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Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence at her home in Lakefield, Ontario, ca. 1985. Photograph by Doug Boulton, Village of Wellington, Ontario, K0K 3L0, Canada.

MARGARET LAURENCE'S "ALBUM" SONGS

DIVINING FOR MISSING LINKS AND DEEPER MEANINGS

WES MANTOOTH

[*The Diviners*] still needs a lot of work, general cutting of corny bits and putting things into reasonable shape and so on. . . . BUT—oh John. Wow. Zonk. Kapow. Etcetera. Goddamn novel is in present typescript 527 pp, and I have written 4 songs for it, and—what I really want is to convince publishers that there should be: this novel, with maps, portraits, songs, music for songs, records of songs being sung, and all that. I may have gone berserk, John but I DO NOT THINK SO. I feel great. Jack McClelland [Laurence's publisher], when I tell him, will probably feel lousy, but let us not think of that for the moment.¹

While Margaret Laurence's artistic legacy rests primarily, and rightly so, on her output of novels, her memoirs and published letters reveal tantalizing glimpses into a much less known, and yet not unrelated, aspect of her artistic interests—a lifelong passion for music, which included a desire to explore song-

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writing as a creative outlet. Drawing on these memoirs and letters, along with my own primary research, I have tried to sketch a portrait of Laurence's musical life, with a particular focus on how her musical interests coalesced in *The Diviners*' "Album"—four songs included in the text of *The Diviners*, compiled with melodic notation at the end of the book, and (as hinted in Laurence's letter above) recorded onto a disc which, except for promotional purposes, ultimately was not available for sale with the novel. This recording, I believe, is a significant—and, sadly, little-heard—facet of Laurence's artistry. And, far from being a single, whimsical songwriting experiment, it also represents the beginning of what Laurence saw (but never fully realized) as a potential artistic rebirth.

[GPQ 19 (Summer 1999): 167-79]

Very few critics discuss the (printed) "Album" songs beyond commenting briefly on their contextual function within the novel—as an orally passed family legacy handed from Jules's generation to Pique's, linking past, present, and future. Only Walter Swayze, to my knowledge, has noted the existence of a *recording* and (favorably) remarked on its aesthetic qualities.² Certainly, the lack of extensive critical investigation into these songs must be attributed in part to the practical inaccessibility of a recording to scholars and, more so, to the general public. Despite the current unavailability of this recording, an inquiry into the "Album" songs offers valuable insight into the unique artistic vision(s) that shaped their style and function in *The Diviners*. By restoring critical interest in these songs—specifically in the recording of them—and demonstrating Laurence's conviction in their artistic integrity and structural importance to her novel, it is not inconceivable that the recording will someday finally reach a wider audience and, as I maintain, significantly enrich a reader's experience of *The Diviners*.³

LAURENCE'S MUSICAL BACKGROUND

Music, in various capacities, always had an integral role in Laurence's life. Although writing was unquestionably the strength through which Laurence defined and distinguished herself during her youth, as a teen she did play violin in the Neepawa Collegiate Institute orchestra.⁴ Friends from her student days at United College in Winnipeg fondly remembered "the girl who stamped around the residence room . . . singing at the top of her voice with more gusto than tune."⁵ A later friend, the noted Canadian folklorist and musicologist Edith Fowke, recalled that Laurence "was particularly fond of labour songs; she knew many of the ones in my book *Songs of Work and Freedom*, and told me she used to sing them when she worked in Winnipeg [as a journalist for the *Winnipeg Citizen*] back in the forties."⁶ Laurence's years in Africa in the 1950s

also gave her a love of African music and dance.⁷

In an era when adults of Laurence's generation often condemned popular music for corrupting youth and turning them away from their parents' values, Laurence seems to have been unusually open to the music of her children's generation. During the decade from 1963 to 1973, when Laurence lived in the sprawling, six-bedroom "Elm Cottage" in Penn, Buckinghamshire, England, young Canadian artists, including many songwriters, frequently stayed at her home. One room in Elm Cottage, a "sitting room" to previous inhabitants of the house, became a "music room" where impromptu performances often occurred. Near the end of her time at Elm Cottage, while working on *The Diviners*' songs, Laurence would claim that although she felt "unsure of writing in the idiom of a generation younger than myself . . . christ knows I've heard thousands of the kids' songs from young Canadians visiting here, not only from records" (VLS, 79).

IMPETUS FOR INCLUDING SONGS IN *THE DIVINERS*

Part of Laurence's creative decision to work with song writing characters and, ultimately, actual songs in *The Diviners* seems to stem from a personal frustration over the inadequacy of words to express inner feelings. In a letter to Canadian poet Al Purdy, Laurence articulates her trepidation on overcoming inherent limitations in the printed medium of the work she knows she must write: "I don't want to think of that goddam novel. Dunno how to tackle it. I realize more and more that realism bores me to hell, now. No way I can do it in straight narration. Can't think of any other way. Stalemate. Words fail." Not insignificantly, she wryly suggests that "maybe I should take up painting or music? No? No."⁸

Although the possibilities (and idiosyncrasies) of language captivate *The Diviners*' protagonist, Morag, she (like Laurence, a novelist)

often casts doubt on her choice of words as a medium of artistic expression: "I used to think that words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally."⁹ Laurence, like Morag, chose the novel—a long, complex, and highly literate form—as her primary medium of artistic expression. However, she realized (as Morag comes to realize) that people who lack a rich and erudite palette of language may still find compelling artistic forms of self-expression. She further believed that a wide range of communicative forms—linguistic, visual, aural, and various combinations of these—might express ideas and emotions more directly and forcefully, and to a wider audience, than the novel could.

