

In Memoriam R2RS, 1981-1997

David Gregory

Presumably readers outside of Alberta will at least know some of the contours of the difficulties radio station CKUA has faced over the last few years. In 1993, we commented on the Klein government's dropping of the station from the list of provincial activities. The act of privatizing CKUA may have also included setting a mole in place; at least, when the executive director announced that the station had to fold because it was bankrupt, many listeners and observers wondered at her role in this. At the time, although popular press commentators mocked the sorts of programming the station offered, enough Albertans came to the aid of the station that it was at least temporarily saved.

Unfortunately, CKUA is embroiled in controversy yet again, and the end of it all is difficult to foresee. Our discussion of the original privatization of CKUA included comments that were not entirely favorable, but the point is not that CKUA needs to be perfect to be valuable. Board member David Gregory's discussion of the joys and difficulties of producing one of the CKUA programs of greatest interest to our readers offers insights into what makes the station, as well as Gregory's own radio work, extremely valuable.

All of this provides more context to the discussion of CBC that takes up our editorial pages this issue. Any attempt to balance education and entertainment will meet with resistance and non-comprehension. Once upon a time, the resistance was as likely to come from the academic side, but I suspect that this is no longer true. It's been years since I encountered anyone at a university who doubted the value of studying the work of John Coltrane or Elvis Presley. But the same midbrow mentality that questions the CKUA playlist loves to claim that some areas studied by scholars are so obscure as to be worthless—just glance at your local paper whenever the *Learners* come to your town.

Obscure or not, music is fun. Radio programming like CKUA's or the CBC's fulfills the same function as a good library, as one writer, to help people believe that the rest of the world really exists. Something a serious rocker like Johnny V will attest to—on his first trip west, fiddling with the car radio dial, he hit on Sonny Boy Williamson, being broadcast on CKUA. Not something one was likely to get north of Chicago or after 1965. When the station started to fade, he made the driver stop the car, so he could listen. This wasn't new music to Johnny (he already knew he loved it), but it probably was to someone in Alberta. —GWL

Ragtime to Rolling Stones is now just a memory. The last program was broadcast in November 1997, sixteen years after the series first hit the air in the fall of 1981. It seems an appropriate time to look back on the project, evaluate what it achieved and whether it was all worth while, and perhaps begin to put it into some kind of historical perspective. But for those readers who don't live in Alberta or who never discovered the CKUA Radio network, I should stop and explain what R2RS or, as we affectionately called it, *Ragstones*, was all about.

Ragtime to Rolling Stones comprised one hundred and four one-hour radio programs, tracing the history of (mainly American) popular music from approximately 1900 to 1970. It began with ragtime, and it ended with jazz-rock fusion and folk-rock. In between it provided both a chronological coverage of the development of most genres of popular music (Tin Pan Alley pop and Broadway shows were two exceptions) and a series of feature programs on individual artists or groups. Somebody, somewhere else, may have put together an even more comprehensive audio survey of the his-

tory of modern Western popular music, but if they have, I've never come across it. Certainly *Ragstones* was much more systematic—and, dare I say it, more scholarly—than any of the glitzy specials on the history of rock that occasionally grace our TV screens. And of course it went back further, tracing such musical traditions as blues, jazz, country, and folk music from the very first years that listenable recordings were made to their late flowering in the golden decade of the sixties.

Perhaps some future historian of Alberta's cultural and intellectual life in the late twentieth century will give more than a passing footnote to CKUA Radio's ongoing attempts to develop a style of evening programming that successfully blends education and entertainment. Complying with its CRTC mandate (to provide a minimum number of hours of educational broadcasting) while still obtaining good audience ratings has always been a tough challenge for a network which broadcasts on both AM and FM throughout the province and has all the costs associated with providing that kind of geographical coverage. Now that

CKUA is a commercial station and dependent for its very existence on advertising revenue, the struggle to find a satisfactory blend will be all the harder.

Ragtime to Rolling Stones should be understood, and judged, in the context of this challenge. I believe—though, of course, you may discount this as special pleading—that it was the most successful of all CKUA's attempts to find the right balance. At its height the program had an audience of about 10,000, and even in its last year of broadcast when most of the individual programs had been aired at least a dozen times each there was still a faithful following of about 4,000 fans. So it was reasonably popular, and yet for those who listened regularly it did more than entertain.

Ragtime to Rolling Stones was, in a way, an offshoot of another radio series I made for CKUA back in the early eighties. In those days Athabasca University was not much more than a pilot project housed in a couple of warehouses on an industrial park in northwest Edmonton, but when I joined the university in 1979 it already had a collaborative rela-

tionship with the ACCESS TV Network which happened to be officially in charge of the Alberta government's radio network. So if ACCESS Radio CKUA had an educational mandate from the CRTC, and if ACCESS TV was already helping Alberta's fledgling Open University, why shouldn't CKUA play its part in delivering distance learning courses also?

