

CANADIAN CHILDREN'S RECORDS V1

From the perspective of 1989, it is certainly fair to say that the 'eighties have been crucial years for the children's recording industry in Canada. Entertainers like Sharon, Lois and Bram, Fred Penner, Raffi, and Bob Schneider, to name only a few, have justly become household names for a whole generation of children and their parents. The success of national and international tours and record sales indicates that a very big market has been solidly established. At this pivotal stage as we slide into the 'nineties, the questions that quite naturally come to mind are: Where do we go from here? What new avenues are there left to explore in theme and performance? Can the same (sometimes well-worn) formulas continue to work? And so, at the decade's end, I feel that the artists should do some serious stock-taking about what they feel their goals should be in the 'nineties and about ways to infuse exciting new material and artistry into the existing storehouse of talent.

Nineteen eighty-eight was a busy year for Fred Penner: besides undertaking an extended Canadian tour from March to June, he released his fifth album, *Fred Penner's place*. Versatility has been the hallmark of his previous albums (as I pointed out in *CCL*, 49, 1988). Penner now shows himself to be master of a stunning variety of rhythms and moods. From the jaunty opener, "We're gonna shine," which includes French and Spanish verses, to the reassuring promise of "You can do it (if you try)," the album presents entertainment at every level. Backed up by Connie Kaldor (see below), Penner makes a bow to swing in "Sing sing sing" and the novelty song of the 1940's, "Mairzy doats." Also a feature of Side 2 is "The Trans-Canadian Super Continental Streamlined Special Express," an up-beat original, which presents aspects (I wish these had been elaborated upon) of Canadian geography from east to west in each verse. Penner's versatility is shown in the rollicking traditional Italian song, "E compare" (dealing with various musical instruments), the original, "Father's song," with its soothing, heartwarming melody, and a song to which many children could relate – the ballad "Moving time," with its reconciliation of past and future.

Lyric sheets/activity booklets have always been an important adjunct to the record itself and the enclosed pamphlet in *Fred Penner's place* is one of the most attractive and helpful I have seen. As an aid to parent and teacher, there are activity suggestions following many song lyrics, but the "Tree of creativity" to be used with the song, "I am the wind," is especially enlightening. "Wind" studies and activities are suggested in the areas of math and science, field trips, physical education, language arts, music, and art. Similar activities could be applied to other songs on the album as well. Bravo, Fred!

It is now over ten years since the release of their first album, *One elephant* and in that time, Sharon, Lois and Bram not only have become an institution

for young Canadian audiences but also, as a result of their television exposure and tremendously successful American tour, they have become international celebrities. *Stay tuned*, their eighth album, includes twenty-three new songs from the TV series, *The elephant show*, and provides the formula that has been working so successfully over the past decade: up-beat versions of traditional material, nonsense, folk, swing, calypso, rock, even a lullaby. The result is plenty of lively entertainment with just a few moments to catch one's breath. Most of the songs are well-known to older generations ("How much is that doggie in the window?" "The Hokey Pokey," "A tisket a tasket," "Rock around the clock"); yet, one original about travel in outer space, "The galaxy song," provides some interesting scientific facts about "this amazing and expanding universe" and similar songs might well be considered for future albums.

The activity booklet is anecdotal and not quite so creative as Fred Penner's, but the song "Shoo fly pie" does come complete with recipe. With Sharon, Lois and Bram, it is essentially the delight in responding to music through song and action that has become a trademark; there is little introspection or appeal to the more sensitive emotions of children. The razzle-dazzle is all very well, but one does get the feeling that the "elephant" experience can be somewhat overbalanced in that direction.

The lullaby business certainly is thriving in 1989! On the west coast, Pat Carfra established the trend in 1982 with *Lullabies and laughter* followed it up in 1984 with *Sleepy-heads and Out-of-beds*. Carfra's latest album, *Babes, beasts and birds* uses the same successful formula in presenting some fairly lively songs on Side one (the wide awake but settling in period), while the lullabies appear on Side two (dozing off). As the title indicates, most of the songs are about animals and birds, but there is plenty of variety, from "When the cows get up in the morning," an echo song with animal imitations and the nonsense of "The sow song," to the American folksong "Had a little rooster." "The bear hunt," a chant, has excellent sound effects and Side one establishes a happy, vital sense of camaraderie in song. The "Dozing off" side shows Carfra's research and fine knowledge of lullabies from many lands; the notes indicate that several have been sung in the same family for five generations and, in the oral tradition, some of the words have been misplaced. Well known traditional English "Oranges and lemons" is matched with French-Canadian "La poulette grise;" Scotland is represented by "Ally bally," a song about Coulter's candy and Wales by "Suo Gan," sung beautifully as by Nana Mouskouri on her *Songs of the British Isles* album. The music is professionally presented throughout and Carfra's fine voice is consistently well controlled.

