

## **This Is Mersey Folk Volume 1.**

The Liverpool of the 1960s was a vibrant place. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century this migrant city experienced dramatic economic meltdown together with all of the associated problems of long term urban neglect. Yet, paradoxically, Liverpool's unique demographics and cultural geography also guaranteed great prosperity for some, exemplified across the city and on the Wirral peninsular by an almost impervious bourgeoisie and its accompanying fortresses of fringe suburbia. From 1963-onward this ambiguous, ambivalent (in fact, downright confusing) scenario was supplemented by intense national (and then international) media scrutiny following the advent of 'Merseybeat'.

As the success of the Beatles and other local rock groups such as Gerry and the Pacemakers, the Swinging Blue Jeans and the Searchers intensified, so too did the glare of the media gaze, bringing national attention to a previously largely forgotten city - a positive development, one might suggest. There was, however, a downside to this renaissance. For example, by 1964, the Beatles, having already been lured away from the city, were followed by a posse of younger beat hopefuls. For most of these would-be pop stars, an encouraging light flickered only briefly and dimly in the afterglow of that first wave; soon, day jobs or unemployment called most of them back to Merseyside. It was a period of great creativity and indigenous pride, but one, also, of tremendous disappointments. Looking back, perhaps the one indisputable outcome of this adventure was a confirmation of shared separation and alienation. Certainly, complex social strategies to deal ironically with what appeared to be an increasingly ironic world were erected by many of Merseyside's young people at that time. The residue of these strategies still permeates Liverpool's renowned victim culture to this day.

Liverpool's dalliance with popular music forms did not begin and end with beat music, however. It had already occurred to broadcaster and documentary maker Daniel Farson in his work Beat City (broadcast ITV, 24<sup>th</sup>

December 1963), that the 'explosion' of music-making in and around the Liverpool of the 1960s actually had some kind of pre (or 'ur') history. Notwithstanding some truly phony pronouncements in Beat City, Farson identified - to his credit - a thriving folk music scene. He focused in particular on the events at Gregson's Well pub in Low Hill where the Spinners and Jacqui and Bridie held court. Both groups went on to enjoy international distinction as folk music interpreters *par excellence* (and we shall be featuring their work in volume two of this series), but, in truth, they represented only the tip of a folk music community that had evolved not only in Liverpool but in many other major cities across the UK throughout the post-WWII era.

Despite claims (both then and now) to the contrary, this folk music revival did not actually have a great deal in common with the performance practices of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. It was, in fact, post-war in both its gestation and its vaguely Marxist ideology. Indeed what appeared to be at stake for many adherents of the folk revival was the rather Manichaeian prognosis of either divining music performance and reception through a specific political/historical gnosis in antithesis to industrial capitalism and mass consumption - or else face the prospect of losing that music altogether. Modern life, it seems, was guilty of having destroyed the characteristics of true identity through a conglomeration of external influences that were invariably deemed baneful and threatening. This had lead, according to many 'folkies', to falsifications or travesties of original, authentic culture. The music, then, represented a link with (an often mythical) past - a continuum in sound - and, as such, represented a kind of inverted patrimonial sod. In fact the years following the end of World War Two introduced an important transitional period in which at least three social/musical themes were developed around the uses of folk song: (i) political interpretation of the 'real' (ii) audience access to the 'natural' and (iii) engagement with a past undiluted by the 'apostasy' of Americana. For some, the point of the revival was to

implant into those who had been previously attracted by mass production a sense of a creative tradition that had heroically evaded commercial structures.

By extension, there was also an affirmation of a defenseless, anonymous yet stoically heroic working class figure of the past - an 'every man'. This mythological figure helped to satiate an appetite - particularly among the grammar school success stories of the 1950s - for mental vulnerability (spiced, as it was, with a 'liberal' dash of Marxism) and was extended back into history in order to be recast as an accessory for contemporary 'alternative' society. It gave the folk revival a sense of the consanguine, while, at the same time helped to retain its alienation from contemporary society. The visible and aural estrangement of the solo, unaccompanied folk singer/protagonist from the world was a staple of the folk revival and engendered a sense of holy communion (the 'holy trinity' of Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Bert Lloyd springs to mind, here).

