

Genesis of a Folksinger/Songwriter

Vera Johnson

I first met Vera Johnson in the early 1950s when she came to Toronto with three little girls. Our first link was our mutual interest in folksongs, and we soon found we were both socialists and anti-war. Vera was having short stories published, and I dramatized one of them for CBC Radio. I remember that Burl Ives recorded one of her songs about the ducks in Grenadier Pond.

After she left Toronto we exchanged many letters, books, tapes, and songs over the years. She sent me some bawdy items and children's lore, and taped songs for me from Stanley Botting, Captain Cates, and Emma Caslor, some of which I've used in books. I'm planning to use one of her science fiction songs in my book of Canadian women's songs.

I love many of the songs she's written, particularly "The Word," "The Minsk from Pinsk," and my favourite of all, a beautiful parody of the symbolic bawdy ballads about occupations. She's one of the best contemporary songwriters I know and a much cherished friend.

Edith Fowke
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What inspires anyone to become a folksinger/songwriter? I can speak only from my own experience, and what is true in my case may not apply to others. For me it was a long, slow process, still unfinished. I was born in 1920, learned to read six years later and immediately started writing stories and poems. About 1930 I began piano lessons and soon after was writing songs. I grew up, left home, married, had children, and became politically active, my main ambition being to change the world for the better.

In 1948, through Edith Fowke's programs on CBC, I discovered folksongs, went on a mad collecting spree, and wrote a few political songs using familiar tunes. Now I knew how I'd change the world: by writing fiction and writing and singing my own songs in a folk idiom. In 1949 I bought a guitar for \$10 and an instruction book and learned to sing the songs I had been collecting as well as my own.

The next year I was offered my own 15-minute program on CKMO (now C-FUN), *Songs of the People*. It was a lot of work, but the response was rewarding. Since these were all traditional songs, I had to dig for those with a message, but I found them.

Then MacLean's Magazine announced a fiction contest in which stories had to be based on a plot germ by Somerset Maugham. I couldn't see any way to give the plot political significance, so I wrote a suspense story and sent it off. It didn't win the prize, but W. O. Mitchell, then the editor, bought and published it. Not only that, he introduced me by mail to a New York agent who agreed to act for me. Years later Mitchell was dragged by a friend to the Unitarian Church in Calgary to hear me give a service consisting entirely of

songs, and we spent some pleasant hours together, but that is another story.

My next project was a musical comedy, *Towdy Owdy*. I wrote the book, music and lyrics. The only message it conveyed was that if you want to win a song contest, you should pinch your refrain from folksongs, but I sent it off to CBC Radio anyway. After six months they returned it, and tucked inside were the first fifteen pages of an original manuscript, somebody else's adaptation of Kafka's "The Castle." That soured my view of CBC.

In 1951 I worked with the BC Federation of Labour preparing for the upcoming Canadian Congress of Labour convention to be held in Vancouver. I wrote a song, "The ABC of Unions", and OPWOC (The Office and Professional Workers' Organizing Committee, of which I was a member) ran off several hundred copies and sold them to delegates, the proceeds going to OPWOC. I sang it at the banquet, and the delegates joined in with enthusiasm. Some of them suggested I should move east. So my youngest sister, my three daughters and I boarded a bus for Toronto. The day we arrived I was hired by the Ontario Federation of Labour Political Action Committee, rented a room on Spadina Avenue, and enrolled the girls in a nearby school.

Next day I wrote a song for the election campaign which was just beginning and soon had completed twelve and was singing them at meetings everywhere, including the Toronto Labour Council. "You sounded better in Vancouver," one delegate told me. "Maybe it was the good booze out there."

The most impressive politician I met during the election was Agnes Macphail, who was trying to change the world, as

I was, but using strictly political means.

The election over, I went to work through the Underwood agency and was sent to a steel company where I had a lot of free time. I used it to write a series of plays, *Six Studies in Snobbery*. One dealt with racism, some with other social issues. I sent them off to CBC Radio and Arthur Hiller (then a Toronto producer, now a big name in Hollywood) bought two of them. One of them did have a message: that a lousy housekeeper (like me) might well be a more congenial and interesting companion than a house-proud snob. I enjoyed watching that production. The male lead was played by Murray Westgate, who had been a fellow student of mine at Commercial High in Regina.

In this period I also wrote eleven short stories and entered them in the new contest MacLean's had announced. In October I was informed that my story, "Willie Huckelmeyer and the Polish Leprechaun," was a strong contender for the third prize if I removed the leprechaun. I did, making it a better and stronger story. In 1960 it was published as "The Huckelmeyer Story" in *Northern Lights*, described on the cover as "A New Collection of Distinguished Writing by Canadian Authors." MacLean's also bought another of my entries, so I was making progress with my fiction in some areas.

Edith Fowke took me to see the musical *Paint Your Wagon*, starring Burl Ives, and afterwards to a party where Burl and other cast members were the honoured guests. Edith had told me to bring my guitar (a new Martin Classic which I had ordered as soon as I sold the plays), and I was asked to do some of my own songs. When I sang "Grenadier Pond," Burl said, "That little fishy song of yours brought tears to my eyes." I gave him the words and music, and later he sang it at Festival Hall in London, England, as reported by Margaret Aitken in her column. The other cast members were more interested in learning "That Minx from Pinsk," which starts out

The Russian steppes are cold and bare,
They have no escalators.

Well, not every song or story can deal with social issues.

The following January I went to work for Tom Paterson, the founder and General Manager of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival, in their publicity office, and stayed with them up until the time of the first production. MacLean's suggested I write a story with the Festival as a background, and they (and I) were delighted with the result. I went to Stratford to organize preparations for moving the publicity office up there. We celebrated my birthday with a Chinese dinner (followed by an enormous strawberry shortcake topped with candles) and then joined a cast party already in progress. I was asked to sing, and later Alec Guinness told me how much he enjoyed the songs and asked if I knew "Roger Young." Fortunately I did and was able to sing it for him.

The Festival wanted me to stay with the publicity office in Stratford, but I couldn't persuade my husband, Mac, who had joined us in Toronto. We did get to the opening night and

took our daughters to a later performance which our middle daughter, Moira, found very impressive. "Say, who wrote these plays anyway?" she wanted to know. That year I wrote at least one good story. "The Way Is Hard and Weary" was published in the *Canadian Forum*. The protagonist was an elderly socialist, somewhat like Agnes Macphail, whose party has just suffered a crushing defeat. For a brief moment she wonders if faith and prayers are the answer, and decides they are not. Later I learned this was listed on the Roll of Honor of 1953 stories in *Best American Short Stories 1954*, edited by Martha Foley. That was a thrill.

I wrote a short novel (50,000 words) about a young woman who was a psychopath, finishing it in just one month, but my agent suggested so many changes that I put it aside.

We returned to Vancouver. Finding a job was easy, as my typing speed on a manual machine was 102 wpm, and I now had lots of legal experience. Soon Office Assistance was sending me to various firms. MacLean's announced another contest. I was working day and night to support the family, leaving little time for fiction. But I managed to produce one story of the "change the world" variety. It portrayed a young couple, concerned about the threat of a nuclear bomb dropping on Vancouver, who stage a hunger strike on Siwash Rock. It fails, of course, and they decide to move to the Okanagan Valley, where the family will be marginally safer. The story didn't earn a prize but MacLean's bought it, and the illustration by James Hill won a special award some months later. We used the money to move to Naramata.

The next three years were pretty frantic. I was working at a law office in Penticton, trying to organize a Unitarian Fellowship, ghost-writing a book about Jim Bury's experiences as an ICFTU organizer in Kenya (helping Tom Mboya to build a trade union movement among the blacks), collecting asparagus in the Spring when it grows wild through the orchards, performing with the Pioneer Players of Penticton, the Naramata Players, and the Summerland Singers and Players, churning out press releases for the CCF and the PTA, teaching at our church school, conducting a night school class in Creative Writing, in the summer holidays canning from morning to night while entertaining visitors, going on rattlesnake hunts with Alison, organizing Unitarian wiener roasts on the beach, holding music sessions with an elderly friend and self-styled hermit, Stan Botting, taping his songs and sending them off to Edith. She included one in a broadcast and another, "The Dying Outlaw," in *Canada's Story in Song* (by Edith Fowke and Alan Mills, published by W. J. Gage Limited).

Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova came to Penticton to speak for the Unitarian Service Committee, and pleaded with us to make pullovers for Korean children from wool they supplied. Another activity was added to my list. I was so moved by her words and the slides that I told her to send us 20 pounds of wool. It was so coarse that nobody would work with it except me. There I was—knitting, eternally knitting. I tried to solve the problem by buying a knitting machine. Alas, it also refused to work with the wool. Back to the needles.

My songwriting activities were minimal during this time,



Photograph by Brian Ken, Vancouver Sun

although for the cast party after our productions of "Pinafore" and "Down in the Valley" (in which I played the guitar and portrayed the Leader), I wrote a song with 31 verses mentioning everybody, using the tune of "I'se the B'y That Builds the Boat."

I finished the first three chapters of Jim's book, *Reluctant Moses*, and sent them off to Beacon Press. They returned them with no comment but a month later wrote to say they were interested and would like to see the complete manuscript.

Glen Morley, director of the Summerland Singers and Players, asked me to work with him on a musical comedy, *Cariboo*, based on the formation by Governor Douglas and some of his British friends of the British Columbia Emigration Society. The first of three boatloads of women arrived in Victoria in 1861 and were subsequently sent to the Cariboo, where it was hoped they would reduce lawlessness among the gold prospectors. I was quite excited about this project and actually wrote the words for six songs, but Glen never did anything more about it.

In May of 1957 I finished the last chapter of Jim's book and sent it off. I had begun a novel, *After the Long Winter*, but had put it aside to work on our CCF election campaign. In our house we didn't have TV, so we couldn't watch the election news. Instead we watched jars of tadpoles which were gradually turning into frogs. (In some ways, that was more interesting.) On election day the Progressive-Conservatives wiped out the Liberals, which was good. The CCF lost a few but gained more, which was better.

Toni Onley had been teaching an art class at our church

school, but in October of 1957 he won a painting scholarship at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. After an auction of his paintings at which most were sold, he headed south. The next year he wrote from Mexico suggesting I apply to the Instituto for a writing scholarship. I sent off an application, several stories and the unfinished novel, as well as a letter of recommendation from Edith Fowke.

On Wednesday, May 21, 1958, I drove into the garage at 5:30 after a day at the office, and suddenly my girls were all there, banging on the car and screaming words I couldn't make out. Then I realized they were shouting, "You've won a scholarship!" They showed me the press release from Peter Olwyler, the Instituto's PR man. The first prize was three months' room, board, and tuition, but I had come second, which gave me only three months' tuition. It would cost roughly \$1,000 to go there. How could I raise it? I was really antsy, walked down to the store twice, went to visit our neighbours, the Darlings, twice. On the second visit, although I hadn't smoked for two years, I bummed some cigarettes and was soon puffing away.

On June 13, my 38th birthday, I learned the top winner had illness in the family and could not accept the scholarship. They were offering it to me, as the second in line. Would I accept? Would I accept a birthday present like that? Of course! The girls and I decided I should take Alison (then 13) with me, and I would have to pay for her to board with somebody. This would increase the cost, but what the hell. We would work it out somehow. The return fare to Mexico by bus was only \$110, so that's how we would travel. Jim Onley (Toni's father) had offered me a role in *The Drunkard* (for pay, and that would help). I figured we still needed approximately \$600.

On the way home four days later, I had a brilliant idea for raising money. I knew it was completely mad, so I acted on it immediately. I booked the high school auditorium and typed a draft program/ticket for a reading from my unfinished novel, and arranged with a printer friend for a few hundred copies to be produced. They would be sold for \$1.00.

The Drunkard is an old farce which has been around so long it was probably in the public domain by this time. At the first rehearsal on the beached boat, the *Sicamous*, I discovered I was to play a role (to understudy the understudy to Ethel Joslin), sing a couple of songs in the middle, and also understudy the pianist. Crowds were small to begin with. Later they hired a sound truck to go all over town blaring publicity, and that helped. I received my first cheque on July 8th for \$5.00, but don't remember the others.

Once we were running, I established a pattern of staying in town after work, having a quick bite, then selling tickets to the reading until it was time to perform. By the day of the big event, I had personally sold 279 tickets. About 100 people showed up at the auditorium, and it was a good night.

In August the girls and I spent an exciting and rewarding week at the Unitarian summer camp at Seabeck, Washington. One of the speakers had dealt with the dangers of generalizing, referring to it as "Allness." I wrote a song about this, using the tune of "Always."

We should all avoid allness (allness),
That's a doity woid, allness (allness);
Allness, you will find, tends to warp your mind.
Makes you somewhat blind, allness (allness).
It's a mortal sin, allness (allness),
So it's always been, allness (allness);
Labels make us sad, generalizing's bad,
Don't embrace this fad, it's allness (allness).

The night of the talent show it was performed with a chorus line of ministers and was a great success. I also wrote "Song Without Words," based on the theme of another speaker, using the melody of "Side by Side." It started out:

Oh, we ain't got a barrel of chatter
But the shortage of words doesn't matter;
With a grunt or a squeal we express what we feel,
GRUNT ... GROAN ... SQUEAL.

This was sung, grunted, groaned and squealed by some cave-men and women in fetching costumes of potato sacks and imitation long hair. They did a great job.

The day after we returned to Naramata, Alex Walton (a bank manager in Penticton and, I was told, brother of Sir William Walton) phoned to tell me I would be receiving \$250 as a grant from the Koerner Foundation, to assist with my expenses. That was a big help.

My sister-in-law drove us to Oroville, Washington and we caught the bus for Mexico with 15 minutes to spare.

Mexico was wonderful. We both loved San Miguel and Alison thought we ought to move there permanently. She stayed with Toni Onley and his daughter Lynn, and later with other friends, while I had a room at the Posada de las Monjas. Alison came up each day for help with her correspondence courses. In those three months we met dozens of fascinating people, suffered from *turista*, attended two bullfights (one of which featured Arussa and was great), fed the starving dogs, visited Jim Bury and family in Mexico City and walked 16 miles in one day exploring. I also studied Spanish, photography, and writing, took in the numerous fiestas, sang every day, learned some Spanish songs, and wrote "San Miguel," words and music, the chorus of which went:

San Miguel, San Miguel,
That is the place that we love so well;
Bad people die and they go to hell
But the good people go to San Miguel

There were four verses to begin with, but it kept expanding. It became very popular, and I was always being asked to sing it.

One morning I met a new couple at breakfast, Mel (an Air Force pilot) and Rita. Then Martha turned up with Dick Thompson, and on her heels came Alison for her spelling workout. Martha introduced Dick, who was looking for someone to ghost-write his memoirs and had millionaire friends who would pay for the job. She thought I might help.

She left, and Dick and Alison joined us. We listened to him for two hours, completely enthralled. He was a pilot/adventurer, had known Lindbergh, and was familiar with his plane, The Spirit of St. Louis, and had been called in as a consultant when a movie company needed a mock-up of the plane. It was all quite fascinating, but I felt that this was not the job for me, so I turned him over to Dennis Wiegand.

Next day at the Instituto I introduced him to Toni and my friend Billye Oliver and a number of others, including a young woman from Hawaii, Elizabeth. Later Elizabeth told me Dick had invited her to go on horseback to visit a mercury mine. Did I think she should? I said sure, it would be interesting. She did, and enjoyed it. A day or two passed, and Dick disappeared, nobody knew where. But a month later Dennis showed me the cover of the latest *Magazine de Policia*. There was a close-up of Dick, with a caption identifying him as a modern *Jack el Destripador* (Jack the Ripper). Apparently he cultivated elderly American women with lots of dough, persuaded them to hire him as a pilot and guide, then murdered and robbed them. The police knew of at least five victims and suspected there were more. That was a shattering experience, because I had fancied that I had some insight into people's characters, and this showed just how wrong I could be.

At one writing class the instructor, Ashmead Scott, gave us a story germ and left us to work it out. I couldn't think of any way to handle it, so I went to bed at eight and woke at 12 with an idea for the story. I finished it at 3:30 a.m. The next day I worked on revisions, then borrowed a machine and typed the story, single-spaced, on both sides of paper torn from a pad for correspondence. I took it to class and read it. Scotty said it was very good and I should try to market it. So I sent off the original, just as it was, to my agent. I knew that manuscripts should be typed double-spaced on one side only of regulation 8½"x11" paper, but to prepare it like that would have taken a lot of time and energy. I had lots of energy, but never enough time. That was October 23rd.

