

Moira Cameron: Northern Balladeer

Dave Gregory writes: I've never had the good fortune to hear Moira Cameron sing in person. A year or two ago I heard a beautiful rendition of a Child ballad on the radio, and I knew instantly that I had to find the recording, whatever it was. Although it took me a while to track them down, I eventually got hold of Moira's two solo CDs, *One Evening As I Rambled* and *Lilies Among the Bushes*. Sometimes when you buy a CD you find that the track you heard on the radio was by far the best thing on the album. Not in this case. Both CDs are excellent, although *One Evening*, the earlier of the two, is a little short: it has only about thirty minutes of music (there is also a fourteen minute story, "Mr Fox"). *Lilies* (about an hour in length) is Moira's mature statement as a singer of traditional ballads, and you will find not only the singing to be first class but also the choice of ballad texts and their interpretation interesting and, perhaps, controversial. Rosaleen, a ballad singer herself, has penned some critical thoughts on Moira's feminist approach to ballads in a review of *Lilies*. This could be the beginning of an interesting debate.

Anyway, Moira is special, and when I agreed to take over as co-editor of *CFMB*, I knew that I should take the opportunity to find out more about her and spread the word. Not that she is exactly unknown in the folk community in Western Canada, but I doubt that very many of our readers in Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada are familiar with her. I originally intended to try to write an article about her, but I found that the only way I could get sufficient information was to go to the horse's mouth. And then when I looked at the results of my e-mail conversations with Moira, I realized that it would be a shame to mute the very personal voice that came through in her responses to my questions. So the following utilizes an interview format, although I have sometimes done a little editing to eliminate repetition. Here is Moira's story, as she told it to me.



Dave: Moira, could you please begin by telling us about your background, your family, and your childhood, as you remember it?

Moira: I was born in Toronto in Spring of 1968. My parents were barely twenty when I arrived on the scene. My earliest memories were of my

is about a woman who outsmarts a serial killer. People immediately clue into that.

Dave: It sounds to me as though you have a mission in life. Do you see it that way?

Moira: I do believe I have a gift, and I am therefore responsible for sharing it. There are not many people who dedicate themselves to learning and singing ballads, and who do it well. I feel I owe it to the Art of Balladry to spread the word, as it were, and inspire interest keeping it alive. In the last year, I have developed and presented a workshop on Ballad singing from a singer's perspective (as opposed to an academic's). I first presented the workshop last July at the Storytellers of Canada annual conference. I was nervous, but my passion for the topic shone through. I was so impressed at how positively the workshop was received that I offered to do it again at the Yukon Storytelling Festival this summer. I haven't presented in schools yet, but I'm considering doing so. If I can inspire someone to learn a ballad, I would feel I have accomplished something of great value.

Dave: What comes next? I presume there is a third CD in the cards quite soon?

Moira: What next? Yes, I am putting together a list of songs for a third album. I have the title picked already: *Sands of the Shore*; the title of a traditional Scottish anti-love song. The album's subtitle will be: "Be Tricked or Betrayed." This time I will record a few of my own compositions. I have been dabbling at song writing in the style of Ewan MacColl. The two songs I plan to record have traditional sounding lyrics and tunes that will mix well with the traditional pieces on the album. The first, entitled "Kate's Ballad", is based on a tragedy that happened to a friend of mine in Yellowknife. Her home was burnt down on purpose by a male friend of hers. The second song was written for the wives of the miners laid off at one of Yellowknife's gold mines. It is called "Lament of a Miner's Wife." But not all of the material on this next album will be sad or "angry". For example I plan to record "Queen Eleanor's Confession" and "Maid on the Shore". Also the very obscure Child ballad "Whummil Bore" to lighten things up a little.

Dave: How about touring in the south? You could put together a bunch of concerts in B.C. and Alberta, couldn't you?

