

Student number: 7261488

MUSC 30400

In Search of a Voice: Women in British Folk Music 1880-2011

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the degree of
Bachelor of Music.

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Abstract

Of all the existing research that documents the twists and turns, ups and downs, and ducks and dives of British folk music's history, there appears to be no cohesive exploration of the key involvements of women's voices. Publications are instead devoted to the stories of successful male figures such as Cecil Sharp, A.L. (Bert) Lloyd, or Ewan MacColl who, although admittedly having a great influence on the genre's development, were by no means the only protagonists in its history. This dissertation attempts to close a void in research by providing a sounding-board for the achievements of women within the genre. Although largely unnoticed, these achievements have been pivotal moments in the genre's history, and have contributed heavily to its development.

The consultation of the small amount of literature that exists on Lucy Broadwood and Kate Lee of the first folk revival will kick-start this study, since along with providing a needed introduction to their successes, its lack of content will also highlight a number of problems that will reverberate throughout the duration of this work and that threatened to bring the journey of finding the woman's voice to a halt. The nature of the portrayal of women in traditional song will also be analysed, which adds further obstacles to the course. A reliable body of interviews with British female folk artists whose careers range from the 1970s to today will inform the second part of this dissertation, which deals exclusively with the second revival, showing how women wrestled with the misogyny left behind by the first. One will witness how feminism and the gathering momentum of the women's movement assisted these women, as the quest to find a voice accelerated. Ultimately, the extreme importance of their place in history will be established, concluding that today's British female folk artists would be in troubled waters without them.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank sincerely the following people, without whom the writing of this dissertation would not have been possible:

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Caroline Bithell who, with her unwavering support, has guided me through my research, providing valuable advice, and assistance in contacting a number of the artists who I have interviewed to enrich my study.

Secondly, I would like to thank Nina Whiteman, for her welcome assistance with editing, and for the significant amount of time she has sacrificed to prepare my research materials, formatting them so that I could gain full access to their content. I would also like to extend my thanks to Francesca Marsden, who has also assisted with proof-reading. I have been privileged to converse with a whole host of dedicated female folk artists, whose information has heavily contributed to my work, and I would like to express my gratitude to these people: Frankie Armstrong, Peggy Seeger, Sandra Kerr, Polly Bolton, Fay Hield, Peta Webb, and Irene Shettle. All these artists have allowed me to quote them in my work, and this is greatly appreciated.

Introduction

'Society at large provides no sounding-board for the harmonics of women's voices; at best it absorbs the vibrations, muffling them in a cloak of indulgence, at worst it isolates and ridicules them', insists the Scottish actor and voice teacher Kristin Linklater (Armstrong and Pearson, 2000). Whilst musing on such a provocative statement, it is almost certain that one would be visited by thoughts of radical feminism, a political and ethical commitment that, although possibly relevant to the concerns of a portion of society, is today often 'lambasted in the mass media' (Whelehan, 1995), and brushed aside. Old-fashioned images of posters, emblazoned with slogans and campaigns fighting for equal rights with men, coupled with those of iconic protestors stationed in landmark locations expressing their frustration at the absence of a 'sounding-board' for women in society may also spring to mind. Such images constitute the nuts and bolts of the universal, social and political Women's Movement.

If, however, one was to apply Linklater's statement to British folk music, with how many people would it resonate? The answer, I venture, would be extremely few. The innocent unawareness of the influential impact women had on this genre is, in part, due to the undeniable fact that it is obscured by popular music, and English traditional music in particular is often viewed as old-fashioned, and tends to suffer a fairly isolated reception. Yet the tendency to overlook women's contributions results in a frustratingly incoherent history of the ways in which style, repertoire and performance have developed throughout the last two centuries. It is these developments, and the women behind them, that I will explore here.

The feminist ideology of the opening statement, however, along with any images it conjures, must be born in mind throughout this investigation, since it is folk music's partnership with feminism that will be a primary focus. The importance of this relationship

goes severely unrecognised, yet the women's movement, and the feminist ideology it evoked, is heavily responsible for the developments for women within the genre. Simultaneously, folk music has given a voice to feminists within the movement, so the two factions have worked hand in hand to develop their ideas. The successes of this fusion are intensely manifested during the 1970s and 80s, when the women's movement had gained full momentum, and female folk artists sought to colour their lyrics with feminist ideals, recounting the societal struggles of women, in an attempt to be heard.

The evidence that the idea of finding the voice through folk music and the women's movement in Britain has been shamefully relegated to the sidelines is, perhaps, openly manifested in a recent interview with Peggy Seeger. Her musings on this topic concluded with the assumption that the links between folk music and feminism were fairly tenuous and 'sedate' compared to those of America, and she struggled to envisage a comprehensive list of female artists relevant to the discussion (interview with Peggy Seeger, 21/11/2010). She speculated, though, that this could be far from true, since many success stories of British women artists remain undocumented. Her comment, as we will see, also appears somewhat strange, since her own encounter with feminism greatly influenced the folk genre, whilst serving as a prime example of how the two areas could be closely linked. The role of women as both folk song collectors and transmitters has, too, been insufficiently analysed, their contributions being seemingly muffled by the voices of Cecil Sharp, Alfred Williams and other male figures. In her book *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, Georgina Boyes creates a healthy catalyst for this research. Whilst providing the reader with a certain amount of critical discussion concerning the early years, Boyes, although deceptively implying in the book's title that she will focus on the English folk revival in its entirety, comes to an abrupt halt in the late 1960s (Bradtke, 1995). This is

somewhat frustrating since, as will be revealed in Chapter Two, the collision between folk music and feminism, and the attitudes towards traditional repertoire that bubbled violently to the surface of British folk music came to light in these omitted years, and aspects of folksong undoubtedly began to change. Boyes does, however, provide my investigation with a fairly rigid historical background, as will be witnessed in Chapter One. She successfully introduces the first revival, and she appropriately addresses the pressing argument that the idea of the 'folk' was an artificial construct, 'imagined in order to facilitate the identification of an English national culture through a folk revival' (Schofield, 1993), a familiar idea famously articulated in Dave Harker's publication *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British Folk Song*. Expectations are raised when Boyes rightly acknowledges that 'the tradition the society seems most willingly to have upheld during most of the twentieth century was misogyny' (Boyes, 2010), but they are soon muted by the fact that she seems primarily concerned with the dance revival, as opposed to the song revival. Schofield insists that Boyes 'under-represents' women folk song collectors (Schofield, 1993). She does admittedly talk about figures such as Mary Neale, who appears to be the main point of reference when discussing women's roles in the folk revival. Yet what about unfamiliar names such as Lucy Broadwood, or Kate Lee? These names are absent in the bulk of publications on this subject but, as will be discussed in Chapter One, these figures may well have provided a backbone for the revival.

Michael Brocken, in his publication *The British Folk Revival: 1944-2002*, initiates similar problems. Although having a somewhat more succinct and concentrated title than that of Boyes', the content of this publication has been critiqued for its 'abstraction and generalisation' (Russell, 2005), since Brocken occasionally glides over aspects that would benefit from a greater amount of substance and exploration. Women, of course, fall victim

to this, and their role in both revivals is hardly acknowledged. There is a disappointingly short burst of information concerning the role of Kate Lee as a folk song collector (page 2), but it is devoid of any of the struggles or hardships she had to overcome to ensure popularity. Although only two major publications on this subject area have been pinpointed here, it would prove extremely difficult to locate any substantial amounts of information concerning the role of women in British folk music, a growing problem which is becoming increasingly visible.

How, then, would one propose to attempt to close such a conspicuous gap in research? Sheila Whiteley has successfully done so in the popular music world with her publication *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. Admittedly dealing with a different genre - although one cannot deny that the line between popular and folk music is becoming steadily more hazy - such a publication certainly provides a role model for this study. Sheryl Keyes summarises: 'Sexing the Groove places emphasis on artists, groups, song-writers...and communities who/that perpetuate and challenge gendered identities...' (Keyes, 1999). An emphasis on these people/places in the British folk genre will inform the bulk of my discussion; and the analysis of song lyrics, another interest of Whiteley's, will play a principal part. The rich body of recordings that will be discussed particularly in the second chapter, allows for an informative insight into the way women's voices have changed, and an in depth observation of the ways in which tone and vocal strategy have developed. Autobiographies of inspirational artists such as Frankie Armstrong, who will feature in this study, paint a reliable and thought-provoking picture of her and others' involvement in the freeing of women's voices through folk music. I also interviewed a selection of female British artists, whose career spans range from the 70s and 80s to today, and in doing so was treated to an exciting array of first-hand performance and song-writing

experiences which, as we will see, were/are strong contributors to both women's limitedness and independence.

