

Stompin' Tom media critic champions Canadian talent

By Jennifer Barr

Canada's number one male country singer sat in his Erin Township home, nervously chain-smoking. He told me he was fed up with the condition of the music business in Canada.

Stompin' Tom Connors has fought hard for recognition of Canadian talent. Now he feels he's losing the battle.

"In 50 years Canadian talent will be blase" laments the man who has done so much for Canadian folk singing.

Twenty-seven albums, nearly 100 singles, numerous gold records and six Juno awards haven't gone to Tom's head. Comfortable and easy-talking, Stompin' Tom is an enthusiastic patriot but nevertheless is not happy with media reception of Canadian talent.

For years Connors has attempted to assist struggling musicians gain recognition.

"If other performers have to go through half what I went through," he comments, "they'll just go to the States."

In 1971 Connors established Boot Records to encourage young talent. The Mississauga based company now embraces nine subsidiary companies under the protection of the 'Boot Group', as it is known. Eight people are employed with the organization dealing in a variety of acts from classical, to easy-listening and folk music.

Two hundred albums have been released and 500 singles from 700 groups. They also control over 5,000 pieces of published Canadian music.

Tom's manager and business associate, Jury Krytiuk, says promotion is his biggest job but they still can't get past the media. Radio programmers claim the music is not for their listeners, Krytiuk states. "But who is it buys the records?" he queries.

Stompin' Tom, considered more native Canadian than other performers and noted for his country ballads about small towns, can't understand the attitude of radio disc jockeys. The C.R.T.C. regulations of 1971 demanded 30 per cent Canadian content on every program but, according to Tom, when program organizers discovered loopholes in the legislation they went right back to almost total American talent.

"They come up with a bunch of excuses," he says. "And when we satisfy those excuses, they come up with more." He feels he'll go bankrupt if Canadian performers don't get more air time.

"If I'd saved my money," he mutters, "I could be very well off now." But Connors has been sinking everything above modest living expenses back into the business. He says he's knocking his head against a wall because the public will never buy recordings unless they hear the artists.

"I can't continually put thousands into production when no demand is being created," he comments glumly.

Tom feels if Canadian artists go to the States for recognition everyone loses.

He publicly decries the music business at every opportunity and has even gone as far as to turn down appearing at the Canadian National Exhibition two years in a row because he felt the Canadian content wasn't sufficient.

He says the CNE is the largest of its kind in the world. "We have it here—it's ours. Why can't we use it to our advantage?"

He told CNE officials they should have at least 60 per cent Canadian content—"if you can't make a commitment, I won't play," he told them.

And he didn't. He's also unhappy with newspaper coverage of the so-called cancellation of his CBC television series "Stompin' Tom's Canada."

"I wasn't cancelled," he frowns, "the contract was up."

He explained the CBC wanted to sign him to a 26 series with options for renewal



Stompin' Tom

but Connors only wanted to do a 13 week series without option, fearing damage to record sales if he didn't get back on the road. They met somewhere in the middle and negotiations were completed.

When the contract was up, Tom said, he was free to do other things but the public only heard the word "cancellation."

"I'm known to be the fool of Canadian businessmen," he laughs, "I'm fighting a losing battle... but I'm happy and contented inside—at least I did my bit."

The Stomper's home for the last while is a modest split level house situated between Acton and Georgetown. The unstylish decor suits the lanky, down-to-earth musician and his family, Lena, baby Tommy and Lena's father.

After a gruelling six month tour, Tom plans to hole up there, writing more songs for his next two albums. He also hopes to get to know his son, born in an area hospital just before his father left on tour. This is the first year Lena Connors hasn't accompanied her husband across Canada.

Writing takes him about 16 hours a day. He spreads a map of Canada in front of him, surrounds himself with tourist guides, pamphlets and short histories, while sweating out the inspiration.

"I've got to get it all together—it's a combination of things." He says he's thrown away more songs than he's used and has probably written over a thousand.

When asked what brought the Connors to the area, Tom shrugs and remarks, "We had two days to buy a place and this one was for sale."

He hasn't been home much to judge the community but says the people "seem very nice."

"It suits my needs, I like it quiet and isolated—we enjoy it very much... I've got no complaints."

Although the property measures ten acres of picturesque bush, swamp and underbrush, the Stomper doesn't plan on keeping many animals. He'll keep a dog when he can be home to train it. He doesn't ride.

"Only city people ride horses for pleasure," he growls. "To people from the farm a horse is a horse."

The Connors may not stay in this area. It all depends on business.

Tom says he might retire to his farm in Prince Edward Island if he gets tired of fighting his fight, going back to the land where he and Lena came from.

As a child Tom was raised in orphanages

and foster homes in the Maritimes. He refers to the farm in Skinner's Pond, P.E.I., where he lived most of his youth, as his home.

Striking out on the road in his early teens, Tom started Canadian wanderings that inspired his songs. For years he rode the rails. He was down and out, playing for a beer or a night's shelter but getting to know the people and country he loves with obvious passion.

It was many years before the Canadian public became aware of the guttural voice under the inevitable black stetson accompanied by the thumping heel on plywood.

Songs like "Bud the Spud", Connor's all time best-seller, "Tillsonburg" and "Big Joe Mufferaw" are now well-known but are still not receiving adequate media attention, Connors insists.

Disappointed in response by a media he feels is most influential, Tom tells of his sadness and feeling of hopelessness for all Canadian performers.

"If the rest of Canada would take a few cultural hints from Quebec, we might be doing something," he says. French culture in Quebec looks after their own and makes sure everything home-produced gets top priority from the media, he notes.

"In terms of their creative arts and music, Quebec is way ahead," he says with regret. "But I shouldn't complain," admits the singer-composer. "I'm probably getting more response than other artists... I feel for the other guy."

That's exactly the way Stompin' Tom Connors came across—a sincere advocate championing Canadian talent.



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