

Notes

The Newsletter of Readifolk

Issue 15

Reading's folk song
and music club

Autumn 2012

Welcome
to another Readifolk
newsletter

Rumblings from the Roots

Welcome to the Autumn edition of Notes.

The Summer was a mix of disappointment, weather-wise, and jubilation with the feel-good factor generated by the London Olympics etc. and of course Sunday evenings at Readifolk. In spite of the weather, we managed a week under canvas at the Sidmouth Folk Week and looked in on Chippenham Festival, the White Horse Festival at Grove and the Wallingford Bunkfest. In all venues we had a really good time and saw many new performers, some of whom we have signed up to appear at Readifolk.

This edition of Notes once again includes interesting articles written by club members as well as reviews of all the forthcoming guests in October, November and December. The full programme of events is on the back page and you will see that as well as return visits by several of our favourite performers we have a number of excellent newcomers who we are sure will delight you. As well as the newcomers on our Guest list it is always pleasing to welcome newcomers to the audience. One such recent visitor was the young student Miriam Wright who dropped in for the Mike Nicholson concert and was so taken by the performance that she sent us a detailed review giving her first impressions of Readifolk. The

following are extracts from that excellent review.

"This article starts with a bit of a confession about my time at the Mike Nicholson evening with Readifolk. I turned up late, was 80p short and a little out of breath after my sprint to the nearest ATM. I also knew little about the group itself and am exceptionally new to the genre. After having encountered and written about several bands with a bit of a folk lilt to their recordings (whether they delved more into punk or otherwise) I was curious to discover the roots to their work, so I came along for an evening. And better yet, despite me giving a terrible first impression I was welcomed in by the warm people and atmosphere that occupied the room at RISC... my Grandad instilled in me the love of a sonorous voice carrying a beautiful melancholic melody and Nicholson excelled at just that: a warm man with a rich voice. He especially urged audience participation, something I am beginning to consider imperative to the beautiful spell that the folk songs cast... The evening with Readifolk and Mike Nicholson was brilliant and their evenings will be highly recommended to others by me. I hope I will be enjoying their company and musical talent once again at Christmas when I return to Readifolk."

You can see the full review at www.readifolk.org.uk. If you are one of those who have hesitated to try a Readifolk evening do be encouraged to come by Miriam's impressions.

Our e-mailing list continues to expand and copies of Notes are now sent as far as Australia. If you want to be kept up to date with all the ongoing activities at Readifolk, then join the mailing list by sending your details to colin@readifolk.org.uk.

The voice of Readifolk goes worldwide every Friday at 6 - 8 pm on the local internet radio www.reading4u.co.uk. Do listen in to get a taste of local, national and International folk music.

We look forward to seeing you.

Una & Colin

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Favourites **Magpie Lane** return to Readifolk for our
Christmas concert on **December 16th**.

Instruments of Joy

Taking a look at the instruments of the folk idiom.

This issue:

The Ukulele

As well as occasionally trying to force a tune out of a saw,
your editor has sometimes been seen abusing a ukulele.

As if that wasn't torture enough, here he tells us why...

I sense that suggesting the ukulele is a folk instrument may have some people raising their hands in horror; at the very least, an eye-brow or two. The uke has come in for a bad press in this country. It has been subject to considerable misrepresentation; devalued to being a mere music-hall comedy instrument, helped along the way by the likes of Billy 'Uke' Scott, Tessie O'Shea, and that other bloke - George something-or-other. Probably best not to mention him.

Actually, these acts were usually seen with a banjo-ukulele - or it might have been a ukulele-banjo. The more usual, but often incorrect term 'banjolele' was patented by the Alvin D. Keech instrument company, and so can only properly be applied to instruments made by them. But whatever we call it, this bowdlerised instrument was developed in the 1920s to give the uke more volume in larger venues, before amplification became common place. It has a harsher, twangier, more strident tone, which is probably what makes it more popular for comedy songs. But its half-brother, the ukulele proper, made with carefully selected tone-woods to give it a rich spectrum of sound, was tarred with the same 'comedy instrument' brush.

Nearly everywhere outside Britain where you find the ukulele, it has a long heritage as a proper instrument, but it's not so long ago that here, when trying to buy one, you would be directed to the toy department, or offered something from the poverty economy that looked 'ethnic', but was utterly unplayable. You were lucky to find one at all in a music shop - a well known store in Reading once suggested coming back nearer Christmas "...when we get the novelty items in" (happily that store now sells a selection of fine instruments). Show a uke to someone in this country, and you will still hear responses like "Ey-up; turned out nice again, he-heee" in a cod Lancashire accent, imitating someone it's probably best not to mention. It is ingrained in our psyche, quite incorrectly, as a joke, or dismissed as no more than a toy for children.

