“There’s some played harder, and there’s some played smarter, but nobody played like you.”

The Life and Times of Stringband
By Gary Cristall

Gary Cristall wrote this essay in 2002 as the liner notes – possibly the world’s longest – for the Indispensable Stringband box set. Someone asked me if I had read them before publication. I said I had and I thought they were terrific. He was surprised. “You don’t come off very well,” he said. “I thought I did,” I said. To my ear, Gary’s account rings remarkably true. - **Bob Bossin**

IF YOU HAD WANDERED through downtown Toronto on a summer’s evening in 1972, you might have wound up on the Yonge Street mall. A half dozen blocks of Toronto’s main thoroughfare had been closed to traffic that summer and turned into a cross between a European boulevard and an Arab souk. There were hippie jewellers and sellers of tie-dyed T-shirts. There was also a profusion of buskers. As you walked along, one quartet might have caught your ear. They were your typical folk band–banjo, guitar, fiddle, and washtub bass–played by three long-haired young men and a comely young woman with a beguiling voice. The banjo player exuded energy and chutzpah; the lanky fiddler sawed his violin with passion and skill. A dog of undetermined breed snoozed at their feet. They would play two or three hot tunes to gather a crowd and then the bass player would flip over his washtub to reveal the legend “Fight Muzak” painted on the bottom. The tub then served as a collection plate. When it had completed its round, the band slowed to a ballad and the crowd dispersed, making room for a new audience a few minutes later. It was a primitive marketing technique, but it worked. You tossed some change into the tub and moved on, contributing to the band’s average daily wage of $15 each. You would not have guessed that you had heard the prototype of one of Canada’s most enduring and loved folk music ensembles.


Dennis, Bob, Calvin, Marie-Lynn c1983. Photo: Gwenn Kallio

Thirty years later, in September 2001, you might have turned on CBC radio to catch Stuart McLean’s *Vinyl Café*.

Stuart was pleased, he said, that the Vinyl Café had re-united one of his all-time favourite bands. Stringband would play together for the first time in a decade. "Like Gordon Lightfoot or Monique Leyrac," he said, "like Margaret Atwood or Robertson Davies, Stringband made you proud to be Canadian."

What happened in between the two shows is what you hold in your hands–two CDs of music and these notes. It is a story of victory against the odds; of how an intrepid band of dissidents confronted the dominance of foreign mercenaries to carve out a niche for homegrown music. It is the story of two important creative talents who disliked each other upon first meeting and proceded to work together for the next two decades, battling behind the scenes while, on stage, they delighted hundreds of thousands of listeners from Tuktoyaktuk to Toronto, Mexico City to Moscow. Stringband laid down the roots of independent recording in Canada; they inspired scores if not hundreds of musicians, and they left behind a dozen of the best songs ever written in this country.

Bob

The cheeky banjo player on the Yonge Street mall was Bob Bossin, then age 26. Bob grew up in a middle-class, Jewish Toronto home, though his parents were not professionals by the accepted definition. Bob's father, Dave Bossin, had made his living in the gambling business. As a boy, he sold newspapers at the corner of York and Richmond, where he impressed the sporting crowd with his ability to calculate odds in his head. Years later, he would be asked to explain to a judge why he needed 60 telephone lines. "To report race results," he answered calmly.

In 1939, Dave married Marcia Levitt, "the most beautiful woman in Toronto," according to the maître-d' of the Club Indigo. In 1946, Marcia bore their first and only child, and Dave left the gambling world; it was getting rougher and he didn't want his son to grow up around it. He acquired a theatrical agency, booking entertainers into hotels and nightclubs. Marcia, meanwhile, became an accomplished portrait painter. Bob grew up around artists and show people, many of whom graced the family's supper table on Sundays when, by law, Toronto shut down tight. There he "heard a lot of stories and they weren't about baseball," as he would write in *Daddy Was a Ballplayer*. Still, though the adults earned their livings in unorthodox ways, it was all on the up-and-up. Dave Bossin didn't book strippers. And he didn't book folk groups.


Bob, 1960

Folk groups were a new phenomenon in the entertainment business, arising from the unexpected success of The Weavers in 1950. Before that, folk singers worked solo, when they worked at all. The Weavers, a product of the American left in general and Communist Party circles in particular, professionalized the music and changed it, crossing barn-dance instrumentation and kitchen-table voices with powerful, polished harmonies and savvy showmanship. In two years, The Weavers went from playing left-wing benefits to topping the charts with hits like *Irene Goodnight* and *On Top of Old Smokey*. Their fall, however, was equally precipitous. By the mid-50s, they were black-listed and marginalized by the McCarthy witch-hunts. And another new musical form had sprung up.

Like millions of other kids in the mid-1950s, Bob Bossin fell in love with rock 'n roll. The sexy, rebellious young Elvis and the other early rockers touched Bob's adolescent soul. In 1955, because of Elvis, he asked his parents for a guitar. But Bob's love for rock music was short-lived. It didn't take long for the music business to turn rock 'n roll into a bland parody of what it had been, leaving Bob and other teenagers bereft of music that pulsed with the real human experience they could feel, if not articulate. Then, one night in 1958, Bob heard Tom Dooley on the radio, performed by The Kingston Trio. It stopped him in his tracks. In this, too, he was far from alone.

While The Weavers had been driven underground by the black list, the appetite for folk music stayed alive in left-wing circles, at summer camps, and on college campuses. It had a natural appeal for young people like Bob Bossin: it was earthy and real, the antithesis to mainstream 1950s culture. When the politically unimpeachable Kingston

Trio turned an Appalachian murder ballad into a smash hit, the floodgates opened and the folk groups poured through: The Limeliters, The Journeymen, The Tarriers, Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers, then Peter, Paul and Mary. In Canada, there were The Travellers (like The Weavers, a product of the left), The Courriers, The Chanteclairs, The Brothers-in-Law. Most folk groups were pure middle-of-the-road. Some, like The New Lost City Ramblers, stayed close to the roots of the music, while a few others, like The Holy Modal Rounders and The Incredible String Band, took the music in new directions, creating eccentric hybrid forms.

Like the dinosaurs, the professional, tradition-based folk groups were doomed.

It was a wonderful time for young Toronto folkies like Bob. The Mariposa Folk Festival had started in 1961, bringing a cornucopia of folk music from Quebec, Atlantic Canada, England, Scotland and Ireland. On CBC Radio, Alan Mills, who was Canada's first folk music "star," had a weekly show, and folklorist Edith Fowke produced many programs of folk music. A dozen coffeehouses sprang up where folk acts played, passing on songs and performance smarts–artists like Bonnie Dobson, Karen James, and Ian and Sylvia. The old blues men passed through; Bob heard the Reverend Gary Davis and was profoundly influenced by his guitar style. Then there were the new American songwriters. Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Tom Paxton followed in Woody Guthrie's footsteps, creating a new style of song that tackled social and political issues. By the mid-1960s, it seemed that every political event that caught the attention of young people was reflected in a song: *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol, Draft Dodger Rag, What Did You Learn In School Today?* The new folk songs captured the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, the radicalization of a new generation of students, and the incipient opposition to the US war against the Vietnamese. As had been the case for the folk audience that had come of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there seemed to be no contradiction in singing a traditional ballad from the southern mountains followed by a song hastily assembled from yesterday's news. The connection lay in what had impressed Bob about *Tom Dooley*–these were songs that told true stories, songs about real life.

By the time Bob reached his teens, he was playing banjo and singing in amateur folk groups. In 1963, he hitchhiked to Orillia for Mariposa; most weekends, he hung out at the Bohemian Embassy, the New Gate of Cleve, or the Purple Onion, where he sat in the front row watching The Courriers, a trio from Ottawa. Bob dreamed of someday standing on the stage where they stood.

At least in its particulars, that would never happen. In a few short years, the Purple Onion was presenting R&B bands; The Courriers and the folk boom were gone, victims of the twin hammers of the British invasion and the emergence of the singer-songwriter. Increasingly, interpretations of traditional songs were replaced with songs written by the artists themselves. At this, Canadians excelled. By the mid-1960s, Ian Tyson, Sylvia Fricker, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, and Joni Mitchell had created a Canadian song canon. *Four Strong Winds, You Were On My Mind, Early Morning Rain, Suzanne,* and *The Circle Game* had entered the popular consciousness, where they remain to this day. Their success inspired more writers–Neil Young, Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlan and dozens, in fact hundreds, of others.

Marie-Lynn, Bob and Ben, 1974

Like the dinosaurs, the professional, tradition-based folk groups were doomed by the changing environment. Some of the bigger names survived as curiosities in mainstream venues; members of others moved into folk-rock, forming groups such as The Byrds, The Mamas and The Papas, The Lovin' Spoonful and Steeleye Span.

Bob's musical taste never really made the turn. Marie-Lynn Hammond's did.

Marie-Lynn

Marie-Lynn Hammond's family could be a metaphor for Canada. Her father, Barney Hammond, came from a wealthy, Protestant, English Montreal family. Her mother, Marie-Thérèse, was Québecoise, Catholic, francophone, and working-class. Farther back in the family, there was some Abenaki.

Marie-Lynn c1965

English was the official language of the Hammond household, but Marie-Thérèse taught her three daughters French when her husband was not around. Barney Hammond had been a flier in the Second World War and stayed with the air force afterwards, eventually joining NORAD intelligence. The family moved around the country almost yearly.

Music was not a big part of the Hammond home. Marie-Lynn begged for violin lessons as a child, but was no prodigy. Marie-Lynn's grandmother was a good singer and piano player, but Marie-Lynn rarely saw her, and while Marie-Thérèse sometimes sang French-Canadian folk songs, she sang them "slightly off key," so none of this seemed to make a serious mark on the daughter.

