

SUITABLE SONGS FOR CANADIAN CHILDREN

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One of the newest phenomena in Canadian children's literature is the increased production of songs. Whereas three or four years ago the marketplace would turn up few if any children's records or song-books, today there are several bestselling records and some excellent new books for teaching and entertaining children with song. The purpose of this article is to discuss what is available and to examine it in its social context.

"In today's world of hit parade, we feel that there is a lack of suitable songs for children in the popular trend."¹ How often, I wonder, have these sentiments been expressed, in appropriate media language, with reference to television, literature, radio, theatre and film? This particular quotation comes from a 1960 publication *Modern Children's Songs* by a Canadian publisher. The question that arises from the quotation is, "What are 'suitable' Canadian songs for children?"

From a child's point of view, "suitable" must be an alien concept. The only negative reactions I've seen children exhibit to any songs are complaints of loudness (they have very sensitive ears) and inattention due to boredom. Often boredom can be attributed to presentation: lack of dramatic appeal is often the problem. Sometimes the fault lies in content, when song concepts outstrip the child's psychological development; however, this can be counteracted by a combination of drama and rhythm.

From a parent's point of view, "suitable" is a term with as many meanings as there are parents, and it probably includes a double standard as well. Most parents would probably agree, however, that unsuitable songs include those condoning violence, destructive sex, and profane language. At present, as in the nineteen-sixties, the hit parade focuses almost entirely on "love songs." Few of these songs are the product of real emotion; most are the products of formula writing (hook, line and singer). They sing of love lost, love won and love in limbo, but the common element is that of personal relationships and human contact. These songs are very powerful transmitters of moral values, social codes, and fashionable trends in language, dance and dress. What makes them unsuitable for children is simply the degree of saturation with the topic of love and the insistence that sex is love. In these songs there is a total absence of models for other kinds of human, love-inspired relationships. Parents may feel that children are too young to be guided extra-familially in these aspects of social behavior, and that the power of the medium of song should also be used to present non-social topics and those aspects of the social world other than male-female sexual

relationships.

The record industry has led us to believe that the average child buys his/her first 45 r.p.m. record at the age of eight. Perhaps it is at this age that a child's intense desire to learn about and identify with adult and adolescent emotions through extra-familial sources surfaces.

In their search for suitable songs, parents have often turned to folk songs and to songs written especially for children. While there are now more Canadian authors writing in these styles, it is interesting to note that very few of the song writers for children mention or portray Canada in their songs. The bulk of their writing is pan-anglophone. This is not to their discredit but it does frustrate nationalistic educators and future Canadian folksong collectors alike. The contemporary folk songs that I will be discussing here are from the following sources: live performances, books, records and media.

Over the last five years there has been an enormous increase in folk song music festivals across Canada, the majority of which focus on contemporary rather than traditional music. Happily these festivals include intimate workshops at large concerts. Every festival that has workshops has had a Children's Song Workshop, and I have attended a large number of them.

At these gatherings the emphasis is on entertainment rather than education. Performers are nervous as to how they will "go over with the kids" if they have had no experience, and they tend to stay with standard proven songs at first. Songs such as "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" and "The Marvellous Toy" are common, as are the popular Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and traditional songs for children. There is not much Canadiana here, and often the performers are American or British. Later in the workshops, the more experienced and the more adventurous do experiment with original material. Some writers who have been published did much of their groundwork in this workshop set-up, particularly at all-Canadian festivals, before gaining recognition for their children's songs.

In an entertainment situation, the energy level and the communicative abilities of the performer are more important than the content. Audience participation is the key to success. Therefore many performers will shun lyrics altogether at times and concentrate on dance or rhythmic clapping or drumming to instrumental pieces.