Before delving into the musical activities of such artists, however, it is important to explore briefly the genesis of the genre, and this is dealt with in the first chapter. I will focus on what is now loosely termed the 'first revival', and study the involvement of two important women folk song collectors who have failed to take the limelight in much of the research concerning this subject. I will then take a selection of traditional songs from as early as the seventeenth century that were resurrected in the first revival, and observe the different ways in which women are portrayed. My second chapter is, essentially, the pivotal point of this study, since it documents a turn in the road for women and folk music. It deals exclusively with the late 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s: a period when the 'second revival' was in full-swing. The collision between folk music and feminism will be examined, and in looking at a number of artists' involvement, responses to women's representation in the traditional repertoire will be uncovered through song, style and performance. The ways women were limited, though, will also be explored, and performance experiences will illustrate this view. I will then conclude with a reflection on these pioneering women's legacies, critically examining how, if at all, it is continued by some of today's British female folk artists. Are women's songs of freedom and protest still alive in their repertoire? If not, is there an explanation as to why? Does a contemporary audience influence what these artists can sing? Ultimately, I am seeking to explore Linklater's statement from two angles: on the one hand, I want to relate to it by exploring some of the ways in which there was not, and indeed still is not, a proper 'sounding-board' for British female folk artists and collectors, whilst simultaneously attempting to create one by documenting their successes. Secondly, I

would like to investigate the ways in which artists challenged the statement through their work, as they sought to find the female voice.

Before embarking on this mission, however, it would prove productive to define a number of terms that will be encountered in transit, to avoid any confusion or inaccessibility. Attempting to allocate a rigid definition to folk music would be an arduous task, one, perhaps, worthy of its own dissertation. In this context, however, it assumes two definitions: firstly, it concerns music originating from the oral tradition. Whilst it may appear later in written form, its master copy survives only in the oral memory. Secondly, it could refer to music by the people, for the people, reflecting the lifestyles, and changing socio-political currents of different classes. The term 'women's songs' will also be encountered, and refers to any songs that feature women as their subject. 'First-' and 'second-wave feminism' are two other terms that will be mentioned, and these refer to the two different phases of feminist activity. In the UK, the first wave indicates activity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which focused on de jure (officially mandated) inequalities, primarily on gaining the right to vote (Pugh, 2000). The second wave is allocated to the resurgence of feminism commencing in the late 1960s, continuing into the 70s and 80s, whose ideology was extended to address de facto (unofficial) inequalities within the family and workplace, for example.

Now, armed with this information, let the journey begin...

Chapter One *We Were There: Women and the First Revival*

From as early as the nineteenth century, the belief that a concatenation of developments threatened England as an imperial nation, undermining its pre-eminence as a political and cultural power (Boyes, 2010), began cementing itself into the minds of many, including some key founders of the first English folk-lore revival. Externally, Germany and the USA posed increasing threats, since their industrial and military strengths would, it was feared, soon surpass those of Britain (Sutton, 2000). Closer to home, urbanisation, industrialisation and mass production were also thought to be contributors to a 'cultural crisis in which refined aesthetics were being overwhelmed by a tide of vulgarity' (Boyes, 2010). In terms of gender conflicts, first-wave feminism began to spread, resulting in a number of militant protests replacing the more peaceful non-violent approach of the suffragists (Sutton, 2000). All this, and considerably more, concocted apocalyptic images of Britain's cultural future, which needed to be dealt with.

The solution to this assumed descent into cultural despair was an extreme stress on decorum and behaviour, ideals that some enthusiasts believed could come to fruition through music. It was with folk music that they were primarily concerned, as it was said to have the power of reconnecting the people with their past and each other. It also provided idyllic images of the rural past, aspects of which were slowly being killed by the 'fever of industrialism' (Boyes, 2010). The subsequent collecting of traditional British folksongs brought about, in part, by such phobias, lends itself to the term 'first revival'. This terminology, however, as Irene Shettle acknowledges, is 'slightly knotty' (interview with Irene Shettle, 4/1/2011), as a significant number of writers delegate Cecil Sharp and the 1890s as its beginning. The 'first revival' did in fact blossom from as early as the 1840s, and the 1880s saw women collectors such as Lucy Broadwood take the limelight. This period,

however, is sparsely researched, yet when studying women's contributions to the genre, it would fit aptly into our story.

Born to a wealthy upper-middle-class Scottish family, Lucy Broadwood was one of the foremost folksong collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'a lynchpin of the collecting movement around which many of the important collectors of the day revolved' (ibid.). Her diverse knowledge of British traditional song, as well as serving as a valuable advice bureau for collectors and musicians, greatly influenced a number of classical composers including Ralph Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger. Lucy's aspirations to publicise the songs she and others had collected were high, and she successfully fulfilled these in 1889, republishing her uncle's (Rev. John Broadwood) privately published book *Old English Songs of 1847*. Assisted by H. F. Birch Reynardson, Lucy added to the book and retitled it *Sussex Songs*. She then co-edited the inspirational work *County Songs* in 1893 with J. Fuller Maitland, her efforts reaching their climax in 1898 when she became a founding member of the English Folk-Song Society. Showing an impressive amount of independence in an environment where the seeds of political feminism had been relatively recently planted, she was to become secretary-editor of the society's journal, and was further promoted to president shortly before her death (Shettle, 2007). Being an active suffragist, Broadwood would surely serve as a key figure in the development of this movement as a woman who had successfully achieved an influential career in an environment where women were slowly taking positions of power on councils and committees.

Yet, as previously mentioned, Lucy Broadwood's success both as a folk song collector and independent woman went dramatically unnoticed. Cecil Sharp, coincidentally a male figure, is known to most to be the dominant figure in the revival, the pioneer and the initiator. Is such a lack of research on Broadwood due to little archival evidence? Or, if we

studied the situation through feminist-tinted spectacles, is it the fact that she was a woman and therefore disadvantaged? To use Kristin Linklater's analogy, could Broadwood's significant contribution to a cultural sound house dominated by the bass notes of male patriarchy confuse the harmonics of society (Armstrong and Pearson, 2000)?

Similar neglect has been shown in regard to the research into the concert and opera singer Kate Lee, who, in fact, was co-founder of the Folk-Song Society. As C. J. Bearman acknowledges in his paper, which provides the first substantial biographical material on Lee, there is no comprehensive account of the Folk-Song Society's foundation (Bearman, 1999). Frederick Keel, in his paper published in 1948 for the Society's jubilee, glosses over the details by merely stating that 'a group of people met to discuss the foundation of an English folk song society' (Keel, 1948). When studying the limited yet insightful material provided by Bearman, however, the failure of writers such as Keel to explore the lives and stories of influential figures such as Lee appears shocking, ignorant and difficult to comprehend. Her struggles and achievements carry particular resonance, as she successfully altered and overcame a structured life that was so carefully mapped out for her. Lee's determination to become a professional singer was apparently ignored by a family and society who subscribed to the typical nineteenth-century view that a woman's proper role in life was that of a wife and mother, her supposedly arranged marriage to Arthur Lee in 1877 affirming this (Bearman, 1999).

Kate Lee's enrolment at the Royal College of Music in 1887 marks the beginning of her musical career. She already had two children, and now had to juggle her household duties with her musical life. Training in voice and piano, she left in 1889 with a renewed desire to build a career on the stage. Before becoming a professional opera singer, however, Lee appeared as a talented amateur (*ibid.*), and the venues in which she performed were

typical of the nineteenth-century lady amateur musician. Small concerts in village halls featured heavily on her engagement list, as well as performances at the social gatherings of professional bodies and political parties (ibid.). On 29 November, 1893, she performed at a concert arranged by the Women's Liberal Association for South Kensington. Lee's professional career launched in 1895, and lasted two or three years, her regular appearances in operas taking her all over England. Yet traditional folksong had always been a primary interest, and in the earlier amateur concerts she would include a number of songs from this genre. The slackening of her singing career in 1897 meant that she was able to collect a great number of folksongs, Norfolk being an area in which she was particularly successful (ibid.).

Kate Lee's tight web of connections and her upper-middle-class upbringing may well explain her success story. Her husband had several legal connections, and she was fortunate enough to come into contact with influential figures such as Lucy Broadwood and Alfred Calisch. Her legal connections provided her with an opportunity to meet Lord Herschell, the first president of the Folk-Song Society (ibid.). It cannot be dismissed, however, that sheer determination and independence were at the heart of Lee's achievements. In many ways, she defied the rules that governed her society, and proved that it was more than manageable both to run a household and firmly establish herself in the classical and folk music worlds.

Frustratingly, then, the same problem is encountered. Women such as Lee and Broadwood have been relegated to the sidelines of a significant amount of literature that admittedly exists concerning the 'first revival'. It would appear that scholars have merely scratched the surface when emphasising Cecil Sharp as the figurehead of the revival, omitting other protagonists from its story. A return, though, to a somewhat old-fashioned

idyllic conception of the benefits of the revival could provide an illuminating explanation for the insubstantial amount of publication and recognition these women collectors received.