So, let me try and disabuse you of your misapprehensions. In other countries the ukulele is regarded as a serious instrument with all the dynamic range and compass of any other serious instrument. But we need to clarify what we mean by 'serious'. The ukulele is undoubtedly an instrument of joy; George Harrison, no mean uke player himself, summed it up when he said "No-one can play the ukulele without smiling". But comedy and joy are two different things, and this is probably where our low regard for the instrument stems from. Both can result in smiles and laughter, however one trivialises the subject, while the other enhances it. In Britain, I suggest, we may have become a little confused by the two.

The origins of the instrument are not, as you may think, Hawaii, but most likely Portugal, where you will find a four stringed instrument with a long history and a variety of names, like cavaquinho, or braguinha. One legend has it that a 19th century Portuguese sailor, harboured on the island of Hawaii, sat on the quayside and played his cavaquinho, and the locals, watched his fingers dance like fleas, and made it their own (the word 'ukulele', apparently, translates roughly as 'dancing flea', though other versions of history offer other possible etymologies). It may also be related to a five stringed Portuguese instrument called the rajão, the top four strings of which it derives its distinctive tuning from.

The modern uke comes in four main sizes; the smallest, about 21 inches long, is the soprano, followed by the slightly larger concert uke, and then the tenor and the baritone, the last being around 30 inches long. These sizes are now well established, but manufacturers are often

experimenting, and a tiny sopranino, little more than a foot long, can also be found, as well as a bass instrument, using a tenor body but with much thicker strings. Variations on the number of strings are not uncommon, either.

The soprano, concert and tenor instruments, although being different sizes, and contrary to what their names may suggest, are all usually tuned to the same pitch of GCEA, where the G is tuned high (between the E and A). This is the classic my-dog's-got-fleas tuning, more properly referred to as 're-entrant' tuning, and gives a distinctive, chirpy personality to the sound of the uke. This tuning is related to the top four strings of a guitar - with a capo at the fifth fret - and many guitar chord shapes can be used, suitably transposed.

Some people like to tune the soprano and concert ukes a couple of semitones higher to ADF#B - again with a re-entrant A - giving a brighter sound from the shorter strings. Sometimes the 1st string of the tenor is tuned more conventionally low, and the baritone is generally tuned to DGBE, the same as the top 4 strings of a guitar. Some people say this makes the baritone ukulele a tenor guitar. But only some. Others know that really, the tenor guitar is actually a closet baritone ukulele.

Happily, the last five years have seen a great change in our collective attitude towards the ukulele, and you will now commonly see the instrument used in all forms of popular music. Music shops will have a range in stock, and it has replaced the recorder as the starting instrument in many junior schools, where small fingers find the size of the fretboard easy to work with. Traditionally, the ukulele is made from the wood of the koa tree, a native of Hawaii, which has a rich colour, a bold grain pattern and good tonal qualities. But, while it is not yet an endangered species, supplies of the wood are becoming limited, and these days there are many other options.

If you want to try one out, you should be able to buy a basic Chinese-made soprano by Mahalo (it means 'thank-you' in Hawaiian) for less than £20; many people deride Mahalo, and their intonation is unlikely to be perfect, but they can be good starter instruments, and a lot of players have one in their collection alongside more expensive brands. £50 - £200 can get you a very decent instrument with fine tone and playability.

But beware of UAS - Ukulele Acquisition Syndrome, and be warned that some hand-made items can cost thousands of pounds.

The internet is full of ukulele sites, with many offering free tabs and tutorials. Here is a selection of my favourites:

