

Rolling On

Chapter 1

They say that folk music is in the blood whereas I know for sure that in my case its mainly in the beer. As I wait to go on stage in the grand final in the Milkmaid Folk Club, all I can think of is that is was probably a mistake to have that third pint and dry roasted peanuts are probably not what singers at La Scala tuck into before they give it large on the Puccini.

But then thats folk music for you. Ordinary people sharing everyday music. The voice of the people. Sharing rather than performance. Talent optional. Or, depending on your personal stance, thats just a description of bad folk music performed by mediocre musicians who don't practice enough and have no understanding and less interest in the complexities and standards inherent in the folk tradition.

My own introduction to the folk world occured in the early 1970's as a long haired, split-knee loon wearing teenager tripping over to Hoddesden to catch the old boys in the pub singing dido, bendigo, gentry he was there O and the larks they sang melodious. Strung out on Lord of the Rings, Pink Floyd and the Incredible String Band, my dry soul soaked up the music, my brain letting me know that here was the bardic tradition still alive and kicking in an unbroken line reaching back to the dark ages and beyond.

Now that I am grey bearded and old codger-like myself, I realise that these guys were really just blokes learning songs off the radio, cassette tapes or LP's and it was my role as the younger generation to add the mythology that they were the real deal and I was a green and sappy incomer.

I know this for certain because over the years, a number of our younger session members assume I was around at the beginning of the folk revival, asking what it was like and its only when I point out that I was still getting the hang of potty training when Ewan McColl was doing his stuff that they realise that being an old bloke is as much a state of mind as a chronological fact.

This brings me on to key issue no. 1 - the never ending saga called 'The Death of Folk Music'. Ever since I can remember going to folk clubs and sessions, there has been a predominance of grey haired people of a certain age. When I look at pictures of folk club audiences from the 50's and 60's I see oodles of people looking like they have just taken a day off school. These people are now the grey haired brigade.

But wait. A more detailed forensic review of the evidence shows clear signs of the grey hairs hanging out in the background or hiding behind the youngsters or even more likely, just out of shot getting another pint or popping out (again) for a leak.

I was young once, at least according to the photo album and I see young people all over the place at festivals, open mics, sessions and clubs but have to agree that the picture is patchy depending on where you go. So far on my travels round the sessions and singarounds, I can say with the researchers clipboard in hand that the average age of the punters is late 40's plus.

On the other hand, at our own sessions I can cite the case of exhibit A (Alice) who first started coming aged 10 and exhibit B, Blaise (more about him later), aged 15. A quick glance over my web based research files reveals that young folkies are to be found all over the UK in great numbers with a widespread but localised distribution.

My friend Cath who co-wrote the Rolling On song is a professional moth-botherer and tells me that it's quite normal to send out a message to moth-botherers everywhere to record moth numbers and species in their own area followed up by a reporting session back to moth HQ. I suggest we do the same for young folkies and send the results, with details of species and habits, back to Rolling On HQ for analysis.

To help you in your task, here is a list of the better known young folkie types:

The Lesser Spotted Teenager: in the sense of being spotted hanging out with their folkie parents less and less at festivals as they get old enough to sneak off without a causing major panic and multiple announcements on the PA.

The Dalai-Lama: here's where Blaise (remember him?) comes to mind. Writing and performing songs that sound like Pete Hammil or Leonard Cohen originals in 2015 when you are all of 15 is direct evidence of folkie reincarnation.

The Folk Mozart: mind-boggling multi-instrumentalists capable of playing 250 tunes at the drop of a hat with the ambition to know 2000 by the time they are 20. Scottish uber-professional folkie (and personal favourite of mine even though I don't know a word of the Gaelic) Julie Fowlis says she has set a goal of knowing 500 songs by the time she is 50, by way of comparison.

The No-Beardie-Weirdie: young they may be but in every way including poor dress sense, love of good beer and a natural ability to sing like a moose with a sore throat, they are indistinguishable from the old lags, especially in dim lighting in a crowded pub after a few pints.

Do send in your sightings of any of the above and include details of new species to add to the list.

Hospitality. That's what it's all about. That's why people feel welcome. That's why they come back. Works the same however old you are. Lilly came in with the family to our session recently. All of 6 years old. When we asked her if she had a song for us she said 'No, but I can do a dance instead'...and did. How cool was that?

The reverse is true too. For those of you who may be taking your first tentative steps into the world of sessions and singarounds, a word to the wise. So that it doesn't come as a bit of a shock and puts you off ever going out again, here's a couple of things to be prepared for.

1. Some (rare) sessions are set by Papal Decree that means only Irish tunes can be played. As Tarzan might say: You audience; me somewhere up the sharp end of folk muso autism
2. Some (rare) sessions are ruled by pretend-protestant Henry VIII's Church of England's Book of Common Bollocks that mean only English tunes may be played. Facing 47 melodeon players pumping out Shepherds Hey for the first time can be deeply disturbing.

This brings me back nicely to the scene I described way back in the opening paragraph. Here I am about to go on stage in the grand final of the Milkmaid Songwriting Competition. I am about to perform two songs one of which is my official entry. Now, I am much happier sharing than performing. Let me explain.

Performing a song is what you tend to have to do when someone sticks a microphone in your face and you enter into a contract with the audience to entertain them for which they agree to pay attention and either applaud at the end or throw a bottle or two.

Sharing a song is what you do when you are sitting in a cosy pub and the rule of going round clockwise means it's now your turn. Tis true enough that I have done plenty of performing in the past 40 years but I have always done it on the basis of imagining myself to be back in the pub, sharing a song or two with a mate or three over a pint or four.

This works well if there are 200 people in the audience or just 2. Some people are in love with performing for it's own sake but I am not one of them.

The last 10 years or so has seen a huge increase in performance-focused music making for which a lot of the blame can be placed on tacky TV shows like the X Factor and Britain's Got Talent but Open Mics have got a lot to answer for as well.

Here's the thing - i would sell my granny into slavery (only if she was willing of course, she's a tough old bird) for the principle that anyone is welcome to have a go at sharing a song or a tune in a pub session, whether or not they have a morsel of talent. What I wouldn't offer my nan for sale for though is the right of a person without a morsel of talent to share a song LOUDLY down a microphone. Sharing equals anything goes. Performing equals a careful balance between talent and practice.

So there I was, about to put myself yet again to the test of whether I have sufficient talent and have put in enough hours donkey work to entertain the audiences and the competition judges enough to get an honourable mention. If you have seen the website that goes along with this book you will know already that I got the first prize for 'Rolling On', the song we wrote in our own little pub telling the story of session singers and players down the ages. And yet...there I was, a living example of the sharing-performing paradigm. Think I need another pint while I chat it all over for the millionth time with the rest of the folk world.

Chapter 2

There is a serious intent behind all this fun and frolic. Not too serious though, just serious enough to justify what is turning out to be the longest pub crawl in history in the name of social research. Along the way I am gathering all sorts of material from all sorts of people including people who write things with titles like 'Understanding complex influences affecting participation in singing' (thanks, Coleen Whidden) and 'I don't hate all singers for being attention whoring shallow extroverts with no regard for the creative lives or energies of instrumentalists....Just most of them' as shared by MP1996 on that fount of all musical weirdness, www.thesession.org.

Any researcher worth their salt (personally I prefer cheese and onion) has a duty to demonstrate that they know what they are talking about in the first paragraph. I have clearly failed to do this so far, so lets make up some lost ground by introducing the uninitiated to the various sorts of music making forums we are interested in here.

Our turf is divided unequally and with big overlapping verges into the following: the Singaround; the Singalong; the Session; the Open Mic and the Acoustic Night. These are the terms you will see on websites, facebook pages and pub 'What's On' lists all over the English speaking world and elsewhere too. Did you know, for example, that an open mic in Afrikaans is an Oop Mikrofoon and in Welsh its a Meic Agored, both of which I would love to play at but sadly in reality both nations tend to call them the same as us Anglos so suddenly I have lost all interest.

Back to our main theme and you will find the definitions here are as good as any as a prelude to an argument:

Singaround: everyone who wants to takes a turn, usually in a clockwise direction but sometimes where your name comes on the list you signed as you came in. Everyone tends to join in unless you

exercise your right to tell them to shut it whilst presenting your masterwork. In hardcore singarounds, tunes are actively discouraged. Singalong: someone bashes out a set of old favourites and we all join in with the one verse we know and the chorus. Singalongs happen at singarounds when other people know at least one verse and everyone joins in the chorus. Got it?

Session: a single focus instrumental workout with the option of exclusively Irish, exclusively English, exclusively Latvian or whatever the hardcore are into. Songs are generally rationed to one every hour at best, although many sessions are mixed, meaning that no-one of a purist persuasion goes away happy.

Open Mic: like a singaround but MUCH LOUDER

Acoustic Night: like a session, a singaround and a singalong combined but without the fear of getting it wrong.

The Singaround is not to be confused entirely with a Singalong, which tends to happen in old people's homes or in the rather fetching picture you can find on our website home page from Coronation Street in the mid 1960's showing the fabled Minnie Cordwell in a fetching hat bashing out a toon on the old joanna whilst the rest of the cast singalong.

You can see that we have already run into a problem.

Some of you will already be struggling with the cultural references, being either too young, too hipster, too not-from-the UK or just too posh to know that Coronation Street is the longest running soap opera in the universe and a Joanna is not Minnie's battered significant other but cockney rhyming slang for the piano-forte.

We should also make it clear that Minnie and friends were doing their stuff hundreds of miles away from the cheeky chappies in East London, so she wouldn't have called it a Joanna, unless she was pretending to be a cockney to give the others a laugh. Or maybe her Dad was a cockney and used to sing cheerful cockney songs to her at bedtime, just like my genuine article cockney old Dad used to do for me when I was a tiddler.

You see, culture travels. We get it off the telly and we get it off the family and we get it off the neighbours and we get it off the cinema and sometimes we get it off educated arts programmes on BBC 4 about the roots of the folk tradition. Its then up to us how we incorporate this or that cultural leaning into our daily lives and our need to categorise everything.

So you can have a singalong were everybody joins in to your equivalent of Minnie or you can have a singaround were Minnie only gets to strut her stuff when its her 'round the room' turn or you can have the usual reality of people singing along to the songs they know whether its a singaround or a singalong. To be honest, I do know people who sing along to songs they don't know just as I know some people who play along to tunes they don't know, so that proves something but I am not sure what.

I used to have a thing about wanting to feel a bit of the Celt in me and for some considerable time I believed Grandad Alf was Welsh as I was told thats where he spent so much of his time. Turned out he was an East End roofer cashing in on the building repair boom facilitated by the German Airforce as their contribution to WW2.

On the other hand, Great Granny Rosa was meant to be a French witch, so that's the Breton-Celtic link and the pagan heritage in one dollop. There has never been any evidence to support that claim but it was something to latch onto at the time. As a kid brought up in one of the post-war London overspill Newtowns, roots did not appear to go deep in the nicely kept back gardens down our road.

The East End link back to family was still there and I recall peering out from under the drinks table at Uncle John and Auntie Ivy's place next to the Mann Crossman Brewery down the Old Kent Road while our mob was doing the Hokey Cokey and having a right knees up. The songs they sang were mainly from the old music hall tradition with a sprinkling of sentimental Irish ballads alongside the Nat King Cole and Doris Day. My Nan thought old Doris was singing about a lass called Kay Sarah. So did I until I started to learn french at primary school. In case you wondered if I was under the table because I'd overdone it on Double Diamond , I would like to point out I was only about 5 years old at the time.

So whatever your level of interest in whatever definition of folk music you salute and from whatever cultural mix you spring from, there's someone somewhere singing your songs, playing your tunes and telling your tales in a pub near you.....you just have to go out and find them.

You would be forgiven for thinking that our Rolling On project is happily rooted at the heart of the folk music community but you would be wrong. Possibly. Or perhaps you would be right. It's difficult to tell. It depends on your starting point.

On tune sessions

I once had an interesting discussion with a chap at a festival as we sat waiting for a session to get going in a local pub. I say 'interesting' in the English sense of 'nuts' and the conversation went something like this:

Me: 'so have you been to this session before then'

Him: 'it's not a session, a session is for tunes only. This is a singaround for songs only'. You can't have both at the same.'

Me: 'we do at our place'

Him: 'well you're wrong because you can't have both at the same time'

Me: 'you just said that – I told you that we - and lots of others I know do'

Him: 'well, you are all wrong'

So, we are all wrong eh? By the way the event turned out to be a mix of tunes and songs just in case you wondered. My new friend's assurance that he knew the precise definitions of our musical activities echoes some of the more polarised postings on social media that we have collected over the years. Having explored the differences between sessions, singarounds, singalongs and open mics in a previous chapter, it's time to strike while the bodhran's hot, take the flute by the horns, grasp the fiddle, jump in the box, take the guitar for a plunge and face the music.

There's a general understanding in tunes based sessions that you can't have enough melody instruments but accompanying equipment should be strictly limited to at most, one guitar and one (and they mean one at a time) bodhran. There's also a general preference for quality over quantity.

In both die hard traditional Irish or English sessions, respect for the tune is paramount. This is certainly true in Scotland and my father in law, a fine fiddler in the Scottish tradition, was always demanding that I play on the beat rather than introduce my usual variations which were, according to him 'all right for you sassenachs with no sense of your own tradition' but had no place in his musical world.

Getting involved in these kinds of events can be a real turn off for the happy go lucky would be drummers and guitar players who just want to join the vibe and take a selfie or two. Some session organisers assert their right to label their event a closed session, meaning only invited players can join in. This is a good way of keeping the standard of playing at the inspirational level and a terrible closed shop of mediocrity if the reason for being closed in the first place is to ensure your small circle of no-hopers get the seats round the table nearest the fire every week.

Another variation on the closed session often written about and discussed endlessly amongst those who genuinely want to see both the maintenance of quality and the inclusion of newcomers are the various tips on session etiquette, some of which we included in an earlier chapter but in a light hearted way so as not to put you off so early in the book.

This is the hard stuff if you want to avoid being seen as a pain in the bum by people you want to hang out with. This applies to newbie players as well as brilliant musicians – hospitality is stretched by both ends of the spectrum when people 'make too much of themselves' as my Nan used to put it.

The first rule is to go to a session a few times just to listen, get your face known and check out the repertoire. The second rule is to practice at home until your contribution is actually adding something to the vibe rather than being a massive distraction to the tune players.

Two friends of mine (a bodhran player of repute) and her partner (a whistle player of equal repute) recently had to ask a tuba player (yes, that's right – a tuba player) to move a few seats away as they couldn't hear themselves think let alone play. They did it with so much politeness and so much reassurance that they valued tubas in general and her one in particular that it was all done amiably. So much better than pouring your beer down the blunt end and pointing towards the door with a few choice words of encouragement to leave and never come back.

The third rule is to feel free not to play all the time for every tune. This goes hand in hand with rule four – if you are familiar with the tune but not so familiar with your fingers, play nice and softly in the background, put the mute on the fiddle, use brushes on the bodhran, finger the chords on the guitar rather than swat them with your heaviest pick, move your fingers up and down on the flute or whistle but blow gently like a summer breeze rather than a raging gale.

For those of you who are now horrified that there are people out there who actually have rules about how to have a nice time playing a tune or two, be reassured that there are loads of sessions that love the free for all, include everyone and make people like me explore the outer reaches of my tolerance for ear splittingly painful inclusion. This is why rule one should be the only one to stick to. Go and listen and then decide if the place and the people are right for you. That way you'll be right for them too.

If you are a committed traditionalist, the chances are that you would see most of the sessions and singarounds we have visited as a nice enough way to spend an evening out but with little to do with the accepted academic version of what folk music actually is. Confused? I certainly was when I began to come across the various schools of thought that exist, so a brief introduction to the squabbles would be helpful or at the very least, mildly amusing, here.

The broadest definition of folk music in general circulation is so annoying to people who like their interest in folk music to be neatly classified that the merest whiff of it will get punters hissing 'horse!' at the writer, speaker or performer dim enough to mention it. I refer of course (if you are already immersed in the folk world) or I refer, without the of course (if you have no idea what's coming next) to the quote from either Louis Armstrong (possibly) or Big Bill Broonsy (probably) suggesting 'all music is folk music – I ain't never heard a horse sing'.

Hard core folk song researchers appear to limit their interest to the period up to the start of the late 1950's when the second folk revival hit the UK and became messily tangled up in controversy about what was and was not proper folk in an age where every left leaning hippie with a guitar started making it up as they went along.

The first revival ran from the late 1800's to the late 1930's, petering out in the 40's and 50's, featuring a broad range of mainly posh collectors, rescuing working class songs and dances from the great unwashed who were failing in their duty to keep picturesque songs and dances alive in favour of belting out the mindless pop songs of the day, namely bawdy or sentimental music hall ditties.