It was Sister Emma at a North Bay Catholic girls' high school who started Marie-Lynn Hammond's musical career. In 1964, teaching the ballad in a Grade 12 English class, Sister Emma brought in Joan Baez' recording of *The House Carpenter*. Marie-Lynn was entranced. Neither the voice nor the song was like anything she had heard. She had the local record store special-order the Baez album, and then learned every song. Next it was Peter, Paul, and Mary. Then, on a television show, Marie-Lynn saw Ian and Sylvia perform *Four Strong Winds*. Having heard only American music on records or radio, Marie-Lynn was stunned by the mention of Alberta in the lyric. "At that point Canada became real to me because I'd heard it in a song," she would later write. Like Bob Bossin, Marie-Lynn was hooked on folk music. Unlike Bob, it was a private pursuit. She played no instrument and was much too shy to sing for anyone other than herself.

In 1965, Marie-Lynn moved to Ottawa to attend Carleton University. To her surprise, everywhere she went there were people playing guitars and singing folk songs. For Christmas that year Marie-Lynn asked for and received a guitar. Now, in addition to singing alone in her room, Marie-Lynn was feverishly learning guitar and writing songs of unrequited love. One evening at a party, the usual sing-around was going on. Marie-Lynn joined in on *Don't Think Twice, It's Alright*. Her friends were amazed by her voice. The ice was broken and Marie-Lynn plunged in. Soon she was singing with two guitarists "who picked endlessly."

Marie-Lynn was stunned by the mention of Alberta in a song.

After graduating in 1968, Marie-Lynn travelled for a while. Then, in the spring of 1970, she decided to enroll in art school in Toronto, and went there to apply. Friends from Ottawa who knew Bob invited the two of them over for supper. Bob brought his guitar and played. Marie-Lynn told him it was out of tune, and as she remembers it, tuned it for him, to his discomfort. Their voices, however, blended in a way that only coincidence and genetics can bring about. It was not the most successful introduction, but Bob invited Marie-Lynn to drop by his room at Rochdale College, so they could play some more. She did, and for a few months they sang together. It didn't work, though. As Marie-Lynn describes it, "I was too whiny, introverted and angst-ridden for him. He was too arrogant for me." He didn't like the songs she was writing and she didn't like him. Bob Bossin and Marie-Lynn Hammond did not seem destined to change the face of Canadian folk music.

Oh, the year was 1971

Bob loved Marie-Lynn's voice and liked the music they made, but in 1971, it was far from his idea of what was most important. Like many of his contemporaries, Bob was out to change the world.

"There was music in the cafés at night and revolution in the air," Bob Dylan wrote of his days in Minneapolis,

and it was still true of Toronto in 1971. On campus and in high schools, in the arts, and in such conservative institutions as the NDP and the unions, the "new left" demanded change. There were organizations for every taste–communists, Trotskyists, Maoists, anarchists. On the Danforth, the Greek exiles plotted the overthrow of the junta. In North Toronto, housewives boycotted California grapes. Women organized, native people organized, gay liberation came to Toronto. In the US, the war in Vietnam ground on; at Kent State, four protesting students were killed by the National Guard. Back home, Trudeau imposed the War Measures Act. The left-wing Waffle shook up the NDP. And a Montreal doctor and holocaust survivor named Morgenthaler defied the abortion laws. In the fall of 1971, over 10,000 people marched through downtown Toronto protesting the testing of an atomic bomb off the coast of Alaska.

The strange brew of competition, resentment, respect, hostility, and friendship would fuel Stringband's successes and failures.

There was a similar ferment in the arts. New theatre companies, such as Theatre Passe Muraille, opened their doors. Canadian record labels, like True North and Attic, set up shop. A host of new publishers brought out books. One, House of Anansi Press, published poems by Earl Birney, Margaret Atwood, and in an anthology of new Canadian voices, Bob Bossin.

But Bob the poet took a back seat to Bob the student organizer and budding journalist. At the University of Toronto, Bob was an important figure on the campus left. He wrote, spoke and organized. He also developed a knack for "networking." His talent and his gift for self-promotion got him a slot writing a "token radical" column for *Maclean's* magazine under Peter Gzowski's brief editorship. He still played folk music, but increasingly, he used it to mobilize and protest.

The Something-or-other Stringband

In the spring of 1971, six months after their first musical parting, Bob and Marie-Lynn ran into each other on the street. Bob told Marie-Lynn that he had met a fiddler and suggested that they try making music again, as a trio. Marie-Lynn figured it was worth a try. This time it took, though the tensions that characterized Bob and Marie-Lynn's relationship remained and would not dissipate with time. They came to characterize Stringband. No matter who played fiddle or bass, the dominant personalities were Bob and Marie-Lynn. The strange brew of competition, resentment, respect, hostility, and friendship would fuel Stringband's successes and failures. Their stage banter and offstage confrontations came to resemble the television couples of their youth: Ralph and Alice, George and Gracie, or perhaps best, Desi and Lucy–two people from different worlds trying to make it work. Bob, the urban Jewish hustler and Marie-Lynn, the earnest French-Canadian Catholic girl, were their own Canadian folk sitcom.

Jerry Lewycky was studying music at the University of Toronto when he met Bob Bossin. He played violin, piano, flute, clarinet and trombone. Forced to enroll in courses other than music, he found himself in what he remembers as some kind of sociology course. "It was the strangest class I was ever in," he recalls. The students more or less ran the course and even graded themselves. One of the organizers of the class was Bob. When Jerry told Bob he played fiddle, Bob lit up and invited Jerry over to play and to meet Marie-Lynn. The chemistry was there. Jerry contributed the instrumental lead that neither Bob nor Marie-Lynn could, adding the melodic extras–and the fun. "It provided balance to the serious stuff," Jerry recalls. "As soon as the fiddle starts, things pick up."

In folk circles, fiddle, banjo, guitar and voices made a string band, which often was the patrinomic name: the Iron

Mountain String Band, The Incredible String Band. So "Stringband" came easily, but Bob, Marie-Lynn and Jerry couldn't agree what string band they wanted to be. As a stopgap, they called themselves the Stringband and figured a first name would come along. It never did.

In the beginning, Stringband played traditional Appalachian numbers like *The Cuckoo, Cripple Creek,* and *Hot Corn, Cold Corn*. They played *The Battle of New Orleans*. Relying on Marie-Lynn's French and Jerry's fiddle, they played *La Bastringue* and *Youpe, youpe sur la rivière*. They also sang the new political songs that had emerged from the anti-war and other radical movements, like Jefferson Airplane's anti-establishment anthem, *We Should Be Together*, with its defiant introduction, "We are all outlaws in the eyes of America. In order to survive we steal, cheat, lie, forge, fuck, hide and deal."

The folk boom was over but there was still work around. They played college pubs, coffeehouses, free concerts in the park–anywhere anyone would have them. The pay was bad, but Bob got the band enough gigs to compensate. Jerry and Marie-Lynn remember with amazement and respect Bob's tenacity at finding work. Bob had grown up around his father's booking agency and was not intimidated by the business end of things. His work as a student organizer had given him skills few bands possessed: he could put together events, make leaflets, write articles and press releases. He knew how to work with few resources, motivated by belief in a cause. Now the cause was Stringband.

Stringband moved up a rung. They played Egerton's, Fiddlers' Green, Campbell's Coffeehouse, Grossman's Tavern, the Bull Ring at the University of Guelph. Marie-Lynn and Jerry were still going to school. Bob was living off unemployment insurance. Slowly, they realized that they could actually support themselves making music. Marie-Lynn remembers thinking that it had to be art school or music but it couldn't be both, and the music was paying the rent. They hovered on the edge of turning pro.

Turning pro meant touring, and it also meant recording. In 1973, Stringband did both. The tour was a modest excursion out west in Bob's Datsun station wagon. In Winnipeg, they found that the club that had booked them had changed hands and someone else was performing. They stayed with Mitch Podolak, who Bob knew from the Bohemian Embassy coffeehouse. Mitch was organizing the first Winnipeg Folk Festival, and Stringband came away with an invitation to the festival the next summer. In Saskatoon, they stayed with Humphrey and the Dumptrucks, the Saskatchewan bluegrass band who, like Stringband, were bringing their own north-of-the-border take to an American musical genre. In Edmonton they played The Hovel, a coffeehouse then residing in the basement of a church. They got as far as BC, where they hung out at a hippie encampment near Rock Creek where Bob had friends. The tour made no money, but they had toured.

L-R: Jerry Lewicky, Bob, Marie-Lynn

Canadian Sunset

The opportunity to record came about because of one of the band's first fans, an older gentleman named Nick. Nick was a psychologist and an eccentric who wore three watches and used an ear trumpet. He liked Bob and was entranced by Marie-Lynn. One night, he brought his nephew, Jeff Smith, to hear the band. Jeff wanted to produce records and had set up a studio in his basement. Bob promised to call him when Stingband was ready to record, but he was in no hurry, since the band didn't have the money. Just to be polite, he called Jeff to tell him that. Jeff seemed confused and told Bob, "Uncle Nick is going to pay for it."

Now Bob was nonplussed. "I don't think Nick knows how much it costs to make a record," he said.

"I don't think you know how much money Nick has," Jeff replied.

Nick, it turned out, was Nick Laidlaw, the scion of the Laidlaw family. Bob drew up a budget of $2976, and in July of 1973, in Jeff Smith's basement, Stringband recorded its first song, *Did You Hear They Busted the Fiddle Player*.

The producer had never produced, the engineer had never engineered, and the recording artists had never recorded.

Recording Canadian Sunset was not easy. The producer had never produced, the engineer had never engineered, and the recording artists had never recorded. But when they were done, they had made one of Canada's first independently recorded and released albums. Along with Perth County Conspiracy (does not exist), David Essig, and The Original Sloth Band, Stringband was creating a new genre–the artist-produced and artist- owned record. The artwork was done by Carol Noel, the friend who had introduced Marie-Lynn to Bob. The colour of the cover was the result of an excessive order of pumpkin stock for George Harrison's Bangladesh benefit album, which the manufacturer gave to Stringband cheap. For further colour at minimal cost, Marie-Lynn suggested they glue a sunset postcard onto each album.

