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SOUND REVIEW

The Legacy of “Aunt Martha’s Sheep”: Political and Social Satire in the Newfoundland Recordings of Ellis and Wince Coles

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Ellis and Wince Coles are a country ballad duo from Carmanville, Newfoundland. The brothers are part-time musicians who have gained widespread popularity among “outport” Newfoundlanders (those from small coastal communities) and among the numerous expatriate Newfoundlanders of southern Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. In many ways their hometown is a typical Newfoundland community. Having a population of approximately eight hundred, Carmanville is located in Hamilton Sound, on the central north coast of the island. Its homes are stretched along the shore, facing the traditional fishing grounds on which the economy has been based. Given the lack of industry or employment outside of the fishery, and because of the northern cod moratorium (ongoing since 1992), it is a community awaiting revival. Ellis and Wince’s version of the Newfoundland country ballad has developed through their intimate relation with this milieu, the present recession, and the consequent depopulation of the region.

Ellis (b. 1939) and Wince (b. 1945) both began playing the guitar and composing songs while in their youth. As adults, however, they each followed separate paths toward local stardom. Ellis worked primarily as a heavy equipment operator, traveling regularly throughout Newfoundland. While driving alone during the day, he would often compose songs in his mind and then perform them at night for his fellow workers. When asked about this compositional process, Ellis explained, “It is just stories, funny things that happened. Sometimes you get it from the old fella next door, they doing something foolish out around the bay. It’s not until

the later years that we started picking up on the news, on the moratorium and such. There was always a lot of imagination. When I was young, I could take a story, pick up a guitar, and sing it. I could write the song while I sang it” (Ellis Coles, 1998). Ellis’s formal public debut as a songwriter came in 1972, when popular Newfoundland singer Dick Nolan recorded “Aunt Martha’s Sheep,” a song cowritten with Ellis.

Wince notes that he and Ellis both began writing songs as a pastime when they were teenagers. But, “after a year or two [we] threw them in the garbage.” Eventually, however, they began to record their songs: “[O]ne day we bought a little 4-track. I had a few songs. Ellis had a few songs down there. After about a year we went down and did a bunch of songs on the four track, just for our own use. Then one day we thought maybe some of the folks, our friends in Carmanville might like to hear this stuff. So we put a couple out in the store. It started to catch on and everybody was coming in . . . asking for more” (Wince Coles, 1998).

The brothers have continued to use the technique of recording each track separately. Wince records the first track(s) in his home studio in Topsail and then brings his equipment out to Carmanville so that Ellis can add his own track(s) at leisure. They both contribute to lyrics and melody, but Wince usually composes and sings the more serious tunes while Ellis writes and performs the humorous ones. When asked to describe their differences in style, Wince stated, “A lot of it is what I call Newfoundland country ballad. They all tell a story. Ellis is a very funny guy. He really is. So he writes quite a bit of comedy, but he’s also good at more tear jerk. People like one or the other. They won’t be fussy about in between. You gotta cry or they gotta laugh. We try to do one or the other. So I usually pick up some of the more sadder type things. Ellis goes with the funny. In between we pop in a scattered country one because a lot of Newfoundlanders in

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my generation . . . grew up on the country music" (Wince Coles, 1998).

All of their recordings have guitar and bass, but sometimes there is an additional singer, such as Nancy Squires on "A Mother's Prayer" (*Harp and Hood*, 1998) and "Good Ol' Newfie Girl" (*The Eagle*, 2003b) or Leanne Chaulk on "More to be Pitied" and "Sweet Bye and Bye" (*Still Barkin'*, 2001) and "Like the Rose" (*The Eagle*, 2003b). Kevin Raymond was brought in to play accordion between verses on "Political Laugh," a spoken satirical recitation on Newfoundland politics (*Eli's on the Weed*, [1995?]). Although accordion is well enshrined in Newfoundland traditional music, Ellis and Wince have only used it in this one recitation. Guy King also played bass for several tracks on *Harp and Hood* (1998), and, as noted in the liner notes, provided advice on further developing their sound.

