English folk singer and guitarist Martin Carthy: An appraisal of his six-decade career

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On the sixtieth anniversary of his first album, veteran folk singer Martin Carthy this year released *Transform Me Then Into A Fish*, revisiting and reinventing his debut album and other highlights of his influential career. At 84, he became the oldest person ever nominated for the Mercury Prize (awarded for the best album released by a musical act from the United Kingdom or Ireland), eventually won by Sam Fender.

Carthy wears his considerable history lightly. His album was reflective without being nostalgic or complacent, building on a lifetime's commitment to the performance and interpretation of traditional music. His playing all but created revival guitar styles, while his compelling singing shaped the folk scene's traditional repertoire. Paul Simon and Bob Dylan both picked up material from him.

He has always seen folk as reflecting social life and conditions, so has never shied away from social and political issues.

Carthy grew up in London in a Labour Party-supporting family. His father was a "very Old Labour" trade unionist and local councillor. He also had a violin and a guitar around the house and had stopped playing the fiddle because his wife thought it "too rough."

Carthy loved singing and became a chorister. Passing the common entrance (11-plus) took him to St Olave's grammar school, which provided choristers for Southwark Cathedral and the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy. At Queen's Chapel he learned the English church repertoire of the 16th and 17th centuries.

This is beautiful music, architectural in its construction, and something of its impact can be traced in Carthy's work. It developed his considerable technical skills.

It also contributed to his vocal style. Of his debut album he has said that the unaccompanied tracks veered towards plainsong and Gregorian chant. If his training encouraged some vocal mannerism, it allowed him later to create stunning arrangements, as in his setting of the Chartist poet Ernest Jones's "Song of the Lower Classes" to a traditional Sussex hymn tune.

Church music training may also have helped him appreciate the tunes collected by people like Ralph Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp. They particularly celebrated tunes with a modal melodic structure outside the familiar major/minor modes, which require a different model of harmonisation than had been written for the piano. This fed Carthy's contribution to the folk revival.

The intermediate step was skiffle, which inspired him to take up the guitar. He bought three records on the same day: Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," Lonnie Donegan's "Rock Island Line" and Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel." His drive to play the guitar properly came from listening to blues singer Big Bill Broonzy records, and his early setlists included many guitar rags. While dropping the latter gradually, he incorporated the techniques more widely and continued to look further afield, as with Anton Karas's "The Harry Lime Theme."

"Rock Island Line," he said, was "the trigger." It unleashed a surge of interest in popular music as a "people's music," but Carthy also heard a friend's father grumbling that Donegan "gets half his stuff from people like Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie." This gave him a sense that these songs had a history.

He knew of Cecil Sharp's collection, which had been published in selections for schools, but the revelation came with a visit to Ewan MacColl's Ballads and Blues Club (launched in London's Soho around 1953). MacColl had worked with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, was associated with the Stalinist Communist Party (he wrote an excruciating "Ballad of Stalin" in 1954) and was instrumental in shaping approaches to English folk song.

MacColl presented traditional singers with fine repertoires, often grooming their setlists to highlight material he thought their best. Carthy, who had gone to see a friend perform, heard the elderly Norfolk fisherman Sam Larner, who finished his set (at MacColl's programming) with the ballad "The Lofty Tall Ship."

Carthy heard this at the time "as a terminally weird tune with apparently endless variations." It "left my head spinning."

He studied the English folk song collections, which tested his skills with their unusual key signatures and musical modes. His approach was to make musical sense of songs on the guitar first. He wanted "to learn anything there was to know about the guitar [and] still… to be able to accompany English folksongs."

Working at the edges of the jazz world, he soaked up new ideas and songs, all while devoting himself to traditional songs. He learned several guitar tunings beyond the standard EADGBA, which has led to much teasing at his painstaking retuning on stage.

His approach to arrangement and accompaniment prioritises melody and words. He allows the words to dictate the pulse of the performance, and rarely play chords, which do not work with modal tunes. His accompaniments often create fascinating harmonic voicings that he cultivates to carry the narrative. It is a careful and deliberate construction.

His first album documented his performance repertoire but also showed his lightning-quick adaptability. His longstanding collaborator, fiddler Dave Swarbrick (1941-2016), came down the night before recording and suggested "A Begging I Will Go." Carthy has returned frequently to this song (as he has others), adding new verses to make further points about homelessness and capitalism: "For I'm a great Victorian value, I'm enterprise poverty Completely

invisible to the state and there for all to see."

Carthy's first five albums were recorded with Swarbrick. They made three more good albums together in the 1990s/2000s, also collaborating on other projects. Their regular duo gigs pushed them both along in a joyous exploration of the music. Carthy has often cited the fiddler's comment, "You can do anything to music. It doesn't mind."

The early albums are good, but he was really coming into his own with *Prince Heathen* (1969). Here he first started to feel comfortable adapting and changing material as well as just arranging it.