Everywhere Bob went, he carried a pile of records with him. One reviewer wrote that Bob handed him a copy on the street. He loved it: all the reviewers did–the independence, the postcards, and the music. Canadian Sunset was noticed with approval by *The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Sun,* and *Sound Magazine*; it was added to the CHUM FM playlist; and University of Toronto Radio listed it as the most popular album of the week of January 28, 1974, alongside Bette Midler. All the reviewers cheered the band for producing and marketing Canadian Sunset on their own. In 1973, that was news. The very act of making the record seemed a blow for Canadian art and a protest against the multinationals that owned the record business. When Thomas Schofield wrote in Canadian Forum, "This is important music by a band who did not, and will not, move to Laurel Canyon," he captured what was implicit in Stringband. They were not yet the Canadian group who would sing Canadian stories to Canadian audiences; in fact there is little on Canadian Sunset that is particularly Canadian. But listeners could sense it: Stringband was proud of where they lived.

For many who bought Canadian Sunset, Stringband seemed a metaphor for what they wanted Canada to be. They sang in French and English. They were pro-marijuana (*Did You Hear They Busted the Fiddle Player*) and sexually liberated (*Vancouver*). They respected tradition but were looking forward, "singin' 'bout the old times, livin' in the new."

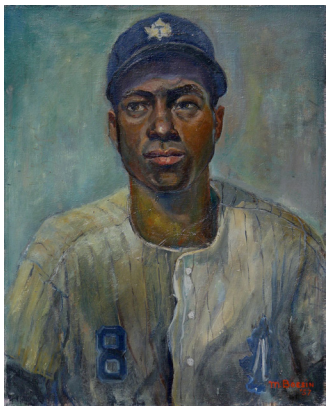
In point of fact, on Canadian Sunset, Stringband sang about the old times very little. Of 16 songs on the album, 12 are written by Marie-Lynn or Bob. The rest are mainly short fiddle tunes. None of the covers of American songwriters or Appalachian folk songs made the record. Stringband was now a band that fashioned its own songs, that, tentatively but distinctly, was raising its own voice.

And when Marie-Lynn sang, what a unique voice it was! Marie-Lynn intrigued everyone who heard her. She didn't sound like the American singers you heard on record or radio. Like Sylvia Tyson or Kate and Anna McGarrigle, Marie-Lynn had a "Canadian" voice. It was quirky, passionate, intimate and compelling. Particularly on *Vancouver*. The song even got airplay.

Vancouver was not only sung in a uniquely personal voice, it was written in one. The cityscape, the old lover, the temptation of West Coast life, the ambivalence about moving yet again after leaving Ottawa for Toronto–these are all very personal, yet very Canadian, themes. Vancouver was, in a way, an updated *Four Strong Winds*, but it was about contemporary urban life and written from a woman's point of view. When Marie-Lynn sang, "We went to bed for old times sake," she went beyond most songs of the time. It was, well, liberating.

If *Vancouver* was the most popular song on Canadian Sunset, *Daddy Was a Ballplayer* proved the most enduring.

Like *Vancouver*, it was based on personal experience. Bob's father and his cronies used to go to Toronto's baseball stadium on the lakeshore to schmooze and cool off from Toronto's oppressive summer heat. When Bob got to be old enough, he tagged along. One evening, he watched Sam Jethroe, who had been one of the first blacks to cross the colour bar, steal a base. Bob bought a picture of Jethroe. His mother, Marcia, liked Jethroe's strong, sombre face and painted a portrait of him. Bob has taken the painting with him everywhere he has lived.



Sam Jethroe by Marcia Bossin, 1957

Daddy Was a Ballplayer, like most of Bob's songs, began with LSD. Bob always knew there was a song in Sam Jethroe but couldn't find it. Then, gazing at the portrait with drug-distended pupils, he realized that, while he could not fathom Sam's experience, he could easily imagine his son's. Combining fact and fantasy, cycling through a half-dozen musical themes in several keys, *Daddy Was a Ballplayer* remains a masterpiece of songwriting. It is unlike anything else of its time.

It also got Stringband its first national media exposure. Peter Gzowski, who was about to start the CBC morning radio show that would stay on the air for 30 years, had a summer house on Toronto's Ward's Island. Bob dropped in on his old editor one day with his dog and his banjo and played *Daddy Was a Ballplayer*. Peter loved it. He invited Stringband to play the song live on one of his first programs.

After Sunset

A few weeks later, Stringband opened for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band at Convocation Hall, an 1800-seat theatre on the University of Toronto campus. "They literally captured their audience with their toe-tapping country folk music," wrote one reviewer. One drunken blues devotee did shout a loud and demanding "Butterfield!" in the middle of Stringband's set, but then he did the same thing again while the Butterfield Band played.

In March, *Canadian Composer* ran a two-page spread on the band. The author of the piece was Richard Flohil, the magazine's editor. He was also the manager and publicist for the Downchild Blues Band. He began to take a more-than-journalistic interest in Stringband. He became, as he describes it, their "publicist, opener of doors, and friend," the conduit between the band and the rest of the music industry. By 1974, Stringband had struggled up from the Yonge Street mall to concert halls, albeit as an opening act. But just as things were starting to roll, they lost their fiddler. Jerry Lewycky was first and foremost a musician. In Stringband, he recalls, "musical talent was lacking." The band liked to say that Bob's best instrument was the telephone. For Bob and Marie-Lynn, Stringband was primarily about the songs; they needed to play well enough to get the songs across, and that they could do. But what audiences found charming, Jerry found unprofessional. Jerry also found Bob hard to deal with. "He ran the show," says Jerry. Then there was the money. While Stringband was getting better gigs, they were barely making a living. Jerry could make better money with country-rock bands, and he left to start one. The Honky Tonk Rounders toured around Ontario until he joined the Bug Alley Band, featuring vocalist Karen Young. For four or five years Jerry continued to perform, and then moved into the embryonic organic food business. Today he is Eastern Canada's only miso maker.

Stringband needed a fiddler, desperately, and, heart in mouth, Bob called Ben Mink. Ben had fiddled on *Hoedown* on Canadian Sunset. The folklore is that Jerry could not play in the key of B, and Ben could. Ben was a virtuoso journeyman player; he could and did play just about any kind of music. He was no folkie, but Stringband felt like a going concern. Though he never saw himself as a member of the band, he liked the songs and he liked the people. De facto, Ben signed on. What had started as a crippling loss for the band turned out to be a major stroke of luck. "Ben is the most creative musician I ever worked with," says Bob. "With Ben, we were something hot!"

Stringband was on the move. "I worked the phone pretty hard," Bob remembers. The gigs got better, the favourable

reviews piled up. But there was one sour note. Estelle Klein, the artistic director of Mariposa, rejected the band's application–for the third year running. It must have hurt bitterly to be told by the director of Canada's most important folk music event that a jury of nine of their peers "does not feel that most of the written material is as yet up to the standard for Mariposa." No matter how successful the band got, Estelle Klein never hired Stringband.

Winnipeg was another story. The first Winnipeg Folk Festival, in July 1974, saw huge crowds–12,000 a day. And Stringband lucked out; they drew the sunset spot–9:30 pm Friday night, on the mainstage. They followed Bruce Cockburn. The audience was primed. They loved Marie-Lynn's impassioned singing, Ben's high-octane fiddle, and Bob's witty lyrics. To close the set, Bob chose a brand new song, the true story of a California highschool girl who answered her principal's invitation to enter a beauty pageant with a ruler and her own invitation to, in Bob's words, "Show us the length of your cock." Bob had heard the story in a song by Vancouver folksinger Vera Johnston, who had read about the incident in Ms magazine. Bob tracked down the article and took off from there. The Winnipeg audience was stunned. "Basically, they went wild," Bob recalls. "It was our first standing ovation. We sold a pile of records."

"As a connoisseur of good music," Dief said, "I am simply delighted."

Energized, Stringband returned to Toronto. They appeared at another huge event, the annual High Park Free Music Festival. A reported 45,000 people showed up. Bob and Ben donned tuxes for the occasion. In October, Stringband opened for Fairport Convention, and a few weeks later for The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, bumping the regular opening act, Steve Martin, who was reduced to a cameo spot during the Dirt Band's set. It was tough company, but reviewers liked the hometown band that could hold its own with bigger names. In November they headed to Halifax to tape a CBC television show, *Take Time* with Noel Harrison. Bob pulled together a few other gigs, leaving a day for a side-trip to Lunenburg. Wandering lysergically blissful through Lunenburg's ancient graveyard, Bob started composing his sweetest and one of his most popular songs, *Lunenburg Concerto*.

In December, Stringband taped Ian Tyson's TV show, broadcast nationally on CTV. Tyson's other guest was progressive bluegrass pioneer John Hartford. For Bob it was especially gratifying. He had forsaken the banjo in his student-radical days–until he heard Hartford at Mariposa in 1971. Now he was sharing the stage with one of his heroes.

A month later, Stringband was back on national radio, with another new song by Bob–as close to a hit as they would ever get. Bob had watched the Muhammad Ali v. Joe Frazier fight on TV with a university chum, Bob Rae, later the first and only NDP premier of Ontario. Ali won, becoming the first man ever to regain the heavyweight title. (He had been stripped of it for his refusal to fight in Vietnam.) Rae joked about other resurrections–Marilyn Bell could re-swim Lake Ontario and Diefenbaker would come back to lead the Tories. Bob hit the ground running. *Dief Will Be the Chief Again* is funny and nostalgic in a uniquely Canadian way. *As It Happens*, the CBC's flagship radio show, got Diefenbaker on the phone and played the song for him. "As a connoisseur of good music," he said, "I am simply delighted." Dief, the old conservative populist and Bob, a populist of a different stripe, were a compelling pair, and it brought the song a lot of attention. Bob and Richard Flohil would work it for all it was worth.

National Melodies

When Stringband entered Toronto's Thunder Sound in March of 1975 to record their second album, they were a different band from the one that had laboured in Jeff Smith's basement 20 months before. Now they were pros with a couple of hundred shows under their belt. Ben Mink, though still insistently not a member, had been with the band for a year. Asked what he brought to the record, Ben answered, "Reverb. Canadian Sunset

sounded like it had been recorded in a closet full of coats." National Melodies would feature Ben's first original composition, *Male Chauvinist Jig*, so-titled as a sly dig at Stringband's feminism. Ben would go on to co-author *Constant Craving* with k.d.lang and other Juno- and Grammy-winning songs.