<http://ukulelehunt.com>

<http://ukulelesecrets.org>

<http://ukuleleunderground.com>

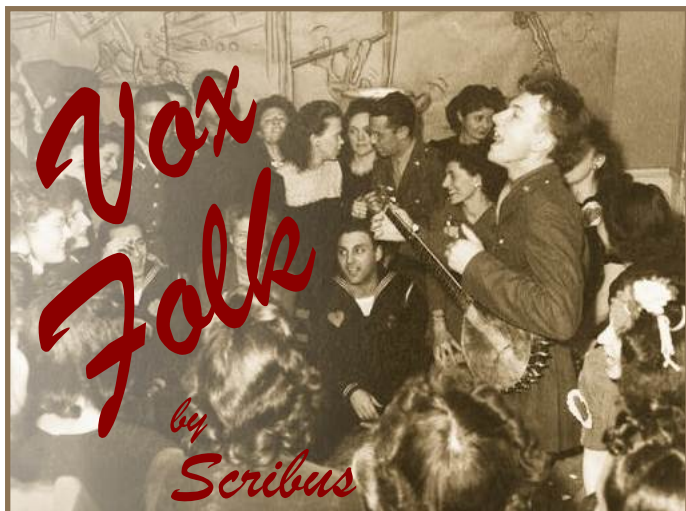
<http://www.doctoruke.com>

www.youtube.com/user/coveywood



Ukulele in koa wood

The ukulele, then, is neither toy nor joke. It is quite clear, however, that it constantly reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. Be happy. It seems quite difficult to play a sad song on a uke. If you manage to see The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain you will see this demonstrated with panache; expert musicians who are also well equipped with a high degree of irony and self-deprecation. But if you want to see the other end of its emotional spectrum, seek out Jake Shimabukuro on YouTube to see his astounding version of George Harrison's *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, or John Lennon's *In My Life* played on a tenor uke. James Hill also demonstrates extraordinary ability, with his party piece being Michael Jackson's *Billy Jean*. But do yourself a favour and avoid the clips by that other chap - best not to mention him at all.



A roundup of news snippets, information and disconnected folk jottings.

News and Stuff

A biography of Eliza Carthy was recently published by Soundcheck Books. *Wayward Daughter* is written by Sophie Parkes, a fiddle player herself, and writer on folk music, and is based on interviews with Eliza's family and friends, including her parents, Richard Thompson, Lucy Ward, Billy Bragg, and Eliza herself. It charts Eliza's progression from being born into folk royalty to branching out into her own style of music.

After 30 years of distinctive, anarchistic, collective music making,



Chumbawamba will finally hang up their guitars, trumpets and football rattles after a few final gigs in late 2012. With their music audibly drawing from

folk roots, and never afraid to stir things up a little, they say "Thirty years of being snotty, eclectic, funny, contrary and just plain weird. What a privilege and what a good time we've had."

One of the interweb's more delightful gems is www.SongsFromTheShed.com; musicians, usually from the folk genre, are persuaded to squeeze into someone's garden shed to perform a few numbers, which are filmed and posted on the site. Amongst the many artists there, you will find Reg Meuross, Fairport Convention, Steve Knightly and Jackie Oates. In a similar vein, with its aim to put musicians into an unusual environment, is www.BlackCabSessions.com. More eclectic in its musical range, it none the less includes artists such as Richard Thompson, Bon Iver, King Creosote, and even Beach Boy Brian Wilson, all trying to fit themselves, various instruments and often the rest of their stage band, too, for a gig in the back of a London Taxi.

Maggie Boyle's Kitchen Songs <http://kitchensongs.org.uk> is a not altogether dissimilar project, which features many artists that will be familiar to Readifolk regulars, including Pete Morton, Jez Lowe, Will Kaufman, Mike Silver, as well as Maggie Boyle herself. It features interviews and songs from artists in their own kitchen.



In America, guitar maker Gibson is to pay £240,000 in fines and community payments, as well as having £200,000 worth of materials seized, after admitting using timber that had been illegally logged in Madagascar. Deforestation is a major issue

in Madagascar, and in recent years has escalated, having devastating effects on local wildlife.

New Yorker journalist Jonah Lehrer recently published a book exploring the subject of creativity. True to his subject matter, it seems that he created several quotes that he attributed to Bob Dylan which his Bobness never actually said. Having under-estimated the devotion and tenacity of Dylan's fan base, and after some investigation by other journalists, Lehrer has now confessed to making up portions of his chapter on Dylan in his book *Imagine: How Creativity Works*. The publisher has now halted shipment and de-listed the e-book edition, and Lehrer has resigned from the New Yorker.

Nova Scotian folk singer Dave Gunning has just released an album called *No More Pennies*, to mark the demise of the Canadian one cent coin. Whilst the album includes collaborations with people such as Karine Polwart, the cover artwork makes use of images of the eponymous coin. Alas, this has incurred the wrath of the Canadian mint, who are now demanding a royalty for use of the image, at a rate of 60 cents per album. Dave Gunning says that this compares to a song royalty of 8 cents when he records someone else's song. With the album already in production, his wife suggested gluing real coins over the images, as a cheaper solution, but he has said he favours the idea of asking people at his concerts to donate their pennies, so he can pay the royalties in one cent coins.



In a recent interview with Rolling Stone magazine, Bob Dylan criticised his critics who accuse him of plagiarism, referring to them as "wussies and pussies", and explaining that songwriters have always drawn on the influences of what has gone before, often referencing and quoting other peoples' work. And now Marcus Mumford, of indie-folk-popsters Mumford & Son, has made similar ground in an interview with Radio 4's Front Line. Perhaps reflecting his somewhat more exclusive education at King's College School, he was pleased to list an array of literary influences, ranging from Shakespeare to Steinbeck, as well as saying, of former Booker Prize winner and current nominee Hilary Mantel, "There's a line I lifted completely from Hilary Mantel; I'm not going to tell you which, because I think it might be illegal."

Farewells

Lol Coxhill died 10/7/12 aged 79 - Better known lately as a jazz saxophonist, he first came to notice in the late '60s when working with Kevin Ayers And The Whole World (which included a fledgling Mike Oldfield and David Bedford), as well as Shirley Collins and the Albion Band.

Kitty Wells died 16/7/12 aged 92 - Country music's first big female star, who opened doors for subsequent female Country singers. Her first major hit in 1952, *It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels*, grappled firmly with gender politics, and was banned by many radio stations, but became a million seller, and she went on to have over 80 further Country hits.

John Stockfish died 17/8/12 aged 69 - Canadian bass player best known for his work with Gordon Lightfoot, but he also worked with Mel Tormé and Cab Calloway.

Scott McKenzie died 18/8/12 aged 73 - Singer of 1967's seminal 'summer of love' hit *San Francisco (Be Sure To Wear Flowers In Your Hair)*, and a close associate of The Mamas & The Papas. He continued to perform occasionally, and said philosophically of his only hit, "If you have to be a one-hit wonder, then *San Francisco* is the one to have."

Gerry Harrison died 3/9/12 aged 58 - Old Time fiddle player, instrument maker, composer and collector of the musical heritage of his native mid-west America.

Shows Worth Seeing

Previewing the new season of guest nights coming to Readifolk.

Ian Bruce will be making a welcome - and long overdue - return to Readifolk on **14th October**.

What he says:

I work solo, mainly. My solo performances are generally vocal (some unaccompanied) and guitar. I'll sing you some Scots' trad & Robert Burns, but in the main, I'll be singing a 60% self-penned programme. It's difficult for me to give you a personal brief on my songwriting styles. Best I can say is that they are generally written with an emphasis on audience participation. And are sung BIG. We'll probably have a bit of a giggle too.



What others say:

"A big man with a big voice and some big songs to match. He has been compared to 'Scotland's Harry Chapin', but make no mistake - this marvelous songwriter leads all the way." - *Llantrisant Folk Club*. "Ian Bruce is a Scottish singer/songwriter, and one whose initial impact comes from his wide ranging and splendid voice; I've seen it reduce a rabble to silence within half a verse. What sets them (the songs) apart tend to be their memorable tunes." - *Bob Walton, Folk Roots*

What we say:

A firm favourite at Readifolk, this return visit is long overdue. We look forward to the powerful vocals and excellent guitar playing from one of Scotland's finest singer/songwriters.

Hear more:

www.myspace.com/ianbrucemusic
www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1N-N6Z7gCY
www.youtube.com/watch?v=arb2Z0q59dM



On **21st October** the singers' night will include a feature spot by **Damian Clarke**, well known to Readifolk from performances by Pressgang.

What he says:

His solo concerts are played on the beautiful hammer dulcimer and hurdy gurdy, along with unaccompanied songs that he encourages audiences to sing along to, all passionately delivered. He sings songs that have a great story or a clear message. His musical mission is to perform traditional material, and to make it appeal to a wider audience than the folk scene, especially for younger ears. He is a supporter of the movement to protect minority cultures from extinction, as he values variety. He sings small nation language songs such as Irish, Plat Deutsch, and Breton. He hates nationalist, and purist tendencies, instead he values the truer picture of cultures meeting and cross fertilising.



What others say:

"A solo artist [who] specialises in a fascinating variety of songs and tunes from all round Europe. A big personality and a striking stage presence in semi-piratical garb, Damian got the audience joining in early on. Demonstrating a strong singing voice - without aid of the microphone - the songs were all well-received" - *Colin Bailey, Folking Live, Bracknell*. "A sparkling programme of refreshing 'wandering-minstrel' takes on trad songs (English, Breton, Plat Deutsch - all sung in the original language), interspersed with tunes. Accompanying himself on hurdy-gurdy or hammer dulcimer, Damian's come up with an

inspiring and enjoyable collection." - *Folk Roots*.

