask, Who says that you have to be a fine songwriter to deserve visitors?) At any rate, I don't have any trouble doubting his picture of her scheming to escape the confines of this protective custody. Listen to "Women's Liberation Blues" and you'll realize that she was doing that all her life!

I don't suppose Vera ever read these comments, queries and anecdotes, but the interchange among her family, friends and admirers speaks well of her and also offers some insight into what might be most valuable about both the internet and the folkie community. It must have been fun to read it as it appeared: sharing songs (sometimes just titles, sometimes entire texts, accurately transcribed or not), memories and insights, these people made Vera come alive in real time. That's why reading the Mudcat thread was so poignant to me when I discovered it a couple of weeks ago. I printed the exchange for my own reading, present and future; it amounts to over 30 pages. I highly recommend it to all those who loved her work. You should also read Vera's own memoir, "Genesis of a Folksinger/Songwriter", in the March 1995 (29.1, p.3) issue of the *Bulletin*; she was 74 when she wrote it. She'd kept extensive diaries during her performance travelling, and she gives a good account of the British/Canadian scene from the 60s through the 70s. Her essay was among the most important items published in the magazine during my time working on it – and perhaps during its entire existence.

One of my favourite anecdotes in her article had the late Peter Bellamy complaining about how difficult it had been to follow her at Mariposa in 1968 – whenever I think of it, I recall Otis Redding declaring that he'd never follow Sam and Dave after his first adventure with them. Do the arithmetic: Redding may have been dealing with his peers (in age, if not race), but Vera was 48 in that year, playing for a crowd of Bellamy's contemporaries, a crowd that notoriously claimed to have no interest in people

over 30. Yes, I know that Mariposa was somewhat different from your average rock crowd, but perhaps not as different as some would like to believe, and Johnson's ability to capture their attention must have been a bit of a surprise.

Also in 1968, Vera sang her tribute to Pierre Trudeau's liveliness ("...il parle bien, / Avec candeur, sans peur de rien") at a Fort Langley gathering where Trudeau himself was guest of honour. When she'd completed it, he characteristically leapt off his platform to embrace her. The next day she rode in a parade for the NDP candidate, expressing her political (if not her romantic) colours.

Now that they're gone, Johnson and Trudeau seem vaguely, oddly similar to me. Neither of them was physically imposing, both were adventurous, youthful in some ways until late in life, and I think of both in motion: Trudeau in canoes and sports cars, Vera travelling from flat to flat, coffeehouse to pub to festival, with her guitar. And I'd say that her coyote gesture, singing for Trudeau but voting NDP, represents something essential about the sixties at their best, the paradoxical ethos best represented by Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Trudeau was himself a pretty shifty character, and he probably appreciated the irony.

Is this a foolish comparison? I suppose so, but Vera Johnson thrived on oddball analogies. Remember:

The Russian steppes are cold and bare,
They have no elevators....

George Lyon, Calgary, Alberta

I was in the audience at the Mariposa Folk Festival which George Lyon describes in his tribute to Vera. I was bemused by this middle-aged woman in a housedress, alone but for her guitar, taking her place on stage. I don't remember which songs she sang, but I'm guessing that she may have started out with "Bald Eagle" [printed below].

Vera had that gift of blindsiding us with unexpected insights and turns of phrase. By the end of her set, I felt exactly as Peter Bellamy expressed it: I pitied the people having to follow her. (Mind you, Bellamy and The Young Tradition had no trouble winning the crowd over with their own brand of British traditional songs, which opened a lot of ears and minds as well as my own.) Next day, Vera was singing for the ferry line-ups, on her own initiative. Her lack of pretension was a defining characteristic.

When I moved to Calgary, one of the first performers I saw at the Calgary Folk Club was Vera. And when I started doing bookings for the Rocky

Mountain Folk Club, the first out-of-town performer I booked was Vera. I made the acquaintance of her daughter, son-in-law and grandsons in the course of teaching banjo. Vera was unfailingly friendly and down-to-earth.

In addition to the autobiographical article which George cites above, Vera penned memoirs on Alan Mills ("Just Call Me Al", 30.2, p.5) and Edith Fowke ("Fowkelore", 30.4, p. 7), and many of her songs appeared in the pages of this magazine over the years. She was created an Honorary Life Member of the Society in 1999.

John Leeder, Calgary, Alberta

During the 1960s when folk music was THE popular music of the United States and the appreciation and collection of traditional materials blossomed here, in Canada, the UK and other parts of Europe, Folk Festivals and concerts at universities and clubs in the US attracted thousands of fans.

Vera Johnson was a popular performer at many of these. I particularly remember one of her concerts during a festival at the University of California in Berkeley. Before a packed auditorium, this rather inconspicuous middle-aged lady appeared alone, carrying only a guitar (which seemed always to be just a little bit out of tune), and captivated the audience, composed mostly of University students. While she was a relief from the loud bands and smooth 'stars' on most festival stages, her popularity came from the original songs she presented, which spoke to the realities of life and current events and had meaning for her listeners. Their applause was sincere and prolonged.