Wince, who now lives in Topsail (more than two hundred miles away, near the province's capital, St. John's) and works for an electrical utility (Newfoundland Power), was discovered in 1982 by Newfoundland country duo Dave and Aubrey, who subsequently recorded several of his songs. Through the encouragement of friends and relatives, he then recorded his own album in 1985 (*I Want to be a Working Man Again*). This album included his now well-known song "By the Glow of the Kerosene Light," which has been recorded by several artists, most notably by Newfoundland's musical comedians Buddy Wasiname & the Other Fellas (*100% Pure* (1993) and *Greatest Misses!* (1999); see <http://www.buddywasiname.com>). Ellis and Wince also re-released the song on their latest album (*The Eagle*, 2003b).

Through the encouragement of Wince, Ellis recorded and released his own album in 1992 (*The Polar Bear Tape*), thus entering the realm of independent recording artist himself. Since their start, the brothers have released a total of twenty recordings, all produced in home studios. As the early tapes became more popular and community members clamored for more releases, Ellis and Wince began recording regularly. They sell and distribute their tapes and compact disks (CDs), out of their homes and in local stores, as well as through the Landwash

Distribution Company, Ltd., a small provincial distributor. Advertising has been almost entirely by word of mouth. Their recordings can now be purchased through most Newfoundland music stores, convenience stores, and tourist shops, as well as a variety of Newfoundland-oriented stores in mainland Canada, and through several online retailers that specialize in serving expatriate Newfoundland communities.¹ Ellis and Wince never perform live.

The genre most strongly associated with the Coles, the Newfoundland country ballad, began to develop in the 1930s when traditional Newfoundland musicians encountered American and Canadian country music for the first time. Newfoundlanders began to listen to country music shows on American radio stations whose broadcast range included the island. As American military bases were built across Newfoundland in the 1940s and 1950s, local American military radio stations were also established, thus extending this influence. Simultaneously, the island saw increased airplay of country music on its own radio stations and occasional tours by mainland country musicians.² The result is what Peter Narváez describes as "a musical syncretism in which traditional melodies, rhythms, and [the] button accordion are joined with musical content and traditional forms from Britain and Ireland, and country music of the United States, the Maritimes, and mainland Canada" (1997:3). Newfoundland country music is primarily identifiable by the use of guitar and fiddle or accordion above a waltz beat or in cut time, the emphatic rhythm being supplied primarily by percussion (often electronic) and an electric bass. For the performance of Newfoundland country ballads, we must add to the foregoing characteristics a single vocalist performing a strophic song. Although there are many variations on the Newfoundland country sound, the most popular example is the music of Simani (Bud Davidge and Sim Savory).³ The recordings of Ellis and Wince usually consist of a single voice and guitar accompanied by percussion and bass, without accordion or fiddle.

The Newfoundland country ballad is an extension of the island's strong culture of song composition. As Herbert Halpert notes, "There

has hardly been a shipwreck or other sea disaster on our [Newfoundland's] coast that has not been memorialized by some locally-composed song. Readers of St. John's newspapers will readily attest that Newfoundlanders have little hesitation about composing verses on events of local importance" (1975:iv). Further, he continues to emphasize that a strong folk culture such as Newfoundland's resists homogenization into mainstream commercial music. It adopts selectively from various new styles and adjusts them to create a better fit with local aesthetics (v). This is exactly what has happened with the Newfoundland country ballad and the music of Ellis and Wince Coles. The process of Newfoundland song making about local people and events is strongly grounded. Forms of transmission and styles of presentation, however, have been altered to take advantage of new technologies that provide better access to a largely mobile and geographically dispersed audience and of the instrumentation of country music, the guitar often being viewed as more versatile than the accordion and easier to master than the traditional fiddle.

