

The one comment I read with skepticism was in the chapter on the voice. I wondered where Cass-Beggs found documentation for her comment that "Father's voice is very satisfying too, but it can't replace mother's. It is merely an added bonus". This type of comment can deal a severe blow to the single male parent and mars an otherwise conscientiously non-sexist book. For different reasons, I also found Cass-Beggs treading dangerous ground in vocal instructions such as, "Open your mouth wide". This clichéd advice can create severe sound distortions and make singing seem strange and foreign — the way it would feel if you spoke that way. The one serious reservation I had about the book was that its format as a course may restrict its general usefulness. It is hard to "dabble" in it, as many parents and even teachers might wish to do. I would also have liked to see specific exercises referenced in a separate index for quick referral.

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CANADIAN CHILDREN'S RECORDS V

"Alive, well, and going places" is a pretty accurate way to describe the current Canadian children's music scene! Each year introduces new artists with sparkling original work as well as imaginative revamping of familiar, well-loved material. The eleven records to be reviewed offer a fine variety of music and story telling for every taste in the age group of two to ten. Several will provide attractive entertainment for the entire family.

For plenty of toe-tapping rhythm, try *Lots more Junior Jug Band* with Chris and Ken Whitely, backed up by Chris's children, Jenny and Daniel. The idea is to create new sounds with homemade instruments, get together with family and friends and have a wonderful jam session. The album combines folk, swing, boogie, and rock. There are songs for working out ("Exercising"), experimenting with the trumpet ("The music goes 'round and around"), easy listening ("Halfway down the stairs," "Take it slow and easy"), and even a rendition of Offenbach's "Can can" arranged for various harmonicas. The voices are clear and pleasing, and the accompaniment of over twenty instruments provides continual surprise. The album comes with an activity sheet with ideas for creating new instruments from common articles around the home.

Clearly more limited in stylistic scope is the album, *Cathy Fink and friends; Grandma slid down the mountain*. Fink is an accomplished banjo player and yodeler and the songs, which lean heavily toward country and folk idioms, are mainly traditional and include campfire favourites ("Brush

your teeth," "Peanut butter and jelly") and some wonderful updates of "The cat and the fiddle" and "The jazzy three bears." Cathy Fink's voice is appropriately folksy (she sounds amazingly like Judy Collins at times) but, during the speaking and "say-a-song" sections, her voice tends to sound just slightly uninterested. The activity book is a fine feature of this album. Besides the lyrics, there is a valuable historical comment about each song, together with creative interpretative suggestions on how to put it into action. Cathy Fink, the educator, is very much in evidence here and her brief notes at the beginning should prove useful in the classroom.

Of the children's troubadours on the Canadian circuit, one of the most respected performers is surely Fred Penner. In the album, *A home for me*, his warm, flexible voice is perfectly adaptable to the upbeat folk songs ("Crawdad," "Jack was every inch a sailor"), calypso ("Hold 'em Joe") or the beautiful renditions of "Hush little baby," "Michael row the boat ashore" and the title song. The material is primarily traditional; yet, there is a freshness in Penner's easy-going delivery that does not wear even with the most familiar material. A soft summer evening, water lapping on the rocks, a blazing campfire and Fred Penner's voice — a very fine treat, indeed.

On the move, a sixth album for Greg (Scelsa) and Steve (Millang) is just that: from the opening invitation, "Rock to the music" to the final strains of "Shoo fly" (where the actions are wiggling, jumping, swimming, and crawling), there is never a let up. Especially attractive is the "Sports dance" segment on Side Two, which combines basketball, jumprope, football, hula-hoop, baseball, and hopscotch in a rhythmically contagious rock sequence. The two artists are professionally confident in every way; their basic rock approach to music provides even some self-parody: they come across as rock superstars for their junior audience. An exciting feature on Side One is "An adventure in space," a skillfully handled special effects narration which vindicates the desire of Arriety in Mary Norton's *The borrowers* for "adventure and safety mixed." Almost all of the songs are Greg Scelsa originals, very hummable and catchy: well done!

