

The Cautious Rise of the 'Techno-Folkie'

You may have seen us but you wouldn't know it. We are the ones who stand alone in the festival tent because none of our friends would be seen dead at a folk gig. We have no traditional upbringing or roots. We are probably in our twenties and have come to folk music post teenage-angst, looking for something less vain and more meaningful. We love Show of Hands. We don't feel at home at a session, instead we listen to our music on the Internet. We are secretive. We fear being shunned as heretics. We are a new breed. We are the 'techno-folkies'.

These unholy ragamuffins may have had their interest in folk music sparked by chancing upon a memorable act, or by the TV series *Sharpe*. The same mass communication which has so damaged the oral tradition spawns and sustains this parasitic new breed. The Internet, and Myspace especially, allows these people to develop their interests and circumvent the traditional folk clubs and sessions, which may seem to them far too austere and limiting and where the average 'techno-folkie' simply cannot relate to older members.

Learning outside of the oral tradition like this can meet with strong opposition. Damien O'Kane, who has studied a folk degree at Newcastle University, has had to defend himself against accusations that he is damaging the oral tradition. When I watched Chris Wood perform in Loughborough, I could clearly hear a snort of derision upon the mention of his tutoring role in the Newcastle degree. What would these people think of the 'techno-folkies' internet-based, distance learning approach to folk music?

The main problem for the 'techno-folkies' is that folk music is about who the artist is, not just what they are trying to present. The ties of tradition are strong indeed. There has been a long tradition of family dynasties in folk music, with a powerful belief in the transference of traditional music and the knowledge and talent needed to convey it. Of course, this doesn't mean that experimental approaches to folk music are forbidden, far from it. Rachel Unthank and the Winterset are very much a nu-folk, experimental band. They have influences

both modern and traditional, and their inclusive view of folk music is expressed on their Myspace website where they quote Louis Armstrong: "all music is folk music, I ain't never heard a horse sing a song". However, as revolutionary as this may be, they still have the necessary foundations in traditional music: the Unthank sisters grew up in a 'folkie' family listening to floor singers in the North East. They have the correct 'qualifications' for entry to the folk scene.

The importance placed on this traditional upbringing by the folk community is expressed by provision of children's activities and workshops: an attempt to instill children with an appreciation of local traditions from a young age. 'Techno-folkies', who have a wide range of influences, are even more likely to experiment with folk music than people brought up in a strong tradition. The difference is they lack an authenticating traditional background. Experimenting with folk music and not having the 'required background' or 'training' may be judged unacceptable by people in the folk community who see themselves as guardians of tradition.

The result of the concentration on heredity and upbringing is that, instead of folk music being by the people and for the people, we have the ascendance of various tribes. The word 'royalty' is constantly applied to certain families in the press, a bit of an oxymoron when we think of what 'folk' music really means! I'm certainly not against folk heroes, these have always existed and long may they do so. Some people think heroes are born and not made, but I believe musicians should be judged by their output as well as their lineage. Poor 'techno-folkies' don't even have a place on the scale, and naturally feel excluded. They have no traditional background and they've already grown up, so is it too late for them? Is there no mission to invite them to the fold? Is there any place the 'techno-folkies' can belong, where they can experience a sense of community?

Fortunately there is: The Magpies Nest in Islington run by the vivacious young organisers Joe Buirski and Sam Lee. Their website heading (which reads like a mission statement) boldly proclaims "Old Folk, New Folk,

No Folk". Here is an inclusive folk club that allows the shy 'techno-folkies' to encounter folk music on their own terms. Like Pinocchio becoming a real boy, here 'techno-folkies' can engage with others and become full-blown Folkies. Understandably, they've jumped at it. The Young rub shoulders with the old, the traditionalists chat with song writers. It is wonderfully vibrant. When you go to the Magpies Nest, whoever you are, you'll feel part of a real scene.

All this is well and good, but won't such a mish-mash affect the quality of the music? The fact remains that 'techno-folkies' have no links to tradition whatsoever. How can anything they produce be of value? A spade's a spade isn't it? But in the modern world, we have the ability to think outside our own lives. We can research to learn the history and traditions of old, and modern technology only makes this easier. This research can inform folk musicians, even those whose output is largely traditional. At the 2006

Loughborough Folk Festival John Tams joked that he spent so much time in the library he was mistaken for staff! The oral tradition has its guardians and enthusiasts and everyone in the folk scene respects these people. But the integrity of the oral tradition will not be better preserved by obstructing others getting involved using modern methods of learning.

'Techno-folkies' should not be made to feel like 'pseudo-folkies'. We should hold our heads high. And why not? We enjoy our folk music on our own terms whilst staunchly withstanding the ridicule of our friends for enjoying 'old men's music'. We may not be instructed by oral tradition but our passion cannot be questioned. We even have a folk club that welcomes us. So maybe we're not pedigree. We're certainly not royalty when it comes to the folk world. But more importantly, we're still dedicated folkies. And proud.

James Weikert
www.themagpiesnest.co.uk

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