Folk Revivals: the UK and USA

Key Points

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Folk music revivals are amongst some of the most fascinating musical phenomena of the industrial and post-industrial ages. Songs and tunes regarded as belonging to 'the people' (and considered to be handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, with back-histories going back hundreds of years) continue to attract the collective and collector-inclined attention of succeeding generations. It seems that songs, once they are branded as 'folk', rather than as 'popular', carry important signifiers which connote authentic and 'pure' folk art, carrying with them the 'lore' or wisdom of the people through time and space.

The study of folklore also remains popular in its own right and has been described in terms of 'histories of survival', 'museums of thoughts, sayings and doings of our forefathers' and 'the expression of the psychology of early man' (Hull, 1928:1). However, folklore is also mistrusted by some owing to its degree of irrationality and lack of scientific exactitude (also for being rooted in the pre-Christian). Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (also originally published in 1928) informs us that folktales contain similar form, irrespective of the mythologies of the people and their customs. If examined structurally they can inform us of changes in people's everyday lives, even if the tales do not appear to represent the everyday:

> The […] a morphological study of the tale will show that it contains very little pertaining to everyday life. [but] Certain transitional stages from the pattern of daily living to tales do exist, and this pattern is indirectly reflected in them [for example] tales contain such obvious traces of religious notions that they can be tracked down without the help of a historical study. (Propp, 2009:106)

Folklore also attracts attention from those who yearn for connections with a 'mother earth' narrative – perhaps the most widespread of all forms of ancient worship, yet absolutely relevant if one considers our current global climate crisis. For many our 'Mother Earth' narrative has been lost in a modern age of industrial and technological processes and scientific definitions. Therefore folklore, folk music and dance are all relevant yet contentious signifiers representing for some an authentic discourse that refers us to the endeavours required for one to exist in the everyday. True, folklore

might present both 'mythical' times and places, but people believed in the power of nature over man and understood in real terms the natural forces over which mankind had only partial command. This appears to be something that modern society has lost.

Therefore given the significance of the above information, the varying degrees of folk-related musical practices brought to the fore during the later-19th and early-20th centuries via revivalism (e.g. in the UK the Folk Song Society was founded in 1898 with the objective of 'collecting folk-ballads and tunes') are of great interest to the popular music researcher, containing as they do many contextual, counter-cultural and politically-apprised concepts concerning antidotes and restoratives to the pressures of mass industrialisation, mass production and mass consumption – all of which are at the very heart of understanding popular music.

In his 1994 text *Poplore* American scholar Gene Bluestein proposed that concepts concerning the meanings and uses of the term 'folklore' in the United States required revision. Bluestein advanced his concept of 'poplore' as more accurately reflecting American culture and in doing so challenged and isolated a great deal of the so-called 'purity' ideas surrounding American folk music. For example, suggesting that 'the influence of Seeger and others permeated a much broader social and political spectrum' than the one we often associate with the US folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s, Bluestein described Pete Seeger as a poplorist:

Seeger and Lee Hayes, his long-time collaborator and Weavers colleague, composed 'If I Had a Hammer', which gave clear meanings to the traditional values of American egalitarianism and the idea that music has the power to unite the nation. Many songs by Seeger and other poplorists have moved along the same political and cultural lines, adapting folk motifs to broader and often overtly political concerns. (Bluestein, 1995: 93)

Pete Seeger replied:

> Poplore […] is wonderful. A very sensible new word; Bluestein's analysis makes sense. Two centuries ago the word 'folklore' made sense, describing the traditional culture of the peasant class, 90% of the population. In this industrial technology ridden times, it's better to use a new word than try to make an old one fit. (Seeger to Bluestein, 1995: dustcover)