As one such medium of self-expression, a song, by melding verbal and musical language, may potentially enrich or transcend the surface meaning of its words. As Laurence's musical collaborator on *The Diviners*, Ian Cameron, speculated in his letter to me, "I think now . . . that what attracted Margaret to the songs was the fact that the tune would carry an archetypal pattern, an emotional and spiritual wholeness, which words are only a part of. The experience of listening to a song, particularly a live performance, is one in which the mind is occupied with the words, the heart with the music, and the whole of oneself with the being of the song which is greater than words or music."

So, the characters of Jules and Pique, and their songs, provided vehicles for Laurence to explore and demonstrate this range of ideas. The songs allow us to see deeper and with more sympathy into the characters who wrote them than their spoken words and actions alone would allow. They provide powerfully condensed and highly emotional alternate "versions" of events which are also approached within *The Diviners*' narrative from Laurence's (and Morag's) novelistic perspective. And, these songs speak through folk and folk-pop idioms which, in their relative simplicity and familiarity, may elicit deep and immediate responses from a wide audience—particularly

from the youth of Laurence's children's generation, who generally were attuned much more closely to the medium and message of popular music than to the novel.

COMPOSING THE SONGS — THE COLLABORATION

In her memoir, *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence provides an extremely brief sketch of the circumstances that inspired her in the course of her work on *The Diviners* to create these songs: "I realized I had a small problem. I was writing about a character [Jules Tonnerre] who composed songs, but I was trying to describe the songs without the songs themselves actually existing. I found it unconvincing." At this point, Ian Cameron enters the story. Laurence's friend Clara Thomas had introduced Laurence to Ian and his wife, Sandy, in 1969, when Laurence accepted a one-year (1969-70) writer-in-residence position at the University of Toronto. Laurence was at that time living in England with her two adolescent children, David and Jocelyn. She wanted her children to be able to stay in England while she went to Toronto, and needed someone to look after them. At Thomas's recommendation, Laurence chose the Camerons for this job. "Clara had known them both for some time, Ian as a graduate student of hers at York [University, Toronto] and Sandy as a don [i.e., tutor at a British college] there" (DE, 201). The Camerons remained close to Laurence after she returned to England and worked on *The Diviners* in 1970-72, often driving up to visit Laurence's sprawling "cottage" (affectionately known as "Elmcot") on weekends. Sandy kept a vegetable garden there, and Ian was a frequent participant in Elmcot's musical gatherings. So, in 1972, Laurence told Ian, "who composed a lot of songs himself," of the "small problem" posed by her songwriting character (DE, 201). Ian, as Laurence recalled in her memoirs, "suggested I try to write some [songs] of my own. I didn't think I could—I'd never been a songwriter. Ian said, 'How do you know

until you try?" So I did. I had a tune in my mind for the ballad of Jules Tonnerre, so I wrote the words and whistled the tune to Ian. A week or so later, he came back with his guitar and played the song to me. I was so encouraged that I went on and wrote the words for three more songs, with Ian composing the music. The completion of *The Diviners* was, in a sense a team effort" (DE, 201). This recollection, written more than a decade after completing *The Diviners*, glosses over many revealing and fascinating details about this "team effort" (although Laurence's very labeling of her book's composition as such is an astonishing acknowledgment of how integral and essential she felt these four songs were to the finished novel—even many years after the initial euphoria and wonder over their composition must have passed).

Many of Laurence's published letters from late 1972 to late 1973 refer briefly to the composition and recording of these songs, and to later negotiations over inclusion of a recording of them with the novel. These letters leave no doubt as to Laurence's astonishment and joy at being "given" several songs (she held a view—part humble, part mystical—that her songs had formed somewhere beyond her conscious imagination) and to her firm commitment to their artistic contribution to her novel. Ian Cameron's invaluable letter to me, however, provides the most coherent and complete story of this unusual artistic collaboration and most fully documents his own highly significant role—along with that of the other musicians involved in this project—in bringing these songs to fruition.