Why not, indeed, thought AU's new Humanities professor. The result was *Writers and Thinkers*, a series of seventy-two spoken word programs on subjects that ranged from Sophocles and Jesus of Nazareth to Karl Marx and T.S. Eliot. I think my greatest achievement in the W&T series, and probably the program that had the lowest listener count of all, was a feature on the philosophers Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein that took me an entire week to script. Well, it was definitely educational radio, and I thought it was great fun trying to beat CBC's Ideas team at their own game, but was it entertaining? Except for a small minority of listeners who felt starved of serious ideas and good drama, I think not. Certainly the station manager at CKUA thought it was all a tad too heavy, a bit too intellectual even for the kind of minority audience that the station was aiming to please. So what could we do instead? How about a music program?

One of the great things about Athabasca University in the very early days was that its professors really did have academic freedom. We had precious few resources, but we did have a lot of enthusiasm and energy, and nobody much was looking over our shoulder and disapproving of our experiments in distance education. One of my experiments was a course on the history of popular music which I initially tried to teach by means of a series of teleconferenced seminars linking students scattered all over Alberta. Apart from the fact that the teleconference bridge kept losing contact with students:

"Hello, Grande Prairie, are you still there?"

Deathly silence.

I got feedback from the students that the sound quality when I played music over the telephone lines really wasn't very

good. It was egalitarian, at least: Miles Davis and Blind Lemon Jefferson were reduced to the same aural lowest common denominator. But it wasn't really satisfactory. And, to tell you the truth, I didn't much like teaching by teleconference, and I wasn't very good at it:

"Jennifer in Stetler, can you tell me which Alberta artist was strongly influenced by Jimmy Rodgers?"

Deathly silence, then an apologetic voice from the other Stetler student:

"Oh, Professor Gregory, Jennifer just popped out to buy us some coffee and doughnuts!"

The seminars turned more and more into lectures, and the students suggested that, maybe, I could send them cassettes of both the lectures and the music. No problem in mailing out lectures on cassette, in fact I still do it. But cassettes of the music, no way! Why? Prohibited by the Canadian Copyright Act, at least as interpreted by the University's copyright officer. Well then, how about putting the music on CKUA radio? Sounds like a good reason for a collaborative project ... and thus the idea of *Ragtime to Rolling Stones* was born.

Sometime in the summer of 1981, I was assigned a producer, and Lady Luck smiled on me because it was Brian Dunsmore.

"Let's make the programs live to tape," quoth he.

"What's that?" said I.

He explained we would record each program the week before it was due to be aired, and if I got tongue-tied he would roll the tape back and let me do that bit again. Don't write scripts, he advised, just come prepared with a few notes and chat about the music. I did my best, which wasn't always that wonderful, and Brian turned out to be a champion at rolling back tape.

And we soon got into the big debate about education versus entertainment. The first couple of programs, on ragtime and on the beginnings of recorded jazz, we made the way I wanted, which meant quite a lot of talk explaining the music and putting it into its historical context. At the time I was quite pleased with how they sounded, although I was obviously nervous and it might have been better to

have fully scripted my commentary. Brian let them pass, but he decided I needed reining in. Ragstones must be entertaining, he insisted, with lots of music and only a little jabber by that long-winded professor. Chastened, I gave in. We swung to the other extreme, and one or two of the other early programs essentially consist of music linked by a minimalist DJ stating song titles and who played them.

With half-a-dozen shows under our belt, Brian and I sat down for what in educational jargon is known as a formative evaluation session. It took all of five minutes, and we've been firm friends ever since. We agreed that we were both right: there was too much talk in the programs done my way, too little in the programs done his way, and there was no reason on earth why we couldn't find a good compromise between the two. We now had a concept and a goal: the right balance between education and entertainment.

The remaining one hundred or so programs of *Ragtime to Rolling Stones* more or less implemented the concept. On the whole, I think we succeeded. We made two 52-part series. The first series was unscripted, and if I was having a bad day it might take us four or five hours to lay down one hour of much-edited tape. We often started working at about 10pm, after our kids were in bed and when we could be sure to find an empty studio. That meant that we saw quite a few bleary-eyed Edmonton sunrises. In retrospect I'm amazed at how tolerant Brian was of my repeated inability to say what I wanted in a concise and articulate way. It was funny, I could do fine until the microphone was switched on, and then suddenly my tongue turned to rubber and kept getting caught in my teeth....

