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Robert Farnon Revisited
Part Two

I once observed to Bob that the only thing that has dated in those early London albums is the rhythm section sound. The rhythm sections of the old recordings had a plodding quality.

"The only album we had a good drummer on was *Sunny Side Up*," Bob said. "We had Phil Seaman. A serious drunk. Finally killed himself with a needle. Did you know him?"

"No, just of him."

"Pissed all the time. He was the one who was in the pit of *West Side Story* in London, and he fell asleep during a ballad. Someone nudged him for a cue coming up, and he grabbed his stick and accidentally hit the big gong. And he stood up grandly and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served.' He got fired that night."

Excepting *From the Emerald Isle* and *From the Highlands*, most of those albums were made up of standard popular songs. But the elegance of the orchestration was astounding. The tunes were mostly done at dance tempi, with dance-band brass but with flutes and other "classical" woodwinds rather than a sax section, a string section, and touches of color from vibes. Bob uses vibes for color more than any arranger or composer I've ever heard. All the arrangements were harmonically hip and notable for exquisite voice leading, every little line going somewhere intelligent and very musical. Recently I got these albums out, though they are hissy and worn, and listened to them anew. They remain as fresh as ever, nearly fifty years after they were made. One of their qualities is that even in melancholy or wistful ballads, there is a certain sunniness about them. It perfectly reflects Bob's personality.

I heard various influences in the writing, particularly and obviously Ravel and Debussy. They were affecting arrangers everywhere, to be sure, as was Stravinsky, who had a great influence on Ralph Burns and Neal Hefti. I thought I heard touches of Sibelius, particularly in the way Bob used woodwinds, and, later, when I asked him if he were a big Sibelius buff, he said, "Yes indeed."

Some of the charts and compositions Bob wrote for the Canadian band were later recorded. One of these was his composition *Jumping Bean*, written for a fairy tale done in one of the Canadian army's entertainment shows. He also wrote *Peanut Polka* during that period, and *Canadian Caravan*, the band's signature theme.

I did not at that time detect the influence of Delius on Bob's writing, for the good reason that I was not yet familiar with the music of Delius. "Oh yes!" Bob said in Miami. "All the French school. Fauré, Satie, Debussy, Ravel, and Delius, as you say." The English, understandbly, are discomfitted if Delius is referred to as anything but English. He was born In Yorkshire, but his parents were German, he spoke German at home, left England for Florida at eighteen, studied in Leipzig, and spent the rest of his life in France. And he was part of the French school.

"And Tchaikovsky," Bob said. "He was an influence in the early stages of my writing career. He could really write a tune." He sang two or three Tchaikovsky themes in illustration.

"And then I got on to Bartok, although I went through a Stravinsky period too, his ballet music. I didn't like some of his avant-garde music.

"I had the pleasure of meeting Bartok in 1945. It was an evening at the MacDowell Club in New York. MacDowell's wife owned the club. She started it after her husband's death. Bartok was there, and some of them did a Bartok quartet with Bartok and his wife playing the two-piano part. He was very ill by that time. It was a highlight of my life to meet this man. It was like meeting God.

"I so adored his music. I admire the way he developed the folk song of Hungary — so much better than Kodaly did. His orchestration, of course. And then his gentle use of atonality. He never overdid it, like some. He didn't go wild. He used it for a purpose that was very effective. He didn't write it mechanically, mathematically. He wrote it from the heart, even though some of it's atonal, and that's rare.

"In a lot of atonal music, the composers are the only ones who enjoy it. The musicians on the whole don't enjoy playing it. I found that out in my travels.

"I was invited to a session, produced by his son, Peter Bartok, a wizard recording engineer. They were recording most of Bartok's major works. It was such a pleasure to get to know him and talk about his father."

Probably no one on earth, at this point, knows the Farnon canon as well as Jeff Sultanof, for no one else has studied the scores as closely as he has in the process of restoring them.

"What I started to do was to get the main pieces that everyone knew, such as *Jumping Bean* and *A Star Is Born*," Jeff said. "And I wanted to get to some of the classic arrangements he did for English Decca. They were recorded *pretty* well, but I would never want to think about transcribing them. A lot of it had been destroyed in a fire at Chappell in 1964. For example, *Yes We Have No Bananas*, which is a classic arrangement, went up in flames. They had to put that catalogue back together, particularly the symphonic stuff. It took them years to find out what they'd lost.

"I knew that Bob had a huge library, a lot of it stuff that he was using for concerts. I made up a basic list and told him that I wanted to prepare definitive editions of these things. For instance, *Jumping Bean*. That had been published with only a piano-conductor part. You could get the parts but you could not get the full scores.

"Having been in publishing, I can tell you that the publisher was at first looking to get some extra mileage out of those pieces. Obviously there was some demand for them. They had been done for the Chappell library. They were recorded with a relatively

small orchestra, basically two flutes, one oboe, two clarinets, one bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, not even a tuba, maybe two percussion, maybe a tympani, harp, and strings. Except for rare occasions, the instrumentation was pretty consistent. Whoever did them at Chappell made his own piano conductor parts, because Bob said he never saw them.