Moira: As far as future gigs are concerned, it is difficult to say what I will be doing. I unfortunately have to balance a 'real job' with the creative stuff. To do any kind of a worthwhile tour, I'd have to take several weeks off of work. I probably will arrange to do the odd house concert in various locations across Western Canada. I did a house concert in Edmonton a few years ago, and thoroughly enjoyed myself. It was put on by the Edmonton storytelling organization T.A.L.E.S. So far, some of my best gigs as far as ballad singing is concerned have been sponsored by storytelling organizations. It seems to be easier to sell myself as a balladeer to storytellers than to folk music organizers. In the meantime, I will continue learning ballads and collecting ballad recordings of others. No other music gives me more of a thrill. I've been singing them since I could talk, and I still get excited when I hear a new rendition of a familiar story song.

Moira Cameron's first CD, *One Evening As I Rambled* (\$15), and her second, *Lilies Among the Bushes* (\$20), are available from 4505 School Draw Ave., Yellowknife, NT. X1A 1K3.
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For a review of *One Evening As I Rambled*, see [Canadian Folk Music Bulletin](#), Vol. 29, No. 1: "she is a highly competent performer on a variety of instruments...In particular, though, she has an enchanting, indeed haunting, voice...and chooses songs that allow it full expression."

We first reviewed *Lilies Among the Bushes* in [Canadian Folk Music Bulletin](#), Vol. 32, No. 3: "I still have that special feeling of wonder and gratitude when I discover a new and talented musician...and realize just what true artistry and musical excellence are all about. That is how I first felt when I accidentally came across the work of Moira Cameron."

father painting and singing around the small apartment we lived in while my mother worked. Stewart Cameron was an artist-I remember spending hours admiring his creations, which hung on our walls. He also was a singer songwriter, in the style of Bob Dylan, although he rarely performed his own material to people outside the family. Of course, later on he was known as a balladeer and storyteller.

My mother is Canadian, but my father was born in Scotland, the son of a Nova Scotian mother and Scottish father. His family immigrated to Canada when he was a year old. So for all intents and purposes, he was Canadian. The accent he used when he sang was not his speaking accent. He didn't actually become seriously interested in traditional ballads until he came across recordings of Ewan MacColl and A.L. Lloyd. He developed his specialty in singing ballads during my early years when he performed with the Friends of Fiddler's Green.

Because my mother worked during the day, my father was my primary caregiver initially. He would sing ballads around the house while doing chores or whatever. I must have heard some of them hundreds of times. Perhaps that is why it was second nature for me to sing them before I was really able to talk.

Dave: Did you start singing at an early age?

Moira: Well, that question leads right into the myth of my origins as a balladeer. I have no memory of this event; only of the story which was told countless times by my parents. And I'm sure my mother embellished it over time, but the story goes like this: We were at Fiddler's Green folk club in Toronto on a Friday night. I was three years old. We went every week, until the club moved to another location. During an intermission, I took it into my head to climb up on stage, grab a mic, and launch into a Scottish rendition of "Bonny Suzie Clelland." For those who aren't familiar with the ballad, it is a tragic tale of a young girl who is burnt at the stake by her father because she defied him and fell in love with a man he didn't approve of. I'm sure I didn't have a clue what I was singing. The image of a child so young singing so violent a ballad must have made quite an impression. For years, I had nothing to validate this story. Then a few years ago, after I did a performance in Toronto, a fellow who used to be a regular of the Fiddler's Green Club approached me and said he had a tape

of me singing the ballad. He, like my father, used to record the performances onto reel to reel tapes. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to get a copy of this evidence of my early precocity.

Dave: Do you remember Fiddler's Green and the Toronto folk music scene?

Moira: Yes, I have wonderful memories of those early Toronto years. My parents took me to every club and festival my father performed at. I met countless other excellent performers, all of whom indirectly taught me how to perform by their example. People like Frankie Armstrong, John Roberts and Tony Barrand, Owen McBride and Enoch Kent, Margaret Christl, Louis Killen, and many more. I especially loved the Friends of Fiddler's Green. When my father was part of the group, they performed mummers plays, traditional music and ballads. I followed them around everywhere at festivals. Once, after hearing a woman sing the traditional American ballad, "Pretty Polly", I felt the itch for the first time to actively learn a ballad. My father and I performed it together when I was about 7 or 8-he accompanied me on the banjo-at a guest performer slot at Fiddler's Green. By this time, I was old enough to know how to feel nervous in front of a crowd. I think I was too scared to sing the story properly.



