MUSIC AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURE
in the Mining Communities of Cape Breton Island

BY John C. O'Donnell



THE MEN OF THE DEEPS

MY INTEREST IN THE MUSIC OF CAPE BRETON'S MINING COMMUNITIES BEGAN IN 1966 WHEN I WAS ASKED TO BECOME MUSICAL DIRECTOR OF A NEWLY FORMED CHOIR OF WORKING AND RETIRED COAL MINERS NOW KNOWN AS *THE MEN OF THE DEEPS*. CAPE BRETON, OF COURSE, WAS THE SITE OF ONE OF THE FIRST COMMERCIAL COAL MINING OPERATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA, AND FOR MOST OF THE PAST THREE HUNDRED YEARS THE ISLAND HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT INDUSTRIAL CENTRE.

In the 1960s, in an effort to preserve some of the rich folklore of the island's coal mining communities, its citizens organized the Miners' Folk Society as a tribute to Canada's Centennial year, 1967. Two significant monuments emerged from the efforts of the Miners' Folk Society: The Cape Breton Miners' Museum and the *Men of the Deeps* coal miners' choir.

For most of the past thirty-five years, the group has been singing of the work and life-style of the Cape Breton coal miner to audiences in most of Canada and through parts of the United States; in 1976 they became the first Canadian performing group to tour the People's Republic of China after diplomatic relations between the two nations were restored four year before. And as recently as September 1999 the men traveled to Kosovo, Yugoslavia, at the request of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, where they performed in a gala festival organized by actress Vanessa Redgrave on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund.

The music of the *Men of the Deeps* is drawn from mining communities around the world. Some of the group's songs are also "home grown" – composed by contemporary Cape Breton bards, while others are traditional songs which trace their roots to their Celtic forebearers in the old country. But all of it expresses the spirit of a special breed of people.

Now the coal industry, once so flourishing and vital to the island's economy, is about to come to an end – and one is prompted to ask: How vital a role has music played in shaping, defining and preserving the character of these communities?

Anyone who has visited Cape Breton Island will have observed that, like its neighboring island of Newfoundland, it is a treasure house of musical talent. Solo talents like Rita MacNeil and performing groups like the Barra MacNeils from Sydney Mines and

the Ranking Family of Mabou have carried the special musical heritage of Cape Breton far beyond the island's shores.

Allister MacGillivray of Marion Bridge is one of Nova Scotia's most successful songwriters. He has performed as a guitarist and singer with Celtic music groups and his songs have been recorded by such international artists as Anne Murray, the Garrison Brothers, Foster and Allen, Frank Patterson and Phil Coulter.

Leon Dubinsky of Englishtown has composed music for many stage productions and number of films. He is also the composer of the popular anthem *Rise Again* – a song which praises the indomitable spirit of a people who have known hard times.

Lillian Crew Walsh was born in the village of Neil's Harbour in 1884. She died in 1967 but many of her poems have been immortalized, thanks to her collaboration with Charlie MacKinnon. Charlie, a well-known balladeer who lived in Portage, gained great fame through his recordings of Maritime-flavoured material. His untimely death in the late '80s was a great loss to Cape Breton's musical community. Professional songwriters and balladeers such as these represent the contemporary voice of Cape Breton's mining communities. They have been steeped in and nurtured by the traditions of the island from their earliest years, and their music and poetry often reflect the spirit of their heritage in the same way that oral tradition molds the spirit of a people.

Why is it that the music emanating from the people of these two islands off Canada's East Coast often appears to dominate the contemporary music scene in Canada? One explanation can likely be traced to the insular isolation of the early pioneers. But surely a major influence to inspire such a wealth of music must be the difficult lifestyles imposed on these peoples by the demanding industries that, until recently, powered these islands' economies.

In Newfoundland, of course, it was the fishing industry (now rapidly in decline). And in Cape Breton it was coal that molded the spirit of its people.

Many of the songs popularized by the *Men of the Deeps* were the direct result of mine tragedies and rescue operations. But equally prominent – as though to "balance off" the serious reality of the dangers of mining – are those songs which express humour.

Workers subjected to the confines of close quarters and long hours have traditionally looked to humour and camaraderie for comfort and solace. America's famous industrial folklorist, George Korson, once observed: "Death, the colliery boss, the company, the miner's sense of security. Weighed down by these forces," noted Korson in *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*, "the miner felt frustrated and insignificant. But over any one of them, he acquired a temporary sense of superiority. In his triumph lay spontaneous humour."

