

Canadian Children's Records: A Survey

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Nineteen sixty-seven not only ushered in Canada's second century, but also introduced probably the first and certainly the most famous Canadian children's song, Bobby Gimby's "Ca-na-da". Since then, the number of records geared especially for the 3-9 age group has been phenomenal. Along with Gimby, artists such as Sandy Offenheim, Sandra Beech, and Raffi, emerging as household troubadours of the young, are acknowledged communicators of feelings, humour, nonsense, and beauty. Today, there is a wide market of fine children's records by Canadian artists and it seems appropriate at this point to pause and survey the field.

Excellence in a children's record is a fusion of a number of qualities that happily come together in one groovy moment to produce a recognizable pleasure to the sensibilities. Each artist, of course, has his own ideal and attitude toward his material. One claims his album was designed "to amuse, delight, and stretch the imagination"; another stresses "the joy of words and word games and the magic that word images can evoke"; yet another plays more upon the feelings: "a lot of humour, a dash of whimsy and a serious moment or two . . ." Certainly, all the records invite participation from the listener. Bobby Gimby quotes a Chinese proverb: "Tell me, I'll forget. Show me and I might remember, - but involve me and I'll understand." The lyrics to the songs are included in almost every album and in many there are activity booklets with suggestions for teachers and interested parents . . . but more of this later.

By their very nature, records have the advantage over books in appealing to the immediate attention of the child. Yet, this fact can turn against the recording as well; the child not engaged by the sounds he hears can simply walk away and not play the record again - bad news for the concerned parents' material investment in their children's cultural life!

In listening to these recordings many times and in testing them with children of the appropriate age group, I found that several of the qualities contributing to success emerged clearly. Therefore, a general discussion of several general areas - selection of materials, performance, background and special effects - will precede an examination of each record's individual merits.

In the choice of songs, an artist can use either original work (generally of his/her own composition) or traditional material (and therefore familiar and "safe"). Frequently, both original and traditional songs are used on the

same recording (e.g., Bobby Gimbi, Raffi), while occasionally a familiar melody is given new, up-to-date, or "relevant" lyrics ("He'll be comin' down the chimney when he comes . . .").

Totally new songs appeal to children most often when the words relate to their everyday living experiences. These express not only their pleasures and wishes, but also their fears, disappointments, and concerns for identity. Of course, everyday life can be the source of a great deal of nonsense, but the art of creating good nonsense is not just a haphazard thing: it must have its own inner logic and apparent structure. One of the techniques of nonsense is free word-play but, while exciting to the performer and perhaps the adult listener, too much verbal sophistry is confusing and ultimately boring to the child. Melodies should be hummable or sustained by a catchy or familiar rhythm pattern. Admittedly, certain songs are remembered for their witty lyrics, but they need an appealing melody too.

Recording artists may feel secure in avoiding all these pitfalls by choosing well known material, such as spirituals, folk songs, or popular songs from the 20's. But it is not enough simply to bang away at the familiar old tunes in the hope that the child listener will respond to them. They must be performed with vitality and a sense of novelty. Good taste and respect are certainly the best rules-of-thumb when resurrecting an oldie but goodie.

In attentively observing children's reactions, I found that the performers who were best received had clear, strong, but "untrained" sounding voices. In order to evoke a variety of moods, the voice(s) must be flexible, confident, yet relaxed and engaging. Children appreciate honesty; they are confused when the artist takes his "mask" seriously.

The use of background accompaniment can either make or break the appeal of a record for children. Sometimes a variety of rhythm-band style instruments mixed into a synthesizer allows the child to recognize the sounds he can make to participate in the fun with his own simple instruments. Problems with background seem not so much in the quality as in the quantity: in certain records the accompaniment intruded so much that the lyrics were hard to catch, especially in original songs with an up-beat tempo. Gimmicks are fun - but again, they ought not to be overly exploited. Most often they were used as sound effects to express or extend the lyrics. One eight-year-old boy proudly brought in the neighbourhood gang to hear the graphic burps on two records. But there were many other things he enjoyed about these songs: in other words, gimmicks are fine so long as they do not, like all aspects of art, become an end in themselves.

The Kaleidoscope Theatre was founded in 1974 with the aim of bringing "new and evocative" drama to primary school children. The songs and

poems on *The Allihipporhinocrocodiligator* have been used in their productions over the years. The effect of the record is therefore primarily theatrical. Beginning softly, in spoken voice and with ample use of sound effects, many of the poems break into music with a strong rhythmic background. It is not difficult to see that the company is fascinated with the evocative power of words. The two sides of the record are composed of songs and poems about journeys into a garden and to the sea.

