

A Singer's Notebook

From the second issue (Vol 1, No 2, July-Aug 1954) onwards, John Hasted's column "A Singer's Notebook" was a frequent, if irregular, feature of *Sing* magazine. The following brief selections from the column and from John's other contributions capture some of the flavour of life in the political wing of the English folksong revival. The Cold War was still at its height, the Conservative Party had regained power, and both rock 'n' roll and folk music had the aura of political as well as cultural rebellion for a younger generation disillusioned with the Labour Party's failure to follow through with its program of social reforms and the Tories' self-satisfied slogan "You Never Had It So Good". The Rosenbergs had been executed, but skiffle and the "Ban the Bomb" movement were just beginning.

Sing, 1:3 (Sept-Oct, 1954):

"[Ewan MacColl's *The Shuttle and Cage*] is the first general industrial collection to appear in Britain and is therefore of great importance. It is comparatively small (twenty-one songs) but contains some splendid material.... On the debit side, the song 'Hot Asphalt' is to be avoided as stage Irish.... It remains true that the miners have produced the largest and probably the finest body of folksong of any one trade. This serves rather to emphasize the paucity of material in other industries, and it seems a pity that so many songs by Ewan MacColl himself have had to be included. However, these songs not only fit naturally into the collection, but are among the finest. Singers will do well to increase their repertoire of industrial material, and they will find a study of 'The Shuttle and Cage' very rewarding." (p. 43).

Sing, 1:4 (Nov-Dec, 1954):

"Ballads and songs of all shapes and sizes have found their way to the SING office this month. Although they cannot all be published, we have at least started a library to which readers can have access.... Ballad songs are all the rage with film and stage producers.... We are to be treated to something altogether more authentic when *Moby Dick*, at present being filmed in and around the Irish sea, is released. A. L. Lloyd, contributor to SING, is leading the shanties with, I believe, unsmoothed singing by seamen from the Barry Riggers Club and elsewhere.... Londoners can go and hear folk artists performing any Monday night at 8 by burrowing deep into The Good Earth, a club situated well below 44 Gerrard St., near Piccadilly. It is the first venture of this sort to be started in England, and SING wishes it every success." (p. 71).

Sing, 2:3 (Aug-Sept, 1955):

"You thought that London was a sad old city with wet and foggy streets.... But this summer it is as lively as any continental city. During the hot spell street dancing, entertainment and carnival were a commonplace up West; much of the credit must go to the organisers of the Soho Fair, which, despite the cold shoulder of authority, has caught the imagination of Londoners. Moreover the necessity of collecting large sums of money to help young people travel to the Warsaw Youth Festival has forced at least four groups to hold street meetings and performances all over London and the South Coast holiday resorts. Hundreds of pounds have been collected in this way, and the experiences will not be forgotten. In Glasgow, police action has forced the YCL choir off the streets, and their task is much harder. But they will be in Warsaw too, and their leader Jimmy Callan is expected to be fit again in time to come with them. A fine piece of news-reporting in song

comes from East Grinstead, Surrey, where a marathon come-all-ye has been written about the closing of their local railway line (known as the 'Bluebell and Primrose')." (p. 40).

Sing, 2:6 (Feb-March, 1956):

"'The Foggy Foggy Dew' has been one of our most popular folksongs for some twenty years. Songs with this title exist in Ireland, Scotland and America as well as England; they may well derive from entirely different starting points. But there seems to be one important root in East Anglia, and it is from there that the most popular version originates. This version is normally sung with only three stanzas (Nos 1, 4, 9), but recently BBC collector Peter Kennedy has recorded all nine verses from Phil Hamond of Morston, Norfolk. It is now possible to do more than guess at the true story that is told in the song, and it seems a pity that such a fine song has been known in a mutilated version for so long. We are also printing a fine version collected by Peter Kennedy from Harry Cox, the aged blacksmith of Potter Heigham, Norfolk, who is probably one of the finest living traditional singers in England. Note the similarity of the tune to that of 'Ye Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon'." (p. 87)