Dave: Did you have a favourite singer among those you saw perform in Toronto?

Moira: At around that time, I remember being really impressed with Margaret Christl's LP "Jockey to the Fair." I was a big fan of her at the time. I learned her rendition of "Banks of Airdrie-O" almost immediately after playing the album. When I saw her at the Mariposa Folk Festival, I insisted on singing her the ballad from start to finish. It was important to me for her to know that she had inspired me to learn the ballad. I still sing that today, using it as a teaching tool in my workshops on ballad singing.

Dave: Was folk music very much a family affair in those days?

Moira: Yes, but our family was becoming busier. My brother, Duncan, was born when I was five. My father didn't bring us all along to his performances as frequently as he once did. I didn't really notice the change too much until I was about ten. I was still involved with music myself, though not in any formal way. I was introduced to the recorder in Grade 3. I actually was inspired by the instrument, although not until my recorder teacher took a handful of us aside and gave us 'real' wooden recorders to play in a special recorder ensemble. She lent me her very own Tenor recorder - it is an octave lower than the regular Soprano recorder most people recognize. I had to stretch my fingers every day to be able to reach the holes on that instrument. But the sound we made as a group-6 or 7 grade schoolers playing Baroque music on the instruments it was written for-was almost magical. I wanted to be able to play the music I was familiar with (reels and hornpipes), so I have kept up playing the recorder ever since.

Dave: You play several instruments. What did you pick up after the recorder?

Moira: The next instrument I started learning seriously was the Appalachian Dulcimer. My father played a dulcimer made by Tam Kearney. I loved the soft sounds of the drones and longed to play my own dulcimer. My father found me one in a garage sale or something, and he began teaching me how to play. The truth was, he wanted someone to play dulcimer duets with. It took me a while to coordinate my strumming and melody playing, but eventually I mastered it. The dulcimer remains my favourite instrument in my repertoire now.

Dave: When did you start singing and playing in public? Was it as a teenager?

Moira: Aside from that one guest set at Fiddler's Green, I didn't perform folk music much in Toronto. I sang in a few different school choirs, which taught me how to listen to the relationships between harmonies and melody, but I didn't do any solo performing. I joined a madrigal group in Grade 8 at a private school. I really enjoyed that, especially because I was totally enamoured with my music teacher at the time. She had a beautiful voice. She expressed a great deal of emotion when singing. I think it was by listening to her that I consciously made the connection between emotions and music. But although I wasn't singing ballads as much, I was learning a new type of performing art: story-telling. The Toronto storytellers had formed a weekly club called "A Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling". My father and I began going regularly. I teamed up with a group of other young tellers to perform a tour of sorts in the Toronto grade schools. We also performed at the Mariposa Festival in the children's area. It was my first time hired as a performer to a festival. I remember being quite proud that I got my father in as a 'Performer Kin' - he wasn't performing that year. The roles were reversed.

Dave: So you were happy in Toronto, but you had to leave in the early eighties?

Moira: Yes, it was with a very sad heart that my family left the Toronto folk music and story-telling scene. I was fifteen and just out of grade 9. My mother got a job in Sudbury, so we moved north. Although my father got involved with the music scene in Sudbury, and we started having monthly House Ceilidhs (song circles), I didn't do much music until my second year in my new highschool. I found a girl who shared my love of music. We had both been singing in the school choir where we got to know one another. Soon Laurie and I were singing together every spare moment we had. I taught Laurie all sorts of traditional songs-material I managed to learn off of those reel to reel tapes my father had made of the performances at Fiddler's Green. I collected mostly the music of John and Tony, Lou and Sally Killen, the Dransfield Brothers, and other similar duos of the traditional music scene. We found a little-used stairwell in between two music rooms at the school. We sat in the stairwell and sang all sorts of songs in two-part harmony. The acoustics were fantastic. We performed at various school functions. Once, we even performed a ballad and a story as a joint English assignment. The ballad was "Reynardine"

and the story was "Mr. Fox" - both of which I later recorded.

