

The singer and the song explored

The Voice of the People: A 20 CD collection of folk song by Topic Records

Paul Bond
5 March 1999

The recent release of Topic Records' 20 CD collection *The Voice of the People* makes available many long-deleted recordings of traditional folk-singers and musicians from the British Isles. Compiled by Dr Reg Hall, himself a fine musician, the collection draws primarily on Topic's own output of some 120 albums, but also on previously unreleased private recordings and other long-unavailable commercial recordings. Coinciding with last year's centenary of the English Folk Dance & Song Society (EFDSS), it marks a highpoint of what is being described as a revival of folk-song in Britain.

In the past, Topic put out albums by individual performers, but these 20 CDs are arranged thematically. There are three volumes of dance music, two of nautical songs, two concerning work (mainly rural), two of ballads, four of songs about love, courtship and sexual encounters, three of what might broadly be termed leisure pursuits (including drinking and hunting), and one each about exile, topical issues, and seasonal and ritual events. The one exception to the broadly thematic arrangement is Volume 11, *My father's the king of the gypsies*, which is devoted to recordings of English and Welsh travellers.

The recordings span the whole century. The earliest are those organised by the Australian composer Percy Grainger in 1908 with the 75-year old Lincolnshire singer Joseph Taylor, whilst the latest date from the early 1990s. Most date from the heyday of Topic Records between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. Hall and his co-producer Tony Engle have done a fine job with the sound quality. They have not been afraid to use recordings previously unreleased because of the presence of background noise. This marks a significant change. Hall and Engle have made an effort to see the music in a social context. To this end it makes sense to hear a singer like the Irish traveller Margaret Barry playing in a London pub whereas previously it might have been thought that a cash register ringing in the background would distract from the performance.

The main criterion for inclusion is that the singer either learned the song traditionally or was part of a traditional system of entertainment. Although there is a high level of artistic achievement, and many of the performers were semi-professional, the main intent of this music was recreational. Many of the performers were quite old when recorded, so there are occasional problems with faltering voices or uncertain touch on instruments, but these have been tolerated where the material performed is of the most exceptional quality or provides a direct link with the last century. The fiddler Stephen Baldwin, for example, was over 80 when he was recorded, so his hands were not too steady. But he had played from the late 1880s onwards and the tunes are magnificent.

Generally, the pipers and accordion or melodeon players fare better, perhaps because they were recorded closer to the time of playing for dances or functions. With the great fiddler Michael Coleman and the melodeon-playing Hyde Brothers, the original recordings were made for

dance halls frequented by New York Irish immigrants in the 1920s and '30s.

It is hard to think of a more assured singer than Joseph Taylor, who has some of the finest moments in the collection. He sang some splendid tunes, elevating even a song about a champion racehorse (*Creeping Jane* on Volume 8) into a stirring work of art. (Taylor was the source of the melody used by composer Frederick Delius for his orchestral work *Unto Brigg Fair*). Even if much of the material seems alien, few of the singers do. It is only in an extreme case, like the highly-mannered Fred Jordan, that the singing seems to have come from another world.

Singing styles vary widely according to both locale and personal taste. The great Walter Pardon, a Norfolk carpenter who was 60 years old before he performed in public, sings in a quiet, instructive manner that suits most effectively a song like the poaching/transportation ballad *Van Diemen's Land*:

"Come all you wild and wicked youths wherever you may be, I pray you give attention and listen unto me. The fate of our poor transports you shall understand. The hardships they undergo upon Van Diemen's Land"

Margaret Barry, accompanied by her own banjo and sometimes by Michael Gorman's fiddle, has a powerful, slightly nasal voice which admirably captures the defiance and strength of a song like *The Wild Colonial Boy*. Brighton fisherman Johnny Doughty has a showman's expressive voice, perfect for carrying off a sea song like *Come My Own One, Come My Fond One*:

"... Come my dearest unto me, Will you wed with a poor sailor lad, Who has just returned from sea?"

The material varies widely enough to make the thematic assembly seem almost arbitrary (different versions of the same songs turn up throughout the set). Many of the songs originated in ballad sheets issued by printers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, although there are earlier songs that survived in oral tradition like *Barbara Allen*, sung here by the great Ulster singer Sarah Makem. Mass-produced ballad sheets had long provided cheaply-available entertainment and were used by rural singers. For example, there was a huge market in gallows confessions and repentances like Jumbo Brightwell's *Newry Town* on Volume 3.

Many of the ballads were similar with only the detail changed. They provided raw material for singers to work to their own taste. Gradually the stilted language of hacks like Catnach of London or Harkness of Preston were smoothed into singable form by successive singers. Some of the tales might well have started as records of historical events, but gradually historically verifiable details were elided or confused. What resulted were songs that continued to grip their audience, perhaps for completely different reasons than originally intended. In Cyril Poacher's *A Broadside* (on Volume 2, *My ship shall sail the ocean*), a Napoleonic sea-battle rages, when the admiral is shot down, an unspecified woman takes his

place and leads the British crew to victory. What makes the song memorable is a moment of courage related to a conventional ballad conceit. This turns up again in Joseph Taylor's version of *Bold William Taylor* (on Volume 6, *Tonight I'll make you my bride*) in which, having donned a sailor's uniform to pursue and kill her deceitful lover, the heroine is rewarded with the command of her own ship.