"I was looking to study these things. I knew they had printed only parts. I said, 'Okay, this is something I've done before.' Because I used to buy old big-band things and make scores out of the parts. If you bought a big-band chart, there was only a one-line conductor part.

"So I would put them together, and find errors. The only way you could see there were errors was if you saw them with the other parts.

"And as happens in publishing, these things never get corrected."

The other problem was that all the Farnon pieces were out of print.

Jeff became involved in this restoration project while he was the editorial director of the Warner Brothers print-music division. Warner had long since bought Chappell.

"I took this on on my own," Jeff said. "The people at Warners didn't even know I was doing this. And the reason I was doing it was because I wanted to study the stuff. And I wanted to conduct it. I have heard performances of these things that were atrocities because the conductors had no scores. They were working from violin parts or piano-conductor scores.

"I got some of the material from the rental library — Schirmer had it at this point. It had gone around to so many rental agents, from pillar to post. A lot of these pieces were unknown in the United States. Whatever little you could find was mostly in bad photocopies. And some titles were completely missing from the library. One that was missing was *Gateway to the West*."

Gateway to the West is one of Farnon's many Canadian pieces, among them *Canadian Rhapsody, Prairie Sunset, Cascades to the Sea, Alcan Highway, Toronto City March,* and *North of the French River*. *Gateway to the West* was used as the theme for the David Susskind television show.

"First I had to find out what was physically in the United States that I could Xerox," Jeff continued. "Then I went to our British facility and got more from them. And I went to work on these pieces, in consultation with Bob.

"I've completed thirty of them now."

And he has done this work entirely on his own. No one is paying him to pursue this massive undertaking. "I've been looking for funding from the beginning," he said. "I don't know who to go to."

This labor of love led to a friendship with Marc Fortier, a fellow conductor, composer, and arranger who for several summers had conducted the Montreal Pops Orchestra. Marc too was interested in performing a good deal of the Farnon material but couldn't get his hands on it. What adds a spice of irony to the situation is that Marc is a past president of SOCAN, the Canadian performing rights society. It is Farnon's own society: he remains a member after all his years of absence from Canada. And even Marc Fortier couldn't get the stuff.

Jeff talked to the Chappell office in Toronto, swiftly learning that this branch of the company wasn't interested in Farnon's music — yet another of the slights Farnon has experienced in his native land.

"Even in England," Jeff said, "the attitude was that the music didn't get rented all that much, so why bother? Much of the stuff I did get from them was unplayable because it was unreadable. That is not unusual in rental libraries. A lot of pieces circulate in very poor condition.

"Take, for instance, Bob's piece *Colditz March*. Bob originally wrote it for a BBC series. It's a terrific march. There was one score that I received that he had written for the television series. In order to expand it for symphony orchestras, he wrote a second score, in which he filled in extra parts. There was no full score that contained all the parts. On top of which there was never a viola part. We had to add one. So I was putting together a master score, finally. Between the two of us, we finally got a score."

Whereas Jeff has been working to build the scores back up to their full size, Marc Fortier, interestingly, is involved in an inversion of that process, again with Bob's collaboration: he is scaling down the Farnon scores so that they can be performed by smaller community orchestras.

"I look at Bob as a composer who is an arranger, Jeff said. "His mastery of music is almost total. The lines that he writes! His music is extraordinarily linear. Gil Evans wrote that way. The individual parts are wonderful to play. They make incredible sense.

"What really attracted me initially were the arrangements. All the arrangers love his harmony. But his harmony is derived from linear writing. The way he would realize these things for orchestra was just extraordinary. And of course we all know about the string writing. Everybody has commented on it.

"But when I actually got these things on paper and looked at them, I realized there is no way you could transcribe them from the records. They're beautifully written for the players. They're beautiful to play. And they're great to hear. There are a lot of little subtle things going on.

"The market that he was writing for at the time was quote-unquote mood music. One of the albums was *Flirtation Walk*. Most of the pieces in it are mezzo piano, mezzo forte maybe, with a couple of little splashes of stuff. Then we get to a little dinky song, *Flirtation Walk*, a cute jaunty little thing. It goes along like most of the Muzak of that time. Then he does an eight-bar transition to a new section with muted brass. That eight bars is some of the finest music you'll ever hear in an arrangement. It is an atonal modulation. It does it in such a subtle way that if you're not listening, it'll fly by you. But if you're listening, you'll ask

yourself, 'Where the hell is he going?' And then he lands in this brass thing. And it's genius."

I pointed out to Jeff that some things of Farnon's I've always liked are actually bitonal and even walk on the edge of atonality. But the writing is so beautiful that you don't notice how radical it was for the time in which it was written; you are seduced by it. This doubtless reflects Bob's love of Bartok, and the lyrical and subtle way Bartok would use these techniques. But that he applied these things to popular music, and did so nearly fifty years ago, boggles the mind.

