

TRIPPING OVER ROOTS: Seeds of Island Songwriting

Margie Carmichael

Island Lecture Series March 20, 2003

"PADDY LAST"

I was late, quite late, for my own birthday
Seven false alarms so my mother says
LaboUr's bad enough but I made it more intense
I came out arse-backwards, and I'm like that ever since.
- yes I was late

It was St. Patrick's Day and my middle name's Patricia
Otherwise I would be named Stephanie Cyrilla
If you were in my place and you knew that was your fate
Would you not put your foot down, wouldn't you procrastinate?
- that's why I'm late

I confess that tardiness is something of a habit
If life was a fairy tale, I'd be Alice's White Rabbit
Every day is loaded with adventure and distractions
But when I hear the call I always get there for the ac-
tion – but I may be late

One snowy Boxing Day, with icy roads a factor
My car lost control, and I collided with a tractor
It wasn't due to skill, it must have been God's will
that if we'd hit a second earlier, we'd have all been killed
- but I was late

Although I'd love to put it off, someday I'm gonna die
And a fancy station wagon's gonna take me for a ride
When they roll me up the aisle, steeple bells will loudly chime
That the late Margie Carmichael is finally on time.

Margie Carmichael March 17/2003

This little ditty was written last week on a dare from my husband Michael, who has patiently accepted this among many quirks that came with the package when he married me. Paddy Last was a nickname my mother called me for obvious reasons.

This ditty is also a good example of the first songs I learned at home, east of here in Elliotvale. That's where I come from. Putting this ditty to a fiddle tune (The Mason's Apron) is like

something my father John Carmichael would do sometimes to entertain us. He was a songwriter, singer, entertainer and farmer, who with my mother Mary Murphy raised 10 children. Though providing for everybody was a challenge to them, they left us gifts money cannot buy – love of music and creative spirits.

Each one of my siblings has these gifts in varying combinations, some enjoy them more than others, some use them more than others, but they are being passed on in the next generation of children, nieces and nephews in our family

There are several reasons for this title "Tripping Over Roots" – for starts, I'm a bit of a clutz and my eyesight has led me to several interesting encounters with parking meters, plate-glass windows, and people of course – living or dead. Perhaps the most amusing example was looking for my husband's grand-aunt's tombstone in Cardigan Cemetery a few years ago. We had just given up on finding it, Michael on his way back to the car with the boys before they woke the dead, when I tripped and fell flat on my face. I looked behind me, imagining a bony hand reaching from the grave, and there it was – a small grave marker - 'Annie McMaster' - the woman we were looking for.

Truth be known, I've been tripping over my my roots since I was small, being reminded constantly of where I've come from, who I'm related to and how, the genetic and historical reasons why the so-and-sos are the way they are, the power and long reach of the Island memory. I'd be lying if I said I didn't try to escape this from time to time in my life. We all do it, stretch the borders to discover more about ourselves and the outside world. Tripping is humbling, but has its own lessons to teach.

I'm "tripping over roots" in a different way these days, celebrating the gift of growing up in a place like this, so rich in history, story and uniqueness. The seeds were planted long ago at home. Our father was quite an entertainer, and our house was a gathering spot for many. My parents' generation were children born during prohibition, and even though there were liquor stores by the time we were born, the majority of people still 'snuck' liquor into the house-parties and wakes, it seemed to be a necessary catalyst for some people to get the courage to sing – and added insurance, if you made a 'bull's arse of yourself' as my father would say. All would be forgotten or forgiven because you 'had a few.' "Tessie's Can" is an example of this. My brother Urban recorded it a few years ago.

Most of my father's songs were about people or events in our community, meant to tease or tell a story, or perhaps extract revenge on someone in a safe but public way. My mother wasn't too fond of him singing them sometimes, but it made it all the more memorable for us kids who lapped up every syllable. We learned a lot about other people in our community who were long gone before we were born.

People like my father were chroniclers of their times, catching history in the making and committing it to memory. The song-collections compiled by persons such as Dr. Sandy Ives, George Arsenault and Randy Dibblee, to name a few, are invaluable in capturing our Island history and preserving our cultural harvest. From these harvests come the seeds of our contemporary and future songwriters storytellers and artisans.