Sir Hubert Parry's articulation at the opening meeting of the Folk-Song Society aptly communicates this:

[English folk tunes] are characteristic of the race, of the quiet reticence of our country folk, courageous and content, ready to meet what chance shall bring with a cheery heart. All the things that make the folk-music of the race also betoken the qualities of the race, and, as a faithful reflection of ourselves, we needs must cherish it... (cited by Boyes, 2010)

The succinctness of such a statement makes its intentions all too clear. Parry undoubtedly seeks to create a romanticised image of society, in which a perfect hierarchical structure might exist. The 'faithful reflection of ourselves', in the case of women, denotes the domestic self, coupled with an equal stress on decorum and behaviour. Such an assumed status of women, then, makes those such as Lee and Broadwood over-independent and uncharacteristic of this ideal society, and their work, though influential and paramount to the revival, may well have been deliberately credited to males within the group.

Against this backdrop of morality and idealism, the collected songs themselves were often redolent of strict societal structures and social norms. The exploration and analysis of a body of traditional songs in which women feature as either protagonists or antagonists, paints an insightful, sometimes exaggerated picture of the rigid gender roles that were so prevalent. In *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, Bruno Nettl estimates that female representation in the larger collections of European folk music is about half (Nettl, 2005), and it was often the women who knew the best and earlier material. Such knowledge was obviously valuable for collectors, but it is Alfred Williams' apparently innocent comment that 'the women's songs were chiefly the sweetest of them all', which 'befitted the feminine nature' (Armstrong and Pearson, 2000), that does not settle well. Although at times sweet,

charming and good-humoured, many of the songs evoke a great deal of sexism towards which many women were, and indeed still are, impervious. Whilst acknowledging that decorum and femininity may well have characterised the societies in which these songs were created and transmitted, it cannot go unnoticed that women were often 'victimised, marginalised, trivialised, jeered at, discarded and murdered' in a number of the songs (www.peggyseeger.com), images that may appear irritating and unsettling to some contemporary listeners or analysts.

Such views are excited when observing the sharply contrasting male characters of the songs, whose voices and activities appear much more liberal and dynamic. Men are often assigned with professions such as soldier or sailor, factory worker or farmer, and appear frequently in sociable settings such as the pub or bar (www.peggyseeger.com). When men are the central figures of the songs, plots are often humorous, and rarely involve melancholy or grief, and home settings or domestic housework are equally uncharacteristic (*ibid.*). The woman, whose songs frequently feature love as their principal theme, is limited in her activities. The home is a common setting, and cleaning, looking after infants or going for a pleasant walk are her typical movements.

Before experiencing the emotional twists and turns of a relationship, however, the woman of course needs to find her man. Much of the traditional repertoire explores themes of a woman's desires to marry, or court a gentleman. For many of the women in the songs, to be 'left on the shelf' (Henderson et al, 1979), denotes dishonour or disaster, and they are seemingly unafraid to share such a desperation. *Whistle Daughter Whistle*, for example, is a song in which a daughter freely shares with her mother her longings to marry. Not only this, but she openly acknowledges that she is 'almost weary of her virginity' (all lyrics in this chapter from Henderson et al, 1979, unless otherwise stated), which appears to be a

physical burden. This idea is confirmed in the second stanza: 'My maidenhead it grieves me...It is a burden, a heavy burden, it's more than I can bear'. Nothing her mother can offer will surpass her whim, her frustration seemingly mounting in every stanza. Yet when she is threatened with work in the fields, she immediately labels her mother as 'cruel', and insists she cannot be trusted out there with young men who may entice her at her early age. This song openly portrays the young girl as being desperate, and she herself realises that she cannot be trusted around young men. She is naive, easily led, and so cannot enter any social circle where men may be present.

Don't Let me Die an Old Maid also expresses a woman's longing for marriage, but it addresses an array of other issues too. It becomes apparent that, although the protagonist wishes to marry for her own satisfaction, she feels ashamed, since she is the oldest and is still not taken. Her parents too are keen for her to marry well, a custom common in rural society: 'My father and mother say I'm in the lurch now, And surely it's time someone took me to church now'. She then goes on to explain how all her sisters, some younger, others who are 'plain' and 'simple', all have men. The 'good wife', who she insists she will be, is also somewhat stereotypical of the domestic woman:

I'd make a good wife, nor scolding nor jealous,

I'd find him with money to spend at the alehouse.

While he was out spending I'd be at home mending

So judge me now, young men, if that isn't commending.

In the final two lines of the song, the theme of desperation returns. The woman is not concerned about what the man is like, she just does not want to 'die an old maid', and love too seems a secondary element when she begs 'take me for pity'.

These two songs only scratch the surface of a theme that features so prominently in this repertoire. Whilst it would be impracticable to discuss all the examples of songs expressing a woman's desperation, it is worth pinpointing *The Female Auctioneer*, an eighteenth-century Broadside ballad. The desperation and longing for a man encountered in the above songs is put into practice through the use of a rather absurd analogy. The female puts herself up for sale singing, 'I'm going, going, going, who bids for me?' (Armstrong and Pearson, 2000), which is evidently highly suggestive. The measures to which a woman will go to secure herself a man for her own sexual fulfilment seem endless, and she is unafraid to display them publically.

On finding the man, however, the woman's life is often far from smooth, her anticipation of a happy relationship filled with pleasure sometimes interrupted by war or call of duty. The traditional ballad *The White Cockade* is a key example of this hardship, but also brings to light a number of other interesting concepts. The ballad features both a male and female protagonist, but is narrated by the female giving her own first-person account of events. The story begins with the female 'walking all o'er yon fields of moss' (liner notes, Rusby, 2003), innocently unaware of enlistment and how it could impact on her life. She then comes across some soldiers (a typical portrayal of the valiant male), who invite her to a ball. It would appear the woman is unemployed or else unable to provide for herself, since the soldiers 'advanced' her some money, 'a shilling from the crown' (ibid.). In the second verse, the woman speaks of her 'true love' (ibid.), quite a development from simply coming across the soldiers. He is portrayed as the perfect hero; he is handsome, and shows true masculine and dutiful qualities wearing his 'white cockade'. Unfortunately, he has 'gone to serve the King' (ibid.), and the woman must wait for his return. From the lyrics, it is clear that she can do nothing but grieve, and the rest of the song features a somewhat

melancholic account of her feelings. Her heart aches, hallows and cries, and she expresses anger towards the man who listed him. The woman then recounts her lover 'wiping her flowing eye' and pronounces that they will be married when he returns (ibid.). He seems to be the decisive character as well as the active one, since he is the only one who pronounces he will do something, as opposed to the woman who wishes to do something. He is her world, and she cannot think of, or do, anything else. Here, then, several issues are being raised. The woman's naivety is striking, for she seems to fall rapidly in love, and is willing to wait for her soldier to return without question. She openly trusts him, and her whole life appears to revolve around him and his return. She does not seem to involve herself in any other activities, and does not seem able to function without him: 'and it's all for him I'll rove' (ibid.).

Desertion, though, was, and indeed still is, experienced by women, and this is captured in some of the songs. The way in which it is dealt with, however, is at times fairly dramatic, seeing the woman suffering a major emotional trauma. The song *Died for Love* is a woman's lament after her lover, who is seen with a fresh woman every day, has left her. Note also that the male is placed in the tavern, a much more sociable and active place than the home, where the woman is often placed. Determined to make the man love her, she wishes she had a child, assessing that he would then become committed. Yet she does not, and, in the last stanza, she admits she cannot survive without him. She would rather 'die for love' than carry on.

At times, women may also be deserted on account of their weak social and economic status. *The Month of January* is a ballad concerning a woman who has been thrown over for another of higher status: 'And cruel was my own love who changed his mind for gold'

(Armstrong, 1992). Parents, too, were sometimes responsible for a relationship's downfall, pronouncing the male or female unfit or unsuitable owing to their lack of social status. The lyrics, however, are not solely responsible for the stereotypical treatment of women in these songs. The music makes its own contributions. If we were to look at the melodic backbones of *The White Cockade*, for example, they mirror both the woman's relatively passive lifestyle and her melancholy. Whilst it has an extremely singable quality, as does much of the traditional repertoire, the melodic range is confined to a major sixth, and the melodic line remains diatonic throughout. The ballad adopts a simple strophic form, with a short refrain-like figure at the end of each verse, and the harmony is equally simple, chords I IV and V being the progression throughout. It is difficult, though, to establish the correct way in which this ballad should be sung. On her album *Underneath the Stars*, Kate Rusby opts for the basic melodic structure in C major, with the 4/4 meter and constant militant-like steady tempo evoking the emotions of grief and sorrow, as well as encapsulating this idea of limitedness. Listening to Maureen Craik's interpretation, however, offers an alternative emotional experience (Craik, 1965). In a lively 6/8, the piece seems to be redundant of much of the grief and sorrow the lyrics suggest, and Maureen's voice is much more defiant. Angrier sentiments are felt, and vocal precision seems less important in this version than it does in Kate's. Vocal technique will be discussed further in the second chapter, but it must be acknowledged briefly here to show that there is not just one way of singing these songs.