Steve Roud's impressive 700 page study of the first revival, published in 2017 as the definitive 'Folk Songs in England' offers the following compellingly straightforward definition of the traditionalists view of what constitutes folk music:

' Folk song is everyday vocal music within a community: it is learned and performed in informal, untrained, face-to-face, voluntary, non-commercial situations, sanctioned by community approval and custom; songs are passed on from person to person informally, the singers adhere to local norms and are uninhibited by status or theory; singers are not constrained by adherence to a perceived original and correct rendition; songs themselves vary but within the expected parameters of local useage'

I say 'compelling' because he describes exactly what goes in our pub every Thursday night, although if he had witnessed one or more of our more hairy, drunken nights he would no doubt wish to clarify what he meant by using the word uninhibited. The definition also applies well to what we are seeing on our tour of the UK's singarounds and sessions but I can't help but wonder if it's possible to comfortably include items like the Chinese trio we found at the Eagle in Lincolnshire or the rendition of 'Yellow Polka Dot Bikini' we enjoyed by an eighty something year old at the Trout in the Southern Cotswolds.

The early song and dance collectors were said to be somewhat choosy in their selection of material, taking a dim view of anything they found was learned from sheet music rather than passed down from generation to generation.

One notable exception was a wonderfully eccentric chap called Owen Williams who cycled thousands of miles round what he referred to as the Upper Thames area noting every song he heard in every pub he visited, whether it was traditional, straight out of the music hall or written by some bloke in the next village yesterday.

He would have felt right at home in any of the pubs we have visited, except one. That particular exception to the general run of things provides a nice little example of why the sector can be a trifle unappealing if you end up in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong expectation. It will also serve as a reminder of the categories of folkie nights out I described in chapter 1 for those of you that like to test yourselves.

In this scenario, the pub advertising blurb described the evening as an 'Acoustic Night – anything goes, everyone welcome' or to put it into the right box using our definitions 'like a session, a singaround and a singalong combined but without the fear of getting it wrong' but what we actually got was a small group of people practising English tunes on a variety of instruments or, as our category has it 'a session: a single focus instrumental workout with the option of exclusively Irish, exclusively English, exclusively Latvian or whatever the hardcore are into. Songs are generally rationed to one every hour at best, although many sessions are mixed, meaning that no-one of a purist persuasion goes away happy.'

Now, I defend to the death the right of any group of people to do what the hell they want to in a pub that provides a welcome but there has to be some grasp of the principles of the Trades Description Act if we are going to attract new people to the wonderful world of folk music. It could well be that the pub team had a clear idea about what they wanted to boost beer sales and attract a younger and hipper clientele and were less than thrilled when they found they had given over the back room to what was effectively an adult evening class.

Going back to our friend Owen Williams and his boozy cycle tours, 'tis true that I feel a keen sense of kinship. The Old Berlingo has taken us round the country in relative comfort and we are keenly noting everything we hear, regardless of where and when the songs and tunes have come from.

By doing this we find we are at risk of placing ourselves firmly in the 'Horse' camp and thereby pissing off everyone in the folk world. But wait! Is it a bird, is it a plane – no - it's Steve Roud's definition coming to our rescue. All of this stuff is happening in 'informal, untrained, face-to-face, voluntary, non-commercial situations' so we are on solid ground. Or maybe not. There's always an interesting mix of amateurs, semi-pros and the occasional fully professional at the events we have visited so we might have to exclude any song sung by a punter who has earned a few quid singing for their supper at some point in their life.

Or at least we would if we gave a tinkers cuss about towing a purist line, which as you probably guessed, we definitely don't.

Chapter 3

'Standing behind the singer is the ghost of the singer they learnt the song from. Standing behind that ghost is another ghost, back to the beginning of music. For a short time this common sense is ours to learn from, to add to and then to hand on.'

(Chris Wood 2008) in Fay Hield's thesis 'English Folk Singing And The Construction Of Community' (2010)

We all have our heroes and my own favourite happens to be Chris Wood, singer, songwriter, instrumentalist and a man who has tuned into the eternal truth of what music actually means to us to such an extent that he can sum it all up in the three pithy sentences above. Now some people will immediately take exception to the last statement about the music being 'ours toadd to and then to hand on' preferring to focus on the bit about it being 'ours to learn from' and stopping there.

Learning and improving are key components of achieving sufficient competence to sing a song in mixed company with a good chance of being asked to do another one. Without the learning and improvement element in place it's easier to understand why some people feel able to criticise what they see as unacceptable face of mediocrity in some clubs, sessions and singarounds where certain individuals who couldn't hold a tune in a bucket are actively encouraged to share a song or two.

These criticisms may well be based on reality if your criteria for listening to any music is that it has to be a) in tune b) in time and c) recognisable. If however, you feel a to c are optional in favour of more subjective factors like the song being more important than the singer; sharing being more important than performing and the basic human right for anyone to 'have a go' you will be more welcoming and less critical. Unless, of course, you are paying good money for it.

Here's where one of the complexities of the folk world comes in to play. I suspect that some of Chris Wood's ghosts would be more than slightly put out by people who refuse to learn the words, insist on adding out of tune, badly played guitar, tuba or their instrument of choice to everything or ramble on for hours before introducing us to the first two phenomena – and I am talking here about what's happening on stage not in a cosy corner of a pub after a few pints of the local brew.

It would be easier for the purposes of writing about folk music if the two sides – the professional and the amateur – didn't try to mix but what a depressingly monochrome world it would be if all of our music making had to be processed into an acceptable package before it could be presented to the world. I'm totally in tune with one respondent to Peter Wilby's Ph.D thesis on community music making who wrote:

'I'd much rather sit with 'poor' musicians for 3 hours and have good craic, than sit with people with egos as big as their backsides.'

The ego factor looms large for many people who pursue what my 5 year old Grandson expresses as 'lookit me, Grandad, Lookit, lookit' and I have to reply 'I'm lookiting, I'm lookiting!'. The folk world is not immune to this and there is a definite ego inflation link between those people who are primarily into performing rather than simply sharing. This does tend to come to the fore more often when open mic or perform-from-the-front formats are used for singarounds, where the rest of the group is reduced to being an audience with the single task of 'lookiting'.

Mind you, we have seen the ego factor come out to play even when there's a handful of folks sitting round the table. The odd thing is that egotism appears to emerge in a negative correlation to the level of ability of the singer or player.

I have yet to meet a really competent amateur or pro who suffers from the inflated ego factor – it's nearly always people in the mid-range who are possibly over-compensating for their lack of international recognition and on stage thrown underpant collection.

Peter Wilby's excellent write up includes his own summary of the ego-busting effect of the singaround circle

'The circular arrangement of seating is what distinguishes the singaround as a specific form of folk club interaction. There is no raised stage area, no public address system, no stage lighting, no anticipated hierarchy of performance where 'lesser mortal' floor singers prepare the ground for the evening's star turn. The circle signifies a community event, in which each member's contribution is valued, with the possibly unfortunate connotation of a group therapy session or corporate team-building gathering.'

There is also an unfortunate connotation of the big circle for some of the punters we have met who have expressed a sense of impending doom when faced with a wide circle of chairs in an atmosphere free village hall with strip lighting where you would have to shout or use semaphore to have a natter with the person opposite you.

I love this snippet from 'Dave' on a Mudcat chat stream, although as a convenor of singaround circles I know I shouldn't

'Lots of people here seem, and good luck to them, to prefer the 'singaround'. Why is that? To me it's sitting for hours listening to rubbish just so that you can sing something badly yourself. Can someone please explain the appeal?'

This is where the more subtle rules of hospitality come in to play. Lighting, seating, tea, biscuits, beer, warmth and a host of other soft factors make all the difference to an evening's enjoyment. This is the main reason that the pub is still the preferred venue for most of the 200 or so sessions and singarounds we have visited to date.

The ideal appears to be the function room, close to the bar but free of football chat and 90 decibel laughter. The majority of tune based sessions we have visited have a particular built in resistance to background pub noise, partly because they are making a decent enough level of sound themselves but also because a bit of background chatter and the occasional whoop or two actually add to the atmosphere. Woe betide anyone actually in or too near the session or singaround circle who breaks the unwritten rule of not nattering when the music is flowing though.

This brings us on to the thorny subject of session and singaround etiquette, a subject full of subjective judgementalism and the cause of many a verbal (and near physical) altercation. We have come across a number of attempts to produce good practice lists, some of which are hilariously confrontational and some simply warm hearted attempts to put newcomers at ease.

Chapter 4

Fay Hield's role as a performer, lecturer and academic in the folk world includes her thesis on 'Folk singing and the construction of community'. This extract is typical of the wit and wisdom we have found on our travels whenever we ask about session and singaround do's and don'ts:

'Bacca Pipes Rules or the foremost five of thousands of unwritten folk club rules. It's a minefield out there.

The Notice Board

There is a notice on the inner door (don't worry, no-one else sees it either) asking you to enter between songs (for the hard of interpreting, this also includes stories, poems and tunes) However, if you get here before we started (around 8.30) ignore this notice and this rule. OK?

The Bar Ban

There is no bar ban. The new room layout provides real drinkers with the 'between song' facility we always lacked. However, please don't go for a drink during a song as being thrown bodily down the steps can cause offence.

The Chatterbox

Let me tell you a story (but not whilst the turn is on) of our enviable reputation for repartee. It is sympathetic, not selfish, it can be educational but it's not elitist. It is not chatter and it's never during a song.

The Rules Rule

And finally, this is the 'don't steal the rules' rule. To reduce this steady attrition we have engaged the services of our Gallant Leader's Patch the Wanderdog, so called because she will wander around until she trips over the thief (and this is the scary bit) and begs for food with extreme prejudice.'

Here's an offering from Acorn4 at the session.com who wanted to add 'not all suggestions here of equal seriousness'

'Singarounds: Code of Conduct

- 1 *If you arrive after the start, fine, but please wait until the end of the song before going in. If you want to greet people enthusiastically and noisily please get there for the start or wait for the interval.*
2. *With many of us getting to an advanced age it's fine to use a sheet of words or ipad/phone but please don't constantly flick through pages or stare at your phone under the table – it's bad manners!*
3. *When going to the toilet/bar please wait until the end of the song – even the weakest of bladders can last out a Child Ballad – try to avoid going to the bar/toilet during the same person's turn twice.*
4. *If you have multiple instruments plus cases, music stand and words it is suggested you get there for the start of a session rather than interrupting the flow of the night with a "kerfuffle" while you sort yourself out.*
- 5 *It is fine to do a long song but try to avoid this in the last half hour when others are hoping they might squeeze a song in.*
- 6 *If your rear end could be described as "generous" and the room has bench seats do not try to fit in a space half the width of your behind – it may mean the poor person at the end falling off!*

7. *If you must do "Ride On" try to make it last no more than 4 minutes; if you do "Knocking on Heaven's Door" try to make it last no longer than 3 minutes.*
8. *Try not to do your turn and then leave straight away – it gives the message:- "I'm here to be listened to not to listen to other people".*
9. *If you join in with someone's song, LISTEN to what they are doing – it might be different to the usual treatment of the song – don't impose your own version.*
10. *Fine to discuss the songs –it's all part of the night, but try not to get involved in conversations which only include two or three people – your geraniums may be of no interest to the rest of the room! Wait til the break.*
11. *If you play tunes on a melodeon remember this doesn't entitle you to twice as many turns as everybody else.*

Session afficiandos have a similar mystical rule book and the following, tongue-in-cheek 'Ten Commandments' from Linn Shultz and Tom Hall at the session.com should stand you in good stead:

'The Ten Commandments of Sessions

1. *Thou shalt not ever forsake the beat.*
2. *Thou shalt arrange thyself in a small circle so that thou mayest hear and see the other musicians. Thou shalt listen with thine ears to the songs and tunes and attempt to play in accord with the group;*

also, open thine eyes betimes to look about thee, lest there be some visual sign someone is endeavoring to send thee. Thou shalt play softly when someone lifteth his voice in song, when playing harmony, and when thou knowest not what thou doest.

3. *Thou shalt play in tune. Tune thine instrument well, and tune it often with thine electric tuner, lest the sounds emanating from thine instrument be unclean.*
4. *Thou shalt commence and cease playing each tune together as one, so that the noise ye make be a joyful noise, and is not an abomination. Whensoever a musician sticketh forth his foot as though he were afflicted with a cramp in the fatted calf, thou must complete the rest of that verse, and then cease. Thou shalt not noodle in the blessed silence, nor interfere with a singer seeking a note.*
5. *Thou shalt stick out thine own foot or else lift up thy voice crying "This is it!", or "Last time!" if thou hast been the one to begin the tune, and it has been played sufficient times over. If the one who began a tune endeth it not by one of these signs, then the tune will just go on and on, like the Old Testament, until the listeners say, "Hark! It all soundeth the same."*
6. *Thou shalt concentrate and thou shalt not confound the music by mixing up the A part and the B part. Most tunes, but not all, proceed according to the ancient law "AABB". But if thou sinneth in this regard, or make any mistake that is unclean, thou may atone not by ceasing to play -- but by reentering the tune in the proper place and playing on.*

7. *Thou shalt be ever mindful of the key the banjo or concertina is tuned in, and play many tunes in that key, for the banjo is but a lowly instrument, which must needs be retuned each time there is a key change, and the concertina may not be tuned at all except by an expert.*
8. *Thou shalt not speed up or slow down accidentally when playing a tune, for it is an abomination. (See commandment 1)*
9. *Thou shalt not, by thine own self, commence noodling off on a tune the other musicians know not, unless asked or unless thou art teaching that tune, for it is an abomination, and the other musicians will not hold thee guiltless, and shall take thee off their computer lists, yea, even unto the third and the fourth generation.*
10. *Thou shalt not come to the jam session to impress others with thine amazing talents for this also is an abomination. The song shalt be the center around which all musicians shall rotate, not vice-versa.*

"Attempts to make thine own star shine shall lead thee into darkness."

Top marks go to Nygel and Sue from the wonderfully weirdly named 'Goose is out' (ask them about it) at the ivy House in London for providing the most warm hearted intro to their singaround on their website – who wouldn't feel welcome and reassured after reading this: Our popular Singarounds are held in the Ballroom at The Ivy House. There is a bar in the room, so you won't miss any of the singing whilst getting another pint!

'Unlike our other events, the Singarounds continue throughout the year, including in December (when we have a Seasonal Singaround!) and during the Summer.

People often ask us what a Singaround actually is – or else they confuse it with a Singalong (hey, we're not Chas and Dave) or an Open Mic evening (There is no mic! There is no audience! It is NOT NOT NOT Open Mic!)

So, read on

What Is a Singaround?

In short, a Singaround – well, ours anyway – consists of people – or sometimes small groups of people – taking it in turns to sing a song. Don't stop reading there!! You don't have to sing if you don't want to!!

Our Singaround is very informal and participative – no mics, no lights, no audience, we sing for ourselves. And we don't sit in a circle! Though we did once have a participant who kept moving the chairs into a circle, so we had to keep changing them back

Our Seasonal Singaround, held every year in December, has a different format as we intersperse individual songs with unison singing of carols and other seasonal songs.

What can I sing though?

You can sing whatever you like, but as we're a folk club many people do sing folk or folk-influenced songs. If your song has a chorus or people can join in with it, all the better!

We do however ask that you don't sing very long songs, unless you are Mike Waterson singing Tam Lin, which we can say with absolute certainty that you won't be.

We also ask that you don't spend more than a very short time on introducing your song. If there are a lot of people wanting to sing, a lot of talking means that other people may not get a second song during the evening, plus we want to hear singing, not talking!

If you would rather people didn't join in when it's "your" turn, please say so before you start, we (probably) won't be offended

Songs from any country or culture are welcome! We've had songs in French, German, Welsh, Hebrew, Norwegian, Gaelic, Hungarian, Japanese and many other languages.

We have also had everything from hard-core traditional folk/beautiful self-penned songs to Status Quo (sorry, afraid that was Nyge and Sue aka The Goose doing a rather poor version of Down The Dustpipe) via jazz standards, so feel free to let loose – within reason

We do prefer it if people don't sing really hackneyed songs (we actually half-seriously banned Scarborough Fair for a bit) but hey we are not the Singaround police. Well not usually.

Every Singaround is different, depending on who turns up on any particular evening ! Because we don't vet anyone – or what they are going to sing – this does mean that on some evenings you may not personally enjoy some of the singers or the songs. We feel this is a small price to pay for having an inclusive Singaround where we hope that everybody feels welcome. It also means that the evenings are usually, let's say, varied!

How do I know when it's my time to sing?

You put your name on the list on the table when you arrive. If you can't find the list, please ask somebody. If they don't know, please ask somebody else

The order of the names is the order of singing, unless the person has gone to the bar or the loo! We will call your name when it's your turn. If you want to sing later in the evening, please wait and put your name on the list later. It confuses everybody if you leave a big blank space on the list with your name at the bottom of the space!