In a forward to Georges Arsenault's *Acadian Legends, Folktales and Songs From Prince Edward Island* Dr. Ives writes "a song or a story is a thing in itself, existing, moving, and changing as though by its own rules, quite apart from any social or cultural context"....and of Georges Arsenault's collection he writes "as for songs, we see them in two special contexts, first, a gleaning from one family's tradition; second, a collection of Island-made songs, showing that the old tradition, though changed and somewhat diminished is still a presence to be reckoned with."

In his preface to this same book, George Arsenault writes "for centuries, Acadians have shared the Island with the Mi'kmaq, the English, the Scots, and the Irish. In fact, they have borrowed various elements from these ethnic groups, not only in the area of songs, folktales and legends, but especially in the non-oral traditions such as music, dance and foodways...after the British conquest, English quickly became the dominant language in every sector of life on Prince Edward Island, including the schools. The Gaelic language, whether the Scottish or Irish, was the first to disappear, followed by Mik'maq. Although it fared a little better, French was not spared, and gradually it disappeared in the areas where the Acadians were numerically weak and intermingled with Anglophones." (see pxii –*Acadian Legends, Folktales and Songs From Prince Edward Island*) Noticeably sparse in our archives, as yet, are collections from Micmac Islanders. With the powerful revival of their culture and language in recent years, I believe this is forthcoming.

It's easy at this time to tell you of the importance of growing up with music and song in our home. We were one of many large poor families in our community, and when such families struggle with poverty at many levels, their place and identity are clearly defined. In our family, music and singing gave us a unique identity. In childhood it lasted only as long as we were on stage, it would disappear with the borrowed clothes. In adulthood though, the identity is in us wherever we are, performing or not. It has shaped us in a wonderful way and grows with us still.

The Carmichael Sisters – Julie, Noreen Leona and myself – have been performing since we were able to talk. I remember us being told by American visitors "Those girls should be on the Ed Sullivan Show" – what a carrot to dangle in front of hungry little girls! We never got there of course, but when we were much older, a loving uncle left us money to finally do a recording. We had 6 original songs on it and we launched "Under The Lindens" to a capacity crowd at the Charlottetown Hotel Ballroom in 1996. It was better than the Ed Sullival Show!

I started writing songs at age 14, the same age I taught myself how to play guitar. Did I write about the Island? Not a chance! By that age I was planning my escape, as teens do, and writing about everything I saw or felt, longing to taste the forbidden fruit of the outside world, watching the 60's revolution and all that came with it from a safe distance, hearing songs and writers that influenced my future writing, tapping into the mystery of feeling and insight – territory not quite so explored by previous generations. Looking back, I thank God for my strict parents and rural isolation; my naivety and foolishness would not have kept me safe from the larger world. Even little old Charlottetown had its dangers.

The first Island songwriter I encountered was Gene Maclellan, through Sing-along Jubilee. God bless him, he made his mark on all of us here and around the world. In his wake came many other Island songwriters who began to make their marks, including Marty Reno, Mike Mooney,

Allan Rankin, and among many others – Bonnie Leclair. I bonded with Bonnie then, at age 17, through the TV shows I saw her on – her c.v. would blow you away! She was doing exactly what I wanted to do, and in a sense, our lives ran parallel for a while, though we didn't know each other then. We only met and truly became friends in recent years. Bonnie released her first solo CD this winter "The Heart Rules" and I was almost as proud as if it was my own. Trust me, it was worth the wait. Buy it!

In university days at UPEI, I met Lennie Gallant. I don't need to tell you much about Lenny, he's more than made his mark in this country and beyond. When I met him he was a young fellow from Rustico who was just beginning to write his songs and explore his Acadian roots. We met at a residence party, I was playing a 4-string banjo and he joined me on guitar. After a few beers, more tunes and some song sharing, we began a game that we ended up playing regularly at music gatherings. One or the other of us would make up and sing some hair-brained verse - on the spot - and challenge the other to make the next verse and so on till it ended. I still think we had more fun than the listeners. Improv, we would call it now. Back then we called it fun.

Prior to UPEI, I sang with my sisters, or in the church choir, or by myself. Some of my first gigs were at local concerts and friendly bootlegging establishments where I sang for beer and my brothers drank it - I wasn't old enough. At UPEI there were coffeehouses and parties and some of the folk clubs were springing up in Charlottetown around that time – Enjoy the Company on University Avenue was my favorite haunt. At that time I had a chance to leave the Island and have that great escape I had been planning, Some friends were going to the Yukon for the summer, Teresa Doyle among them. At the last minute I backed out. I was afraid to leave. While I continued to play my heart out here and work in tourism, Teresa was starting her career in the Yukon. I don't need to tell you about her Teresa either. She too has made her mark.