Following D. K. Wilgus, we can observe that CDs and cassettes of Newfoundland country ballads comprise contemporary broadsides of outport and expatriate Newfoundland.⁴ Because Newfoundland country ballads are produced and distributed in a grassroots manner, emphasize local issues in their lyrics, and adhere to formulaic patterns, they may be considered both popular and community based. The popularity of a given song is often closely related to how well that song's lyrics present the issues and concerns of its audiences; this is particularly important in a community that often perceives itself to be misrepresented in media and politics. Michael Taft has refined Wilgus's recording-as-broadside equation in light of Newfoundland popular music, arguing that sound recordings influence listeners in terms of tune and style, characteristics that distinguish the popular recording from the popular tradition of broadsides (1975:v). Newfoundland country music recordings, however, also highlight narrative texts, and music has traditionally been a medium for conveying these stories. The tunes are memorable, but song popularity, according

to musicians and audiences, is based primarily in the texts. Noting the tradition of selling broadsides on street corners, Taft also demonstrates the relationship between this genre and the broadside tradition: "We know that Johnny Burke, Newfoundland's best known song composer, hawked his own broadsides on the streets of St. John's. Some twenty years later, according to legend, Arthur Scammell sold his records on the street from the trunk of his car" (1975:xxi-xxii). Ellis and Wince Coles continue the transformation of media from printed text, to vinyl record, cassette tape, and, most recently, locally produced CD.

While Ellis and Wince Coles are household names in outport and expatriate communities, they are virtually unknown among Newfoundland music aficionados in St. John's. This is representative of a cultural divide in Newfoundland, locally recognized as the "Townie-Bayman" (St. John's vs. outport) dichotomy.⁵ Their music may be viewed as a form of cultural capital and as a counterhegemonic tool. Themes of antiauthoritarianism, rural-urban tensions, nostalgia for the customs and traditions of the past, and the outport utopian dream can all be found in the music. It is a form of lighthearted play with serious undertones, a classic example of how music can be used to express ideas and emotions that are otherwise discouraged.

As previously noted, Ellis Coles' first big hit was in 1972, when Newfoundland country singer Dick Nolan wrote a melody to Ellis's lyrics and recorded "Aunt Martha's Sheep" (RCA LP CAS-2576 and RCA 45 rpm 75-1098). This recording sold more than 100,000 copies—an extraordinary hit considering the modest size of Newfoundland's population (approximately 500,000 today). Taft (1986) has discovered that a previous variant of the song, written by Arthur Butt thirty years earlier and entitled "Aunt Allie's Sheep," became quite popular in the area of Perry's Cove, Conception Bay, the songwriter's home community. In Ellis's version, the lyrics focus on the gullibility of an officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (an RCMP "Mountie"), and this theme brought the song great popularity. "Aunt Martha's Sheep" is the story of a Mountie who is sent out

one evening to find a stolen sheep. The sheep was stolen for a late-night scoff (meal or party), a relatively minor offense by local custom. While looking for the offenders, the Mountie finds the party and is invited in for a piece of moose, which in fact is the stolen sheep. The song closes with the famous line, "We might have stole the sheep, boys, but the Mountie ate the most."

Taft argues that the popularity of "Aunt Martha's Sheep" was based primarily on (1) the amalgamation of three popular Newfoundland themes (the stolen feast, antiauthoritarianism, and the outsider or mainlander as cultural dupe); (2) the growing popularity of Dick Nolan's recordings; and (3) the improved advertising and distribution of Nolan's music through his new contract with RCA records (1986). In his analysis of the song, Taft argues that because Mounties were mostly cultural outsiders at the time (mainlanders stationed in Newfoundland), they took such minor offenses too seriously and were likewise easily fooled. This was all performed within the context of the "goofy Newfie" stereotype in mainland Canada, "Newfie" jokes, recent increases in Newfoundland-Canadian migration, and the struggle of Newfoundland to find its place as a newly formed province of Canada, having joined the confederation of Canada only in 1949.⁶

It was through the popularity of "Aunt Martha's Sheep" that Ellis's musical career began to take off. Soon after this release, RCA tried to convince him to record his own album. Newfoundland actor Gordon Pinsent then attempted to recruit him for a movie about Newfoundland. Despite the pressure, Ellis responded by saying, "No thanks. I'm going fishing" (1998). Ellis has always treated his song writing and recordings as a hobby. As such, the music of Ellis and Wince is relatively uninfluenced by outside producers or market demands. They write only for themselves and their immediate community.

