

Stan Rogers (1949-1983)

Obituary

by Ian Robb

On the evening of June 2nd, 1983, the Canadian folk music community lost perhaps its most influential and colourful character.

Stan Rogers was impossible to ignore; his physical size and penchant for speaking his mind saw to that. His outward brashness and apparently enormous self-confidence made him difficult to praise, though like all of us, he probably needed that praise. Now he is gone, it is so easy to measure the man's achievements, to say the things that should have been said while he was around, and to recognize that he was clearly the greatest of all the singer-songwriters English Canada has produced in the last two decades. Others, some of them Stan's own one-time idols, have achieved greater commercial success, but none has been more adept at finding the inside view on a subject and creating that wonderful match of integrity, precise poetry and singable melody which characterises a great song. While others wrote about their own experience, Rogers assumed the mantle of other folks' troubles and found the horse's mouth.

In retrospect, many of his songs seem inevitably to assume a terrible irony; so much so that for a while they may be difficult to listen to. The greatest irony of all, though, is that, having studiously avoided the commercial route in the interest of longevity, he and his music should be cut short by such incidental tragedy. Fortunately, Rogers had packed as much good writing into a decade and a half as many can wring out of an uninterrupted lifetime, and he only rarely allowed the naivety of youth to surface in his songs. That such gems as 'The Mary Ellen Carter', 'The Jeannie C.', 'Lies' and 'The Field

Behind the Plough' will survive him is beyond question.

Like a great poet with a speech impediment, the performer and his songs sometimes seemed strangely at odds. He was not what one would call a cautious speaker and occasionally ruffled feathers by airing his thoughts without hesitation, and without too much regard for the sensitivities of others. At the more considered level of his writing and singing, however, he could make even his most ruffled critic wonder at the power, subtlety and sensitivity of his art.

This art seemed to render transparent Stan's often loud and bull-headed facade, revealing the highly-principled and generous soul which his friends knew and loved. All these friends have some personal recollections of Stan; all share an enormous respect and admiration for his music, and all will remember his energy and dedication in promoting Canadian singers and musicians. Not a few touring Canadians have arrived in unfamiliar surroundings to find that the locals, through the good words of Stan Rogers, know all about them and their music.

Like so many others, I feel very fortunate to have known Stan Rogers, to have shared songs with him, and to have been on the receiving end of his generosity. The final chorus of 'The Mary Ellen Carter', read at his funeral, surely expressed the hopes and wishes of all of us, for his family and for Fogarty's Cove Music:

Rise again, rise again—
Though your heart it be broken
And life about to end,
No matter what you've lost,
Be it a home, a love, a friend
Like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!