Live music for children is also becoming available through various coffee houses. It is ironic to see these 1960's bastions of radicalism introducing "suitable songs for children" as a regular matinee feature. The concerts are modelled after a Pete Seeger concept, originally begun in the late fifties and early sixties, and, at coffee houses such as Montreal's Yellow Door, have become quite popular. The concerts run the gamut from instrumental music for dance and participation, through the traditional and contemporary singers, to clowns and

small plays. For the writer/singer, the forty-fifty-minute coffee-house concert is an excellent opportunity to test original material. For the child, concerts are good exposure to acoustic music (no amplification) and musicianship. The proximity of the child to the musician is emphasized so that the studio-recorded aspect of music is demythologized, especially when the artists have their own records for sale on hand. The number of Canadian singers is higher here than at the festivals because it is difficult to arrange hiring an American/British performer for a one-afternoon stand. In general, the performers in this situation are more relaxed than when at festivals and tend to experiment with their own compositions because of the lack of competition from other performers.

Children's concerts and workshops are relatively new developments in Canadian folk music. While their content is unpredictable, their existence and popularity in the larger Canadian cities is giving a new strength to the songwriter's art and a new respectability to acoustic musicians (folksingers).

Live music in primary and secondary schools outside of Toronto has been largely the territory of the rock band. In Toronto, the "Mariposa in the Schools" organization has been operating for many years, promoting mainly traditional music in the classroom as an educational resource. Depending on the performer's repertoire, folk music can easily be fitted into the contexts of history, English, French, music, and social studies classes. Contemporary song writers have occasionally been included in this organization if they can mix traditional with contemporary songs. It is unfortunate that there has been no other consistent organization of this type elsewhere in Canada. The school boards of Winnipeg and Vancouver have been more receptive than others, but the onus of organization has been left up to the individual performers or groups. The traditional role of music in the schools exists at the early primary and kindergarten levels, where music education is mixed with other subjects as a transition or for relaxation.

Books of songs for children tend to emphasize musical education and participation. Most primary and kindergarten music teachers should have a small collection of songs from Canadian sources, including traditional folk songs in both English and French. That excellent guide for teaching music to young children, Barbara Cass-Beggs' *To Listen, To Like, and To Learn*, has synthesized, from some of the world's foremost children's musical training methods, a comprehensive guide which uses mainly Canadian music. Five sources of songs are listed: nursery rhymes, folk music, singing games, traditional songs for children and contemporary ones.

The subjects of these songs (amplified from Cass-Beggs' list) can be roughly divided along social and non-social lines. The song categories of action, animal, finger and toe, musical idea, nonsense, quiet, and seasons and weather may be considered non-social, while play, idea, language, made-up, personal contact, protest and satire, and humour songs may be designated as social. Special occasion and mood songs can be considered social or non-social, accord-

ing to content. The content of Cass-Beggs' original songs, however, is limited by her ideas on teaching. Of the two dozen original songs, only five fit into categories other than action or music ideas, and of those only three have any social context at all (one play, one mood, and one special occasion song). With little evidence of personal contact, the songs in this book will never substitute for the hit parade, nor have they much Canadian content. However, the children exposed to the traditional songs presented here might develop some receptivity to contemporary Canadian folksongs.

The *Second Song Book* of Lucille Panabaker is a good example of how contemporary songs can mix both education and entertainment. There is a good balance here across the spectrum of subject references. While action and participation songs top the list with nine, there are almost as many social songs (19) as there are non-social songs (24). Notable are the four songs which give the child the opportunity to make up rhymes and verses, an educational and entertaining adventure for children. Ms. Panabaker's songs in the hands of a good performer or teacher would be appreciated by children. It is unfortunate that they are not available on record. While the songs remain in their present form (print), they will be at best a classroom tool, whereas with a little production cost they could easily cross over into the popular song/record market for children.

While doing research for this article, I found it very difficult to obtain copies of the above books. In fact, both eventually had to be obtained through the National Archives in Ottawa via inter-library loans. Later still, after browsing through many bookstores, I did come across the second Panabaker book. I still have never found the first Panabaker songbook, even through interlibrary loans! Despite this atrocious distribution of Canadian songbooks, I did unearth a few others worth mentioning.

