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CD HA001, 2001, Notes by Russell Bowers).

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Espace

Space

Volume 24, numéro 1, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006548ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/006548ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Hiscock, P. (2002). Compte rendu de [*The Very Best of Harry Hibbs, Volume One.* By Harry Hibbs (Producer, Russell Bowers. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation CD HA001, 2001, Notes by Russell Bowers).] *Ethnologies*, 24 (1), 311–314. <https://doi.org/10.7202/006548ar>

The Very Best of Harry Hibbs, Volume One. By Harry Hibbs (Producer, Russell Bowers. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation CD HA001, 2001, Notes by Russell Bowers).

Like Don Messer a generation earlier, thirty years ago Harry Hibbs seemed to be a national Canadian icon of cultural regionalism. He epitomized the variety of Canadian culture at a time when Canadians were intensely aware of American cultural dominance. That intensity has passed and Harry Hibbs himself has been dead for thirteen years. The release in late 2001 of a CD containing two dozen titles, on 21 tracks, of music performed by Harry Hibbs is a welcome event. This CD, produced by Russell Bowers for and distributed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, provides a new view of an important part of the canon of Newfoundland vernacular music of the 1960s through the 1980s.

Harry Hibbs was born in 1942 on the then industrial Bell Island, a mining community in Conception Bay, not very far from St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland. He grew up in a musical family with a fiddling father and a singing mother, and in his early years he must have soaked up influences from the lively musical community around him. In the middle of the twentieth century there was a vigorous musical culture on radio, and Bell Island was well situated to hear local, American, and Canadian stations.

Bell Island was fine for Harry, but by the 1960s it was clear the life of Bell Island's large mine was limited and, four years before its final demise, he left home in 1962 for Toronto, the destination of choice for his generation of Newfoundland emigrants. He never lost his roots on Bell Island, and continued to symbolically connect himself to it through his musical career.

Nonetheless, a musical career was not his first choice. In Toronto he worked as a press operator for five years. A work accident crushed his legs in 1967, putting him in hospital for months and leaving him with the prospect of being unable to work for the next few years. An activity that kept him occupied during his convalescence was playing his accordion and singing the songs he'd learned as a boy and later. This eclectic mix sustained him for years.

In early 1968, newly released from hospital in Toronto, he was convinced to hobble, on crutches, on to a stage at a party and perform. Word of his musical talents spread rapidly among Newfoundlanders in

Toronto and thence to a wider audience. In the context of late-sixties, multicultural Canada and the emigrant culture of Newfoundlanders in Toronto, he was seen as a new star in the firmament. Harry liked this new fame and line of work.

A month later, the Caribou Club opened. It was a favourite home for Newfoundlanders and the club featured him as its star. A series of career events cascaded: radio and television features, a recording and touring deal, magazine write-ups, and a television series all contributed to make Harry Hibbs a nearly overnight Canadian star.

Hibbs's music was, if not revolutionary, then sharply evolutionary and syncretistic. In the popular traditions of music in Newfoundland in the 1950s, the accordionist was mainly an instrumentalist. Hibbs was among the first popular Newfoundland performers to play his accordion and sing at the same time. This was possible partly because of his mastery of microphones and amplification — he often sang in unison with his accordion, but knew how to manipulate levels in such a way that his voice was in the lead. Wilf Doyle, who has had a forty-five year career regionally in Newfoundland was a forerunner in this regard and Hibbs was probably aware of his late-fifties radio and record performances. Hibbs used country music instrumentation freely: a simple drum kit, a bass guitar, and often a fiddle and backup singers.

Harry Hibbs's music was rooted in the traditional, pre-twentieth century song culture of Newfoundland and in the early twentieth century popular culture not only of the province but of pan-North American "Irish" music. That Irish music had taken root as a vernacular form in Newfoundland at least a generation earlier, at the beginning of the radio era, and arguably long before that. Using "modern" instrumentation, and a full range of ideas drawn from current country and western and middle-of-the-road music, in the late 1960s Hibbs represented a new syncretism. His style brought together the upbeat and modern sound of a bass- and drum-driven band with the appearance and appeal of what could be heard by all as "traditional".