What we say:

Damian is no stranger to Readifolk having appeared with Pressgang, The Two Butchers (with George Whitfield) and solo, with songs and tunes demonstrating his considerable vocal and instrumental talents. On this occasion Damian entertains with a selection of self-penned tunes played on the hammer dulcimer.

Hear more:

www.myspace.com/damianclarkeuk
www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-Ttd4zgp6o
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCNGk05utSA



On **28th October** Readifolk welcomes **The Bailey Sisters**, from the north-west of England

What they say:

We're not sisters and we don't drink Baileys. The Bailey Sisters are Alyson Rainey, Karen Dyson and Shelley Rainey. They offer a wide variety of traditional, self penned and classical material, ranging from the thirteenth century to the present day. However, they are becoming particularly known for their a cappella performances.

What others say:

"The Bailey Sisters have delivered an album that is both uplifting and melancholic, in roughly equal measure, mainly because it is so heartfelt. You can really pick out the emotional input. I miss traditional a capella singing, particularly when it's this good." - *Neil King, Fetea Magazine*. "The trio are clearly comfortable performing together, and their edifying harmonies provide a strong backbone to the album. A charming mix of original, early and traditional music." - *Mark Dishman, Bright Young Folk*.



What we say:

We were greatly impressed when The Bailey Sisters performed at two of our Singers Nights. Their a capella singing is top class - harmonising beautifully and with the added attraction of sensitive guitar and fiddle accompaniment to some songs. We are sure that you will be equally impressed.

Hear more:

www.myspace.com/baileysisters
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByppxzMN_SQ
www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2ek2NQvIwU



On **11th November** the five-piece **Jimmy Lee and the Edge of Chaos Orchestra** are set to blow our socks off!

What he says:

This composer, singer, songwriter and his group of musicians sail through a repertoire of original folk, ballads, sublime instrumentals and Americana. Their live performances simply 'creak' with talent. Tracks from their album *The Ragamuffin*



have been featured on BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio Scotland, BBC Radio Wales, WYKX Michigan (USA), BBC Southern Counties Radio... and more.

What others say:

"The exceptional talent that is Jimmy Lee and the superb band that surround him ... the combination of their talent and Jimmy's own self-penned material will surely see Jimmy receiving kudos beyond his wildest dreams" - *Maverick Magazine*. "We love your music" - *Ian Anderson Show, BBC Radio Scotland*.

What we say:

Making their first appearance at Readifolk this highly accomplished group are bound to entertain you. Jimmy Lee, the lead vocalist and guitarist, writes most of the group's material. The orchestra includes a mix of folk and classical musicians with a wide variety of instruments. We look forward to a memorable evening.

Hear more:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTA0npOtSAw
www.youtube.com/watch?v=PidMHHoD4Ko
www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC_3jg3WhGI



On **25th November** we welcome back Readifolk favourites **Martyn Wyndham-Read with Iris Bishop**.



What he says:

Martyn Wyndham-Read has been involved with folk music for over forty years. In his late teens he left his mother's farm in Sussex and headed off, with his guitar, to Australia where he worked on a sheep station, Emu Springs, in South Australia. It was while he was there that he heard, first hand, the old songs sung by some of the station hands at Emu Springs, and he became

captivated by these songs and the need to know more of them and where they came from. He headed off to Melbourne and became part of the folk song revival there and throughout Australia during the early 1960's. Back to England in 1967 where he met up with the renowned singer and song collector Bert Lloyd, who himself had spent time in Australia. Martyn was asked by Bert Lloyd to be part of the album *Leviathan* on the Topic label and soon after he started recording for Bill Leader and touring extensively worldwide. In the early 1970's Martyn started the 'Maypoles to Mistletoe' concerts which portray the seasons of the year through song, music, dance and verse and illustration. Martyn is also the instigator of the well known Song Links Project,

What others say:

"Martyn is one of our best known and respected singers, with a laid-back, hypnotic style which never fails to relax and enthrall his audiences; he is also an acknowledged expert on Australian song. A real craftsman, who sings from the heart." - *The Living Tradition*.

What we say:

What more is there to say about this impressive duo? Martyn's unique vocal style is beautifully complemented by Iris's exquisite concertina backing. You cannot fail to be enthralled by this evening's entertainment.

