

Enoch Kent's Scots folk reborn in powerful new album

by Greg Quill (Toronto Star)

"A bit of a break" is the way veteran Scottish folksinger Enoch Kent describes his 36-year absence from the recording studio.

He immigrated to Canada in the late 1960s working as a schoolteacher, then a graphic designer, but never stopped writing, never stopped playing guitar, never stopped singing

The Farm Auction

by Enoch Kent

A rusting tractor on the hill
The fence post with the printed bill
That said the sale was on until
Everything was gone

Chorus:

*The auctioneer comes here today
Privacy upon display
The highest bidder takes away
But they can't take it all*

The letter came on a Wednesday
The bank said that we'd have to pay
Or else they'd take the farm away
And they said they'd take it all

There's bone and silver napkin rings
Elastic bands 'round spoons and things
Tiny fingers held the strings
Of that fiddle in the case

And there's coffee pots we never used
Silver frames a little bruised
Around the portraits that amused us
In the parlour and the hall

Like fireglow and favourite songs
And laughter, they're the things among
The memories that still belong
Within those empty rooms

O remember when the lights were low
Pies, balloons, and mistletoe
Morning sunlight on the snow
Who will buy a broken sleigh?

There's a jar of nails and a box of tacks
The dining chairs with the wicker backs
They're in the garden piled and stacked
And being spotted by the rain

The auctioneer comes here today
Cars line the sidewalk black and grey
Children watch the odd display
While their mothers touch the lots

That are numbered now with coloured tags
Books and clothing sold in bags
Bought for learning. Bought for rags
Everything must go

for himself in his Etobicoke home.

"If it hadn't been for a handful of people badgering me to get some songs onto a record, I'd probably not have done it," Kent explains in a rich and raspy, full-throated Glasgow burr. "I kept asking them, what's the point?"

He's talking about *I'm A Workin' Chap*, a collection of 15 powerful, evocative and quite beautifully performed ballads - some from the traditional Scottish repertoire, most of them originals, or original lyrics paired with ancient folk airs, all of them squarely in the Extreme Folk mold, but far from mouldy.

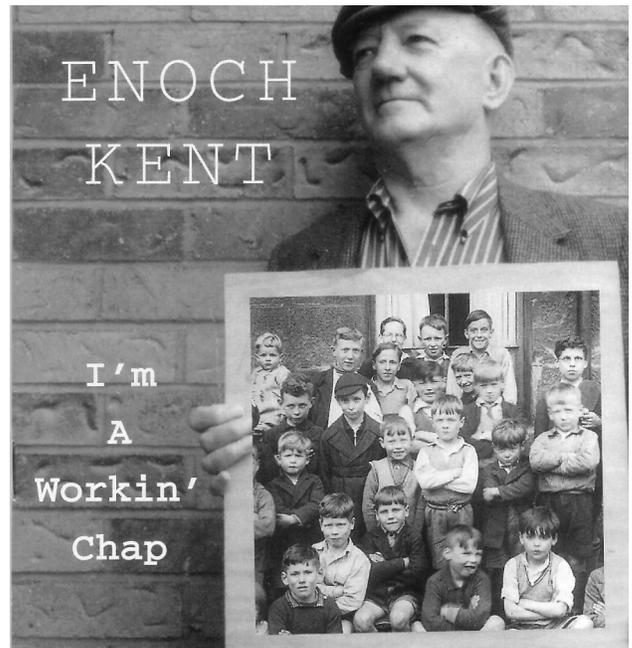
The album is an instant classic, an all-but-flawless exercise in folk art and craft, combining perceptive, brave and often provocative lyrics. Kent's political faith is as

strong as his love of a wry and ribald ditty - with graceful melodies, sparsely embellished with guitar arpeggios, some fiddle and flute, and a seasoned singer's unwavering commitment to conveying the full meaning of what he knows are songs of the very highest quality.

Now retired, and a good 20 years after he last performed at the Mariposa Folk Festival, Kent has recently rediscovered the joys of public performance. Earlier this year he was invited to sing at the Edinburgh Festival, where he was welcomed at half-a-dozen performances by admiring young fans, many of them singers and writers inspired by Kent's own early work.

"I was astonished that they knew me at all, but when they started quoting songs and singing bits and pieces of The Exiles' repertoire . . . weel, who'd have thought? And what they're singing and writing about are the same things we were doing, back in the CND (Committee for Nuclear Disarmament) and anti-apartheid marches, when they called us pinkos and commies - big things, big ideas about political and social systems and war and greed, the stuff that can change the way people think.

"Maybe they were the children or the grandchildren of the people back home I used to know. . ."



"I was waiting for a reason to make a record," says Kent, the 70-year-old singer and songwriter, founding member in the 1950s and early '60s of folk revivalist stalwarts *The Reivers* in his native Glasgow, and then *The Exiles* in London. Kent is also the founder of the "Hour Club" which supports the Scottish Studies Foundation. His CD is priced at \$20 with \$5 going to the Foundation. For information call Second Avenue Records, toll-free at 1-888-923-3879 or e-mail: info@secondavenue.ca

His wellspring is still the stories of the working people and hard-minted ideals of the hometown Kent says he occasionally visits, "but not often enough."

In one song, "My Father's Cause," he laments not being able in the new millennium to explain to his grandchildren the reasons for acts of terrorism and of the murderous retribution of the wealthy and powerful.

"It's a different world, but the same things still make my blood boil. When I read in the newspaper that the Singer company, which made the sewing machine my mother made all our clothes on, was now making guidance systems for nuclear weapons... I had to write a song."

The same thing happened when, a few years ago, Kent witnessed the sad finality of a bank-enforced farm auction.

The song that tells of that experience, "The Farm Auction," has been recorded by half-a-dozen other artists - never till now by Kent himself - and is well established in the traditional song repertoire.

"People pass it along as if it were a folk song, as if it was always there," Kent chuckles. "That makes me so proud ... knowing that there's something out there, something I made, that someone else finds useful." ■