On November 22 the manuscript was returned. I could feel it through the envelope, so I knew it was nothing exciting. However, I opened it up and read the enclosed letter without much interest, although I did notice he was suggesting minor changes. Then I came to the last paragraph. "This Week will buy the story on hearing of your approval for \$1,000." I screamed and rushed around from door to door and then farther afield, spreading the news.

This was it, I was convinced. I could quit my job and come back to Mexico (where living was cheap) to establish myself as a free-lance writer. In the meantime I would leave the girls with one of my sisters until I could send for them. Back in Naramata in December, I told my husband (the marriage had been on shaky ground for some time), gave a month's notice at work, arranged for the girls to move in with my youngest sister at Christmas, and in January I headed south again with a sculptor friend who was returning to San Miguel and wanted somebody to share the driving.

The first few months of 1959 in Mexico were a disaster I don't like to recall, even now. Then I borrowed enough

money to get back to Vancouver and returned to Office Assistance. By July I was working full-time in the public relations department of the White Pass and Yukon Route for a wonderful boss, Roy Minter. I was also singing regularly at two folksong groups. In August John Emerson asked me to write words for a catchy, clever melody by Lawrence Wilson called "The Roue's Rhumba." He was delighted with the result and used it on his program, and CBC paid me \$30. In October I joined a group of writers (including Maria Hardman, Bill McConnell, Phyllis Webb, Robert Harlow, Ann Marriott and Jane Rule). Their criticism was tough and intelligent, and as a result I realized I would have to rethink the basic plot of *After the Long Winter* and perhaps change it completely.

I was still learning to write songs and fiction, but now I was to learn something about writing film scripts. The White Pass and Yukon Route decided to make a film about its activities in the Arctic, and soon a movie cameraman, Bill Roozeboom, was sent north and Roy and I were both working on the script. I suggested the title, *Take Four Giant Steps*, and that was approved. On May 11, 1960, after a full day's work at the office we viewed the film while reading the script, and found we had too much film, not enough words. Back to the drawing board. At two a.m. we had another read-through. This was terrible; too many words. Roy and I went back to the office, and I typed a new version. We timed it: still too long. At four a.m. we went to Chinatown for a feed, trying not to dribble sweet and sour sauce over the script as we hacked and chopped. To the office, and I typed the re-re-revised version. To Parry Films. George McLean, who was to do the narration, arrived. He listened to Roy read while the film ran. Then he recorded it wild. (I think that means without rehearsal.) We still needed some sound effects and our ship, the *Clifford J. Rogers*, happened to be at the dock in North Vancouver, so we wheeled over there and Roy recorded the whistle and the sound of the winch in operation. He brought me home at 3.30 p.m., and I died.

We were both very proud of the finished product and anxious to see it shown everywhere, but at the end of June we received explicit instructions from the higher-ups. Don't show the film to anybody. Don't even talk about it. Forget you ever saw it. Somebody is planning a take-over, and the film would only encourage them. Eventually the rumoured take-over failed to materialize and we were able to release the film. You won't find my name on it anywhere, but I know how much I put into it. In time, it won the equivalent of an Oscar for an industrial film.

In September I wrote a song about W.A.C. (Wacky) Bennett, then our Premier, to the tune of "Jamaica Farewell," and entitled "Victoria Farewell." The chorus was:

But some fine day he'll be on his way,
He won't be back for many a day;
The M.L.A.'s won't see him any more
'Cause he'll be busy working in a hardware store.

This turned out to be very popular, especially when I sang it for 1,000 NDP supporters at the Bay Theatre. Unfortunately,

it was not an accurate prediction.

With Roy, I had joined the Industrial Editors' Association, and in September we attended our first conference, which started out in Seattle, then moved by ferry to the Empress Hotel in Victoria. For this event I used "I'se the B'y That Builds the Boat" again for a song mentioning everybody attending the conference, 25 verses in all, plus a chorus. I sang it after luncheon in the Empress, and everybody joined in lustily.

In October Tom Patterson phoned Roy. He was en route to the Yukon to prepare a folk festival and had Burl Ives in tow. Burl called me later, and we had a pleasant chat. In November my agent sold one of my stories to *Woman's Mirror*, so 1960 was a much better year for me than 1959.

With one of my daughters and her friends, I had formed a singing group called The Cadoodlehoppers, and we travelled around singing at places like The Question Mark, but eventually it was disbanded. That didn't result in any more free time for me because I was soon deeply involved with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

In 1964 the Royal Commission on Gasoline Price Structure began its hearings, and Office Assistance was given the job of recording them all verbatim and producing transcripts. For a year and a half I travelled all over the province, in company with the lawyers representing the oil companies, Cyril Shelford (the MLA whose urgings had led to the Commission being set up) and two newspapermen, Duncan Holmes from the Province and Dick Dolman of the Sun. I thought we should write a song about it, so Dick and I went to work on the words, and Duncan (an Australian) suggested we use "Waltzing Matilda" for the tune. The result was "Down with the Prices," a mammoth production of nineteen verses and a slightly different chorus for each. I was particularly proud of the verse I wrote for Tommy Ellis, who was noted for speaking very rapidly. Accordingly, I put double the number of words into the same tune and it came out like this:

Mr. Ellis said, "It's true, there's been evidence right here
And the witnesses have said that the evidence is clear
On the tank wagon prices and the freighting costs of beer,
Don't you agree?
Though we're the barometric leader, we have had an
awful wrench,
McFarlane used to stand here, now he's sitting on the
Bench,
And he's left me all alone here to present the reasons why
we must
Maintain the price of petrol in B.C."

In July we travelled by bus to the new Peace River dam, where we were shown over the project and then treated to lunch. Afterwards, we gave the song its premiere and the response was overwhelming. The Commissioner, Judge Morrow, laughed so hard he almost fell off his chair. Everybody insisted that we must make a recording, so later we did, just enough copies for everyone with the Commission.

In the spring of the following year I was hospitalized with rheumatoid arthritis, then released and told I must avoid overworking. I tried, but it wasn't easy. In 1966 my second marriage came to an end, and I decided to investigate the folk clubs of Britain, travelling by bus to New York and then boarding the Queen Elizabeth. In New York I found the Maryland Hotel ("not recommended for discriminating tourists" the book said, but very cheap), took a room, and went off looking for coffee houses. I found lots of them and made many friends. On the ship there were 14 young Rhodes Scholars on their way to Oxford, and they were all mad about folk music, so we had a wonderful time, in spite of the terrible weather. I think more than half the passengers were confined to their cabins, but I never missed a meal or a course, and spent most of my time in the Sun Room or the Observation Bar, singing up a storm.

After we landed at Southampton I spent a few days visiting relatives and friends of friends, then headed for London. There I went searching for the folk clubs, but instead discovered the Porcupine pub where all the buskers hung out. I had never heard of a busker (street musician) or a bottler (who collects money for the busker), so this was a whole new world to me. One of the people I met was Meg, the Queen of the Street Singers. She took me out busking that first day, singing under the arches, and it wasn't long before I lost my voice. Meg had a strong soprano voice, beautifully clear and resonant. (If you saw the movie *Darling*, I understand she was featured at the end.) Then I discovered Cecil Sharp House, headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and the Folk Directory, which listed most of the folk clubs in Britain. I was also introduced to Bunjie's and The Marquee and Les Cousins (a French name which should be pronounced something like Lay Coozan but invariably came out as "Les", like the man's name, "Cousins," like cousins). All of these venues featured folk music on occasion.

In October I moved to Birmingham, stayed with relatives, registered for work with a number of agencies for temporary office work, sang at the Peanuts Folk Club, and met a number of interesting people. Jackie Swift booked me as a guest the following week, and I was given another booking at the Birmingham Arms in November. A few days later Brook Street Bureau, one of the agencies, had a spot for me, and after that I was on a roll. I went to see the place where I was born at 13 Fraser Road and visited the four Higginson girls (all still unmarried) who had been living there at the time of my birth in 1920. They still remembered the day! I visited numerous other folk clubs and heard many fine singers and musicians. One of the folk clubs was at the Old Crown on High Deritend. This was the oldest building in Birmingham, built in 1368; later a man told me how Cromwell's Birmingham supporters had rallied at the Old Crown, sallying forth the next day to do battle with Prince Rupert, whose headquarters were in another pub up the road.