Dave: So it was in Sudbury that you really became hooked on singing traditional ballads?

Moira: Yes, although I didn't specialize in ballads to begin with. The summer Laurie graduated (she was a year ahead of me) we got hired by the Northern Lights Festival Boreal. We performed there in July 1986, calling ourselves *The Swan and the Wild Goose* (a reference to the ballad "Polly Von" and the sea shanty "Wild Goose"). We sang mostly folksongs, not ballads, with a few exceptions (we did a rendition of "Robin Hood and the Bishop of Hereford" which I learned from a John and Tony concert.) Festival Boreal was our first (and only) paying gig. We had, I think, a side stage concert set and one workshop stage. It was a Women's Workshop. We shared the stage with Eileen McGann and Loreena McKennitt, which was a big thrill for us at the time. Eileen asked us to join her in one of her songs.

That same year, Laurie and I were part of my mother's group *Mums the Word*, which was also hired by the Sudbury festival. *Mums the Word* performed mummers plays and traditional music. We rarely sang ballads. The group consisted mainly of my family, but we had a couple of other people performing with us as well, including Scottish balladeer and storyteller, Phyllis Davison. To be honest, I didn't enjoy the group that much. It was fun at first, but we had a lot of tension happening. Unfortunately, I think my mother was jealous of how well Laurie and I did at the festival. After that summer, Laurie and I never performed together again. But *Mums the Word* continued the next year. My father and I, as part of the group, learned many duets; songs Laurie and I had sung together. I enjoyed singing with him. It was during my last year in Sudbury that I discovered the magic and power of ballad singing. I had heard them for years; they were almost commonplace in my life. So I had never really thought about ballads as something special. I don't know exactly what made me see them in a new light.

Dave: Your father was a ballad singer, wasn't he? Did you inherit your love of ballads from him?

Moira: I do remember watching my father perform at the Toronto Storytelling Festival. He was singing a broadside ballad I had heard him sing countless times before called "The Sheffield Apprentice". It

was like I had never heard it before. I felt caught up in the story, as if I was the young man wrongly accused of theft. I felt his anger, his despair. Suddenly, I realized my father was making me feel that way because he was feeling it. What an awesome power that was! After that, I noticed he performed other ballads in the same way. So I decided to try singing that way too. I realized that the ballads could teach me to empathize with others as well as get in touch with my own feelings. It turned out this was a very important discovery. I didn't really get a chance to try out this new approach to ballad singing on others, but I sang them for myself constantly. The only performing I did as a soloist for the remainder of my time in Sudbury was at House Ceilidhs. It was there I met my future spouse, Steve Goff. He was a professor at Laurentian University and performed English folk songs and American Blues in his spare time.

Dave: Why did you leave Sudbury?

Moira: Well, I graduated from highschool and decided upon Trent University in Peterborough. At Trent, I studied both English and History. I was aiming for a double major, but I have never completed more than the two years. I loved both topics, but especially English. Being the only person in the tutorials with any knowledge of ballads, I was often pointing out the references made to traditional ballads and stories present in the literature we were studying; the similarities between King Lear and the traditional tale Cap-O-Rushes, for instance. But I regret to say I put my singing on hold for two years, even though there was a growing folk music community in Peterborough. Instead, I devoted what spare time I had to writing poetry and stories. I still met my family for various performances in Toronto from time to time.

Dave: But why didn't you stay at Trent to finish your degree?

Moira: The summer after my first year at Trent, my father was diagnosed as having terminal cancer. For the next year, until his death, I juggled university, a part-time job, and visits to Sudbury. I was burnt out emotionally and physically after he died. I had no inclination to continue my studies. Steve had moved to Yellowknife in the meantime, so after long consideration, I decided I wanted to join him. I left Peterborough in January of 1990.