Lullaby berceuse, the first album by Connie Kaldor and Carmen Campagne, gives us just that – a fine collection of both traditional and (more frequently) original lullabies. Kaldor, who also appears as back-up singer in *Fred Penner's place* and is a veteran of the Canadian folk circuit, has a beautifully resonant contralto voice, which is nowhere heard to better advantage than in "All

through the night" and "I have you," a hauntingly meaningful Kaldor original on Side one. A highlight here is "Dream baby/L'enfant des rêves," which literally filters out of the lusciously orchestrated themes of Debussy's "Clair de lune." By the time Carmen Campagne begins the French section, we are soaring into dreamland. The effect is soothing – and stunningly done. On the other side, Campagne's gentler, cosier voice joins Kaldor's in *Les berceuses*. Again, original work predominates and a highlight is "Maman fait dodo," which blends the voices beautifully. Altogether, the album is wonderfully satisfying and cries out for a sequel. As Craig MacInnis noted in *The Toronto Star* (January 15, 1989), Kaldor may be working her way into the big time "by putting her audience to sleep"!

Charlotte Diamond is no newcomer to this feature. (Her album, *Diamond in the rough*, was reviewed in *CCL*, no. 49). Her clear, engaging voice and personality continue to create a variety of moods in both *Diamonds and dragons* and *Qu'il y ait toujours le soleil*. As its title suggests, *Diamonds and dragons* is an adventure into the fantastic and the creation of real and imaginary animals in art is the subject of the title song. As well as dragons, dinosaurs, sharks, purple kitties, unicorns, and an imp with blood-red eyes populate Side one (the last appears in a well told spooky tale about point of view and, ultimately, friendship). Wild imagination, however, is not what this album is completely about. Side two might well be studied by Sharon, Lois and Bram à propos of my comment above. It deals with a variety of warm "emotional thoughts" largely concerning the problem of identity. Sharing the limelight without always competing ruthlessly is portrayed in "Co-operation;" "Animals have personality" concludes with this statement:

Well, I'm an animal, you are too
We're just like our animal friends
I care for you, you care for me
Our friendship never ends.

The album concludes with "You can make a miracle," an inspirational song written, the note states, "for the Children's Hospital in Vancouver, B.C. and dedicated to all children in need all over the world."

Charlotte Diamond's latest album, *Qu'il y ait toujours le soleil*, provides excellent entertainment for French speaking youngsters or for anglophones in French immersion programs. There is plenty of variety from the jaunty translation of her hit, "Four hugs a day" ("Embrasse quatre foi"), through traditional material ("V'la l'bon vent"), to the beautifully sung "Donne-moi la main." In between, we have the saga of "Je suis une pizza" and its unfortunate end; "Le sergent," a military song with a pacifist message; the familiar "La bamba;" "La belle pieuvre," a Diamond original describing underwater eating habits; and a rowdily humorous "La bastringue," complete with dancing instructions.

The title song, celebrating the delights of "le soleil," "le ciel bleu," and "ma maman" is also presented in English, Russian, Italian, Spanish, German and Chinese and, in its own way, I think, sums up Charlotte Diamond's universal appeal.

And so, as we move over to the 'nineties, we look forward eagerly to the same high standards of excellence and professionalism among the artists; as well, we hope they will present some pleasant surprises along the way – no simple task, indeed!

RECORDINGS DISCUSSED

Fred Penner's place. Fred Penner. Oak St. Music Inc., 1988.

Stay tuned. Sharon, Lois and Bram. Elephant Records, 1987.

Babes, beasts and birds. Pat Carfra, 1987.

Lullaby berceuse. Connie Kaldor and Carmen Campagne. Oak St. Music Inc., 1988.

Diamonds and dragons. Charlotte Diamond. Hug Bug Records, 1988.

Qu'il y ait toujours le soleil. Charlotte Diamond. Hug Bug Records, 1988.

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