In November I rented a bed-sitter (a third-floor room with a couch, bed and chair, and kitchen facilities on the landing) in Edgbaston. The same night I sang at the Jug of Punch Folk Club, where the guests were Belle, Kate and

Alex—the Stewarts of Blairgowrie. Wonderful performers and wonderful people. The next night I guested at the Birmingham Arms, and thought the first set didn't go over very well. Then someone told me that last night Ian Campbell said to him, "Did you hear Vera tonight? Wasn't she great? We'll have to have her on here soon." I was so elated I threw out the set I had planned, picked new amusing songs, and the reception was terrific.

For about six days I was visiting folk clubs every night, but apart from the one booking, had no paying jobs. That made things difficult, but I didn't let it get me down. Instead I wrote another humorous song, "The Silver Screw." This was based on a story I heard from a former boss, and when it was finished I decided it was even funnier as a song than it had been as a story.

At last Alfred Marks, another agency, had a job for me—shorthand-typing for a legal firm! (My meals that day, because of the dwindling finances, had been reduced to one egg, a can of Spanish rice, bread, Ry-King and one piece of cheese.) At night I did "The Silver Screw" at the Jug of Punch and they loved it. The guest was Jean Ritchie, another great performer. In December I met Murray Kash, who ran his own folk club in London, and he helped me a great deal.

In December I had a three-night booking at the Pop Inn in Erdington. This was a restaurant, not a very congenial background for a folksinger, but we got some good lively crowds who liked to sing. At the end of the month I gave up my bed-sitter and stored most of my belongings in the loft at my cousin Derry's place. On New Year's Day 1967 I set out on a tour arranged by mail. First stop was Coventry, where I met Dominic Behan in a bar and spent an hour chatting, then guested at the City Arms. Then Manchester, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Lancaster, Blackpool, Preston, and north as far as the Hebrides, visiting relatives as well as filling bookings. I had been phoning Derry frequently, expecting news of Alison's first baby, and finally heard that Michael Anthony had arrived safely. I went north again, then back to Lancashire and Yorkshire, from there to Edinburgh for a booking at the Forth Bridges Motel at Queensferry. They were double-booked, paid me only the equivalent of \$2.20, but I appreciated the luxury accommodation. From Denny (near Falkirk) I went to Ponteland (where they liked me so much they even cheered when I finished off a pint). Then it was West Hartlepool (where Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger were the guests and I did three songs), Barnsley, and finally Birmingham, where Derry took me in. After a few days I had to take off again for a booking in Daventry, but this time I was reduced to hitchhiking and had many problems with lorry drivers.

On February 21 I left for three weeks on the Continent. In Amsterdam a number of sleeping car attendants asked me to sing for them. Afterwards they gave me a 10 guilder note and presented me with a bunch of yellow rosebuds. On a Eurail Pass I travelled through 16 countries, visited friends in Rome and Oslo, sang "Oh, Freedom" in the station at Madrid while the Guardia Civil patrolled. In Ventimiglia I went to the market and bought rolls, cheese, meat, and wine. A tall young man came towards me smiling and said, "Amsterdam." It was

one of the sleeping car attendants. He found paper cups, and we toasted each other. One very pleasant day was spent in Copenhagen with a brother and sister who played the guitar and sang. Then they left for Hanover, and I took off for Stockholm.

On March 12 I was back in London. But the next day I had to hitchhike (no money) to Warrington, arrived at 7:15 a.m. At the Blue Bell, I collapsed on a table in the club room and slept until 12:30, when Jack Froggatt arrived and took me home. Next day I hitched again, then took buses to Barnt Green, staying with Derry. At night the guest at the Jug of Punch was Leon Rosselson. I had never seen or heard him before, and his songs were a revelation. I had a few more bookings, including one at the City Arms in Coventry where we had a marvellous evening. I stayed at Harvey Andrews' place for five days while he was away, then did another booking in Chasetown, near Walsall. I wrote another song, "That Man's My Brother," sang it that night at a booking in Cannock, and made a complete mess of it. The next night I did it justice at the BroadSides Folk Club.

On April 3 I made a last visit to BroadSides, where the guest was John Pearse, a fantastic instrumentalist, fine comedian and singer, publisher of guitar instruction books, and soon a very good and helpful friend. The next day I visited my Birmingham relatives and made one last trip to the Peanuts Folk Club, where Johnny Handle played melodeon, Jew's harp, hunting horn, guitar and piano and sang Geordie songs.

Then I went off to London. I spent two nights at a hotel, then found a bed-sitter on Trinity Crescent, SW17, where the nearest tube stop was Tooting Bec. The first few days were occupied by visits with relatives in London and Guildford, as well as to folk clubs that were new to me and reunions with the buskers. Brook Street Bureau sent me off on a job, and after work I went to the Little Hogg Folk Club, where I sang four songs (the members hollered, "More! More!") and was given a booking at another club called Hole in the Ground. I discovered the Troubadour, a late-night venue on Old Brompton Road run by Martin Winsor and Redd Sullivan. The following Saturday I had a wonderful night at the Cellar Folk Club at Cecil Sharp House, went on to the Troubadour where I did three songs and stayed till 2 a.m., then walked over to Les Cousins, where the Young Tradition were in charge. Royston Wood remembered me from Wolverhampton. I stayed till 7 a.m., then went to visit another cousin, had a nap, then talked for hours exchanging family history.

I was doing office work every day now, and these late nights were a bit of a strain, but Tuesday I went straight home and slept for ten hours, which helped. Thursday I was at the Fox in Islington to see the Watersons again, as well as Tim Hart and Maddy Prior. Friday the Watersons were guests at the Central Hotel in East Ham. I arrived at the interval, and the organizer's wife told me there was no room for folk-singers, but a young fellow from Leeds said, "Aren't you going to put her on? She's marvellous." So she consulted, and I was allowed to do two. First I sang "Brave Wolfe," which Mike Waterson had liked so much, and then "Wade in the

Water," and the response was great. Among the floor singers was Joe Stead, who later became the producer of my first record.

I met Diz Disley, a marvellous guitarist and great performer. His Rolls Royce was parked outside the club. I also met Eric Winter—writer, editor, songwriter, folk expert, and soon a good friend. A few days earlier I had gone to Trafalgar Square to attend a demonstration which didn't materialize. On April another demo was promised, the March of Shame. (I can't remember now what we were protesting.) Nothing was happening, but Meg was there and suggested I sing, so I did. About five people gathered to listen. There were hundreds outside the barrier fences, but we were inside, maybe because we arrived earlier. A reporter interviewed us, and then about ten people asked for my autograph. Eventually a march started (some of the people were carrying coffins), and we walked to join them. On the way I met Dick Tsien, who had come over on the Queen Elizabeth with me. At Downing Street there was a scuffle, and two people were arrested.

May 1st was an important day in my life, though I didn't realize it at the time. After work I went to the Royal Oak at Green City Green, near Orpington. The guest was John Pearse and he had brought Ian Russell with him. Afterwards the three of us boarded the same train, and I sang more of my own songs for them. John suggested I should do nothing but my own songs. I was quite upset. "But I'm a folksinger!" I protested.

This proposal led me to reconsider the definition of a folksong. I knew the folklorists contended it must have been written a certain number of years ago and appeared in so many variant forms, but to my mind, the important question was, "Why was it written?" If it were written to make money for the composer and the lyricist, the recording artist and the record company, then it was a pop song, even if it never made the top ten. If it were written to share a tender experience, or to arouse people's anger over a miscarriage of justice, or awaken enthusiasm for political ideals, or make people laugh at human foibles, then it was a folksong. I don't expect this argument to influence the folklorists, but it convinced me. I decided my own songs were folksongs, even if they didn't fit the accepted definition.

The weeks went by. I worked in the daytime, at night wrote letters trying to line up bookings or visited different folk clubs for the same purpose, as well as to meet new people and see friends. I also wrote songs, including "Mince Pies," inspired by a newspaper account. The chorus goes:

Mince pies, mince pies, never eat them green,
And we have got the ripest pies that you have ever seen;
If you like your pies mature and covered up with mould,
Come and buy our mince pies twelve years old.

I wrote "Bus Conductor's Shanty." Every second line is "Press the button and away we go," and the song follows the actual route from Dorking to Whippsnade. Neither of these songs packed a message, but they were fun to sing and much re-

quested. I wrote "It's Great To Be Independent," which has a bouncy chorus and nostalgic verses. This also went over well.