The garden side really has only one song worth waiting for: "The Allihipporhinocrocodiligator". With a solid beat and plenty of nonsensical word-play, the song makes the creature on the album cover come alive and the song climaxes with the famous burp. The journey to the seaside contains two haunting songs, "Sea Shell" and "Sea Gull Song". Although I enjoyed both of these, the "Sea Shell" seemed a little mature for a younger audience. The rollicking "Mrs. Ocean" in fine Irish style also was a favourite, but the *tour de force* of side two was "The Persian Market". Bizarre, eerie voices whisper exotic pleasures to be found there, although when one reads the lyrics as poetry, it is easy to see how important the live delivery of the song actually is. Although too slow-moving for my taste, it was the children's favourite.

In the past five years, Sandy Offenheim has established herself as a composer of sensitive and appealing children's songs. Her three records, *If Snowflakes Fell in Flavours*, *Honey on Toast* (see CCL, No. 16, 56-58) and *Are We There Yet* reveal the Offenheim family as a talented group of performers. Part of Sandra Offenheim's success with children is that the themes of many of her songs deal directly with children's problems - from a child's point of view. Some titles will explain: "Eye to Tummy" (on the problem of being small), "Clearing the Table Is My Job" (rather than the fun of setting it), "Are We There Yet" (the rigours of a car trip), "I Swallowed My Tooth for Lunch" (self-explanatory), "I'm the Noisiest Person I Know" (another burp here). Dreams and wish-fulfilment are present in abundance but we are never far from reality; the flavoured imaginative snowflakes are really "covered in dust, POLLUTION and grime." Another reason for the success of these three records is the absolute clarity and precision with which the voices are projected. Stephen, age 8, manages to stay exactly on key while enunciating each word perfectly as he belts out the saga of his swallowed tooth. Nadine, 12, displays fine musical sense in "Not What I Used to Be" and marvellous versatility in the twangy "I Sprained My Neck Chewing Licorice". The senior Offenheims are almost as good! The standard is consistent throughout the three albums; I recommend them all and look forward to new releases.

Bigfoot Betty, the story of a Sasquatch with incurably cold feet and her discovery of humanity in the form of "Baldy", another misfit, is really

another version of the Rudolph cartoon shown at Christmas time with a little Canadiana thrown in. The simple narrative, incredibly drawn out to two sides of an LP, is padded with songs and instrumental interludes which tend to lose the young listeners although the words are capably sung by Elaine Overholt and Geannette Poniatowski backed up by a competent group of musicians. I got the impression that the musical settings, impressive in themselves, were ballet-like and the entire story would be made vivid by dramatising it. As narrator, Tedde Moore sometimes lets her voice trail off in a listless manner. There are only a few funny moments, as when Betty finally manages to accommodate a size fifty boot (from Toe-ron-to) and the moral of the story is clearly stated in the line: "How you look isn't nearly as important as who you are inside and I didn't understand that till I met you." *Bigfoot Betty* is really an album for adults. It is carefully and professionally produced, but a younger audience will need some parental guidance for its appreciation.

What is it about the Raffi records that makes one want to play them long after the children have gone to bed? There is something for every age group here (*More Singable Songs by Raffi*, *The Corner Grocery Store*) from "Six Little Ducks" and "There Came a Girl from France" to the captivating beauty of "Douglas Mountain". There are traditional songs ("Sodeo", "Pick a Bale of Cotton") and original material ("If I Had a Dinosaur", "Oh Me, Oh My"). Whether singing an up-beat spiritual or wistful ballad, the remarkably relaxed and flexible voice of Raffi makes for easy listening all the way. Children respond naturally to the action songs; serious moments are never drawn out; the record never lags. Performers who feel that children need the rah-rah bang-bang treatment should take a hint from the understated eloquence of this artist.

Bobby Gimby, "The Pied Piper of Canada", needs no introduction to adults or children; his hits "Ca-na-da" and "The Cricket Song" have become classics in recent Canadian culture. *The Bunny Hop Record* includes these plus a variety of spirituals, Al Jolson standards and traditional Dixieland material. While the latter give Gimby a chance to serenade with his trumpet and are clearly sung by "the kids", they are not performed with any great novelty and appear ultimately to act as filler for this two-hit album. Children like the Star Wars background of "Be Aware - Space Creatures" and the ghoulish screams of "The Hallowe'en Kids". The overall impression is one of inspiration and love: Gimby has well earned his ambassadorship of good will. The album comes with a heavy activity booklet, which suggests actions to accompany the lyrics; these could be helpful to teacher and parents.