National Melodies had fewer original songs than Canadian Sunset. In their place was more of the band's traditional repertoire, especially French-Canadian. The record features three songs in French, *Le devidoir, Dans le mois de mai,* and the barnburner, *Le prisonnier de londres*. With Marie-Lynn's and Ben's passionate performances, *Prisonnier* became a Stringband mainstay for the life of the band. National Melodies also featured the first cover of someone else's song, Angele Arsenault's version of Acadian mouth music, *Mic Mac Song*. The group had heard the tune at the Winnipeg Folk Festival and Ben, who always carried his tape recorder with him, had taped Angele singing it in a hotel elevator. It, too, became a Stringband standard.

Marie-Lynn accused Bob of being an evil genius who could write a dirty song in favour of women's liberation.

National Melodies confirmed Stringband's strong Canadian identity and its political bent. *Dief Will Be the Chief Again* had an ambiguous political message, but it was Canadian as could be. *Mrs. Murphy* was a defence of the family farm, an institution that was an important part of the Canadian creation myth. Millions of immigrants over several centuries had been drawn to Canada with the promise of land. Now obscure forces were driving them off. Unlike Murray McLauchlan's *Farmer Song* or Stan Rogers' *The Field Behind the Plough*, *Mrs. Murphy* mixed the farmer's plight with the politics behind it.

If there was nostalgia to the politics of *Dief* and *Mrs. Murphy*, *Show Us the Length* was a very contemporary song, reflecting the growth of the women's movement. Like all of Stringband's best political efforts, it scored its points with humour. "We didn't do anthems. We wanted to tell stories," says Marie-Lynn. *Show Us the Length* combined a feminist message with the shock and titillation of a woman saying "cock" on a public stage. Marie-Lynn has accused Bob of being an evil genius who could write a "dirty song in favour of women's liberation." She was aware that along with the women who delighted in the song's message, there were guys who just liked hearing a woman talk dirty. She would look out at the audience and find the guy with the biggest leer and point at him as she sang, "Don't worry if it's short or bent or slender," enjoying herself as the smirk turned to self-conscious embarrassment.

What *Dief* did above ground, *Show Us the Length* did underground. It built a reputation for the band as clever and politically aware, and in the case of Show Us the Length, fearless and feminist to boot. Many women thought Marie-Lynn had written it. *Show Us the Length* was published in *Sing Out!*, the folk bible, and was covered by the grand old man of folk music, Pete Seeger. Meanwhile, Ian Tyson performed Dief on one of his tours. Pete Seeger and Ian Tyson singing your songs–it didn't get better than that.

The photograph on the back of National Melodies shows three people who exude confidence, even cockiness. Posed on skates, they looked like a trio who were fast becoming one of the most respected and popular groups in Canadian folk music. Bob's face is lit by what could be called a "shit-eating" grin.

Canadian Sunset had been an independent record from the get-go; there was never any thought about doing it any other way. National Melodies had more potential. Stringband now had a profile, and *Dief Will Be the Chief Again* had at least minor hit potential. Marie-Lynn wanted to "shop" the record to the labels. Bob was unenthusiastic, but he agreed. They took it to everyone they could get in to see. The president of GRT Records said he loved it, but turned it down, saying,"We've got to go for the long ball." The record wouldn't sell in the US and that was what counted. Another executive told them, sympathetically, "It makes you think and it makes you feel, and those are

liabilities." Al Mair of Attic Records was not interested either, but he sat Bob and Marie-Lynn down and showed them some numbers. They could make a lot more money selling a few thousand copies themselves than he would pay them for selling five or ten thousand. Bob had figured as much. So National Melodies became the second release on Nick Records (they had named the label after Nick Laidlaw). All subsequent Stringband albums would be marketed independently.

A record executive told them, "It makes you think and it makes you feel, and those are liabilities."

With Flohil's help, they released *Dief Will Be the Chief Again* as a single. It got some airplay, but not much. CKBI in Diefenbaker's hometown of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan declared it "number one" with them. Bob wrote, "You know when you're a kid, you dream of having the number one hit song? Well, it isn't the same." Still, *Dief* earned over $6000 in royalties from TV, radio and live performances. No Stringband song would come close to that mark again.

On September 18, 1975, the Diefenbaker nostalgia craze peaked when the Chief turned 80. Stringband was playing the Parktown Motel in Saskatoon. A hippie passed out birthday candles. The next day, CTV flew the band back to Toronto to play the song live by hook-up to Diefenbaker, who was being feted in Saskatoon. (Bob had tried and failed to get Stringband onto the bill.) On the monitor to which Stringband played, Dief chuckled. Later, though, he became non-committal when asked about the song. Bob's mother told him, "Honey, I think he's on to us." There was no face-to-face meeting between Diefenbaker and the band and no sales breakthrough for either the single or National Melodies.

That same weekend, Ben left the band. While he admired Bob and Marie-Lynn's songwriting and the fact that "they actually got off their ass and toured and sold records," he was uncomfortable with the level of musicianship, the politics and the folkiness, "the schmutz on stage, the dog. I always had my eye out for something else." The something else turned out to be Murray McLauchlan, who invited Ben to join his band. Murray was on a major label and had a higher profile. The money and the touring conditions were better, especially for someone whose memories of Stringband tours are of always being cold. On the weekend of Diefenbaker's birthday, Ben appeared at a Saskatoon festival with Stringband and then came out again to close the show as Murray's new fiddler. Ben was gone the next day. Toronto fiddler Anne Lederman sat in on fiddle for the Parktown gig. Bob tried to be philosophical, saying "A worker always takes a higher paying job," but Ben's departure was a devastating blow, and he knew it. Once again Stringband was looking for a fiddler.

Terry

As luck would have it, it didn't take long to find one. Terry King was a jazz player. Born in Portland, Terry had gone to school in Montreal and started gigging. The Montreal jazz scene in those days was small and limited, and in 1972, Terry jumped at the chance to join Robert Charlebois' band. It wasn't jazz, but it was a steady paycheque and lots of playing. After a year he was ready to call it quits. In 1974, he joined the exodus of Montreal jazz musicians to the (relatively) greener pastures of Toronto. There were lots of other Montrealers in town. One of them was guitarist Rick Whitelaw, who told Terry that there was a band looking for a fiddle player. It took about five minutes for Bob and Marie-Lynn to decide that Terry could do the job. They were impressed and so was Terry. Folk wasn't really his music but, as he recalls, "Bob had his act together." This meant steady work and coming home from the

L-R: Marie-Lynn,Terry, Bob. Photo: David Street

road with money. And they let him play some jazz. In fact Terry had a big influence on the band. Bob liked old "classic" jazz and Marie-Lynn was more and more interested in 20s and 30s swing. With Terry in the band, they could go there. Terry liked both Bob and Marie-Lynn. This was an asset, as their relationship was once again fraying at the edges.

With Terry on board, Stringband was back on track and back on tour. In November of 1975 they left Toronto for the West again, and a 14-city tour. Guitar genius Eugene Chadbourne, writing for the *Calgary Herald* in those days, was knocked out by Terry's playing on a Joe Venuti instrumental, *Wild Dog*. "Any violinist that can play this tune deserves a medal," he wrote. Filling Ben Mink's shoes was no easy task, but Terry had done it.

"Any violinist that can play this tune deserves a medal."

The next year was a blur of names, dates and places. This was Stringband's time. On Mayday they celebrated the band's fifth anniversary with a self-produced concert at Toronto's St. Lawrence Centre. Producing their own concert in the country's biggest city is a further indication of Stringband's power and their autonomy from the industry. It was a decidedly counter-cultural affair, complete with clowns, a mime and Peter Froehlich's sneeze poetry. A few weeks later they were in the Yukon playing a community hall in Elsa. Then it was on to Ottawa for the first Festival for the Folks, where the *Ottawa Citizen* reviewer reported that Stringband had given the crowd "a quick but explosive lesson in Canadian folk music. At its best." Who needed Mariposa? Other festivals were emerging across the country, festivals that appreciated what Stringband was about. Still, they took time from a busy schedule to craft an application to Mariposa from the Ottawa Valley Rounders, a ficticious pure laine folk group. They even got Bob Cosbey, a respected folklorist from the University of Regina, to write a letter of support for the "Rounders." Mariposa treated the Rounders with the same indifference they showed to Stringband.

By 1976, Stringband had become one of Canada's most successful folk bands. But all was not well. Marie-Lynn was restless, and Terry was part of the trouble. By bringing a jazz sensibility to Stringband, he encouraged Marie-Lynn's own jazz sympathies. While she couldn't play it, she could sing it and Terry could back her up. She was beginning to chafe at the musical limitations of Stringband under Bob's de facto leadership, and what she thought of as his unprofessional stage antics. However, Stringband was doing well, playing to bigger crowds, selling more records and making more money. For Marie-Lynn, it was a quandary.

Thanks To The Following

"Give a dollar when the bucket comes round
and we can set some wheels in motion."
- Did You Hear They Busted the Fiddle Player?

From the beginning, Stringband was committed to both a different kind of repertoire and a different way of doing business. Though they had toyed with the possibility of a record deal for National Melodies, and had worked with agents, record distributors, publicists and the like, when push came to shove, Stringband was doing it on their own. They had made a virtue of necessity, and it served them well. There was a commercial advantage to their stringent anti-commercialism.

The key to their success was the band's symbiotic relationship with their audience. In a letter sent to concert organizers, Stringband stressed that they liked being billeted. It brought them closer to their audience and saved them money. Audience members who took the band home after a show sometimes became long-time friends and, occasionally, organizers of future concerts. The Stringband mailing list was a lifeline for the band, connecting them to their fans across the country. It helped fill halls, sell records and recruit further cadre. The band's independence,

its repertoire, and its members' devotion to a variety of causes made supporting Stringband a political act. Stringband's fans showed a level of commitment to the band that, in adults, is rare.