Most of the songs have a striking story. This is predominantly a narrative tradition. Even where the story has become confused over time, or is only partially remembered, the singer implies the sense of the rest of the song. Some of them tell simple and affecting tales of betrayal in love without recourse to the melodrama of sea-battles or adventure, for example Walter Pardon's beautiful *I Wish I Wish*:

"but 'tis in vain, I wish I was a maid again"

On Volume 4, *Farewell my own dear native land*, many of the songs of exile (most of them Irish) are couched in terms of lovers torn apart. The circumstances that separate them are mentioned only in passing and the impact of events is expressed in the simplest human terms--in Paddy Tunney's magnificent *Craigie Hill*, for example. This is also true of many of the songs of battle, for example Willie Scott's fine *Bloody Waterloo* on Volume 8, where the battle is seen in terms of its gory impact on one pair of lovers.

There are also a large number of songs, mostly the older school of ballads, with a strong supernatural or fantastical element. Ghosts in English folk-song occupy an Olympian position, interceding to show their survivors some important fact. In *Molly Vaughan* (sung on Volume 3 by the gypsy singer Phoebe Smith) the protagonist shoots Molly by accident at twilight. His defence, that he mistook her for a swan, has been rejected when her ghost turns up at court "like a fountain of snow", pleading against his hanging 'for my true love loved me'. The supernatural is used to emphasise the human.

Many of the songs are horrifically violent. *Cruel Lincoln* sneaks in by night and murders both a baby and its mother:

"There was blood in the kitchen, there was blood in the hall, There was blood in the parlour where the lady did fall"

There is a relish in not shying away from the horrors of life, whether in love, war or work. Even those songs with an implausible happy ending, like Fred Jordan's *The Dark-Eyed Sailor* on Volume 2 (where a lover thought dead for seven years turns up unrecognised with his half of a broken token, by which he is identified), illustrate a harsh and unpredictable life.

Hall, in his introduction to the series, notes that most of the music reflects "cultures that have passed or are passing rapidly, as the social and economic conditions and the habitats that supported them have gone or are going for ever, yet many of the songs will find a response with modern listeners." The world has changed, certainly, but not so much as to render songs of lovers separated by war or hunger obsolete. The collection makes available material that others will enjoy singing. It contains several songs that were the immediate sources for a number of professional revival folk-singers. Levi Smith's version of *Georgie* on Volume 11 was the basis for Martin Carthy's recent recording, Dick Gaughan included his take *On Craigie Hill* on his seminal 1980 album *A Handful of Earth*, Frankie Armstrong has recorded John Reilly's version of *The Well Below the Valley*, etc. As a minority music, folk has always depended on the oral transmission of material.

There are certain problems with the 20 CD set. The thematic arrangement was designed to offer a new audience a way into the music. Unfortunately, it works against the extensive information given in the liner notes about the background and lifestyle of the performers and their audiences.

In an interview given late last year, Hall and Engle talked about the problems of Topic's earlier single-artist releases where many of the elderly performers were not capable of sustaining a whole album. Even so, those

albums did give, by their arrangement, an idea of the repertoire of an individual singer. Here that is missing. They are far more likely to appeal to someone looking for songs in a specific field (sea songs or songs of exile, for example) than to someone coming to the music for the first time or interested in its social context.

The most successful single volume is the one that avoids this trap and gives a social context to the music, both on the recordings and in the liner notes. Volume 11, *My father's the king of the gypsies*, contains songs which would have fitted quite comfortably on other volumes, whilst other volumes feature not only some of the same singers, the wonderful Phoebe Smith, for example, but also Scottish and Irish travellers who seem arbitrarily excluded. Scots and Irish travellers have recorded some of the most influential material in this field, as can be heard throughout the rest of the collection, and releases of Jeannie Robertson, Margaret Barry or the Stewarts of Blairgowrie amongst others. Nevertheless, it is in this volume that we hear a singing tradition alien to the experience of most listeners. English gypsies and travellers sing in a highly nasal, rubato style; Ewan MacColl attributed it in part to singing in the open air. Because of the close-knit travelling community, many songs were preserved among gypsies that were lost elsewhere. Of course, with successive legislation against travellers and nomads, traditional gypsy itinerant lifestyles are also being eroded, and gypsy forms of entertainment are inevitably changing too.

Reg Hall has provided enough substance to discuss folk-song again, and there is enough material here to realise the possibilities of the genre and what it might become. The main problem with the collection is that Hall's promise of a "revised view of traditional music" is laudable, but it is based on the conceptions (and the source material) of previous views. Hall does acknowledge that a "major constraint has been the nature and the quantity of the material available, which inevitably reflects the self-directing activities and priorities of those who made the recordings. This has resulted in distortions of representation relating to geographical regions, performance genres, and the age, gender and social background of performers". He assures us that "other CDs in the Topic catalogue ... will fill some of the gaps", but many of the restrictions of collection are inherent in this catalogue also. I doubt that the collection is either all-embracing enough to satisfy those with previous knowledge, or selective enough to satisfy the complete beginner. This is unfortunate, because there is much valuable and beautiful material here.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact