

Folk Music & Me

Music by the people for the people that in some ways reflects the reality of their lived lives.

Folk music has always been there in my life. As a child in rural Scotland in the late 50's and early 60's other than hymns sung in church, it was the only music, but this was all Scottish folk music. I was not aware there was any other sort.

When the 'Folk Revival' hit the TV screens of our little world in about '64, I remember my father proclaiming that this was not proper folk music. I can't recall what performers it was in particular that enflamed his ire. It could have been Peter, Paul and Mary, or The Kingston Trio, or The New Christie Minstrels or any number of American groups strumming guitars, banging tambourines and singing along with fixed cheesy grins. Whatever it was it seemed like a million miles from the Scottish folk music that my father would have known all his life.

In 1968 I started to learn some chords on my sister's guitar. The first book of music I bought and hoped to learn was a Bob Dylan one, it contained all his songs from his pre electric era. By this time I was listening to a programme on BBC Radio 1, called 'Mike Raven's Rhythm and Blues Show'. On this a lot of pre war country blues were played - Blind Lemon Jefferson, Rev. Gary Davies, Son House, Leadbelly and of course Robert Johnson. I loved this music it was what I wanted to learn to play. At the music shop where I had bought the Bob Dylan book I was hoping to get a book that would teach me to play like Robert Johnson. They didn't have one, what they did have was a Leadbelly songbook. I bought it, but was disappointed to find that most of the songs were not strictly blues. There was a forward in this book by an Alan Lomax. I read it and then re read it. It seemed Alan Lomax with his father, John Lomax, had criss-crossed the states of America, in the pre-war years, tracking down folk, blues and country singers. These were not professional singers, but ones that did it for friends, family and maybe the local fish fry or shindig on a Saturday night. Any of these singers they thought had something special they would record, not to try to launch million selling careers but because they thought this music told the story of their land and as such should be kept for posterity. The idea of what they had done enthralled me far more than learning to play 'Good Night Irene' by Leadbelly.

There was a lad in my class at the time called Chris Ward, we used to go fishing together. Summer term '69, Chris Ward told me the real music I should be listening to is Country & Western and Johnny Cash in particular. The 'Johnny Cash At San Quinten' album had just come out. I became an instant fan, then there was a TV documentary about Johnny Cash where he talked about the Blues and Hank Williams and Bob Dylan and Scottish Ballads and some how it all made sense to me.

By this time I was going to folk clubs most weekends, every town in the land had one. I started to learn in practise, how all the various strands of folk music wove together, from the Scottish folk music of my childhood, to Bob Dylan, to Fairport Convention, to the Leadbelly to Johnny Cash to The Boys Of The Lough and on and on.

So even though I was also interested in at least 1000 other genres of music, folk music in its many and various strands has always been there with me. Mind you there is a problem I've always felt with my relationship with folk music, they were not written and performed for me. The songs never documented my experiences of life. I am always just a voyeur. I get my kicks from these songs vicariously. There is something fundamentally very fake about me liking this music. It says something about me that I don't like.

When Rebecca Shatwell asked me to take part in this Harry Smith exhibition, and sent me a song about farming in the southern states during the 1930s depression, I would like to have brought something of that feeling of fake ness in my relationship with folk music to what ever I did for the exhibition. But all I could do was listen to the song 'Got The Farmland Blues', over and over again. And in the end using the form - some text on a poster - that I usually use, throw my predicament back at the viewer.

Bill Drummond, 23 April 2007
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