



Brian Willer

By the early 1970s, artists in English-speaking Canada were accepting similar responsibilities and opportunities. Some were campaigning for Canadian (as opposed to U.S.) control of industry; others were throwing themselves into the debate over women's rights. In a sense, they had a larger role to play in Canada than similar artists might play elsewhere. Because English-speaking Canada mainly lacks star entertainers, writers and painters often attract the kind of public attention that Americans lavish on movie stars and comedians.

They attracted even more attention than usual during the federal election campaign of 1988. The main issue was the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and Canadian culture suddenly became the centre of a blistering argument. Many artists,

Sharon, Lois and Bram: the hottest ticket in children's entertainment in Canada.

the novelist Margaret Atwood most prominently, claimed that the FTA would erode the institutions — in broadcasting and publishing, to take two crucial fields — that nurture cultural expression. The U.S. and Canadian governments said that nothing in the agreement could affect culture, but Atwood and many other artists didn't believe them. Another novelist of international standing, Mordecai Richler, apparently did; he and a group of artists and writers urged that the Progressive Conservatives be re-elected and the agreement signed. That was what happened, but many artists saw the FTA as a setback for their cause and a fresh reason for organizing and lobbying

on behalf of Canadian culture. The ferocity of the 1988 argument left people on all sides with a fresh awareness of how central these issues had become in the Canadian community as a whole.

The New Canadian Internationalists

A fortunate people in many ways, Canadians have often thought themselves culturally unlucky, somehow short-changed by history. They've looked with envy at traditional cultures, such as those in Europe and Asia, whose sense of identity stretches back into the mists of time. For different reasons, they've also envied their U.S. neighbours, who have built a highly suc-

cessful mass culture and sold it to the world. By contrast, Canadians have felt marginalized and largely ignored. Canadian artists, for their part, have always believed themselves severely handicapped by their tiny home market. But Canadians tend to express such concerns far less often today. As audiences, Canadians have always been internationalists, always ready to appreciate American movies, English plays, French painting or German music.

For many decades this was a one-way kind of internationalism — everything coming in, precious little going out. The most important change for this generation of Canadian artists, from novelist to circus acrobat, is that internationalism has finally become a two-way street. As a result, Canadians are prepared to play a substantial role in the evolving and unpredictable global culture of the future. ♦