In the United Kingdom, the many symbolisms and mythologies surrounding folklore and folk revivalism award us an excellent example of how popular music genres engage with authenticities, nostalgia, legends and oppositions. For example, for those drawn to the folk revival of the first decade-or-so of the 20th century the genuineness of the oral transmission of folk music was used as a binary opposite to the 'gutter garbage' (see Vaughan Williams, 1934) of popular music created by the burgeoning entertainment systems of industrialised society (e.g. Music Hall). However, such folk authenticities were both political and contextual, for they largely manifested from within the educated and upper classes of British society: those who expressed a curiosity in (rather than a belonging to) the 'vulgus in populo'. These exotic peasant 'others' were at first identified as mostly belonging to the rural working classes, illustrating to those from a higher class an ancient yet continuous orally-transmitted musical record stretching back to pre-Christian days. Therefore, following composer Cecil Sharp's overhearing of gardener John England's rendition of 'Seeds of Love' in the vicarage garden of local clergyman Charles Marson in the Somerset village of Hambridge on 22nd August 1903, the rural working classes became unwitting icons of folk authenticity and ideology across the upper echelons of Britain's stratified society in the years leading up to WWI.

For some, tradition was seen as a kind of recoverable national 'heritage' stretching all the way back (at least in England) to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Such idealistic and (taking into account the inter-war years and the rise of fascism) ideological definitions inflicted upon traditional music informs the researcher that the preservation of folk music became over-burdened with what might be described as invented traditions. As Bert Lloyd stated in 1967:

> […] the scholar sometimes forgets that behind the myths and the ceremonials and the songs attached to them lies nothing more obscure, nothing less realistic, than the yearly round of work in the fields, and the perpetual anxiety over yield and increase and a full flour bin.' (Lloyd, 1967:96).

British folk music revivalism has frequently involved ideological and politicised interpretations of the past within specific meanings and contexts of the present. To this very day discussions amongst folk revivalists frequently revolve around origins and definitions:

e.g. what actually ***is*** folk song (interestingly, revivalists often find it easier to define what folk song is ***not***), where and how are such folk songs rooted? Who were the people from which song emerged? What was their status in society and what was the status of the music? The very nature of the syncretism between musical traditions and the blending of song and dance styles can be ignored by folklorists because such unification can reveal the extent to which popular and folk styles coalesce. Such ideological oppositions ask the popular music researcher important questions about how and why, and under what social and cultural (as well as musicological) conditions opinions are formed. For example, how might nostalgia 'inform' concepts of the folk as a wellspring of poetry, dance and song and from which fonts do the romantic concepts of primitive folk life emerge? What were the motivations of the Workers' Music Association to promote folk music in the post-WWII era? According to Bert Lloyd, the WMA assisted in 'the re-discovery of our own lower-class traditions' (*ibid*, 1967: i) so, we might ask ourselves how a Marxist discourse might help us to understand these connections? Such traditions as defined by Bert Lloyd were usually (although not exclusively) drawn from the mid-20th century political left's historical concepts of authenticity as representing true working-class aspiration: largely from the historical writings of left-wing historians such as JL and Barbara Hammond, EP Thompson, AL Morton, etc. Perhaps via the writings of these 20th century British historians (and others), we might be able to unpack the rationale of British Folk Revival. As RF Atkinson states, we should adopt a 'second order: not the study of the past, but the study of some of the presuppositions of the study of the past. It is a conceptual, critical or analytical enquiry.' (Atkinson, 1992:24)

In spite of there being no guarantee that it will always be possible to ascertain the historical truth about our 'folk' origins and also that such investigative connotations can be little more than male stereotypes of faceless, unconscious and primitive 'artists', there still exists within the British folk revival a seemingly unending concern about folk music 'purity' with authenticities residing with an anonymous 'brother' and 'other'; Bert Lloyd stated in 1967: 'Some seem to have the feeling that a peasant pot is less of a peasant pot if you can name the potter' (Lloyd 1967: 25). Such 'other-ist' dogma has been used by many from both the political right and left to marshal folk song as an expression of a national genealogy.