Ironically, because it shows the author from a third-person, and yet intimate, perspective, Cameron's letter at times gives more colorful insight into Laurence's passionate relationship to these songs than Laurence's own words: "Margaret first approached me in the hallway outside her study early in the New Year of 1973, and with a coyness which was most unlike her, asked whether I thought there could be a place for some songs in her novel. I was quite as taken aback as excited—the writer

was asking me?! . . . Now Margaret was speaking of including songs in her novel, but she said that she wasn't sure she could write them. I longed to say, so OK, let me do it! But what I actually said was, you won't know if you can write songs until you try. And I thought, I'm bloody sure you can do it."¹⁰

Contrary to what she says in her memoirs, Laurence did much more in the first unveiling of "The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre" than merely "whistle the tune" to Ian. As Cameron recalls,

Margaret asked Sandy and Bob and Paula [Berry]¹¹ and me to Elm Cot in a week or so [after the encounter described in the previous quote]. In the old sitting room (the music room, we called it) she finally summoned up enough courage to appear. Before that, she'd been in her study with Sandy, talking about the characters she'd created. . . . Then finally Margaret came into the music room, and stood like some girl at a Sunday School presentation, hands folded and all. And she started, then stopped, and then we got her started again, and she sang 'The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre'. The Sunday School presence disappeared, and she thumped her foot on the floor like a backwoods singer. Bob and I looked at each other, found the key, and started playing along. Margaret finished, and we were all knocked out. Dead simple tune and all, but it worked, and what a story! But all Margaret could repeat, over and over, was that Bob and I had turned it into music by playing three chords to it! It was a high, and Margaret decided that she could, after all, continue to work on the remaining songs (I suspect that they were already drafted out).

Despite this quick fruition of her new found ability to create songs, Laurence still felt some trepidation about including them in her novel. In a letter to Dale Zieroth, a writer from her hometown (Neepawa, Manitoba), she admits self-doubt about this artistically risky venture: "This is perhaps very foolhardy of me, I mean

to compose songs in the name of several of my characters, but it feels like the right thing. Of course, it adds to the already huge length of the damn thing, too!" (VLS, 230). And, when Purdy expressed "misgivings about the accompanying song bit and all that," Laurence conceded that, "Yeh, I agree about the songs, actually—it's just that I've enjoyed doing them, as it is very different from anything I've ever done. The novel does not hinge on them at all, and in fact they take up a very small part of the book. They simply express a part of Jules which he could not express in ordinary speech, or would not" (FL, 271, 275). But Laurence clearly *did* see the songs as something important to her book: although excessive length was a prime concern as she sent the manuscript to her publisher, the songs were never cut.

While Laurence suggests that she simply gave Cameron the lyrics in their final form to be set to music, Cameron's letter details a more complex back-and-forth collaboration, showing Laurence's firm aesthetic control and determination to make these songs exactly mesh with her conception of the characters in whose name they were written:

Over the next few weeks she sent me a draft of 'Song for Lazarus', then 'Song for Piquette', and finally 'Pique's Song'. She didn't give any ideas for tunes to these songs. . . . So, for each of the songs, I just received the words she'd send, and I'd pick out a tune to it, find where the words she'd written didn't fit, or seemed awkward or wrong, and I'd send her back a re-draft. She'd redraft again, and then on the weekend I'd come to Elm Cot and sing what I had in mind, and she'd always insist that I'd done something magic. But she'd never agree to a change of words unless she was sure that it fitted with her basic feeling and conception. These were songs created by her characters. She certainly told me that Skinner played country music in bars, and that we had to remain true to the words and the tunes of that genre. . . .

So, though I am credited with the music, and Margaret with the words, that is an oversimple convenience. She created the tune for 'The Ballad', and we both worked on her words for the rest of the songs. I still have drafts where I've scratched out bits she wrote and tried whole different ways of setting words. But I couldn't say for sure now whose words are whose—we worked together and then, as she heard the song sung, we both began to know what held the magic. The tunes for the three songs are mine, but then again, I was responding to the emotion about the characters which she expressed with so much power.

RECORDINGS AND NEGOTIATIONS

Two recordings of Laurence and Cameron's songs were made before the book's publication in 1974. In late February of 1973, Ian Cameron and Bob and Paula Berry recorded the songs at Elmcot on Cameron's Tandberg recorder while Ian's wife, Sandy, and Laurence's son, David, engineered. In a letter from this time, Laurence remarked, "this house is filled with recording equipment. . . . I find all this kind of exciting" (VLS, 231-32). She took this recording with her on a Canadian reading tour in support of her new novel later that year. A letter to Al Purdy from this time suggests that Laurence actually made this recording the feature of her appearances: "Well, I have to state that if one is gonna put a show on the road, it had better be as good a show as possible. I do have a kind of feeling of professionalism about that. . . . Got together with the sound technician in each place, to get right what I wanted done re: the songs" (FL, 301).

During this time in Canada, Laurence reported that "I am still trying (vainly, I think) to persuade M&S [her publisher, McClelland & Stewart] to put out a 45-record with each copy of THE DIVINERS. McClelland thinks it is a lousy notion, but might be okay to do some for publicity purposes" (FL, 296-97). McClelland could not be persuaded to support the issuing of a recording with every copy

of *The Diviners*, and agreed only to finance the pressing of a thousand 7-inch, 33-rpm records (Laurence would have to pay for the actual production of the recording herself). "That," Cameron feels, "set the tone for the amateurish way in which the project was carried through. It was basically left to ML to get the record put out. We were all enthusiastic, but terribly inexperienced. I should have had someone who could act as a producer, someone who understood recording and also had a deep sense of what ML and I wanted."