Jeff said, "For the listener who is not paying attention, this stuff will go right by you."

One of Farnon's best-known pieces is *Lake of the Woods*. It is inspired by one of the most beautiful lakes in Canada. Listening to it in the *Hornblower* album, I caught something I had never heard. Bob paraphrases *Afternoon of a Fawn*. Then against it he quotes Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*: the wolf and the deer, living on the shores of that lake. I asked Jeff if he'd ever noticed this.

"No!" he said.

"When we get off the phone, listen to it."

One of the persons who listened attentively to the Farnon records was an arranger from Georgia named Marion Evans. He remembers his first hearing.

"I was driving down a road in New Jersey," Marion said. "I had the radio on and I heard Rudolf Friml's *Donkey Serenade* on WNEW in New York. I pulled over to the side of the road and called WNEW and wanted to know who the arranger was. And they told me, 'Robert Farnon,' which meant absolutely nothing to me. That was in the early 1950s. It was a single, as I later found. Then a friend of mine told me, 'I know Bob Farnon.'

"Bob, I believe, at this time, was living in New Jersey." Marion right about this, and it identifies the year as 1954.

Bob had married a Canadian girl, Joanne Dallas, who sang with his wartime band. "In 1953," Bob said, "I went back to Canada with Joanne. I was getting offers to work in the States. We moved to Riverside, New Jersey, early in the spring of 1954. I started to write with a very dear friend of mine, Red Ginzler. He arranged an awful lot of shows, such as *Bye Bye Birdie*, and he offered me a show, *The Girl in Pink Tights*, which starred Zizi Jeanmaire.

"Shortly after I began to get established in New York, I got a telegram from Herbert Wilcox, to go back to England and do another film, *King's Rhapsody*, with Erroll Flynn and Anna Neagle. That took me back to England. And then even bigger jobs came up. Warner Brothers wanted me to do another film."

"As I recall," Marion said, "I wrote Bob a letter in London. Then I found out he was coming over here." Bob wrote the score for an American film, *Gentleman Marry Brunettes*. He even dubbed a singing voice for Scott Brady, who couldn't sing. The film was released in 1955.

"So while he was here, I gave a party for Bob," Marion said. "Anybody who wrote notes was there. Irv Kostal, Frank Hunter, Al Cohn, Eddie Sauter, Red Ginzler, Manny Albam, Earle Hagen. Everybody. Don Costa called in the middle of the party because he couldn't be there, but he wanted to meet Bob on the phone." Also present were Jimmy Dorsey, Urbie Green, and Milton Hinton. Quincy Jones, one of those who attended, said later that if a bomb had been fired at that party, there wouldn't have been another note of music written in New York for the next five years. "As I was getting the party together," Marion said, "one of Bob's greatest albums came out, *Two Cigarettes in the Dark*. And from the time everybody heard that first thing, that was it."

Bob's memory of the event is slightly different: he said, "It was shortly after I did the *Sunny Side Up* album, because they were playing it at the party." Probably they were playing both albums.

"Dizzy was playing at Birdland," Marion said. "About two o'clock in the morning, Quincy said, 'I think I'll go up and get Dizzy.'

"When Dizzy came in, he was joking and carrying on and he said to Bob, 'You know, you never could play the trumpet worth a damn.' And Bob said, 'Well, you know, the first time I heard you play with Cab's band, I just couldn't believe it. It just knocked me out. I went home and I made a lamp out of my trumpet and took up writing.'"

This was banter, of course. Dizzy told me that Bob played superbly; and Bob had begun writing before he met Dizzy. But the badinage was funny, and Milton Hinton, listening, said, 'Dizzy, that was the greatest contribution you ever made to music.'"

Marion Evans had begun his own postwar career, after service in the South Pacific with the Marine Corps, as an arranger for the Glenn Miller band led by Tex Beneke. (Ray McKinley, who had been offered the leadership, turned it down.) Helen Miller, Glenn's widow, apparently resented Beneke's growing prominence and obtained a court order for the confiscation of the band's book. It was delivered by a sheriff during an intermission at the Westchester Country Club. The book was huge. It took a half an hour, Marion said, for the deputies to haul it away. The sheriff chatted apologetically with Beneke until the saxophonist excused himself, saying he had to go back to work. He got on the bandstand and the band played the whole book from memory. Marion was then assigned to take down the book from recordings. "I wrote out at least a hundred of those Glenn Miller arrangements," he said. In those days you could not copyright an arrangement. You could take it down off a record and perform it with impunity: only the song itself was copyrighted; the treatment was not.

By the time Marion met Farnon, he was himself a reputed arranger in the recording studios, particularly noted for his own use of strings in albums by Steve Lawrence, Edie Gorme, Tony Bennett, and others. The arrangement on Tony Bennett's *Country Girl*, a song Bob wrote with a lyric adapted from a poem by Wordsworth, is Marion's. Marion's writing — and that of the late Don Costa, with whom Marion for a time was in partnership —

strikingly resembled Bob's, and like Johnny Mandel, he is completely unapologetic about it.