One very upsetting day I was down to my last 12 pence and couldn't get money from my postal savings account because the post office had sent my book away to be updated. I went to the call box at the tube station to phone Brook Street Bureau and let them know why I couldn't come to work. I put a sixpence in the slot and asked for Miss Otley, but before she reached me, the time ran out, and all I had was a dial tone. I cried a little before I inserted the last sixpence. Miss Otley said they could lend me a couple of pounds if I could get there, but I decided to wait for the second post, and the book arrived, solving my problems. Then I took £10 from the account and went off to work, and later to the Earl of Sandwich (a new hangout for the buskers) where I had a visit with Donovan, Derroll Adams and Alex Campbell. Then I had a booking. There was another booking (and another good night) on the 15th. And the next two days I was busy entertaining my friend Joan from Seattle and getting very little sleep.

On the 17th I was booked at the National College of Food Technology at Weybridge, and Joan went with me. That was a tremendous evening, and they particularly enjoyed "Mince Pies." The next day we went back for a visit; then Joan left to visit friends in Farnham, and I put songs and conversation on tape for the students.

More work, more folk clubs, more bookings, more exposure to singers who were new to me. And more songs. On June 22nd I wrote "Battersea Park," a very tender and moving song (I think, and others agree with me), the chorus of which is:

Tugboats were hooting way down on the river,
The streetlamps made halos out there in the dark;
Our bed was a jacket spread over the rustling
Leaves of October in Battersea Park.

On June 24 wrote "Layabouts." The chorus

Why don't they advertise for layabouts?
Every country ought to have a few;
We just sit around all day in an unobtrusive way
And you must admit we're quite a pleasant crew.
(A pleasant crew!)
Now chemists, they make poisons (CHOKING NOISE)
And physicists make bombs (SOUND EFFECT)
And engineers drive roads through every farm
(TRACTOR NOISE)
But the highly skilled and qualified and practised British
layabout,
He never does a bloody bit of harm.

It was a smash hit that night at Folk at the Clerkenwell.

June 26 I had a booking in Port Talbot in Wales. This time I did all my own songs in the second half, and they went over well.

I wrote one more song in June, making six in all. In July, continuing on this creative roll, I wrote seventeen! Best

of all, I think at least twelve of them are still worth singing, including "Ballad for Billy" (about Billy Graham), "McFadyen's Motor Car" (which Peggy Seeger published), "Mink," "Oh, Mr. Kropp," "Birminghamese," "Housewife's Lament" (Edith Fowke's favorite), "I'm All Woman and a Yard Wide," "Muhammad Ali," "The Chilton Cantelo Public School Fire Brigade," and "The National College of Food Technology."

Also in July, I attended the Keele Folk Festival, and one day at noon previewed some of the new songs for John Pearse and friends. He decided to include some on his next record. I filled several bookings and went to the Cambridge Folk Festival, which was exhausting but a lot of fun. I had a sleeping bag with me, draped a piece of plastic over a branch to make a campsite. Then I sang wherever I could gather a crowd. Murray Kash took me off to a quiet spot to interview me. He said he would use the tape on his own radio program and try to sell it to CBC and BBC. Alex Atterson heard me sing and asked, "When can you come to Norwich?" As this was the last day, I agreed to go back with him that night "to take a look at the place," as he phrased it. Actually, he was giving me a booking. The club that night was packed. I had almost no voice left but managed to do two half-hour spots, and the audience response was great.

The next festival on my program was at Sidmouth, down on the south coast. The cost was only £15 (\$30) for eight days, including meals, and accommodation was provided at a hostel called the Cuddy's Nest. (I think there was a charge but it was minimal.) Getting there was the big problem, but I took a bus and a train and then hitchhiked.

Sidmouth was exciting. Unfortunately, I had used up all the pages in my notebook, so I couldn't record the details. The response to my new songs was heart-warming.

One more festival to go, the Blairgowrie Folk Festival in Scotland, and the journey there is one I'd like to forget. In fact, I'll skim over it lightly. I was given a ride to the Bristol Road. From there I had to hitch, and it took 12 separate lifts (waiting for each in the pouring rain) to Edinburgh, which was not where I wanted to be, as I had asked to be dropped off at the Stirling cut-off. Blessings on the two young men, occupying a friend's apartment while he was out of town, who gave me a couch and a chance to sleep for a few hours before I hit the road again.

Next morning two lifts brought me to Blairgowrie. The festival is held in various pubs throughout the town. I soon linked up with the Stewarts and we had a grand time. On Saturday night I sang "I'm All Woman and a Yard Wide" at the Angus and was praised by Hamish Henderson, which made all the sleepless hours and discomfort worthwhile.

I spent two days with the Stewarts recuperating, then hitched back to London. The worst part of the trip began when I noticed that the lorry driver was falling asleep. I began talking at a great rate, asking him questions, banging, shouting whenever his eyes closed. It was a great relief when we pulled into Smithfield Market.

Later that month, as arranged by Murray Kash, I went to the CBC studios in Great Titchfield Street and recorded seven

songs of my own and two Canadian folksongs. A copy of the tape would be sent to Toronto, and Murray would play the original to Ian Grant and send a copy to Nathan Joseph. On August 23 I wrote "Boom Boom" (about the sonic boom), on the 23rd "Take Your Time", on the 26th "The Singing Revolution." These were all "message" songs.

On the 28th my total assets were very low, including a shilling I had put aside for electricity and sixpence for gas. I wasn't worried because I had a booking that night, but when I left I forgot to take the electricity and gas money with me. After walking a mile I discovered I had only 8 pence. I rode a bus as far as that would take me and then walked another mile, I arrived hot and weary and thirsty. It was a small crowd but my songs went over well, and they paid me my full fee.

On the last day of the month I wrote "Flowers and Weeds." The chorus says:

You may ridicule the
flower people,
Their bells, their kooky
costumes and their beads;
But there's one thing we
know, no matter where
you go,
It's better to have flowers
than have weeds.

And the verses describe some of the people who might be called "weeds."

I filled eight bookings in September and wrote five songs. I rented a typewriter. At the Manchester Sports Guild booking, Rod McEwen bought me a drink. I had met him before but had forgotten. At the time, I wrote, "He has a number of Ips out." And now I wonder if by any chance this was Rod McKuen. The main guests at this venue were the Grehan Sisters, but my songs went over so well that fans were getting me to put my autograph on their album. I went to a Country Meets Folk broadcast, and noted that the compere, Wally Whyton, "did one song that was very good by Joni Mitchell of Saskatoon." That was the first time I had heard of her. On the 30th I had two bookings, one in the morning at the Farnborough Festival leading a songwriters' workshop, and the other in the evening at the Thetford Folk Club.

I had only 11 more days to spend in Britain, but a number of interesting things happened in that time. I had a reunion with Dick Tsien and some other former shipmates when I did a booking at a folk club in Oxford. We had a

fantastic night at the club. By this time I was doing all my own songs and making no apologies. We also had a spectacular evening at Newark, the best yet. They not only applauded, they shouted, stamped, whistled.

Then one morning I went to the BBC Maida Vale studios and met Ian Grant, who wanted to put six songs on tape. I gave him a list of thirteen and sang a bit of each. "Charles de Gaulle" was out because of political developments, but he liked all the others and decided to do two programs, with six on each. We recorded the songs, with Brian Brocklehurst assisting on bass, and they paid me ten guineas for my work.

I rushed off to the Tate Gallery to see a painting by Toni, but it was on loan to Montreal's EXPO 67. I did another booking at the Sloop Inn on the Isle of Wight. There were farewell visits with relatives and bookings in Southampton and Welwyn Garden City. The next day I went to Southampton and boarded the Queen Elizabeth. On the second day we were into heavy weather and most passengers were ill, including my cabin-mate, but I was fine. I wrote four songs during the trip, and though I discarded one of them, I thought another, "Heave Up, My Lads," was a masterpiece. So did the passengers, when they began to recover, and the crew, and I was constantly being asked to sing it.

After delivering a Christmas cake and plum pudding to Ray Diffen in New York and managing to locate only one of my other friends, I visited relatives in Massachusetts and went on to Montreal. There I stayed with my friends, the McLeans, nursing a cold, and wrote one of my best songs, "The Gentle Rain of England". Two days later I wrote another good one, "Recreationally Inert." Then I had a brief visit with Edith in Toronto and stayed with a niece and her family, for whom I wrote "The Parade." Next stop was Regina and then Vancouver.