This is where his crafting and reshaping of big ballads (like the title track) from fragmentary source material comes to the fore. Remaking and performing ballads like "Famous Flower of Serving Men" became his trademark accomplishment. He has returned to "Famous Flower" repeatedly, with the guitar gradually becoming less dulcimer-like and the singing settling more into the narrative. In his latest recording, Carthy dispenses with the accompaniment altogether, performing it as a recitation. Even his spoken account echoes with rhythm and melody.

Early live recordings give some sense of Carthy and Swarbrick's joy playing together, as well as their musical development. On *Both Ears and the Tail* (from 1966), Carthy was still predominantly playing in standard tuning, although "the beginnings of later thinking can be heard." He has always credited Swarbrick with bringing him out of his shell musically.

Those earlier recordings show some mannerism in his singing. This has always been less pronounced on his unaccompanied singing. It may reflect MacColl's influence. Confronting the skiffle craze's turn to American folk, MacColl encouraged singers to look to their own local musical traditions. A great theatrical performer, the Salford-born singer was not averse to adopting regional accents along the way. Carthy has written that the "all-purpose country accent which I commandeered… eluded reason at the time and still does."

Swarbrick was invited to join Fairport Convention, and Carthy, in turn, also joined a folk-rock group, Steeleye Span. Although electric, the music was still traditional, with some excellent group singing. While his solo acoustic guitar playing had developed in technique and range, playing electric "taught me to play less."

Carthy has always sought and benefited from collaboration, but (despite good things in it) the folk-rock group was not quite his natural environment. He felt more at home in a folk club context, in line with his ethos that traditional music is "not me, it's us."

It made him a folk club favourite, and a key player in ensuring their survival during difficult times. It also meant audiences became accustomed to a singing style that he felt was becoming "ridiculously mannered" in his early 1970s albums. What got him "out of the hole," he said, was The Watersons.

He met Norma Waterson (1939-2022) at her folk club in Hull, where she sang with her brother Mike, sister Lal and cousin John Harrison in the best polyphonic traditions of English rural singers like the Copper Family. When Martin and Norma got together, Harrison had moved away, and Carthy became an honorary Waterson.

The impact was immense. It "simplified" singing for him, bringing him back to a more direct way with a song. The Watersons were all complex singers, but their singing was "always to the point." After Mike and Lal's deaths, Carthy played with Norma and their daughter Eliza (also an excellent and inventive singer) in the group Waterson:Carthy.

He has latterly been playing and recording with Eliza, who co-produced *Waiting for Angels* (2004) and the new *Transform Me Then*. He has never been afraid of new material or instrumentation and recording techniques, without losing sight of the traditional material. He was part of the Imagined Village in the 2000s, alongside Benjamin Zephaniah and others, reinventing ways of thinking about English folk music. Sheema Mukherjee, sitar-player there, is one of the accompanists on the new album.

From the mid-1970s, Carthy shook off the "travesty" he felt his singing had become. The ensuing albums showed a matured talent, with the guitar playing perfectly matching the refocused singing. His accompaniment also matched the driving brass and John Kirkpatrick's accordion in the group Brass Monkey, which took a different approach to a similar repertoire.

Here were remade ballads, traditional songs and tunes alongside more recent compositions. Politically the period was one of reaction and Carthy, who had always seen the folk scene as broadly political, responded instinctively. He had long been associated with songwriter Leon Rosselson as bandmate, accompanist and interpreter. Rosselson, brought up around the Communist Party, can be overly didactic in his writing, but his best songs are very good. In 1976, Carthy recorded his "Palaces of Gold," written in response to the Aberfan disaster.

Carthy, a child of the Aldermaston anti-nuclear marches of the 1950s and 1960s (which saw an upsurge in protest songwriting), responded particularly to the renewed imperialist war drives. His own "Company Policy," on *Right of Passage* (1988), told of a Malvinas war widow:

For it was all a case of saving face
When they sent my love to the war
For eighteen hundred landless tenants
Of a South Atlantic company store.
Eighteen hundred landless tenants
Eighteen hundred landless poor
Eighteen hundred waking dreams
Of Empire long gone before.

He also reworked a poem from 1649, "Dominion of the Sword:"

Lay by your pleading, law lies a-bleeding
Burn all your studies down, and throw away your reading
Small power the word has, and can afford us
Not half so much privilege as the sword does

In 1992, he and Swarbrick recorded two songs responding to the first Gulf War, Maggie Holland's "Perfumes of Arabia" and Les Barker's poem "Such a War Has Never Been," for which Carthy wrote the tune. With Kirkpatrick, they joined the Band of Hope, a more directly political project with Labour left singer Roy Bailey.

Carthy has linked these songs to traditional ballads about the Battle of Waterloo, like "Eighteenth of June." These songs, he argues, have been the only place for ordinary people to remember their own dead. His impressive musical talent is allied with an essential seriousness, hostility to the inequality of "Poverty PLC" and sympathy for ordinary people that makes him worth noting.