Ah well, I did eventually get more relaxed, and I think I improved with time. It was just like giving lectures, really. I find that if I have the security of a written text, I can depart from it and ad lib without any difficulty, but if I have nothing in front of me the mind has a horrible tendency of going blank at the wrong moment. So I semi-scripted the second series. If you listen carefully, you can sometimes hear the difference. In the later programs I sound more confident

but less spontaneous. With scripting you spend more hours in preparation, but the method works. And after the government, in its wisdom, moved the university to Athabasca, we ended up making two programs a night on each of my fortnightly trips to Edmonton. So the scripting approach won out, for better or for worse. I think it gave the later programs a slightly more formal feel, subtly emphasising that they were educational radio. But I hope and believe that they were always fun to listen to.

Yes, of course I have some favourite programs, and some others that stick out in my mind. My favourites tend to reflect the musical content of those programs rather than anything that I contributed to them. By and large, I like best the programs that include my musical heroes. For example, my top picks certainly include the feature on Bix Beiderbecke, who was for my money a true genius, the greatest ever jazz cornet player, and whose wonderful music is unfortunately almost totally neglected these days, even by CKUA. Then there is the program on Lester Young and Billie Holiday, one of the occasions when (at least in my judgment) weaving two musical portraits together succeeded beautifully. And, of course, I love all the folk revival programs, including (among others) those on the Cambridge/Boston folk scene, on the Newport Festivals, on Pete Seeger and Jean Ritchie, on Tom Rush and Eric Anderson, on Phil Ochs, on Bert Jansch and John Renbourn, and on Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span.

I'm particularly proud of R2RS, second series, # 38, on the development of traditional folk song on both sides of the Atlantic between the late 1940s and the mid-1960s. The program includes performances of narrative ballads and folk lyrics by five American singers: Burl Ives, Susan Reed, Cynthia Gooding, Peggy Seeger and Hedy West, and by four British solo singers: Ewan MacColl, A.L. Lloyd, Anne Briggs and Shirley Collins, as well as an a cappella group, the Water-sons. Names you don't often hear on the radio, I regret to say, but no lover of traditional folksong will have difficulty in recognising the special quality of the mel-

odies in that program.

Some programs stick in my mind for other reasons. For example, there was the one on Appalachian hillbilly music that got me and CKUA attacked as racists by the Edmonton black community. I played



a song by Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers called "Run, Nigger, Run," and the phones started ringing. I was summoned to explain my crime to the station manager.

"Well," I said, "the course and the program try to put the music in its social context. This song was recorded in the American Deep South in the 1920s, and the language of the lyrics reflects that. In fact, if you listen carefully, you'll see that the song dates from before the American Civil War and encourages slaves to escape. And so it reflects the mutual hostility felt by blacks and by white hill farmers towards the big cotton plantation owners. It's actually an anti-racist song."

The station manager nonetheless thought it might be prudent to remake the program with another selection from the Skillet Lickers repertoire. I politely—I hope it was politely—refused, saying that I wasn't in the business of sanitizing history and that I felt my academic freedom was being infringed. There was nothing more to say, and I walked out of the office at high noon feeling that Ragstones

was probably in its last broadcast year. It wasn't. High noon came and went. "Run, Nigger, Run" defiled the air-waves of Alberta for many years to come, and the Edmonton Black Cultural Association even forgave me enough to invite me to give a lecture on some aspect of Afro-American music history. I played safe and chose Tampa Red.

The chronological programs were quite a challenge. We had to create a sense of natural flow and continuity between the tracks I had chosen to best illustrate the musical highlights of a given two-year period. Somehow each cut had to lead naturally into the next, even though we were ranging widely over the whole spectrum of popular music. It wasn't easy, so I feel warm and fuzzy towards those programs where I think we succeeded.

An example of a good one is # 34, first series, on *Years of Transition, 1959-60*. It begins with the London Youth Choir singing "The H-Bomb's Thunder," protest music from the great Aldermaston March against British nuclear weapons, and it ends with the Charles Mingus Jazz Workshop performing a trenchant protest against American discrimination and segregation, "Original Faubus Fables." In between we have Pete Seeger performing "Bells of Rhymney" at the Newport Folk Festival, a very young Joan Baez singing "Banks of the Ohio" oh-so-carefully and beautifully, Barbara Dane emoting "Dink's Blues," Lightning Hopkins' fine acoustic version of "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," urban blues from Blind Arvella Grey recorded live on Chicago's Maxwell Street, Howlin' Wolf's magnificent "Spoonful," Ray Charles' electrifying "What'd I Say," the Everly Brothers with "Problems," British traditional jazz from the Chris Barber Band with a wonderful muted solo from trumpeter Pat Halcox, highly atmospheric poetry and modern jazz from Christopher Logue with the Tony Kinsey band, searing free-form jazz from Ornette Coleman, and modal jazz from Miles Davis' classic *Kind of Blue* album. Apart from the jump from the Everlys to Chris Barber, it all goes very smoothly, and every one of the tracks is a winner. Those were the days, eh?