By December I was working as a legal secretary again and immortalized every member of the firm in a new song, "Campney, Owen and Murphy," which made a big hit at our Christmas party. Walter Owen (who had travelled with us on the Royal Commission hearings and later became B.C.'s Lieutenant-Governor) made a very complimentary speech about me.



Photograph by Jean Christy

On the last day of the year I wrote "The Word," which poked fun at the B.C. Department of Education's suggestion that teachers who disapproved of certain language in some stories on the curriculum could pick up a pencil and cross out the offensive words. The chorus goes:

You may think we're CLAP CLAP censors,
But we're only here to teach;
You may think we're CLAP CLAP preachers,
But we didn't come to preach.
You may think we're CLAP CLAP cowards,
But we're really bold as brass,
And you can take your CLAP CLAP pencil
And you can CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP.

Then it was 1968—a really exciting year for me. Some tragic things happened this year as well, on both the international and personal levels, but I'm not going to mention them. In January I wrote only five songs, but two of them (also recorded later) were "Jesus Was a Preacher" and "You Can't Let Your Hair Hang Down." I was quite proud of both. I had moved into a cheap hotel close to the office, and, as well as working every day, I was going to meetings of the Vancouver Folk Guild, the Folk Song Circle, Western Writers, conducting a series of eight classes at the Unitarian Church on Life Reflected in Folksongs, attending a Vancouver South NDP nominating meeting, and singing at various venues including the Arts Club, where they asked me to come back.

In February I had a booking at the Arts Club where there was a big, enthusiastic crowd, and we had a wonderful night. John Pearse sent me a copy of his latest record, which included two of my songs, and I was delighted with what he said about me in the sleeve notes. One of the songs I wrote that month was "Viva Che," which pleased me and others. I made a brief visit to Seattle, met a crowd of folksingers, was interviewed by a disk jockey at an FM radio station, and did 30 plus songs at a club called The Lead Balloon.

A handsome new fountain had been installed in front of the Vancouver Court House, and police had begun arresting hippies who came to admire it. So in March I wrote "The Fountain," which had a bouncy chorus:

Go and climb a mountain
Or take a boat for a sail,
But don't go look at the fountain
Or you might wind up in jail.

I was learning to use humour to make pointed political comments.

I had decided previously that I wanted to write a song about Pierre Trudeau. I had no use for his party, but I liked him as a person. While I was working on "The Fountain," my mind was invaded by a melody for the Trudeau song. It was so strong that I didn't resist it, simply grabbed some music paper and wrote out the tune without even checking it on the guitar. Then I finished "The Fountain."

The next day I put words to "Pierre Trudeau," a leader

and chorus song with verses alternately in English and French. That night I did both new songs at the Folksong Circle, and the reception was riotous. After the coffee break Al Cox (another of the founding members) and I went over to Mac Elrod's place to meet a crowd of people, among them Barry Olivier, who was producing the Berkeley Folk Festival. Mac asked me to do a number of songs, and Barry got quite excited. When I sang "Jesus Was a Preacher" he said, "I just wished it would never come to an end."

On March 21 I finished typing over 300 envelopes to British folk clubs, then went off to the Olympia Theatre, arriving just in time to go on stage and sing "Viva Che" prior to the showing of a documentary. Then I was able to watch the film and repeat the song before the second showing. There was another booking at the Arts Club—so many people the seats were filled and the late-comers had to sit on the floor. The next day Barry took a bunch of photographs of me, and taped a number of songs. I mailed photocopied letters to British clubs. On Sunday Mac Elrod gave the service at the North Shore Unitarian Church, and I sang "Jesus Was a Preacher."

On Monday I worked at Davis & Company, typing mortgages (a fate worse than death, in my view). But one of the lawyers in the office was Boyd Ferris, to whom I had sent a copy of "Pierre Trudeau." A couple of days later the song was mentioned in Denny Boyd's column in the Sun, with the comment, "What do you bet it gets played 3,000 times at the convention?" Boyd Ferris had planted this item, he told me later, and he wanted me to phone him on Sunday. The same column said a "loiter-in" would be held in front of the Court House on Saturday, so I went along and sat on the steps, beside a woman with a baby, and soon people had moved in all round us. I mounted the steps and stood behind a pillar, where the guard below couldn't see me, and, taking out my guitar, sang "The Fountain" and then repeated it. This time the crowd joined in the chorus. A reporter asked some questions and wrote down the words of the first verse and chorus. The result was a big spread opening with the words of the chorus and headlined "200 voice protest at fountain rally." The long-term result was that now anybody can go and admire the fountain.

Sunday I met with Boyd and the committee backing Trudeau. They wanted me to attend the convention with them and sing there but hadn't been able to arrange it with Ottawa. While they were still trying, my bosses at Office Assistance decided to print 1,500 copies of the song at their own expense. Ottawa finally turned thumbs down on the committee's idea, but the songs were given to a committee member to take back east. (He left them on a bus and they were lost. Oh well, what can you expect of Liberals?) In the meantime, I had phoned Simma Holt to tell her about a writer I had met in London who had known Simma's brother in Israel and talked at length about what a wonderful person he was. In the course of our conversation, Simma asked what I was doing in London and in Vancouver and then wondered if I would like some exposure. "Sure," I said. She phoned later and told me to be at CJOR at 10 a.m. the next day to talk to

Jack Wasserman. "And be prepared to sing that song." I was there on time, and did both "Pierre Trudeau" and "The Fountain," and there were lots of favourable calls about both.

In April I wrote more songs, bookings were coming in from British clubs, and Barry Olivier said he wanted to tape "We're Gonna Make His Dream Come True" (about Martin Luther King) as a possibility for Joan Baez, and was also sending a copy to Pete Seeger. In May Pete wrote that he had passed it on to Broadside and hoped they would use it. Then I was given a booking at the Penticton folk club, Chautauqua 333, run by George Ryga, the playwright, and Ben Benson. That was a wonderful experience. Later a letter came from Estelle Klein, artistic director of the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto, arranging for me to appear on the Songwriters' Workshop. In May my song "Mince Pies" was published in Club Folk, the magazine of the British Federation of Folk Clubs.

This was all wonderful, but I was too busy to celebrate as a political campaign was in progress, and I was writing songs for NDP candidates Norm Levi and Bill Deverell and singing them. I also taped a program for Bill Terry of the CBC, and it was later broadcast. On June 17 I took a day off work and was paid by the Liberals to sing for Trudeau in Fort Langley. That was a terrific experience. I had a chance to rehearse with the crowd of about 2,000 before Trudeau arrived, and they joined in with gusto. Trudeau was on a platform, I was on the ground, and he leaned over a railing and listened all the way through. When I finished, he vaulted over the railing to the ground and clasped me in his arms. The TV and newspaper cameras were all following the action, and next day there were television reports and stories and pictures in both newspapers. Five days later, the NDP staged a motorcade tour through the West End. The sign on the car I was in read *SHE SANG FOR TRUDEAU BUT SHE'LL VOTE FOR DEVERELL!*

On July 2nd I flew to San Francisco (my first trip in a jet) and the next day went to the University of Berkeley for the Folk Festival, which opened on July 4th. That was another wonderful experience, not only meeting and hearing people like Sam Hinton, Mitch Greenhill, Malvina Reynolds, and others, but also finding my own songs so well received. In a letter to Barry Olivier published in Folknik, Faith Petric wrote, "In my opinion Vera Johnson stole the Festival... I worried about her when she walked on stage ... carrying a simple acoustical Martin guitar. AND - well, you too were there and saw the dynamic meeting of artist and audience, the beautiful love affair, the only standing ovation of the Festival." I was walking on air after reading that. On the last day of the festival I flew to Vancouver, stayed at the Airport Inn overnight and next morning flew to Penticton for another booking at Chautauqua 333, this time for a whole week.

I flew to Calgary, took a bus to Moose Jaw and stopped off there for a visit, made a side trip to Assiniboia to see my Great-uncle John Minazzi, went from there to Regina to see friends and sing "George, the Peculiar Cat" for Derry Jones and family—including George, of course. Then I travelled by train to Toronto and Montreal, and the McLeans gave me a lift to the Newport Folk Festival. Again, it was a wonderful

experience. I saw and heard Lou Killen again, also Sam Hinton (he introduced me to Moe Asch and praised me), as well as Pete Seeger, and met Pete's wife, Toshi. I also met Mike Seeger and Libba Cotten, Norman Kennedy, Joe Heaney and other outstanding performers. I heard Arlo Guthrie for the first time. On Friday, the first day of the workshops, I set up my own workshop doing my own songs and got bigger crowds than some of those that were scheduled.