Dave: So Steve was the main reason you ended up in Yellowknife?

Moira: Yes, the main reason but not the only one! Steve worked for the Federal Government as a district geologist when he moved north. I followed him mostly because I didn't want to do the long distance relationship thing any longer. But Canada's North has always held an attraction for me since I read Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, *Never Cry Wolf* and *People of the Deer* in grade school. I never really thought I'd be living North of 60. A week after I arrived in Yellowknife, the temperature dropped to -50 C and stayed there for about three weeks. When it gets that cold, 'ice fog' forms out of the tiny water particles in the air. This fog can be thick enough one can't see across the street. That together with the long nights can be rather disheartening. I found it difficult to adjust to my new home initially, especially as I was unemployed for my first few months. Once I had gotten everything unpacked, I braved the extreme temperatures and walked downtown to get a feel for the city. I passed by a cafe called 'The Miner's Mess' (unfortunately no longer in existence). A man saw me and stopped me on the sidewalk. "You're new here, aren't you," he said. I told him I had just moved here from Ontario. We chatted for a bit and then went on our ways. The feeling I got from him was that I was someone special just for moving to Yellowknife. I had never experienced such a welcome before in any city. So those were my first impressions of Yellowknife: extremely cold, and wonderfully warm.

Dave: Did you find Yellowknife a good place for singing?

Moira: Not that first winter! It wasn't until the summer began in June that I began thinking about performing music. There wasn't any folk club around. The only music being performed live in town was country or blues and that was only in bar settings-not my thing at all. I heard about the Yellowknife *Folk on the Rocks* festival. I attended one of the festival's volunteer drives and approached Steve Lacey, one of the organizers. I asked him if the festival would hire me as a 'volunteer performer'. A month later, in July, I was performing for free on the workshop stages. This was my chance, I thought, to make a name for myself separate from the Cameron family and my father.



Dave: You felt you had always been under your father's shadow, and now you had a chance to be just yourself?

Moira: Yes, but it wasn't that easy, even in Yellowknife! I remember performing in a Celtic Music workshop with the Ontario group Tip Splinter. I was familiar with their work as I had seen them a few times in Toronto. They recognized me as well. Apparently they had seen me perform a duet with my father at a Celtic music festival in Toronto some years back. One of the members offered to introduce me onto the stage. He got on stage and talked about meeting one of the finest ballad singers he had ever heard, Stewart Cameron. "And now," he proclaimed, "I'd like to welcome onto the stage, Stew Cameron's daughter, Moira!" Well, I was pleased he remembered me, but I couldn't help but be a little annoyed. So much for making my own name. Nevertheless for the remainder of that year, I continued performing what gigs I could get, mostly at fundraisers and benefits. Steve and I decided to make folk music more available to Yellowknifers, so we started hosting monthly Ceilidhs, or song circles. Steve Lacey and his wife Dawn were among the first regular Ceilidh goers.

Dave: Both Steves and Dawn sing or play on both your CDs, so I imagine you became good musical friends?

Moira: Yes, the four of us discovered we had a lot in common musically. We loved jamming together. When the Gulf War started, we began singing together more formally at anti-war demonstrations. We've been together as Ceilidh Friends ever since.

Dave: This is still the early nineties, right? Was it round about this time that you started singing at folk clubs and festivals?