Further disseminating the Farnon influence, Marion founded an informal school for arrangers in his cluttered apartment on West 49th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Marion denies that it was ever a school, and in any case he refused payment from his students. "I'd get drunk and we'd talk about music," he said. He imposed two strict disciplines on his students: they had to study thoroughly the composition and harmony books of Percy Goetschius and the records of Bob Farnon. Through that "school" passed Patrick Williams, J.J. Johnson, Torrie Zito, Jack Cortner, and Nick Perito, and you can hear the Farnon influence in the writing of all of them.

Nor was Marion the only arranger to use the Farnon albums as teaching material. "We *all* used them for that purpose," Ralph Burns said.

Marion — who later gave up the music business, saying he was sick of writing music by the pound, to enter the world of finance — cast light on a factor in Farnon's career of which I had been unaware. James Caesar Petrillo, the inflexible and dictatorial president of the American Federation of Musicians who had called two disastrous recording bans, both of which helped end the big-band era, made still another lethal maneuver. In the early days of television, he demanded of the nascent stations and networks a five percent trust fund fee to the American Federation of Musicians off the top from the sale of every TV show that used music. This particularly applied to such dramatic shows as *Playhouse Ninety*.

By then Bob was well advanced in his writing of "library music" for Chappell in London, music that could be rented for underscore use in movies and television.

Marion said, "I think most of the music on American television during that period was Farnon's. Those original things of his were fantastic. On *Playhouse Ninety*, for example, the guy from Chappell would arrive with what looked like about six big telephone books, cross-indexed. And the director or producer would say something like, 'I want forty-one seconds of Hawaiian music in a chase scene here.' And the guy from Chappell would thumb open the books and go tracing through, and say, 'Okay. Next.' And he would write all this up, like somebody in a shoe department taking an order, and he would go back and build the tracks from Bob's recorded music.

"After a while, the producers began to say, 'We want another composer instead of Farnon now.' And the guy from Chappell would say, 'Okay, we'll use Joe Green,' or whoever, and send them some more music by Farnon. I think he wrote under half a dozen pseudonyms.

"The best of the things, later on, were recorded for albums."

Marion long ago told me that there was a march by Farnon that for some years was used as a signoff theme for seemingly half the television stations in America. And of course that meant that ASCAP was collecting money for all these performances and forwarding it to Farnon through the Canadian society, then CAPAC and now SOCAN. That one march alone made Bob an incredible amount of money. Was it, I asked Marion recently, the *Colditz March*? "I don't think so," Marion said. "He had all kinds of marches. He even had baseball marches. He wrote so many of them, I think he gave them numbers — you know, Baseball March 23. That stuff is played and played and played. Still."

Marion's evaluation of Farnon: "He just simply is the best," he said.

"He's a rare combination. Every once in a while, by some biological meeting, some cross-fertilization, we produce an Albert Einstein. We produce somebody who has the talent, the dedication, the training. Farnon had it all. And it was all in one place.

"Plus, through no fault of his own, he found himself in an incredible position in London, where he was standing in front of a large orchestra every day and writing. You do that for a while and you learn. And that's doing it the hard way.

"He had that rare combination of everything. He is exceptional by every standard.

"I think it's not really kosher to analyze Bob in a highly technical manner. It doesn't begin to touch the depth of his talent. Bob has enormous technique, but his talent far exceeds his technique, and so did Mozart's. And that is precisely what you want. Anyone can learn as much technique as Bob Farnon has by going to music school. But they don't have that extra edge.

"Mozart didn't write masterpieces all the time. He sat down and kept writing and let it flow. Bob has a lot of that in him. He's fast. He is one of the fastest writers I've ever known. He just does it, and that's it. He doesn't labor over it. When it's good, it's fantastic."

There are certain events that leave an indelible impression in one's life. The obvious are the outbreak of wars, the deaths of great leaders, and other dire occurences. And we remember happier events as well. Pianist and composer Alan Broadbent can remember the exact circumstances in which he first heard a Bill Evans record. Horace Silver remembers the first time he saw and heard the Jimmie Lunceford band. Leonard Feather remembered the first time he heard a Louis Armstrong record. And like Marion Evans, I can remember the first time I heard a Farnon record. It was in the record department of a furniture store on St. Catherine Street in Montreal. (There were few separate record stores in those days. Records were sold in adjunct departments of furniture stores, which also sold the phonographs on which they were played.)