From there I went back to Boston, where I gave a concert on the Common, and then to Rowley to visit relatives. I arrived in Toronto by bus and booked a room at a cheap hotel. In Yorkville I sang on the street. I did this again the next day, and the kids I was singing for took up a collection and turned it over to me. That touched me.

On August 10 I performed at Mariposa in the Songwriters' Concert. I was the only one who got an encore, and I got two, as well as a standing ovation. Joni Mitchell, who was hosting, said that she cried when she heard "Jesus Was a Preacher." Afterwards David Wilkes (representative of a New York management company) said he would phone me from New York and make arrangements to meet. The manager of Le Hibou in Ottawa wanted to arrange a booking, would set a date later. Ray Woodley of The Travellers said they would like to learn some of my songs. And Estelle Klein asked me to sing in the main concert that night, stressing that it must be only three songs.

At that concert, Mike Seeger came on after the intermission, and I followed. I did "Viva Che," "It's Great To Be Independent," and "I'm All Woman and a Yard Wide." The chorus says:

I'm all woman and a yard wide,
Got a disposition on the easy side;
I've had eight husbands and I wouldn't mind nine;
If you want to apply, boys, just get in line.

It's not an important song, but the response it evoked was sensational—everybody standing up and clapping and yelling for more. I was already offstage, but I could hear the M.C. telling the crowd, "Vera's already taken off, so if you want to get in line you'll have to go round to the back." On the boat returning to the mainland, Peter Bellamy of The Young Tradition, who followed my act, came over to me and said, "Since you stole the show, the least you can do is give me a cigarette." I gave him one and responded, "Well, you told me to leave them happy, so I did." Peter's retort was, "I didn't mean that happy."

Harvey Glatt phoned from Ottawa and we arranged a booking at Le Hibou. David Wilkes phoned from New York, and we agreed to meet at the Beers Festival. Ray Woodley called to set up a taping session, which was held on August 15. On the 16th Edith Fowke and I took off for the Beers Festival in Fox Hollow. The next day David arrived with two friends, Steve Gillette (a performer) and Mary Keller. We set a time for meeting the next day, and then I concentrated on enjoying the rest of the festival, which wasn't hard. Sunday night Edith and I said our goodbyes, and then I joined the

others. First stop was Albany Airport, as Steve was flying to a booking, and next, New York. Mary had an apartment on Riverside Drive, and I was to stay there for the time being.

Things were hectic for the next few days. With David, I went to Towers Studio and taped a bunch of songs. At night we visited The Bitter End and Gerde's Folk Center, where I did a set. Next night we were at The Tin Angel with Brian, one of Fred Weintraub's associates. (Fred was the top man in Fredana Management.) Brian had listened to the tapes and said he was bowled over. David

reported that Harvey Glatt had said I was the most exciting thing at Mariposa. The following day David, Brian and Fred held a meeting, and started laying plans for me. First they would arrange a booking at The Bitter End and invite all the record companies to attend. They called me in and told me what they wanted. First, I should postpone my departure, stay in New York for a while. They would buy me a new airline ticket to London via BOAC on September 14, and I should cancel the one I had. They would move me to a hotel. The contract should be ready on Monday. On Tuesday they would fly me to Ottawa for my booking at Le Hibou and would fly me back on September 2nd, when I would start my booking at The Bitter End. They also wanted me to fly back to New York in November to cut a record. If it were released in December, I should be back in January for TV and personal appearances.

It all sounded great, if somewhat unbelievable, and it started out well. They moved me into the Hotel Van Rensselaer. The contracts were ready on Monday, and I mailed copies to my solicitor, John Millington. They did fly me to Ottawa, and I sang for five nights at Le Hibou. (While there I ran into Lotta Hitschmanova, Executive Director of the Unitarian Service Committee, who wanted me to write a song for their fund-raising campaign. On the second-last day I wrote "Nagamma," and next morning I went to Lotta's office and sang it for her. She cried. I cried. She phoned CBC. They didn't cry but made an appointment for me to record it at 1:30. Then Lotta used it as the theme song for the campaign.) Soon I was back in New York, and David met me.

On September 4th there were further discussions at the Fredana office. I went to a studio with David and his friend,

John Rolfe (manager of the Yellow Door in Montreal) and taped a whole raft of songs. John said I was fantastic and wanted to book me. We went back to the office and signed the contracts. I received a cheque for \$500 but had to give \$150 back: \$50 I had been given as an advance, and \$100 to pay the lawyer's bill.

Opening night at The Bitter End was disappointing—a small crowd and quite unresponsive. Next day I complained about a "bad audience," but Fred said there are no "bad" audiences, only "bad" performers. He said I should be more natural, more informal, should move about the stage more. I took his advice to heart, so the following night I moved about the stage while singing. Fred grabbed David and snarled, "What's she moving about the stage for?" David said, "Well, you told her to." Later Fred modified his instructions. I shouldn't move while singing. That night there was a bigger crowd and things went better.

On September 8th I went to White Plains for a visit with Billye Oliver and Taylor (my friends from San Miguel) and then back to The Bitter End at night. I decided Fred was right; I did need to learn how to handle an audience, and I felt I was learning. September 9th was my last night at The Bitter End, after which I made a flying visit to Rowley to visit relatives.

September 12 was the REALLY big day. We made our way to Columbia Records

for an interview with John Hammond. I was trying very hard to stay calm and not quite succeeding. This was the man who had discovered Bob Dylan! This was the man who had signed up Donovan and a lot of others, including Malvina Reynolds! I don't know what I was expecting, but Hammond turned out to be quite human and friendly. He had listened to the tapes and was delighted to meet me. He said he was putting through a requisition and would have a contract drawn up. I asked if by any chance they could record in England, maybe at my booking in Oxford. He didn't know off-hand but made a phone call and then reported yes, it could be done. They could fly in equipment from Switzerland. If they did that, he and David would come over, and maybe Fred as well. He dictated a letter for me to deliver to the CBS man in London, a letter that started out, "This will introduce an enormously talented folksinger from Canada whom Columbia is very interested in



Photograph by Toronto Life

recording."

The BOAC flight to London was fast and comfortable.

It landed at Heathrow, and I called Tooting Taxi, as I was returning to my old stamping grounds at 9 Trinity Crescent. (I had written to Irene Greenslade, my former landlady, to ask if any rooms were vacant, and luckily someone had just moved out.) When the taxi arrived the driver looked at me closely and said, "Aren't you Vera Johnson?" I agreed I was, but how did he know? The answer was simple. He had driven me once before, and then had heard me singing on "Country Meets Folk." After dumping my luggage I rushed over to Eric Winter's place and from there made phone calls to various people (including arranging for a phone to be installed at my place the next day), had a cup of tea, sang some of the new songs. Then I went to Leicester Square, found Don Partridge and Alan Young at the Round Table and learned that they were now working Blackpool. I ended up at The Troubadour, saw Redd and Martin and others. Missed the last train, phoned Tooting Taxi, and the same driver turned up. Apparently it was a one-man operation.

My song output was very low during this period. On September 13th I wrote "Just Like You" and on October 13th, "Never Speak to Strangers," nothing in between. This was mainly because I had arranged so many bookings at widely separated places that it took all my time to get from one venue to the next. If anybody else had made the arrangements I would have been cheesed off, but under the circumstances, there was nobody I could complain to. Some of the bookings were great, some were not so great, and a few had been cancelled.

This was a very trying time for me. I was constantly writing to David Wilkes in an attempt to find out what was happening. The date of the Oxford booking was imminent and I had heard nothing definite, although David did say, "If we do an album for Columbia in England, and it looks very good...." Fredana was preparing lead sheets for the songs, but ignoring my letters pointing out mistakes in them which should be corrected. Up until October 18, I was not taking any bookings for December, on Fredana's instructions, but after that they decided December would be okay. Then I had to chase around and try to line some up. I wanted copies of the lead sheets to give to people, as I had always done with the words, but now Fredana said I shouldn't be doing this. Copies should go only to established artists who might record the songs. The Oxford date passed but there was still no definite word. And eventually the project was buried.