Despite this early success, Ellis did not record his own album until 1992 (*The Polar Bear Tape*). Together, Ellis and Wince have since recorded seventeen albums, with Ellis also recording a second solo album (*All the Best* [1994?]).

Among Ellis's many songs of humor and social criticism, the characters of Eli and Aunt Sophie are the most prominent; they represent and deflate the "goofy Newfie" stereotype. Contemplative, romantic, and nostalgic, Wince's stories often describe Newfoundland traditions and their loss. Whether serious or comical, these songs discuss the impact on Newfoundland of the loss of the fishery and sealing industries, pride in Newfoundland heritage and traditions, and the attempt to control or manipulate outport life by political and cultural outsiders. Many of them likewise comment on the merging of traditional outport life with contemporary culture from the outside and issues that older rural Newfoundlanders face in trying to understand the "modern" world. These themes appear to appeal especially to Newfoundland expatriates who face similar difficulties while trying to adapt to unfamiliar environments.

Since 1992, Ellis and Wince have recorded an average of two albums per year. About one-third of the songs on each album center on the fictional lives of Eli and Aunt Sophie, one-third are nostalgic of traditional Newfoundland life, and the rest are more direct political and/or social commentaries. In these songs, Eli and Aunt Sophie continuously mock and subvert society. For example, there are stories about how Eli and Sophie discover seal oil capsules, Viagra, genetic cloning, and the first atomic bomb (*Eli's on the Weed*, [1995?]; *Still Barkin'*, 2001). In "Eli Was Here Before John" (*Alive an' Kickin'*, 1997a), they rewrite history in honor of the five hundredth anniversary of John Cabot's discovery of the New World. Here, Eli and Sophie hold Cabot hostage in their well, and then send him back to Europe after feeding him laxatives. In the chorus, they urge us to simply accept their version of the truth: "Now Eli was here before John. / It don't really matter if history is wrong. / So let's just forget it. It's over and gone. / Eli was here before John." As in "Aunt Martha's Sheep," Eli and Sophie mock and ignore the Mounties in "Eli's on the Weed" (*Eli's on the Weed*, [1995?]). While standing in line at the bank and needing a cigarette, Eli accidentally buys some "wacky tobacco" (marijuana) from a hippie and is subsequently arrested. Not understanding his crime, he insists

on continuing to smoke while in the police car. The Mounties get high from the secondhand smoke, and when Aunt Sophie arrives to save Eli, she locks the Mounties into their own jail cell and takes poor Eli home.

"By the Glow of the Kerosene Light" (*I Want to be a Working Man Again*, 1985; *The Eagle*, 2003b) has become a classic example of their nostalgic style. Opening with the lines, "I remember the time when my grandpa and I would sit by the fire at night. And I'd listen to stories of how he once lived by the glow of the kerosene light," the song examines memories of peacefulness and comfort among a family in a traditional outport. These themes are likewise present in "Only a Rock" (*Greatest Hits. Volume One*, 1997b). In the song, a tourist remarks that "I don't understand how you live on a rock like this," and a Newfoundlander explains why this "rock" is the most wonderful, perfect place in the world.⁷ In "Please Turn out the Light" (*Still Barkin'*, 2001), Wince lists his memories of outport life and then uses his grandmother's bedtime words as an analogy for the loss of his childhood community: "Would the last one leaving please turn out the light,/ and make sure you close the door 'cause it's freezing out tonight./ Tie up your boots. Put on your mitts. Zipper your coat up tight./ Would the last one leaving please turn out the light."

