

State of the Art February 27, 2016

## If you change the music, what is left?

I finally got to the Cultural Market held at the former YMCA on Saturdays from 9 to 4, started seven months ago. What a great place, with the food of the whole world represented: Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan. I ate Indian Shwarma, Chinese dumplings, and Afghan Firni. I'll go back so that eventually I can try everything.

I was about ten when I was taken on a tour of the Chinese restaurant where my aunt waitressed and was amazed to see many pallets of bean sprouts. I could never have guessed that 70 years later bean sprouts would be commonplace and that I could drive a mile to have an Afghan dessert.

The CBC Weekend show played a recording by New Brunswick's own Matt Andersen. He deserves all the accolades he gets. I noticed the harmonica solo at the beginning, and afterwards Bill Roach remarked on the fine playing of Mike Stevens. As I was lying in bed, into my head popped an image of my aunt reaching in her jeans pocket for her harmonica. It's the perfect democratic instrument. Almost everyone can afford a harmonica; it travels easily in their pockets. In my childhood, a piano in the home was fairly common. People taught themselves to play these instruments. They would say--sometimes with pride, sometimes with regret--"I never had lessons. I just play by ear." In my experience playing music has always been a democratic activity. In the Methodist tradition even if you had a lousy voice as I do, you were supposed to sing lustily because you were praising God. Playing music has become even more egalitarian with hundreds of bands in the province.

Making visual art is also more democratic now. It's even quite ridiculous how many photographs are taken with a cellphone.

Publishing has always been democratic. Millie Yeomans sent me two books of poetry self-published in the 1970's: *The Story of a People* and *The Collected Verse of Hazel MacQueen* (nee Burgoyne.) MacQueen's poetry captures the flavour of life in rural New Brunswick. Her ballads of provincial legends are entertaining—of mysterious strangers and the hard work of lumbermen. "The Tale of the Giberson Gold" tells of the curse that followed anyone who looked for the gold, reported to have been found on the Miramichi, the Odell, the Gulquac, or Sisson Brook. From "Spring in the Lumber Woods": "In 'The long and yellow days of March',/The partridge flutter from groves of larch." She includes a glossary of words used in farming and logging. "Wangan" referred to the boat that followed the stream drive with supplies and also to the contents of the knapsacks that the men took to the lumber camp.

A controversy sprung up over the way Nelly Furtado sang the Canadian National Anthem at the National Basketball Association all-star game. She tried to fancy it up as singers try to fancy up the American National anthem. The emphasis is on the singer: "Look at me, look at me." Anthems are important because of the music, not the words. The words are often banal. If you change the music, what is left? The words of the American national anthem are not banal—but they describe a battle in 1812 with the British, not of our times. The tune is notoriously difficult to sing and the words to remember.

When I was trying to learn the words of the Canadian national anthem, I was confused by the controversy that there were too many of the phrase “we stand on guard for thee”—five. Two were replaced, obviously not by a poet, so now there are only three. The French words are romantic and full of meaning, but again, not of our times.

The music of the Russian anthem is stirring, but the words are also banal. When the music is played, the band pulls out all the stops. No popular singer would dare mess with the music of the Russian anthem. The European Union has stolen Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. You can’t go wrong with that. Germany stole the music of Joseph Haydn. The United States also stole its music.

The music of the Canadian anthem is not stirring, but it’s original. The words aren’t belligerent. We aren’t the greatest—we just want to be free. Our hearts want to glow. Nelly Furtado ought to have appreciated that.

Wayne Curtis came by with a copy of his new book of short stories, *In the Country*, published by Pottersfield Press in Nova Scotia, his 16<sup>th</sup> book. I like Curtis’ work because I like his depiction of rural life on the Miramichi in the 1950’s and his strong sense of place. The theme of much of his fiction is the rural youngster who wants to be more like the village sophisticate or even better, like the city slicker. More about the book anon.