When we come to *The Rugrats rock on*, we address the central question of what to do with the traditional nursery rhyme in order to captivate a child of the eighties. Reading the lyric sheet gives one the impression that this record is just another re-do of the most popular Mother Goose and folk tunes. Now, turn it on. The incessant rock beat, well synthesized, hits one at once—and the wealth of folklore emotes. Essentially, the trio of musicians behind the Rugrats (Ronney Abramson, Ron Garant and Fred Mollin), in their pop-rock approach to traditional material, are not far from Dennis Lee's philosophy in creating *Alligator pie*. All this is wonderful and I have no problem with the ideals intended. My criticism is much more technical: while the musicians are obsessed with rhythmic background gyrations,

they tend to forget that the entire record is pitched at exactly the same volume; there is no differentiation in voice or accompaniment—a fact that reduces much of the listening appeal of the entire record.

A frequent performer on “Mr. Dressup,” “Sesame Street,” and Sharon, Lois and Bram’s “The elephant show,” Eric Nagler is well known to children’s audiences in Canada and the U.S. Like the Whiteley’s Junior Jug Band, Nagler is a capable performer on a bewildering number of home-made instruments, including a rather suspect “sewerphone,” made from ten feet of plastic drainpipe and the agitator from a clothes washer. The songs range from pure nonsense (“Purple elephant,” “Spoon tunes,” “I don’t wanna [have an iguana]”), swing (“Three piggy jive”), Irish folksong (“Great high wind”), and a beautifully sentimental “Happy birthday, happy birthday.” One appealing feature is the presentation of the *child’s point of view* in several songs: “Button up your overcoat” (this was a high point in the record for me), “Too sick for school,” “Be kind to your parents.” Good fun all around!

The musical credentials of David E. Walden and Lois Birkenshaw are most impressive, indeed. Walden, composer, pianist, author (*Music theory for the bored and confused*) and Birkenshaw, coordinator of the Orff music programme for the Toronto Board of Education, professor of music at York University and author of *Music for fun music for learning*, bring their talents together in a record for very young children, *The goat with the bright red socks*. Learning numbers, parts of the body, to tell the time, kinds of transportation are some of the topics addressed. The record, as suggested, would also be helpful in special education classes. And yet, for all the talent of the artists, everything somehow falls flat. The songs are not particularly imaginative (two are based on the same well-know hymn) and the words of “When I get up in the morning,” “I can count” and “These are my eyes, eyes, eyes” are repetitive to the point of dullness. The delivery of Birkenshaw, especially, is just too precisely perfect. Technically, the singers perform wonderfully but, as with Browning’s Andrea del Sarto, technique is not all, and the final impression is one of inevitable silver greyness.

The album jacket does sound promising: “The magic singing animal farm” but, as the record progresses, there is less and less magic, more and more frustration. The animal sounds, produced by computer, provide a background for some very basic Mother Goose. The songs, strung together by the thinnest of narrative threads, should appeal to a very young audience (2-5), although I found the animal noises nerve-wracking and ultimately distracting. The children’s voices, while capably managed, need to be more lively. Perhaps a little Rugrat flavour could be injected somewhere! The voices of “Dead eye dog” and “Flakey the frog” (David E. Walden and Arlene Meadows) are a forced disguise and tend to wear thin very quickly.

I do not look forward to *The magic singing animal farm II*.

Over the years, I have cried out for more Canadian content. Well, I should be well satisfied with *Canada's favourite folksongs for kids!* With a credible narrator (Carl Banas), Side One begins with a fine Newfoundland Medley sung by a listenable children's chorus. In some songs like "The Klondike gold rush," the background tends to be too heavy for the singers, although this is rectified in "Red River." "The Eskimo lullaby" with its 'cello obbligato is especially beautiful and "The Huron carol" is equally haunting with its subtle rock background. French Canada is amply represented on Side Two with a medley including "En roulant ma boule," "Vive la Canadienne," "Un Canadien errant" and, of course "Alouette." (It is difficult to imagine how this last could be made novel but, dispersed among the other songs, it sparkles with a fine, upbeat swing treatment). It is all summed up in Gordon Wright's heart-melting rendition of "She's like the Swallow:"

She's like the swallow that flies so high,
She's like the river that never runs dry.
She's like the sunshine on the lee shore. . .