Hear more:

www.myspace.com/dannilajeuss
www.youtube.com/watch?v=va2HbFirCTQ
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFG_am9IGR0



Bob and Gill Berry are known and loved by the Readifolk audience. On **2nd December** they return with friends as the band **Tinker's Bag**.

What they say:

Tinkers Bag are a group of friends that have played music and sung together since 1997. The group has written and played 6 full length shows and performed at concerts and clubs throughout the county and at Festivals and clubs well beyond Wiltshire's borders. Between them, the group plays a vast array of instruments including, Melodeons, Concertinas, bouzouki, Mandola, Mandolin, Guitar, Whistles, flute, recorder, Appalachian Dulcimer, Drums and cymbals, kazoos, triangle, shaky egg and many others (though not all at the same time!!).



What others say:

"Tinkers Bag take Sidmouth by storm. Our local band had a great show at Sidmouth and received some great comments. Gill Berry was probably the first person ever in the 50 years of the Festival to play the full size scythe as an instrument. She is obviously at the cutting edge of experimental music!" - *Wiltshire Folk Arts*.

What we say:

We are delighted that we have finally been able to coax this renowned group of singers and musicians to Readifolk. We are sure that you will be delighted with their seasonal songs and music - mainly from rural Wiltshire.

Hear more:

www.myspace.com/tinkersbag
www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLmkzqNy4wg
www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OQGJm7MeQw



On **16th December** **Magpie Lane** will again be helping us to get into the Christmas spirit with their traditional seasonal set.

What they say:

Magpie Lane perform traditional English music and song. They combine powerful vocals with vigorous dance tunes - inventive arrangements on acoustic instruments.

What others say:

"In my opinion the finest English Folk Band for concerts. Magpie Lane release a much-anticipated CD which still manages to exceed our high expectations. If I want to show someone why I love English folk music, I can play them this." - *Flos Headford, Shreds and Patches*. "Magpie Lane are equally effective singing in permutations from solo to full ensemble and (a big plus in my book) make good use of a cello in their arrangements." - *Nick Beale, fRoots*. "This Oxfordshire sextet represents the very best in the English country dance and song tradition" - *Sing Out*. "Consistently good albums of English songs and music" - *Mike Harding*. "The Oxfordshire-based quintet marry a deep love of their material with an unflashy musicality and a seriousness of purpose that is never solemn. This is traditional music with nothing taken out and just the right soupçon of seasoning." - *Jon Boden & Fay Hield, Royal Traditions, Dungworth*.



Magpie Lane photos by Rob Midgeley

What we say:

Since their last appearance at Readifolk, Magpie Lane have gone on to greater things and have received wide recognition, culminating in a centre stage performance at this year's Sidmouth Festival. Once again they return to entertain us at our traditional Christmas concert.

Hear more:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VMduKN7qgI
www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x9Zczwsvhw
www.myspace.com/magpielane

Where Do Songs Come From?

Steve Bingham asks a big question, and comes up with some interesting answers...

People have always sung. They've sung to maintain a rhythm for work; they've sung to pass on stories, news or lore; they've sung for entertainment and to praise their god. They have also sung because often a singer can say things that cannot be said in normal conversation. For example many ballads have elements of incest, while sea shanty and slave work songs often make comments about ships' officers and the overseers. This is the reason why shanties were banned by the Royal Navy.

Every song must have a moment of creation whether it is written down or whether it is just made up on the spur of the moment. The problem is that once it has been sung it is no longer the property of the creator. The next person to sing it may change something about it. It may be changed because the singer did not learn it properly or because the singer didn't like something about it. If the singer has

moved to the next town then names mentioned in the song may be meaningless so new local names will be substituted. Even if a song is fully documented and published it will still change, as Andy Barnes discovered with his song *The Last Leviathan*. When it was written, it didn't have a chorus, but somebody started using the first verse as a chorus and that is how the song is now generally performed. Some singers have favourite verses which they insert into any or all of their songs – sometimes they don't fit too well, but no matter, when the song is passed on the favourite verse remains.

For almost as long as people have been singing people have been writing down the songs and making informal collections of the songs they liked. In the estate rolls of Delaval Hall in Northumberland, there are a number of songs written between the household accounts. The songs had been heard by the account keeper, and written in the only place available for writing. Unfortunately, only the words were written, which were likely written to tunes everybody knew, and were easy to remember, and probably the writer did not know how to write music. More formal collecting of songs began in the 18th century, when vicars seemed to have time on their hands and would collect the words of songs from their parishioners. Sometimes these got published but more often they ended up with the reverend gentleman's other papers and were given to a library or made their way into the county record office.