I began to play with other musicians more, duos, trios, etc. I did leave the Island eventually, to pursue a love interest in Duluth Minnesota, but it didn't work out at that time. I wrote one song there, about the only real friends I made there, Napoleon and Peg, two burned-out homeless Viet Nam vets who I met at a laundromat. After 5 months of living illegally, I camp back to the Island with my tail between my legs - the last place I wanted to come, but the only place for me to go. I arrived home to a sizzling music scene here, the Montage Dance Theatre was a thriving cultural centre and I met more songwriters, including Scott Parsons, Paul Broadbent, Bonnie Leclair was back, Mike Mooney and brother Sean. It was the peak of times here, with lots of work as a musician. Good old days.

I had grown up with Scottish fiddle music, and was playing with fiddlers a lot too. Then I heard the Chieftans for the first time at Confederation Centre. It was an epiphany for me, as this centuries-old music went right for my heart and stirred up a longing I never knew I had, opened up a well that badly needed filling. To this day, my favorite fix is to play with an Irish fiddler.

In the last part of the 70's I was part of "Speed the Plough" with Lennie Gallant, Roy Johnstone, Sigrid Rolfe and David Papazian who was later replaced by Chris Corrigan. I was in heaven. My songwriting took on a new dimension. However, though I wrote them, I didn't sing many of my songs in public or private. I think I had a major outbreak of what I call 'Islanditis' at that time—symptoms include fear of being judged and rejected, low levels of self-esteem and confidence,

needing to be jump-started frequently, fear of revealing secrets, addiction to other peoples' mirrors to reflect oneself and, of course, an age-old Island malady – an allergy to compliments. It took me 20 years to recover. In the meantime, I put most of my energy into my instruments.

By age 26 I was married, and for the next 15 years I was otherwise occupied. I married Michael, my love interest from Minnesota (from New York originally). and kept up my musical connections, otherwise I would have gone insane. I was often a session player or back-up vocalist on other friends' recordings, and had quite a few under my belt. I continued to write songs, and not sing very many of them. They were intimate, personal, somewhat 'dark' in nature, I was told by many. As it turns out, those songs were in keeping with what other Island songwriters were writing about at that time, songs about the hidden secrets of growing up, including abuse, loneliness, schoolyard bullying, isolation, loss – our own or somebody else's - not suited for bars, where I began to play again after my kids were older. After 3 years of that I got back into performing/songwriting on a different basis. In June and July of 1995 I recorded Redstone with Steve Sharratt and Sigrid Rolfe, Under the Lindens with The Carmichael Sisters – many of my songs are on both recordings- and a second recording with the College of Piping.

I haven't done a major recording since then, but I intend to as soon as I can finish up some other writing projects I'm doing now. My songwriting has evolved, many of my songs have been recorded by other singers locally and regionally, and I can't complain about CBC airplay, locally or nationally. I write funny songs, happy songs, intense songs, story songs, poetic songs, ditties, parodies – that's really fun! I've become braver at exploring other ways of expressing and creating, and I'm fully recovered from 'Islanditis' – give or take the odd brief relapse.

My songs come from many places now: from within - I didn't know what my spirit was till I was kicked there; from without - I'm a vigilant emphatic observer of people; from around - I'm a chronicler too; from above - I'm a Christian; and particularly from below - my roots don't trip me now. I tie my boots with them, they walk with me.

I have been planting my seeds all along, though I haven't always been aware of it, by sharing what I know, supporting other writers in their work and teenagers in their first steps of creativity, being part of my community and offering what I have to those who can use it to make life a little more interesting. I saw a poster once and bought it for the back wall of our church. "The woods would be silent indeed in spring if none but the best of the birds did sing."

This winter I've been visiting classrooms in Island schools, spending time with students interested in writing and songwriting. I don't know who is learning more, them or myself. All I know is, the sparks are there in those children, and they are just waiting for the open air – seedlings needing water, loving care and sunshine. I'll finish this with something few writers in their right mind would do in public. I'll sing you a verse from one of my first songs, written at the ripe old age of 15.

Which way do I turn to look for love?
What signs do I follow to take me there?
Am I on the right road? Am I gonna find it?
Or am I just a hopeless case destined to end up nowhere?

Silly me goin' on and on about love – I damn near tripped over it! Thank you for coming!

© 2002 Institute of Island Studies