Because Laurence had to personally finance the recording, Cameron felt pressured to keep the project as low-budget as possible. He booked time at Gooseberry Studio in London's China Town and, with Bob Berry, recorded "The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre," "Lazarus," and "Song for Piquette" during one night in February 1973. After this recording session, Cameron "sent the tape to Peter MacLachlan, whom Margaret had agreed should handle the Canadian side of the recording organisation."¹² Although Bob Berry's wife, Paula, had sung "Pique's Song" on the earlier "Elmcot" recording, Laurence "said that her Buckinghamshire accent just wouldn't do for the final recording. So Peter [MacLachlan] got Joan Minkoff, a Boston based midwestern American woman, to sing Pique's Song. He [MacLachlan] played guitar." In Cameron's view, the choice of Minkoff for "Pique's Song" was "all wrong. She's a great lady, but the wrong age, and it just isn't Pique's voice."

Instead of becoming an integral part of *The Diviners*' text, as Laurence had fervently hoped, this recording was only sold in record stores and during Laurence's readings as a "publicity gimmick" (Cameron); it was thus destined for quick obscurity. No more copies of the record were ever pressed. Sandy Cameron remembers "stacks" of unsold records around Laurence's house, and doubts that many people who read the book were even aware of the recording. Still, Laurence would express her gratitude for those who continued to appreciate these songs in following years, writing to her friend Hubert Evans in 1977 that "I had

news of you, a bit, a short time ago, when an old friend of mine . . . went out to see you and you were listening to the tape of THE DIVINERS. . . . Thanks. I mean it" (VLS, 68).

Cameron (who still lives in England and works as a "media studies" advisor and a counselor) re-recorded *The Diviners*' "Album" songs with his partner, Dee Kraaij, for a 1994 album, *Divining*. He still feels that the new recording is lacking in some regards: "'The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre' is still far from what I would like—the melodeon [an accordion-like instrument] player was unsympathetic, and my guitar playing is not what I wanted. But the other songs are pretty good."¹³

ASSESSING THE MERITS OF THE DIVINERS' "ALBUM"

One could argue that each reader should be left to imagine the sound of these songs, much as we generally rely solely on the author's written clues to form our own visual images of characters. Certainly, if the recording somehow lessened the aesthetic value of Laurence's descriptions of the songs, this could be a valid argument. In this case, however, I believe that Cameron's matching of melody and stylistic texture to Laurence's words and established fictional performance contexts is essential to bringing the songs to life off the paper, especially given that the text of *The Diviners* provides very few written clues as to the stylistic realization of the lyrics and melodies in a live performance. Cameron took care to make the instrumentation and singing realistically reflect of the performers and performances in the book. In their stylistic traits, these songs also convincingly suggest a range of plausible influences on Jules Tonnerre as a traveling singer-songwriter during the 1950s and 1960s and on Pique as an adolescent during the 1960s. In creating these songs, Laurence and Cameron drew on a familiarity with a wide range of folk-influenced music, from traditional songs to current products of the singer-songwriter movement. Within these four songs alone, Laurence's lyrics range

from the long, narrative style of traditional ballads ("Jules Tonnerre" and "Lazarus"), to a highly condensed and poetically symbolic lyrical song ("Piquette's Song"), to a first-person "confessional" style ("Pique's Song") evocative in its spirit of individualism and questing of such 1960s songwriters as Buffy Sainte-Marie. Likewise, Cameron drew from diverse and appropriate folk- and popular-based influences: "I had been listening to Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and the whole singer-songwriter movement of the 60s, but I had also been heavily influenced by traditional Appalachian songs, Canadian and French Canadian stuff, and, since Sandy and I had come to England in 1969 . . . had been heavily involved in the folk club movement, and had heard a lot of traditional English, Scottish, and Irish song."

An important thematic concept in *The Diviners*—symbolized by the river appearing to flow in two directions—is that past events inform the present, and present circumstances color perspectives of the past. Through allusions to past and present musical traditions that are subtle and yet rich with meaning, *The Diviners'* songs illustrate and embody this theme. The songs are, of course, intimately bound to the characters who ostensibly created them, and to the socio-historical forces that engendered their styles of musical expression. With a minimum of scattered details, Laurence manages to evoke realistic and specific times and places from which these songs emerge. When, for instance, Morag identifies a particular Métis song that Jules's grandfather used to sing, or when we encounter a list of several popular singer-songwriters whom Pique admires, Laurence may be hinting at a wealth of significant material beneath the surface of these allusions. Although the scope of this paper does not allow a full investigation of this argument, a look into a couple of these songs' potential influences, past and present, will at least suggest one way in which they enrich the novel—particularly when *heard* in recorded form.