Hibbs's voice was a clear, high-pitched, nasal one, moving freely into the falsetto, with the fluid subtlety of what is popularly known as "the Irish tenor". His preferences in local song ran to the Irish and that colour of his repertoire is reflected in the present CD. Never strictly defined, his repertoire drew on songs and styles from the oral tradition of Newfoundland, from the current Bell Island and Toronto song-making

scenes, from music halls, and from North American Irish music. Included here are “I’s the B’y”, “Kelligrews Soiree” and “The Ryans and the Pittmans” from the Newfoundland local tradition; “Roses are Blooming” and “Nobody’s Child” from early country music; and “The Black Velvet Band”, “Twenty-One Years”, and “The Wild Rover” from the mid-twentieth century Irish revival. Music-hall favourites (“Come Round Any Old Time”) and folk revival songs from the oral canon (“Nightingale”, Laws P14) are also included.

Hibbs plays accordion on all but two tracks, one of which (David Mallett’s “The Garden Song” — “Inch by inch, row by row”) was his attempt in the 1980s to re-emerge as an important Canadian recording star. A decade earlier, he had had that status, when he was fêted on national radio and television programmes, touring widely, and recording regularly. (A page in the CD booklet shows the covers of sixteen of his LPs.) But by the 1980s, Harry Hibbs had little to show for his fame and fans. His last years were spent keeping body and soul together by working in a warehouse for a national retail chain. The intervening years had seen his once powerful form of regional music in a multicultural Canada converted into an old-fashioned form the music markets wanted little to do with. He died of cancer in December 1989.

In his heyday, Hibbs was popular at home in Newfoundland, but his career was mainly in central Canada where he played at clubs that catered to a “Down East” clientele and where he had his own widely-distributed television series. His meteoric career signalled for a generation of Newfoundland musicians the possibility of turning regional music into commercial success. Within a couple of years of his rise, young rock musicians were turning their hands at incorporating Newfoundland folk music into their preferred musical forms, with heavy drum and bass beats and electric guitar riffs. Much of that trad-rock scene in St John’s was informed by a desired political and cultural independence from Canada. Hibbs’s music was seen by some of its performers as the very antithesis of what they did. For a decade or more, the accordion — so strongly associated with Hibbs — was the least likely of the traditional instruments to turn up in the trad-rock repertoire in St. John’s.

It is worth reading the enclosed lyrics sheet while listening to the CD and noting the interesting differences. The producer, Russell Bowers, has included a caveat to picky listeners like me, pointing out that Hibbs

regularly changed words, substituting as he saw fit “to make the song his own”. Most performers do. But his versions, particularly of tricky songs like John Burke’s “Kelligrews Soiree”, show clear signs of having learned them aurally rather than from written texts. Again, this points out the fact that the “authenticity” he represented to late-1960s Canada was not misplaced.

The tracks that make up this CD are from a variety of sources, at least some of them from well-used and no doubt scratchy LP records. They have been digitally cleaned and enhanced, a process that gives a crystal clear sound even for the previously unreleased track that originated on a videotape of one of Hibbs’s television shows (“Roses Are Blooming”).

The CD package is nicely produced. Its twenty-page booklet is filled with photographs from all stages of Hibbs’ career, showing him almost always in his signature vest and salt-and-pepper cap. Two journalistic excerpts, from articles written in 1971 and just after his death in 1989, serve up most of the biographical information found here. I would have preferred to find more information, about both Hibbs and the individual cuts: which albums did they come from, what technical decisions were made by the producer for this compilation, what do we know about the studio musicians? The recording of “The Ryans and Pittmans” for example seems to have been recorded at a lively and relaxed session and it would be nice to know more about it.

For a long time Harry Hibbs’ music has been unavailable except on long-deleted LP records. This CD is a wonderful series of snapshots of Harry Hibbs’ twenty-one-year career as Newfoundland’s premier musical representative in Canada. I recommend its purchase to anyone interested in vernacular music in Newfoundland and Canada.

Reference

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