Likewise, there was a cultivation of a fellowship of conflict in which the values 'inherent' in 'natural' and 'organic' traditional music were those of ideology, discord and difference - the polemic of the folk revival was personified by partisans endorsing the solemn burden of the coal mine and the pawn shop. In this environment, of course, early manifestations of counter-culture were able to revolve around a folk music 'lifestyle'. They were able to express alienation, cultivate existential values, yet via the negativity at the root of the movement (i.e. that modern life was rubbish) also find succour from the politically historicised. The folk scene represented a critique of society and the folk music aficionados acted out a kind of exaggerated separation from both institutions and other music lovers (which still persists to this day). Folk music form and performance came to connote not only obscure social and political meanings and a non-mainstream lifestyle, but also a model for a withdrawn internalized world (an interesting oxymoron).

It was all contextual. The language of the folk revival reflected the social climate just after World War II when workers and bosses seemed to stand unalterably opposed to each other and integrity was often equated with hard left political ideology and low commercial aspirations. Indeed the Topic Record Company grew directly out of the Workers' Music Association which was founded in 1936 by the London Labour Choral Union and the Co-operative Musical Association. In reality, the WMA, was little more than a nebulous offshoot of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The British folk revival's search for a 'natural' form of music (and lifestyle), then, was wholly linked to other concomitant social processes. It took wing in an era of apparent certainty - that of the onward march of the 'progressive' movement (with whatever more precise political inflection its individual adherents chose to add to it).

Curiously, the folk revival was also somewhat modernist. Tradition is often perceived as revolutionary. A tradition can be perceived to be older than the immediate past; hence the endorsement of tradition always implies a rejection of that immediate past in the interests of something uncontaminated, original. Such rejection is always experienced as revolutionary, an overturning of the values of an immediate past which has outlived its usefulness. This conviction also forms the basis of much post WWII *avant-gardism*. There was a search for a lost unity of life and music, together with a desire for reconstruction on a tangibly different level, with a *promesse de bonheur*.

Of course, the British folk revival was never going to rediscover 'natural' music at all. It simply engineered and shifted disparate forms of music towards a preconceived and willful format. Musical 'ruins' were erected (the real was substituted, arranged and maneuvered by the likes of the aforementioned Workers' Music Association) to cater for an effect, to create a 'real illusion' which, through the aesthetic emotions it triggered, ceased to appear to be an illusion, for somewhere within it lay a claim to an alternative

system of cognition - one which grew out of but appeared to radically contrast with the *zeitgeist*. The whole dynamic of the folk revival merely represented a certain discernment made within a particular era of performance history.

So, while folk music traditions are often claimed as a representation of our historical heritage, this understanding fails to recognize the complex social processes within which folk historicity came to be constituted in the first place. As a consequence, these traditions continue to be simplified by the folk media's own rather modest theoretical and historiographical development. For example, a simplistic hate-love attitude towards popular music and urban society still saturates most folk writing, leaving the reader confused by the twisted dialectics of inextricable contradictions about the over-abundance of cultural product. This perspective fails to appreciate how modern cultures re-articulate the past in a variety of different (and often stimulating) ways. For the folk revivalists of the 1950s and 1960s the past took on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it was only able to achieve through a narrative of the present!

It is true that without memories and associations a song is diminished in meaning, but it is also true that if the song remains simply revivalist, its scope to affect is equally depleted. In fact, under these kind of conditions, a song comes to be regarded as a kind of magical antidote (for 'revival' read 'tonic') to any 'alien' modern context. This can be seen, with hindsight, as a seriously flawed reading of music's role within history, for all song is available to give old forms new meaning. The folk revival accomplished a great deal but inevitably it was only able to loop back within its own established criteria (while moodily criticizing contemporary forms!). It is little wonder that it has, in recent years, stalled. Sadly, folk music lovers themselves are not only the ones responsible for folk music's failing visage: in a very real sense they are also its main victims!