Nostalgia, current events, and comedy are combined in "Grandpa's Love Song" (*Greatest Hits. Volume One*, 1997b), when the characters purposely break a law that they feel is unjust. This serious song is overlaid with a comic recitation, which criticizes the Canadian government's management of Newfoundland's cod fishery. A young boy, played by Wince, sings a song while his grandfather, played by Ellis, constantly interrupts him with misinterpretations of the text. As the song ends, Grandpa suggests that they try to catch some cod fish. His grandson protests, stating that it is illegal. Grandpa responds: "Ah, that's no odds my son. If the fishery fellers comes along, just tell them we're foreigners. They're allowed to catch all they want. . . . Pass me down me jigger. I've done it all my life, and I'm gonna do it now." Early in the moratorium, Newfoundlanders observed a lack of enforcement of fisheries regulations

among foreign vessels. They blamed these foreign-owned trawlers for many of the problems that led to and extended the fishing moratorium and thus at times refused to accept regulations that they viewed as anti-Newfoundland. It is not just a coincidence that Ellis and Wince began to record and gain widespread popularity just after the start of the northern cod moratorium (1992). As a major cause of unemployment and migration away from Newfoundland outports, as well as a cause of social and cultural disorder, the moratorium generated a resurgence in distrust of nonlocal authorities.

Political commentary is repeated in "Harp and Hood" (*Harp and Hood*, 1998), in which Ellis and Wince sing about the invention of a seal-language-translation machine: "Hear 'em talking. Them seals a talking,/ in a language that we all understand./ Them seals a talking. Oh hear 'em talking./ On that machine they're talking like a man." Each verse traces a conversation between the seals as they discuss how Newfoundlanders love to try to eat seal "feet" (flippers), how Japanese sealers are always chasing them for their penises (an aphrodisiac), how Newfoundlanders now only fish at night to avoid fisheries officers, and how Newfoundland Liberal politician John Efford is continuously promoting seal oil capsules as part of his plan to market seal oil as a new cure for arthritis and as a tactic to rebuild Newfoundland's economy. A related theme appears in "Seal Oil Capsule," also on the album *Harp and Hood*. In this story Eli starts taking seal oil capsules and, to Aunt Sophie's dismay, decides that they really are a wonder drug.

Ellis and Wince's most recent album, *The Eagle* (2003b), is a tribute to the victims of September 11th. The title track both reminds us of the strength of human social ties and the influence of this tragedy beyond American borders. Ellis's and Wince's hometown is only forty miles from Gander, a former air force base that became home to thousands of stranded passengers when flights above the North Atlantic where suddenly rerouted away from the United States on the morning of the attacks. The song has a strong melody and a memorable chorus: "Hear the screaming of the Eagle seeking prey on wings of might, / as she remembers heroes

fallen, wrapped up in the stars and stripes./ Let nobody ever wonder, will she stand or will she fall./ She'll be here when mad men vanish, guarding freedom for us all."

In his analysis of song responses to the collapse of the North Atlantic cod fishery, Narváez argues that the songs fit into two primary categories: rhetorical and polemical (1997:7). Rhetorical songs are defined as those that express opinion and pose questions without direct calls to action. Polemical songs are those that attempt to prod and rally the listeners to agree with the song's perspective and act. There is a fine line between the two. One's relationship to, and opinion of, such songs partly defines one's interpretation of, and reaction to the politics and identities expressed therein. I see the music of Ellis and Wince Coles as primarily rhetorical. Because of the concentration of the audience base in Newfoundland and its expatriate communities and the assumed agreement and support of their listeners for the struggles of Newfoundland fishers, the polemical approach is not necessary.

With regard to popularity, the songs about the antics of Eli and Aunt Sophie have been particularly successful. For example, "Eli's on the Weed" and "Eli Clones His Self" have both been re-released on their *Greatest Hits* albums (volumes one and two, respectively). Ellis and Wince state that nostalgic tunes, such as "Only a Rock" and "Calloused Hands" (*Greatest Hits. Volume One*), "Newfoundland Saturday Night" (*Greatest Hits. Volume Two*), and "Please Turn Out the Light" (*Still Barkin'*) are also very popular. Because they do not perform live, though, the popularity of individual songs is hard to determine.