It took me a while to recover from that, and months to escape from the Fredana contract and recover my songs. Eventually, Joe Stead produced my first record on his Sweet Folk All label, and it was recorded at the Black Horse Folk Club in Amberley, Sussex. A Canadian version was distributed by Boot Records. The second one was produced by Mitch Podolak, founder of both the Winnipeg and Vancouver Folk Festivals. This too was recorded live, at the Green Cove Coffee House in Vancouver, with Cathy Fink and Duck Donald backing me. Mitch lost interest after a while, and eventually I paid to have a thousand copies pressed and issued

under my own label, Zax Music Publishing.

For some years after 1969 I made two visits to Britain each year, for three months each time, and after I discovered the Science Fiction groups and their conventions, I timed these trips so I could attend Eastercon (held in various cities) and Novacon (held in Birmingham in November). As well, I arranged a complete tour of North America each year, making sure it would enable me to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in whatever city it was being held. My Science Fiction story, "The Day They Cut Off the Power," was published in *New Writings in SF* 27, along with stories by Brian Aldiss and others. This was definitely a "message" story. Everywhere I went, I sang. I discovered folksongs, which are the SF version of folksongs, and wrote one myself, based on a story by Roger Zelazny, which I included on the second record. (Zelazny heard me performing it and sent me an order for 12 copies.) For financial reasons, later I had to cut down the British visits to one per year. The folk clubs began going downhill and at Jenny Beeching's suggestion I tried busking on the continent instead. That was so enjoyable I kept it up until 1984. That year I was back at the Cambridge Folk Festival, where I had reunions with Alex Atterson, Cliff Aungier, Martin Jenkins, Joe Stead, Ralph McTell, Tom Paxton and others and heard Christy Moore, who was a knockout. At the Tønder Folk and Jazz Festival in Denmark there were more reunions with Derroll Adams, Alistair Anderson, The Boys of the Lough, The Dubliners, Odetta, Hans Theesink and Milica, Danny Kyle, Tich Frier, Hamish Imlach, Alex Campbell, Alan Taylor, and I heard many performers who were new to me. A week later I was at the Vienna Folk Festival meeting some of the same people once again as well as Donovan, Brownie McGhee, The Red Clay Ramblers, and hearing Miriam Makeba do the "Click Song." There were a lot of European performers I hadn't heard before, and I was especially impressed by two Austrian nuns, Geschwister Simbok, who were hilarious. On that last visit, I left Vancouver with \$100 in hand, having paid for my return fare and a Eurail Pass, and returned after three months of travelling and singing my way around several countries with \$167. Then I retired and could no longer afford to sustain a career as a folksinger/songwriter.

From 1966 to 1967 I spent a little over a year in the UK and paid British income tax. But after that I paid income tax in Canada and always made sure that I spent slightly under six months in the UK. I could write a book (and someday maybe I will) about my continuing battle with the British income tax authorities. I was trying to collect income tax which had been deducted from my cheques when I was doing office work. They were refusing to return this and every year were notifying me that I owed them hundreds of pounds, based on their estimates of my earnings from gigs. I have a voluminous file of correspondence dating from 1970 to 1983. I finally won, and they turned over the money they had been holding.

As a songwriter, I belonged first to ASCAP and then to CAPAC, the Canadian equivalent. Since royalties are paid 50% to the publisher and 50% to the songwriter, I registered a proprietorship under the name Zax Music Publishing, which

entitled me to claim the publisher's share as well. For a number of songs, I assigned the royalties. For instance, royalties for "The Fountain" were turned over to the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. For "Nagamma," they went to the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada. Those for "That's What I Believe" were directed to the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. For "We're Gonna Make His Dream Come True," they were sent to the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (Martin Luther King's organization). For "Pierre Trudeau," they went to UNICEF. These amounts were substantial at one time but no royalties have been received for years. If I start again (as I hope to do next year, when I'm no longer required to participate in the housing co-op) I hope that situation will change.

Since 1984, I have been so bogged down in co-op work that it has been difficult to write any songs (except songs

about co-operatives—I've done a couple of those) and fiction (although I have done some Science Fiction, including two novels which I must revise one of these days). But now I have resigned from the Board and belong to only three committees: Traffic and Security, Newsletter, and Policy/Rules Review. At present I am solely responsible for our Handbook, because all the documents are on my word processor, but after I manage to transfer them to our computer, it will be a different story.

I am now 74 years old and in addition to my six grandchildren have six great-grandchildren. I still want to change the world, and if I haven't got very far with this ambition (in spite of the 274 songs and the stories I have written), there have been some small victories. Take a look at the fountain in front of the old Court House, now the Art Gallery, and the people passing by it and sometimes pausing. That represents a victory!



There are still some copies of Vera's two lps and her songbook available for sale. The lps are \$8.00 each, and the songbooks go for \$5.00. Both prices include postage. Write to her at 3572 Cordiale Avenue, Vancouver, B.C., V5S 4H3. Songbooks are also available from the Society's Mail Order Service. A word to the wise: Vera's songbook includes the bawdy parody Edith Fowke cites as a favorite; it's called "The Housewife's Lament."



Published and broadcast works by Vera Johnson. Items marked *SF* are Science Fiction. In addition to these published works, Vera has written three unpublished novels, eighteen plays and radio and television scripts, and fifty short stories.

Radio Series

Songs of the People, weekly program of folksongs on station CKMO (now C-FUN), October 1950-September 1951.

Essay

"Wanderlust." *Nature Magazine*, July 1934.

Nonfiction

Intercom, Office Assistance employee newsletter, November 1965-July 1966.

Growing Pains, Autobiography 1940-1958 (self published).

Poetry

Melodiae Zoecium, verses read aloud between sections of a musical composition by Glen Morley.

Radio Plays

Next to Godliness. CBC Radio Summer Fare, August 15, 1952; produced by Arthur Hiller.

The Very Best People. CBC Radio Summer Fare, September 12, 1952; bought by Arthur Hiller, produced by Esse W. Ljungh.

Songs

"Shipping Susan C.O.D." *Fictions #4*, 1991. *SF*

Short Stories

"Black Six on Red Seven." *MacLean's Magazine*, January 15, 1951. Honourable Mention, story contest. Republished in *Sondags-BT* (Denmark).

"The Huckelmeyer Story." *MacLean's Magazine*, February 1, 1953, as "A Man's Gotta Lie Once in a While." Third Prize, story contest. Republished under original title in *Northern Lights: Anthology of Distinguished Canadian Writing*, 1960.

"The Long Night." *MacLean's Magazine*, April 15, 1953. Republished: *John Bull Magazine*, 1953; *Sondags-BT*, 1953; *Revue* (Netherlands), October 1954.

"The Way is Hard and Weary." *The Canadian Forum*, April 1953. Listed on 1953 Roll of Honor, Best American Short Stories of 1954.

"The Beat of Moth-Wings." Published as "The Silent Star of Stratford." *MacLean's Magazine*, August 15, 1953.

"Death in the Toy Parade." *MacLean's Magazine*, December 1953.

"Vigil on the Rock." *MacLean's Magazine*, December 10, 1955.

"The Legacy." Published as "He Married for Murder." *This Week*, December 1958. Republished: *Toronto Star Weekly*, August 1, 1959; *Sondags-BT* (Denmark), 1959; *London Express News*, 1963.

"The Pilgrimage." *The Canadian Forum*, February 1959.

"Death Comes to the Fiesta." Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, July 1960.

"The Day They Cut Off the Power." New Writings in SF #27, 1975. *SF*

"The Throwback." Fictions #1, 1988. *SF*

"The Flower Words of Xochiquetzal." Fictions #3, 1990. *SF*

"The Case of the Raptrans Mole." Fictions #5, 1993. *SF*

"A Surfeit of Suspects." Fictions #6, 1994. *SF*



Vera Johnson's songs on other people's records:

John Pearce. Transatlantic Records XTRA 1056. (120/122 Marylebone Lane, London W1, England): "It's Great to be Independent," "That Minx from Pinsk."

75 Mariposa Folk Festival. M-75-0001: "The Fountain."

Faith Petric. As We Were. Center Records. (885 Clayton, San Francisco, California, 94117): "Women's Liberation Blues."

Ian Russell. Sing Something Sinful. Lucky Records LUS 3006, Volume 6: "That Minx from Pinsk."

The Folk World of Jackie & Bridie. Concord CON-1002: "The Gentle Rain of England."

Since the blitz on vinyl lps, these are presumably out of print. However, some of the smaller companies may keep stock.