We give people one song each until we reach the end of the list, then we start again, so if you are early you are more likely to get more than one song. If there are a lot of people, though, we usually only go through once. Confusing? Nah!

If you are using an instrument (see below) and that instrument is in a case, it is very helpful if you could make sure it is a) out of its case and b) tuned if necessary before your name is called

Can I Sing With Someone Else, or with a Group of People?

Yes, of course! If there is more than one person singing together, it counts as one song per group. However the people in the group can also sing a solo song if they want, but they also have to put their names on the list separately in that case.

Hope that's clear, it certainly hasn't been in the past

Can I use an Instrument?

You are welcome to accompany yourself on an instrument, but this is a Singaround, so not the place for solely instrumental tunes. Nor is it a session! Sorry! There are several sessions happening locally, but we are not sure of the situation during Covid so we are not linking to them at present.

Can I use Words (Written, that is)?

Yes of course! Thought it's always impressive when people don't have to refer to words

When Does The Singaround Start and Finish? Is There a Break?

The door opens at 7pm and the singing starts at 7.15pm.

The exact finish time will depend on how many people there are who want to sing.

I'm Worried Everybody Else Will Be Better Than Me

Yeh, you and most of us! Really, don't worry. Some people who come have been singing for years and are very experienced. Others have never sung in public before. Others have but are still terrified every time. Some people hide it better than others It's like anything, it gets easier the more you do it. You've got to start somewhere

I Don't Want To Sing At All!

If you want to come and just listen, of course that's absolutely fine too – we don't want to make anybody feel uncomfortable, or feel that they have to sing. You don't! Though we hope if you're a bit shy that at some stage you'll give it a go! And of course we hope that you'll join in the choruses (though you don't have to, obviously!).'

It may surprise some people to think that a list of FAQ's like Nygel and Sue's are needed if it's just a question of turning up at the right time and joining in. Human nature and in particular, human nature armed with a guitar, proves the rule.

The vast majority of events we have witnessed follow an open-hearted policy of anything goes as long as it's acoustic. Even then it's amazing how far you can stretch the term 'acoustic' if your tuba is actually attached to a row of pedals via a roland cube busking amp. (You think I'm making this up don't you?).

What's in and what's out varies from place to place and give rise to some hilarious stories. Here's a chap called Ross Faison on session.com on one his own big no-no's:

*'Even more annoying are the singer-songwriters offering overwritten songs about their sorry-a****d little lives. That said, I was once in a session with some known trad musicians in Lisdoonvarna who mostly wanted to sing old Hank Williams songs. Kinda fun...weird, but fun.'*

and then there's this exchange from Matt Milton on a mudcat.org thread:

'Had a real classic humdinger of how NOT to approach a floor spot the other night. Feel driven to share as it annoyed me so much. Guy sits down, then spends basically the time it would take anyone else to sing an entire song just to put his guitar into some special tuning. All the while he informs us that he's about to sing a really long song. This is why, apparently, he has the lyrics on his phone - he tells us that normally he wouldn't dream of such a thing, being such a pro etc, but they are only there just cos it's a really long song and he probably won't need them - they are there just in case.'

He starts the song off really fast, in order to seem really impressive on the guitar. But he then slows down massively when he actually has to start singing at the same time. He immediately forgets some words. He has placed his phone on a chair next to him, where he can't actually see it. So he has to stop the song to look at them. He does this three times. He also turns out to be not much of a good singer, hitting all the high notes flat. I have to fight the urge to heckle so so so much... '

I loved the quick fire response to this one from a certain Jerry who quipped:

'What an utter and complete jerk. I reckon that guy must be doing the rounds, because he seems to be at every event I go to. Ouch, just realised I am that man. Thanks for not heckling though'

My final offering on this subject turned out to be a joke – but not before everyone on the thread took a sharp intake of breath, realising how many times they had sat there and thought how nice it would be if SOMEONE ELSE actually did that. Thanks to Christie for this one:

'This may seem like a dumb question. I went to my first folk session last night. Everybody was playing along. I tried to join in on a few songs but was having a lot of trouble, and getting a few glares from some of the other musicians. There was finally a song that I felt like I was able to play, so I played along, quite happy with my progress. About halfway through the song, a man left the circle.

After the song was over, he came back, snatched my guitar from me, and proceeded to cut each of the strings with a pair of pliers. Then he threw my guitar on the floor outside of the circle and sat back down. Nobody said anything, so I just left my guitar on the floor, and went home. Needless to say, I am quite hurt and humiliated by the whole event. If this is how things are normally done, I don't know why everyone enjoys playing together so much. Maybe in a couple of months I'll buy a new guitar, then never play it outside my home again. Is this standard behaviour for these gatherings? '

Well Christie, joking or not I can say that after roaming round the country for a few years dropping into all kinds of sessions and singarounds in all kinds of places, you can expect a warm welcome and a genuine interest whatever stage your musical journey is at from the vast majority of places. Of the very few we visited and wouldn't by choice go back to, you know who you are.

Actually that's not true. These very few off putting events are peopled by folkies who lack the social sensibilities to give a stale turd about anything other than their own pleasure so go along for the first time, look and listen, then decide if it's worth a return trip. Everyone's happy that way.

Chapter 5

Apart from the obvious increase in my personal knowledge of fine ales from around the country, we should move on to thinking about what, if anything, we have learned. My previous career (I use that word guardedly as the proud owner of 25 job titles before I hit my 30th birthday) as a project manager in the community development sector gave me a sad ability to make use of analytical tools with wonderfully inappropriate acronyms such as PEST, PESTLE, STEEP and STEEPLE. Who makes these things up – oh yes, people like me when I had to make a living impressing people by stating the obvious without them realising it.

If you are not familiar with these terms, the first letters in all of them offer the different angles anyone would need to think about – the social, technical, economic, environmental, political, legal and ethical aspects of human existence. I am not going to bore you to death by covering each of these attributes but I would like to offer my own new acronym (and heavens knows, the world does so needs another one) of FOLKY to help us all understand what's going on in sessions and singarounds in the 21st century. Here's the run down:

- F – is for fun, without which it's all meaningless
- O – is for oldy, without whom a lot of events would be sparcely populated
- L – is for love, because it's all you need, obviously
- K – is for knowledge, especially around defining what we mean by folk
- Y– is for why we bother week after week

Fun

For sure, we have all had a lot of fun wandering round the country for the past couple of years and indeed, for many of us, the past 40 years or more in sessions and singarounds in our own backyards.

Fun is very underrated as a key motivator. I think back on the times when I have been helpless with laughter at the Bluebell in Essex when Rod and Ian are belting each other with wet socks to celebrate their joint birthdays, or up at the Last Post in Derbyshire when Andrew was manfully playing away on the cahon while an unknown drunken admirer gave him a big cuddle up. Priceless moments.

I also draw from my huge memory bank of fantastic tunes, songs, poems and stories that have moved me over the years together with the motivation of the people delivering them as professionals re-connecting with the joy of playing to a select group of half-drunk mates or a faltering first timer delivering a gem with the same level of stage nerves you'd expect when playing the Albert Hall.

Oldy

Despite the reported appearance of young folks all over the country in huge numbers at festivals and some clubs, it remains true that the majority of places we visited showed a young at heart but old of face kind of profile.

Should we be concerned about that? I suspect not – once the younger element has settled into a regular job, had a kid or two and come to the point of wondering where the hell their life has gone, they'll find their way back to the most accessible place for a sing-song and a good tale or two, down at the old Dog and Ferret. Mind you, it does have to be the right pub on the right night with the right people.

Love

What's more to say? If Beatles songs are not accepted as part of the folk canon, everyone but the trad die hards will say what hope is there for the future of the tradition? Antique status comes after 50 years for bedpans and so on, so they say, so why not pop groups? As long as people love playing and listening to good music, love being part of a tradition and love to have a pint or two, it really is all you need.

Knowledge

A little of it can be a dangerous thing. Checkout the comments that buzz around the social media sites from punters who are driven crazy by longwinded intros but balance that with the great stories from ace rapporteurs that give our sessions and singarounds a real sense of depth and living tradition. It also covers the folk heroes who spend half their life logging and mapping the ever changing availability of sessions, singarounds and clubs all over the country so that we can find a great night out at the press of a button. This Rolling On project would have been impossible with the dedicated work of the few, for whom so much is owed by so many. Or something like that.

Y ?

A lot of people have asked me this question, most notably my wife. 'Are you seriously going out again to hang out to sing the same old songs with the same old people' she says ' I don't know why you do it". It's because it's not just the same old – there's nearly always something new, someone new or if there isn't what's so bad about liking to feel part of a slow moving river of tradition in our fast moving toilet cistern of modern culture?

Even more people have asked me how I can afford to wander all over the country dropping in on pub after pub without a research budget or inheritance from Granny. Here's the thing. We go out as a group from our session to festivals on a sort of extended charabanc outing at least once a year and the team gets out and about on their own as much as they are allowed.

I happen to have a part-time work role where I have to review secure hospitals all over the country and always ensure that I stay somewhere close to a session or singaround the night before. Many years ago I became allergic to hotels after waking up once too often in one and having no clue where I was.

It's a totally different feeling if you've been out for the night, met some great people, heard some fine music (Alright then, and had a few pints in good company) and then tumbled into bed at a fine local hostelry – joy of joys if it's the same place as the session. Of course you know where you are when you wake up – how could you possibly forget. It's imprinted on your memory for ever.

You could do worse than run the FOLKY analysis across your own night out and see how it shapes up. Take a flip chart with you for added professionalism or better still, stand-by loo paper.

When we look at the stories people have told us including those that have been written down and included on the www.rolligon.org website, the question 'why' opens up a rich vein of insight.

Let's kick off with this from Tracey, reflecting on her experiences moving between the world of professional theatre and the wild and woolly wide at the Bastard Session in Oxford.

From Bard to Bastard - Tracey Rimell

I was born into a family of songwriters and music producers, with a published poet for a grandma to boot. It's not a huge surprise then that I ventured down the same path. My love of music started aged seven, when I learned the classic childhood joy that is primary school recorder. I'm not sure why I enjoyed it so much when my school had a somewhat rigid approach to learning.

In fact, if you forgot to bring your recorder to class, you were made to 'play' a ruler to get the practise in. And practise was needed; there's nothing like the resounding squawk of a choir of plastic recorders in dissonance with each other. Delightful.

My passion really took off when I joined the school assembly recorder players. An elite group of six who were permitted to sit on a PE bench instead of the floor and play along during morning hymns. A true honour indeed, extended even further when I was promoted to alto recorder. Though I was never able to span a tenor and still cannot comfortably do so to this day, even with a key..

Having discovered the true fun of music, I was desperate to take things further. I longed to play piano like my best friend and begged my parents to let me. They finally caved in after I resorted to making myself a life-sized imitation keyboard out of an old cardboard box and a magic-marker, and spent at least an hour a day pretending to play this makeshift monstrosity. By the time I reached my teenage years, I had taken piano lessons and started messing about putting pop songs together. My uncle taught me some basic recording skills on an old analogue 8-track. Needless to say the quality was ropey as hell, but it was great fun!

It wasn't until my mid-teens that I decided I wanted to be a professional singer- songwriter. I started doing the audition rounds circa the time that Pop Idol landed on our screens and the industry started shifting toward highly commercial TV music competitions. Audition after audition I was judged, rejected, asked to leave based solely on my appearance, and spent hundreds if not thousands of pounds on travel and accommodation, only to stand in rainy audition queues on the grey heaving streets of London. Slowly but surely my dream turned into a minor nightmare and all the love I had for music drained out of me like old bathwater.

In an attempt to redirect myself, I did an internship with a recording studio in Swansea which did serve to reignite some of my passion. The people there were brilliant and talented and I started to find my joy again. I went on to do a BSc in Music Technology and ended up working in theatre tech as a result. There were many rewarding aspects to this but it was also a huge amount of work. Juggling operational backstage work at one venue while writing and producing music for another, ended up wiping me out to the point that I got totally exhausted. I knew it was too much and something had to give. Sadly it was the music.

For years, music remained a forgotten hobby abandoned in a neglected corner of my subconscious like a distant and dusty memory. My career moved in another direction with theatre becoming the main focus. Years later, that direction would take me to drama school where I met the man who later became my fiancé. After graduation and a stint living in London, the expense and fast pace of the city got the better of us and we wanted a change.

We occasionally ventured north to Oxford to visit my partner's family, and I began to fall in love with its architectural and cultural charms. After a couple of years we decided to relocate there.

Moving to a new city where you don't know anybody and your career schedule keeps you from joining any classes or groups, is suffocatingly lonely. I remember days where I sat on benches in town so I could watch passers-by, phoning my mother crying telling her how deeply I needed people and a community.

By that time, my partner had made more social headway thanks to his roots in the area. He started to play at local folk sessions and had joined a madcap folk collective called the Half Moon All Stars (HMAS). I went to watch them play at Cowley's Catweasle Club and I was completely blown away. Not because it was the most polished or rehearsed set, but because the sheer energy and camaraderie was completely intoxicating. I wanted in.

As soon as my schedule allowed, I tagged along to a monthly folk night called The Bastard English Session, where HMAS were notably present and my other half liked to play and make merry. And from that moment on my Oxford existence was changed forever. The room pulsed with music, dancing, singing and even shouting. Players and singers of all levels and abilities. Some sung beautiful tunes, while others played delicate instruments, and some even rapped.

Then the room would unite in a sea of raw voices that butchered classic hits and medleyed pop, rock, and sea shanties galore. It didn't matter if you had a beautiful voice. It didn't matter if you were the most talented player. In fact, it didn't even really matter if you could hold a tune. All that counted was that you felt welcome and you had fun. It was the most gleeful and energising atmosphere I'd ever experienced at a music event. It was this feeling of inclusivity that I didn't know I had been missing. Before long I was hooked and went to every single session, cunningly persuading HMAS to take me under their wing and give me a shot as a harmony singer on the side.

I even broke out my recorder once again and found that forgotten thrill of being sat on the PE bench back in assembly.

The raucousness of The Bastard English Session is not everyone's cup of tea, but for me it was where I found my folk family and finally felt part of the community that I had so longed for. It is there that I fell in love with Oxford, met some of my best friends, and reconnected with the pure enjoyment of music for music's sake. I will be forever grateful to that motley gang for their warmth, and hold those early Bastard and HMAS years as some of the most precious in my life to date.

Find out more about Tracey's music and theatre career at www.traceyrimell.com

James Bell is the man responsible for the radical styling of the Bastard Session and you can hear an hilarious interview with him on the www.rollington.org website if you fancy a laugh and some sharp insight into the folk world

Overcoming the hesitancy to actually go into a pub on your own, let alone sing a song to a bunch of strangers, requires a deep breath and a deal of self-confidence. Many people find that a step too far unless someone has already told them what a friendly bunch you are or your on-line blurb (you do have on-line blurb don't you.....) is as friendly as our example from 'The Goose is Out'. Here's our Ali on her first experience of the Plough and Fleece weekly get together.

It's your turn: Alison White

My dad has been in many bands throughout his life, playing the guitar and harmonica in at least one band, the Blown Bottle. He is a natural performer and he loves to perform; as he would tell you, he's not the best guitarist or the best singer in the world, but he knows how to sell a song.

My mother used to play the piano for our primary school assemblies, but aside from that I know very little about her relationship with music as, as far back as I can remember she has only listened to Radio 4 and classical music.

For my part, music and singing have been an important part of my life since I was about 6 years of age. This is when my brother and I started going to Sierra Leone twice a year to visit our Dad. During these holidays we would listen to his music – Bobby Bare, Boney M., Johnny Cash, Leonard Cohen, Ian Dury & The Blockheads, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and The Who, to name an important few – and my dad would often play the guitar and sing, and I would join in. Our first duets were Scarborough Fair, Sweet Little Sixteen and Where Have All The Flowers Gone, others include Big Dupree, Faster Horses, Gimme A Ride To Heaven Boy and Marie Laveau.

For a few years, my singing was limited to these holidays and singing to myself, and then at secondary school, I joined the choir. We did also have to play the recorder in our music lessons, but the least said about that the better – I could only read two notes of music, so they were the only notes I played! We moved to Paris when I was 14, where my singing was limited to my bedroom and as a member of the chorus in the annual school musical.

Since then, I have been in a couple more choirs, have continued to sing for myself and occasionally for friends, around the odd campfire... and with my father when we were in the same place at the same time, although his repertoire has definitely moved on, and he sometimes despaired of my lack of projection! The exclamation mark is there, as I find that quite comical, as projection is definitely not something I now lack, possibly something I have a bit much of.