"'If you print a song,' he said, 'you imprison it, it can't develop; no folksong has ever remained plumb the same.' It's a pretty poor jail, I said, it's made of tin; any decent song should be able to bust right out again. Furthermore and moreover, I said, there's publicity in going to jail, remember those boys who chained themselves to the railings of the American Embassy? 'Anyone who chains himself to America,' he said, 'gets what's coming to him.' 'And nobody,' he said, 'sings the songs like they're printed in SING'. In these days of TV and supersupervision, the old songs don't travel like they used to, so they need publicity; if they weren't printed in SING they wouldn't travel so quickly, and people wouldn't sing them at all. Not so much, any way. I'm going to take a song

which travels around in so many versions that I've lost count. Now, let's imprison some of the words right here. We'll see if it gets around more – many singers seem not to have heard it, and may it never be sung exactly like it is here! It all started when 'a soldier and a sailor were a-walking one-day'. They walked to many tunes but more often than not they walked to a tune rather like 'Villikins'. In the second world war, the sailor became an airman. Anyway... 'A soldier and a sailor were a-walking one day/ Said the soldier to the sailor, "I've a good mind to pray/ For the rights of all people and the wrongs of all men/ And whatever ever ever ever ever ever I shall pray for you must say Amen!"' Naturally they prayed for the things they wanted most; good wives, wenches, beer, boats to take them home, the Queen, and so on. Much of their psalmody is unsuitable for these columns. I feel they were capable of higher thoughts. Perhaps. "We'll pray for the farmer that follows the plough/ and gets his hard earnings by the sweat of his brow/ We'll pray for the collier and all working men/ And may all working people be united," said the airman. "Amen!" And Stan Bootle has sent me a fine verse something like this: "And the last thing we'll pray for, we'll pray for world peace/ From Egypt to Israel, from England to Greece/ And if it last one year, may it also last ten/ May we never never never never never have another war," and we all said, "Amen!"". (p. 93)

Sing, 3:2 (June-July, 1956):

"I believe that the future of singing folksongs lies very largely with small groups of performers. A group is able to sustain a higher level of performance, variety and quality, for a longer period than an individual. Until more front rank individual singers (with instrument) appear in this country, the group will take their place." (p. 30).

Sing, 3:6 (Feb-March, 1957):

“All right, granted that some skiffle groups made a dreadful noise, that many of the folksongs are badly interpreted, that some skiffle is indistinguishable from rock 'n' roll. The point that has been missed is this. Folk music has been dead in English cities for many years. Young people all over the kingdom are producing the home-made article. New songs, new tunes, above all a new style, in an age when you are supposed to Sit and Listen to What You Get. With people's singing at a low ebb it will take years to get right and it will probably never become folk song in the sense we have come to understand it. Nevertheless, here is the first spark under our noses and we should not recoil from it in horror.” (p. 81).

Sing, 4:1 (April-May, 1957):

“Well, we are now on the crest of the skiffle wave, and we can afford to assess the situation and make some criticisms without killing the patient off. There must be over four hundred Skiffle groups in Greater London alone. The Vicar of Much Chasuble keeps complaining that skiffle keeps his choirboys away from practice and if you cut this out this time, Eric Winter, I'll sue you. Local competitions receive entries from about ten groups in each borough. Unlike the older skiffle groups, the new ones make no distinction between a rock 'n' roll number and a folk song, and I think this is only to be expected and is not a bad thing anyway. We should not set folk music on a sort of pedestal – as Satch has said recently, ‘They're all folk songs, I ain't never heard a horse sing.’ It seems to me the good songs will last the longest, and immediate popularity is no criterion. The groups will get very tired of the rock 'n' roll up-tempo twelve-bar, and turn to real blues if they've got it in them. Broonzy, after a magnificent Royal Festival Hall concert, told reporters: ‘These young lads Ellis Preston and Jack Haley are singing my old stuff.’ Which brings me to the first point of criticism – English music