This became increasingly important as both the band and the club owners came to realize that Stringband did not sell booze. Like the band members, Stringband fans didn't drink much. So the bread-and-butter venues for most touring musicians were not there for Stringband. They turned to their fans. It was part necessity and part Bob's politics. There was no mystery to producing a concert, Bob knew, just as there was no mystery to making your own record; anyone could do it by following a few simple steps. So Bob wrote a booklet that laid them down. From details on billeting ("No hamsters in the bedroom please"), to where to set up the bar if there needed to be one ("We figure that drinking mixes with music like it does with driving"), "How To Put On A Stringband Concert" was friendly, honest and useful. The concert was a partnership, not the uneasy relationship between performer and promoter so prevalent in commercial music. Thus did Stringband lay the foundation for its own touring network, creating for the band the same kind of independence from the "business" that they enjoyed as producers of their own records. Their approaches to concerts and records were about to converge, as Stringband prepared to make their third recording. If you could have friends and fans organize concerts for you, why not have them fund a record?

Any thoughts of a breakthrough into the commercial mainstream were gone.

Fraser and Debolt, a Montreal folk duo had already solicited advance sales for an album, but they split up without making the record. Stringband was just the band to carry it off. In the fall of 1976, they sent a letter to their mailing list offering $5 advance subscriptions. Subscribers were promised their name on the album cover, and those who lived near Toronto could sing backup. As the band toured, they kept handing out the flyers. By the time they entered the studio in early December, they had over 800 subscribers and $5,000 in the bank. Over a hundred "angels" came to the first recording session to watch and help out on the chorus of *Look What's Become of Me*. The session made the CTV national news.

National Melodies recorded one version of Stringband, Thanks To The Following, another. The new record had only one traditional cut, a medley of French-Canadian tunes. The traditional fiddle tunes were not there at all; the only instrumental was the old jazz workhorse, *Indiana*, with a chunk of Charlie Parker's *Donnalee* thrown in. Nine of the record's 13 cuts were originals.

Bob continued his writing streak. *Sterner Stuff* made a western bookend for *Lunenberg Concerto*, with landscape and longing combining beautifully. *Mail-Sortin' Man*, written with Peter Froehlich, updated the Afro-American classic *John Henry*, with the steel-driving man now a mail sorter. Canadian postal workers had gone on strike against the advent of automated sorting, and Bob, at his proselytizing best, celebrated the union side with a song so silly and infectious that you had to laugh and clap along. But Bob's most accomplished song, and the longest-lived, was *Tugboats*.

Tugboats was Bob's first excursion into a kind of musical journalism; he immersed himself in research to get the details and the language just right. There were bays with "names only tugboats know," and Bob intended to get them right. *Tugboats* sprang from Stringband's frenetic touring through the small towns on the BC coast. In each show Bob asked if anyone had worked on the tugs. Someone always had, and soon Bob had accumulated the details that give the song its authenticity. He was quite proud of himself when, one day, a tugboat man asked him which boats he had worked. (*Tugboats* also marked the recording debut of an up-and-coming young singer-songwriter with a deep maritime voice, Stan Rogers.)

Meanwhile, Marie-Lynn tried out her jazz chops, abetted by Terry and guitarist and sometime-boyfriend, Doug Bowes. She and Bowes co-wrote *Second Fiddle Rag*, a delightful ditty about a woman fiddler in the 1930s. It was feminism lite, but it was the lightness that made it work. The album's "hit" was Marie-Lynn's *I Don't Sleep With Strangers Anymore*. The song recalls *Vancouver*, where the heroine "went to bed for old time's sake." It shares the sexual frankness, but in the new song, the offer of company from a young man in a bar is turned down in favour of "the lights of home." The most significant of Marie-Lynn's songs is *Flying/Spring of '44*. Dedicated to Barney, her father, it was the first in a series of family portraits that would become Marie-Lynn's crowning achievement as a songwriter. *Flying* is deeply personal and richly detailed, its characters drawn with a playwright's bold strokes.

Thanks To The Following is less focused than National Melodies, reflecting the diverse ensemble Stringband had become. The title is about process rather than content, and there is not a lot of interaction between the group's members. Only *Mail Sortin' Man*, recorded live, gives the feel of a band. Thanks To The Following made no attempt to be anything other than what the band was–a contemporary folk group with two uncommonly gifted songwriters and a wide musical range. Any thoughts of a breakthrough into the commercial mainstream were gone. The list of names of the subscribers takes up much of the cover. It is a graphic representation of those to whom the band was beholden. Thanks To The Following is a record of, by, and for the people.

The First Annual Farewell

In January 1977, *Weekend Magazine*, which was inserted into newspapers across the country, ran a major piece on Stringband. Written by Val Ross, and complete with colour photos, it was a tribute to the band's past and present. It praised Bob's continued commitment to radical causes when so many of his contemporaries had made their peace with mainstream society. It celebrates Marie-Lynn's feminism–"She's assertive. Liberated. She's the one who defaces posters on buses with stickers saying 'This Ad Exploits Women.' But she's a gentle fighter." Ross ends with the hope that "they stick together, making it on their own Canadian terms." A piece like this in a mainstream national magazine gives some sense of what Stringband had accomplished. They were part of the official opposition, respected critics of, and contributors to, the country's cultural life. This position was reinforced by an ebullient call from Richard Flohil. "You're going to love me for this," he chortled to Bob. Harmonium, a Quebec jazz-rock band, had bailed out of a government-funded tour to Mexico. So in February, Stringband headed south for two weeks of concerts. The Mexicans loved them. The embassy loved them. Against all odds, Stringband had become an official cultural export.

Marie-Lynn and Bob c1975

In March, Stringband was back on the road on their 10th cross-Canada tour. They were now able to sell out two shows at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, no mean feat then or now. A month later they were back in Toronto to self-produce their "second annual 5th anniversary concert." But despite the good press, the successful tour, and the favourable reception for Thanks To The Following, the band was in trouble. Bob and Marie-Lynn were on the rocks. Bob's brash, Duddy-Kravitz confidence had always clashed with the insecurity that plagued Marie-Lynn. On stage, what Bob thought was folksy and charming offended Marie-Lynn's sense of decorum. In the Weekend article, Val Ross reports Marie-Lynn's reaction to Bob's trademark mismatched socks: "'Of course he does it to get attention,' Marie-Lynn says disgustedly." Bob is unrepentant about their different ideas of showmanship. "Marie-Lynn always said she didn't want to be in vaudeville; I aspired to vaudeville." Bob wanted a punchy, low-culture show without affectation or pretence. What Ben Mink had described as "schmutz on stage" was, for Bob, part of what made Stringband different; it went along with the billeting and the homemade albums. Bob wanted to lower the height of the concert stage. What Brecht had done for theatre, Bob was trying to do for music–tear down

the wall between the artist and the audience. For Marie-Lynn, who believed in dressing up and maintaining the sense of spectacle, this was just unprofessional. She wanted the audience to experience a concert, not a living-room hootenanny, and was convinced that not even Brecht would have allowed the dog onstage. Marie-Lynn was also feeling the draw of mainstream music. Bob was never going to be a pop star; he didn't have the look, the temperament, or the songs. But Marie-Lynn, some had always said, had "star potential." Musically, she wanted beautiful harmonies, richer instrumentation, drums. She wanted to be in Steeleye Span, not The Weavers.

Periodically, Marie-Lynn had talked about leaving, but Bob had always talked her out of it. There was always something coming up, some next step up the ladder, that made her decide to stay. They had even gone for counselling. But by the fall of 1977, they hardly looked at each other on stage. The day after the last show of the fall tour, Bob and Marie-Lynn went for a walk in Vancouver's Stanley Park. Marie-Lynn said she wanted to quit. Bob, perhaps worn out from the bickering, could not think of a reason why she shouldn't. At the end of the year, on New Year's Eve to be precise, Stringband gave their farewell concert. Six hundred people packed Toronto's Bathurst Street Theatre to see out the old year and an old musical friend. Even the farewell had its edgy moment. Bob announced that he and Terry would be continuing to play. Marie-Lynn jumped in saying "But it won't be Stringband!" The boys shuffled their feet. Well, yes and no.

Bob and Marie-Lynn had even gone for counselling. But by the fall of 1977, they hardly looked at each other on stage.

Where Is Whilom?

A blow like Marie-Lynn's departure would have felled most bands. Her voice, her songs and her French-Canadian heritage, were key components of Stringband's identity and success. But Stringband had enough momentum to keep moving forward. They might not be scaling the heights of stardom, but business was good. The years of touring and recording were paying off. And in a way, Bob's dominance in the band now came in handy. Bob was the spokesman for Stringband, and Bob was still speaking.

That fall, like a couple of bachelors, Bob and Terry had haunted the clubs looking at women, or more to the point, listening to their voices. Bob held auditions, lots of auditions, but what he was looking for wasn't there. Then one night he ventured into a vegetarian restaurant to hear a singer-songwriter from Nova Scotia, Nancy Ahern. He was excited. Nancy did not sound like Marie-Lynn, or anyone else for that matter. She had a memorable voice and a striking presence. Bob remembers, "Nancy meant it. There was nothing false about her, no disconnection between her heart and her performance." If what made Stringband so attractive to its audience was the sense that they were real people writing and singing songs about real places and events, then Nancy would fit in perfectly. The songs she was writing would today be called "new age." They were poetic and mystical. Bob and Terry, who weren't, would come to marvel at the response from audiences– many were spellbound, some weeping.

Nancy was part of a musical family in Dartmouth. Her father had been a choirmaster and her sister Aileen was a professional singer. Brother Brian had been the musical director of CBC TV's *Singalong Jubilee*, and had produced records for Anne Murray and Emmylou Harris. While the old band rehearsed for their farewell concert on New Years Eve, Bob started working up the Stringband material with Nancy. In March they were back on the road.