Whilst at university, back in 1994, I met my friend Mick, who was lead singer in a punk band back in the 80s, The Cheaters, and when he met his wife Carole, who has an incredible voice and was a karaoke queen in Majorca for a number of years, we started singing together. Fun evenings of food, wine, music, harmony and song.

And then I moved from Manchester to Cambridge in 2014. One of the first rental properties I was attracted to happened to be in Horningsea, and whilst investigating the area, I discovered that the pub in the village had a weekly singaround/music session. Although that property didn't work out, I was determined to get to those music sessions, which is partly why I chose to live in the next village.

My first Thursday in Waterbeach, I headed down to the Plough and Fleece to check it out. I got there early, treated myself to dinner, and then spotted someone arriving by bicycle who I thought might be part of the session, so I plucked up the courage to say hello. Fortunately I was right. You might ask what a session participant looks like, and the reality is that we are actually quite a diverse bunch really, I was just lucky, and he was obviously arriving at about the right time. Anyway, that was Peter, our sea shanty maestro who brings so much energy and joy to the sessions.

My plan had been to just listen, learn and enjoy, and work on building up the courage to actually participate some Thursday in the future, but that was scuppered when, whilst getting a drink at the bar, I heard shouts of 'Manchester, it's your turn' and, in the nicest possible way, they refused to let me decline. So I bit the bullet and sang a song.

I think it was Ready for the Storm by Dougie MacLean, although I don't remember much about it, except for holding my hands under the table to stop them shaking, feeling like my cheeks were burning, worrying I'd made a hash of it, and then, everyone being very positive and encouraging. And that is key!

Tony ran the session at that time, and his passion for the sessions, his joy in the music, his skill at jamming with others, and his ever positive demeanour and encouragement made it a very special place for all involved, and particularly for 'newbies' who had very little experience of playing and/or singing in public. Drew and Paul stepped up to the mark to run the sessions when Tony moved out of the area, not an easy thing to do, and they did so with the same positivity, until the pandemic threw a spanner in all things social, but we will return.

Safe to say that following that first night I became one of the regulars, albeit sometimes somewhat intermittently. I did worry that people would get bored of me just singing without any musical accompaniment, and also with my very limited repertoire, but everyone has always been complimentary, which is a nice ego boost. I have added a few more songs to my repertoire, although I definitely need to keep working on that; have grown in confidence (I guess hence that projection), although my hands still shake; have worked on my ability to harmonise, which is a work in progress; and a few times, some of the musicians have joined in with me, which is a joy and there's no other feeling like it!

Over time a few of us started visiting other sessions in the region, which is fantastic. There is so much musical talent in this land, it is inspiring and so enjoyable. Our furthest adventure was a trip to the Amber Festival, Dougie MacLean's folk music festival in Dunkeld, Scotland.

We stayed in a converted chapel, jammed 'at home', joined a number of sessions and started a couple. So beautiful and so much fun! And when one of the posse, Polly, moved to Derby, she found a new musical home and in 2018 we went up to participate in the fringe to the Derby Folk Festival at the pub, The Last Post – a long weekend of almost 12 hour daily sessions. We enjoyed it so much, we returned in 2019, and we would have been there last year, if we hadn't been kiboshed by Covid.

This past year, with all the pandemic restrictions, has been a tough one. There have been regular virtual singaround/music sessions via Zoom, and I started out joining one set up by one of the Plough and Fleece regulars - Lockdown Folk hosted by Jeremy Harmer. It was fun to hear new people, but it just didn't work for me; I missed the atmosphere of the session and the jamming aspect, and I worried about how my unaccompanied voice carried through the ether, and my limited repertoire.

I cannot wait for the day that we can all meet up in person and make music together again! And to the distinct possibility that I might have someone to accompany me on guitar and to work with me on extending my repertoire! Roll on the next phase in all our musical lives, and in the words of a famous, far from folky band:

*Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing
Who can live without it? I ask in all honesty What would life be?
Without a song or a dance, what are we?
So I say thank you for the music, for giving it to me.
Singing takes me out of myself, it makes my heart swell and my feelings soar. And long may it keep rolling on!*

Chapter 6

You would think that big, burly shanty man Peter Edwards would bulldoze his way through any session or singaround without a hint of self-consciousness, but you'd be wrong. He is still a big, burly shanty man with a voice to frighten the seagulls but a big softy on the inside. Witness his 'Where have all the flowers gone' – the only person we have met on all our travels who stills sings that winsome classic without adding rude words.

Finding my Voice - Peter 'Captain' Edwards

I arrived with my parents in a small village called Newton near Cambridge from South Africa in 1960, after a period of acceptance by the villagers and school children, I became friends with among others another a young man called Robin from Sawston who convinced me that going to a folk club called 'The Rob Roy' upstairs room and sitting on cushions with the Cambridge Crofters performing was the best way to meet young girls especially foreign ones keen to learn English.

This was my introduction into the 'Folk World'; I enjoyed joining in with all the chorus songs even if I didn't know the words or the songs message. The visits to 'The Rob Roy' continued until Robin went to UEA as a mature student, I visited him occasionally and we always seemed to end up in pubs with 'singarounds' where we were routinely be asked if we would like to sing which certainly terrified me, but also made me feel guilty that I was listening to others and not contributing, a feeling that stayed with me.

Years passed with no contact with the 'Folk world' with the exception of yearly visits to the Cambridge folk festival.

Still interested in folk music, but married now with young children, my wife Ruth suggested I go to a Folk Club at Fulbourn to see it was my cup of tea so I enlisted a friend to go with me and enjoyed the evening and heard about the Cherry Hinton Folk Club and became a regular visitor.

About this time Robin had moved to the Wye valley and had started to collect sea shanty recorded music from The Shanty Crew, Johnny Collins and others. He invited us to join him and his family camping at the Bromyard Folk festival, I joined in with the Johnny Collins and friends sessions choruses at every opportunity. We went for a few years but our children were growing up. My wife Ruth decided to go to a Singing in Tune workshops in Cambridge and I followed later, I didn't mind singing in a group but was still terrified to sing on my own but it did begin to build up my confidence.

While doing the workshops I decided to learn some songs inevitably from the shanty crew and Johnny Collins tapes, learning on journeys to and from work. I made a tape of me singing not knowing what my voice sounded like and played it to my 14 year old daughter Hannah who said it was OK so emboldened I decided to sing at a Cherry Hinton folk club visit hosted by the lovely Barry and Rose I plucked up courage (by way of a number of pints of beer) and when asked if I would like to sing by Rose I answered faulting yes and that was my wobbly start to singing in public.

This shaky start inspired me to learn new songs and then try them out at the Cherry Hinton and Fulbourn folk clubs and latterly The Red Lion at Whittlesford . As my confidence grew I branched out with a small selection of songs, I researched for venues in my local area as well as those at my holiday destinations and folk festivals. I stuck fairly rigidly to singarounds but did end up on stage a few times as well as singing at the front but much preferred singarounds.

I was now feeling a lot more comfortable in singarounds, I started to take more notice of others and the huge amount of musical talent that exists at singarounds. Unfortunately all my 'go to' folk clubs closed so I was without a regular venue, Ruth (My wife) mentioned she had met a certain Tony Phillips through her work on a bike project 'You Can Bike Too' Tony, she told me ran music festivals and regular singarounds at The Plough and Fleece Horningsea (soon to become a community pub).

This was just what I was looking for, so I plucked up courage and went along. I had never been to such a welcoming singaround, Tony was outstanding in his approach of inclusivity. So still clinging desperately to my songsheets I started singing at my new base, I started to feel even more confident than I was before, so much so that Ruth told me to try standing up when singing and this coupled with the great support and encouragement of Tony and others I started remembering words to songs and now rarely need the songsheets.

After several years of singarounds and festivals at the Plough and Fleece, Tony decided to start the 'Rolling on project' visiting as many venues in the UK as possible and he has very kindly invited me to go along with him. I would encourage anyone reading this to refer to the places visited as it is a great resource for keeping music alive.

Chris is a local legend in Hertfordshire, where he runs the Royston Folk Club but also in London, where he runs a nightclub and goes under the name Cee Dub. Not a combination you often find in the folk world. Here's his story.

I was made for music - Chris Walls (Cee Dub) at Royston Folk Club, Hertfordshire

I believe we probably come into this world fully formed and if life allows, we follow our path – though sometimes life gets in the way...I remember as a small kid growing up in Enfield North London, listening to music on the transistor radio I had saved for.

We had a tape recorder to send and listen to messages with friends in Australia. I would record songs from the radio and I would record my voice. My father noodled on guitar, he sucked and blew a harmonica and he had friends who skiffled with him. He took me to local productions of every musical of the time; Sound of Music, Carousel, South Pacific etc etc. I have ever since loved all the cheesy musicals that have come along there after.

I failed 11 plus and went to a secondary modern. I was bullied and hated the school, but a teacher took me under his wing and gave me a job looking after the stage. I set up mics for assembly, lighting for events. I made scenery. I was safe on my stage with a few like minded others. The same teacher married a teacher, who played guitar and taught me how to play. I borrowed a school guitar and I played and sung in groups, sung in choirs and recorded on 3 albums of folk music. I loved woodwork and in the workshop was a technician who made violins.

Everybody else made plant pot stands etc... So did I - but I also made a speaker to enhance my transistor radio and I copied the school guitar. At home I made an electric guitar and I bolted a little 5 watt amp from Tottenham Court Rd onto a speaker in a box. At lunch time with two turntables from jumble sales and old PA equipment bits found on the stage I ran lunch time discos.

I left school to start an engineering apprenticeship, the wages were crap, but I was DJing as much as possible using equipment I designed and made. From 18 I shared a flat with a great guy, who was a much better guitarist than me and had a great record collection. I sold my guitars to fund my DJing. It was the 70s and all I needed was 'Saturday night Fever' to make a profit in those disco days.

I listened to everything and anything, early Peter Green, Reggae, Motown, Funk, Soul, early synth, prog rock, folk rock, singer songwriters, US FM but maybe my greatest loves were Carol King and James Taylor. Then came punk and music polarized.

I found as a DJ I could satisfy births deaths and marriages but I could not find my niche and without a niche and with work opportunities flourishing I buried myself in work for too many years. My DJ equipment sold to buy a nice Hi Fi with too many buttons playing vanilla records. My musically wasted 30s.

The last company I worked for was Soundcraft, a leading sound mixing manufacturer. I was an engineer but musically I had lost my way. The mixing desks were to me just products. I found the company the building that they now operate from and set up the plan for them to move to it. In return they made me redundant. I set my mind to never work for a company again – I never have. (But I do now use a Soundcraft mixing desk!).

It was the early 90s I did anything that paid more than £5 an hour and I partied. Watching a DJ one night I was amazed as the beats were mixed into one continuous euphoric dance. I was with gay friends and the music scene was rich. I had found my niche. I made scenery, costumes, show tapes for cabaret and I helped promote gay nightclub nights. With rudimentary computer skills learnt from my time working for Amstrad, I started publicity and marketing nightclubs, cabaret artists, drag acts.

My introduction to the internet was very early. I sang. I toured. I did 180 shows in one year. Yes that old love of musicals; Sound of Music, Carousel, South Pacific etc (and all that followed (Cabaret, Rocky Horror, Little shop of Horrors, Hairspray, Grease) sure fed the imagination for material to perform.

In 2005 I lost a very good friend. He was just 40 years old. At the time of his death I had the vague opportunity to design and build our own home near Royston in Hertfordshire. At the same time my promotion and marketing had hit a wall as web sites took over the marketing budgets.

As my friend died he said "follow your dream build your ranch. Life is short don't wait". For three years I put all my effort into building our home and when it was finished I expected to drive back and forward to my contacts and interests in London. After twice falling asleep driving home late at night I knew it was time to make a new life near to my new home.

My builder and music hero friend who is my closest neighbor said one day – "I was working in Enfield and mentioned you to my client – they said they knew you and that you sang and played guitar – I didn't know you played guitar?" I told him I hadn't played since I was 20. He said "you should start playing again". I asked him what kind of guitar I should get. He said "you will know it when you play it".

It took me a further 3 years to find that guitar and a teacher to get me over many bad habits and inhibitions. The guitar I now play, I made from scratch. During those 3 years I put a PA in my bungalow that had been built to party in and I hosted ill conceived jams.

My guitar teacher one day invited me to the launch of Royston Folk Club by one of his students. I went and was inspired to help. My internet, promotion, booking, marketing and sound engineering skills were soon employed. Sadly the founder of the club moved away and the guitar teacher got ill. Bloody cancer again. Before he died he encouraged me to keep the Folk Club going and introduced to me to another of his students. He told us both to keep each other going.

That teachers name was Tony Buch (pronounced Buck) and Richard and I named our duo 'Pass the Buch' to take forward his name. I think he would be proud to know we are still together, making steady progress, finding our songs, enjoying practicing and entertaining.

Our house has now hosted many parties and concerts. I have made SO many wonderful musician friends through my voluntary work with Royston Folk Club. I have booked acts for our concerts working closely with the rest of the team that I have gathered round me. I can truly say that the things that came naturally to me as a kid are now the foundation of all I hold dear today. My home is a house of music.

I make and set up instruments, I share my tools with others that make instruments. I have friends drop in to practice and try things through the PA.

Why do musicians, promoters, technicians, do what we do? It sure as hell ain't the money. NO It's because music is like a faith. It can't be explained. You either have it or you don't. It brings us together. It gives us our community. We know a secret that can't be shared with others, that don't know music, like we know music. That's why we just have to make music and to share music.

Les Ray is Cambridge's Mister Music, having a finger in every flavour of folk pie going as well as (in my view) an unhealthy interest in Americana. I'm joking Les – don't send the boys round again. This introduces us to yet another doosey in the folk chat world – the pros and cons of the stateside influence on our music.

Musical Wanderlust - Les Ray of Strummers and Dreamers

Like the other contributors to this page, my life has had its own musical soundtrack. In my case the songs were those to be heard as I was growing up in a Northamptonshire village, losing my innocence at

Reading University, spending a decade in exile in Italy and Argentina, to then return to the UK in the 1990s and embark on my own musical adventures with a band and a radio show. . I'm currently working on a writing project, which is part personal memoir, part family and village history and part ruminations on life, but the theme running through is of course music. Below are a couple of my stories that will eventually end up in the book in some form.

The Birth of Wanderlust: Listening to America:

It was a Christmas present I think, as I don't think I was old enough to buy it for myself. A couple of years later I would regularly take the bus to Kettering and visit Alf Bailey's shop in Gold Street to buy or order an LP or a single. In previous decades the shop used to specialise in selling sheet music and 78s; the owner at that time was founder Alf's grandson Graham, who, dressed in his garish dicky bow tie, wasn't exactly a fashion icon for the kids, but his was the only record shop in town, so it was truly Mecca for us.

Alf's mostly didn't have the music I wanted so I'd have to order it and patiently wait a couple of weeks for it to arrive and then go back to experience the joy of holding the precious object in my hands and complete the pilgrimage by returning home to place it on the sacred turntable.

But this was before then; this was the time of my awakening, my discovery through music that there was a big wide world out there.

Of course we sang folk songs by the radio and hymns in assembly at school, and mum and dad had their own music, Elvis for Mum and Lonnie Donegan for Dad; I even remember seeing Jimi Hendrix - who I later came to love - on Top of the Pops, but it was only when I found Simon & Garfunkel that I truly had my very own music.

I can't remember where I first heard them; I imagine it was "Bridge over Troubled Water", again on Top of the Pops, being danced to inappropriately by Pan's People, although it might have been from my older cousin Penny, who had the most amazing record collection ever. It might even have been from my friend Brian, whom I would later reject as not being cool enough, as my other "cooler" friends didn't like him much.

In any event, how I came to know of them is now lost to my memory. What I do remember is that wintertime - as I say, probably at Christmas. I would have been 13 years old, I guess. We had moved house - from 17 to 25 High Street, so not far - when my brother Martin was born in 1967. Our new home was bigger, two small houses knocked into one, and Mum and Dad spent a couple of years slowly renovating the parts of the house that had fallen into disrepair, including what became their bedroom. When they moved into it, I got their old room, much bigger than mine, which then became my brother's. Ray family pecking order.

My new bedroom had a great view across the road to the rising and falling meadows of what had once been the site of the old castle. My parents gave me their record player, as they weren't using it, and I would sit on the painted wooden inside windowsill and look out across the fields as I listened to my favourite LPs. I only had a few at that time.

The first was a Top of the Pops LP, which I had asked for as a present and then was horrified to find that the songs on it weren't by the original artists, but were copies: a cruel introduction to the ways of the world. I got rid of it quite soon after that. Pity, it would be very valuable today, as apparently they're very collectable now.

It had "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" by someone pretending to be Joan Baez. Wikipedia tells me the original was released in 1971, so yes I would have been 13 or so.