Between the late 17th century and the mid 19th century, broadsheets were published. These served much the same purpose as today's tabloid newspapers. Each sheet contained a text, often a song, and an advertisement. The songs were often very gory, giving details of a horrible crime or the last words of a notorious criminal, spoken from the

gallows. A well known tune was suggested for the song. During the 19th century, the music halls provided a wealth of songs, many of which are still current today.

In the late 19th century there was a great surge in nationalism across Europe. Countries were searching for their identities and looked to their folk memories to create this identity. The Brothers Grimm in Germany collected folk tales and songs. Composers from Norway to Eastern Europe used

folk melodies in their classical compositions. In Britain, Lucy Broadwood, Cecil Sharp and others took to the road with their writing materials, and on some occasions primitive recording equipment, and recorded the songs of the people. Many of the songs that were collected were published in 'drawing room' arrangements which were suitable for middle class consumption. Others, like Percy

Grainger and Ralph Vaughan Williams, were more interested in the tunes, which they used in their own classical compositions. Many tunes were put to work in the English Hymnal, which became a rival to the 1861 Hymns Ancient and Modern.

In the 1950s and 60s many popular music artists were singing material from North America. Many became dissatisfied with this material and wanted songs that were relevant to the British Isles. They found what they wanted in the works of Sharp and others. Peter Kennedy and others took sophisticated recording equipment into the homes of traditional singers. Although much of the material collected were merely versions of already known songs, or variants of music hall songs, some new material emerged. Much of this has been released on Topic Records' Voice of the People series.

In the BBC Radio series The Radio Ballads, Ewan McColl took the words of working people and set them to music. Many of the songs written for this series are still popular today. This work also triggered much of the song writing of the 1960s.

Today's folk performers take advantage of all of these sources. Many adapt songs for their own purposes, writing new tunes where necessary, adding verses and generally making free with the material. This is fine; this is what has always happened in the folk tradition. The difference is that today's performers have access to wider musical influences than their predecessors and consequently can push the songs farther. What they do is also communicated much faster than ever before. All of this helps to make folk music the vibrant, living force it is in today's world of entertainment.



Dog Looking At And Listening To A Phonograph (1896) by Francis Barraud

A Song Worth Singing

A Man of Constant Sorrow Kathy Bestwick looks at a favourite Joan Baez song

The song *A Man Of Constant Sorrow* is probably best known these days from the Coen brothers' film *O Brother Where Art Thou*, in which it plays a central role in the film's plot. It is often attributed to Dick Burnett, an American folk singer, who made the first known recording of it, under the title of *Farewell Song*, in 1913. However Burnett himself, in an interview towards the end of his life, said that he couldn't remember whether he wrote the song or not, also saying that it was probably based on an earlier song.

People have speculated whether that earlier song may have been a Baptist hymn called *Wandering Boy*, while others say it may also have been based on the singing of Irish migrant Cameron O'Mackin from around 1880. In 1918 Cecil Sharp collected the song and published it as *In Old Virginny* (Sharp 11, 233).

Speaking in 2009, Ralph Stanley of The Stanley Brothers, who recorded it in 1951, said that it was probably two or three hundred years old. If this is true, then the version sung by Burnett, and all subsequent versions, have added the reference to a railway, since the first American locomotive railway was not built until 1827.

Recordings of this song abound, and it has been popular since long before *O Brother Where Art Thou* rekindled interest in it. It seems to have become a standard in many, predominantly American, repertoires, including that of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Gerry Garcia & David Grisman, several Seegers, Judy Collins, and even a young Rod Stewart.

Most recordings seem fairly similar to what we hear in *O Brother Where Art Thou*, though variations are numerous, some with additional verses. Sarah Ogan Gunning re-wrote the traditional

'Man' into 'Girl/Maid' in 1936. Some sing of leaving Colorado, rather than Kentucky, while others are returning to it. Joan Baez recorded it several times, in which she sings either of leaving Kentucky, or of returning to California. Dick Burnett's original recording makes reference to the fact that he had been blinded in one eye.

It is a very plaintive song of a lonesome man, or woman. All versions revolve around a character who feels forced to leave home, and often part from a lover, for reasons of unspecified 'trouble', and who often seems to expect to die soon, with the hopeful release of 'God's golden shore'. It's tempting to think that this was a song of the Great Depression, or possibly a black slave song, except that it clearly pre-dates the 1930s, and it seems to be recorded almost exclusively by white singers. If it is as old as some say, then maybe there are references to the American Civil War - Kentucky famously being a border state which saw a fair share of trouble; at first it was neutral, before the Confederates tried, unsuccessfully, to annex it, whereafter it formed an alliance with the Unionists of the north.