THE INFLUENCE OF MÉTIS HISTORY ON THE DIVINERS' SONGS

In the section entitled "Skinner's Tale of Lazarus' Tale of Rider Tonnerre," Jules, as a teenager, shows a vague awareness of a particular ballad having been in his family's oral heritage. Talking to Morag, he describes a conflict between the Métis and "a bunch of Englishmen [who] . . . came in to take away the Métis land and to stop the people from hunting buffalo." In the resulting battle, according to Jules, "every single one of [the English and Scotchmen] got killed." And, he says, "one of Rider's men made up a song about it, only my old man, he don't remember it. But he said his father, Old Jules, used to sing it sometimes." Morag suddenly connects Jules's tale with her historical knowledge: "'Hey—I know. That would be 'Falcon's Song,' and the battle would be Seven Oaks, where they killed the Governor.' 'That so?' Jules replies. 'I never connected it with that, because my dad's version was a whole lot different'" (D, 118).

The song in question is "*La Bataille des Sept Chênes*" ("The Battle of Seven Oaks"), also known as "*Chanson de la Grenonillère*" ("Song of Frog Plain"), written by Pierre Falcon (1793–1876), a man known through his numerous songs as "The Bard of the Prairie Métis."¹⁴ A single verse from this song, loosely translated by James Reaney, amply shows the jubilation and pride of these "lords of the prairie" following their victory: "You should have seen those Englishmen— / Bois-Brûlés chasing them, chasing them / From bluff to bluff they stumbled that day / While the Bois-Brûlés / Shouted 'Hurray!'"¹⁵

"The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre" gains additional richness as a song of social protest by consciously or unconsciously tapping into and updating this Métis tradition of reliving battlefield glories through song. Jules's song suggests continuity by using the narrative form of balladry, and by employing 6/8 meter and what Margaret MacLeod describes as the "rollicking tune" characteristic of Métis song.¹⁶ In

marked contrast, however, to the traditional bravado of "Seven Oaks," Jules's ballad is steeped in a solemn understanding of the horrors of warfare that must come in no small part from his having survived the calamitous landing at Dieppe, France, during World War II. Rather than poking fun at the English soldiers—the "young *Anglais* from Ontario"—Jules sympathizes that "They don't know what they're fighting for, / But they've got the cannon, so it must be war" (*D*, 374). While the 1816 Battle of Seven Oaks ended with only one Métis casualty and twenty English colonists killed and their Governor mortally wounded,¹⁷ the Métis suffered bitter defeat at Batoche in 1885. So, in Jules' "Ballad," a song form traditionally associated with victory gains a postmodern ambivalence: while Jules cannot celebrate a Métis victory, he can still take pride in his grandfather's having survived this battle and, more importantly, carried on with his life and raised his family.

A REFLECTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY
FOLK PROTEST MOVEMENT IN
THE DIVINERS' SONGS

From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, Buffy Sainte-Marie, a Cree Indian born in 1941 on a reservation in Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley, was the most visible, if not the only, widely known Native American musician writing and singing songs that explicitly protested the oppression of Native people by whites. It is surely not insignificant that Laurence mentions Sainte-Marie among the various singer-songwriters whom Pique admires: "She plays the records of [Joan] Baez and [Bob] Dylan and [Leonard] Cohen and Joni Mitchell and Buffy Sainte-Marie and James Taylor and Bruce Cockburn and a dozen others whose names Morag frequently misplaces, over and over and over, trying to learn from them. Pique listens to groups, too, but it is the solitary singers, singing their own songs, who really absorb her" (*D*, 347). Like Pique, Sainte-Marie grew up in a predominantly white society (she was raised by adoptive parents in

Massachusetts) and faced similar alienation: "I always knew I was of Indian descent. But I didn't say much about it. It got bad reception. . . . Being Indian, that's funny. You get the 'woo-woo-woos.'"¹⁸

Sainte-Marie's reflections from the time period may help to verify the accuracy of Laurence's portrayal of white antagonism towards Jules's songs. As Laurence aptly demonstrates within her novel, white Canadians during this time were still passionately divided in their opinions about the 1885 rebellion and held onto many ignorant prejudices about the Métis people. Although Sainte-Marie's best known protest songs, "Now That the Buffalo's Gone" and "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying" (both recorded in the mid-1960s), are much more explicitly topical than Jules's songs, all arise out of anger toward unjust white treatment of Native peoples. As Sainte-Marie became widely known for political activism, she "would speak of being 'blacklisted' for her strong human rights stance. 'On the "Tonight Show,"' she has said, 'I was told not to sing anything to do with the Indian people.'"¹⁹

Similarly, Laurence shows that Jules's white audiences tend to respond to his songs with indifference or antagonism. In one instance—as Jules' musical partner, Billy Joe, later tells Morag—when Jules plays his "Ballad," "at first they didn't listen. Then they laughed, some" (*D*, 229). At another time, Jules tells Morag that white audience members "about my age" either simply find this ballad too long, "or they don't wanna know about it" (*D*, 283). However this audience responds to his songs, to Jules they are all related to ancestors who fought against and defeated his grandfather at Batoche. They share ethnicity with the Mounties who "threw [Lazarus] in the Manawaka jail," and with "my sister's man" in "Piquette's Song," who abandoned Piquette and drove her into drunken despair. Performed in this confrontational context, all three of Jules's songs embody a spirit of both traditional and contemporary protest songs, described by Greenway as "the struggle songs of

the people. . . . outburst of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life."²⁰

