

The Song's the Thing

Rosaleen M. Gregory

At the last CSTM conference in Ottawa a number of people asked me questions about my musical background and how I came to sing folksongs and ballads. At the time I was dissatisfied with the responses I was able to give, feeling that the real answers were more complex. So at the risk of navel-gazing, I decided to take advantage of my position as co-editor of *Canadian Folk Music* to set down a few autobiographical and personal thoughts on the subject.

As a child I was surrounded by music—much classical and some folk—due to my father's job. Dr. Donald J. Hughes (Dr. of Music, that is) was Music Adviser for the large, sprawling County of Middlesex to the north and west of Central London, including such London suburbs as Hendon, Uxbridge, Hounslow, Ruislip, Wembley and Ealing, where we lived and I went to school. At that time music education in Middlesex was split in two; one position covered music education in schools, the other, my dad's job, covered adult music education. "Adult" spanned youth to old age, and the job involved a multitude of musicmaking activities such as directing and conducting choirs and orchestras, adjudicating at music festivals, running weekend courses and summer schools, and assisting young people embarking on a musical career with scholarships and grants. If I remember correctly, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Jacqueline du Pré were probably the most famous of those on whose early efforts my father was able to have some impact.

All this meant that from 1951, when I was nine and my father's job started, I came to take for granted going to concerts sometimes two or three times a week, and was in fact mildly puzzled at first to find that this was not normal practice for my schoolmates, some of whom, I found, went to concerts barely two or three times a year. My mother and I often attended rehearsals as well as performances of concerts and musical dramas organized and conducted by my father—of the latter I especially remember a musical adaptation of Sellar and Yeatman's spoof on English history, *1066 and all That*, Arnold Sundgaard and Kurt Weill's folk opera *Down in the Valley*, Rutland Boughton's *Bethlehem*, and another operetta based on the story of "The Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green", the name of whose composer temporarily escapes me. At the time I came to know the music

and songs of all these, and some I can still remember. And then there was Christmas, with carol concerts and at least one performance of Handel's *Messiah*.

At school I sang in the choir (alto, because I could read music), and took part in a number of productions put on by our vibrant and ambitious music teacher, Miss Woodcock (she later married a person from Central Europe with an unpronounceable name, so we continued to call her by the name we were used to, pretending we had forgotten her new name. As you see, I have genuinely forgotten it). Under her supervision we not only achieved a collaboration with the local boys' grammar school and adult guest soloists in a performance of Brahms' *Requiem* at Ealing Abbey, which instilled in me a lifelong love of that work, but also put on two folk-oriented productions, Smetana's *Bartered Bride* and a folk extravaganza of her own contriving titled *Balkan Market*, which was really a concert of folksongs from a wide variety of countries which we performed dressed in suitably colourful Central European costumes while milling around in a marketplace which apparently sold produce from every corner of the globe. It was all great fun; political correctness was nowhere to be seen, and if Miss Woodcock was flexible where authenticity of costume was concerned, in the music she required accuracy as well as fervour. I don't think a piano was used; she just stood up and conducted us as we sang the songs, some of which I remember to this day.

My father's interest in folk music can be seen in his choices of material such as *Down in the Valley* and the operetta on the "Blind Beggar's Daughter". He was an incurably modest man, who in fact played a significant role in the English folk revival of the late fifties and early sixties. My first introduction to other participants in this revival, whether as collectors, scholars or performers, came as early as 1951, when I met Eric Winter and Will Sahnaw at my father's Folk Music Summer School held at Albrighton Hall near Shrewsbury. Granted, I was only nine at the time, and more interested in Oliver Cromwell (don't ask). More summer schools took place at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1952 and 1954, though I forget if these were folk or classical music oriented. The weekend courses in folk music that I remember best took place over a number of years during the late

fifties and early sixties at Battle of Britain House, Ruislip, a “stately home” owned—or at least “managed”—by Vic Stanyon and his wife, and made available to organizations for weekend and summer courses. My father ran a number of folk music courses there, and it was there I met John Hasted, one of my dad’s colleagues in the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) as well as a fine performer—he did a chilling rendition of “Strange Fruit”, the song about lynching in the southern States that Billie Holiday was the first to perform and record. Other people I met at Battle of Britain House included singers Joy Hyman and Jennifer Rice and scholar-collector Pat Shuldham-Shaw. I loved these courses because, as a teenage schoolgirl, I didn’t have any responsibilities or obligations vis-à-vis the actual course but could simply sit in on sessions or wander off at will into the woods at the far end of the landscaped gardens, returning in time for whatever happened to be the next meal.