But I'm getting sidetracked.

The cover tells you all you need to know. A black and white photo of two sensitive, intelligent-looking young men dressed in dark turtle-neck sweaters. They must have something important to say. And they did. Paul Simon was the songwriter, and Art Garfunkel had the voice of an angel, and when they sang harmony ... heaven!

Simon's words took me travelling with him. "America" is the story of his journey to look for America with his girlfriend Kathy. Turns out Kathy is from Barking, Essex - just down the road really - and Simon fell in love with her when he was touring England in 1964, but I only found that out much later.

Here are a couple of verses:

*Kathy I said as we boarded a Greyhound in Pittsburg,
Michigan seems like a dream to me now.*

It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw.

I've come to look for America

Kathy, I'm lost I said, though I knew she was sleeping.

I'm empty and aching and I don't know why.

*Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike,
they've all come to look for America".*

It was from those verses that I caught the Wanderlust that would stay with me for most of my life. I can't really convey in words how exotic those place names were to my child's mind. They don't have that magic now, just the vague memory of it, like an aroma from a former time that you can't quite place, but I do remember how magical they felt to me then. I wanted to visit all those strange-sounding places, ideally with a girlfriend to love and hold close.

All this was to come, after a fashion, but I was becoming impatient. The village couldn't hold me forever. Now I write my own songs and still hold Paul Simon up as one of the greatest songwriters of all. That song is often cited as one of his finest, with the very literary line "the moon rose over an open field" given as an excellent example of assonance in many learned books on poetic verse. I can appreciate the greatness of the writing now, but I can't possibly be moved as powerfully now as I was then.

A couple of years passed. I and a small group of friends formed a band and a clique based around the music we loved: The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead. Simon & Garfunkel were no longer considered cool and so met the same fate as Brian - rejection. I swapped their LPs for some other music - who knows what? - that at the time I thought was more acceptable. More fool I.

Sometimes we are so desperate to fit in that we completely lose sight of who we are. Years later, in my early 20s, I went to live in Italy and soon spent my evenings playing guitar and singing in clubs and bars with my friend Gianni. Turns out Gianni had a love for the music of Simon & Garfunkel, so they were back in favour again... and my travels had begun. From that seed planted many years earlier by Paul Simon.
The Jack of Both Sides (Reading 1980)

In the summer of 1980 I was living in Reading, in Radstock Road, near Cemetery Junction, sharing a house with four friends from university. We'd all just graduated and were stepping cautiously into the world of work. I'd found a job at British Telecom. In the interview - which I passed - I was told I would be a "Telecommunications Traffic Officer", which sounded rather grand, so imagine my consternation when I turned up in my shiny only suit and new shoes for my first day at work, only to find that I was to be employed in the complaints department; oh sorry, that's customer services department.

My new line manager - who I seem to remember was called Geoff - showed me to my desk in the large open plan office. My consternation increased exponentially when I saw the huge pile of files in the inbox on the desk. Noting my shock, Geoff said: "Oh yes, this was poor John Wentworth's desk, sadly he committed suicide a couple of months ago, and no one else has had time to take on the cases he was dealing with". "Mum, I want to come home", I thought.

BT has the shrewd policy of employing graduates in the complaints department, rather than telecoms engineers. Telecoms engineers understood telephones, but although graduates knew nothing about telephones, they had voices that sounded polite and intelligent over the phone... and they were cheaper. The light on the top of my phone flashed for an incoming call... But that's not the story I want to tell you. That will do for another time. I want to tell you about the Jack of Both Sides.

My housemates were Rupert, who had found the place for us, Simon and Debbie, a couple, and Graham, who I hadn't known before but who when I moved in made it discreetly clear to me that he was gay by showing me around the house; in his room, laid casually on the bed, there was a copy of Gay News. "Very stylishly done", I thought to myself.

Simon and I both played guitar and sang. Simon was the bassist in a band, but they were on a bit of a hiatus, so we decided to work on some songs together with a view to earning a bit of extra cash by playing in pubs. It just so happened that our local was the Jack of Both Sides, where every Saturday night they had a live act playing country and western. "We can do that", we confidently decided.

The "Jack" was our local mainly because it was the closest. It wasn't a student pub, much more a working man's boozier.

The beer was cheaper than a lot of places, and the staff were friendly enough, so we kind of liked it, partly because students didn't tend to go there and we could convince ourselves we were more integrated. It didn't have sawdust on the floor exactly, but it was far from plush. Simon and I were really fond of country music, which had become popular with younger audiences in recent years. Dylan had done a couple of country albums, one with the legendary Johnny Cash joining him. But it was Emmylou Harris who had made country cool; her musical partner and mentor Gram Parsons had turned her onto some of the greats of previous eras, such as George Jones, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens.

After Gram died in mysterious circumstances in 1973, Emmylou went on to form her own band and toured the UK, building up a big following among students such as us. Bob Harris loved her, and that was recommendation enough.

So we worked on our repertoire, taking our favourites by Dylan, the Eagles, the Everly Brothers, and of course Emmylou. We put together arrangements for two guitars, and nice vocal harmonies. One evening we tentatively enquired with the landlady at the Jack if we could play there sometime and to our amazement she said yes, so we agreed on a date a couple of weeks hence.

I guess she was interested in getting more students into the pub, as in those days they had more money with their grants to spend.

The big day came. We had some form of amplification, but I can't remember what it was, so I suppose the pub must have provided it. We got there early and set up, did a quick sound check and waited for the punters to arrive. The public bar began to fill; soon several tables were abuzz with conversation. "Now's the time", we agreed.

Nerves made the first song a bit of a mess, but by the second we were in our stride. By five songs in we were starting to enjoy ourselves, yet the locals weren't applauding much at all; just a smattering, most were ignoring us. That didn't bother us much though; we were too engrossed in what we were doing.

Then, as we were drawing towards the end of our set, a man got up from one of the tables and walked towards us. Any detailed memories of what he looked like have been lost in the mists of time, but I do remember he was a lot older than us - when you're 20 anyone over 35 looks old - and that he was quite smartly dressed. He will have been of the generation who get dressed up in suit and tie to go out on a Saturday night.

Anyway, we're between songs and we watch in trepidation as he approaches us. "Play the Crystal Chandeliers". We had no idea what that was. A band? A song? "I'm afraid we can't", we confessed. "Call yourselves a country band and you can't play the Crystal Chandeliers! You're rubbish", he pronounced. And with that he returned to his seat and resumed his conversation with his friends, no doubt telling them how rubbish we were. We had a short break, then played our second set, not to universal acclaim, it must be said.

The landlady didn't rebook us. When we summoned up the courage to ask her why, she said they hadn't liked us much, as we didn't play the right songs.

That was nearly 40 years ago, and I now know what the Crystal Chandeliers is. It's a song recorded by Charlie Pride in 1965 about a poor guy who falls for a society lady. Charlie Pride himself is unusual as he's a black country and western singer adored by redneck audiences. I guess our not knowing the song confirmed everything the man who requested it thought about elitist students.

Jack of Both Sides

*School was out, bright and bushy tailed we went to sing our songs
To the weekend crowd at the Jack, where we hoped we'd belong.
We played Eagles, Dylan, Everlys, then this guy drew near
Asked if we could play him "Crystal Chandeliers"*

*It was Saturday night, he wore suit and tie, we t-shirt and jeans
He was a working man, he was middle-aged, we'd just left our teens
We said we didn't know the song, which spoiled the atmosphere
But we couldn't play him "Crystal Chandeliers"*

*Now I'm older than that guy, that night is distant past
He's likely dead, the pub is gone, but all the songs will last
And it's music that still cheers us and moves us to tears
And now I can play you "Crystal Chandeliers".*

*Oh the crystal chandeliers light up the paintings on your wall
The marble statuettes are standing stately in the hall
But will the timely crowd
that has you laughing loud
help you dry your tears
when the new wears off of your crystal chandeliers?*

Chapter 7

I met Maggie at the wonderfully named Scrag End folk club in Albert in Leicestershire and her story is typical of the experience of so many people we have met who have come to see their folk buddies as 'family'.

My Folk Family - Maggie Culver

Hello, my name is Maggie, and I live in a small village in Leicestershire. For the first 26 years of marriage, my life centred around bringing up 2 children, and my social scene was motor bike rallies, race meetings and club meetings. At the age of 54, my husband and I were driving through a village near to where I live, and we saw a sign outside a pub which said "FOLK MUSIC ON SUNDAY 8.30. We decided to give it a try, and that was my very first introduction to "Folk Music"

It was a very relaxed and friendly atmosphere, and we were made to feel most welcome. The organisers were a trio who did a few songs, and then people took it in turns to do a spot. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole evening, but unfortunately my husband wasn't keen. For me, the seed was sewn, I just wanted more; little did I know just how much it would grow.

A few months later I went to my 1st Folk Festival "The National Folk Festival" held at Sutton Bonnington Nr. Loughborough (1994) I didn't know anybody, but the music was wonderful. I remember seeing Vin Garbutt on stage, and people wearing T - shirts with his name on, and also Martin Carthy- neither of whom I 'd ever heard of.

There was a very large lounge/bar where people gathered to drink and chat. and this particular year, there were a lot of Irish visitors, some of whom got together in small groups in the lounge and played "tune sessions".

I'd never heard Irish music before-but it "blew me away" - it was just magical – also in the bar, groups of singers got together to share songs. I saw a bodhran for the first time, and immediately went to the craft fair and bought one together with an instruction tape by Stefan Hannigan.

Also in the lounge/bar, I encountered a Banjo player; what's that instrument"?- "It' s a 5 string Banjo" he said, and promptly played and sang me a tune. It turned out that he was born in Ireland and came to England when he was 15, and lived locally. It was an incredible week end and one I will never forget. I bought a Chieftans tape and practiced by bodhran playing every day.

I continued to visit my 1st folk club, and also another one not too far from where I live. It was there that a week or so later, that the Banjo Player turned up; we got chatting and he told me about more folk clubs in existence, which of course, I went to. I subsequently learned to play penny whistle, and began singing unaccompanied. To cut a long story short, we became friends, and visited many folk clubs and festivals all over he country, including Ireland and Scotland.

24 years later I'm on my own, still going to folk clubs, singing and playing, though not travelling far these days. 10 years ago I started learning to play the flute, and I am also just starting the concertina. Last year at the Moira Furnace Folk Festival, I ran 2 works shops for tin whistle, beginners and improvers and had a total of 32 people which pleased me greatly. My folk music friends are my family, where I feel I belong,

Andrew is a drummer. Enough said. There are millions of drummer jokes circulating in the rock world but in the folk world, bodhran players tend to bear the brunt. Except for banjo players of course but then Andrew plays both cahon and ukelele, so is beyond the pale. He's also my friend in case you wondered.

I wanted to be a concert pianist: Andrew Martin

But as I couldn't manage the 4 hours daily practice, I decided to become a drummer. The mid sixties were an exciting time for British music. I was a boarder at King Edward VI School at Bury St Edmunds where I remember the first two Beatles albums being played to death in the common room. As the sixties advanced music became ever more sophisticated especially when pirate radio was able to broadcast it to the nation while the BBC limited it to about one hour a week.

My entry to the world of drumming started by having to pass an audition. I had to play Wipeout by the Surfaris on a drum that consisted of a biscuit tin covered by a yellow duster. I got the gig. The band consisted of two acoustic guitars with very basic pickups and me. The only other song I can remember that was in our repertoire was Poison Ivy by The Coasters recently covered by the Stones.

College in 68/69 resulted in no qualifications but some amazing musical experiences. Live concerts by Jimi Hendrix, Otis Redding and Cream's last concert to mention a few. While at college I bought some bongos and provided some percussion to a college folk trio. Moved to Exeter in 1970 and joined folk/blues group based initially on John Mayall's album Turning Point which ironically has no percussion.

After a complicated personal life, I moved to Muswell Hill in 1974. Purchased a pair of Natal Congas and for a short time played in an Afro-Rock band. Then I joined a duo consisting of two scousers who were guitarists who wrote their own material. This duo were friends with John Peel, who bought me a pint of Guinness when we met him one night. Somehow, we managed to get a gig at the famous Marquee club In Soho as a support act. The group was known as Big Sur, the coastal area in California but the name was misheard by the Melody Maker and printed as Big Fir!

Then moved back to Exeter in 1974 to join band No Mere Nosebleed where I played a standard drum kit. This was a band inspired by bands such as Yes so, most songs had unusual time signatures. Great bunch of musicians who played keyboards, guitars, saxophone, bass and percussion. Also, the band experimented with tape loops and special effects. I also worked with the guitarist in the band to provide music for a local dance.

In 1976 the band split and I started a band, Junkyard Angels with guitarist and bass player. This was a blues rock band covering West Coast American music and Derek and Dominos songs etc. We managed to get lots of gigs around the college and pub circuit. The outstanding gig was as support to The Sensational Alex Harvey Band at Taunton Odeon. This band is still going today led by Julian Piper who is a great blues guitarist.

At this time, I became interested in recording music. I bought what was the state-of-the-art equipment at the time, a very large reel to reel tape machine, mixer and microphones. I also took a course in electronic engineering for a year. After is couple of years I regarded myself as a recording engineer, so I applied for a job with Virgin Music. Unbelievably I was given the interview at The Manor studio, however despite borrowing a very cool leather jacket I didn't get the job.

In 1978 I went into disco mode after a spell as a DJ in a small nightclub in Exeter. The nightclub put on live bands at the beginning of the evening, so we put together a parody punk band named the Stoats. Our repertoire included a very fast version of Hard Rain's Gonna Fall and an original song named Bondage Tango (some punks actually believed we were the real thing for a while!).

I then moved to Oxford and ran a mobile disco for 3 years. You find out very rapidly that your clients do not always share your taste in music. I returned to university in 1982 at Swansea.

I concentrated on my studies for three years and was not involved in any music apart from one night's DJ'ing when Gary Glitter was booked at the college. This was several years before he went out of fashion! After college in 1986 I bought a standard drum kit and joined a band that played a regular weekly gig in a pub in North London. The style was rock/jazz. Occasionally the sax player in the band would pay for a guest instrumentalist to join us for the gig.

Australia beckoned in 1989. For some reason I decided to purchase an alto saxophone. I then had lessons with Percy, an Afro-American sax player from San Francisco who gave me a basic grounding. I then attended a few workshops to give me a little more confidence.

Returning to the UK in 1990 I now regarded myself as a saxophone player. I therefore put an ad in a local music shop offering myself as a sax player. This was a bit ambitious as my experience was just slightly more than zero. However, I got the job with a newly formed band called Brass Roots. This was a band based on the Blues Brothers and The Commitments. I managed to survive by learning the sax riffs by heart. I was now living in Chester and the band managed to get lots of gigs in the Manchester/Liverpool area.

We then emigrated to Australia in 1996. For the next 15 years I turned to choral singing with the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and an a capella group Laanysta. With the Sydney Philharmonia we sang Tenor and later Bass in Handel's Messiah every year in the Opera House. Also, Carmina Borana, Verdi's Requiem etc. With Laanysta we sang world music, folk, pop, gospel, standards and all sorts.

In 2010 we purchased a piece of land on Magnetic Island which is off Townsville in North Queensland. Every year on the island they have an event called Music on Magnetic.

This is an event where you can learn how to write songs, join in percussion with homemade instruments learn live looping and even Bollywood dancing so to be involved in this I thought I better take an instrument and as I didn't have much room to carry it I thought I would buy a ukulele so I learned a few chords, and so started my association with the instrument.

Returning to UK in 2012, I soon discovered the Plough and Fleece and its Thursday night music event. I added a few more songs to my repertoire of three songs and braved the room full of performers. Along with others I discovered the fear and excitement of solo performance. Recently I joined Alison White in a choir called Vocal Remix, which performs mashups of pop from the last 40 years. Never thought I would be singing Taylor Swift at my age!

Over the last couple of years Tony Philips and Peter Edwards have invented "Plough and Fleece on Tour". So far 5 of us have visited folk festivals in Dunkeld and Derby. This year we are going to Sheffield and Filey. It's great to play our music in other people's pubs and join in with their songs. Derby reintroduced me to percussion where I discovered the fun of playing the cajon.

Just to square the circle I obtained a piano recently. Maybe if I have lessons and spend 4 hours practicing each day... "The Music Keeps Rolling On"

Penny describes herself as a reluctant folkie but hangs around with us anyway, adding her beloved jazz numbers into the mix. She's also an Aussie and in love with the emotional rush that music and good company can create, hence her constant search for what the Spanish call 'duende'.