THE SONGS AS EXPRESSIONS OF RECONCILIATION

But these songs express emotions more complex than outrage or blame. Laurence once commented that writing, however bleak, "is more than an act of will. It is an act of hope and faith; it says life is worth living."²¹ In this philosophical vein, she uses the songs of Jules (and Pique) to counteract certain self-destructive tendencies in these characters. Although Jules does at times find the spoken words to make sense of the pain in his life, such moments are rare and often contradicted by other words and actions. Through crafting his bitter experiences into art, Jules shows that this life has not been futile and without meaning. His willingness to perform for members of the society he holds largely responsible for his people's oppression acknowledges the potential for forgiveness and healing. Because they must be crafted and withstand repeated performances, Jules's songs can be seen to reveal his deepest convictions more than anything said in passing conversation. They help to open windows into his guarded personality, showing a pride in his Métis heritage and a love for his family and, in this way, revising both the other views Jules has expressed and the majority white Canadian views—on the Tonnerre family in particular and the Métis people in general. And, in her song, Pique also shows a new acceptance of her heritage and family upbringing.

As a performed song, the "Ballad" powerfully corrects the ambivalence toward his family history that Jules has sometimes shown conversationally. Once, Jules had mentioned to Morag (when both were teenagers) that his grandfather had fought in "the Troubles" (the 1885 North West Rebellion). But when Morag asks for details, Jules refuses: "Shit, I can't remember. It's all crap. Anyhow, I wouldn't

tell you" (D, 60). Time and again, Jules has seen majority representations of history degrade or delete his family's place in this narrative. Confronting such prejudice, Jules's ballad immediately establishes the Métis view on the revolt: "to keep their lands, to keep them free" (374). Although his sung version of the uprising, unlike that printed in textbooks, may only be "one that the wind will tell," he still expresses hope that white Canadians may come to sympathize with the rebellion: "They say the dead don't always die; / They say the truth outlives the lie" (D, 375).

The song "Lazarus" brings Jules yet closer to exorcizing the shame and anger that have compelled him to distance himself from his immediate family. Once, as a teenager, Jules had told Morag that "My old man's always drunk . . . and the girls, they're about the same. The little kids are just dumb brats. The old lady my Ma, she ain't coming back, and good riddance to bad rubbish" (D, 104). As Jules grows older, he does demonstrate considerable sympathy for his family—"Lazarus" and "Piquette's Song" showing, perhaps, the culmination of this maturing. In "Lazarus," for example, Jules identifies with the increasing loneliness and despair his father must have felt when he "lost his woman" and "lost some of [his] children" (D, 377). Finally, like the "Ballad," this song again subtly addresses an oppressive white majority, not directly, but by calling on his dead father to "rise up out of the Valley; / Tell them what it really means to try." The attempt to forgive in the words "Go tell them in the town; though they always put you down" (D, 378) has surely not come easily to Jules. By exposing such painful sentiments for a white audience, he allows himself to live out the forgiveness that his lyrics seem to displace onto his dead father.

"Piquette's Song" also represents Jules's attempt to look into a life he never really tried to know until it was lost to him forever. While Jules's lyrics conceal his relationship to the subject of "Lazarus," he starts each stanza of "Piquette's Song," significantly, with the words "my sister," showing a release of his past shame,

and an acceptance of his sister's hardships as unavoidably linked to his own life. Like "Lazarus," this song subtly challenges white listeners to sympathize with people their society has marginalized. The former song challenges the listener who would dismiss the mere fact that Lazarus didn't kill himself to "just try walking in his shoes." And "Song for Piquette" again challenges a listener to see the life inside his sister's impenetrable eyes: Jules's opening verse claims that "What [her eyes] were telling / You couldn't know"; he concludes in the final verse that "You'll never know" (*D*, 379-80).

Pique has two important reasons for treasuring these few songs that Jules leaves her. First, they give her a legacy, bitter but real, of a family and Métis heritage she knows little about, from a father she sees only a few times in her life. Second, because Pique guards her deepest feelings, much as her father does, Jules's songs model for her another way of communication. We see Pique, then, trying through her song to explain to Morag, as she cannot in conversation, why she must go away to Galloping Mountain, where some of her Métis relatives live. Through Pique's singing, Morag grasps the sharp reality of all the pain and confusion, "unwittingly inflicted on her by her mother, by circumstances," she has been afraid to acknowledge that her daughter must feel. But, as Jules's songs seek forgiveness, "Pique's Song," Morag realizes, "was not as signing any blame—that was not what it was all about" (360). And, like her father, Pique does not ask for pity in her song; she simply gives her perspective on the difficult path she has been down.