There had been a few excursions into the full-orchestra presentation of the kind of high-quality popular music that evolved in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, notably Morton Gould's *After Dark* album on twelve-inch 78-rpm records, probably around 1946, and a ten-inch Capitol album by Frank DeVol of music by Jimmy Van Heusen that probably was issued about the same time as the first Farnon albums on London. By the early 1950s, there was a flood

of such albums. They became a fashion, albums by Frank Chacksfield, who had a huge hit with *Ebb Tide*, the Melachrino Orchestra, led by Bob's wartime colleague, and the Italian-born Mantovani in England; Franck Pourcel and Michel Legrand (whose *I Love Paris* album became one of the biggest hits in the history of Columbia Records) in France; and Hugo Winterhalter, Percy Faith, and Paul Weston in the United States. The level of taste varied widely, with Mantovani's saccharine strings at the bottom and Faith, Farnon, and Weston at the top. All of them were far more successful on records in America than Farnon. But he was the arranger whose albums arrangers themselves collected, like squirrels gathering nuts in autumn. Bob once said he thought that *only* arrangers bought those albums.

But I had never heard anything like this. The harmony was exquisite, fresh and adventurous; and if I could not analyze the voice leading I could certainly hear it. It was startling stuff, and I got my hands on as much of it as I could. Forty and more years later, I still have the London LPs I acquired at that time.

Bob said in 1984, "I wanted to enhance the popular song. When I do an arrangement of a popular song, I like to put some thought into it, not just dish it up in two choruses. Make it into a piece of music, a composition, tell a story."

As I have noted before, the experience of growing up in Canada was not in those days an easy one. As the Americans were culturally obeissant to Europe and patronizing toward their own composers, Canadians were obeissant to the United States. But beyond that, the smaller economy allowed no such proliferation of the arts as one found in the United States, and indeed Canada was soaked in American (and to a lesser extent British) novels and movies and songs and recordings, and it seemed as if everyone famous and accomplished was of another nationality, mostly American. This led to the unreasoned and unconscious assumption since no Canadian had ever accomplished anything, certainly not in the arts, none ever would. Few among us were aware of the enormous number of "American" film stars who were Canadians. The limitation of opportunities in Canada caused adventurous Canadians to leave.

The psychological effect of this great overshadowing was compounded by a quirk in the Canadian character, the unarticulated tenet that a seemly modesty is the ultimate and perhaps the only virtue. This does not encourage aspirations toward professions where high visibility is a requisite to getting work. Percy Faith's experience with the CBC was by no means unique. The playwright Bernard Slade, whose first dramas were written for the CBC, left in a huff not unlike that of Percy, and never looked back. Lorne Green told me that frustration with the CBC was the main reason he left Canada. When Christopher Plummer, who was born in Toronto, and I were discussing this cultural characteristic, he shook his head and said, "Oh Lord, it's a wonder any of us got out of there with any of our talent intact."

And so for me the discovery that the novelist Morley Callaghan and the arranger Robert Farnon (I was not yet aware of his compositions) were Canadians were milestones of my life.

"The effect on me was profound," I told Bob in Miami. "It was the discovery that a Canadian could actually do things — because we had grown up in the shadow of the Americans and didn't feel we could."

"I know what you mean," Bob said. "I used to have that same feeling."

Like Marion Evans, I became curious about the man behind this music. And in 1954, the *Montreal Star*, the newspaper where I was a reporter, covering fires and strikes and plane crashes and murders, assigned me to do some stories in England and France, both political and military. I covered, for example, the fall of the French government of Pierre Mendes France and the rise of Charles De Gaulle as a major political force. And one of the things I did in London was to arrange an introduction to Robert Farnon.

Bob said that after his brief residence in New Jersey and his return to England to write the score for *King's Rhapsody*, Warner Brothers asked him to do the score for a satiric western with Jayne Mansfield and Kenneth More. The film was *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw*.

"And that's when I met you," I said. "Muir Matheson conducted the recording session. I was there with you."

"That's *right*!" Bob said.

"I remember having lunch with you and Muir Matheson." It was at some countrified-looking English inn, probably with the half timbering that seemed so quaint to me then. "We were talking about Wagner and his almost interminable development of themes. And Muir Matheson said with his lofty and precise English accent, and I've never forgotten it, 'Yes, quite. I always want to take a blue pencil to him.'"

Bob laughed aloud, saying, "I remember that!"

"And Pye was at the same time recording an album of your writing, with a Welsh conductor named Jones."

"You're right," Bob said, "Leslie Jones. What a memory you have!"

"No I don't," I said. "What I have forgotten frightens me. That's why I keep trying to get history on paper."

Bob said. "It was the Kingsway Hall studio."

"Didn't they call it the Kingsway Hall Light Orchestra?"

"That's right!" Bob said.

I interviewed Bob at length about his wartime experiences and the rise of his career in England. I took photos. I returned to Montreal, determined to tell his story to Canada. My newspaper wasn't interested. The Sunday supplements weren't interested. The major national magazine, *Maclean's*, wasn't interested. I abandoned the story.

Bob remained in the London area for five years after that, living in Gerrard's Cross in Buckinghamshire. By 1959, He and wife Pat had one child and another was on the way. "We needed a larger place," Bob said. "A friend suggested we go to the island

of Guernsey and look around. And it didn't matter where I was. Being a writer, I work at home anyway. We went over one Easter and just fell in love with the place and that was it. We found a property and were moved in within six weeks. It's quite big. It has twenty-one rooms. It's got granite walls three feet thick, so that it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer."