The Irish have their concept of the craic, there's the Mandarin Chinese idea of Re- Nao, the Greeks have Maraki, the Japanese have Ikigai but what do the English have except perhaps 'quite nice really, given all'

In search of Duende - Penny Waterhouse

I sing because I am. At that moment of stillness, before the music starts, I am waiting for something to arrive. Something transformative. To take me, other musicians and the audience to another place. Something that is of me, and not me. What am I waiting for? Duende or tener duende ("having duende") loosely means having soul, a heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity, often connected with flamenco.

The artistic and especially musical term was derived from the duende, a fairy or goblin-like creature in Spanish mythology. The Spanish poet and writer, Lorca, talked in detail about Duende. There is something here, I thought.

The characteristics of Duende speak to the heart of the "something" I was aware of, lurking in the shadows. Something elusive that keeps slipping out of sight but which on occasion appears. The duende is not in the throat; the duende climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet.

Duende is dark. Its qualities consist of conflict, "the other", capriciousness and death. It is enriched by diaspora and hardship. It speaks to the human conditions of authentic joy and sorrow. It is the well from which creativity and insight is drawn.

Duende doesn't show up unless there is a possibility of death – it loves the fringe, the wound, places where shapes melt into desire. Its presence in the blood smarts like ground glass.

The duende loves the rim of the wound. It draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of human expression. Duende lives in blue notes, in the break in a singer's voice. A point of possible extinction. It is what gives you chills, makes you smile or cry as a bodily reaction to an artistic performance that is particularly expressive.

It is not a question of ability. Lorca writes: "The duende, then, is a force not a labour. It is a struggle, not a thought. The true fight is with the duende. No emotion is possible unless the duende comes. There are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the duende. One must awaken the duende in the remotest mansions of the blood. Every artist climbs each step in the tower of their perfection by fighting their duende. A mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains."

According to Christopher Maurer, editor of "In Search of Duende", at least four elements can be isolated in Lorca's vision of duende: irrationality, earthiness, a heightened awareness of death, and a dash of the diabolical. The duende shows the limits of intelligence, reminding us that ants can eat us or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on our heads.

The duende is seen by Lorca as an alternative to style, to mere virtuosity. Not that the artist simply surrenders to the duende; they have to battle it skillfully, in "hand-to-hand combat". With idea, sound, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well.

Duende is shape-shifting. The duende's arrival always means a radical change in forms. It brings to old planes feelings of freshness, with the quality of something newly created.

A sense of first-timeness which can never be repeated, any more than do the forms of the sea during a squall. The trouble with duende is that it is too dark, too serious to be the star of the show. I am not only waiting to sing the profound and the harrowing. I am waiting for Joy and celebration. To express brightness which does not depend on sorrow. To find the sparkle that comes from a naughty fairy. To value ephemera as well as substance.

Perhaps I am simply waiting for my brain to fire up its oxytocin wash. The chemical which is pumped out when humans listen to and make music. The chemical which assists birth and social bonding, mends wounds, reduces fear and increases libido and trust.

A cocktail of Duende and Oxytocin is a heady mixture. But the other trouble with Duende is its potential for elitism and exclusivity: what about us mere mortals who, despite our aspirations, fail to meet this illustrious visitor. Is our music and expression of less value? Perhaps I'll lower my sights and simply hope to find the work-a-day joy and communion of making music with others.

I met Dave at a session in Quorn in Leicestershire, crammed into the backroom at the Blacksmiths with a mass of folkies who clearly knew all about how to have a bloody good time without actually having a word for it. Here's Dave:

50 years folkling about: Dave Henderson

When you are 15 in 1967 and living on the West Coast of Cumbria your dreams can seem a long way away, particularly when they are not centred on rugby league or punching someone with gloves on. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't a town where we suddenly launched attacks on unexpected glove-wearing pensioners, more a mining town; boxing culture.

My escape had always been in walking up mountains, climbing bits of rock and then in 1967 I was introduced to Egremont Folk Club in, of all places, the Rugby League Club. When you are 15 in 1967 and living on the West Coast of Cumbria your dreams can seem a long way away, particularly when they are not centred on rugby league or punching someone with gloves on. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't a town where we suddenly launched attacks on unexpected glove-wearing pensioners, more a mining town; boxing culture.

My escape had always been in walking up mountains, climbing bits of rock and then in 1967 I was introduced to Egremont Folk Club in, of all places, the Rugby League Club. 5 miles from my home, it involved a bus but none ran on the way back....so a walk or a hitch. I was trying to grow my hair and wore a slightly oversize RAF coat. Not many people stopped!

So, first time in the club and it was like the beginning of my musical education. Old boys taking me under my wing. 'Have a listen to this. Have a listen to this! Do you know who Martin Carthy is? Do you know who Robert Johnson is? To list who I saw would be impossible: certainly Barbara Dickson and a Manchester duo I loved called Therapy, I won their album in the raffle and wandered up to claim it trying to belie the number of Newcy Brown's I had had. Another burgeoning part of my education.

In 1970 I went to Manchester, Didsbury College of Education, to be a teacher but then Music really unfolded. I helped with the college folk club and there were just so many people to book who, at the time, I was sadly unaware of their talents. Mike Harding sang weekly in a pub in the village and he was a fount of artists, many of whom kipped on his floor.

Christy Moore came, bringing with him his sister – wonderful - and we didn't really appreciate it. Keith Christmas came and played, a week after he had done Whistle Test. He kipped in our student house overnight.....and stayed for 6 weeks! The Ian Campbell Folk Group and so many more.

There were clubs in Manchester, where you weren't allowed in carrying a guitar cos it wasn't trad folk you were going to play. Yep, the Folk Police were about. Then of course the weekends at the Manchester Uni Union scratching my other itch with bands like Free, Humble Pie, Edgar Broughton, Vinegar Joe, Steppenwolf etc for the princely sum of 50p and a curry at 2 in the morning on the walk home. Bands like the Incredible String Band and Deep Purple at the Free Trade Hall. Music is just music.

In 1969 , I sat on the floor of my bedroom with my trusty Dansette and played a borrowed album from a mate at school and heard the Fairport's playing A Sailors Life it was a Damascene moment. I loved that band; Sandy's voice, RT's guitar, Swarb's fiddle and DM's drumming (which literally made folk rock possible) and of course Mr Hutchings which led to seeing Lark Rise and the Mysteries at the National Theatre and finding John Tams. So.....for the next 40 years , I was a fan of whatever folk/folk-rock is. Lots of gigs, festivals, regular yearly visits to Cropredy and a lifelong urge to discover new stuff.

I love crossovers, experimentation, the Afro Celts, Lau, Peatbog Faeries, Jim Moray, False Lights, Imagined Village, Rails, Blackbeards Tea Party and so many more. Put music under glass in a museum and it dies, as did the folk clubs of the 50's and 60's revival. Music has to grow and morph. And then in my retirement from my proper job I found myself, by serendipity, playing with a very good folk/folk rock band, way out of my class.....but it makes you work and learn.

As a real bonus, I started to meet my heroes. Playing a festival and sitting and eating back stage with Phil Beer, Steve Knightly, Miranda Sykes, Chris Leslie, Maddy Prior, PJ Wright, Joe Broughton....I thought what on earth am I doing here and they are talking to me as if it is a perfectly normal thing to do!

In 2015, I compèred the wonderful Langdale Charity Folk Festival in Cumbria at the Old Dungeon Ghyll pub. A bunch of organisers and musicians who put on a festival twice a year, no one gets paid, no expenses, to raise money for Cumbria Air Ambulance and Mountain Search Dogs.

In 2009 to 2017 they raised well over £50,000. Some great musicians, sound men giving their time for free; just lovely people. I have made some real friends from that festival. The vibe of that fest sums up for me the essence of whatever folk music is; people playing together, for fun, for the joy, for the craic

So 50 plus years of searching out new music....what was that all about then? I have made a lot of friends and I have done a lot of things, been to places I would never have done without music. I have heard some truly wonderful performers and songs. I continue to want to 'discover' new talent even though they may already be known to others.

In the last few years; Lowri Evans, Lucy Ward, Ange Hardy, Luke Jackson, Kenneth J Nash, Chapin Wickwar, Phantom Voices, the Jon Palmer Acoustic Band and many more and this summer we'll do it again.

Gigs and fests with my present band, gigs and fests as a member of the audience, gigs and fests just to be with friends, singarounds, open mics and always that search for that one new voice that started at Egremont Folk Club 51 years ago.

Contact Dave at davidghenderson@btinternet.com. For more about the band, visit the Whale website at: www.facebook.com/pg/whalebanduk

For me, and millions like me, getting out and about in the music world is the way I have preserved my sanity and god-like physical health (wrong on both counts, I hear my friends cry) but music as a way to get over a crocodile attack? That's something you need to hear from Pete and Savannah.

South Africa: Pete and Savannah's story

Pete Knottenbelt, lover of folk music and life itself, and grand-daughter Savannah have added their voices from sunny South Africa, but that's only the tip of the proverbial iceberg in terms of a headline story. Having miraculously survived a close encounter with a crocodile, in which he sustained life-threatening injuries and lost the lower half of his right leg, Pete, 71, has made a remarkable recovery. Throughout his ordeal he has remained amazingly positive and upbeat:

'I'm determined to face the challenges ahead and to live life to the full. For me this means continuing to be as physically active as possible and to continue to develop myself and others through learning. Most importantly it means contributing to society, I'm especially keen to get back to the Stairs Project I set up 8 years ago in the university department I was working in. The aim is to foster not only physical fitness but also self-esteem and integrity in young people, and I'm hoping to work with schools and other institutions in order to broaden its scope'

When invited to take part in the Rolling On project by his sister Maggie in the UK, Pete immediately jumped at it:

'I've always loved singing and playing the guitar. I got into the British folk scene as a student in Cornwall in the 60s, and there's nothing I like better than getting together with friends and family in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA and South Africa, for a singsong.'

Both my wrists were badly broken in the attack so I'm currently unable to play properly but I'm itching to getting back to it. So this involvement in Rolling On comes as a very welcome bit of fun and light relief from my rigorous rehab programme. I also love the idea of connecting with music lovers and other folk across the world, especially those going through tough times'

Contact Peter at peterknottenbelt@hotmail.com

Savannah, his 19-year-old granddaughter who witnessed the crocodile incident, couldn't resist the chance to sing along with her beloved Gramps and sent us over the mp3. Could this be the start of Rolling On going global?

Chapter 8

Pete Knottenbelts kind of folk 'enlightenment' takes us into a deeper level of understanding about the gifts that are on offer for people who fully engage with the sector. Joe Offer is known globally for his work in setting up the online Mudcat.org community and the following post from him shows just how thoughtful, engaging and downright enjoyable being built into a musical family where warm hearted trust is the key word and everyone knows the rules.

Mudcat on singarounds – Joe Offer

I belong to a singaround group called 'In Harmony' a spinoff from the group that meets in the east San Francisco Bay area. We sing 2-5 PM on the third and fifth Sundays of every month. Usually, 10-12 singers come, some from 75 miles away. It's a delightful gathering, a very supportive group that somehow accommodates singers from a wide range of skill levels. Our host is Sharon Carl, who moved to Auburn from the Bay Area and brought music along with her. Sharon read us this "In Harmony's Way Song Session Values and Culture Statement" at the beginning of our first few sessions. I think Sharon got it from the Bay Area group - I think you'll note that it has a real California tone to it. We regularly defy it, but it has served us well:

IN HARMONY'S WAY SONG SESSION VALUES AND CULTURE

Value #1: Revering the Circle

Every time someone leads a song in our presence they offer us a gift, not only of their music but also of their willingness to be vulnerable in our presence. We receive their gift best by giving them our full attention.

We ask each participant to help keep the circle a place where the music is honored and each singer is respected as they share that gift. (If you're reading this sheet during a song, flipping through a songbook or texting, you're depriving another singer of your attention. That makes us sad.)

Value #2: So Many Songs, So Little Time.

We usually go around in a circle at least once, so everyone who wishes to gets a chance to share a song early in the Sing. When it is your turn, please be ready with one of your three options: 1) sing a song, 2) request a particular song from someone else, or 3) pass. If you can't decide, yield quickly to the singer waiting next to you. Passing is totally OK.

After we've gone once around the circle, the session leaders will switch to "moderated chaos," where people are free to jump in spontaneously and sing when they feel moved [We keep going around the circle in Auburn]. This can be great fun, and also a bit intimidating for shy folks. If you want to lead a song during moderated chaos but feel uncomfortable jumping in, just raise a finger or make eye contact with a session leader and they will call on you very soon.

We have a strong preference for chorus songs, ones that all can join in on. We also prefer to keep it simple so as to avoid spending valuable Sing time being taught difficult material.

Value #3: There Are No Bad Singers.

We are eager to hear songs from experienced singers and novices alike. So whether you love your voice or not, feel free to share it with us. And if you're feeling shy, you are always welcome to join in on the choruses.

Value #4: The Circle as a Food-Free Zone.

Everybody gets the munchies, and we usually have a few snacks on a nearby table. But eating, chewing, crinkling wrappers and such take focus away from the music. Help us keep the circle a place of reverence for song and singer. If you want to grab food, please wait until the song is over to leave the circle. When you return, please do so food-free and in a way that does not take focus away from the lead singer.

Value #5: Save a Tree: Memorize Your Song.

We love the closeness that comes from sharing songs in the oral tradition and we have seen how much richer the singing can be without lyric sheets. Songs that come straight from the heart tend to communicate feelings more than those delivered through paper (or smart phones.) Give memorizing a chance, even if it means taking a bit of time to prepare before the session.

And if you really feel you need to bring a lyric sheet, no worries. Please bring just one sheet for yourself so we can give our attention to you rather than to papers in front of us.

And remember, whether you memorize or not, we are glad you're sharing. [We generally don't memorize in Auburn]

Value #6: We Love Guitars, But

We are primarily an a cappella session. If you would like to accompany yourself on a song that you lead, go for it, and then quietly put the instrument away. Also, if you want to body percuss during someone else's song, please do so in a way that is not intrusive.

Value #7: Rejoice in Song!

It's great that you're here and not home watching TV!

More from Joe at www.mudcat.org

Away from the rarified atmosphere of the Rolling On network, our trawl of the internet and library shelves reveals a wealth of personal stories and comments that help to illustrate the attraction of the folk scene for both professional musicians and researchers, often one and the same in the cases of Ph.D owners, Peter Wilby (or Pete Willow as he is known to the folk world) and Fay Hield. Here's a couple of interesting contributions from them plus Jon Boden and Mike Harding, pro folkies at both ends of the age spectrum.

Amateur music making - Peter Wilby

'Are you looking for some good music? Then what are you doing here?'
The customary call-out by the master of ceremonies for the monthly 'Sly Old Dogs and Friends' music session effectively silences the hubbub in the function room of the village pub and the twenty-five occupants settle down to a Sunday evening of musical entertainment and good-natured banter.

Many of them are here solely as audience members who participate in the conventional manner through applause, reaction to jokes and comments, singing along with choruses and in some cases engaging in humorous verbal exchanges with the performing musicians. The performers themselves are either members of the resident group or musicians and singers who have come along to join in.

None of the performers receive payment (although there is an arrangement for each resident musician to claim one free drink from the owner of the public house) and there is no admission charge for the audience. The monthly event is one of hundreds across the UK in which amateur musicians meet in a public space to perform and share music and entertain an audience.

Other themes have arisen seemingly from custom and practice within the community of club regulars and have become popular events in the club's annual calendar. These include the 'Non-PC night' and the 'Top 20 night', the former reflecting the club's perceived roots in the traditions of folk singing, the latter reflecting its broad and catholic approach to what constitutes 'folk' music.

Norman Wheatley explains the club's rationale for the 'Non-PC nights' by relating the concept to traditional themes of songs frequently played in folk clubs: Half the canon of folk songs are not politically correct, for heaven's sake – fox hunting, whale hunting, having adulterous relationships, gypsy travellers, all these kind of contentious issues. Basically the slogan on that night is – 'If you think you can't get away with it, you can tonight!' It's remarkably popular!

He describes how he was personally inspired to introduce the 'Top 20' theme night, after realising that three 'number one' chart songs had been performed at the club during one evening: One of these was 'On The Trail of the Lonesome Pine' by Laurel and Hardy. Somebody else had previously sung 'She' by Charles Aznavour to concertina accompaniment. Wonderful! Somebody else had done Don McLean's 'Vincent' – lovely folk-ish, contemporary folk, why not?

Norman evokes a broader notion of 'folk' as 'popular' music: Old pop songs have become the folk songs of today. They kind of fulfil the same kind of function. We grew up with them when we were little. Whether you've heard them for years or not, you know the song. You can sing along with them, whether you thought you knew the words or not. They're pretty darn simple. Most folk songs have got probably three chords and they've got easy singable choruses, to the point of banality in some cases. For instance, 'Drift Away', Dobie Grey – not necessarily the world's best known song.