Moira: Yes, I performed a second time at the 1991 Folk on the Rocks Festival, this time as a paid entertainer. There was no one there to introduce me as anybody's daughter. I represented myself and had a terrific time. It was the first time I shared the stage with Paddy Tutty. I had met her earlier at a house concert my parents hosted in Sudbury. Paddy has another connection to Yellowknife and to me incidentally. Her sister in law, so to speak, is Dawn Lacey, the other female member of Ceilidh Friends. But besides *Folk on the Rocks*, and the odd benefit fundraiser, there was still not that many opportunities for me to perform as a soloist. So I decided to make my own opportunities. Together with the other members of Ceilidh Friends, we took the idea of Ceilidhs to CBC North Radio. We began what became an annual event for a few years: a Christmas Ceilidh. We invited other guest performers, like the Choral Society, the Gumboots, the Yellowknife Youth Choir and others to share in a thematic song swap in the early morning show broadcast on December 26th. We did this each year until government cutbacks prevented our local CBC from using live entertainment. Another annual event I started was the International Women's Day Concert. It was a fundraiser for the Yellowknife Women's Society, and was meant to be a celebration of women's performing talent. For 10 years, this annual variety show featured dance, music, storytelling, poetry and theatre all on one stage. They were a big hit while they lasted, but unfortunately because I was the only one organizing them, when I decided to take a break from doing them, the concerts stopped happening.

Dave: How did you come to make your first CD?

Moira: Near the end of 1991, a friend suggested I apply for a NWT Arts Council Grant to make a recording. I applied for the grant and was very pleased and surprised to be awarded a sizable amount of money in Spring of 1992. I set to work immediately. My goal for this first album (*One*

Evening as I Rambled), was to record material that best reflected my diverse repertoire. Of course, I wanted to share my favourites, but I also wanted to demonstrate my versatility. In fact, I saw this album as being primarily a 'demo' to send to festivals and radio stations, and I planned to release it on both cassette and CD around the time of my birthday in March of 1993.



Dave: Can you just say a bit about the songs and tunes on the CD?

Moira: Most of the material I chose I regularly sang at Ceilidhs and at various events around town. The tunes I chose for the recording (the ones I play with recorder and bowed psaltery) were among the first tunes I learned to play on the recorder. "Morgan Megan", still a favourite of mine, was also learned very early on. I had been playing these since I lived in Toronto. The dance tune "Gathering Peascods" I used to play with Mums the Word in Sudbury. I chose to record "Drimindown" not because it was Canadian, but because I learned it from my father. The newest piece on the album was "Outlandish Knight" inspired and learned from a Frankie Armstrong album. I had become a true fan of her music since moving to Yellowknife. The "Shepherd's Song" was an old stand-by of Laurie's and mine in Sudbury. "Reynardine" (from which I derived the title of the album) and "Mr Fox" have long been favourites of mine. I thought that the story would show the 'storyteller' side of my performing talent. The album was released on schedule in time for International Women's day, March 8th.

Dave: How do you think it turned out? Were you pleased with it? Would you do anything differently in retrospect?

Moira: Yes, I was happy with how it turned out and I was actually already thinking of what I would record next. But I saw room for improvement in a second recording. For example, I knew I would make the second album longer, the notes would be more detailed and accurate, and there would be a more definable theme.

Dave: Your promo kit lists some tracks on some compilation discs made between your solo CDs. What were they, and are they still available?

Moira: By this time, Ceilidh Friends had also applied for and was awarded a grant from the NWT Arts Council. So I was in the studio again in 1993 and once more in 1994 helping to produce the group's albums. There were two of them: *Yellowknife Evening* and *The Spirit of Giving: a Yellowknife Yuletide with Ceilidh Friends*. While recording this latter album, Ceilidh Friends and I were asked to contribute to a benefit album of Christmas material entitled *Ten Songs of Christmas*. The sale of the album would raise money for the Abe Miller Centre, a workshop run by the Association for Community Living. Many other local performers also participated. The album had a limited run and is no longer available.

Dave: So in the early nineties, despite your first solo CD, you were primarily active as a member of the group Ceilidh Friends?

Moira: Well, in the meantime, I was trying to balance my solo performing needs with those of the group. And to add to my busy schedule of performing, I was a member and original founder of a group of women singers called Solstice Sisters. We performed at whatever event we could, including "Take Back the Night" marches, Montreal Massacre vigils, fundraisers like the International Women's Day Concerts, and of course, *Folk on the Rocks*. New venues were beginning to open up for acoustic performers. A new arts festival started up called *Festival of the Midnight Sun* that featured dance, theatre, painting and carving, and music. Ceilidh Friends performed as often as possible at these and other northern festivals like the Great Northern Music and Arts Festival in Inuvik. Unfortunately, because travel costs are so high in the north, we were not able to

perform out of Yellowknife as often as we would have liked.