Along with the gaping hole in the research of a substantial number of writers, these songs witness a limited voice, and a severe lack of power or confidence. Although intentionally seeking to create the perfect society, folk song would eventually divide it, and, though admittedly taking some time, women's voices would find their places in the songs.

Their contributions, as we will see in the following chapter, will break boundaries and, as well as significantly developing the repertoire, they will seek to overcome the oppression to which they were clearly subjected.

Chapter Two *Peaceful Woman Fighting Hard: Women and the Second Revival*

One may pinpoint a pivotal moment for female folk artists, and indeed researchers, in 1964, with the formation of Ewan MacColl's Critics Group. At this juncture, the second revival was in full swing, fuelled by a significantly different tank of ideas from those of the first which, as John Morrish excellently puts it, had produced a 'cocktail of problems' (Morrish, 2007). Such a romanticised and idealised perspective of the rural past that was so characteristic of the first revival undoubtedly drew an elitist curtain over the British tradition, and, as witnessed in Chapter One, folk song was often marinated in upper-middle-class flavours, failing, I venture, to portray aptly the people from which the genre originated. It is not surprising, then, that such sentiments punctured the revival, and so the First World War, although certainly a contributor to the disbanding of many folk music groups and organisations, cannot carry the entire blame for greedily snatching the tradition. People began searching for alternative genres during these intervening years, as the folk memory became more and more faded. There seemed to be no apparent solution for preventing such an abandonment of the tradition. Cecil Sharp had ruffled too many feathers and, as far as women were concerned, there seemed little point in battling with his misogynistic leanings. The women's movement, very much a part of society before the war, seemed to slide into the background so that, at this point, Linklater's statement appears enormously relevant.

Towards the end of the Second World War, however, there seemed to be something of a wake-up call. A group of enthusiasts, notably A.L. Lloyd and Ewan MacColl, armed with new intentions, began collecting folk songs. Their work was certainly connected to the first revival in that they wished to preserve the British tradition as did the now amalgamated English Folk Dance and Song Society (Brocken, 2003), but their work 'has been recorded as a

more accurate representation of “workers music” (ibid.), perhaps functioning more as a presentation of people’s life experiences and struggles. MacColl had been committed to theatre and politics since the 1930s, and so he was the perfect candidate for collecting songs that would address relevant issues, and he extended such a commitment by writing songs of his own in the folk idiom that could communicate contemporary struggles. Already, then, one can observe the contrasting motives of both revivals, and those of the second, namely the idea of communicating contemporary struggles, would contribute to the raising of women’s voices, which the first revival had undoubtedly silenced. Yet persuading the people to turn back to Britain and rediscover such a ‘rich tapestry of song’ (liner notes, *The Female Frolic*, 1968) proved somewhat difficult at first. American skiffle spiced the influences of collectors and singers in the 1950s, and they began turning away from British songs that they falsely believed to be ‘dowdy and unexciting’ (ibid.), and they much preferred the folk songs and blues of North America.

Perhaps spurred on by such tendencies, and keen to explore fully the treasure trove of British traditional song, Ewan MacColl decided to set up an independent group that Charles Parker later called The Critics Group, ‘whose purpose would be to study the nature and forms of traditional song, to generate new songs and to create projects both for recording and for the theatre’ (Armstrong, 1992). MacColl’s encyclopaedic knowledge of politics, anthropology and traditional song excited the group’s members, who would meet every Tuesday to examine and discuss the vocal styles of traditional working-class songs worldwide. Although obviously led by a male, there were certainly some strong and vivacious female protagonists in the group: Frankie Armstrong, Sandra Kerr and, of course, Ewan’s wife and pillar of the feminist folk music scene, Peggy Seeger. Frankie Armstrong, who was also to become extremely influential, recalls that she ‘lacked any kind of economic

or historical analysis' to back up any gut feelings she may have had concerning injustice (ibid.), or other political and social problems . Ewan's ability, therefore, to educate such people through debating various political issues, provided them with ample ammunition to explore critically the nature of the British traditional repertoire.

The mission is launched

One may allocate the adolescent stages of the quest to find the woman's voice to 1968, the year of the creation of *The Female Frolic*. Driven by the men of The Critics Group, who in 1966-7 researched and recorded sea shanties, the women decided to embark on a project of their own. Frankie Armstrong, Sandra Kerr and Peggy Seeger searched through their existing repertoires to find songs that were specifically about women. The resulting album of their findings is, unquestionably, a joy to listen to, and it is a great shame that it seems to have vanished from the shelves. The combination of the three repertoires results in an exciting and informative mélange of themes, embracing everything from tragedy to hilarity. The album draws on the traditional and the contemporary, providing an artistic collage of the complexities of women's emotions. Songs such as *The Blacksmith* illustrate pain and desertion, as the woman is deceived by her lover, whilst *The Whore's Lament* tells a moving tale of a young woman forced into prostitution. These traditional ballads reiterate themes familiar to us from the previous chapter, but *The Doffing Mistress*, which also originates from the traditional repertoire, gives off alternative vibes:

Sometimes the boss he looks in the door,
"Tie your ends up, doffers," he will roar.
Tie our ends up we surely do,
For Elsie Thompson but not for you (*The Female Frolic*, 1968).

This song provides a witty alternative to those encountered thus far. Set in a factory, it is a humorous tale of women who stick together boldly to defy their boss, choosing to ignore him, perhaps, because he is a man. Elsie (the Doffing Mistress) appears to have more authority, since they will tie up their ends for her. This is different, however, from the often defenceless female protagonist in much of the traditional repertoire. The scene is also more active, since the song is set in the factory, and contains evidence of women working and interacting with each other.

An equal measure of boldness is also witnessed in *Me Husband's got no Courage in Him*, a quirky little ballad, again from the traditional repertoire, of a woman's complaints about her husband who is not sexually satisfying her. This is an unusual scenario, since it disposes of the idea so conspicuous in traditional song that sex is a purely male-initiated activity. Ploughmen ploughing, farmers sowing seeds, tinkers mending holes in pans, and other male-related laborious metaphorical references, the commonplace descriptors of sex in the traditional repertoire, are completely absent here, as the woman explains:

Every night when I goes to bed
I lie and throw my leg right o'er him
and my hand I clap between his thighs
But I can't put any courage in him (*The Female Frolic*, 1968).

The conclusion to the song sees the woman wishing her husband dead, so she can replace him with a better performer:

I wish my husband he was dead
And in the grave I'd quickly lay him
And then I'd try another one
That's got a little courage in him (ibid.).

Although admittedly hyperbolic, the pragmatics of such a desire and, indeed, the entire song suggest an unhappy marriage on both sides, a marriage that may not have been

initiated by love. On the surface, however, the ballad is witty and entertaining, a fine example of the woman in the driving seat.

The Housewife's Lament, unusually cast in a major key despite its mournful title, sees the protagonist complaining about the monotony of her work. It is an interesting song choice for this album, since it seems to be the musical number that raises the most contemporary issue of the society to which it would soon be exposed. The never-ending household chores were certainly discussed among women, and were a concern of classic feminists, but the concept of second-wave feminism had not yet spread itself amongst society. Such sentiments, therefore, were probably relatively private, since women did not have any political hook on which to hang them. Strategically positioned as the final track of the album, however, the song almost serves as a precursor, or prediction of what is to come. Perhaps this positioning, coupled with the protagonist's pessimistic prophecy in the chorus that things will only deteriorate, serves as a warning:

O life is a toil,
And love is a trouble,
Beauty will fade
And riches will flee,
Wages will dwindle
And prices will double
And nothing is as I
Would wish it to be (*The Female Frolic*, 1968).

Even a whistle-stop tour of this album appears to bring a plethora of issues to light, and a forensic examination of the origins of a selection of the songs encountered will see the plot thicken. If, for example, one were to scrutinise the majority of songbooks and publications of the first revival, locating ballads such as *The Doffing Mistress* or *Me Husband's Got no Courage in Him* would not be unlike searching for a needle in a haystack. Yet, as this album indicates, such songs were very much a part of the oral tradition, and the

fact that some of them date from as early as the sixteenth century, suggests they have had a healthy lifespan. These songs, however, were silenced by the ideology of the first revival, a notion on which Sandra Kerr elaborates: 'collectors came to the task of collecting with nineteenth-century prejudices, and will almost certainly have collected a certain style of songs' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011).