The inclusion of "Pique's Song" in the *Diviners*' "Album" achieves what may be this novel's greatest affirmation of hope. This song indicates that Jules has successfully passed his songwriting on to his daughter. As Cecil Abrahams notes, the "task of the oral storyteller [is] to further the myths . . . by inspiring the birth of another teller."²² Through a limited number of encounters with his daughter, Jules has been able to inspire such a birth. Just

after Pique unveils her song for her mother—the first of Pique's own songs that Morag has heard—we learn that Jules is dying of throat cancer. Morag feels sure that Pique will someday "[make] a song for [Jules], . . . the song he never brought himself to make for himself" (367). Thus, Pique affirms at a crucial moment that she will carry her Métis heritage into the next generation. Like Pique, we absorb the songs and, in this transaction, participate in the struggle for cultural survival which *The Diviners* dramatizes.

"ONE WRITES WHAT IS GIVEN":
LAURENCE AND SONGWRITING
AFTER *THE DIVINERS*

Laurence's post-*Diviners* letters contain some rather curious and poignant comments, which mix tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation about her lack of formal musical training with an apprehensive, yet sincere, desire to work more with pure songwriting as a serious creative form. Laurence's children, David and Jocelyn, young adults at the time Laurence was writing *The Diviners* (Jocelyn was born in 1952 and David in 1955), may have instilled in Laurence a desire to "connect" with their generation through songs—a desire that Morag also feels regarding Pique. Morag, in fact, secretly envies that while Pique may not read her novels for many years, if ever, Jules's songs touch Pique profoundly: "Jealous of the fact that [Jules] had [songs] to give. . . . Could you hand over a stack of books to someone? Only to someone who wanted to read, presumably" (*D*, 192). After completing the first three *Diviners* songs, she wrote Purdy that "I may become like Leonard Cohen yet!" (*FL*, 262). Incidentally, Cohen—a Canadian singer, songwriter, and novelist—is one of the musicians Pique admires (*D*, 347). Later, Laurence perhaps half-jokingly admitted to Purdy a wish to "break into the Pop Song business" (*FL*, 297).

Evidence of Laurence wanting to work with songwriting grows even stronger up through the early 1980s. After completing *The Diviners*,

she felt that she had drained her reservoir of novel material and even stated publicly that she would not write another novel. Despite subsequent attempts to write longer fiction again—Ian Cameron notes that she "occasionally spoke of another novel, about Louis Riel"—*The Diviners* ultimately proved to be Laurence's last published novel. In January 1983, she wrote to Gabrielle Roy that "I have spent the past two years in trying, without much success, to write the novel I have been attempting to do for so long. Maybe I will do it—maybe not. We will see. . . . I do not tell many people about this anguish" (VLS, 189).

During this time of "anguish," however, Laurence seemed to see songwriting as an alluring and untapped creative avenue. In April of 1980, Laurence told her Canadian writer friend Silver Don Cameron about a song she had written for her new children's book, *Six Darn Cows*: "The tune is MINE! How about that? I am. . . . hem hem. . . . a COMPOSER" (VLS, 59). In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence also recalls this collaboration, remarking that "I . . . thought, for a moment, that I might have a new career—but then I'd thought that when I did the songs for *The Diviners*, too" (DE, 218).

But surely Laurence's most poignant expression of an unrealized desire to do more with the folk-song genre came in a letter to Timothy Findley from late November 1983—just a few years before her death of cancer: "I'm writing very different stuff now. Seems absurd, but one writes what is given. I'm writing a few songs, with no musical training. How embarrassing, in a way. . . . I've got a swell voice in church, to belt out the old and noble hymns, with the organ and the congregation. A different matter when singing alone, with the old tobacco voice! However, we will see. There are so many things I want to do, and am doing, but not enough time. . . . What I'm hoping to find one of these days is a young woman who plays guitar and who might not intimidate me and who might agree to listen for awhile and maybe . . ." (VLS, 86).

This letter further mentions "Old Woman's Song," which Laurence had written (and also included with melodic notation in *Dance on the Earth*). Because it represents Laurence's direct songwriting voice, rather than that of a fictional character, "Old Woman's Song" offers a valuable stylistic comparison with the songs by Jules and Pique. While the "Album" songs draw from traditional ballad, country and western, and modern pop-folk styles, "Old Woman's Song," in its meter and tune, evokes a Protestant hymn tradition: "I see old women dancing / dancing on the earth / I hear old women singing / singing children's birth / great is their caring / strong is their measure / dancing and singing / life's frail treasure" (DE, 225). Appropriate to a folk-song tradition, "Old Woman's Song" uses a timeless vocabulary to present equally timeless sentiments. Still, it advances the folk and hymn traditions by presenting, from a maternal viewpoint, messages of peace more reflective of modern folk protest songs: "through all the ages / children have been taken / accidents, diseases, / parents left forsaken / may the holy spirit / teach us to know why / but may we not conspire / in wars to let them die" (DE, 225). Though crafted in some respects, stanzas such as these, as compared to the sophisticated and complex structure of Laurence's novels, show that Laurence had the ability to approach the composition of a folk song from a radically different perspective than that from which she wrote a novel's narrative. In their simple rhythms, rhymes, and repetitions, these lyrics do not necessarily stand up, divorced from their melodies, as poetry. But Laurence means for these songs (like those of Jules and Pique) to be *functional*—for readers to try them out, sing them to a group, teach the words and melodies to others. Thus, the notation incites curiosity and encourages the physical act of singing.