But it was not quite Stringband. Marie-Lynn had told Bob that she didn't want him to keep using the name. Stringband included her, and without her, it was not Stringband. Bob honoured her wishes… sort of. Bob's partner, Sarah Weber, who would read the dictionary for fun, found "whilom," an archaic word for former, and Bob christened the new band the Whilom Stringband. It confused everyone and was dropped after a while, but it was the Whilom Stringband that started a tour to the West in March of 1978.

The first tour by the new band was a test. They would be going to the band's heartland, places they had performed many times with Marie-Lynn. How would the family accept Nancy? As it turned out, she was greeted with all the warmth Stringband audiences had for the band. When they hit the West Coast, the often-acerbic *Vancouver Sun* columnist Vaughan Palmer ended his review with "They're great," and Victoria's *Monday Magazine* ran the headline "Stringband Still Canada's Most Talented Folk Band." Nancy had passed the test.

The Maple Leaf Dog

To make the fourth Stringband album Bob turned to Ben Mink. Ben had been busy since leaving Stringband for Murray McLauchlan three years before. Now he was playing with the progressive rock outfit, FM. Ben had logged a lot of hours in the studio, and the recording process fascinated him. Bob's offer gave him his first opportunity to act as producer, and he took it. He booked Daniel Lanois' Grant Street Recording Studio in Hamilton. The folkie session musicians of previous albums were replaced by jazz-playing friends of Terry and Nancy. In the hands of Mink and Lanois (who would both become famous and sought-after for their skills), and backed up by some of Toronto's best players, The Maple Leaf Dog was no home-made production.

Bob had a quartet of songs for the album that ranked among his best. All of them were deeply Canadian, reflecting his many tours across the country. *The Casca and the Whitehorse Burned Down* was inspired by a postcard he had come across in the Yukon. *The Union Cowboy* came from an old-timer he met in Rock Creek, BC. *Newfoundlanders* was the most recent, inspired by Stringband's trip to the island in July. (There was a federal election in the offing and the government had sent out the cultural missionary corps to all corners of the country to whip the faithful into a fit of "national unity." Stringband got Newfoundland.) Bob fell in love with the language and history of Canada's most recent province. He read everything about Newfoundland he could lay his hands on and produced a song that, with its rollicking chorus of "We're Newfoundlanders, not Canadians, not by a damn sight yet," did not exactly fit the government's bill. *Newfoundlanders* was both a celebration of regional identity and a poke in the eye of national unity.

L-R: Bob, Ben, Pierre Trudeau, Allan Soberman, M-L. c1976

Mining the same vein, Bob had another new song that, in the most disarming way, equated patriotism with stupidity. *The Maple Leaf Dog*, whose "heart was big, though his brain was small," was yet another result of Bob's lysergic peregrinations. Bob, his pal Froehlich, and Bob's dog Roach, had dropped by Kingsmere, Mackenzie King's old Gatineau estate, only to find a "No dogs allowed" sign on the gate. Taking stoned umbrage, the two friends berated the gate post with accounts of the great dogs of Canadian history. Bob and Terry premiered *The Maple Leaf Dog* at the farewell concert. The audience roared with laughter and approval, then roared again when Marie-Lynn returned to the stage and announced, "I got out just in the nick of time." Bob still marvels that Stringband continued to be offered "official" gigs while performing songs that took the piss out of official-style patriotism. Stringband would eventually sing *The Maple Leaf Dog* in the Canada Day show on Parliament Hill for 100,000 people. Bob added a participatory howl for the occasion, and his eyes twinkle as he recalls the sound of 100,000 citizens massed before the parliament buildings, howling.

Nancy brought three original songs to *The Maple Leaf Dog*, of which *Root Like A Rose* is the most enduring. (In 2002, it was covered by Emmylou Harris.) A tribute to Nova Scotia, it reflected the revival of Celtic music, and was

recorded complete with bagpipes. With five classic songs, Ben and Terry on fiddle, Ben and Daniel Lanois in the control room, Frank Falco and George McFetridge on piano, Kieran Overs on bass, and a cameo appearance by Stan Rogers, The Maple Leaf Dog was vintage Stringband, but, at last, with the kind of production Marie-Lynn had always dreamed of.

Clockwise from top left: Terry, Daniel Lanois, Lisa Henderson, Kieran Overs, Bob, Nancy, Ben. 1978.
Photo Doc Dawe

At the end of January 1979, Stringband headed west again. From January 27 until March 18 the band toured non-stop, hitting thirty towns from Kenora to Yellowknife to Tofino. Many of the shows were for community concert societies in places that you never hear about unless something bad happens there: Neepawa, Manitoba; Wishart, Saskatchewan; Pine Point, NWT. Stringband was talking the talk and walking the walk, bringing Canadian music to Canadian audiences in the most far-flung and diverse (western) places. They had proved that there was a market for Canadian music and for contemporary Canadian folksongs–a market they had helped create. They had done it without the music industry, and proved *that* was possible too. Bob had every right to be proud.

While Bob may have been realizing his dream, Terry King was not. Terry was a jazz player and in jazz there is New York and there is everywhere else. Stringband had been good to Terry, but now he wanted to try to break into New York. He didn't want to look back and see that he had never tried. He told Bob he would stay until the end of the year, then go.

Stringband kept touring. The Maple Leaf Dog got good reviews and was selling well. Bob, with his penchant for publicity, even got a small feature in *Dogs in Canada*. There was Roach, Bob's unpedigreed mutt, up among the high-priced show-dogs, like a canine Stringband.

Bob and Marie-Lynn, Round Three

As 1980 drew near, Stringband was a Canadian cultural icon. But Bob was a band leader without a band. Terry was off to New York and Bob told Nancy that it was over. In Bob's account, Nancy just wasn't a touring musician, ready to lug the amplifiers in the cold and the mud. "The reality of life on the road just wasn't her world," Bob recalls gallantly. Says Nancy, "I was kicked out of the band." Nancy feels that it was her challenges to Bob's authority and

that brought the break. “He’s a Capricorn,” she says. “Still, it was a wonderful experience. We always ended up in Vancouver in the spring with the cherry blossoms.”

Bob had a further problem. Though outwardly at the peak of its career, Stringband was slipping. In the big cities, the band did not draw as well as before. In Winnipeg, Calgary, Saskatoon, and Vancouver, the promoters who had been happy to present Stringband were waffling. They were looking at club gigs rather than theatres. Stringband had come through the western cities so many times, fans knew they could catch them next year. Like the Stringband members, Stringband fans were getting older and did not go out as often as they used to. Younger listeners were attaching their loyalties to other, younger musicians. Without the celebrity and the play on commercial radio that attended acts on the major labels, there was no pool of new ticket-buyers to replace the fans who, this time, stayed home.

Marie-Lynn responded directly to Bob’s oblique question. “What about me?” she said.

Stringband was the victim of its own success in another way too. They had helped inspire other folk musicians to make their own records and book their own tours. Artists like Stan Rogers, Connie Kaldor, Cathy Fink and Duck Donald had listened and were now competing for spots that had been Stringband’s. Like the old troupers they were, Stringband could still wow a crowd at a festival and bring the house down in small towns. But in the big cities, and there are only a dozen or so in the country, Stringband was fighting for market share.

Stringband took the summer of 1979 off. Bob spent it at Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, working on a new project, a book about the early European settlers at Clayoquot Sound. In the fall, refreshed, he returned to Toronto with a new plan for Stringband. He would make it a part-time job.

Shortly after his return home, Bob invited Marie-Lynn out to dinner. He had learned a couple things about fundraising, and employed a classic fundraiser’s ruse: if you want advice, ask for money; if you want money, ask for advice. Bob asked Marie-Lynn for ideas about a singer for Stringband. He had been listening to lots of them and had even corresponded with the American folksinger, Sally Rogers. Marie-Lynn responded directly to Bob’s oblique question.

“What about me?” she said.

Since leaving Stringband, Marie-Lynn had made her own record and played some festivals and concerts. She had been well received, but she was also discovering how hard it was to make a living at it. She hated being a band leader and says of that time, “I got standing ovations but didn’t sell beer.” The infrastructure that Stringband had accumulated and the entrepreneurial zeal Bob possessed were not things she had or wanted. “I hated all the things Bob was good at.” She had received a grant to write a play about her grandmothers and wanted a half-time music career. Bob needed a singer and wanted to spend half his time working on his book. They were, sort of, made for each other.

So it was a deal. Marie-Lynn would return. She would have half the year to pursue her own career. Bob wanted her to learn the bodhran. She refused–there are some things a girl won’t do–but she agreed to take up the spoons to help out the fiddle tunes. And she agreed it would be Bob’s band. There would be no more illusions about a partnership. Bob, a dedicated poker player, had won a big hand.

To take over the fiddler’s duties, Bob hired Zeke Mazurek. Though not the virtuoso that Ben or Terry had been,

Zeke was an excellent country fiddler and knew how to win an audience with a flashy fiddle tune. He also had the virtue of not seeing Stringband as something to do until he could do what he really wanted. He was a touring back-up musician. That's what he did.

L-R: Zeke, Bob, Roach, Marie-Lynn, Dennis. c1980

On bass, as he would be for the rest of Stringband's life, was Dennis Nichol. Dennis had been a student of Kieran Overs, the virtuoso jazz bassist and sometime-boyfriend of Nancy Ahern. Stringband was the best, most professional gig Dennis had ever had and he loved everything about it–the songs, the people, the touring. This was a great relief to Bob, weary of going over the charts with new bass players. Alan Soberman had played bass with the band on and off since 1973; he was great but would not tour. Now Bob had a steady bass player who could and would.

As well, the new Stringband would travel with its own soundman, a benchmark of touring luxury and success. Bob knew "Doctor" Steve Darke as the instrument repairman at the Toronto Folklore Centre, but Steve also had a van and could operate a sound system. Steve signed on for a tour and, like Dennis, continued to work with Stringband for years to come.

