

***An Unfinished Conversation : The Life and Music of Stan Rogers.* By Chris Gudgeon. (Toronto : Viking/Penguin, 1994. Pp. 216.)**

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for young workers to get training and experience or dead-end stop-gap work needed for survival. If they are “bad” jobs, who bears the brunt of the negatives ? The book’s most important contribution is providing detail for this discussion and debate.

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### *An Unfinished Conversation : The Life and Music of Stan Rogers.*

By Chris Gudgeon. (Toronto : Viking/Penguin, 1994. Pp. 216.)

Stan Rogers was a big man with a powerful voice and a matching personality. He was an outstanding songwriter, touching something that was lacking in the songs of this time. In the mid-seventies, a great many urban singers pretended that they did not have families, let alone roots. Yet, Stan’s clear voice ran out, “My Sally’s like a raven’s wing, her hair is like her mother’s” (p. 156), evoking images of places where people were connected by kinship and friendship, like the Maritime communities in which I spent much of my life. When I first heard Stan perform as a relative unknown at the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1975, I knew that I was listening to a very special singer. Word spread at the festival that he was someone to hear and his performances only improved over the years. Al Simmons, a western Canadian performer, described the last performance of Rogers and his band in 1983 :

Stan later said it was the worst show he’d done in years... But I was absolutely blown away, and they had the audience absolutely hypnotized. I’d never seen anything like it before. When he sang and when he performed, the power coming off the stage was incredible. [21]

Though I knew Stan only casually, I found him to be a man of great warmth. He welcomed me into a rather closed scene which centred on the Toronto Folklore Centre, a music store and folk revivalist hangout. However, Stan could

be extremely insensitive, sexist, and offensive. At times, he was a bully. Chris Gudgeon tells of Stan's first meeting with Jim Post, a fellow musician with whom he planned to tour.

"Why, he's just a little guy," Stan said without offering his hand. "I could lift him right up and break his neck, couldn't I?"  
 "You put your hand on me and I'll poke your eyes out," Post replied.  
 "Feisty too, isn't he." [100]

Needless to say, Rogers did not endear himself to Post although, according to Gudgeon, the two eventually became friends.

Stan evoked strong reactions in others too. Legends which arose soon after his untimely death in a plane accident in 1983 attest to his larger-than-life presence (p. 124). Stan's popularity spread after his death while his songs continued to appeal to his old fans. Friends and acquaintances still argued about the complexities of his personality a decade later and, knowing him, they would have been reluctant to support his canonization.

Given all this, I was intrigued when I heard Chris Gudgeon discussing his biography of Stan Rogers on CBC's "Morningside." Gudgeon was an interesting speaker with good stories to tell and insightful analyses of Rogers' life and work. He not only had access to Stan's family and fellow performers but included in his book some of Stan's favourite recipes for brown bread, blueberry grunt (an old Nova Scotia standard — but don't add ice cream !), and Stan's home brew (pp. 33, 76, 55). I looked forward to reading *An Unfinished Conversation*, which promised to be a well-informed and enjoyable book. However, while not without value, it was a disappointment.

*An Unfinished Conversation* takes its name from an unpublished song, the title symbolizing Stan Rogers' life, cut off midway. The book provides the basic details of Stan's life. We discover that he came from a long line of opinionated and quarrelsome ancestors as far back as John the Martyr, the first Protestant executed by Bloody Queen Mary in the sixteenth century (p. 28). Stan's parents were economic migrants who moved from Nova Scotia to Ontario, where Stan was born in 1949 and lived all his life. His Maritime heritage and his family's love of music strongly influenced him and through both, he was able to compensate for the outsider status which he acquired as a child. Like most outstanding performers, Stan did not suddenly appear out of the blue. He played in rock bands in his early teens and was a hard-working perfectionist who had been writing songs and performing on the south Ontario coffee circuit for years before he surfaced at folk festivals in 1975.

The book's value is that it documents Stan Rogers' life within the perspective of the Canadian professional folk-music scene of the 1970s and early 80s. Gudgeon examines Stan's musical heroes and influences and provides information about performing and producing records in Canada at that time. For

instance, he explains how Canadian-content laws and American ownership of record companies affected the recording careers of singer-songwriters (pp. 46-49) and provides a technical reason for LP records ending with slow songs (p. 95). He also gives brief sketches of a number of popular singers who influenced the Canadian music scene, showing how they either helped pave the way for Stan Rogers or travelled a similar route. Gudgeon gives credit to John Allen Cameron, an often neglected performer because of his public persona and his willingness to perform in popular culture settings.