Guernsey has another advantage: very low taxes.

The house is rather famous; musicians made pilgrimages to it. In 1983, Dizzy Gillespie arrived for a visit. It was the racing season. "We took him to the track," Bob said "Just for fun he took out his trumpet and played that race-course bugle call before the start of each race, with his trumpet up in the air and his African hat on. He broke up the island, because it's a very small place, and that Dizzy Gillespie was there was very important news."

Bob's preference, as a composer, is instrumental recording. But singers wanted him and began to travel to England to make albums with him. He wrote several for Tony Bennett, as well as *Sinatra Sings Great Songs from Great Britain*. He wrote an album for Lena Horne and Phil Woods, recorded in London in 1976 and released on the RCA label. It is of course out of print. Bob wrote for Sarah Vaughan and Pia Zadora. George Shearing wanted him, and he wrote an album for the pianist recorded by the MPS label; they have since collaborated on several albums. Polydor recorded his *Prelude and Dance*, written for the classical harmonica virtuoso (and Bob's fellow Torontonian) Tommy Reilly, as well as his *Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra*, with Steven Staryk as soloist.

There was one album that Bob desperately wanted to do, one that he wrote for Dizzy Gillespie and Oscar Peterson.

"We were going to record it in Berlin," Bob recounted. "A piece I wrote for Oscar, *The Pleasure of his Company*, and *Private Suite*, which I wrote for Dizzy. We were going to take over first-chair men because we weren't sure of the musicians in Berlin. First trumpet, lead alto, baritone, and of course Ed Thigpen and Ray Brown.

"Well the guys got talking in London, saying, 'We're going to Berlin to record with Oscar Peterson and Dizzy Gillespie.' And it got to the union. At that time musicians in Britain were not allowed to record in Europe. Well the British union got in touch with the American union and we got telegrams in Berlin, through Norman Granz, saying that if we made the album, we would all be suspended from the unions.

"And so we all went home with our tails between our legs, and the whole thing was shelved, although later I performed the first movement of the piano piece on television with Oscar in London."

But the two pieces have never been recorded, and now, *Private Suite* never will be. Dizzy is dead, and the score has been lost.

Bob and Pat continue to live in their grand manor in Guernsey. Their five children are all grown. Thus far Bob and Pat have four grandchildren.

David, the oldest of their four sons, has an M.A. in music from Cambridge University. He is a composer and piano teacher. "He teaches wonderfully," Bob said. "His knowledge of music history puts mine to shame. He wrote a lot of music for *The Muppet Show*. When he was first learning, I used to bring him in when I was doing a film. He did some of my copying and also did some work on the short scores that I did. He learned a lot about film. He's coasting along nicely and making a fortune, writing for the music libraries. He's living in Guernsey too.

"Robert, who's number two son, is a recording engineer in London. He's very musical. He didn't study music when he was younger, and he regrets it now. But he loves his work. He has an amazing ear.

"Number three son, Brian, is in Canada. He lives in Vancouver. He is an executive, with his own company, supplying music for films and television. He's thirty-one.

"Number four son, Peter, is a police detective, in the fraud squad of the Guernsey police. He used to play trombone, and very well. He's a big guy, about six foot six.

"We had four boys in a row and then a girl. Deborah lives in a cottage across from our house. She is a secretary who does temp work to pay for her horses. She loves horses and built a stable that she rents out."

Bob continues to travel extensively, recording and conducting concerts all over Europe. He has done very few concerts in Canada. Over the years I have tried to remove or at least mitigate the Canadian indifference toward him, to little avail. Some years ago, I wrote and narrated a one-hour program about him for the CBC radio network. Ten minutes into the broadcast the time was usurped for a news report about the American astronauts on the moon. The big news was that they were sleeping. This soporific reportage maundered on for the rest of the hour. The Farnon broadcast was never repeated and is now lost.

"What do you think is the reason for it?" Bob said in Miami. "Is it because I went away?"

"No," I said. "It's because you're Canadian."

Bob's most ardent admirer remains his brother Brian.

Brian said, "You have no idea, and Bob has no idea, how insane I am about my brother's work. Bob would never know. When I have tried to tell him, he just says, 'Ah, you're my brother. You're just saying that.'

"Recently I was driving down to Concord . . ." he was referring to Concord, California " . . . and had a jazz program on the radio. Here comes this piece of music with a trombone player and Orchestra, and I kept saying, 'God *damn* it, that's gotta be Bob. It has to be.' There was nobody in the car with me. The background chart was incredibly impeccable. It was wonderful. And at the end of it the announcer said, 'That was J.J. Johnson with Robert Farnon and his orchestra.' And I couldn't contain myself. Out loud I said, 'God *damn* it, Bob, I knew that was you.'"

Three years ago, I was invited to do a week-long series of

seminars on lyric-writing at a special summer camp near St. Hilaire, Québec, which is about thirty miles east of Montreal in apple-orchard country on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River. The location is ten or fifteen miles from the start of what are called the Eastern Townships, birthplace of another Canadian who went off adventuring, a long time ago: Bat Masterson.