The album cover of *Songs of Animals and Imagination* sung by Hank Davis seems intriguing enough with pictures of smiling children's faces and

contented looking cartoon animals. The blurb on the back promises a “happy and imaginative” listening experience. The record, however, is a disappointment. Hank Davis’s twangy voice, which is reminiscent of Johnny Cash, doesn’t seem particularly appropriate to the lyrics or mood of many of the songs. Side one gets off to a slow start with the repetitiveness of “The Never Song” and “There’s a Mouse Loose in Here”. The tango rhythm of “Marvin the Dinosaur”, the catchiest of the lot, might appeal to kids who are into dinosaurs. Generally, however, neither the melodies nor the lyrics seem especially original or imaginative. Some, such as “Redolent Cornflakes” have good ideas but simply carry on far too long. “Scrambled Eggs and Iguanas”, a nonsense song with a moral rather like “The Quangle Wangle’s Hat”, juxtaposes a few unlikely animals who go to the movies and drink nothing more ingenious than lemonade. Hank Davis should look more closely to models like Edward Lear to discover the requisites of good nonsense verse.

Younger sister to Will Millar of the Irish Rovers, Sandra Beech has produced in *Chickery Chick* a record of appealing songs primarily from the British Isles. From the bouncy title song and “Wella Wallia” (about a kidnapping witch) to “Carrion Crow” and “The Wee Falorie Man” the pace rarely slows down. Variations on well known nursery rimes such as “Old King Cole” prove refreshing. Sandra Beech’s voice is pleasingly clear and she is adequately backed up by a children’s chorus. The accompanying activity book provides music as well as lyrics and suggestions for actions, although they are unfortunately in a different order from the songs on the record, nor are all songs included.

Since 1969, Mariposa in the Schools (MITS) has been offering folk music to the schools and libraries of Ontario. The result of their efforts is an engaging record bringing together eighteen well-known performers in a variety of folksongs from French Canada, the Maritimes, the British Isles, Jamaica, and the southern U.S. Further efforts are made to present a cosmopolitan atmosphere by singing “one-two-three” in seven languages to the tune of “Frere Jacques”; “A la Volette” is sung alternately in French and in English lines. Traditional material is done up in new packages: the finale of side two is a rousing spiritual medley combining “Rock My Soul”, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” and “My Heaven So High” as a round. The rendition demands participation as does much of the record.

From the Winnipeg-based TV show, “Let’s Go” comes a most entertaining record by the same name. Lyrics and music are composed by Victor Davies and the songs are a fine example of how original material can be attractive to children. Practically every song is a parody of a style that would be appealing to the over-eight age group so that we have the “Dill Pickle Blues”, “Frankie Loved His Trumpet” (swing), “Ants in Your

Pants" (1920's), "The Band Called the Squawks" (1950's rock). Although most of the songs are up-beat, there are some wistful moments in "I'm Just a Clown" and the very beautiful "Tropic Fruit". The lyrics are clever and well sung by the "Let's Go Kids", but in several songs the voices are drowned out by a too-insistent background, which makes listener participation difficult.

Two recent records by Sharon Hampson, Lois Lilienstein, and Bram Morrison, *One Elephant, Deux Elephants* and *Smorgasbord*, provide a little of everything for the young listener. Heavily laced with playground chants and camping songs, both records draw primarily upon traditional material, although some, like "Looby Loo", are given a modern jazzed-up treatment. Unexpected things find their way in, too, such as an effective guitar arrangement of the "Gavotte" from Bach's 6th Cello Suite and a haunting Iroquois lullaby, "Ho Ho Watanay". A high point in *One Elephant, Deux Elephants* is the Newfoundland Jig medley and "Bye 'n Bye" with its soothing melody line. Helpful activity booklets are included.

While by no means exhaustive, this survey shows that there is a fine measure of excellence in Canadian children's records. Sensitivity, humour, craftsmanship, and honesty all seem to be behind the most successful. We look forward to more in the 'eighties.

RECORDINGS DISCUSSED

The Allhipporhinocrocodiligator, Kaleidoscope Theatre Productions. Seashell Recordings, 1978.

Are We There Yet, Sandy Offenheim. Berandol Records, 1978.

Honey on Toast, Sandy Offenheim. Berandol Records, 1977.

If Snowflakes Fell in Flavours, Sandy Offenheim. Berandol Records, 1975.

Bigfoot Betty, Rebecca Ryan and Mary Ramsey. Almada Corporation, 1979.

More Singable Songs, Raffi. Troubadour Records, 1977.

The Corner Grocery Store, Raffi. Troubadour Records, 1979.

The Bunny Hop Record. Bobby Gimby and the Kids. Almada Corporation, n.d.

Songs of Animals and Imagination, Hank Davis. Red Squirrel Records, n.d.

Chickery Chick, Sandra Beech. Golden Records, n.d.

Going Bananas, Mariposa in the Schools. Mariposa Folk Foundation, 1979.

Songs from "Let's Go", Janis Dunning and the "Let's Go Kids". Leapfrog Records, 1979.

One Elephant, Deux Elephant, Sharon, Lois and Bram. Elephant Records, 1978.

Smorgasbord, Sharon, Lois and Bram. Elephant Records, 1979.

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