

***Songs of the Iron Trail: The Canadian Railroad Expérience in Song.* By Barry Luft and Tim Rogers with Crit Laskin; Patty Rogers, bass, Roy Warhurst, fiddle. (Calgary: Sefel Records Ltd, 1983. SEF83/T01)**

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Although his selection gives but a glimpse of the world view of his subjects, Elbaz's interpretation is sound and perceptive and results in the arousal of interest in the intriguing Moroccan-Sephardic tradition with its syncretic characteristics and its deeply-rooted faith in the supernatural. One is left wanting more, such as details about the daily life of the common people, special occasions, values, and customs. One hopes that the entire collection will be published soon to offer a more complete picture and broader view of the rich culture it depicts. This is an immigrant culture in transition. Now is the time to focus on it.

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**Songs of the Iron Trail:
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*By Barry Luft and Tim Rogers with Grit Laskin;
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fiddle.*
(Calgary: Sefel Records Ltd, 1983.
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To begin with, I must say that it is hard to say much about this album without quoting at least 65% of whatever one might need directly from the liner notes: "It is a mosaic of songs about the tremendous impact that the railroad has had on the lives of Canadians as our country has evolved. An impact that is so much a part of our history that it is impossible to visualize Canada — as a country — without reference to the railroad".

This is for the most part a very smooth piece of work, from "Dennis Budgen's marvellous painting for the cover" —

"tasty"/"delicious" was my first reaction — through the liner notes and performance and recording quality. Last first for simplicity: clearly recorded and very cleanly pressed. Nicely balanced too, all the instrumental work is there in its fullest clarity for you to enjoy and swipe licks from, and none of it overrides the word/voice combination which is the heart of this or any folk music. "I need more guitar in the mix, more!" Nonsense; here the instrumentation is best subordinate to the voice. Did you ever notice the incongruity of addressing any singer/songwriter or traditional balladeer with, "What kind of music do you play?" so commonly asked, instead of "What kind of music do you sing?"? Back to the words. The songs have been selected in such a way that since their individual contents have a great deal of detail spreading out from the core of each piece, the totality is an effect of a much more complete coverage/cross-view than is actually possible within the scope of a single LP. Very pleasing. You would not convince me that the Canadian railroad experience might actually be well covered in eleven songs... All the more reason to own this LP. All of this is enhanced by good notes that give background, settings and sources to the proper degree (for me, anyhow) of fulfilment, that I might visualize the action musically taking place, or feel conveniently pointed in the right direction to look, did I feel I had to know more. Nokena's comments, from which the album title is taken, are as valuable as they are funny; both, because of their outside perspective. That I can always take more of, for the insight as well as the giggles, and for the savoury consciousness thereof.

For me, the "choice centre cuts" on this platter are "Hudson Bay Line", the touching "Prairie Harvesters' Song", "Hobo's Song to the Mounties", "B.C. Rail" and "Wreck of the Evening Mail"; the others are "heavy outside cuts": good, crisp and tasty, but a bit thick. That is not a putdown, as Tim

Rogers, Barry Luft and the other album personnel back in the van are aware.

Now, here I feel that a few offerings on performance might help future projects of this type. Offerings, not darts, and made in the spirit of contribution between artists. Not all that much either, and I'll be glad to deliberate details late at the "Pak-kut" next time I'm in Calgary. For now: some individual words seem to have gotten switched in the recording process. Most of these slips don't mean much, but one in the "Wreck of the Evening Mail" is important: the lines: "...men laboured hard in vain/to stop those cars that broke away..." sung as: "...to watch those cars that..." I think I can guess how that slip occurred, but I am concerned about it, because either in past consciousness or present, or even in unconscious innocence, we are engaged in a process of communication through the time stream and it best serves that process to render the voices of the past as accurately as possible. This is one perspective; I am well aware that there are others.

In like orientation — and, again, this is but one of the possible perspectives — a given piece, highly charged with emotion, will usually be uncommunicative if the performer falls victim to the power of the given joy or tragedy. Why? Well, it's nice, it's good, to know that your friend is deep enough and sensitive enough to feel the full import of what they're singing and not simply putting up with the words so that they can play a fast grouping of hot licks (sadly, some do). However, if you/I/we get carried away by that tide, then your audience loses what was to be delivered; that is, it, the emotional emphasis, does not get out where it may be perceived and carried on. That happens a bit here and there in this album, and I suspect that part of the reason will have been studio pressure; and if (guessing again) some of the material was newly learned for the...uh...express...purpose of fitting it into a recording, the combined

tensions can really rub an entertainer's sensitivities quite raw. The best answer for these things is, of course, more, and careful rehearsals. Unfortunately, that time is just not always available. I speak in sympathy. More than a few of us have had material dropped on us with only a couple of days' notice when working in tight situations, like working for some radio stations, another impacted experience which touches the lives of Canadians...