As worthy as folk music collecting and performing has undoubtedly been, across the British Isles there is still a kind of 'here, yet not here' mixture of ideological consciousness attached, together with an urban mythologised social conscience surrounding the meanings and values associated with the 'anonymous origins' of folk song. Added to these values and meanings, is the fact that many early folk music collectors (such as Sharp, Baring-Gould, Lucy Broadwood, etc.) did not essentially profit from their collecting interests: their passions were largely philanthropic. Therefore, for some, words such as purity, tradition, heritage, etc. also apply to the collectors, themselves. They are seen by some as valiant and caring, heroic even: what might have been lost was saved (concomitantly, we as a nation were also 'saved'). What was previously occasionally thought of with derision became esteemed and what was considered dead was revived, brought back to life. Folk revivalism does not simply denote the revival of lost musical materials but connotes in the UK and the US a revival of the 'real' sensory experiences to those willing to engage with the discourse offering the individual an opportunity for a moral resurgence and revitalisation. From within such a revelation, folk music revivalism can be rightly seen as a kind of 'tonic' for it suggests that that we are all torch bearers of some kind of authentic folk music tradition and that we are all responsible for the continuation of such heritage for the benefit of generations to come. This is a common axiom right across the British folk scenes, to this very day.

Of course, the inherent problem with such values being foisted upon folk song is the fact that such contextual 'a priori' meanings were most likely nothing to do with those originally associated with what we call folk song. A consideration of the historiography of folk revivalism (see bibliography) informs the researcher that traditions are malleable and tend to be forged to suit the needs and desires of certain echelons of society at given moments in the present (rather than the past to which they are ascribed). In the case of the first (let us say pre-WWI) revivalists, it can be clearly seen that a great deal of folk song authenticity was interpreted by a quite specific section of the British bourgeoisie concerned that not only folk music but also the national character was being eroded by the onwards march of modernism and hybrid populism. The clarion call was that the thinking classes had to save and preserve folk song before the working classes casually let it pass out of use. Further, collecting folk

music also meant that it would be preserved on their behalf until such a time as they were educated enough to appreciate what they had almost let slip. The music was also re-arranged and orchestrated, meaning that it would be shorn of its vulgarities.

Cecil Sharp, perhaps the most significant researcher in what might be called this 'first' British folk revival considered such disappearances to be concomitant with the fact that the songs had emerged from an intuitive yet illiterate rural peasantry with only oral transmission to aid preservation; he suggested that such 'common people […] are to be found only in those country districts which, by reason of their remoteness, have escaped the infection of modern ideas.' (Sharp, 1907) His concept of aligning 'the folk' with the anonymous, spontaneous and intuitive 'other' suggests to us a patronising and almost colonial imperialist remoteness in terms of a lack of understanding of the rural working classes *in situ* (in his case in the south-west of England). Sharp was (at least from his own perspective) a keen Socialist, but he was also a naïve romanticist. His concepts of a disconnected intuitive and anonymous feudal rural peasantry fecund with song were entirely inaccurate: especially when many folk songs had evolved post-feudally and under various conditions associated with forms of capital.

One need only consider the early growth of industrialisation to realise that a great deal of folk music actually emerged from within 'new' trades created for profit. For example, although ballads were undoubtedly passed on by word-of-mouth, the invention of printing forever changed our oral traditions. It was perhaps only the collectors' lack of knowledge and understanding of Britain's working classes and their pastimes that created the quotient of nostalgia. For something like three hundred years – say from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth (and actually lingering into the 20th), the printing and publishing of Broadsides enabled folk/popular songs to be learnt, passed on and (importantly) re-articulated. Broadsides were printed on single sheets of usually poor-quality paper and were sold on the streets and at fairs and markets right across Britain, mostly to be sung to a popular hymn refrain of the day. A Broadside might concern news of a military victory against the French, or of a gruesome murder in a barn; they might have even been created to advertise a pub in Manchester (e.g. 'A Soldier's Farewell to Manchester' with the pub in question being the Angel Inn). Broadsides were an early form of social media in print and sold all over

the UK in their tens of thousands. Indeed, it is claimed that some of the most popular, such as 'The Murder of Maria Marten' sold in excess of a million copies. Broadside printing was more often than not the creation of the pragmatic businessman. Indeed, the potential to attract unwanted attention from the authorities by producing Broadsides relating to political activity does not appear to have bothered these printers very much. The printing of Broadsides was a more than useful side-line for many provincial jobbing printers: keeping machines running that might otherwise lay idle.