Canadian music owes a debt to John Allen Cameron. He was the first performer to popularize this country's indigenous Celtic music, in particular that of Cape Breton Island. He forged a path that has been followed by some of Canada's best contemporary artists: Rita MacNeil, the Rankin Family, Spirit of the West, Loreena MacKennitt, The Crash Test Dummies, and, of course, Stan Rogers himself. [112]

This statement is not accurate. Cape Breton fiddlers, such as Winston Fitzgerald, had often been recorded and were promoted on radio programs such as the Don Messer Show while Cameron was still in diapers. However, the spirit of what Gudgeon says is correct. John Allen Cameron, love him or hate him, gave a major boost to east coast musicians.

Folklorists always want to know what a writer means by *folk music*. We may not agree with Gudgeon's definition but we can understand his meaning. After explaining that there are many definitions, he concludes that "most people use 'folk' in a general sense to refer to popular acoustic-based music, often with introspective or political lyrics" (p. 37). From the musicians and venues discussed, it is clear that he is writing about the music played at folk clubs and festivals. He confirms this when he describes Pete Seeger as "indisputably North America's greatest living folk artist" — a very disputable remark (p. 130). However, when he says that the roots of the 1960s "folk boom" "go back to 1950 when the Weavers' reworking of a traditional song, 'Good Night Irene,' hit number one on the pop charts," he is choosing an arbitrary date and not even properly examining Pete Seeger's musical career (p. 38). This is not an academic study and should not be judged as such but poor research is unacceptable in any book. A lack of accuracy is one of the major weaknesses of *An Unfinished Conversation*. In one gushing but incorrect statement, Gudgeon exclaims :

Stan... almost single-handedly established a Canadian folk idiom, and helped spark interest in British and Celtic music that swept across North America. Because of Stan, we've all come to recognize that there are other "American" forms of music besides country and the blues. There are jigs, reels, shanties, broadside ballads, hornpipes — all of which deserve a place, not just in music history but in contemporary song writing as well. [70]

The writer seems to be confusing his personal discovery of folk music with North America's. A moderate amount of research would have shown that in 1975, when Stan was still largely unknown, the music which Gudgeon described above was popular on the folk circuit. Appearing with Stan at Mariposa was a large selection of Canadian, British and Irish performers, far too many to list here but which included Newfoundland and Maritime traditional singers and fiddlers, established French-Canadian instrumentalists Philippe Bruneau and Gilles Losier, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, and the British-Irish revival band The Boys of the Lough.

Furthermore, Gudgeon — in spite of his interest in Stan's Maritime roots — seems to feel that south Ontario is Canada and appears unaware that traditional music was alive and well in Quebec and Atlantic Canada, half of Canada's provinces, before Stan became popular. In fact, Gudgeon rarely, if ever, mentions Quebec and French-Canadian music although he claims to speak of Canadian music. Stan Rogers deserves credit for his contributions, which were considerable, but he was one performer (albeit an outstanding one) in a larger movement.

We must also question whether a "Canadian folk idiom" and "British and Celtic music" (except where they have been firmly established in Canadian culture) go hand in hand. My experience of the south Ontario folk-revival scene in which Stan operated was that it was dominated by British and American immigrants, few of whom had any interest in traditional Canadian music. Stan, who was at times vehemently anti-American, was drawn to the British side of this scene. Does this reflect an independent Canadian spirit or a sort of cultural colonialism which still affects the maritime mentality? (I do not exclude myself from this comment.) This is not to suggest that Stan and his songs were not thoroughly Canadian but like many of his peers, he was highly influenced by the British folk revival.

Another problem with this book is its lack of anecdotal evidence. Too often Gudgeon tells us what kind of person Stan was rather than providing us with stories and letting us see for ourselves. The occasional anecdotes — like the story of Stan tormenting Jim Post (above) — are a breath of fresh air and give the reader a much clearer picture of the man but one longs for more. In one instance, Gudgeon describes the time spent recording the live album "Between the Breaks" as "one of the most hectic weeks of Stan's life" (p. 91). Here we have a performer who Gudgeon has established as a fierce-tempered perfectionist who had severely alienated musical collaborators, experiencing one of the most hectic weeks of his life while interacting with a number of other people under stressful conditions. The only quote Gudgeon provides to describe the atmosphere is a mundane comment by Grit Laskin about recording more material than was needed (p. 92). Considering Gudgeon's access to Stan's family, friends and fellow performers, the lack of anecdotes indicates either poor interviewing or poor writing skills.

The major flaw of *An Unfinished Conversation* is its brevity. After the acknowledgements, foreword, two-page introduction and contents, the book

contains 115 pages of biography, 16 pages of fairly interesting photographs, 64 pages of songs, and seven pages of discographies. The discographies provide a reasonable sampling for a reader needing an introduction to the various types of English-Canadian folk music. The collection of song lyrics has been chosen at random and includes a few unpublished songs (without music). While it is interesting to have these lyrics in one place, their presence is not of great value as most are readily available elsewhere. Stan only recorded seven albums (or whatever they call them these days) and included lyric sheets with each. He also published words and music to forty songs in his book "Songs from Fogarty's Cove" (1982).

The 115-page biography includes a two-page memorial poem to Stan, three recipes, numerous quotes from songs — often without providing any important context — and large gaps where nothing is printed. By the time these fillers are eliminated, we are left with a biography the length of a magazine article. Chapters range from two to seven pages. Chapters of this length are common in books for readers in grade three to six but seem bizarre in a biography aimed at competent adult readers. Just as the reader is introduced to an era of Rogers life, the chapter ends. In this slim book, the insightful analysis expressed in Gudgeon's "Morningside" interview is almost entirely lacking. When it does emerge, he drops it like a hot coal. In a chapter entitled "Delineation," Gudgeon states that the theme of the album "Northwest Passage" is "lines."

The linear quality of communications is a very Canadian concept. We see it in our routes of transportation : rivers, railway [sic], roads and even airways, all of which are oriented in an east-west line. The irony is obvious to anyone who lives in this country, lines distance even as lines connect. [106-7]

He then moves on immediately to another subject. Gudgeon obviously is a thoughtful, analytical person but for some reason refuses to develop his ideas to this book.

Dissatisfying as *An Unfinished Conversation* is, it deserves a place in the library of any student of folk music because it is the only book documenting the life and career of Stan Rogers, a highly talented and influential musician. Also, few other books examine the Canadian folk-revival scene of this era. However, a good biography has yet to be written. The life and music of Stan Rogers deserve more than 115 sparsely-filled pages.

### Notes

1. For those unfamiliar with Stan Rogers' music, I would highly recommend *Home in Halifax*, a recording of a concert late in his career.
2. Liner notes to the *Mariposa '75* album.

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*How "Natives" Think : About Captain Cook, for Example*. By Marshall Sahlins. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. 318.)

Marshall Sahlins is widely known in several fields of anthropology. His new book, *How "Natives" Think*, however, has its genesis in a specific and highly charged scholarly debate which may be unfamiliar to most readers. The context in which it was written requires introduction.

Sahlins has been studying the anthropology of Polynesian history, with a strong Hawaiian focus, since the 1970s. His best known work in this area is probably *Islands of History*, a collection of essays published in 1985. There, as elsewhere, Sahlins elaborated a compelling analysis of the events that transpired when Captain James Cook visited Hawaii in January of 1779 and when he returned (the events leading up to his death in early February).

Contemporary writers reported that the Hawaiians received Cook as a manifestation of their annually returning god of fruitful renewal, Lono, whose New Year or Makahiki ceremonies were then in progress. For the Hawaiians, his fulfilment of that role seemed complete when his ships left Kealakekua Bay at the ritually correct moment, 3 February 1779. Cook's fateful troubles came when a storm wrecked the foremast of the *Resolution*, and he was obliged to put back to the bay for repairs. As a fortuitous manifestation of Lono, he returned inexplicably, out of season, just as the powers of the king, the warrior chiefs, and their god were being renewed. The resultant tensions and troubles led to the death of Cook, the