

By Dylan shall they be measured

SOME DAY SOON
Essays on Canadian Songwriters

BY DOUGLAS FETHERLING
Quarry Press, 176 pages, \$16.95

REVIEW BY MARK MILLER

SOME *Day Soon*, the song that gives literary critic Doug Fetherling's collection of essays about five Canadian songwriters its title, was written by Ian Tyson. Now Tyson is as Canadian as songwriters come, but he is not one of Fetherling's chosen five. They are, instead, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Robbie Robertson and Neil Young. Nor does *Some Day Soon*, as a title, appear to have much connection to the book as a whole. It suggests some expectation of things to come, while the best work of these five — according to Fetherling's commentary — is some years behind them.

The title is not, however, without use. In Fetherling's only reference to the Tyson song, he calls it "a tune rich in implication and intellectualized emptiness," a description that half begins to apply to the book. "Rich in implication," it surely is. "Intellectualized emptiness," however, is too harsh. *Some Day Soon* alternately rambles and races through Fetherling's CanLit ideas on CanMus.

His subjects have a few things in common, though probably not as many as Fetherling would like the reader to believe. For a start, all five appeared on the international stage in the mid-1960s, flourished in the 1970s and have continued to work, with varying degrees of vigour, into the 1990s. Three — Mitchell, Robertson and Young — have lived in the United States for some 25 years.

The timing of their emergence internationally places them squarely in what Fetherling calls "the age of Bob Dylan" and, by extension, in the context of the U.S. folk movement. Clearly, the author measures songwriting skills by Dylan, and the Canadians inevitably fall short. They are, moreover, introduced by Fetherling in isolation — back home. Gradually, they come to serve as points of reference for each other, but nowhere in *Some Day Soon* is there the sense that they were, and remain, part of a much larger group of similarly occupied, and similarly preoccupied, Canadian songwriters and singers.

Fetherling nevertheless likes his subjects — in a generally detached way. He shows a clinical respect for Lightfoot's methods, generates some warmth for Cohen (a poet and novelist before he began recording in 1967) and Robertson (an associate and disciple of Dylan), and eventually settles on the positive side of his apparent ambivalence about Mitchell.

His feelings about Neil Young are harder to determine, although they seem to be upbeat. The Young chapter — the last and the shortest — reads like an afterthought. Indeed, this essay and a circuitous preface that begins "Laura Nyro's name is the answer to a trivia question that no one ever asks," give the packaging of the book a hasty look that belies the long and hard thought that has gone into most of it.

Fetherling's approach is several parts literary criticism and one small part musicology. By setting both music and musician, or lyric and lyricist, against a foreign and somewhat one-dimensional backdrop, Fetherling suggests that most of his subjects are at best unfulfilled, at worst rather tortured. Those who now live in the United States are outsiders looking in — his Mitchell becomes "a kind of rock 'n' roll Tocqueville." The stay-at-home Lightfoot is somehow disconnected from the folk tradition, distanced "from the roots of the music he was imitating." Cohen, meanwhile, "the doleful loner with the zippers on his wrists," is simply of another time.

As much to the point in such a study might have been Fetherling's thoughts, for example, on Lightfoot songs in relation to those of someone like Ian Tyson or the late Stan Rogers — the same Stan Rogers who merits nary a mention in *Some Day Soon*. Tyson and Rogers are not, however, Bob Dylan. Which seems to account for the difficulty Fetherling has with the others. They're not Bob Dylan either.

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