The situation of women during that time, and the decorum with which they were expected to behave also impeded them from singing any bawdy or suggestive songs. Consequently, these songs, although very much alive in some women's oral memory, were not presented to the collectors, and were probably reserved for female company or the music hall, a performance domain heavily frowned upon by Cecil Sharp's contingent.

Armstrong, Seeger and Kerr, then, successfully managed to place this genre of song back on the folk music map, whilst simultaneously acquiring a substantial amount of knowledge concerning the myriad of emotions women's songs were capable of conjuring. 'We learned far more than Ewan wanted us to learn' (ibid.), laughs Sandra Kerr, a suspicion that can be easily validated when we look at hers, and the others', later outputs.

As well as providing an eye-opening experience of women's song, however, this album was also the perfect sounding board for the three artists to demonstrate their impressive vocal and instrumental abilities. The multi-talented Peggy Seeger is heard playing the autoharp, guitar, concertina, and five-string banjo, along with performing lead vocals on seven of the tracks. Sandra Kerr's tin whistle skills make a fleeting appearance, and she also takes the vocal lead in six of the tracks. Frankie Armstrong, whose voice serves as her only instrument on the album, makes a fine contribution with her powerful resonating vocal technique, and leads five of the songs. There is also a great sense of unity on the album, since many of the songs are performed with all three voices, both in unison and in harmony;

a strength-in-numbers concept that would later be imitated by groups such as The Silly Sisters and, Sandra's group, Sisters Unlimited. There were, though, two male instrumentalists on the album - Jack Warshaw and John Faulkner - but their role, I believe, may be described as secondary in contrast to that of the women's. One wonders, however, why they were added to the mix at all! They were certainly not a necessary musical ingredient, since Peggy Seeger could play both the guitar and the concertina, instruments these men also played. Was it MacColl's decision? Was it a conscious move to weaken the strong sense of femininity of the album? Or, was it simply a decision of the three artists to include a masculine element? One may never know, but these questions are certainly worth raising.

Undeniably, though, this album was a landmark success for the three artists and, indeed, British female folk artists in general. The women had proved themselves to be able researchers, clearly having a freer reign over the nature of repertoire they could resurrect than those encountered in the previous chapter. Furthermore, their front-line positions in each track, coupled with the fact that they outnumbered their male performers, contradicted the usual pattern of what Peta Webb recalls to be "‘girl’ singers in a male-dominated band' (Webb, 2004).

For many women who had been performing in such groups, Peggy, Frankie, and Sandra provided a sigh of relief, their achievements proving that it was possible to break the norm. Male-dominated groups imposed a whole manner of problems, and were obvious sites for sexist activity. Peta Webb recalls a dispute between members of the group OAK, of which she was a member: 'the other woman in the group got pregnant, and the male members were irritated by having to cut back on the group's work and having to pay for childcare while we were at gigs' (Webb, 2011). This eventually led to the group splitting up

at the males' bequest, showing that there was little patience where women's needs were concerned. Work could still be done, but because money was being wasted and gigs were fewer, the men would not cooperate. Other scenarios are equally frustrating, and it is when we hear them that our appreciation for the three artists of The Critics Group mounts.

The primary performance domains for music of the second revival were the folk clubs - organisations usually homed in the back rooms of pubs. Folk clubs were run by enthusiasts who, apparently, had no initial thoughts of profit or commercial gain (Armstrong, 1979). These establishments were, however, as Frankie Armstrong asserts, 'male chauvinist to a remarkable and remarkably unselfconscious degree' (Armstrong, 1979). Polly Bolton fell victim to such sentiments, appearing to have experienced a rough ride in terms of performance. She entered the folk scene in the late sixties, but the oppressive strand of her tale is pinpointed to 1970, when she joined her first band, in which she was the only female member. 'I felt straight-jacketed in a way the male members weren't' (interview with Polly Bolton, 28/03/2011), Polly recalls, understandably emitting a great deal of bitterness. The extent to which she was restrained is most frustrating: she was unable to make any musical decisions in the band, and was not allowed to contribute her own material. She also found that she 'took the lead in very few of the songs' (ibid.), since she was usually delegated to backing vocals. Polly was not particularly aware of any feminist activity at the time, and found the gender divide shocking (ibid.). This, then, may well explain her difficulty in coming out of her shell. If Polly was not exposed to the gender battle, and did not have any sort of political framework in which to base her problems, perhaps she would have thought it inappropriate to express them in such a chauvinistic atmosphere. Polly's concluding statement in the discussion concerning this segment of her life aptly summarises her, and others', situation at the time: 'I felt completely under-used'

(ibid.). The misogyny to which she was exposed resulted in her temporarily abandoning the folk scene - a move reflecting the sexism of the genre. There seemed to be something missing; a strong sentiment or idea to which these women could cling. *The Female Frolic* had begun to break the sexist mould, but the idea was still only half-baked, and a complete breakthrough was still absent.

Folk music is feminised!

Peggy Seeger's first foray into feminism in 1971 appeared to set the wheels in motion, since it ignited her phenomenal song-writing ability, which plunged folk music into unexplored waters, bringing the ideology of the women's movement to a whole host of unsuspecting audiences. Ironically, it was Ewan MacColl, despite the exclusion of feminism in his politics, who initially administered the dive. 1971 was touted as the year of the woman internationally (Good, 2002), and it was decided that every subsequent year would have a designated day known as Women's Equality Day. Such a decision manifested the serious momentum the movement had re-gathered as a political force, and consequently, second-wave feminist ideals began reaching women throughout British society. The significance of this political development won it a spot in Ewan MacColl's 'Festival of Fools' in 1972. Performed annually, these festivals combined folksong and theatre, and wove together the previous year's political and social events. This particular festival, therefore, needed a song to accompany the play Ewan had written concerning women's liberation, and he asked Peggy to do the job, resulting in the rapid composition of *I'm Gonna be an Engineer*. It is no surprise that this song was to become an anthem of the women's movement, since Peggy was able to encapsulate in the lyrics (see appendix for complete lyrics) an impressive amount of second-wave feminism.

The protagonist battles with the voice of society, her husband, and her mother to become an engineer, one of the most male-dominated jobs imaginable. The subtle satire, wit and defiance with which the lyrics are infused brilliantly explore the twists and turns of her mission, whilst the structure and musicality of the piece successfully conjure the conflicting qualities of the four distinct voices. The verses and choruses contain the voice of the protagonist as she tells her story, juxtaposed with those of her mother and husband, who are determined to stamp out her unconventional ambitions. The boss's voice also makes a brief entrance, adding his discriminatory remarks to the mixture. The short contrasting sections after each chorus contain societal dictates and asides, and the brief flirtations with E flat minor, coupled with a fairly limited melodic range seem to evoke their shallowness, as well as expressing the protagonist's anger towards the sentiments they infer:

She's smart! (for a woman)
I wonder how she got that way? (Peggy Seeger, 1998)

The verses and choruses, by contrast, are cast firmly in F sharp major, the fluctuating jaunty quality of the melody, and the wide vocal range illustrating the confident and feisty voice of the protagonist, along with the equal defiance of those of the deterrents. Ultimately, it is the protagonist who wins, and she is determined to suffer the discrimination to which she is subjected at work in order to prove her point:

But I'll fight them as a woman, not a lady,
Fight them as an engineer! (ibid.)

The *forte* dynamic at which these lines are sung and the almost shouting quality of Peggy's voice personify this defiance, so that the ending clearly evokes a sense of endurance and strength. Such a sentiment, and indeed the mountain of others the song raises (see complete lyrics to fully gain an idea), was emblematic of the women's movement. It was,

therefore, the perfect anthem, giving voice to much of the 1970s' feminist ideology. The version familiar to us today, however, is not the original, and there was, in fact, an additional verse, later removed by Peggy because of concerns of length. A listen to the 1973 album *At the Present Moment* (track 4), re-released in 1994, would lead to the discovery of this verse, potentially the most forward-thinking and serious of them all. It deals with the more contemporary issue of sexual harassment, a problem not officially flagged up by feminists until the late 1980s (Good, 2002). The boss pinches the protagonist's thigh, leering: 'I've never had an engineer!' (ibid.). He then warns her, 'it's the duty of the staff for to give the boss a whirl!'. I believe this to be a demonstration of the sensitivity Peggy showed towards the possibilities of pursuing a male-dominated occupation. Whilst seeming a perfectly acceptable and exciting idea on the surface, it may provoke problems, which Peggy anticipates. She may well have benefitted from retaining the verse, a notion shared by Frankie Armstrong who, in her subsequent covers of the song, chooses to do so (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p220yi2VOj8>).