Despite the aesthetic differences between the highly polished "Old Woman's Song" and the more rough and organic "Album" songs, Laurence writes from both perspectives without artifice. In speaking of this song, Laurence does not portray herself as an accomplished

novelist who should naturally be able to toss off "simple" folk songs. Rather, she allies herself with "the folk" and admits her own lack of musical knowledge and sophistication, suggesting to a friend that "folk songs, I guess, are composed by folks who aren't very knowledgeable or sophisticated. The tune [of "Old Woman's Song"] isn't bad, either. Or so I think . . ." (VLS, 86). This sentiment, like other self-effacing comments about her novice approach to *The Diviners*' "Album," echoes of Jules's comment after five-year-old Pique tells him that she does not know how to write a song: "'Hell, neither do I,' Jules says, 'but I do it all the same'" (D, 284).²³

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence to John Metcalf, 26 January 1973, *A Very Large Soul: Selected Letters from Margaret Laurence to Canadian Writers*, ed. John Wainwright (Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant, 1995), pp. 132-33, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as VLS.

2. Walter E. Swayze, "Margaret Laurence: Novelist-as-Poet," in *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*, ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), pp. 3-16.

3. Cameron agreed: "As you say, it is important that the songs get to a wider audience, and I've always been frustrated in that" (Ian Cameron, letter to author, 18 January 1997). All subsequent quotes from Cameron come from this letter.

4. Joan Hind-Smith, *Three Voices* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin, 1975), p. 10.

5. Clara Thomas, *Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 7.

6. Edith Fowke, "Songs for Margaret Laurence," *Canadian Woman Studies* 8, no. 3 (1987): 54-55.

7. Margaret Laurence, *Dance on the Earth* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p. 17, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as DE.

8. Quoted in John Lennox ed., *Margaret Laurence—Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), p. 177, hereafter cited in the text as FL.

9. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 4, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as D.

10. Laurence's dated letters actually place this event in early December of 1972.

11. As Cameron told me, "Bob and Paula Berry were members of the High Wycombe Folk Club (near Penn, where Margaret lived)," p. 1.

12. McLachlan, according to Cameron, was a young Canadian who had frequently visited Elm Cottage and played his songs there.

13. I find Cameron's original recording to be, overall, more successful in capturing the context of the novel and the spirit of Jules Tonnerre. Compared to the rollicking or raucous quality of the two guitars on the original "Ballad of Jules Tonnerre" (which I imagine to be the playing of Jules and his partner, Billy Joe), the newer version is much more restrained. In the other *Diviners* songs, the use of a flute also detracts from this raucous feel. Since these are songs of protest and a reclaiming of diminished pride in one's heritage, they should use a "no-holds-barred" style of presentation. I imagine Jules performing in the context of a bar, playing to an unsympathetic or even hostile audience, having to shout to be heard, and yet, above all, determined to convey a sense of dignity for himself and for his people.

14. Margaret Arnett MacLeod, *Songs of Old Manitoba* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), p. 2.

15. Ibid., p. 9. Of his translation, James Reaney states that "I have attempted to make only an English equivalent of Falcon's ballad and so translate the really important thing—its high spirits." The original French is as follows: *Si vous aviez vu tous ces Anglais / Et tous ces Bois-Brûlés après / De butte en butte les Anglais culbutaient. / Les Bois-Brûlés jetaient des cris de joie.*

16. MacLeod (note 14 above), p. 2. Ian Cameron writes that "I believe [Laurence] met Edith Fowke, the great Canadian folk song collector, in Canada in 1969-70, while she was writer-in-residence at the U of [Toronto]. Edith played her some recordings of Metis singers, and it was on that that she based her tune for 'The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre.'" In response to my inquiry on possible traditional origins of the tune, Canadian ethnomusicologist Anne Lederman responded that "I don't recognize the tune . . . and it is in an odd form; a b c a (first and last phrase are the same). Most six-eight song tunes in French Metis tradition that I have come across are three or four different musical phrases (a a b, or a a b a). It seems kind of generic, like the kind of tune someone might come up with having heard a couple of similar 6/8 melodies without really knowing the tradition (hence the odd form)" (e-mail to author, 15 April 1997).

17. MacLeod (note 14 above), p. 3.

18. Quoted in Victoria Koppe, "Driven by Dancing Gods and Bathtub Whales," in *The Buffy Sainte-Marie Songbook*, ed. Buffy Sainte-Marie (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), p. 159.

19. Dave DiMartino, *Singer-Songwriters: Pop Music's Performer-Composers, From A to Zevon* (New York: Billboard, 1994), p. 150.

20. Quoted in David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin, Jr., eds. *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival* (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 121.

21. Hind-Smith, *Three Voices* (note 4 above), p. 59.

22. Cecil Abrahams, "Margaret Laurence and the Ancestral Tradition," in *New Perspectives on Mar-*

garet Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism, ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), p. 139.

23. Laurence also suggests her artistic identification with Jules in noting that Jules's songs were written "in the persona of a Manitoba Métis of about my age" (VLS, 79).