Rana's Pond, an ecological musical, is obviously a contemporary product. For the more adventurous music/drama teacher, this Canadian children's musical might be a good challenge. The songs are environmentally educational and anthropomorphic enough to give social education in co-operative living.

A much older series of songbooks, *Scissors and Songs* by Claire Senior Burke, provides a good contrast to the content of present children's songwriting. Most notably absent in Burke's two volumes are the action and participation songs. In fact, one main idea of the songbooks is to get children to cut out of cardboard some of the songs' images (hence the titular scissors). The topics most written about are special occasions (9), animals (9), and seasons and weather (10). The special occasion songs tended to be more descriptive than social. The animal and weather songs seemed to hint at the Canadian environment more than the songs we have already covered. Overall there were many more non-social songs (28) than social ones (5).

"These compositions were written to make music and singing more interesting to the young people who like the modern beat, but are too young to sing

the current type of popular music.”² Returning to the small volume *Modern Children's Songs* by Verna Evans, we find that her collection contains four action/participation songs, two animal songs, and two idea songs. Her emphasis is clearly on the rhythmic content of her songs, and with proper accompaniment they would take on a reasonably modern feeling. Ms. Evans discusses songs under musical categories, usually referring to rhythm (fox trot, rock'n roll, shuffle, meringue, calypso, cha-cha, and march). They are popular songs, but can be termed contemporary folk-songs, for they are sources of future folk-songs. Ironically, the Evans philosophy, so well expressed in print, could be even more vividly brought to life on records.

Of all the sources of current children's songs, the most abundant is the record industry. This industry, aural except for the jackets, has always accounted for the popularity of a large proportion of children's songs, one reason being the volume of crossover material from songbooks and popular media shows. In Canada, until recently, there was a scarcity of Canadian children's records. At present, although the content is not generally Canadian, at least the production and authorship are.

The content of the songs shifts dramatically in records from the non-social to the social. In Sandy Tobias Offenheimer's two recordings to date—*Honey on Toast* and *If Snowflakes Fell in Flavours*—there are thirteen songs which examine personal contact, six songs which reflect upon personal sensations, and seven songs contemplating ideas, humour, and moods. In all, there are thirty songs dealing with human relationships and feelings, and only thirteen non-social songs. Musically, these songs are in the popular trend and use many interesting overdubs in the production. Their melodies for the most part, however, are rambling and unmemorable. With the exception of a couple of tunes, I cannot imagine a child unconsciously humming them, unless by chance improvisation. The lyrics, on the other hand, must be very appealing to a child exploring his/her own mind, sensations, and human relationships. It is as if the music came from a Broadway play written to the free-flowing thoughts of a 5-year-old lyricist.

Kidstuff, a record drawn from a C.T.V. production of the same name, seems to be aimed at a slightly older audience, perhaps seven to eleven year-olds. Here again most of the subjects dealt with fall in the categories of human relationship and ideas: five personal contact, seven ideas, and two protest and satire songs. On the non-social side there are only two songs: one action and one weather song. The concepts presented are complex and are handled directly. The problems of pollution, overpopulation, and conservation of resources and wildlife are perceived in the Buckminster Fuller type of song, “Space ship Earth” and “Nobody's building an ark”.

We all live on a space ship made of water air and dirt
Yes we are aboard a space ship-aboard the space ship earth
We have food and air and water, but they're limited supplies,
And unless we use them carefully, no one will survive.
Like lost and shipwrecked sailors clinging to a raft

Our only hope of safety is this small and fragile craft.³
Equally stressed are themes of self-awareness and confidence:

And his feelings turned into music as he sat on his craft in the lane
And the words fell in place as the music took shape of back alleys,
sadness and pain.

