

A Whisper in the Wind – An HBO Scenario

by Geoffrey Clarfield (May 2015)

“An Imaginary Event”

Home Box Office-HBO. When we all thought TV was on its way out, along came the many Home Box Office created series, soap operas and cliffhangers designed for the intelligent, college educated viewer of 20th and 21st century North America. These offerings have included Deadwood, the Sopranos and a host of other series whose characters are now part of our imaginative universe and, who reflect who we are, where we thought we came from, and where we think we might be going. Perhaps the most popular of all is, or was, the Sopranos, which can be summarized as “the Godfather comes to the suburbs.”

As a Canadian who has seen many of these series, I have always marveled at the historical imagination behind them. For example, Carnivale, is a tale of a conflict between good and evil among a group of Carnies in the southwestern dustbowl, who become part of a wandering circus during the height of the depression. As there is a supernatural and theological dimension to the series, it externalizes much of the inner life of what must have gone on during those times, as perhaps the victims of the dustbowl, almost all from serious Protestant or Catholic backgrounds, must have thought that the depression was punishment from God for their individual sins.

And so not long ago, when a life long time friend, Ken Ramm sent me a clip of music that drew on so much of the tradition that informed Alan Lomax’s recordings of the blues men of the deep south, instead of writing a musical critique, which I had been asked to do, and writing about whether I thought the melodies and arrangements were appropriate and evocative, my mind took a creative turn, or as I have come to understand, created an “imaginary event,” short treatments of ten episodes of a TV series that I could see in my mind’s eye.

On the basis of so many childhood and teenage summers spent among the lakes, rivers, forests and backroads of northern Ontario, I became possessed by characters and a story line that I invented, set in and around the town of Bancroft Ontario, sometime during the 1930s, when although suffering terribly from the depression, its people still farmed, traded and supported the timber trade there.

In retrospect I realized that I have tried to create characters that are believable and reflect the peculiar nature of Canadian interpersonal relationships. So, without further ado, allow me to introduce you to the first season of what I call "A Whisper in the Wind." Knowing that TV series like these are supported by music I have mostly chosen songs from the Alan Lomax Archive, appending one piece as the theme for each episode.

I can see it all in my own mind's eye and, hear it in my mind's ear. I hope that you can too.

"A Whisper in the Wind"

(Music video courtesy of musician Ken Ramm and film maker Jocelyne Lanois)

"A Whisper in the Wind" is a proposed HBO series set in rural southern Ontario during the Great Depression, around 1936. It is about the small town of Bancroft, where about one hundred people manage to subsist working for and around the Canadian National Pacific Railroad. Nothing ever seems to happen in Bancroft but, something always does, even if it is just the remarkable tales told by clients in a restaurant.

The series revolves around Carla, who is in her early twenties, and who scrapes out a living as a cook, owner and waitress in a one person restaurant that serves the townspeople and the men who come on the railway, sometimes just for a few days and sometimes just for a few hours. Carla, an unusually good looking young woman with a trace of Metis descent in her dark hair and high cheekbones, is wise beyond her years.

Carla's parents died of grief when they lost their savings in the crash of 1929. She inherited their last asset, the restaurant, and was left to fend for herself. She is often the wanted or unwanted listener to a host of tales told to her by the men and women who frequent her restaurant, until the train fills up with lumber and/or passengers and moves on.

Each episode usually begins with Carla serving up generous portions of bacon and eggs and endless coffee to these men and sometimes women, who in many most cases have been reduced to working on the railway or, illegally riding its empty boxcars, or in some cases, appearing deceptively well off.

Episode Number One-The Man with the Russian Accent.

Carla is forced to listen to a brief history of the Russian revolution, the family background of the man speaking, and the tortuous ups and downs of his desire to bring about a revolution in Central America. After a long and interesting story he gets up to go. He leaves behind a

gold Russian rouble and a calling card. We find out that he is actually Leon Trotsky on his way to what he thinks is a refuge in Mexico, and where Stalin's hit men will soon kill him in his bed with an axe.

(Music for this episode, "Stirma-Diana Nurmukhamatova," 1964: courtesy of the Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Number Two-The Woman Who Got Away

A young woman of charm and sophistication claims to be a physician who has been tasked by a wealthy family in Toronto to find their runaway daughter, someone with a multiple personality disorder and who frequently disappears for days at a time. This time she has been gone for a week so the family has hired her female doctor to find her. She talks a lot about Sigmund Freud and the charming Dr. Jones who was advising her on the case (in real life Jones was a Freud disciple who practiced psychoanalysis in Toronto for a few years).