Dave: So how did you really get going as a solo ballad singer?

Moira: The first CD helped, but I was still finding it difficult getting known as a soloist outside my own community and Territory. I performed at the Yukon Storytelling Festival after the release of my first album, and managed to squeeze in a short southern tour (by coinciding it with a visit with family and friends in Ontario), but out of town gigs were hard to come by. So I had to be content, for the most part, to simply continue performing the odd gig in town. I tended to focus most of my energies on Ceilidh Friends. In many ways, the group was more "sellable" to northern audiences than I was as a solo performer. Which meant that I rarely had a chance to sing the material I truly loved—that is, the ballads. With Ceilidh Friends, I was able to satisfy my desire to perform meaningful material, but the group has a more 'easy listening' folk sound than my repertoire tends to generate. Yet we always managed to include songs that are good, and not just fluff. It was Ceilidh Friends that tended to get asked to perform at special events like the 1994 Queen's Visit, the City of Yellowknife annual barbeques, Canada Day Festivities, etc.



Dave: Then how did the second CD come about?

Moira: Well, by 1996 I was itching to be back in the studio to record a second album. Using my own funds this time, I began recording a CD almost entirely of ballads. The project cost me about \$4,000 including artwork. My focus this time was to honour my sources - the people who influenced me the most as a balladeer. Naturally, my biggest influence was my father. He and I share Ewan MacColl as an important source. I admire any singer who knows how to tell a story while singing. This is easier said than done. Ewan MacColl made a study of this skill before he became known as a ballad singer. He used ballads to instruct drama students in how to act. Other performers of his ilk include Frankie Armstrong, Louis Killen, and Pete Bellamy. I've learned much of my own skill from listening to these artists.



Dave: How did you decide what to put on the CD?

Moira: Choosing the material was not easy. Although the album ends up having 16 selections totaling 60 minutes, it represents only a fraction of my present repertoire. In the end I decided on ballads that portrayed women's experiences: their fears, their strengths, and their perspectives. I toyed with the idea of recording contemporary pieces, but with the exception of "Martha", which was written by the Gumboots here in Yellowknife, I chose to keep the album traditional. As for the ballads that I did include...Well, again, they were pieces I felt very connected to and have been performing for some time. The song from which the title of the album is derived, "Well Below the Valley", I was inspired to learn because a friend told me I should.

(Ironically, I discovered a year or so after my own album came out that Frankie Armstrong said the same thing about learning a different version of the same ballad for her album *Till the Grass O'ergrew the Corn*.) The song is a story about incest. Being involved in women's organizations in Yellowknife made me doubly interested in learning the song.

Dave: I think it is fair to say that a feminist message comes through your selection of ballads and the particular versions you chose...

Moira: I like singing songs that have significance for me and that teach me something about human behaviour and feelings. There may not be a lot of emotion actually described in the lyrics of most ballads, but often emotions are brought out by the tunes. When I learn a version of a ballad, I usually only learn ones whose tunes allow me full emotional expression.

Dave: How did the business of making the CD go? It sounds as though you knew exactly what you wanted to do and you retained control throughout. Is that true?

Moira: I took more time recording *Lilies Among the Bushes* than I did with my first one. I recorded all of the tracks at one studio in town, and then I waited several months before mixing the recording at a second studio. I wanted to put distance between myself and the recording before starting the mixing process. I think this tactic worked. I was able to be more objective. And the process really didn't take me long. I find recording solo albums far more easy than the group ones, primarily because I only have myself to argue with! I experimented with a certain mixed sound, and then brought it to friends for feedback. For the most part, I had an idea in my head how I wanted each piece to sound. In retrospect, I wish I had followed my instinct and not used so much reverb, but friends seemed to like the sound I was mixing.