We had a guest recently who did that and it made a cracking chorus song – ‘Give me the beat boys, free my soul. Want to get lost in your rock’n’roll and drift away’. Fantastic! It’s the sign of a great song where if you strip it away from all the production, what you’re left with is either just a guitar accompaniment or even sing the song unaccompanied. It’s only words and melody and it’s still a good song full stop, regardless of the category.

From Peter Wilby - Amateur music-making as intersubjective discourse in folk clubs in the English Midlands. (2013)

Peter has a lot of time for the idea of ‘musicking’ put forward by Christopher Small in the late ‘90’s. Rather than being a passive notion of what happens in the space between a performer and a listener. Musicking then is a verb, a doing word, a description of direct involvement in the act of music making where there is little or no difference between the source of the sounds and the reception they get. I like that. I wish we had nabbed the word ‘duende’ (because that just about covers it) before the Spaniards got there. Perhaps we should have let the Armada dock and had a nice cup of tea together back in 1588.

Moving on to a professional musicians perspective, Jon Boden writes well on the subject of age roles in the folk world. Our travels confirm the profile of club, session and singaround hosts as early middle age (70 is the new 40?) with younger people more interested in performing or partying than organising, with some notable exceptions.

My generation – Jon Boden

Having just completed my annual Spring Madness (4 tours in 3 months) I'm back at home taking it fairly easy. One of the things that is filling my time a bit is organising a new folk club at my local. We've got the excellent Pete Coe coming along at the end of the month and there are flyers to be distributed, posters to be stuck up, emails to be circulated etc etc.

I've been a fan of Pete's for many years, not only as a singer/instrumentalist/songwriter/ flat-footer extraordinaire, but also as someone who, as a part of 'Ryburn 3 Step', is very committed to community music making, running regular sessions, singers clubs, folk dance workshops, Mummers plays etc. in and around the Ryburn valley.

Pete's long been critical of my generation for not taking up the organising baton from the 60s generation (until fairly recently there were no folk clubs run by anyone under 50ish and there are still precious few folk festival directors under that age).

But in defence of us "second-generation 2nd folk revivalists" (or 90s generation for short) that criticism assumes that folk clubs are the prime force in the folk movement, where as in fact the 90s generation have mostly been more interested in pub sessions than in folk clubs. I experienced my first session aged 16 (in a pub in Miltown Malbay, Co Clare during the Willie Clancy Summer School - a mind blowing experience) but didn't go to a proper folk club till I was about 23. In a sense pub sessions are much closer to the original aims of the second revival than the folk club model - genuine folk music arguably shouldn't need too much organisation, just a day of the week and a cooperative landlord.

Perhaps because of this session-heavy background we're having a go at running something of a hybrid between a folk club and a pub session. The concert will be in the public bar with people paying in advance for the fairly limited number of seats available and a hat being passed around for those who are standing.

We're also instituting a "house songs" and "house tunes" element so that people can learn a few songs and tunes and be sure of having a chance to play/sing them at every event.

Rather than peppering the gig with floor spots, the gig will finish fairly early to be proceeded by a singing session. It's an experiment, and it may not work. But my feeling is that the 90s generation will start organising, but only once we've worked out our own models for events.

Taken from Mike Harding | 10:31 UK time, Monday, 11 May 2009

More about Jon Boden at www.jonboden.com

Mike Harding's role as writer, performer, broadcaster and general champion of all things folk puts him on a pedestal, up there in my view with the MacColls, Lloyds and other statuesque folk lovers. The difference with Mike Harding is that I get the impression he would rather sit on the pedestal with a pint in hand and just join the fun. Here he is thinking back on the rough and ready world of the pub and club scene as it merged into the limelight for a chosen few.

Folk characters – Mike Harding

I don't want to sound as though I'm a moaning old git because I do think that today's folk scene is a wonderfully exciting place to be, with a vast kaleidoscope of music and song. Amazing new CDs and brilliant young musicians and singers are emerging as we older mortals shuffle along the coil. No - most things on the garden are lovely and if Pangloss were playing a banjo today, he would be more than delighted.

What I miss are the characters. They may be out there somewhere, but if so, I haven't bumped into them yet.

Martin Windsor, that six foot plus, goatee-bearded, ex-guardsman who thought nothing of crossing a pub room mid-song to take a ciggy out of a punters mouth and stamp on it saying: "You can bugger up yer own lungs dear chap, but leave mine alone."

Red Sullivan, who with his flaming red hair would insist on the audience not only singing sea shanties but would insist on them doing all the actions (pumping, hauling on ropes, winding the windlass etc.) If he found the audience less than responsive he had a novel way of leaving the stage. I saw him do this one night in the Kingsway pub in Rochdale where the locals were having trouble understanding Red's thick Cockney accent. Donning a sou'wester he poured a pint of beer over his head, fired a starting pistol into the air and shouted: "Ship in distress - goodnight ladies and gentlemen."

Fish Jim (another Lord of Misrule no longer with us) was a fish dealer from Hull and was as tough as old boots. He wore the worst ginger wig you have ever seen, sang his heart out even though his voice was not the prettiest, and often sang such bawdy or politically left-leaning songs that he provoked fights in the audience, in which he gleefully joined.

And the others... Ian (Jock) Manuel who sang Bothy Ballads beautifully with the voice of somebody who has been gargling with broken glass and who once stood for election in Hull as the candidate for the Get Stuffed Party. He didn't win, but the returning officer had to read out: "Ian Manuel - Get Stuffed - one hundred and twenty seven votes."

Then there was West Country Boy, Trevor Crozier, who played medieval instruments and wrote that wonderful song, The Piddletrethide Jug Band, and whose album cover showed him in Edwardian gentleman's dress riding a penny-farthing. The album was called Trouble Over Bridgewater.

Someone said I ought to write a book about them all. Perhaps I will. Anybody know a good lawyer?

The social mix in many sessions and singarounds is worth considering here. Mike Harding would be more than chuffed to have met many of the wonderfully eccentric folks that we have bumped into over the past few years. There does appear to be a comfortable link between the welcoming vibe of most events and the inclusion of oddballs, myself included in that number as a founder member.

We are, as a loose movement, quietly protesting against the bland and brainless aspects of the more nauseating aspects of modern social media culture by simply turning up and being counted. To give you a run down of character types in the same mode as our spotters guide to young folkies in chapter 1 will expose nearly all of my judgemental tendencies but take this with a light touch and try and guess which category I put myself in.

The Rugged Individualist: dour and dismal ballad specialist with no concept of the need for audience response, or even aware that there is an audience. I was once in a singaround where, of the 15 people in the room at the start of the song, only 2 were left at the half way stage who didn't have to go to the loo, drown their sorrows at the bar or emigrate.

The Non-Traditional Traditionalist: their idea of a traditional christmas song was that frisky little number we all love so much by Slade. How long does it take for a song to become part of the canon? Discuss.

The Traditional Non-Traditionalist: we all join in with an 18th century ballad with a rousing chorus, gazing dreamily into the middle distance as we recall our unknown ancestors out on the stormy deep. 'Well sung that man, where's that from then?' 'Oh, I wrote it last week.'

The Classical Gas: armed with a music stand, manuscript, metronome and long black dress we are treated to a flute solo in strict 6/8 of something trilling from the Playford collection. Who says these events are full of ageing hippies?

The Death Gripper: the dialogue went something like ‘ and now its Reg with something to finish us off’. Reg sings, we applaud. ‘Thanks for that Reg and now it’s time to....’ interrupted by said Reg saying ‘ and this next one is a cover of a Gordon Giltrap classic ’ ‘Not now Reg, it’s time to go...’; ‘..that he wrote sometime in the 50’s, no scrub that, the 70’s or was it the ‘80’s, anyway...’ ‘Not now Reg the lights are going off’ ‘ ...here we go’. We all join in with the chorus and as if on cue, get up and start packing away and putting on coats. Meanwhile...’and this last one was first sung by the Coppers back in late ‘40’s and I...’; ‘seriously though Reg, the landlord will be chucking us out in a sec so..’ ‘...first heard it from old Bob Lofthouse...’ and so on.

The Exception Proves the Rule: a loud troop at the bar looking like extras from Love Island and clearly having nothing to offer a group of folkies and probably laughing at us behind our back. One of the group comes up and asks sweetly if she can do a song and gives us a fantastic version of ‘The Sprig of Thyme’ with her mates joining in in harmony on the last lines. Magic moment and humble pie. The orange people do folk too.

Chapter 9

Whether it's officially or unofficially 'folk' or not, we are following in our bicycling and pub enthusiast, Alfred Owen Williams tyre tracks by noting down everything that's being sung. He was doing this between 1914-1916, covering 13000 miles in the process. We are doing it over a hundred years later and covering large parts of the UK. Unlike Alfred, we do not feel the need to collect songs in danger of being lost as this work has been so well mapped by Steve Roud and other 21st century specialists not to mention a massive internet world and the foundational work of Sharp and his ilk.

Knowing what people are actually singing and playing provides a reality snapshot that we can compare with researchers past analysis and identify the patterns that history leaves behind. I used to teach history at a small school a bunch of friends set up. For 20 years one day a week I would meander about in the leafy woodlands of historical fact and fiction with up to 6 young friends aged anywhere between 10 and 16. We used to laugh about the shape of history itself. Is it a straight line? Is it a plate of spaghetti full of lose ends and strange connections? Is it a series of interlocking cycles ('History repeats itself – it has too. Nobody listens' as Steve Turner put it) We decided in the end that it was more like a bean bag – you sit on one end of it and it bulges out somewhere else and you probably fall of.

Alfred Owen Williams, despite his reputation for 'anything goes' still had this to say about his version of contemporary pop pap:

'A good many of these old songs and chanties survived about the villages till late years, but they are fast dying out now, and are replaced by the idiotic airs of the music-hall'

He actually collected a great number of more contemporary songs on his travels but was clearly making a distinction between songs that were popular but good and songs that were totally commercial and totally crap. By way of example, I have never heard 'Baby Shark' or anything by Bananarama on the circuit but have heard everything from Eminem by way of Abba.

The first two examples are beyond the musical pale whilst the latter examples are acceptable. Right? Of course not. They are only right as far as my own taste is concerned and one man's Meat Loaf is another man's Puccini.

In fact we can be a little more scientific than that thanks partly to our anecdotal record but more so because, strangely enough, the Great Lockdown meant that many sessions and singarounds went virtual and the one hosted by Amanda MacLean for the Sharps Folk Club actually recorded all of the songs sung by all of the contributors, amassing a web based resource that enabled me (it had to be me alone as none of our lot were remotely interested) to tick off what was being sung or played in the categories of traditional, non-traditional, contemporary song writing, pop and finally, weird.

As these are my own categories, I'll offer a little more explanation:

Traditional: anything recorded in Steve Roud's giant database

Non-traditional: things that sound like they should be in Steve Rouds database but probably aren't

Contemporary song writing: things that are written to sound exactly like they will end up in Steve Rouds database

Pop: things that Steve Roud probably flushed down the toilet

Weird: things that don't have a category, even in Steve Roud's wildest imagination.

Of the 6000 or so songs and tunes recorded for the Zoom version of Sharps Folk Club, around about half fell into the 'Traditional' category; around 25% into the non-traditional box; 20% from singer-songwriters; 4% pure pop and 1% too weird to put anywhere else. And remember, this is from punters showing up at Folk Central, the bastion of all things collected and pickled in aspic, Cecil Sharp House.

I can see that line being quoted out of context if anyone gets as far as reading this seriously because Cecil Sharp House has been at the forefront of promoting an eclectic mix of traditional and contemporary folk type music for as many years as I can recall. It may not always have been true but certainly is now and Amanda and her lockdown crew have proven it.

You might recall from an earlier chapter that Acorn4 joining in a thread on www,thesession.org put out a friendly warning in his notes on session etiquette that anyone singing either Dylan's done-to-death classic 'Knockin on Heavens Door' or Jimmy McCarthy's Irish bunny-boiler 'Ride On' should limit themselves to a 4 minute version in the case of the Dylan and 3 minutes for their Christy Moore impersonation with 'Ride On'

I love how specific that is and can't help but add that Acorn4 would have needed to be on tranquilisers (Theakstons Old Peculiar works best here) as these ditties are regularly brought up all over the country with scant regard for any time limits.

Other personal low points would include the millionth time I've heard Richard Thompson's 'Beeswing'. Nothing wrong with the song there, one of my favs actually but even the best piece begins to pale after the first few hundred thousand versions, played on a broad spectrum from excellent to ear bleedingly bad. This over-familiar notion does not have any relevance in more traditionally based environments where familiarity and constant repetition is part of the attraction.

I was once playing at a festival event in a session with three other musicians, doing a good job of a mix of Irish, English and Scottish trad tunes when a bloke wandered over and said 'very nice too lads, just a shame them tunes all sound the same ain't it?' The horror! Our specially chosen exhibition set reduced to musical mush! Couldn't he hear the vast difference between 'O'Carolans Concerto' and 'Mick's Knitted Triplets'? No, he couldn't.

It's also true of some core singarounds that celebrate certain favourite chorus songs by singing the same one's frequently and in some cases, the same one every time at the end of the night. I think that's wonderful. There is something so cosy and inclusive about a room full of people being able to join in with a great big chorus. Jon Tams tends to end all his concerts with a big, hearty burst of his classic 'Rolling Home', a song which also typifies the status of a not-so-old song written by someone who is still alive, that has joined the folk trad canon to such an extent that many people think it's antique.

Sessions and singarounds that show these qualities of familiarity, togetherness and ritual are echoes of religious groups and their ritualistic paraphernalia.

'Why should the devil have all the best tunes' was the query first raised by methodist preacher Rowland Hill (1744-1833) or perhaps by fellow bible thumper George Whitfield a decade or so earlier (history is so annoying like that) and our secular society has rushed to fill the gap with countless community choirs, singarounds and song sessions all re-creating that sense of togetherness for the common cause.

I was even surprised to read recently that there are now non-religious hymn services doing the rounds so that anyone who wants the warm glow of religious group membership can have it without having to suspend their rational credulity or participate in quant ceremonies. All my efforts to explain to my long suffering wife that going down the pub again is a the closest I get to having a religious experience have come to nothing.

Lets take a look at a few examples, case studies if you will, of the kinds of sessions and singarounds we have had the pleasure of joining in with over the years. I'll start with the story of our own night out at the **Plough and Fleece** in Horningsea, a small village on the river just outside Cambridge, where I lived for 10 music and beer filled years. The Plough and Fleece, Cambridgeshire

Back in 2009, the pub was run by Mum and Daughter team, Ro and Emily, long term villagers determined to keep the place open after the long term and much beloved tenants finally retired. Faced with a £27000 a year lease agreement with Greene King just to open the door, Ro and Emily were willing try anything to keep the place going. We started the session on a Wednesday night and combined it with a monthly gig plus a meal on a Saturday to put the place on the map as a 'go to' place for entertainment, good food and a decent pint.

The following year we launched an annual three day festival. By 2015, the village managed to raise enough cash to buy the place from Greene King and set it up a community pub.

The pub is now run by tenants and is so popular with foodies that it's impossible to guarantee the weekly session, let alone the gigs and festivals. Ironic, to say the least. The session continues weekly on a Thursday, hosted at a local punters house if the pub is overbooked.

My original wish list was for a mixed session and singaround with the emphasis on hospitality, anything goes from any genre and a strong holding position from musical friends who I knew would turn up as a core, of traditional tunes and songs. I was also sure that the event should be 'round the room' rather than 'up the front' to avoid any risk of the 'lookitme' performance gremlin creeping in.

For the 10 years I was able to join in the fun before moving away, I can say that it worked pretty well although we weren't without pros and cons, most of which are faced by all the other places we have visited.

For instance, if the evening was rammed full of people it would of necessity lead to everyone singing and playing their most wild and hairy numbers, just to keep up with the party atmosphere. No chance for a wistful love song or a poignant air on the dulcimer. Large numbers also meant folks only got to do one song or tune set which led to the complicated emotional reaction of being politically correct in celebrating every else's contribution whilst wishing you could just go back to being in a cosy huddle and play till your fingers dropped off.

Highlights from a catalogue of so many stand out moments included the night I was introducing a new general purpose protest song with a singalong chorus in a rather fetching 'fiddler on the roof' mode. I said something along the lines that I needed you lot to imagine you are in a Georgian choir when the door opened and what turned out to be a 5 piece Georgian vocal group wandered in. Never been before and we didn't know any of them. Chorus sorted. Magic.

The Last Post, Derby: we were introduced to the Last Post by our Polly, who left us grieving for the loss of her wonderful voice to go to Uni in Derby. Bloody selfish, we called it. She immediately found the Last Post, possibly the smallest pub with the largest heart in the city.