As the story is told, we see many interesting scenes of life in Old English Toronto. When the woman leaves, Carla goes outside and chats with the dishwasher, a wounded Irish Canadian named Brendan, left with one leg from the Great War and together, through analyzing the inconsistencies of the story they figure out that the young woman is actually the runaway that her family is trying to find.

(Music for this episode: Brendan Behan, "The Zoological Gardens," Alan Lomax Archive, 1951)

Episode Three-The Man With Too Many Wives

An American from the deep south shows up and tells his tale of woe. Once a wealthy plantation owner he is down on his luck and plays card games in travelling Medicine Shows for bets and wagers. He gives a good rendition of what Circus life was like there, daring escapes from wild animals, hurricanes, tents that fall in on the crowds and tricks that did not work. He is a man with a soft spot for the ladies and tells of a series of women who broke his heart. He leaves and the next day, two of his ex wives show up looking for him.

(Music for this episode: Spencer Moore, "The Girl I Left Behind," 1959, Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Four-The Man With Itchy Fingers

A young man walks in one day and tells Carla that he wants to confess to a crime. He tells her that he often courts young women and just after he charms them and they agree to marry him he strangles them and hides the body. He has done this three times and wants to confess. Carla is quite shaken up by this and in a rare thunderstorm the lights go out in the restaurant. She is alone and is looking for an oil lamp to light when the guest attacks her. They have a heroic struggle and are saved by Brendan who was bringing a light inside the restaurant. He grabs the ornamental rifle that is always above the bar, knocks out the stranger and they drag him to the constable's office, quite shaken up. (Here we see the beginning of a budding romance between the war amputee and the young woman which will flower as a sub plot during the first season and which will end in an episode where they fall into a river filled with logs and have to be saved from certain destruction. That last episode ends with their marriage ceremony and which ushers in the second season where more of the townsfolk join in the drama).

(Music for this episode: Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson, "The Banks of the Ohio," 1961, Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Five- The Woman Who Liked to Sing

A young woman who sings English ballads is passing through on her way to Vancouver where she will become the governess of an English family. She tells a tale of growing up in England and moving from family to family where she picked up old English ballads and which she sings to the accompaniment of Brendan's fiddle and mandolin as she recreates her tale. But all is not as it seems with the young woman and she has furtive dealings with the constable in town. Brendan and Carla believe that the constable, Jonny Copp, is having an illicit relationship with her. This is made even more contentious when Brendan and Carla break into the room of the young woman and find a suitcase filled with Nazi documents.

Guns in hand they approach the police station and confront Jonny who then swears them to secrecy. He is actually working for the British secret service and the young woman is on her way to Ottawa to brief the government about the inevitable war with Germany and Canada's crucial role in the conflict.

(Music for this episode: Sheila Kay Adams; "Little Margaret," 1982, Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Six-Yankee Go Home

An American fur trapper walks into the restaurant and cannot remember his own name. He tells

them a story of leaving for the north to live as a hunter in northern Ontario. He can recall all and every aspect of the life of a trapper but nothing about his life before and after. They call Dr. Cobb who brings him to the clinic and puts him under hypnosis. It appears that the trapper had a traumatic experience when he trespassed on an ancient Indian burial ground. Carla, drawing on her Indian connections brings in a shaman who exorcises the man. He then remembers his name, goes to the local bank, and finds out that he has hundreds of dollars to his name and vows to go back to Arkansas to support his family who no doubt are suffering from the depredations brought on by the dust bowl.

(Music for this episode: Tommy Jarrell, "Sweet Sunny South," 1983, Courtesy of the Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Seven-The Circus Comes to Town

Everyone in town is all fired up as the circus is coming to town. Despite Carla's almost absolute need to watch the restaurant, she hands it over to Brendan and joins the crowd. We see a variety of old circus acts and we witness the incredible feats of the flying Fratelli Brothers who have a young daughter who is a marvelous acrobat and whose presence over a few days draws so many admirers that it practically empties the town.

Meanwhile each day, someone in town is being robbed and by the last day of the circus Jonny Copp is beside himself with doubt as to his capacities to uphold the law. Things are disappearing left right and centre and the fortuneteller attached to the circus looks like an obvious suspect.

The local pastor Reverend Clark is having an affair with the wife of the lawyer of the town and they use the Circus as a way to meet in the church to have carnal knowledge of each other. They witness the daughter of the circus carrying off the church's brass candlesticks. The next day the Reverend Clark reports them missing.

Jonny Copp has just finished interviewing the famous trapeze artist when he excuses himself to take a leak in the Jonny on the spot. It is occupied and out comes the trapeze artist who he was just interviewing. Holding in his desire to pee he grabs her by the arm and goes back to find out that she is the twin daughter who has been robbing the town blind. She is a living alibi.