Despite their lack of longevity in oral tradition, these community-based vernacular songs function as Newfoundland folksongs. As contemporary ballads they express Newfoundland tradition and identity through a time-honored medium and are often experienced as cathartic. Their nostalgic sentiments are central to the social solidarity of a large segment of Newfoundland's population. Many of them are cautionary tales. Some of them are memorials. Although they have been composed independently by two people and performed in a pop-

ular style, they are designed to appeal intimately to both outport Newfoundlanders and members of Newfoundland's expatriate communities.

Through the combination of humorous stories and serious ballads, Ellis and Wince express an idealist's view of life—that we should always enjoy life, no matter what extraneous demands are placed upon it. Ellis and Wince embrace and subvert the negative representations of the simple, fun-loving Newfoundland stereotype. They have yet to sign any contracts for international production or distribution of their songs, but they are successful and happy nonetheless.

Notes

1. The most popular of these is through *Downhomer Magazine*, a publication and website for Newfoundlanders living outside of Newfoundland (www.downhomer.com; see Audiography for other sources). I have seen these recordings in a variety of Newfoundland restaurants and stores in Ontario, of which there are more than thirty. I have been told that they are also sold in Newfoundland businesses in Alberta and British Columbia but have not yet observed this first hand. These are businesses that cater primarily to emigrant Newfoundlanders and sell traditional Newfoundland foods, Newfoundland books and newspapers, and various items demonstrating Newfoundland affiliation—for example, clothing, car decals, jewelry, flags, and crafts.

2. These roots are cited in Gordon Cox's study of Jim Pinsent (1977), Narváez's study of Harold Skanes (1978), Taft's study of Jimmy Linegar (1981), and Mac Swackhammer's study of Frank Squires (1990).

3. One of the most popular examples is Simani's "Any Mummer's Allowed In?" (see Gerald Pocius 1988). SWC Productions, who reproduce Ellis and Wince's albums, is owned by Simani's Bud Davidge. The name "SWC" is from their 1981 hit "Salt Water Cowboys," about Newfoundlanders living in Alberta.

4. In 1959, folklorist D. K. Wilgus first offered the comparative description of commercial recordings as modern broadsides (283).

5. In nonlocalized terms, we might consider Marx's phrase "rural-urban continuum," as presented by Raymond Williams in *The Country and*

the City; Narváez examines the role of this division in Newfoundland music in his essay on vernacular song and the northern cod moratorium (1997).

6. Neil Rosenberg examines the history of this stereotype and its relation to Newfoundland music and folklore in his article "The Canadianization of Newfoundland Folksong; Or, the Newfoundlandization of Canadian Folksong" (1994). Christie Davies argues that these jokes are closely connected to Newfoundland's geographical and historical separation from mainland Canada (1997).

7. Newfoundlanders often refer to the island as "The Rock," taking pride in their attachment to an often difficult environment.

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Chronological Audiography

All albums are self-produced. They are duplicated by SWC Productions (P.O. Box 77, English Harbour West, NL, Canada A0H 1M0; 709-888-5151). They do not contain issue numbers or copyright dates. Actual dates are given where known; approximate dates are indicated for all others. All are issued on cassette tape. Starting with *Harp and Hood*, each album is also available on CD. They are distributed by the Landwash Distribution Company, Ltd. (<http://www.landwashdistribution.com>) and by Ellis and Wince Coles under Winelco (<http://www.geocities.com/winelco>). They may be ordered online through Landwash Distribution, *Downhomer Magazine* (<http://www.shopdownhomer.com>), and Tidespoint (<http://www.tidespoint.com/music>), or by mail (Winelco, RR1 Box 212, Carmanville, NL, A0G 1N0).

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