Your Rolling On crew of me, Pete, Andrew, Ali and Philip spent a happy three days playing and drinking over 12 hour solid, bums on seats, session tunes and songs while our hosts Karen and Chris provided huge platters of chip butties.

Nearly everyone who came through the doors had a song or a tune to share. The right place, at the right time with the right people.

The Bluebell, Essex: three day sessions, sleeping on the benches, bacon sandwiches, lots tea and we start all over again (after sharing out the jobs cleaning the loos, sweeping up, reviving the unconscious and removing dead bodies) Three times a year for a long weekend of music, fun, frolic and downright bedlam, all hosted by Rod and Marion, the hosts with the most.

Founded as a weekly mixed session by box player and beardy-weirdy, Ian Pease and myself, the pub became a home from home for musicians from both sides of the Atlantic as well as a large number of locals and not-so locals.

The Bluebell was originally a butchers shop whose most famous apprentice and resident was a certain Dick Turpin. It became a tradition for every visiting songwriter to come up with a Dick Turpin number, leading to a particularly moving piece from Reg Meuross, right up there with the aforementioned Chris Wood as one of the nations finest songwriters.

I swear that Dick himself used to enjoy our sessions. One night we were given it large on a set of Ian's favourite box tunes (Buttered Peas, Hole in the Hedge, the Kesh Jig if you are fond of detail) and unknown to us, at each foot stomp, my full to the brim latest pint was edging towards the end of the table. People not actually engaged in playing gawped in alarm as the glass reached the end of the table and.....landed upright on the stone flags without spilling a drop. Try doing that again. Thanks Dick.

The Trout, Lechlade, Cotswolds: one of the 'up the front' style mixed sessions that manages to avoid any sense of the 'lookitme' syndrome. A great mix of tunes, songs, ages, dress styles and beer preferences with the only version of 'Yellow Polka Dot Bikini' we have come across to date, sung by an 80 plus year old young man with the addition of excellent dance moves.

The Trout itself is a real go to place situated on the river with everything a travelling music collector could wish for – a campsite in the garden, great food, superb beer, lovely people, a separate barn with bar for the music and angels singing in the trees. Ok, I lied about the angels but you get the idea.

The Blacksmiths Arms, Quorn: crammed in a back room of the pub, shoulder to shoulder with a friendly mob all keen to share a tune or a song, joining in with everything unless the person whose turn it was asked for a bit of peace and quiet. Guitars sticking out left, right and centre and a fine range of fiddles, whistles, clarinet, cahon, trumpet, mandolins, mandolas, melodeon and concertina filling up the gaps in between.

If you wanted to create a film set of a mixed session in full swing, this would be just the job. Bear in mind this is in a back street pub in England, not Murphys Bar in Ireland.

I often wonder why it is that the English Tourist Board uses images of Morris Dancers (a marmite scenario if ever there was one) rather than the everyday joys of a place like the Blacksmiths. I now have conclusive evidence that you can get to a session of one sort or another in the UK 7 days a week if you had a bike like our man Alfred Owen Williams and a good pair of legs or preferably, a van with a sleeping bag in the back.

The Bastard English Session, Oxford: here's James Bell of the Bastard session in his own words:

'It began in late 2008 (I think) out of a desire to have an English folk session in Oxford, which at the time had a very healthy Irish session, a Breton session and a Scandinavian session (and maybe a Galician session too? I can't remember if it had started by then). There were and are strong English tune sessions and song sessions, but not in town.

Into that vacuum I wanted to start a session that added a particularly English twist: popular music. (In other words, not classical, not really folk, commercial, often urban, usually written down rather than learned through oral tradition.) Why? Because I felt that England had a much richer tradition of popular music than it had of folk music.

I also wanted something much less formal than the sessions I was used to – something irreverent, rough around the edges, even drunk and rowdy. But above all, I wanted it to be welcoming. I wanted it to be an event that a person could go to for the first time by themselves without knowing anyone, and by the end of the night feel that this was something that they were a part of. I didn't want it to be a session where people felt they had to win the approval of whoever was running it. I didn't want anyone tutting, making snide comments and saying that 'that's not how the Tradition should be played'.

The purpose of this session was for people to get together and play music, sing, drink, occasionally dance (there is usually a bit of dancing at this session at some point) and have a good time. This was the purpose because I believed then and believe now that this was the real tradition behind this music. It was about joy, community, friendship, humour, taking the piss a little but always in an affectionate way. Showing off what a technically accomplished musician you are is fine in small doses, but it very quickly makes a tedious evening out for anyone else in the room. I wanted something closer to a knees-up than a school recital.

I knew I wanted it to be on a Friday night (so those with day jobs could go late and drink), and I found a venue: originally the Half Moon pub on St Clements, but it got too crowded on a Friday night and we needed somewhere we could breathe, so we moved to the Isis Farmhouse pub, down by the river. A much larger pub, but pretty far out of the way (the nearest car parking space is about 10 minutes walk away), although that's an advantage as well as a disadvantage, as it means that if people can be bothered to get out there then they can probably be bothered to stay all night, and to enjoy themselves.

All I needed was the name. It needed to be something specific, because this was a folk session that wasn't really folk, with predominantly English music but with any other music from anywhere else allowed. It needed to incorporate tunes and songs, old and new, and it needed to be what session regular Calum Mitchell describes as 'scruffy egalitarianism'. Seeing as I was basically bastardising a folk session format, I named it the 'Bastard English Session'.

Chapter 10

The English factor

*'The English are moral, the English are good
And clever and modest and misunderstood'*

from 'A song of patriotic prejudice' by Flanders and Swann

The trouble with having a lingua franca like English as your defining language is that there's nowhere to hide. To hear a Welsh singer giving it large in their native tongue is to experience something timeless, authentic and immediately identifiable even if they are only actually singing something rare off a Dylan bootleg. How would the non-welsh speaker know?

English music has no immediate identifying characteristic in the public perception, although when we ask people on our travels what their first thought is, we get a range from Brit Pop to Morris tunes via Ralph Vaughn Williams with just about anyone else they've heard who doesn't sing with a made up America accent.

Within the folk world itself the discussion is much more nuanced and much of this chat is being captured by Access Folk, a 5 year research project led by folk singer and academic, Fay Hield at Sheffield University.

'For folk singing to remain relevant in 21st century England, new singers and enthusiasts need to engage with both the music and the meaning of a shared English identity. To that end, the Access Folk research project is exploring ways to increase and diversify participation in folk singing in England.'

<https://accessfolk.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/home>

As I write this in 2025, England is experiencing a new faze of extreme right wing populism and the English flag is being used to intimidate anyone that doesn't match up to their warped version of Englishness. As a counter balance, the Access Folk project is typical of direct action from the rest of the good English folk, working to reclaim the flag and to restore our good name to the Flanders and Swann tongue in cheek claim above that the English are good and clever and modest and misunderstood'.

Our focal point is far too narrow to get involved in anything other than what we find roaming about the UK's sessions, singarounds and folk club. There's a self-selection process here of course as the people who turn up for a tune or a sing don't appear to be the same as the people who turn up to protest outside hotels filled with refugees and asylum seekers. But how would I know?

Well, for a start there's the songs and tunes people choose to sing which could include fascist and racist classics but don't, unless you take offence at some of the many racist traditional folk songs that do the rounds of course. Then there's the ethnicity profile and the welcoming vibe that clearly evidences the inclusion of people of colour, people from the LGBTQIA+ communities, people with disabilities and lots of young people in our sessions and singarounds, doesn't it? Well, no it doesn't sadly.

To address these kinds of issues and to offer insight and ways forward, the Access Folk team has held two open calls for activists inside and outside the folk world to apply for funding. Projects included Anna Anise's unplugged, open-mic style folk singalongs for members of the LGBTQIA+ community; Joanie Bones participatory gig theatre addressing silences in the folksong canon about womanhood and gender issues and Sophie Crawford's series of special events featuring artists of colour.

Then there's Jennifer John's collation of folk repertoires of Caribbean and Black communities that have resided in the Merseyside since the time of the transatlantic slave trade and Stephanie Meskell-Brocken's series of monthly gatherings for youth aged 14-25 that explore the intersections of folk, punk, and poetry.

Similarly, the EFSDS at Cecil Sharp House commissioned black folk musician, Angeline Morrison to create 'The Black History Resource' and the 'A Song and a Dance: using folk arts in inclusive settings' project increasing direct participation by people with a learning disability.

These initiatives help to highlight the inclusion gaps in sessions and singarounds and offer tips for organisers that want to increase their group profile. The key here is whether hosts and organisers feel any obligation to do so, given the informality that typifies the sector where your mates and their plus one and twos make up the common method of spreading the word.

The reasons for taking inclusion seriously are well documented in the research and in our informal meanderings round the pubs and community centres. Firstly there's the age demographic where the typical over 50's event faces a slow decline if no younger people join – unless you subscribe to the idea that the younger generation will join up anyway when they become the over 50's themselves. That would make the original group average age to be over 80, so time (and singing ability) would be somewhat limited.

Secondly, and most importantly, it's about missing out on all the fun, laughter, drama and pathos that new songs and new singers bring to make it a great night out. Now that's a real vote winner.

I'm an English singer and instrumentalist in a band that plays a lot of Irish tunes alongside English and Scottish ones so I feel OK playing in an Irish session or offering a song in an English singaround. Oddly, a full blown 'english tunes only' session with oddles of box players feels less comfortable to me although I have all the credentials in place in terms of birth certificate, authentic estuary english accent and ability to give and receive irony and sarcasm. I'm also pretty fair minded (Billy Bragg himself says sense of fair play is a defining English quality) so maybe my discomfort is down to too many box players at any one time rather than anything vaguely racist.

This brings us onto the subject of musical taste and Englishness. Billy Bragg also writes that his version of Englishness is more about a sense of shared space than anything else. When I was at school in the sixties we had folk singing sessions that included being encouraged to sing Linstead Market written phonetically so we sounded like 'real' Jamaicans (!) and spirituals using the N word with a similar take on bad and insulting impersonations of someone's culture.

The educators intent was no doubt to illustrate what a diverse and multicultural society we lived in but the end result was to highlight difference. Now my younger London family members do their best with the street talk and sound much more authentic than me as a 6 year old singing 'carry me akky ovarr linstee' markitt'. My mate (West Indian dad/Irish mum) was stunned into full denial when the teacher suggested this was his own type of music.

On the other hand I have been involved in concerts singing the phonetic version of 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' during the free Mandela period, similar Estonian anthems and that left field Italian classic 'Bella Ciao' without actually understanding the words for years.

Finding the right way to include all versions of 'singing in England' as well as and in addition to 'singing in English' can only help celebrate the diversity of song on offer.

On the other side of the English class fence, we have the classicalisation (is that a word?) of folk song by Vaughn Williams, Benjamin Britten, Percy Grainger and their colleagues. Nothing is more off putting to me than hearing a folk song presented with an operatic voice in 'received pronunciation' English (or Toff speak if you will) yet to millions of others world wide it is the very definition of English folk song. This kind of cultural appropriation has the same effect on me as the Linstead Market ditty had on my mate.

In 2024, the East Anglian Traditional Music Trust was funded by the National Lottery to run 'Vaughn Williams Folk' taking the music to communities, schools and theatres and my folksinging friend Moose was asked to add his authentic grassroots vocals alongside the choirs and the orchestration to the gigs. He loved every minute of it. I would hate to think that my dreadful prejudice was stopping anyone from coming to a session and giving us a Vaughn Williams version of a lovely song, so I for one have some work to do.

Meanwhile, out there in the unreal world of reality TV, Tiktok, social media influencers and all things popular culture, folk song and folk tunes are getting short shrift. On the other hand, social media has given us a handy way to celebrate and promote the music we love to a growing section of the nation looking for something deeper rooted than the usual here today and gone tomorrow fare. My feeds on Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Bluesky are choc full of live music, sessions, singarounds and news and views of the wonderful world of grass roots music so believe me, there's a scene going on right now on your doorstep – just get out there and join in. Anyone up for a song?

Chapter 11

There are several reasons why people like me feel the need to put together ludicrously ambitious and woefully underfunded projects like this one. The main reason I do it is to distract my brain from going into melt down by facing the reality of pressures that life has thrown at me over the past five decades. I mention this here because there is a focus on the pursuit of fun and frolic for it's own sake inherent in the Rolling On project and this could mask the real reason I (and so many others I have met) try to stay so close to the music. It's about survival. It's about the politics of resistance. It's about dancing to a different tune.

Around about the same time I was winning that prize at the Milkmaid Folk Club, my eldest son was being visited at 6am by the local SWAT team, armed to the teeth in their black stormtrooper protective gear, dragging my daughter in law out of the shower and doing the whole shouty routine we love watching on the telly, but only when it's happening to someone else. It turned out that Tom had acquired an antique pistol but hadn't thought about getting a licence.

Typical Tom but actually typical of many lovely, intelligent, sensitive, thoughtful people like him who have ADHD and habitually make seriously bad decisions as the impulse control takes a break. Not having a licence for a firearm is a statutory 5 year prison sentence. No appeal. How did the police know he had the item in question? A friend of his thought it would be a good move to let the local police know so that a friendly bobby would cycle over and give some uncle-like advice to get a licence yesterday. That friend doesn't have ADHD or any other registered condition but clearly has a black hole where his common sense should be.

The use of words that combine in sentences that include terms like 'mental health', 'ADHD' and 'gun' produces a stock response in our risk averse society in general and the police force in general. The call bypassed community policing and went straight to the boys in black.

Tom spent the 8 months before the inevitable stay in prison knowing what he was facing, having to work through that horror with his wife only to find out the month before he went in that they were expecting the first child. One month after his admission, she was evicted from their rented property. Nightmare. After the initial panic, she (bless her) found a nice little cottage to rent and I became a proxy man about the house for her and a virtual Dad and full time Grandad for baby George.

Meanwhile, back at team Phillips, my wife Bren was taking the first tentative steps on a three year Fine Art degree at the tender age of 57. Quite an achievement for this wonderful woman who had been living with the realities of M.E (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) for the past 30 years. I had agreed to act as her 'Art Bitch' for the three year stint, a combo of art technician, IT consultant, housekeeper, head chef, stand by driver and personal assistant.

On the work front, I was still the director of a local charity with the usual unhealthy mix of lots of people needing help and no money to pay anyone to do it whilst getting endless referrals from health and social care professionals on salaries, paid holidays and pensions asking us to do their job for them for nothing and be grateful for the opportunity.

One of the few things we were being paid to do was to be what the NHS terms an Expert by Experience on a panel with an independent chair and an independent clinical expert to visit and review people who had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act living in hospital.

This meant that for a couple of days a week I would be roaming round the country with out of pocket expenses paid for, an ideal opportunity to chill out in a travelodge all evening as a way of re-charging my batteries. You'd think that if you had never experienced the restorative powers of finding yourself in a room full of people having a great time, letting it all hang out and soaking up the music. And a pint. Or if you've ever actually stayed in a travelodge.

Despite being a qualified social worker and the director of a specialist community development agency, my role as Expert by Experience was entirely due to being Tom's Dad. To sum up, I was able to tour the country visiting sessions and singarounds whilst being paid to visit hospitals all because my son had ADHD and, even better as far as the job role was concerned, was serving time in prison. When I told Tom about this, he cracked up laughing. You have no idea what a wonderful sound that was as we sat in the visitor lounge with his fellow inmates and their distraught wives, kids and/or parents.

Tom asked me to bring in a spare guitar and he spent the final year of his sentence being a full time (unpaid) musician, forming a duo with his cell mate Tats (covered head to toe in tattoos – hence the name), entertaining the wing and, to cap it all, recording an album at a local studio as a farewell gift by the prison service.

Music saved Tom and it certainly saved me. In the last year of his sentence, Tom was allowed day leave and I drove the 2 hours to see him with baby George, a picnic and a spare guitar. We sat under an oak tree in the park swapping songs as two songwriters tend to do and I made him cry with my piece 'My little Family' and he made me sob with his one, 'Nearly here'. George preferred the one we made up on the spot about fluffy bunnies and milky bottles, or some such. 'Fluffy Bunny and Milky Bottles' is lost to the wind, where it should remain.

My weekly therapy session was, of course, the Plough and Fleece session. Every Thursday I received a dose of good company, fine music and an ale or two in a place where I felt welcome, built in and completely at home but without all the rewarding but knackered support duties. Ali, Alison, Philip, Pete, Andrew and I started to go on 'Rolling On' road trips to festivals and sessions in name of research, of course, chalking up group outings to Dunkeld in Scotland, Sheffield, Derby and Yorkshire.

In 2019, Bren and I made the decision to move away from the area to a Suffolk village some 25 miles away. Close enough to stay in touch and far enough away to have to start again building my local musical tribe. Not purely co-incidence then that we moved to Bury St Edmunds, home of the Milkmaid Folk Club, giver of first prize to the Rolling On theme song.

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