Rosaleen Gregory c. 1961

The Battle of Britain House courses were not my first introduction to the text or music of folk songs and ballads. I suppose my very first exposure would have been to my mother singing to me or playing the piano when I was a very young child, but as I recall it she didn’t actually do this very much, although she had gone to a Froebel teacher training college and been a teacher of young children at a time when proficiency in music and art were seen to be almost compulsory requirements in early childhood education. My mother was both artistic and musical, but her conception of folksong, at least at this time, would have been as mediated through piano accompaniments and ar-

rangements—the first folksongs I heard would definitely have been set to music by Arthur Somervell, Cecil Sharp, Percy Grainger, or Ralph Vaughan Williams. I often came to the melodies of folk music through piano arrangements sent to my father for review purposes, which I sight-read on the family piano—as I recall it I was not especially interested in the harmonies, only in the tune, and if I liked it I found myself remembering and singing it, just as I memorized Jenny’s songs from *Down in the Valley* and any others that caught my imagination for beauty of lyric or air. As for the words, my introduction to ballads, at least, came via literature rather than music. My mother had a copy of Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of Ballads*, and I had read all these and chosen my favourites long before the Battle of Britain House folk music weekends. Incidentally, at Battle of Britain House folksongs were sung *a cappella* or with guitar accompaniment (or sometimes other folk instruments such as banjo, accordion, concertina, but not piano).

The first folksong book I bought myself was the *Burl Ives Song Book*, in November 1959, when I was seventeen, but from the first there were few of these songs, even the ones I really liked, that I would have put in the same category as the big ballads with their dramatic stories. It would be some time before I realized that some of those vivid narrative dramas of passion and mystery also had singable tunes.

By then it was 1962 and I was in my first year of University at Keele, North Staffordshire. Joan Baez was beginning to bring out LPs with versions of old ballads sung to an unobtrusive guitar accompaniment. In the next few years I discovered the contemporary folksongs of Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, but also such English folksingers as Shirley Collins, Davey Graham, Anne Briggs, and Bert Jansch, as well as the Appalachian singer Hedy West, whom I much admired. I also discovered the Folk Club on campus and began to perform and to learn songs from other students. I had had my own guitar since some time in the late fifties, when I briefly attended a local skiffle group. In the early sixties it seemed folksongs had lost their piano arrangements only to acquire equally obligatory guitar chords—singing *a cappella* was still relatively unusual, although of course there had always been people doing it, including the source singers themselves, had one known where to look, and as the sixties progressed *a cappella* singing among revival singers became more common.

I became President of the Keele Folk Club in the second year of my four-year degree program at Keele, and from 1963-1966 we had regular informal

sessions and also brought in concert performers who sometimes went on to become more famous than they then were (although some already were pretty famous). These included Phil Ochs, Sandy and Jeannie, Hedy West, Joy Hyman, Shirley and Dolly Collins, Anne Briggs, Rory McEwen, Davey Graham, Bert Jansch, the McPeakes, and the Watsons, amongst others.



Rosaleen at Keele University c. 1964

The wealth of folk material which appeared on LPs and in songbooks from the early 1960s coincided with the time of my greatest exposure to these influences. As a result I have learned relatively few songs directly from other performers or source singers. My musical upbringing meant that although I did not choose to pursue a career in music I could sight-read as well as pick things up by ear, and I have therefore learned most of my songs either from songbooks or LPs, and, later, CDs. I have also been blessed with an ability to remember words as well as tunes, especially in the long ballads which tell a story—short lyrics with “floating verses” can actually be harder because there’s no logic connecting one verse to the next. (Not that my memory’s foolproof—stage fright has occasionally caused a complete block to occur where two hours earlier “I could sing it in my sleep...”). I don’t think I’ve ever actually tried to imitate a specific singer, but I have a long list of “favourite” revival singers whose work I’ve admired over the years.

They include Sandy Denny, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Jacqui McShee, Shirley Collins and, later, Frankie Armstrong, June Tabor, Maddy Prior, and Niamh Parsons.... (By the way, for me anyone is a “revival singer” who sings traditional material, even if they also sing material that is not traditional.) In Canada I’ve been able to add names like Paddy Tutty, Anita Best, and Moira Cameron, but I think my strongest inspiration in terms of sheer magic of singing style remains the English (Nottinghamshire) folksinger Anne Briggs. To my mind no one has ever done it better than Anne.