The director of that summer camp was my conductor and composer friend Marc Fortier. Marc was born in Jonquiere, Quebec, on December 7, 1940.

I had been under the impression that only English-speaking Canada practiced a demoralizing indifference toward its own arts and artists. Marc assured me darkly that the attitude in French Canada was much the same. Many of Québec's best artists go to Paris, and the brilliant concert pianist André Laplante lives in New York City. Marc too has tried to generate interest in Bob's work in Canada. He has had as much success as I have.

When I reminded Marc that Ann Murray had been given the order of Canada (as has Wayne Gretzky) but Farnon had not, he commented a little tartly:

"We are a nation of folk singers," and pointed out that the Montreal Symphony recently received the French Grand Prix du Disque, possibly for the tenth time.

"That orchestra," he said, "is the best symphony orchestra in the world. It is possibly the best symphony orchestra in history. I'm not the only one to say that. Many critics have said it.

"But if you go to Place des Arts in Montreal when it is performing, the place is not full, as it should be. There are almost no French Canadians there.

"If I were thirty-five, I would leave, probably for London. New York would be my second choice. But I'm fifty-four and I have kids and it's too late."

That week in the summer of 1992 was lovely. There were about thirty adult students, half of them music teachers. Only a few spoke English, and my seminars were in French. Marc would help me when I got stuck for a word, and since I'd had little occasion to speak French lately, there were lapses.

The camp was housed in the Gault Estate, a vast old stone mansion with a high-peaked snow-shedding slate roof, a handsome building in the French colonial style typical of Québec. It is managed by McGill University. Three times a day we were served gourmet food by the building's staff at a long table whose large window looked out on a round lake on the slope of a forested mountain. One can scarcely imagine a more Canadian setting.

The London Philharmonic recording of Bob's *Hornblower Suite*, which also contains *A la claire fontaine*, had just come out. That song runs deep in the French Canadian soul. Marc said that most French Canadians knew it by the age of three; or used to, in a time before rap and rock. One theory is that it was composed by a fourteenth or fifteenth century French juggler. Whoever composed it, it is said to have been sung in Canada by Champlain's men as far back as 1608. It has been orchestrated many times, but no one has treated it the way Farnon did.

Marc analyzed it. The melody is extremely simple. Marc said, "It's a ritournelle of four couplets totaling, in four-four time, only six measures, repeated four times.

"The traditional metronome marking is eighty to the quarter note, which gives a thematic element of nineteen seconds. Robert Farnon made of this a seven-minute symphonic poem. It's a masterpiece."

One night at dinner, Marc played it for us. When it was over, someone at the table said, "Play it again."

The words are about a young man who has lost his love, through no fault of his own, as he sees it.

A la claire fontaine
M'en allant promener
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné.

After this swim in the fountain, he dries himself under an oak. On its highest branch, a nightingale sings happily. Sing, nightingale, he says, sing. You who have a heart so gay, a heart to laugh, and I have one to cry.

The lyrics are gentle, poignant, and beautiful.

I added another dimension to the experience of that piece that evening. I told my companions how Bob had come to write his version of it: as a gentle transition to civilian life after the horrors of the war.

Many people who lived along the banks of the St. Lawrence remember the troop ships coming up the river at war's end, soldiers leaning over the rails to catch their first view of home, French- and English-speaking alike. Bob uses flutes and clarinets to suggest the nightingale of the story. The introduction uses vibes for a subtle reinforcement of low strings, in a counterfigure that underlies the song's melody, stated in high strings without vibrato. The piece builds to a great and yet controlled climax, and as it subsides, there is what sounds like a distant and half-forgotten bugle call from the muted brass, a receding memory of war. I have no idea whether Bob did this consciously, and by now neither does he, but it *is* the effect it has.

Marc went back to the CD player and repeated it. And he played it yet again. And again. I said, "That's our *Finlandia*," and Marc said, "Yes. It should be our national anthem."

There were six or eight of us at the table. Listening to the music and looking out at the forest and the evening waters, everyone became very quiet. There was one teacher whose face I will never forget. He was burly, and he looked like a tough guy — which thought had to be tempered by the knowledge that he played just about every instrument known to man and was a graduate of the Sorbonne. I watched him struggling to hold back the tears.

He failed, and when he did, we all did.

There wasn't a dry face at the table.

Recommended Records

Anyone wishing to take part in the Robert Farnon Appreciation Society should write to:

David Ades
Stone Gables, Upton Ln
Seavington St. Michael
Ilminister, Somerset
TA19 OPZ England

For those unfamiliar with Farnon's work, I would recommend:

Joe Williams: *Here's to Life*, Telarc CD-83357. Joe was seventy-five when he and Farnon recorded this album in London in 1993. His voice not only is not gone, it doesn't even seem to be going. The orchestra comprises sixteen violins, three violas, three celli, two basses (including the incredible Chris Lawrence, one of the greatest bassists I have ever heard), four woodwinds plus oboe, three French horns, three trombones, drums, the outstanding Irish guitarist Louis Stewart, harp, piano doublin celeste and DX-7.