publishers are printing ‘public-domain’ folk songs, but written at the top is ‘words and music by Ned Snooks’. Ned Snooks is probably a ledger-clerk from Wigan.... Outstanding case is ‘Sail Away, Ladies’, recorded on Decca many years ago by Uncle Dave Macon and his Fruit-Jar Drinkers, which has appeared in the Top Twenty for weeks under the title ‘Don't You Rock Me Daddy-O’, after a chequered passage across the Atlantic. And there are other cases too.... Second criticism – some of us are too easily satisfied with our own work ... there is a lack of original, creative ideas, and this is nearly always because the performers haven't got the necessary instrumental and vocal technique yet. The next five years will tell. Away with the heavy British ching-ching rhythm! DON'T let skiffle become a sort of Mickey Mouse music.... Good ballads can be heard now at Oxford University (The Heritage Society), Cambridge University (The St. Lawrence Society), and soon at Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, where Fred Dallas is opening a club. HELP to keep the skiffle movement from isolation from the music that the older generation digs, classical and folk; and to keep SING completely in touch with skiffle. Footnote: Latin manuscript discovered in British Museum: Nil Rockendum, Pater, attributed to Walterus Blancus et Scorpiones.... Already the tide is turning away from Rock 'n' Roll and skiffle and towards folk song.” (pp. 13-14).

Sing, 4: 4 & 5 (December 1957):

“Singers who were lucky enough to attend the World Youth Festival in Moscow this August had quite a ball. I went there primarily to learn what musicians and singers were up to in different parts of the world, particularly the Asian republics of the USSR. Wherever the traditional music was developing that was the most exciting sound, the centre of attraction. Wherever the traditions had been shrouded in a coating of European orchestration, or American big band technique, the loss was ours. Amongst the choirs and dancers all over the world the same division was evident, academy versus

people, bright colour versus white flannel trousers or formal dress. The Slav and Asian peoples produced some superb folk music, and some appalling (commercial) dance music. After all, Django Reinhardt never tried to make a sound like Glenn Miller... The skiffle (and jazz) clubs are now clearly divided into those which are selective in what they present and those which are not. I have been receiving publicity recently as championing the individual singer rather than the group. It is true that guitar and banjo playing in this country are being held back by the fashion of group playing; but this is not the central issue. One day we will learn to play many fretted instruments together. The real issue is the cheapening of fine songs and music into the mass-produced commercial product. When skiffle dies down we shall have a legacy of serious singer-guitarists to develop, and possibly a permanent country and western set up, as they have in Australia.” (p. 64)

Sing, 4: 6 (October 1958):

“During the past few months the obvious sign in London of the folk song revival has been the size of the audience at the Hootenannies organised by the Ballads and Blues Association and Folksong Unlimited. Trouble is, the skiffle movement (still strong) and the folk song clubs have been too far apart. Some skiffles resent the uncompromising attitude of the folk song clubs and the club audiences in turn are fed up

with straight skiffle. So there is a danger of the revival becoming isolated from young people and only in out-of-London clubs such as Cambridge and Bradford is this being counteracted thoroughly. In the course of judging skiffle contests, I have listened to more than a dozen groups a week and while the standard is improving the repertoire is not. It is rarely that I hear even a Woody Guthrie song, and as for British material, not more than one group in twenty south of the Tweed thinks about it. The assault upon the commercial product is taking a long, long time. The characteristically British feature of skiffle is surely the discovery that plectrum style guitar can be played in unison by as many as eight (!) instruments, and the driving force when a tub bass and washboard are added to vocal harmony is terrific....

So many people are coming up with stories of how they became genu-ine folksingers that I feel I can no longer keep secret the story of how I became a skiffler (unkind people have suggested I never did). In a small way, my great grandfather was an importer of tea, and one day a very special consignment arrived from Mah-jong, a little-known island in the East Indies. He made a gift of a chest to the Palace. Queen Victoria was not amused: “Hasted,” she said, “this tea is n.b.g.” So the chest was relegated to the attic and forgotten altogether. Many years later....” (p. 74)