Looking back, what would I do differently if I was beginning over? Well, perhaps a couple of things. We made a decision early on that the first series would consist of a mix of chronological programs and features. In order to leave room for the features, that meant that each of the chronological programs had to deal with two years or, occasionally, three or four years. Usable recordings were scarce before 1915, so basically we covered the decades from World War I to 1970 in two-year hops. That meant that we had to be highly selective in the choice of representative material with only six to eight cuts allowed from each calendar year. Fine for some of the early years, maybe, but it got kind of ridiculous later on, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. In retrospect I think it would have been better to have used all fifty-two programs of the first series to provide systematic chronological coverage on a year-by-year basis whenever there was sufficient material to do so.

Another decision we took early on, when we were thinking in terms of only one set of fifty-two programs, was to double-up the featured artists. So most of the feature programs gave the first half-an-hour to one performer and the second half-an-hour to another (Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, to choose one example at random) or intertwined the careers of two fairly similar artists (for instance, Joan Baez and Judy Collins). Some really big names—Jimmy Rodgers, Woody Guthrie, Elvis Presley, and John Coltrane, for ex-

ample—got their own feature programs, but all too often it was only half-an-hour. Pete Seeger, will you ever forgive me? Please understand that I really, really needed to include Jean Ritchie too.... Well, in retrospect I think I should have had the courage of my convictions and planned more than fifty-two programs to start with. And kept going after we hit number 102.

Yes, there should have been a third series. Why did it never happen? Mainly because of the move of Athabasca University from Edmonton to Athabasca. To make use of the valuable CKUA record library, the programs had to be made in Edmonton, yet neither AU nor CKUA wanted to pay my travel expenses from Athabasca. I was donating my time and expertise free in any case, so I thought both the AU administration and the ACCESS bureaucrats were being cheap, unreasonable, and unappreciative of what we had achieved. Actually, I still think that. Anyway, I took umbrage and quit. But by then we already had enough material on tape for student purposes, and I had other fish to fry (such as writing a book on the history of Athabasca Landing and editing one on George Ryga). Nonetheless, the ideal *Ragtime to Rolling Stones* would have included a systematic year-by-year coverage from 1920 to 1970, most feature programs would have devoted a full hour to each important artist or group, and all the glaring gaps would have been filled.

Ragtime to Rolling Stones is gone,

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Folk singing can no longer be considered a living tradition, for most of the singers are recalling songs they have not sung for twenty, forty, or sixty years. Nevertheless, a surprising number can reproduce lengthy ballads without hesitation. Every collector is tantalized by fragments of songs once known and now forgotten, but on the whole the Ontario singers manage to provide complete and well-rounded versions.

Edith Fowke CFMS Newsletter Bulletin 2.1&2 (July 1967)

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But there are also songs born [from] the struggle for existence in the Prairies, all of them humorous: "Flunky Jim," "E.P. Walker" and the valiantly cheerful song of the Depression years, "Saskatchewan, the land of snow."

William A.S. Sarjeant Canada Folk Bulletin 1.5 (September/October 1978)

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After tea, we discussed a variety of topics before the fire; and Mrs. Micawber was good enough to sing us (in a small, thin, flat voice, which I remembered to have considered, when I first knew her, the very table-beer of acoustics) the favourite ballads of "The Dashing White Sergeant" and "Little Tafflin."

Charles Dickens David Copperfield (Yarmouth, England)

but its spirit lives on in the two replacement programs I now host on the new, commercial CKUA. *The Long Weekend*, which is broadcast every Monday evening at 9pm, surveys the history of American popular music between the two World Wars. As good ecologists, Brian and I recycled some two dozen R2RS programs to fit into *The Long Weekend*; the other half of this 48-part series consists of new programs. One of my favourites is on Bix Beiderbecke's buddy, C-melody saxophonist and band-leader Frankie Trumbauer. Another, called *Blues from Sunflower County*, is on the disciples of that founding father of the Delta blues, Charlie Patton. But I digress....

The other new series, *Bop to Rock*, airs on Tuesday nights at 9pm and deals with the popular music of the 1940s and 1950s. Again we are recycling some relevant R2RS programs, but there are lots of new ones too. My favourites include a couple on Alan Lomax's field collecting in the 1940s, not to mention the features on Thelonious Monk, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Amos Milburn, Roy Milton, and the early recordings of Charlie Parker on the Savoy and Dial labels. Hopefully the series does a good job of capturing the development of such musical traditions as bebop, urban blues, r&b, rock 'n' roll, and, of course, the folksong revival. And, as always, we're trying to find the perfect blend of music and information. The search for that elusive balance between education and entertainment still goes on...