With or without the extra verse, though, the song was clearly a success for Peggy, who consequently found herself bathed in an unexpected spotlight. The women's movement had discovered a singing voice, and its participants wanted it to *crescendo*. Consequently, Peggy was asked to sing at a large number of women's concerts and organisations, a key turning point for her and, indeed, female artists of the genre in general. Having been a part of an iconic duo with Ewan MacColl for the best part of twenty years, Peggy was not accustomed to performing solo, and she certainly could not bring him along due to the extreme feminist nature of many of the audiences to which she was performing. She therefore had to adapt to this change, showing confidence and determination that artists such as Polly Bolton 'keenly observed' (interview with Polly Bolton, 28/03/2011).

Peggy also found that she had very little feminist material in her repertoire, a problem she would have to rectify rapidly. She did, of course, have the success of 'Engineer' behind her, but she would need considerably more songs to bring to these feminist gigs.

On the surface, however, Peggy was not, and indeed still is not, the obvious candidate for an iconic feminist status. When writing 'Engineer', she was not involved in the women's movement, and did not particularly play witness to much of its ideology.

'Engineer', as she writes in her 1998 songbook, has no autobiographical bearing: '...and I never wanted to be a boy or an engineer' (Seeger, 1998). In fact, Peggy 'fulfilled the stereotypical woman's role' (interview with Peggy Seeger, 21/11/2011), since Ewan did not do the housework, and she had to look after her children. Having worked with a number of male musicians without experiencing any obvious problems, she did not resent the male sex in a way that a lot of the women in the movement did. The 1976 album *Penelope isn't Waiting Any More* perhaps manifests this situation. *Housewife's Alphabet*, a humorous account of the monotonous components of a housewife's daily routine, certainly touches on issues of the women's movement, but it is an extremely tame representation of feminist ideology. The majority of the album is made up of traditional material which, although selected so that it might portray the woman to be a little more liberated, still does not resonate directly with the movement, and the issues raised tend to be somewhat archaic.

In order to commit fully to her feminist audience, therefore, Peggy would have to tread unfamiliar footsteps, and explore problems about which she had little knowledge. To do this, she decided to observe and interview women who had fallen victim to such hardships. Writing in 1984, Peggy recalls her research methodology:

I sought out battered wives, single mothers, women who had been raped, women on picket lines, and many many others. I interviewed them, listened carefully to their

voices of experience and used their words, their tone of expression, even their breathing patterns and cadences (cited by Rowland, 1984).

The resulting compositions are mind-blowing, and provide an extremely informative and emotional listening experience.

The song *Emily*, for example, is a melancholic ballad cast in A minor, and openly recounts the story of a woman who has suffered from domestic violence (Peggy Seeger, *Original Songs Collection 1932-88*, CD 5, track 13). It is *a capella*, so Peggy's voice is fully exposed, and the weary tone at which the lyrics are sung, coupled with the steady tempo, show how Peggy was able to imitate Emily's, the protagonist's, exact feelings and emotions. The lyrics are far from subtle, and the listener receives an untainted account of Emily's traumatic experience, as well as a reflection of the isolation and discrimination to which she was subjected due to her sex (see appendix for full effect). There is some form of comfort in the last verse, when we learn she has left her husband and lives in a refuge. She now has friends and is 'no longer alone' (ibid.), but it is hardly an enviable life. It is this complete exposure to Emily's tale that adds to the song's sincerity and reliability, and it clearly voices a problem to which women both in and outside the movement could relate. This song takes folk music to an incredibly new level, demonstrating that the genre can be used to dig far deeper into contemporary issues that popular music would not dare touch with a barge poll.

Other equally poignant songs can be found on the 1979 album, *Different Therefore Equal*. This album is much more conspicuously clothed in feminist ideology, and there is a seriousness and sincerity that runs through it. One feels that Peggy has connected with the movement, since her liner notes are much more opinionated than those of *Penelope isn't Waiting Any More*, and seem to convey a sense of urgency and understanding, informed by the interviews she carried out. The introductory comment to *Reclaim the Night*

demonstrates this: 'it has to be understood that rape is not just a misdemeanour but a crime that can cause permanent damage' (Seeger, liner notes to *Different Therefore Equal*, 1979).

All the songs on the album serve a dual purpose: firstly, they resonate directly with those involved in the women's movement, and secondly, they were equally accessible for those women outside the movement. One did not need to be in the women's movement to be aware of rape or domestic violence, as Peggy herself proved. The message of the songs is not hidden by unintelligible jargon; some are a little more light-hearted, whilst still carrying a clear message.

The distinct feminist flavour of the album, however, and the overwhelming success it brought for Peggy raised the eyebrows of some males on the folk scene, once again exposing the genre's sexism. Colin Irwin accuses the songs of being 'ferocious, intimidating and single-minded' (Irwin, 1979, cited by Good, 2002), whilst insisting the album would not generate any sympathy in this 'admittedly male quarter' (ibid.). He also claims it is the most political record he has heard (ibid.), an invalid assessment, I think, since Ewan's output is certainly equally soaked in radical politics, songs of which the reviewer would probably have been aware. Perhaps some of the male 'folkies' were afraid of the radical influence Peggy's album might have on other female artists, who could lead the genre along new paths. Outside the folk world, however, reviews were much more complementary: *Peace Magazine* rightly observes the 'gorgeous melodies and clever lyrics' (Greenfield, 1979, cited by Good, 2002), and *Time Out* congratulates its 'telling detail' (*Time Out*, 1979, cited by Good, 2002), which makes the album so moving and persuasive (ibid.). These two reviews seem more justified, and it is the aspects of the album which they celebrate that have, without question, assisted the development of folk music. The 'male quarter' (Irwin, 1979,

cited by Good, 2002) seemed to have overlooked the fact that Peggy was merely continuing with the intentions of the second revival by recording the contemporary struggles and issues of a portion of society, and they appeared to underestimate the power of the legacy she had begun to launch.

Kick-started by Peggy's success and unperturbed by any negative reviews her material generated, other female artists sought to follow in her footsteps, and experimented with alternative flavours to the traditional folk song diet in an attempt to find the liberated woman's voice. A great deal of selectiveness began to emerge, seeing artists such as Peta Webb, a member of the 1986-formed feminist band Sisters Unlimited, prune her repertoire by removing those songs in which women were victims, keeping only 'those she still felt to be too true' (Webb, 2006). She also tampered with some traditional material, adding and removing verses or changing the gender roles of a ballad to show more of women's strengths.

Frankie Armstrong and Sandra Kerr were similarly selective, although they concentrated more on promoting those traditional songs that displayed a woman's 'wit or cunning' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011), or recounted stories of women who bravely stood outside their traditional role. In 1979, Frankie and Sandra collaborated with Kathy Henderson to embark on a project of collecting a small selection of the 'largely unrecognised culture of women's songs' (Henderson et al, 1979), leading to the creation of *My Song is My Own*. Alongside being a valiant attempt to circulate these songs, this publication fosters women's understanding of the 'global patriarchal prejudice' to which they had been subjected over history (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011), a notion of which many were apparently unaware (ibid.). In observing the sharp contrast between its preface, and that of Lucy Broadwood's *English County Songs*, one discovers how

the approaches to traditional material were transforming. Broadwood appears to concentrate on breaking down the notion that 'England is relatively poor in traditional music' (Broadwood, 1893), by resurrecting a number of songs and tracing their origins. She also seems concerned with their musical structure, and explores how several versions of one song can lead to ambiguities. There is an absence of societal comments, and there is no promise of a critical discussion of themes or stereotypes of the songs. *My Song is my Own*, on the other hand, provides the complete opposite: it promises a scrutiny of the songs' lyrics, and a critical evaluation of their underlying meaning. Although it is intent on resurrecting songs, the music itself becomes a secondary element. This, then, is a demonstration of the increasing awareness of the power of lyrics, and the ways in which social climates can affect songs.

There was an equal acceleration of feminist song writing, as artists became inspired by Peggy Seeger's remarkable approach to style and lyricism, which could successfully raise contemporary women's issues that resonated with relevance. Sandra Kerr wrote an impressive artillery of women's songs, including *We Were There*, which documents a woman's unrecognised place in history. Many of the songs, though, are enveloped in humour and a sense of fun, an idea with which Peggy flirts in songs such as *Housewife's Alphabet* and *B-Side*, an amusing attempt to 'put men in women's shoes' (<http://www.amazon.com/Period-Pieces-Songs-Womens-Mvt/dp/B00000AEQF>).

Harbourtown Records praises Janet Russell, also a member of Sisters Unlimited, for the 'hard-edged humour' of her women's songs (<http://www.harbourtownrecords.com/russell.html>), particularly visible in *Secretary's Song*. This song is a comical monologue by a secretary who complains about how much her boss takes her for granted, and the amount of work she is asked to do for such little wages. The

infectious melody of the chorus allows for audience participation, creating both a light-hearted and politicised atmosphere. Sisters Unlimited themselves, whose repertoire consists of a combination of individual and full-group compositions, advertised with the tagline 'wit and wisdom of womankind' (Webb, 2011), a conscious move on which Sandra Kerr elaborates: 'We used a sense of fun and an ability to entertain to put across political messages' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011).