Some of Vera's songs will bring tears to our eyes, move us to action, stimulate many other emotions and make us laugh. Among my favorites is "The Housewife's Lament", a very funny take on traditional references to housewife helpers who plugged holes, mended pots and played tunes and did other jobs of very special kinds. Another favourite, "Women's Liberation Blues", which I recorded on my LP *As We Were*, defines the roles to which women are still confined, and encourages revolt. Her passing leaves us with a treasure of songs and tunes long to be appreciated and remembered.

Faith Petric, Los Angeles, California

I first met Vera Johnson in the early 1950s when she came to Toronto with three little girls. Our first link was our mutual interest in folksongs, and we soon found we were both socialists and anti-war. Vera was having short stories published, and I dramatized one of them for CBC Radio. I remember that Burl Ives

recorded one of her songs about the ducks in Grenadier Pond.

After she left Toronto we exchanged many letters, books, tapes, and songs over the years. She sent me some bawdy items and children's lore, and taped songs for me from Stanley Botting, Captain Cates, and Emma Caslor, some of which I've used in books. I'm planning to use one of her science fiction

songs in my book of Canadian women's songs.

I love many of the songs she's written, particularly "The Word," "The Minx from Pinsk," and my favourite of all, a beautiful parody of the symbolic bawdy ballads about occupations. She's one of the best contemporary songwriters I know, and a much cherished friend.

Edith Fowke (Canadian Folk Music Bulletin, 1995)

The Bald Eagle

Vera Johnson

Voice

There's a noble brown and white bird they say, The national emblem of the

U. S. A., The big bald eagle bold and free, But I wish that he _____ would n't shit on

me _____ That's a sad little chorus they sing in Viet - nam,

Watch-ing bombers de - liv - er es - plo - sives and na - palm, And when a plane swoops

low - er like some pre - a - tor - y bird, The peo - ple shout out a warn - ing, "Here

comes a - no - ther turd."

There's a noble brown and white bird, they say,
The nation's emblem of the U.S.A.,
The big bald eagle, so bold and free,
But I wish that he wouldn't shit on me.

There's a sad little chorus
They sing in Vietnam,
Watching bombers deliver
Explosives and napalm,
And when a plane swoops lower
Like some predatory bird,
The people shout a warning,
"Here comes another turd!"

CHORUS:

There's a noble brown and white bird, they say,
The nation's emblem of the U.S.A.,
The big bald eagle, so bold and free,
But I wish that he wouldn't shit on me.

Now they've reason to sing it
Out there in Ottawa,
Nixon brought in a surcharge
And quickly made it law,

And when Trudeau and Benson
Together began to cry,
The eagle launched an offensive
And hit them in the eye.
CHORUS

Then they sang on Amchitka
And all across BC
Fearing Cannikin threatened
The land and air and sea;
They pointed out the dangers
And pleaded with him to stop;
The eagle prepared his answer
And then he let it drop.
CHORUS.

[This song was Vera's response to the American testing of a five megaton nuclear weapon on the island of Amchitka in 1971. "Cannikin" (verse 3) was the US code name for the test.]

That's What I Believe

Some people say you shouldn't take a drink or you'll damn your soul to hell;
Other people say you have to go to church and maybe Sunday School as well;
Some folks say a man is born to sin and woman's bound to grieve;
Well, maybe they're right and I'm all wet, but here's what I believe.

CHORUS:

I believe in living, enjoy it while you can;
In kindness and in gentleness, and giving your brother a helping hand;
Work and laugh and love and play, we haven't got too long to stay,
So make the most of every day, that's what I believe.

I don't pretend that I can understand why the earth is moving through space,
Neither do I know what made a cell mutate and started off the human race;
There's just one thing that I know for sure, though to you it may seem odd,
That we are all part of something great, and that's what I call God.

CHORUS

Hell's not a place, it's just a state of mind, it's a sickness of the soul;
Heaven's how you feel when things are going right, you think you're gonna
make your goal;
Good is anything that nurtures life and makes it thrive and bloom
And evil's whatever cripples life and threatens it with doom.

CHORUS

Each man ought to do the best he can, be himself, not what he is not;
 Even if you think you're rather weak on brains, just make the most with
 what you've got;
 Just remember that you're not alone, you're part of all mankind,
 And man can achieve tremendous things when he makes up his mind.
 CHORUS.

That's What I Believe

Vera Johnson

Voice

Some peo - ple say you must -n't take a drink or you'll damn your soul_ to hell,

O - ther peo - ple say you have to go to church and may-be Sun-day school as well.

Some folks claim a man is born to sin and a wom-man's_ bound to grieve, Well

may-be they're right and I'm all wet, but here's what I be - lieve. I be - lieve in

liv - ing,_ en - joy it while you can, In kind-ness and in gen - tle - ness and

giving your brother a help-ing hand, Work and laugh and love and play, we have-n't got too

long to stay, So make the most of ev'-ry day, that's what I bel - ieve.