A last thought on musical arrangements: anybody who has the taste to bring the warmth and genius of Grit Laskin into any musical project deserves a pat on the back and a bow right there, but I feel that if the whistle had been left out of "The Wreck of the Evening Mail", the concertina would have made the tragedy of the piece much more poignant, and properly so; that is, without sugaring or overloading it. That's all. I thought the rest was fine; good fingerwork by all concerned. Seriously, these are not subtleties of performance in a vacuum, but real and important details of the communicative process in musical artistry.

Now in winding down, let me say that this is an important piece of work. My curiosity is extremely piqued to note that there is "a book containing these and other Canadian railroad songs to be published shortly". Super. Will it contain *all* of the material that Rogers has now become the receiver for? Will more of it be recorded? If the next recordings and the book are as well planned and cared-for as *Songs of the Iron Trail*, then they/it should fill all its levels of action: folklore, performance, communication, presentation and musicality. They should even sell well. With these levels of quality already shown, I should be very surprised if they did not become widely sought after. If I had no other way to get that cover painting, I would not consider myself cheated in buying the music to get it: they are complementary. In fact, I would like to see a poster of the album cover issued, 25%

larger and otherwise the same, black bordr and all.

Might I suggest, if it has not already been done, opening a channel of exchange with Utah Phillips, he being one of the foremos American railroad addicts of our time; I'd be really surprised if he didn't use some of it, and there's another voice and another communication. Proper that it be heard on both sides of the border. Fitting. The results and the process should be interesting and exciting to all concerned.

That's all for now; further discussion to be had, late, over Chinese noddles. And *that* really is fitting. Shéh shéh?!

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Au Village-du-Bois. Mémoires d'une communauté acadienne

Par Ronald Labelle

(Moncton: Centre d'études acadiennes, 1985. 254 p.)

Le début est long, aride, on s'emmêle dans le défrichetage et on persiste. Curieusement, cela rappelle le début d'un *Seigneur des anneaux*, de Tolkien, ou encore un commencement d'évangile à la Mathieu : telle famille s'est installée puis une telle, un tel a engendré un tel qui a engendré un tel. À travers le prologue de Paul Surette et le chapitre un, minutieusement, individu après individu, famille après famille, génération après génération, on voit une communauté humaine prendre forme de l'informe et tisser un épisode local de l'histoire. Ma première réaction à *Au Village-du-Bois* n'a pas été scientifique : j'ai été émue. Émue d'entrer ainsi par le menu dans l'effort humain. Je me suis imaginé peu à peu ce village, sa vallée, la « prée » ovale et ses aboiteaux, les terres hautes, les tensions internes, les abus de pouvoir du clan DesBarres qui inféode la place, les femmes qui vont ensemble au ruisseau au printemps se geler à laver la literie d'hiver, le cortège

annuel pour aller chercher le hareng à Shédiac ou à Barachois. Cette histoire à échelle humaine sent la sueur, on l'entend rire et on l'entend parler. On en arrive à percevoir les années de persévérance qui font qu'aujourd'hui ce village est là et qu'il a une histoire. Voilà. En rédigeant cet ouvrage, Ronald Labelle a réussi à donner de la profondeur au présent.

Il le fait dans un style simple, précis. Cela n'est pas sans redondance, et on l'excuse car elle n'est pas exagérée : après tout la vie quotidienne n'est pas divisée en secteurs comme les chapitres d'un livre et on comprend que le curé qui a vidé l'église de son autel et des ornements dans les années '60 ait fait scandale au chapitre sur l'histoire orale et au chapitre sur la vie religieuse. Par la division adoptée, on passe de l'histoire au labeur ouvrier — travail du bois, de la pierre, culture des prées et des terres hautes — à la vie domestique, — alimentation, habitation, entretien, médecine —, à la vie religieuse et sociale, au divertissement — contes, légendes, musique et danse. C'est l'ordre de l'homme traditionnel : d'abord une terre, et il est intéressant de voir l'importance des terres allouées aux jeunes célibataires dans l'historique, puis une occupation pour nourrir sa famille, — « La femme était mieux avec cinq, six cents piastres dans sa jambe de bas que manger des croutes de pain », dira un informateur —, ensuite le train ordinaire de la maison, puis si on a le temps, le débordement vers les autres et les activités de loisir. On peut se demander quelle organisation de cette même matière aurait correspondu cette fois à la vision du monde de la femme traditionnelle à partir de son rôle et de ses priorités à elle.

La monographie locale est un genre en soi de la littérature folklorique et de la littérature paroissiale. Dans le premier cas elle naît d'un désir du folkloriste de mettre en forme et de communiquer son enquête laquelle, surtout si elle est d'ordre général, se limite d'elle-