Canada, indeed! This is a quality art album to be used in classroom and home alike. Although it is not new (1977), its dignity and beauty have passed time's test: it is still fresh and very proudly Canadian.

For a change of pace, try four stories told by Robert Munsch, recorded on tape and accompanied by attractive lilliput-sized books to follow along. "Volume I" begins with "Angela's airplane," the unlikely adventures of a five-year-old, who takes off, flies and lands (but destroys) an airplane. Undaunted, she eventually becomes an airplane pilot. Working on fairytale refrains, "The mudpuddle" provides conflict and will-power and the personified mudpuddle never comes back when faced straight-on by the heroine, Jule Ann. Volume II presents Mortimer, a noisy bedtime specimen, who ultimately — and ironically — sends the entire family into complete chaos. "The paper bag princess," an updated fairytale with a feminist ending (*certis de causis*, they do *not* live happily ever after) provides plenty of entertainment for the under-six age group. Munsch has a gift for creating ridiculous situations, but the more one hears them, the more captivating they get. Perhaps underneath all of this, we find some basic images of fear to be overcome—and overcome they are. Munsch's voice is not great, but it does create warmth and excitement; a wonderful adventure in tale telling.

Charlotte Diamond should be justly proud of her achievements. Her first album, "10 carrot diamond" won her a Juno award in 1986. Her voice, clear and folksy, is most engaging in *Diamond in the rough*. She manages to sing confident and lovable Pete Seeger in "The foolish frog," where everything goes crazy in the end. From the rollicking "What kind of tree

are you," a song essentially about identity, to the moving "Donne-moi la main," Charlotte Diamond taps the toes and pulls the heartstrings. On Side Two, "Metamorphosis," an original, should be helpful in teaching children about the changes in their bodies. Fully bilingual, Diamond manages the traditional "La bastringue" with wonderful aplomb. There is also a day-naming song — in English, French, and Spanish and a wonderful assessment of "Goin' metric." From "You never praise me enough," a child's point-of-view ballad both defiant and heartwarming (a steal from "Sometime when we touch"?) to the catchy Cajun "Collinda," Charlotte Diamond has the ability to bring all the best things of childhood together. Who could ask for more?

New Artists and records seem to pop up from everywhere and, in these vulgar and disgusting days of *Garbage pail kids*, it is heartwarming to know that there are people out there who really care. Caring is what it's all about: reaching a lonely child's heart, touching a receptive child's funnybone, it doesn't really matter. But, when it's done with artistic panache — then it's really wonderful! We have so much of that beauty to offer in this splendid harvest of records for children.

RECORDINGS DISCUSSED

- Lots more Junior Jug Band.* Chris and Ken Whitely. Kids records, 1985.
Cathy Fink and friends; Grandma slid down the mountain. Rounder Records, 1984.
A house for me. Fred Penner. Troubadour Records, 1985.
On the move with Greg and Steve. Greg Scelsa and Steve Millang. A & M Records, 1983.
The Rugrats rock on. Fred Mollin, Ronney Abramson and Ron Garant. A & M Records, 1985
Come on in! Eric Nagler. Elephant Records, 1985.
The goat with the bright red socks. David E. Waleden and Lois Birkenshaw. Berandol, 1980.
The magic singing animal farm. Berandol, n.d.
Canada's favourite folkstongs for kids. Berandol, 1977
Munsch; a book on tape. Robert Munsch. Vols. 1 and 11. Kids' Records, 1985.
Diamond in the rough. Charlotte Diamond. Imperial Records, 1986.

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