The episode ends with the local judge Mr. Peterson sentencing the circus to give a free performance for all of the passengers of the next incoming train and for all the Indians from

the local reservation who are so excited about the circus that they set up a pow wow and invite the citizens to dance. They are allowed to build a sweat lodge and all the notables are obliged to sit in it as a sign of their appreciation of the pow wow. The last scene is a bunch of fully clothed men and women trying to smile as the temperature rises in the sweat lodge.

(Music for this episode: Alan Lomax – Italian treasury – Sicily – “Suonata For Bagpipe And Triangle – Maletto – Catania,” Alan Lomax Archive)

Episode Eight-The Gold of 1812

A man walks into Carla's restaurant and orders breakfast. He is clearly an Englishman of the upper classes. He is vague to the extreme and explains to Carla that he has come to town to “look for something that was lost a long time ago.” He asks where he can find guides, outfitters and people who will dig. She calls Brendan who takes him into town. Eventually, he hires a group of ex-cons who make their living as camp maintainers for the railway repairs.

Using a very old map he takes them far into the forest where they set up camp. He tells them that he looking for the Old Indian meeting place and he has a map. They dig here and there and find nothing. After a while, the men start getting curious and a bit menacing. One evening they attack their employer and tie him to a tree. They run off with the map.

The man is in shock. He is losing water and after twenty-four hours loses consciousness. He has a vision of an exchange between an Indian Chief and a British officer (Sir Isaac Brock and the Indian Chief, Tecumseh) and in his vision he sees a chest of gold coins pass from Brock to his ally during the war of 1812, more than a century before. He sees that it is happening in a river bend with a unique rock in the middle of the river. He wakes up and manages to extract his hands from the bonds and eventually breaks free.

He goes running to the river to drink, looks up and sees the rock downstream.

He goes to the rock and swims around it. Diving this way and that he starts pulling up rocks from the shallow riverbed. He hits something with his foot and then starts digging furiously. He finds the case and drags it out of the water. To his amazement he bangs it open with a rock and it is filled with gold coins.

Energized by his find he walks back to town, comes into Carla's restaurant looking like a ghost, asks for food and tells her the story. She then sends Brendan to Jonny Copp who takes the treasure and gives him a receipt. The next day Judge Dawson holds an inquiry and declares

that according to English law the treasure belongs to the finder with a five percent payment to the crown.

The stranger orders up a feast for the town and we see some really good Celtic singing and dancing in the next scene. People come from miles around and the treasure is displayed under armed guard.

As the man prepares to leave he is served with a notice from the judge. They had telegraphed Ottawa and then telegraphed London who told him that the man had defrauded his family of 100,000 pounds to go and look for treasure for five years. The man is arrested and after the equivalent in gold is sent to Ottawa under armed guard he is released with five thousand dollars, a king's ransom in the depression, but much smaller than he expected. We see him moving west on a first class coach. Carla then goes to the post office and finds that an envelope with ten gold pieces was put in her name with thanks for all of her hospitality and help.

(Music for this episode: Cyril Poacher, "Young Man from the Country," Alan Lomax Archive, 1953)

Episode Nine-And the Dead Shall Rise Again

Carla is cleaning up one evening when a man walks into her restaurant. He orders beef and potatoes. He sits down to eat and Carla breaks into a cold sweat. She walks over to him and politely tells him that he is the spitting image of her father. He tells her that that is why he is there. He is her father's twin brother of whom her father never told her.

Carla is touched to discover that she has family. She takes him in and gives him a waiter's job. He does a marvelous job of it and Carla feels that this is a most wonderful accident. They go fishing together. They play croquet and he tells some great yarns. He confesses that he is a spiritualist and Carla helps him set up series of séances where men cry and women faint as they hear the voices of their dead sons who died in the trenches in the Great War. The relationship is nearly perfect.

Brendan, who has romantic inclinations towards Carla is suspicious. He takes Jonny Copp into his confidence. One day when her uncle is out fishing they come into his room and go through his things. They find a series of war diaries and an unfinished novel in her late father's hand, loosely based on the people in the town. They confront the man who breaks down and explains that he is not her uncle. He was in the trenches with her late father. He was jealous

of his literary ability and stole the unfinished novel. After the war his conscience got the better of him. When he heard that Carla's father had died he vowed to come and make amends. But when he saw Carla and she mistook him for his uncle, he just fell into the charade and could not get out of it.

They take him to the Judge who insists that he do community service in the library; twelve readings of the 12 unfinished chapters of her late father's novel. The first story is about an impostor who comes to town and claims to be someone's twin brother.