In the Coen film there are many subtle references. For example, one character, who plays guitar, is called Tommy Johnson, who says he sold his soul to the devil; the early blues guitarist Robert Johnson is often said to have done just that. The main protagonists record the song as The Soggy Bottom Boys, an allusion to The Foggy Mountain Boys, and the recording is produced by a man who is blind in one eye, as was Dick Burnett, who made the first recording of the song.

The version here is based on one found in The Joan Baez Songbook, published in 1964.

I am a man of constant sor - row, And I've seen troub - les all my days. I'll bid fare-
well to old Ken - tu - cky, The state where I was born and raised. All through this raised.

1. I am a man of constant sorrow,
And I've seen troubles all my days.
I'll bid farewell to old Kentucky,
The state where I was born and raised.

2. All through this world I'm bound to ramble,
Through sun and wind and driving rain,
I'm bound to ride the Northern Railway,
Perhaps I'll take the very next train.

3. Your friends may think that I'm a stranger,
My face you'll never see no more,
There is a promise that is given,
I'll see you on God's golden shore.

4. I always thought I had seen trouble,
Now I know it's common run,
I'll hang my head and weep in sorrow,
Just to think of what you've done.

5. And when I'm in some lonesome hour,
And I am feeling all alone,
I'll weep the briny tears of sorrow,
And think of you so far a-gone.

6. Oh, I'm a man of constant sorrow
And I've seen troubles all my days.
I'll bid farewell to old Kentucky,
The state where I was born and raised.

Readifolk Newsletter

This newsletter will give full stereophonic reproduction when played on stereophonic equipment. It may also be played on suitable monaural equipment.
"How can I be a folk? I'm from the suburbs, you know." - John Fahey



READIFOLK

READING'S FOLK SONG & MUSIC CLUB



Every Sunday 8:00 - 10:30 p.m.

Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC)

35-39 London Street, Reading RG1 4PS

PROGRAMME OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2012

7 Oct	Theme 'For and Against'	<i>Come and entertain us with your 'pros' and 'cons' in song.</i>
14 Oct	Ian Bruce www.ianbruce.org	<i>A welcome return to Readifolk of this renowned Scottish singer/songwriter with a mix of traditional and self-penned material.</i>
21 Oct	Singers Night <i>Including a feature spot with</i> Damian Clarke www.myspace.com/damianclarkeuk	<i>A Singers Night with a difference. Half the evening will be given over to Damian who will entertain us with songs and music with hammer dulcimer accompaniment – no extra charge!</i>
28 Oct	The Bailey Sisters www.baileysisters.co.uk	<i>New to Readifolk this trio combine stunning vocal harmonies with fine guitar and fiddle accompaniment.</i>



4 Nov	Theme 'Guys & Dolls'	<i>Does this theme relate to tomorrow's activities, or not? You decide.</i>
11 Nov	Jimmy Lee and the Edge of Chaos Orchestra www.edgeofchaosorchestra.co.uk	<i>Bringing together musicians from the world of folk and classical music, this ensemble will delight and surprise you.</i>
18 Nov	Singers Night	<i>The usual format – a song, a tune, a poem, a joke or just come and be entertained.</i>
25 Nov	Martyn Wyndham-Read & Iris Bishop www.martynwyndhamread.com	<i>A terrific combination of Martyn's vocals and Iris's sensitive concertina backing, performing songs, often with an Australian connection.</i>



2 Dec	Tinkers Bag www.tinkersbag.co.uk	<i>A group of friends, including Bob & Gill Berry, entertain with a performance of mainly traditional seasonal songs.</i>
9 Dec	Theme 'From Bad to Verse'	<i>This theme offers a range of possibilities for a song or a poem.</i>
16 Dec	Magpie Lane www.magpielane.co.uk	<i>Our traditional Christmas concert featuring the very best in the English country song and dance tradition.</i>
23 Dec	Christmas Party	<i>Start your celebrations here. Come and enjoy the music and the festive fare.</i>
30 Dec	Singers Night	<i>Get ready for the New Year festivities with an evening of song and music in friendly company.</i>

Admission: £6 Guest nights; £2 Singers & Theme nights

More information from our web site www.readifolk.org.uk

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