What had made him feel different, how he felt when they laughed
and wouldn't let him belong

All those things he was feeling have become the reason people ask
him if he'll sing his song.⁴

Musically and lyrically the songs are well balanced, with a distinct rock 'n roll flavour. The enlightened lyrical content is the antithesis of the punk rock violence and negativism, and one can only hope that the writers, Cliff Jones and Bill Hartley, can continue and broaden the market for their songs.

Raffi's two records, *Singable Songs for the Very Young* and *More Singable Songs*, contain a mixture of traditional and contemporary English songs and several others from non-anglo traditional sources. Unlike the other records, the original material herein is more akin to that found in the songbooks, i.e., non-social songs balance with social songs, nine each. When the non-original songs are taken into consideration, the sample stays balanced in this respect. Perhaps this explains their current status as best-sellers. It certainly indicates Ms. Panabaker and others would do well to put their compositions onto the record market. Just as likely a reason for success, however, is the exquisite musicianship on the albums. Understatement of production is the key here. Although the musical rhythms tend to be folksy and not as strong as the rock productions already mentioned, the natural rhythm and structure of the lyrics make the songs infectious and highly memorable. The first verse of one of his classic songs goes:

I've got to shake, shake, shake my sillies out (3X)

Wiggle my waggles away⁵

to a country and western rhythm. It's the kind of inane lyric that I've heard adults sing to themselves when they think no one's listening and that somehow makes enough sense to children, even children who can't yet talk, that I've seen them start to shake their arms and bodies the minute they recognize the song!

It would be fair to mention before concluding that these selected song collections do not exhaust the number of published Canadian children's song writers. Many writers who do not sing specifically for children, but who do participate frequently in workshops and concerts for children, have "suitable" original songs and methods for their education and entertainment. Most have not been published or recorded.

"The enthusiastic response to our first children's record, *Singable Songs for the Very Young*, proved that Daphne Pike was right, 'there is a need for good children's recordings.'"⁶ Have the marketing techniques of the rock 'n roll industry, and the immense improvement in the technology of sound recordings (signal to noise reduction) of the 1970's made obsolete the children's

recordings of the 50's and 60's? It would seem so. I've heard children say that these recordings sound "funny" but the same songs performed live by a good entertainer will still be effective. Judging from the response of the public and publishers, the recent popularity of Canadian children's songs indicates that, in part, the need was for Canadian production and authorship also. Given this marriage of public and publisher, the only thing missing is a content that reflects the geographic, historical, political, or social Canadian experience. The only serious portrayal of Canada is given in the traditional folksongs of the Cass-Beggs book.

Although from analysis of the social content one can see a trend towards the description of human behavior, especially in the records, the most popular recording, *Singable Songs for the Very Young*, has a very balanced social/non-social content and makes little attempt to use the rock 'n roll sound. The implication is that parents find this combination to be most suitable for their children. Between 30,000 and 50,000 units have been sold. While this figure does not come close to the sales figures of Dennis Lee's Canadian poetry publications for children, of which over 100,000 copies have been sold, it is extraordinary for a Canadian children's song album.

Recorded music for children does have an advantage of mnemonic accessibility over the song book form, and distribution of these records is good. The song book form has the advantages of educational involvement and visual stimulation. However, one would hope that the distribution of the song books is better in the schools than it is at the bookstores. With an expanding market for educational and entertaining songs for children, we can look forward to a proliferation of recorded and printed materials. Let us keep an eye on popular music, too, as a powerful source of musical experience. After all, popular songs of today are part of the source from which traditional folk songs will eventually filter.

NOTES

¹Verna Evans, "Publisher's preface," *Modern Children's Songs*, Montreal: Evans Music Corp., 1960.

²"Publisher's preface," *Modern Children's Songs*.

³Cliff Jones and Bill Hartley, *Kidstuff*. Cubbyhole Records Culp 101, Cancon/Maxess Music, 1975.

⁴"Listen to the music, Johnny," *Kidstuff*.

⁵Raffi, "Shake My Sillies Out," *More Singable Songs*, Troubadour Records Tr-004.

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