George Shearing: *How Beautiful Is Night*, Telarc CD 83325. The Shearing quintet sound - vibes, piano, and guitar in block voicings — is used with the Farnon orchestra, which is slightly smaller than that on the Joe Williams album. Shearing does a performance of *Heather on the Hill* that will take your breath away. A great album.

Frank Sinatra, *Great Songs from Great Britain*, Reprise 9 45219-2. Recorded in June, 1962, in London. What is wrong with this album is not what Sinatra thought it was. His voice does sound a little worn, but that only adds to its humanity. What is wrong is the songs. Benny Green, the perceptive British writer and expert on popular music, in the notes to the original album, refers to the "handful of oustanding British popular songs." Is he suggesting that there is only a handful? Certainly most of those in this album aren't very good, from *We'll Gather Lilacs in the Spring* through *Roses of Picardy* to *A Garden in the Rain*, all of them mawkish. Exception: the lovely *A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square*. But the album is historically interesting, the only collaboration between Sinatra and Farnon.

There are three albums by **Eileen Farrell** and Farnon on the market. Two are on Reference Recordings, *This Time It's Love* (RR-42-D) and *It's Over* (RR-46-D). The third, *Here*, is on Elba 95008-2). The album recently recorded in London and Miami hasn't yet found a label. Farrell's phrasing for meaning is thoughtful and she has the kind of control of dynamics that only opera singers have, yet doesn't have that rigid time one usually finds in opera singers venturing into popular music. The techniques are different, and she understands this.

Robert Farnon and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, *Captain Horatio Hornblower RN*, Reference Recordings RR-47CD. This album is made up of the suite from *Hornblower* and other of Bob's concert pieces, including *State Occasion, A Promise of Spring, Intermezzo for Harp, Rhapsody for Violin*, and two of Bob's "Canadian" pieces, *Lake of the Woods* and *A la claire fontaine*. The distribution of records being what it is, you might have trouble finding this CD, though it is not an old one. I have arranged with Tam Henderson, the president of the company, to get some for Jazzletter readers. If you want me to order the album for you, send the Jazzletter $17. I'll wait a month, then order them for everybody, and after that it's closed off. So too with:

Robert Farnon, *At the Movies*. This album was put out by Bob's manager, Derek Boulton, on Derek's own label. The label is called Horatio Nelson Records. Derek said without a smile, "We can't get distribution in France." To which I replied, also without a smile, "Change it to Napoleon Records."

The aforementioned albums show off Bob's brilliance in accompaniment and in concert music. But this album on Derek's label shows his stunning ability to transfer the slightest popular songs into orchestral gems. There are twenty-four tracks in the album, the first six dating from the days before stereo; the other eighteen are in stereo.

You cannot get this CD at all in North America. So I have arranged with Derek to buy some of them direct from him for Jazzletter readers. Again, send the Jazzletter $17 if you want the album, and, again, I want to hold this open only for a month, send Derek one order, and when the CDs arrive, get them off to you.

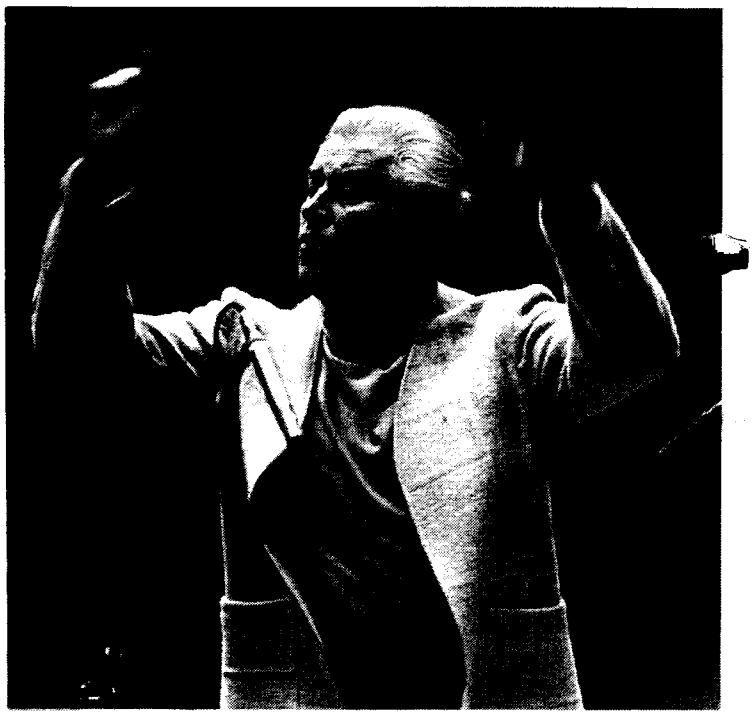

Photo by Derek Boulton