I went on picking up songbooks and LPs and learning songs through the late sixties, attending folk clubs at the University of Essex, where I did my M.A., and at Lewes and the University of Sussex, where Dave did his. After we moved out to Canada in 1969 the pattern shifted—in Kingston, Ontario, where Dave was doing his PhD at Queens, we found other interests than folk music, and the combination of adapting to life in a new country, Dave’s studies and teaching load, and my own various University-related jobs marking papers and tutoring in the Sociology Department, all interspersed with starting a family, resulted in my losing touch with the folk scene in England without initially discovering a corresponding one in Canada. We had no vehicle during the ten years we lived in Kingston, and whatever the folk scene was there—there must have been something—we had other priorities and didn’t make an effort to seek it out. At times I played guitar and sang songs at home to the children, and we continued to buy folk records and attend the odd concert (Dave remembers seeing Tom Rush, Jessie Winchester, Leonard Cohen, and Bruce Cockburn, not to mention Lou Reed and other rock stars), but that’s as far as it went.

For me the same pattern continued after our move to Alberta in 1979, except that we discovered the Edmonton Folk Festival, which we attended faithfully for many years until we both decided it was becoming too large and commercial. Later we also discovered the pleasures of North Country Fair, at Joussard on Lesser Slave Lake, and Calgary Folk Festival with its blessedly shady location at Prince’s Island on the banks of the Bow River. Now it was law studies and, later, law practice that were taking up more and more of my time and energy, while Dave’s teaching job at Athabasca University, which had already enabled him to make use of his love and knowledge of popular music to produce course-related radio programs on CKUA, now provided him also with the opportunity to research English folk-

song and scholarship beyond anything he had previously done. In the mid-1990s we attended our first CSTM conference in Calgary and our familiarity with Canadian, as opposed to British, folk music began its tardy development and is progressing to this day. However, old habits die hard, and I don't think I will ever have as fond an allegiance to indigenous Canadian folksong as I have to the songs and ballads of the British Isles. No offence meant, nor can I deny that there are a fair number of Canadian songs, both traditional and composed by singer-songwriters, that I know, enjoy, and perform. Which brings me to a few words on roots, what one chooses to sing, and whether there are songs one should not sing.

As far as roots go, I guess I'm a British mongrel—not actually much pure English, as it happens, but Irish on my mother's side (her last name, and my middle name, being Moran), Welsh and Scottish on my father's side (my name before I married was Hughes, and I have Scottish ancestors who lived way up at the top of Scotland in Thurso). Oh, and a little bit of French from my maternal grandmother, Eleanor Longes, who was descended from Protestant silkweavers who fled to England from France in the sixteenth century after the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. At least, so the family tells me. Ethnicity certainly determines what types of folk music one is likely to be exposed to in one's formative years, so it is no surprise to me that English, Scottish, and to a lesser extent Irish and Welsh, songs form the bulk of what I've learned and loved.

There was a movement in England in the 1960s, of which Ewan MacColl's Singers Group formed a part, which endeavoured to persuade singers that they should only sing songs from the ethnic group to which they belonged, e.g., no blues singing by white singers, no forays into what later became known as "world music". This is a big and controversial issue and I can only state my own position, which is that singing is, or should be, as natural as breathing, and that no one has the right to dictate to anyone else what they should or should not sing any more than they can dictate how one should breathe. I know the argument for MacColl's approach—that a singer conveys more truly a song that forms part of her or his own heritage. More recently the concept of "cultural appropriation" has also arisen, bringing the suggestion that it is somehow wrong to sing songs that developed in another country and form part of someone else's tradition.

It seems to me that Ewan MacColl's focus was in part a reaction against the global folk music of the late forties, fifties and early sixties. Certainly the

British and American folksingers of those years embraced a post-war desire to celebrate the brotherhood (and sisterhood, though they didn't always say much about that) of human beings; the copies of *Sing Out!*, *Sing* and *Spin* from those years are full of songs from every quarter of the world. Herbert Haufrecht's 1963 *Round the World Folk Sing*, published by Ludlow Music Inc. in New York and Essex Music Ltd. in England, is a particularly striking example of this trend, containing 144 songs, from "A-Walkin' and a-Talkin'" (United States) to "Zum Gali, Gali" (Israel), arranged in geographical sections with English texts added to non-English originals. (No piano arrangements—a single melody line plus optional guitar chords—very typical of the time.)