This tendency to clothe feminist messages in wit and humour proved a useful tool, since the songs were gradually becoming more accessible to those outside the movement, particularly men, who were steadily becoming more aware of the importance of women's voices. After one concert with Sisters Unlimited, Sandra Kerr recalls a male member of the audience approaching her and saying: 'Thank you, I have learned so much!' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011).

Vocal technique

Amongst the excited flurry of feminist-inspired music making, came a desire to experiment with exciting approaches to vocal style initiated, in part, by Frankie Armstrong. Aside from being a successful performer, Frankie was a qualified social worker, and in 1973, her work took her to the United States, where she was scheduled to spend two months visiting drug projects around the country. She had also been asked to perform at the Philadelphia Folk Festival and, once she had arrived, received further invitations to perform at folk clubs and coffeehouses across the country (Armstrong, 1992). On her first evening in Philadelphia, she met Ethel Raim, whose pioneering work was responsible for 'the development of Balkan vocal music in the United States' (Laušević, 2007). This encounter affected Frankie in more ways than one.

Frankie had already been exposed to Bulgarian song via A. L. (Bert) Lloyd's 1964 album *Folk music of Bulgaria*, and began attempting to imitate the sounds with her own voice (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011). This interest was enhanced by Ewan MacColl, who introduced The Critics Group to a number of vocal styles from around the world, including, that of Azerbaijan, whose flavour was powerful enough to 'rival the best operatic tenor' (Armstrong, 1992). To find herself face-to-face with Raim, therefore, and to be invited to one of her Balkan-themed workshops was a dream come true. Frankie was captivated by the exciting timbres of the songs she learned, and observed the overwhelming psychological effects they brought to her and the group: '...people went out bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, even if they'd come in dragged off the New York subway pretty bedraggled' (ibid.). The singability of the songs, and the confidence and relaxation conjured by the idea of singing at a comfortable range in a loud vibrant dynamic resonated with Frankie, who knew she had found the style with which she wanted to perform her music. As well as initiating ideas of liberation, however, the clashing harmonies, and hard-edged timbres evoke a sense of strength and endurance which, as Mirjana Laušević reminds us, is the original intention of this style in its home culture, to denote the 'hard labour [of women] demanded by patriarchal life' (Laušević, 2007). Yet this idea of conveying struggle was central to both the women's movement and the folk genre, so the appropriation of the Balkan style was, for Frankie, the perfect way to approach subsequent vocal material.

Keen to share her knowledge and expose others to this style of singing, Frankie organised - and still organises - women's workshops, to teach the Balkan vocal techniques through an array of Ethel Raim-inspired exercises, and a treasure trove of songs collected whilst attending the Sweets Mill music camp, where Ethel had been running singing groups. The fruits of Frankie's labours are scattered across the albums of those female artists we

have encountered, but are particularly noticeable on Sisters Unlimited's album *No Bed of Roses*. *Childbirth Shanty* (track 14), a song devoted to the unseen struggles of giving birth, adopts a call and response technique, with the fanfare-like verses sung by either one or two voices followed by a chorus of full ensemble: 'Childbirth is no bed of roses, bare down!' (*No Bed of Roses*, 1995). Both the verses and choruses are sung at maximum volume, and use the chest voice throughout to evoke this sense of struggle, strength and endurance. The tightness of the chorus, along with its strong four-part harmony initiate an aspect of 'female bondage' (Laušević, 2007), a strong feature of the Balkan style. There is also evidence of a departure from vocal precision, an idea that we first encountered in Chapter One on Maureen Craik's version of *The White Cockade*. In both cases, this appears to personify the implied struggles in the songs, and also serves as a reminder that folksong has been handed down by the ordinary people, who may not have had trained singing voices.

Overall achievements

All the artists in this chapter have, in some shape or form, experienced the rough ride endured by women throughout the British folk genre. Using the women's movement as a political framework and their exceptional talents in musicianship and song writing as their weapons, they have attempted to wrestle with the misogyny that silenced - and threatened to silence - the importance of women's voices both within the genre and as a whole. Through revisiting traditional material, they have increased an awareness of the oppression to which their ancestors were subjected, and responded to this by invading the repertoire, in the hope that they might hand back the genre to those from whom it had originated so that they could voice realistic and contemporary concerns of society. With constant defiance, each artist has voiced their intentions through music, in an attempt to be heard

through the male-dominated mass of folk artists. Indeed, some were more successful than others, owing, perhaps, to their connections, but those who were not have benefited immensely from the former who, through their work, began to ameliorate performance opportunities for female artists, an achievement to which today's female folk artists are forever indebted. As Polly Bolton succinctly states, 'artists such as Peggy and Frankie were beacons of light, and we wouldn't be where we are today without them' (interview with Polly Bolton, 28/03/2011).

Conclusion

The intention of this exploration of a selection of women's key involvements in the two British folk music revivals was to provide an informative and illuminating journey, differing from those undertaken by the hurly-burly of publications surrounding the genre's history, which appear to omit women from their pages. After discovering the nature and importance of these involvements, one is surely left open-mouthed at the lack of acknowledgment they have received, since it is safe to say, with conviction, that from as early as the 1890s and the dawn of the first revival, women have made a significant mark on the genre, fired by an ambition and determination to make their voices heard. As has been discovered, their quest to do so has been far from smooth, since each woman we have encountered has wrestled with misogynistic attempts to thwart them throughout. Kristin Linklater's statement has lapsed in and out of relevance on the duration of the journey, manifesting the fluctuating success of women to overcome the oppression to which they were constantly subjected. We have witnessed how Lucy Broadwood and Kate Lee attempted to amplify their voices by shaping the organisation of the first revival, and collecting folk songs to contribute to its mission. Their achievements, however, although paramount to the revival's development, were muffled by male domination. This domination, coupled with a fake perspective of folksong, resulted in a frustratingly stereotypical body of collected material, in which women, although seemingly unaware, were often ridiculed, or relegated to the sidelines of society. With continued determination, however, women of the second revival attempted to turn the tables by releasing folk song from its lofty cage of snobbery and idealism, by returning it to its working-class roots, using it to voice contemporary women's issues. In doing so, women's profiles as both people and

performers were raised, and, by the late 1980s, female artists were able to perform confidently as groups or soloists, unafraid of any male opposition.

In the rumbling change and shifting ground of today's folk music genre, however, one wonders how many current female artists are flying the flags for their predecessors. Folk music appears to be attracting increasing attention in the media, and many artists are inevitably seduced by the commercial interest it is gaining, seeming, I venture, to work with what is fashionable and profitable rather than what is historically correct. Fay Hield, professional folk singer and partner to John Bowden of Bellowhead, confesses that the names Lucy Broadwood and Kate Lee 'do not ring any bells' (interview with Fay Hield, 08/02/2011), illustrating, as has already been mentioned, that there is little known about these early female revivalists, who have provided so much material for these artists to work with. Irene Shettle is attempting to rectify this, since she is in the process of creating a Lucy Broadwood show, in which Lucy's achievements are celebrated through spoken word and traditional song (interview with Irene Shettle, 04/02/2011). Being an amateur musician, however, Irene, I suspect, may not receive sufficient publicity to launch her show on the professional market, meaning that it may be attended by a fairly specific audience. She is, though, doing her best!

The concept of post-feminism, which from the early 1990s has been creeping into society, may also account for an abandonment of the old ways. Post-feminism, although assuming a chaotic mishmash of definitions over the years, generally connotes the belief that the women's movement has succeeded in its mission to ameliorate sexism (McRobbie, 2004), and this notion spread to folk music, threatening to leave those iconic feminist artists encountered in Chapter Two out in the cold. After Ewan MacColl's death in 1989, Peggy Seeger began to feel the brunt of post-feminism, as her feminist material, for some, became

unwanted. She explains how one agent referred to her as 'the left overs of a dead duo' (interview with Peggy Seeger, 21/11/2010), and she could not easily find work because she was not 'commercially viable' (ibid.). In this context, commercial viability appears to denote an abandonment of overt political singing. Fay Hield explains how she 'avoids anything too political to avoid being preachy' (interview with Fay Hield, 08/02/2011). Some artists have taken this idea to the extreme, and have slipped back into the habit of singing traditional women's songs without commenting on their often stereotypical implications, and appear to assume that because a song is traditional, it is safe to sing it. Frankie Armstrong elaborates on this: 'It is important to be selective. Just because it is a folksong, it doesn't mean we have to sing it' (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011).