Finally, Bob found a permanent part-time office manager in Pumpkin Sparshott, a young fan who was as eccentric as her name. Pumpkin was also witty and loyal, staying with Stringband until the end of its days. She insisted on the job title "minion." Stringband had always had a minion in the office, a closet-sized room in Bob's apartment. The list of alumni is remarkable: jazz sax-player Jane Fair; singer-songwriter Gwen Swick; Lisa Henderson, who would go on to teach media and cultural studies; and Karen Levine, who would become executive producer of *As it Happens*.

With a strong team both on and off stage, Stringband, whilom no more, took to the road again. In January of 1980, they were driving across the frozen prairie on another tour. As always, at the end of the road was their May concert in Toronto. This time the concert would be recorded by CBC and the result, with overdubs supervised by Ben Mink, would be released as a record.

Stringband Live! is a very different recording from anything the band had made previously. Earlier records had showcased the band's main strength–the songwriting. Live! was a vehicle for the writing of others. Bob had been devoting his creative energy to his book and didn't have much in the way of new songs; Marie-Lynn had a few good ones but was saving them for her second solo album. But the band turned what could have been a weakness into a strength by covering other Canadian writers' songs, notably Ferron's *Ain't Life a Brook* and Wade Hemsworth's *Log Driver's Waltz*. Marie-Lynn never understood the appeal Hemsworth's naive song had for audiences or for Bob. But Bob was the boss, so she sang it like she loved it, tenderly, dramatically, and personally–as she did every cut on the record.

Bob's biggest contribution to Stringband Live! was his rewrite of Vern Partlow's late-1940s *Talking Atom Blues*. *Talking Atom* was the first anti-nuclear song. Partlow, a California journalist who was part of People's Songs, wrote it soon after the first atomic tests, following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bob turned it into a denunciation of the nuclear power industry. As with *Mail-Sortin' Man*, the pointed but folksy humour of T*he New Talking Atom Blues* was nigh irresistable, belying the painstaking research that

had become an integral part of Bob's songwriting. It was exactly the kind of song that kept Stringband relevant to their audience.

Late Innings

Stringband entered its tenth year with a spring in its step. Marie-Lynn was back; they had a new fiddler, a steady bass player, a new album, and a single featuring two anti-nuclear songs from Stringband Live! Bob, now undisputed leader, could be proud; the band had weathered many storms. Just as the summer festival season was started, Peter C. Newman wrote a column in *Maclean's* magazine titled "Summertime… when the Stringband is strummin'." It was a tribute most folks get in their obituaries, a prose poem to Bob and his songs from Canada's most respected political journalist. Newman quoted Bob's notion of nationalism: "One kind of nationalism boasts that we're better than anybody else and should wave our flag to show it. The other kind celebrates the experiences of real people in different parts of the country. I'm very patriotic in that sense."

With Newman's piece gracing living rooms across the land, Stringband played the Vancouver Folk Music Festival once again. This time they closed the festival and 10,000 people stood to give the band an ovation. In August they joined the cream of Canadian folk musicians, including Stan Rogers and Sylvia Tyson, on a month-long tour of Alberta, celebrating the province's 75th anniversary. A trail ride on a day off inspired Marie-Lynn to write *All the Horses Running*, a brilliant fusion of personal experience and Canadian landscape.

After all those years of being turned down by Mariposa… Stringband was Mariposa!

In the spring of 1981, after a six-month hiatus, it was back to touring. Then it would be time for the annual anniversary concert. This one would be their tenth, and Bob had a big idea. Mariposa was no longer running, leaving Toronto without a folk festival. Bob and long-time friend and arts administrator Wendy Newman approached Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, suggesting Stringband produce a folk festival on Canada Day. Harbourfront bought it and on July 1st, 1981, 14,000 people attended Stringband's birthday party. Bob had succeeded in turning his vision of the country into Toronto's official national day celebration. Musical guests included Stan Rogers, Nancy White, Franco-Ontarois Robert Paquette, The Jarvis Benoit Quartet from Halifax, and a batch of western talent, unknown in Toronto–Ferron, Pied Pear, and Connie Kaldor. After all those years of being turned down by Mariposa… Stringband *was* Mariposa!

Like most neat symbols of victory, Stringband's Harbourfront folk festival was more symbolic than victorious. In an interview at the time, Bob said, "English Canada's cultural decisions are made in southern Ontario, and in southern Ontario Canadian culture is out of fashion." For years, Stringband had earned its keep in the west. The Canada Day festival was not going to change that. Bob had long thought about moving to BC, but Sarah Weber, his partner, had a job in Toronto. Now, after years of being widowed to one Stringband tour after another, Sarah had had enough; Bob could go where he wanted, on his own. He packed his Datsun and headed to Vancouver. Marie-Lynn stayed in Toronto.

Over the next year, Stringband maintained a schedule of tours, punctuated by long breaks where everyone went their separate ways. In the summer of 1982, they broke for a year. Marie-Lynn finished her play, *Beautiful Deeds/De beaux gestes*. She also worked on her second solo record, Vignettes. Bob's book, *Settling Clayoquot*, had come out in late 1981, published by the BC Provincial Archives. He now joined with Vancouver's Headlines Theatre as the music director for *Under the Gun*, a show about militarism and globalization. Stringband got back together in the summer of 1983 to play some festivals, and then flew to Europe for a week at the Edinburgh Fringe, a show in

London, another in Paris, and 21 performances in the Soviet Union. George Zuckerman, who booked Stringband on the Overture Concerts circuit of small Canadian towns, was an internationally renowned oboist who had good contacts with Goskoncert, the Soviet state booking agency. Zukerman offered them Stringband. This was worth getting back together for! But once again, Stringband needed a fiddler.

Zeke now had a steady gig on Sylvia Tyson's TV series. There was, however, a hot fiddler in Edmonton. Although Bob didn't realize it, he had met him twice before. On one of the early tours, the band had driven past a young hitchhiker outside Saskatoon. They had a full car but, to help the lad pass the time, they stopped and handed him a joint and a copy of Quotations From Chairman Mao. The hitchhiker was Calvin Cairns. Calvin continued into town and caught the show. Hearing Ben Mink changed his life. He took up the violin. When Stringband came back to Saskatoon the next year and played the Parktown on Diefenbaker's birthday, it was Calvin who passed out the birthday candles. A decade later, he became Stringband's fifth and last fiddler. Calvin was perhaps the best-suited of them all. Beyond his formidable skills on violin and concertina, he had a beguiling presence–kind of sexy, kind of goofy. (In Estonia, on the Soviet tour, a woman sent him a note saying, "Meet me tomorrow at the gate, one o'clock. I am mad already.") Calvin was a natural showman, sharing Bob's delight in the tricks and traditions of lowbrow stagecraft. They would continue to work together, in and out of Stringband, for the next 20 years.

The next morning a Soviet MIG jet fighter shot down Korean Airlines Flight 007.

Across Russia By Stage

In the early hours of August 31, 1983, Marie-Lynn's 35th birthday, Stringband landed at Sheremetyevo airport outside Moscow. Through a screw-up, no one was there to meet them. The band found their way to Soviet passport control, an imposing metal and glass booth manned by a soldier in the Soviet Defence Forces. Stoically, he passed the band members through, but he stopped Marie-Lynn, indicating something on her passport. He spoke no English, she no Russian. They both became increasingly agitated. Finally he pointed directly at the line on her passport for her date of birth. He had been telling her "Happy Birthday."

The next morning, on the Pacific shore of that vast country, another Soviet soldier, piloting a MIG jet fighter, shot down a plane that intruded into Soviet airspace over Kamchatka and refused to identify itself or alter its course. It turned out to be Korean Airlines Flight 007 from Anchorage to Seoul. All 265 people aboard were killed.

Of this event, and the world's outraged reaction, Stringband knew nothing for several days. Meanwhile, they had their own problems. They discovered that they had been billed as a country and western band. C&W, it turned out, was something of a fad in the western USSR. They quickly worked up a few country tunes, reaching far back to the repertoire they had played on Yonge Street. Then there was the issue of Bob's mismatched socks: Goskoncert felt about them much the way Marie-Lynn did. Bob's socks and habit of playing shoeless insulted their notion of stage decorum.

There was, however, a much bigger problem. In the pre-tour negotiations, Bob had arranged for the Soviets to provide an onstage translator. This they did–but she did not speak English. Goskoncert had assumed that the "translator" would recite a scripted introduction at the beginning of the evening and then leave the stage for good. Bob was horrified. To him, it was essential that the audience know what each song was about. He wanted to communicate with them, not just play music for them. The rest of the band was willing to roll with the punches, but Bob was adamant: no translator, no show. Whether Bob, the inveterate poker player, was bluffing, no one was sure, including himself.

The Soviet tour officials contended that there was no onstage translator available in Tallin. (The first concerts were in Tallin, Estonia, where–no surprise–most folks spoke Estonian.) Bob corralled an Estonian translator to introduce the songs in Estonian–once. Since Russian was always the exclusive tongue of such state-sponsored

events, the Estonian introductions drew wild applause. The Soviet bureaucrats were not amused. A sort of cold war ensued. For Bob, it was about the heart of what Stringband did: they told stories. The rest of the band felt that Bob had gone off the deep end. In the end, Bob donned his shoes, and the Soviets agreed that their "translator" would introduce groups of two or three songs at a time, in a mock simultaneous translation.

Détente had been reached, but by then, there was a problem of international scope. In the wake of the shooting down of KAL 007, one western government after another suspended cultural and sports exchanges with the USSR. Some groups from the west were curtailing their tours. Stringband decided to stay. With Ronald Reagan and much of the rest of the world denouncing the USSR as "the evil empire," what better time for some Canadians to bring a message of peace? Bob had always planned to include a segment of peace songs in the show. Now they took on an immediate and profound meaning. Slowly the Soviets realized that the bohemian songster with the poor sense of stage conduct and the mismatched socks was on their side, at least when it came to cruise missiles and nuclear holocaust.


L-R: Dennis, Calvin, Marie-Lynn, Bob c1983.