My personal opinion on this issue is twofold: firstly, I can't help but feel that imitation—or at least cross-fertilization—is the sincerest form of admiration, and that provided the singer treats the song with respect, no offence should be taken. The fear of committing "cultural appropriation" was foreign to the singers of the fifties and early sixties; ideally, songs were for sharing. I happen to think that a generous mindset is still preferable to a narrow-minded one even today, quite apart from the fact that nothing kills a song faster than trying to protect it from outside influences. Songs are not meant to be preserved like flies in amber; a singing heritage involves growth and development, and not just always within one country, either. A particular singer may prefer one version of a specific song to another, and that's OK too—but sometimes the freedom to sing what one perceives as worth singing itself seems to need protection. The perception of "worth" doesn't stop at political or geographical borders. Whenever I have been reluctant to share songs myself, it's been because they meant a lot to me and I felt over-protective and private about them, not because I thought they "belonged" in some way to a particular cultural or ethnic group. I am beginning to get over this now, having reached a stage in my life where communicating—sharing—has become, if not urgent, at least important. To paraphrase Tennyson, "'Tis better to have tried to communicate and failed than never to have tried at all...".

Secondly, implying that one can only sing songs rooted in one's own ethnicity ignores the human gift of imagination, which explains how a white person, for example, can convincingly sing the blues despite the fact that he or she is not black. Surely a willing "suspension of disbelief" can operate here just as it does while watching actors in a play? The alternative can lead to a blinkered narrowness, a refusal to em-

brace the individual manifestations of universal human experience expressed through songs and cultures not our own.

Why do we choose the songs we do, anyway? In my case there has to be something about the song that really appeals on a personal level – sometimes it’s the story, sometimes the choice of language, sometimes the melody, the intriguing *shape* of a particular tune when you wrap your voice round it. Or a combination of these. I don’t have any particular agenda, though I wouldn’t sing a song I personally found distasteful. But I admit I am eclectic—a centrifugal fox, not a focused hedgehog, to use Isaiah Berlin’s personality-defining categories, which apparently he took from the Greek thinker Archilochus, anyway—“The fox knows many things; the hedgehog, one big one”. At some point I started writing down titles of songs—not just folksongs—that I liked, and the list has grown to over 500.

Since retiring from practicing law at the end of 2002 I’ve gone back to my list and weeded out ones which seemed marginal or which are really songs Dave sings rather than me. There are still over 300 left that I know or have known at one time or another, including more than fifty Child ballads, and, having now the inestimable luxury of time, I’m trying to relearn as many as I can. My lack of instrumental proficiency, amongst other things, drove me fairly early on to concentrate on *a cappella* singing, but interestingly enough I now find about half of the songs I know seem to go well with a simple guitar accompaniment, so I’m working on that too. They are mainly either traditional songs or singer-songwriter songs with a sprinkling of pop, and, yes, there is the odd song in German, French or Russian, as well as some Canadian songs, among them, but I find I always go back sooner or later to my first love, the “big ballads” in which I can lose myself in that feeling of becoming one with the song, a vehicle for interpreting something about the human condition much bigger than me.

So now to the most personal thing of all—is there a “correct” way to sing folksongs and ballads, and, if so, can it be taught? Ewan MacColl, at least, thought he had the answer to this one. I’m not so sure, nor would I presume to extrapolate from my own experience. Everyone has her or his own personal style and this is as subjective from the viewpoint of the listener as it is for the performer—“beauty” is in the ears of the listener, or not, as the case may be. In the early years of the twentieth century it was generally thought that folksongs should have piano arrangements and be sung in a trained-voice, art song

style—except, that is, in the minds of the source singers themselves, who sang their songs as they were accustomed to, usually (though not always) unaccompanied and without formal vocal training. Despite my early exposure to it as a listener, I have never been very keen on trained-voice singing or had any desire to sing in that way, though there is, I think, a continuum rather than a hard-and-fast distinction; many singers with formal vocal training moderate the artificiality of the style if they are singing traditional material, which I suppose proves the point that in such cases natural is best. In time pianos gave way to guitars and other instruments in the folk revival movement, and *a cappella* singing of traditional songs, especially narrative ballads, gradually gained ground among revival singers. Concepts of “authenticity” sprang up, and in some cases became dogma in their turn.

I have my doubts that anyone can be taught how to sing traditional songs. Certainly one can learn how to breathe properly and how to improve the projection and control of one’s voice; beyond this I think it is up to the individual singer to do what comes naturally. I tend to think that intuition is a better guide here than analysis, though technique can certainly help intuition and *vice versa*; as any potter knows, when the clay is centred on the wheel and finally spinning true, it sings—metaphorically, at least—and for this, too, intuition and technique are both necessary. In the same way, I have ambivalent feelings about ballad scholarship—I admire those who do it and I have some interest in the results, but I have a low tolerance for textual analysis as I do for analysis of singing; both seem ultimately to be ways of “dissecting the butterfly”. Fortunately, the memory of what a butterfly is dies hard and traditional songs have a way of surviving dissection—they are much too sturdy for that.