Nevertheless, for the Merseyside 'folkies' of the 50s and 60s, folk music was in the vanguard of expectancy. There was the confident expectation that one could bring about wholesale changes in society through singing about 'the past'. Folk music performance represented a rediscovery of innocence which was itself considered a compensation for musical stagnation; the folk scene also consisted of communities where the instinctive was equated with honesty and left-wing politics still equated with sincerity - however naïve that may now appear! The album you are now holding in your hand, therefore, is an utterly unique representation of the British folk revival as manifested in the Liverpool of the 1960s. It is a fascinating insight into a world of music that assumes something more than just a musical style. The performances within are points of identification, expressions of the authentic, and sources of affective alliances.

This recording is made up, in the main, of live music culled from a unique British folk event - one of the very first British folk festivals held away from Cecil Sharp House (and a full 8 months before the first Cambridge Festival). On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1964 the historic Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool hosted an event co-organized by the English Folk Dance and Song Society. It was an all-day affair and there were no 'stars', as such - representing, instead, the discomfiture of the fashionably fragile! Yet the Black Diamonds and their young fiddler Ged Pugh (from Chester) were well respected for their club nights, Andy Kenna was also a local folk club luminary (now back on the scene, incidentally) and the Liverpool Ceili Band were about to become recording artists in their own right, signing to Rex (by that time Decca's main outpost in Ireland) later that year. They were already reigning All Ireland Ceili champions (1963 and 1964) and featured at least two virtuosos in Sean McNamara and Eamon Coyne.

The Liverpool Folk Festival tracks, herewith, then, are not simply antiques and curios but genuinely entertaining pieces of music history. They represent folk music in action at a crucial time in the history of both the British folk revival itself and the Liverpool of the 1960s. Furthermore, as representations of folk music performance from the mid-60s, they remain stylistically fascinating. Listen closely to the singing and playing styles from the festival. As for the vocalizing, can we detect an element of Peter Peers, perhaps? (in phrasing if not in accuracy!). Guitarists will also note the lack of Travis or clawhammer guitar styles (instead we have 'Spanish' or classically-orientated ripple playing); listen to that pounding piano as it accompanies the Liverpool Ceili band. The piano featured for years in many Ceili bands - yet it now sounds somewhat ambiguous (and is considered 'inauthentic' by some - what a pity). Yet this is how it was!

The rest of the album consists of a handful of excellent recordings by 1960s Merseyside folk artists of considerable note. The Crofters were, by the late 1960s, the most popular Liverpool folk group on the regional circuit. They were previously members of the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral Choir and the breadth of their harmonies can be heard to great effect, here. They cut a number of tracks for the Liverpool C.A.M. record company and 'Sally Free and Easy' and 'You'll Be Proud of Me' are both taken from their second, now ultra-rare, e.p. Four More From The Crofters (CAM 22). They continued to perform well into the next decade and (as we shall see in volume two in this series) were occasionally captured in session by BBC Radio Merseyside folk guru Geoff Speed. The Leesiders were Wirral based ('across the water') and probably opened the first folk club there in 1963. By the time of recording 'The Way of The World' in 1966, they were a professional duo - Bob Buckle and Pete Douglas - and were regular contributors to several BBC Radio shows such as 'Night Ride', usually broadcasting from the Oxford Road, Manchester studios. Their recording of 'The Way of the World' is another rarity, being originally included on the now highly collectable Folk Scene magazine

compilation album from 1966. 'Clare's Breakdown' and 'Nasty Spider' were both recorded by the Leesiders in 1970 but it would be fair to credit the latter to Bob Buckle as a solo track (he was shortly to go solo). By this time the Leesiders were recording for Birmingham-based Ash Records and selling copious amounts of albums on their travels. Douglas has long retired but Buckle is still singing, playing and recording - his latest album being released in 2000.

All told an album's worth of historic and entertaining stuff! We hope you enjoy!

Mike Brocken, August, 2001 for Mayfield Productions.