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ENTERTAINMENT

Up From Spud Country

Stompin' Tom Connors, the rising star of Canadian country music, is the first to concede that "I'm not a good singer and I'm not a great guitar player." To a purist, his singing often resembles the cry of a large animal in distress. The 120-odd songs Connors has written and recorded are mostly pretty silly, too. Yet when Stompin' Tom played in Toronto's venerable Massey Hall a fortnight ago, Mayor David-Crombie and Alderman John Sewell were in the enthusiastic audience. So were some fans who brought with them the unmistakable aroma of Connors' beer parlor background. "When I first started out I thought that country music fans were from the country," Connors says. "But I'm beginning to find that they're everywhere."

Connors is as much a social phenomenon as a musical one. A lean Maritimer with a guileless, rough-diamond charm, he speaks to the small town in every man. He has also tapped a vein of unpretentious nationalism by discovering an enthusiasm for simple songs about things and places Canadian. At Massey Hall, Connors typically launched the evening with his 1969 homage to Prince Edward Island: "It's Bud the Spud from the bright red mud, Rollin' down the highway smilin'." Then there was his *Ketchup Song* about tomato picking in southwestern Ontario: "The bottle drips all over the chips Down in the ketchup country." One of his better songs, *Sudbury Saturday Night*, is typical of Connors'



STOMPIN' TOM CONNORS ON STAGE
Rough-diamond charm.

folksy approach to social comment:

*The girls are out to bingo,
And the boys are gettin' stinko,
And we'll think no more of Inco,
On a Sudbury Saturday night.*

Much of Stompin' Tom's rapport with his audiences is generated by his catchy tunes and constant use of place names. *Big Joe Mufferaw* celebrates the Ottawa Valley, *The Coal Boat Song* tells of a "dirty old man" who sails between Newfoundland and Cape Breton. Connors' themes reflect his own experiences. Born in Saint John, N.B., 36 years ago, he had a rough childhood. His unmarried mother was unable to look after him and at the age of seven he was placed with foster parents at Skinner's Pond, P.E.I. Through his teens he crisscrossed Canada and the U.S., working on farms, in mines and once as a short-order cook. Occasionally he sang for nickels and dimes. In 1964, he landed his first singing job at Timmins' Maple Leaf Hotel for \$15 a night and a room to sleep in.

Today, with 22 albums and some 150,000 records sold, Connors earns \$2,500 or more for a single performance and has left the beer hall circuit in favor of university and concert hall appearances. With Manager Jury Krytiuk, Connors is part-owner of Boot Records, a Toronto-based recording firm that is aggressively backing some 20 Canadian country performers.

Connors suspects that he personifies an answer to "the kind of thing that will happen when you're walking down Yonge Street with a smile on your face and you try to say 'good morning.' There seems to be a thing going today that if you show your true color, you're square." Whatever the reason, Stompin' Tom is well on his way to becoming a national figure. To spread the word of P.E.I.'s centennial celebrations this year, Premier Alex Campbell appointed Connors a roving goodwill ambassador. When Queen Elizabeth visits Charlottetown in July, she will find that the "spud-diggin' cowboy from Skinner's Pond" has been invited to give a command performance.