Kate Rusby, who rose to fame in the mid 1990s, falls within this problem, since much of the women's repertoire she carries appears to embrace pain, desertion, or domestic duty, and she never comments on this trend. Kate also writes her own songs based on her notion of the tradition, which is, as Frankie puts it, 'over-romanticised' (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011). Kate's own women's songs, then, rarely feature strength and struggle, tending instead to exhale a somewhat overly-sentimental tone. *Falling (Underneath the Stars, track 8)*, insists a female's utter dependence on a male: 'If it weren't for your wings I'd be gone' (liner notes to *Underneath the Stars, 2003*), and appears to flirt with a sugary perception of love that one may associate with popular music. Her 2005 album is entitled *The Girl Who Couldn't Fly*, a name that would certainly have not been used by the likes of Frankie Armstrong or Sandra Kerr. It is evident that, for Kate, folk music is at its most effective when it harks back to old-fashioned sentiments, since, aside from a brief encounter with politics on the 2010 album *Make the Light* where the song *Let them Fly*

rejects Nick Griffin of the BNP's attempts to hijack traditional music, there are no songs communicating contemporary struggles.

Another frustrating abandonment of the achievements of the 1970s and 80s is the approach to vocal technique. There appears to be an increasing perception that traditional music should employ a 'bland and breathy' tone (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011), devoid of the challenge and intensity so characteristic of second revival singing. Kate Rusby, again, is guilty of this. All her songs, whether chilling or tender, appear to adopt the 'little girlish voice' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011). 'It's very nice, but it doesn't do anything to me much' (interview with Frankie Armstrong, 20/04/2011), Frankie Armstrong admits. Kate's album covers conjure a similar ethereal and sentimental atmosphere. The cover of *Little Lights*, for example, sees her wearing a crown with a dreamy and thoughtful expression on her face. The young female duo, The Unthanks, have similar perceptions, as the language used to advertise their music conjures a sense of serenity: '...A sensationally graceful sound....dreamy and specific, as well as supernaturally ancient' (<http://www.the-unthanks.com/biography>). Many of their songs feature on Frankie Armstrong's 1972 album *Lovely on the Water*, and listening to the two side by side provides a sharp contrast. Frankie's vocals are loud, rough and vibrant, aptly conjuring a challenging intensity, a component which Fay Hield believes 'makes a folksong' (interview with Fay Hield, 08/02/2011). The Unthanks, however, are much more concerned with vocal precision and tuning, and they adopt a thin, smooth timbre. Their harmonies are extremely conventional, and songs are usually harmonised in safe major thirds, providing a completely different sonic experience to that of Sisters Unlimited, for example. The Unthanks rendition of *Here's the Tender Coming*, a woman's chilling account of fear when the press gang

dragged her partner away, is simply too safe and cosy, and their voices strip the song of its harshness.

As Sandra Kerr stresses, it is naive to think that problems of the women's movement have died away (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011). Women are still victims of rape, domestic violence, discrimination at work, and much more. Although artists such as Frankie Armstrong are still acknowledging this by providing women with the opportunity of releasing their problems using their vocal chords in her workshops (Hampton, 1997), it cannot go unnoticed that these issues are no longer raised in folk music. It seems a shame that those responsible for raising them and those who have opened the doors for women solo performers are now rarely remembered. The woman's voice, again, is somewhat limited, although this time, perhaps, it is more by choice. Sandra Kerr, however, insists that 'these things come in cycles' (interview with Sandra Kerr, 07/03/2011). If this is so, then hopefully, a drive to explore women's history in the folk genre will re-emerge, and the strong female voice will be raised once more!

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Appendix: Lyrics for the songs *I'm Gonna be an Engineer*, and *Emily*

I'm Gonna be an Engineer

When I was a little girl I wished I was a boy
I tagged along behind the gang and wore my corduroys.
Everybody said I only did it to annoy
But I was gonna be an engineer

Mamma said, "Why can't you be a lady?
Your duty is to make me the mother of a pearl
Wait until you're older, dear
And maybe you'll be glad that you're a girl.

Dainty as a Dresden statue, gentle as a Jersey cow,
Smooth as silk, gives cream and milk
Learn to coo, learn to moo
That's what you do to be a lady, now".

When I went to school I learned to write and how to read
History, geography and home economy
And typing is a skill that every girl is sure to need
To while away the extra time until the time to breed
And then they had the nerve to ask, what would I like to be?
I says, "I'm gonna be an engineer!"

"No, you only need to learn to be a lady
The duty isn't yours, for to try to run the world
An engineer could never have a baby
Remember, dear, that you're a girl."

She's smart --- for a woman.
I wonder how she got that way?
You get no choice, you get no voice
Just stay mum, pretend you're dumb.
That's how you come to be a lady, today.

Well, I started as a typist but I studied on the sly
Working out the day and night so I could qualify
And every time the boss came in, he pinched me on the thigh
Said, "I've never had an engineer!"
"You owe it to the job to be a lady
The duty of the staff is to give the boss a whirl
The wages that you get are crummy, maybe
But it's all you get, 'cause you're a girl."

Then Jimmy came along and we set up a conjugation

We were busy every night with loving recreation
I spent my days at work so he could get an education
And now he's an engineer!

He said: "I know you'll always be a lady
The duty of my darling is to love me all her life
Could an engineer look after or obey me?
Remember, dear, that you're my wife!"

As soon as Jimmy got a job, I studied hard again
Then busy at me turret-lathe a year or two, and then
The morning that the twins were born, Jimmy says to them
"Your mother was an engineer!"
"You owe it to the kids to be a lady
Dainty as a dish-rag, faithful as a chow
Stay at home, you got to mind the baby
Remember you're a mother now!"

Every time I turn around there's something else to do
Cook a meal or mend a sock or sweep a floor or two
Listening to Jimmy Young - it makes me want to spew
I was gonna be an engineer.

I only wish that I could be a lady
I'd do the lovely things that a lady's s'posed to do
I wouldn't even mind if only they would pay me
Then I could be a person too.

What price for a woman?
You can buy her for a ring of gold,
To love and obey, without any pay,
You get a cook and a nurse for better or worse
You don't need a purse when a lady is sold.

Oh, but now the times are harder and me Jimmy's got the sack;
I went down to Vicker's, they were glad to have me back.
But I'm a third-class citizen, my wages tell me that
But I'm a first-class engineer!

The boss he says "We pay you as a lady,
You only got the job because I can't afford a man,
With you I keep the profits high as may be,
You're just a cheaper pair of hands."

You got one fault, you're a woman;
You're not worth the equal pay.
A bitch or a tart, you're nothing but heart,

Shallow and vain, you've got no brain,

Well, I listened to my mother and I joined a typing pool
Listened to my lover and I put him through his school
If I listen to the boss, I'm just a bloody fool
And an underpaid engineer
I been a sucker ever since I was a baby
As a daughter, as a mother, as a lover, as a dear
But I'll fight them as a woman, not a lady
I'll fight them as an engineer!

(© Seeger, 1998)

Emily

Once we were single
Once we were young
Once we were happy
Husband and wife

But 14 years married
13 years harry'd
Now I don't care
What comes of my life

The first time he lifted
His hand against me
He knew the blow
Was wicked and wrong

He put his arms 'round me
Said he was sorry
Sorry love sorry
All the night long

The next time he lifted
His fist against me
I thought I'd provoked him
I was to blame

The next time the next time
And the time after
I told no one
'Cause I was ashamed

When anything crossed him

I got his fist
If dinner was late
He slapped me around

With beggin' and pleadin'
Stitches and bleeding
Nothing would do
'Til I'm on the ground
My mom come in
She seen I've been crying
Seen I was cut and
Bruised 'round the eyes

My husband turned 'round
All smilin' and charming
Says all she does
Is spend and tell lies

He said I was out
With men every day
He locked me indoors
And tore up my clothes

My friend heard me screamin'
Never come near
Why did I stay with him?
God only knows

If I go quiet
That makes him rage
If I turn and run
He's hunting me down

I says why do you hit me?
He hit me for asking
Whatever I do
I'm down on the ground

Each afternoon
My heart would start trembling
I followed his journey
All the way home

His step at the door
Would nearly dissolve me
When he walked in
My judgment was come

I know there's two sides
To every question
I may be wrong
He may be right

But he's got just two ways
To settle a quarrel
One is his left
The other his right

The doctor said he needs
My understanding
The police held him challenge
A man in his home

Everyone knows him
No one defends me
After the alter
A wife's on her own

I wander I cry
I pray I may die

I walk up to strangers
To talk in the road

Three kids and no money
How can I leave him?
I lose my kids
If I've got no home

The last time he hit me
He nearly killed me
I thought I was dead
And glad to be free

I gathered the kids up
And went to a refuge
He grabbed a crowbar
And come after me

When I go out
I see him behind me
Three times we've moved
He's found us again

If I kill myself
At least I'll die easy
At least I'll know why
At least I'll know when

The refuge is bare
The floors and walls echo
Nothing reminds me
Of comfort or home

But here I can sleep
And here I can rest
Here I have friends
I'm no longer alone

(http://lyrics.wikia.com/Peggy_Seeger:Emily)

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