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The Canadian Literature of Rock 'n' Roll in Relation to Generation and Folk Music

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This paper is a historiographical work chronicling some of the references made in relation to generation and folk music in Rock 'n' Roll. In his opening notes to the book "Axes, Chops and Hot Licks," Ritchie Yorke writes "every experience; personal or collective, can be chronicled in word and song."¹ The 1960s generation, the baby boomers, were aware of the generational factor, which allowed them their power and also used the vehicle of folk music, as a form of protest. The main concern of music purists regarding folk music and the boom generation seems to be that folk has always been the music of the people, delivered free. The boom generation, and music for that generation, including folk music, was a for-profit capitalist enterprise. The quotes used look at the issue of the comfort level of pairing traditional, not-for-profit folk music, with the 1960s for-profit music industry of the baby boom. By the late 1960s some of the boom generation had become "hippies [who] embraced the beliefs of the past... to create a counter culture."² Mainstream culture was capitalist, white, middle-class oriented. The youth generation's counter culture, while eventually proving to be based in the capitalist, white, middle class, tried its best to shed all three images.

CHAPTER ONE: GENERATION.

Generations are best defined by Doug Owsram, in his book Born at the Right Time. He notes that a generation is an age group shaped by history.³ It is not enough on its own to be a generation, or a member of a generation, the defining factor is that history must somehow intervene with that generation to make it stand out. Tom Brokaw uses this approach in his book, The Greatest Generation, when he looks at the generation that was directly affected by the Second World War, the eventual parents of the baby boomers, the generation that fought in the war.⁴

The generation forever associated with the 1960s, the baby boomers, born after the end of the Second World War, were so great in numbers, so affluent and so vocal in a critical sense, of the society they had been born into, it should come as no surprise that their generation was shaped by history. The generation of numeric largesse, they also made certain that history was shaped by them. As their generation came of age, around the early years of the 1960s, they looked closely at the world they were inheriting, and were not impressed by what they saw.⁵ As with any such judgement one can only stay critical for a certain length of time before either moving on, or taking some form of action.

A lot of what the boom generation attempted in the 1960s did not survive much beyond the decade, but in becoming increasingly unwilling to accept the adult values they saw placed in front of them they decided to take action that their numbers allowed by bestowing on them the power of numbers.⁶ In taking up the challenge of protesting almost everything the parental generation held dear, the collective force of the baby boom became known as the counter culture.⁷ Some of the symbols rejected by the younger generation included the clean-cut hair cut, which was replaced by long, shaggy hair. Neat and presentable clothes were replaced by kaftans and sandals; more jeans, considered working men's clothes were also seen. As the boom

generation reached college age, those fortunate enough to have the opportunity to attend dropped out favouring experience over education. The ideal of the early marriage closely followed by two children, a house and car was rejected in favour of cohabitation and communes.

In relation to the outside, rather than the domestic world, the youth rebellion was based on dismay with what they saw, their new visions based on idealism and hope.⁸ For most of the 1950s the boom generation had attended school with the threat of nuclear war hanging over their heads. They had been trained like unfortunate puppies to hide under their school desks in the event of nuclear war attacking their school. Hence, it was understandable when this generation not only took an anti-nuclear stance, but an anti-Vietnam War stance also. Their third major stance was an anti-capitalist stance, but how realistic this was considering the Russians who were the world's other nuclear power did not operate a capitalistic society is unclear.

With it clear in their minds what they were against both within the family home and on a global scale, the boomers had a platform for themselves. As Myrna Kostash notes in her book Long Way From Home, “[the baby boomers] were by self-definition simultaneously critics of the social order and prototypes of a new one.”⁹ If this observation is to be taken at face value, then the boomers were changing more than individual items, they were, to some degree, engineering a new social order for society.

Technological advance, speeded up by the event of two world wars within thirty years, also allowed the boomers opportunity to get their message(s) across. Radio, which had been in its infancy at the beginning of the century, was now in every home. Audio cassettes which had been used as propaganda tools by Hitler against the allies in the Second World War were now owned by most teenagers. Television, which had been non-existent prior to the Second War was now entering homes on a massive scale. The workplace was seeing the installation of more and more conveyor belts. In this sense, the world was changing in a technological revolution under the guise of automation.¹⁰

The group was not just large in numbers due to the birth rate. More of the younger generation were better educated than ever before. This fact alone made it an articulate youth generation. By the end of the decade, and keeping in mind that numbers could have been higher except for the fashionable value of dropping out of school, 68 percent of the youth had attended college and 44 percent of the generation had a father who had earned a college degree.¹¹ Thus, it should have come as no large surprise when one of the centres of political mobilisation of youth was on college campuses.¹² Campuses were convenient rallying points, as the parents were absent, and unlike in a place of work, the younger generation had time to spare, which they used to effect.