So folk song's apparent 'detachment' from early industrial processes and marketing devices is far less secure than romanticists would have us believe. Indeed, it is acknowledged by many researchers of Broadsides that via the lack of a workable copyright law, there was nothing to stop a printer in (say) Manchester, resetting a broadside he had purchased in (say) Birmingham, and accrediting it to his own printshop. As Bert Lloyd states:

> When we consider the great distribution of printed folk song texts among our town proletariat during the nineteenth century […] we cannot avoid the impression that it was a deafness based on romantic prejudice that caused the great collectors such as Baring-Gould, Sharp, Hammond, the indomitable Miss Broadwood, to hold so firmly to the view that folk song was by its very nature rural, entirely an affair of heaths and hedgerows, chilterns and champaigns. (Lloyd, 1967:31)

In this case, the print industry simply published a mixture of musical and newsworthy elements already a feature of working-class British society. Of course, the popular music researcher should also be aware of Bert Lloyd's own political bias concerning such print media processes. He did not fully acknowledge that such printers were part of a proto-popular music industry. The point he preferred to make in his seminal 1967 text quoted above was that the urban proletariat, rather than canny provincial printers, were responsible for the very establishment and transmission of 'folk song'.

There is very little doubt that songs such as, for example 'The Rambling Ploughboy' probably became 'The Rambling Miner' as industrial towns and cities made their mark, but it is a moot point whether songs were passed on in the old rural word-of-mouth style. Lloyd was at pains to point out that a great deal of such work could be traced back on the one hand to 'Lollardry' and on the other 'labour troubles' (ibid, p. 32), but this remains debateable – especially as literacy increased. In fact, as sales of provincial

newspapers (therefore literacy) increased the popularity of Broadsides declined, and many such songs (or versions of the same) could be found printed in these newspapers; others might end up on the Music Hall stages (seemingly so despised by Vaughan Williams), and in chap books, etc.

One might therefore argue that the British example of media involvement in the transmission of 'folk' music is but one of many instances where media technology played a vital part in the dissemination of folk song. It certainly played its part at a very early stage of the British folk revival, for Percy Grainger used a cylinder recorder for his field work. He first began to use a cylinder recorder in 1906 and by such means assembled more than 200 field recordings. Arguably, without the recording machine intervening relatively successfully in folk song collecting, many songs might have been entirely lost. Frederick Delius used Granger's short recording of Joseph Taylor singing 'Brigg Fair' for his own rhapsody of the same name. It was perhaps a pity that the brief battle between cylinder and disc recording was won by the latter, for while it was possible for the amateur to take the more lightweight wax recording equipment on field recording trips, disc recording equipment was far more cumbersome and expensive (in any case, WWI also created a significant hiatus in British folk song collecting).

Music scholarship, composition, issues concerning tonality, popularity, (i.e. rather than the mythical 'brother'/'other') also came to aid the popularity of folk revivalism. For example, in the early years of the 20th century Ralph Vaughan Williams' 'English Folk Song Suite' and 'Fantasia on Greensleeves' were extremely well-received right across British society; so too the works of the aforementioned Percy Grainger and Delius, also George Butterworth. All of these composers literally dipped their pens into notating folk song melodies. For example, Vaughan Williams' instrumental piece 'Fantasia on Greensleeves' is a combination of two songs: 'Greensleeves', an Elizabethan melody of unknown authorship, and 'Lovely Joan', which Williams himself actually collected in Norfolk in 1908.