One of the peace songs Stringband sang, *Refuse the Cruise*, was a protest ditty Bob had written for the Canadian campaign against the cruise missile, a new nuclear weapons technology that threatened to escalate the arms race. The song came complete with a prop: a Refuse-the-Cruise protest banner Bob had brought from Vancouver. He wanted to take a picture of the band with it–in Red Square. The Soviets, sensing a propaganda opportunity, offered to "help." They would send an official photographer to take the picture. The other band members, feeling that they were about to cross the line from dissent to treason, refused. Only Bob was prepared to go along. No official picture was taken.

The incident exemplified the once-again-widening gulf between Bob and Marie-Lynn. To her, Bob had already been a pain in the ass to their Soviet hosts; now he wanted to undertake a risky political maneuver to make some obscure point. Bob had been caught up in the mass anti-war movement on the West Coast, and had bitten into it with his full obsessive fervor. He was always as much activist as artist. The other band members were, to varying degrees, politically-minded too, but they saw themselves primarily as musicians. This contradiction had been there from the start of the band. Now they were playing in the big leagues in a country with whom Canada might one day be at war. Being a peacenik was one thing; allowing yourself to be used as propaganda was quite another. Calvin, Dennis and Steve were on Marie-Lynn's side; why couldn't they just sing the damn songs?

Like all Russian campaigns from Napoleon on, this one left its mark. In some ways the tour was a great success. Stringband played for thousands of people, filling major concert halls night after night. Despite the language barrier, they had created an effective and, as ever, a uniquely *Stringband* show. The message of peace and solidarity was heartfelt and deeply appreciated all around. The band members had made friends, particularly in the dissident communities. But the tour had also been exhausting, stressful, and just plain hard. Stringband left the USSR with no invitation to return. They again went their separate ways. There were no plans for the band's future. For the first time, there was no "next."

After their return from the Soviet Union in October 1983, Stringband only worked together when a gig had sufficient appeal to pull them briefly from their individual pursuits. A trip to Japan to play the Canadian Pavillion at the 1985 World Exposition was one such occasion. Bob did make one more Stringband album, sort of, from the off-the-board recordings Steve Darke had made of their concerts in the USSR. He released it quietly, on cassette only, as Across Russia By Stage. It included Stringband versions of two of Marie-Lynn's best songs, *Elsie* and *La*

jeune mariée. It is the only Stringband recording to feature Calvin Cairns. Truth to tell, by the mid-1980s, everyone's heart was elsewhere. Marie Lynn's disaffection had arisen again under the pressures of the Soviet tour, and neither Bob nor anyone else had a solution. Calvin had plans for his own comic world-music ensemble. The Romaniacs started up in 1984 and played for the next decade.

After Russia, Bob raced back to Vancouver and his new love, Bonnie Eaton. Bob had settled on the West Coast as comfortably as a Canada goose and was up to his ears in the co-op movement, the peace movement, and the fight to stop logging at Clayoquot Sound. In 1985, Wendy Newman, now the director of the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, invited Bob to create a peace show to open at the time of Vancouver's annual Walk for Peace, an event that, in the mid-1980s, brought out tens of thousands. Bob concocted *Bossin's Home Remedy for Nuclear War,* a one-man medicine show. Over the next three years he performed it across Canada, and in the US, New Zealand and Australia, selling 9000 bottles of the elixir that was "guaranteed to prevent nuclear war or your money refunded."

In Toronto, Marie-Lynn was writing plays. *Beautiful Deeds/De beaux gestes* had been a quiet but definite success, earning a nomination for a Dora, the Toronto theatre community's Tony. Marie-Lynn still wrote songs and performed from time to time. She was willing to continue with Stringband, but just.

Stringband got together again for Expo '86 in Vancouver, where they played three weeks of shows at the Folklife Pavillion. Five years would go by before they re-united for a short string of performances celebrating their 20th anniversary. Then ten years elapsed before they played again, for their 30th anniversary, at the instigation of Stuart McLean.

L-R: Dennis, Steve Darke, Bob, Calvin, Marie-Lynn c1983. Photo: Gwenn Kallio

Nobody Played Like You

If you type "Stringband" into an internet search engine, you will likely come up with the Canadian Music Encyclopedia entry, "A satirical folk/Acadian bilingual trio." Like the Holy Roman Empire the band is thrice misnamed; they were only occasionally satirical, not Acadian, nor a trio. In fact the only fully accurate word of the five is "folk". At least they got an entry. So many other musicians of their generation are not mentioned at all.

Historical memory–history preserved not on paper or in photographs but in people's minds–is vital in maintaining the links between generations. Stringband forged an important link in the historical memory of Canadian folk music. Bob Bossin had heard the first generation of artists to discover the richness of Canadian traditional music. Hardly anyone now (and few Stringband listeners then) knew The Courriers, Wade Hemsworth, or Alan Mills. But the audiences that came to Stringband shows caught a whiff of what those artists had done. Marie-Lynn brought something equally vital, her repertoire of French-Canadian music. She was the real thing–a francophone who had

learned the stuff from her family as well as from books and records. Of course her music, like Bob's, had also been formed by the music of the folk "stars" of the 60s. But by the time Stringband hit the stage, these too were rapidly vanishing icons of another time. Generations change quickly in the music business and household names to music lovers of 1965 were virtually unknown ten years later. That inheritance, too, was part of the musical capital Stringband had to invest in its, and in Canada's, music.

As well as connecting their listeners to an obscure, though recent, past, Stringband was revitalizing an old, and inventing a new, songwriting aesthetic. They were not the first to write about Canada–Stompin' Tom Connors and a host of regional writers had been doing that for years. Marie-Lynn was not the first songwriter to explore her family history. But Stringband went further. Bob researched his songs like they were books. He made them sound simple, but underneath, they were complex pieces of art, not ditties. Bob's songs were humane, evocative and literate. He would give each song its own singer: an old camp cook reminiscing about the Wobbly who tried to organize cowboys; a tugboat man who, after 35 years on the Strait of Georgia, knew to "wait and let it come to you." Bob created Newfoundlanders who were not Canadian by a damn sight; Yukoners who brought lawn chairs and thermoses while the *Casca* and the *Whitehorse* burned down; and the guy from Saskatchewan hopefully awaiting the second coming of John Diefenbaker. Bob welded together sentiment, history and landscape as few songwriters have done.

If Bob, like a ventriloquist, projected his voice into his characters, Marie-Lynn used her talent like a ouija board to tap into the past.

Marie-Lynn brought to her songs a contemporary feminist voice, one that predated what, in the late 1970s would be called "women's music." The voice was there in *Vancouver* at the very beginning; it was there in Elsie a decade later and it returns in *Omaha*, 30 years after it was first heard. Marie-Lynn always looked at love and life as an independent actor, the subject rather than the object of events she described. Her characters are never victims. That is the key to the popularity of *Vancouver* and *I Don't Sleep with Strangers Anymore*. In songs like *Flying/ Spring of '44, Second Fiddle Rag,* and *Elsie* she wrote mini-plays. These songs are some of the best stories of women's lives written anywhere. If Bob, like a ventriloquist, projected his voice into his characters, Marie-Lynn used her talent like a ouija board to tap into the past and bring to life women who never got to tell their stories.

The combination of work by these two extraordinary writers was remarkable, but Stringband shows had more. As they toured, they picked up regional images, stories and songs. To these they added traditional French-Canadian music, some Celtic tunes, a little jazz, and a few covers. They balanced songs with social and personal content. They had a repertoire that was enormously diverse, combining modernity and tradition, both official languages, family and history, politics and sex, geography and poetry, work and play. Stringband took most of the elements of people's lives and put them into two hour-long sets. It was a brilliant presentation.

For Canadian musicians, Stringband's most significant influence came not from their music, but from how they purveyed it. Bob understood the economics; he realized that if you sold your own records, you made a lot more money than if a record company sold them. Others soon realized it too, partly as a result of watching Stringband. Bob perfected things that are now standard in independent music far beyond folk circles. In an interview years ago, Bob Dylan said, "I killed Tin Pan Alley." Stringband could say they killed the notion that you could not succeed without the music industry behind you.

For other artists, the combination of independence from the music industry and Stringband's passionate, original, and uncompromised repertoire was a beacon in the night. This was another way to go. Stan Rogers, Connie Kaldor, and Heather Bishop all took something from them. Groups like Tamarack and Scrüj MacDuhk are still inspired by them. Moxy Früvous talks about Stringband's influence, and Tom Cochrane told Marie-Lynn that Stringband pretty much started the independent music industry in Canada. It is impossible to say how many artists looked at Stringband the way Connie Kaldor did: "I saw Marie-Lynn up there and said to myself, 'I can do that!'"

Ultimately though, Stringband's influence on their musical peers is less important than what they left with their audiences. The loyalty of Stringband's fans, and the longevity of that loyalty, are a marvel. In 1977, the band funded Thanks To The Following by selling $5000 worth of subscriptions. Twenty-five years later, and fifteen years after their effective demise as a group, they raised $25,000 to fund this retrospective. Many of the hundreds of supporters who donated are the same people. This is not nostalgia; it is a continuing endorsment of Stringband's artistry and its politics.

The hardcore supporters of all niche bands come from the band's own social community. Stringband's core audience was the broad political and cultural left. They were and are the folks who built the anti-war movements, the environmental movement, and the women's movement. They founded the co-ops. They defend the CBC passionately; they are in the fight against globalization. Stringband played their benefits and articulated their vision of the world. The band, and Bob and Marie-Lynn as individual artists, have never broken faith with these people or their beliefs. For their listeners, Stringband is not something from the past; it is a presence in their minds and in their homes. When they are depressed–and there is much for them to be depressed about these days– Stringband sings out, "Another world is possible." For many, Stringband joins Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and The Weavers in a library of music made to help people change the world. But different from the rest, Stringband was Canadian. Stringband fashioned its music from the experiences, interests and sense of justice they shared with their fans. That was the covenant between the band and its audience. It was always the secret of Stringband's success and it remains unbroken.

Gary Cristall was one of the founders of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and its Artistic Director for many years. He has also been the folk and jazz officer for the Canada Council. Gary is currently writing a book on the history of folk music in Canada.

Marie-Lynn and Bob, 2002. Photo by Sheldon Wagner