One of the biggest changes to affect society at the time, and one of the few enduring legacies of the boom generation, was the advancement of women within society. A tradition of women's movements was reawakened for a few reasons. Firstly, again, there was the issue of numbers. Then, with the idea of liberation generally in the air, the issue of women's liberation was just one of many causes to be taken up. Looking back to the tradition homemaker/family caretaker role of their mother's generation, the young women of the 1960s decided they wanted more than that. The right to higher education, which was in place, but not encouraged; the right to a career; and generally, just the right to determine the path of their own lives was demanded in the re-negotiation of gender roles which began anew in the 1960s.¹³

With the sexes combined in a struggle against the control of the older generation, a common language was adopted by the younger generation. That language served to criticise the parental generation, communicate with each other, and express hopes for the future. That language was popular music, an art form that exploded in size in the 1960s.¹⁴ Thus, in looking at protests by the younger generation in the 1960s, music has to be considered.

David Szatmary, in his book Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll gives three reasons for the explosion of emotion which came to be known as Beatlemania. For Szatmary, the phenomenon had its roots in a dull wartime, the post war baby boom and in the economic depression.¹⁵ The war and the Depression that preceded it, had both been times of hardship across the country, irrespective of class and as such the country had seen fifteen consecutive years of economic hardship, food rationing and death. They were years when it had been hard to be optimistic, and as such, by the end of the war in 1945, a time that coincided with the start of the baby boom, people everywhere were ready to start having fun again and centring on their own needs. This consideration of self would come to fruition when the boomers who had been born into this mentality, and, hence, never known any different, adopted it as a way of life in the Sixties, where despite professing to be a collective body, there was a lot of thinking along the lines of “our way, or no way.”

The cycle of generation is on going, both in everyday life, and in musical inspiration. In 1996, Ottawa born Alanis Morissette was citing Joni Mitchell as an influence and an inspiration for her career.¹⁶ In that sense, the youth of the Sixties have become the parental generation of the 1990s.

CHAPTER TWO: FOLK.

Folk music was not an invention of the 1960s, it had been around, in many countries of the world, for hundreds of years. That folk music re-emerged in the 1960s, should be no surprise, being as it is the musical genre most closely associated with a message, and most messages, in music, being protest.¹⁷ This lineage of protest via a group in song over a long time frame gave folk music what no other music attempting criticism in the 1960s had, integrity.¹⁸ This was to be a vital element as the younger generation expressed its differing views of the world to a mass audience.

Tradition not only gave folk credibility, but the message conveyed, and by association, the messenger.¹⁹ This, almost immediate, credibility was one of the few advantages the younger generation had when they embarked on their crusade to oppose the status quo. There had always been folk music around, but in recent years it had been in the background as stars such as Elvis Presley and Little Richard climbed up the charts. As the 1960s began, folk slowly started to emerge once more. Groups such as Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio followed on the heels of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Then came Bob Dylan, and folk music with a cutting political message was back in the mainstream.

Besides being associated with protest, folk music has always been rooted on locales, events and personalities that are historically specific.²⁰ With the American presence in Viet Nam escalating, domestic unrest due to racial prejudice and the general feeling of rejection of American society by the younger generation, songwriters, such as Dylan, had more than enough material for their folk songs. Referring to both war and racial prejudice in *Blowin' in the Wind*, Dylan asks the American people how long such things will be allowed to go on, emphasising that the only people who can stop such things, are the people themselves, by deciding to stop them.

By placing the choices for the future on the shoulders of the ordinary person, as well as, or instead of, just the politicians, Dylan was echoing President Kennedy's Inauguration Address from 1961 when the new President had urged Americans everywhere to consider what they could do for America (ie, themselves), rather than what the nation state could do for the individual. Hence, both in Washington and in the coffeeshouses there seemed to be an element of self-

reliance as the 1960s dawned. In this individual responsibility was a rejection of mass society and mass culture – the 1950s ‘Big Brother’ syndrome.[21](#)

In combining folk music with the events of everyday life the new folk singers were adhering to the tradition in which in folk music ideally, there is no separation of art and life.[22](#) Music is seen as “of the people” therefore, the two are seen as inseparable. Because of the technological advances in recording music it was now possible for leaders, such as Dylan, not even to be present, for the message to be delivered. This was to serve the 1960s generation well.

The combination of the professional recording studio with the tradition of folk music was responsible for part of the rediscovery of folk.[23](#) Folk music was accessible and relatively cheap. It was not long before the latest sound from the coffeehouses of New York was reaching the West Coast, technology was what made 1960s folk a national, or even, international phenomenon.

The ordinary folk now had means of relaying their message(s) to each other, and to anyone else they cared to reach, yet at the heart of the folk music revival, before it became a commercial enterprise indistinguishable from any other, it was a movement that was committed to preserving the legend and lore of the common people.[24](#) Unfortunately with technology and commercialisation came the curious sight of folk becoming part of the capitalist society it was fighting against.

While folk was still succeeding in getting its message across in the 1960s, it participated in the passing of the torch from the 1930s protestors to the 1960s generation.[25](#) It also gave itself a crusade to aim for. In the 1960s this was the Civil Rights issue. Usually, folk had been perceived of as a class struggle, but by the 1960s it took on a racial struggle. The idea of crusading, of a religious commitment had always been close to the heart of the folk tradition, where in the traditional class struggle victory was envisioned as part of the New Jerusalem. [26](#)

Civil Rights and folk music blossomed around the same time as each other, and were mutually useful to each other.[27](#) Civil Rights gave a subject matter to folk, while folk publicised the Civil Rights struggle. Thereby, the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s helped to breathe new life in to folk music.[28](#)

When the generation of the day, the baby boomers, who were now in college, were combined with folk music and a solid issue on a national scale the scene was set for a mass movement. As with any large movement, they needed a leader. In the case of the folk music scene that person was Bob Dylan.[29](#) Dylan was aware of the issues, was young enough to be accepted by the boom generation, was a good enough songwriter and singer to get the message across, hence, all the pieces of the puzzle came together. What must be kept in mind, however, is despite the fact that they were involved with the issue of Civil Rights, the American (and for that matter, the Canadian) folk music scene was a movement largely involving white musicians and audiences.[30](#)

In Canada, folk music was almost as strong, and almost as popular, as it was in America. Looking back in 1998 Ian Tyson, who in the 1960s had been Ian of Ian & Sylvia fame noted that Canada could also produce very strong folk artists.[31](#) The difference between the Canadian brand of folk and the American version was said to be that Canadian folk singer-songwriters were never taken in by the preachy political side of folk music.[32](#) When one listens to lyrics such as those of Gordon Lightfoot’s *Black Day in July*, a commentary on the race riots in Detroit in 1967, that argument may not stand up to too much scrutiny.

The centre of Canadian folk music was The Riverboat coffeehouse in the Yorkville district of Toronto, which became the most important and successful folk club in Canada.[33](#) It was here

that people such as Gordon Lightfoot, Ian & Sylvia and Joni Mitchell sang when they were in town. It paid the best wages to the artists, thus attracting the best of the folk genre.³⁴

As mentioned before, the problem of commercialising folk music was that eventually it became part of the capitalistic society it was arguing against. Maynard Collins acknowledged this point in his 1988 biography of Gordon Lightfoot, Lightfoot: If You Could Read His Mind when he noted that the minute a professional singer, such as Lightfoot, began to sing in a commercial setting, he distanced himself from the ordinary folk.³⁵ The music was authentic, but the setting was not. In order to survive as a genre, folk would have to accept some changes.

Gordon Lightfoot became the leading minstrel of Canadian folk, the way Dylan was in the U.S. As such he created, partly due to expectations a musical mythology, accessible by the common man, of English Canada. He was the collective historian of a generation.³⁶ As well as *Black Day in July* Lightfoot also penned *Rich Man's Spiritual* a kind of parable in folk song form.³⁷ A parable being a story with a lesson.

By contrast, Joni Mitchell arrived on the music scene a couple of years after Gordon Lightfoot. Her musical heritage was also different to Lightfoot's. Mitchell was steeped in the English folk song tradition.³⁸ The English folk tradition was older than the North American version, dating back hundreds of years. This did not stop Mitchell from becoming a commercial success, just as Lightfoot had, with her composition *Both Sides Now* receiving a Grammy Award in the category of Best Folk Performance.³⁹ (*Melhuish, 80*) Again commercial success was encroaching on the purity of the genre, sending mixed signals to the audiences and critics alike.

CONCLUSIONS:

In considering the youth generation of the 1960s, the baby boomers, in relation to the music of the era, it is plain to see that this music, popular music, was the music of their generation. At the beginning of the 1960s, the boom generation embraced folk music to use as a vehicle for protest, in return, folk music benefited from such a large central audience. In other words, the two entities served each other.

The youth generation of the 1960s stood out because of its large numeric base, and for the political stance it took. Singers such as Bob Dylan, from the U.S. and Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell in Canada, combined commercial careers in a genre usually reserved for its non-materialistic base. In marrying up an old art form, folk, and a new commercial setting, the for-profit music world, some old conceptions sat uncomfortably and had to be worked around.

Lightfoot, it was said, lost his folk credibility the moment he stepped on a stage, because at that moment he distanced himself from the folk base, the ordinary person. Yet, despite these misgivings, both the folk genre and Lightfoot flourished in the 1960s, as did many other artists.

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[2](#) Szatmary, David. Rockin' in Time. p. 56.

[3](#) Owram, Doug. Born at the Right Time. p. 158.

[4](#) Brokaw, Thomas. The Greatest Generation.

[5](#) Edmonds, Alan. The Years of Protest, 1960-1970. p.10.

[6](#) Owram, Doug. Born at the Right Time. p. 187.

[7](#) Edmonds, Alan. The Years of Protest, 1960-1970. p. 25.

[8](#) Owram, Doug. Born at the Right Time. p. 159.

[9](#) Kostash, Myrna. Long Way From Home. p. 131.

[10](#) Edmonds, Alan. The Years of Protest, 1960-1970. p. 7.

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