Once Percy Grainger had recorded Joseph Taylor, he persuaded the Gramophone Company to commercially release a handful of the old man's recordings in the UK. Shortly after the Armistice the Folk Song Society lobbied for folk songs to be included

in singing classes in schools and by the early-1920s children were learning and singing folk songs from books such as those published by the Curwen Press. For example, *North Countrie Folk Songs for Schools* was published in 1921 and *English Folk Songs for Schools* in 1922. Indeed, by the time the BBC had received its Royal Charter in 1927 some folk singing and dancing had been included in its schedules.

Such were the levels to which folk dance had superseded folk song in popularity amongst the interests of certain strata of the population, that the Folk Song Society and the English Folk Dance Society merged in 1932 to form the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS). From this historical distance one might consider that dance was perhaps more in-tune with healthy lifestyles advocated by (e.g.) rambling, hiking and cycling clubs (together with the popular dance music craze of the 1930s). Folk singing was rendered more fixed by the mass-style community singing associated with schools, youth movements and choral societies such as those at the Co-Operative Society (partly from which, Topic Records emerged in 1939).

In the United States two important technological developments also helped propel forward the folk revival in that country. By 1927 RCA Victor had sent a mobile recording unit into the mountain communities of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia. This trip confirmed what Cecil Sharp had suggested on his own early American travels: i.e. that many folk songs had been carried across the Atlantic by migrant communities and had taken on lives of their own in the US. Further, these recordings started a popular 'craze' for what became known as 'hillbilly' music, while also contributing to the vogue for singing cowboys. Indeed, copyrights from such songs came to assist the development of the modern country music industry. This RCA experiment suggested that there was a wealth of both interesting **and** commercially viable material available to any organisation well enough equipped to actually go out and retrieve it. A little later, in the early-mid 1930s the US Library of Congress also began a programme of folk music recording in the field, which, in turn, helped further stimulate an interest in folk music across American colleges and university campuses. Therefore, by the mid-part of the 20th century, US folk song collecting became intrinsically linked with the growing popularity of folk singing and square dancing. During the late-Depression and early-war years, traditional songs and folk singers became very popular amongst the

largely white middle-class counterculture based in Greenwich Village, New York. Many of these young people were also looking for an 'other' America and, as in the UK some were even members of the Communist Party.

Artists such as the aforementioned Pete Seeger, together with Woody Guthrie, along with their various aggregations such as the Almanac Singers and the Weavers became not only popular amongst US radicals but also in the US Hit Parade. Back in the UK their popularity expanded via radio and record sales with the assistance of the aforementioned Workers' Music Association and their record label Topic. Seeger and Guthrie became cult figures in Britain and folklorists and singers such as AL (Bert) Lloyd, Ewan McColl, Peter Kennedy (son of the important folk dance and song researcher Douglas Kennedy) and transplanted Americans such as Peggy Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Jack Elliott came to popularise folk songs to young mostly white middle class listeners, especially via BBC radio programmes and recordings. During WWII the BBC had started to record folk singers and musicians in the field. From this introduction, the BBC's 'dialect scheme' of the post-war years enlarged with material subsequently used in radio programmes such as *Country Magazine* and the extremely popular Sunday morning programme *As I Roved Out*, on which some of the above mentioned 'folkies' appeared alongside field recordings of (e.g.) the Copper Family of Rottingdean and Sam Larner of Great Yarmouth. By the time *As I Roved Out* was first broadcast in 1953 magnetic tape recording was becoming more available and it became progressively easier to use as machines became more portable and a little cheaper. This spurred a new wave of interest amongst field recordists and Peter Kennedy of the EFDSS made regular field recording forays: the revival was thus re-stimulated by media and technology. Further, by the mid-1950s the British folk revival was accelerated by the skiffle boom of 1955-1958 which encouraged young people to learn and play folk, jazz, blues and gospel songs on acoustic instruments; following the decline of skiffle, perhaps the ultimate symbol of folk revivalism came to be that of the British folk club. This development started slowly during the 1950s with only a handful of clubs opening across the country; however, by the peak of the folk revival in the mid-1960s British folk clubs probably numbered in their thousands. Media, technologies, record companies and hybridities brought this music to a new generation of young people, not purisms or 'otherness' – but there were accompanying problems.