I’ve wasted a lot of time in my life when I could have been singing, not getting up the nerve to do it. I think I’ve got over this, largely by remembering that it *is* the song that matters, not the singer. Today’s orthodoxy often privileges the singer over the song, but how interested in the lives of source singers would we be had they not sung the songs? I have also waged a lifelong battle against what I see as my own lack of charisma. The alternative to charisma is authority, knowing what you’re doing; this is what sustained me through the grittier aspects of practicing law—there was a job to be done, I had the tools to do it, and I did it. Singing for me has always involved an adrenalin rush, an enjoyment of the physical act as well as a focus on the mental and emotional content;

when I'm really deep in a song I feel like an interpreter, a vessel through whom the song is temporarily coming alive and, hopefully, transmitting its magic to the listener. I've often thought recently of a perceptive remark made to me by our fellow CSTM member Rika Ruebsaat (another of my favourite Canadian folksingers), who told me once that when her audience praises the song they heard instead of the singer she knows she has succeeded. Oh, we're human; of course we like to hear nice things about our singing, but ultimately we want to know that the song got through, because that's really what it's all for. And perhaps one shouldn't get too solemn about all

this, either—singing, I almost forgot to say, is fun too, and a good excuse for convivial get-togethers!

Which is why this is more than enough about this particular singer. I simply wanted to make some clarifications and tell readers more about my background than I felt I had managed to convey at the conference. As Bob Dylan says in his song "Restless Farewell":

If the arrow is straight, and the point is slick
It can pierce through dust, no matter how thick.

Well, hopefully I've managed to spear a few dust-balls.

Treasures from our Archives

Fifteen Years Ago

Bulletin 25.4 (Winter 1991). George W. Lyon got his feet wet as guest editor of this monumental issue devoted to cowboy poetry and songs. "Words From the Range: Canadian Cowboy Poetry" was the feature article; songs and poems were too numerous to list. Lots of photos, too, including a photo essay, "Home on the Range, Home on the Stage". In addition to the cowboy material, there was the Cumulative Table of Contents covering 1982-89, plus reviews of Gallaher & Galbraith's *Home to the Island*, fiddle recording *Emma Lake Live* and Ken Hamm's *Floodtide*.

Ten Years Ago

Bulletin 30.4 (December 1996). This issue was a memorial to the late Edith Fowke, with articles by Phil Thomas, Robert Rodriguez and Vera Johnson, the playlist of Steve Fruitman's *Great North Wind* radio tribute, biographical notes and a publications list. Songs either collected by Edith or particular favourites of hers were included: "The Rosy Banks So Green" as sung by O.J. Abbott, Hamish Henderson's "Freedom Come-All-Ye" and Vera Johnson's "The Housewife's Lament". There was also a montage of Bill Sargeant's pictures from the recent AGM in Toronto and, as always in this period, there were lots of reviews.

Five Years Ago

Bulletin 35.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2001-2002). This was a double issue, under then editor Lorne Brown. Judith Cohen's article "Following Alan Lomax's Footsteps in Spain" was the leadoff; a shorter article, "The Healing Power of Music" by Ruth Shushan, came

further along, and Leon Kossar was memorialized by Kevin Budd. The Ballad of the Month, "MacPherson's Farewell", was given an intensive treatment by Andrew Kuntz, while Maureen Chafe contributed two shipwreck songs from Newfoundland, "Loss of the *John Harvey*" and "*Union of St. John's*", and Derek Lofthouse gave us two session tunes of Canadian origin, "Reel de Montréal" and "The Grand Chain (La grande chaîne)". The A Mari Usque... column was filled with news from across the country and from various contributors, while Jean Mills authored The Back Page. Lots of reviews, as usual, and a presidential report by Leslie Hall, completed the issue.

These issues (and all back issues, either in original form or as photocopies) are available from CSTM Back Issues, 224 20th Ave. NW, Calgary, Alta. T2M 1C2. For pricing, see the Mail Order Service catalogue or website (www.yorku.ca/cstm and follow the links), or contact john.leeder@nucleus.com. Cumulative Tables of Contents of all issues since 1982 are available on the website as well. [JL]

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