Dave: And you were satisfied with the result? You should be, it's a great album!

Moira: All in all, I wasn't disappointed with the resulting product. And once I had the album reproduced, I set to work distributing it to radio stations. But how does a ballad singer in remote Yellowknife get her album distributed to radio stations around the world? Thanks to the Internet, the job was actually quite easy. I subscribe to an email newsgroup for folk music DJs. The DJs

submit their playlists and discuss the things they like and don't like about albums. By sending information about myself and *Lilies Among the Bushes* to this newsgroup, I was able to distribute my recording throughout North America, parts of Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries. Online reviewers kindly published their very favourable opinions. Without the Internet, I wouldn't have been able to get my album out there.

Dave: How have the sales gone?

Moira: The CD has done quite well - better than I expected. Although the money for sales of my albums only trickles in over an extended period of time, I believe they have both paid for themselves by now. I still get orders from people all over the world who have heard the albums on the radio, or have read a review online somewhere. Now we're not talking about hundreds of people by any stretch of the imagination. But every letter or email I receive is a thrill and a positive confirmation. I have one fan in France who keeps asking me when the next album will be coming out.

Dave: Apart from giving you a psychological boost, do you find the feedback from reviewers and fans useful?

Moira: One bit of feedback I have received since *Lilies* was released has given me pause for thought. A few people have remarked that I must be a very angry person. This comment surprised me at first. Some people think that because I sing ballads that are full of violence and pain, I must be working out my own personal issues. The truth is, I may portray a character in a ballad as feeling angry, but that doesn't mean I am personally feeling that way. When I perform, I am acting out the different roles played out in the ballad's story. I think of the process as being not unlike method acting. Certainly, I put a bit of myself in the characters I 'play', but that is only because I imagine what it is like to 'be' that person. For instance, in the case of Lady Margaret in "Love Henry" (Young Hunting), I imagine being someone who is so emotionally unbalanced she feels murderously jealous at the drop of a hat. But I am only feeling her feelings when she is speaking. When the parrot speaks, I feel wise, all knowing and sly.

Dave: How is the career coming along in the wake of *Lilies*?

Moira: I have managed to get a few more gigs down south. One event that has done me an enormous amount of good is the North American Folk Alliance Conference. This conference is an annual event hosted by a different city each year. When it was held in Toronto several years ago, Ceilidh Friends decided to register. It is very expensive to attend one of these things, a common criticism in fact. However, we felt it would be worth the investment. We were right. In the space of one weekend, our albums were distributed to festival & club organizers, as well as DJs, from across North America. We performed concert sets in our hotel room as well. Although we didn't get huge attendance to these concerts, we did get our name out there. The big thrill for us occurred when Pete Seeger dropped by for a chat to our table in the Exhibition Hall.

Dave: How about more recently?

Moira: Last year the Folk Alliance Conference was held in Vancouver. So again we decided to participate. This time, we split some of the costs amongst Ceilidh Friends, Steve Lacey (who had just released a solo album of his own) and me. Speaking personally, the event turned out to be an immense success and one of the highlights of my performing career. I had noticed that two other balladeers of note were attending the conference: Paddy Tutty and Margaret MacArthur (from the US.) I emailed them both before the conference and arranged for us all to share a concert of ballad singing. The concert was pure magic. The hotel room was packed. We each took turns singing ballads, often accompanying ourselves on each of our Appalachian dulcimers. We were three generations of female ballad singers playing three different styles of dulcimer. It was wonderful!

Dave: Are you a professional musician now then? Can you make a living by singing traditional ballads?

Moira: No, I still don't perform regularly, and certainly not enough to make a living at it. However, singing is much more than a hobby for me. It is a means of expression, both personal and political. I believe in the teaching power of ballads, both traditional and contemporary. When I put together a set, I usually have a balance of old and new songs, blending their messages in such a way that the audience can relate to them. For example, when I sing "Outlandish Knight", I say it