Plain Ole Miner Boy reminds Cape Bretoners, in a humourous way, of the tough times endured during a series of severe strikes in the 1920s. Modeled on an American song, *Plain Ole Country Boy*, catchy phrases like the following show the humour that overrides the reality of depression when times are tough:

Ma makes their clothes from flour sacks
And things she can mend over;
And you can see old "Robin Hood"
Sometimes when they bend over.

Even the iron hand of the early company owners failed to dampen the resilient spirit of the Cape Breton coal miner. Until well into the twentieth century low wages forced miners to trade at company-owned stores. Such a system effectively placed the miner and his family in bondage to the company. The stores became known sarcastically as the "Pluck Me" because of the company's practice of garnishing wages to pay off accounts.

In Cape Breton, most of the Pluck Me stores were destroyed as a result of riots following the great strike of 1925. As John Mellor has noted, "Gone were the bulk foods and full sides of bacon and beef, racks of flour and sugar: gone too was the old potbellied stove, around which many . . . had loved to gather during the long winter months to smoke a pipe of tobacco and swap yarns."

Yet, the songs which recall that infamous page in Cape Breton history would seem to indicate that resilience overrode resentment and, instead, fostered nostalgia when the stores were gone.

We thought we were poorly treated boys
When no dough for work was found,
But many a briny tear was shed
When the Pluck Me burned to the ground.
. . . The Pluck Me Store (Ida MacAulay)

It was compassion that led Charlie MacKinnon to change the words of a traditional song that mocked scab labour imported from Newfoundland. The traditional song *The Honest Working Man* was harsh on those strikebreakers:

What raises high my dander, next door lives a
Newfoundlander
Whose wife you cannot stand her since high living she began,
Along with the railroad wrackers, also the codfish packers,
Who steal the cheese and crackers from the honest
working man.

In order not to offend his many Newfoundland friends, Charlie changed the words to the following:

I think I'll go meander with my friend the Newfoundlander;
His name it is John Allie; he's from the Codroy Valley.
He is the finest fellow to ever grace the land.
He works here in the coal mines with the honest working man.
. . . The Honest Working Man (Charlie MacKinnon)

Those special qualities of resilience, humour and compassion have always inspired the Cape Breton miner to look beyond depression and sadness to a brighter, more positive side of life and have contributed to the Cape Bretoner's sense of pride. The people of Cape Breton Island are a proud people: proud of their work, proud of their struggles and their ability to cope with hard times, and above all, proud of their island:

We are an island, a rock in a stream.
We are a people as proud as there's been,
. . . The Island (Kenzie MacNeil)

Cape Bretoners have an extraordinary love for the natural beauty of their island. Even the Gaelic-speaking forebearers who pioneered the coal industry on the island expressed their love for the island in song:

S'e Ceap Breatainn tir mo graidh;
Tir is aillidh leinn air thalamh

Cape Breton is the land of my love;
We deem it the most beautiful land on earth.

When Britain's famous actress Vanessa Redgrave attended a concert by the *Men of the Deeps*, she was struck by the sense of pride and hope emanating from the songs. Equating the plight of those employed by the dwindling coal industry in Cape Breton with the plight of those who had lost so much in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, she invited the singing miners to bring their message of hope to the people of Kosovo in a festival to welcome the displaced refugees home.

The song which seemed to best express the message of hope which Ms. Redgrave wanted to impart to the returning refugees was the now famous anthem *Rise Again* composed by Leon Dubinsky:

When the waves roll on over the waters,
And the ocean cries,
We look to our sons and daughters
To explain our lives –
As if a child could tell us why
That as sure as the sunrise,
As sure as the sea,
As sure as the wind in the trees. . .

We rise again in the faces of our children;
We rise again in the voices of our song;
We rise again in the waves out on the ocean –
And then we rise again.

One can travel throughout the entire island of Cape Breton and encounter an inexhaustible array of musical talent: singers, step dancers, fiddlers and more – many of whom have made their mark on the world stage – and all of whom give testimony to the fact that music has indeed played an extraordinary role in shaping, defining and preserving the unique character of the people of Cape Breton. Industries may come and go, but the persevering spirit of the people of Cape Breton's mining communities will survive.

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