It was in these folk clubs that tradition could be further re-invented. The back rooms of pubs in working class areas of a town or a city were usually (but not exclusively) commandeered to house folk clubs because they were considered geographically authentic, but they were seldom popularised by (white or Black) working class people, who mostly preferred popular genres. Instead, middle class young people tended to gather and develop policies surrounding what was and was not appropriate, musically: some had 'floor singers only' policies without any guests, so that the ultimate authenticity paradigm, that of 'carrying a tradition', took prominence. In some clubs, rules and regulations set out by The Singers Group in London dictated that English singers should only sing English music, Irish singers should only sing Irish music, etc. Peggy Seeger was to comment in support of this regulation that 'what we don't want is a form of musical Esperanto'. Folk clubs therefore began to split, factionalism became rife and the growth of festival culture (principally via initially the Cambridge Folk Festival) and the incursions of rock musicians who wished to experiment with electric folk, further fractured the folk movement over the forthcoming decades.

Nevertheless, by the late-1960s and early-1970s in both the United Kingdom and the United States folk revivalism had helped address issues concerning authenticity and social ethics in some very pro-active ways, combining as it did with other forces for change. In addition to a variety of compositional stimulations usually drawn from the rock and jazz genres, such discourses were brought together from a multiplicity of complex critical fonts: from the imaginative 'other America' work of Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg to the critical media analysis of Marshall McLuhan; from Timothy Leary's *Politics of Ecstasy* to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. A broad church of anti-establishment critiques came from folk and folk-related artists and expressed a gamut of diverse yet encapsulating influences creating what might be described as an alternative 'world view'. In such a mood as existed in both the United States and Britain in the late-1960s era (affluent yet uncaring, 'multicultural' yet pluralistic, politically powerful, yet paranoid) it took a lot of courage to present the values of one's choice as binding – but by at least the turn of the decade, many young American and British folk revivalists had indeed done so, and it is from this font of knowledge, together with the aforementioned re-invention of tradition and informal music-making assisted by technologies, that the folk revivals in both countries continue relatively unabated.

Interest in folk music revivalism tends to wax and wane somewhat. Currently (2019) folk music in both the UK and the US (in the US 'Americana' is now an important sub-genre combining folk and country) is undergoing a small revival, itself, but it cannot be guaranteed to hold people's interests and attention *en masse* in the ways it once did. Nevertheless, for some it remains an important albeit mythologised signifier of authenticity in our 'post-truth' age.

There always appears to be a hard core of performers, as often as not derived from familial associations such as in the UK, Eliza Carthy, Nancy Kerr, the Unthanks, etc. (this list is almost endless), who all have parental and, in some cases,, even grandparental connections to the folk revival. So, the folk revivals continue to mutate as generations with far less connections to the initial impact of folk revivalism take an interest in the music, but without being essentially driven by the invented traditions and authenticities of past eras.

In the UK this has manifested itself in younger artists emerging such as Damien O'Kane, Clype, Plu, Manran, Solaference, Jim Moray, False Lights, Mishra, Ange Hardy, and many more. All such artists have respect for, but little 'fear' of, traditional mores as espoused by the earlier pioneers and also use digital technologies in their approaches to 'traditional' music-making, song-writing and record production. But in all cases, the paradigms of authenticity remain similar to their precursors via the presentation of a desirable albeit allegorical past as an antidote to a putative culpable present.

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This list includes texts used in this piece, together with a few other recommended texts I have found especially useful over the years. The folk scenes in both the UK and the USA are very 'literary' movements and there are many volumes spanning several decades, concerned with traditional music and folklore.

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