

4 Singer-songwriters and the English folk tradition

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The subjects of this chapter are a heterogeneous collection of individuals, distinguished by far more than they share, but ultimately owing their greatest debt, and generally their identity, to the Second (British) Folk Revival and its inheritors.¹ The folk tradition, of course, is just that: marked by the encounter with traditional songs and dances, many of these musicians share(d) the desire both to maintain that tradition and keep it relevant to contemporary listeners. It is the primacy of that encounter, and of the continued commitment to the folk genre,² which marks out all the singer-songwriters I identify below. The English folk tradition,³ from the early days of the Second Revival of the 1950s through to the present, has frequently blurred that apparent purity (in the way that folk traditions are assumed to modify their material), both implicitly and explicitly, and one outcome of this blurring is a particular line of singer-songwriters that it is the purpose of this chapter to survey. Historically, it is possible to divide these musicians into three generations. The first generation, those involved with the revival and its immediate aftermath,⁴ tended to place more emphasis on the writing of a good song than on details of its performance. Politics is, perhaps, the dominant topic, although this comes in a number of guises. From the mid-1970s, and with the rise of the punk aesthetic, folk retreated to the margins of musical expression, and many writers appear to have become far less outspoken. From the late 1990s, partly with the rise of 'nu-folk', a new set of concerns and approaches can be discerned among the most recent, 'third', generation of singer-songwriters. Rather than stick to a historical narrative, I shall be most concerned, here, with the topics musicians have taken up (politics, geography, humour, emotional tone, the supernatural, and reference to the tradition), and with some stylistic generalisations concerning how these songs sound, broadly the move from songs conceived for live performance towards songs conceived for recorded arrangements. Since there is no comprehensive study of this music, my sources are generally the songs themselves, their recordings, articles in magazines like *fRoots* and *Musical Traditions* (see bibliography), a host of fan and artist websites, and the material I am developing for my own monograph on the English folk song tradition.

Origins

The starting-point for the renewal of this tradition is the work of Ewan MacColl and Bert Lloyd, effectively the instigators of the revival. MacColl worked initially with Joan Littlewood, forming Theatre Workshop as both actor and playwright, a role which incorporated some songwriting. He worked freelance for the BBC, a process which culminated in the famous *Radio Ballads*, broadcast between 1958 and 1964. An earlier programme spawned the Ballads and Blues club, forerunner of Britain's folk-club movement. An apologist for industrial folk song,⁵ many of MacColl's own songs focused on aspects of the lives of the working class, but usually written from a position of immense familiarity with traditional song, ballads, work songs, lyric songs and others. Bert Lloyd learnt some of his repertoire from an early sojourn in Australia; working as a left-wing journalist in England he became considered the foremost expert on traditional song (and he had a similar interest in industrial song). As singers, both recorded widely, mainly in the 1950s and 60s, both separately and together, largely singing traditional material. MacColl's own songs could easily be listed. 'Shoals of Herring', written for the third of the *Radio Ballads*, has become a well-known 'Irish traditional' song under the title 'Shores of Erin' (exemplifying the glory of the non-notated folk process). It is written from the perspective of the herring fisherman. 'Dirty Old Town' envisages industrial blight as containing the seed of socialist revival, a far cry from the stereotypical naïve view of the subject of folk songs. Likewise, perhaps, 'The Ballad of the Big Cigars', written in praise of the Cuban Revolution. MacColl's socialist principles underpin all his work, although 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face', written for his beloved Peggy Seeger, is both more personal and apparently more universal, judging by the very different people who have recorded it. In opposition to MacColl's case, Bert Lloyd's songs cannot be listed. For years it was assumed he simply sang songs he had collected himself, or had found in obscure earlier collections.⁶ In more recent years, it has become clear that he extensively rewrote many of the songs he sang, moving verses from song to song, filling in narrative gaps, often passing on the results to younger compatriots in the Revival. It is, however, impossible to trace all the cases, and details, of this rewriting. The creative approaches adopted by these two founding fathers come to represent two major forms of songwriting adopted by those in this line of tradition: writing from scratch (whether that means inventing lyrics to pre-existing melodies, or lyrics and melodies, alone, both of which were MacColl's approach, or whether that also means supplying chords and arrangement too); and surreptitious rewriting. This latter approach must not be sidelined, since in the tradition itself, it is and was engaged in by most experienced singers, consciously, and conscientiously, or not.

Politics

The politics of folk song in the 1950s and 60s was determinedly left wing, partly because of particularly MacColl's influence, and partly because so many traditional songs and broadside ballads are written from the perspective of the disenfranchised and the wage labourer. Leon Rosselson came to prominence as a songwriter on the first BBC satirical TV show, *That Was the Week That Was*.⁷ As part of the early folk group The Galliards,⁸ he had already recorded international folk songs and would work with such later luminaries as Martin Carthy, Roy Bailey and Frankie Armstrong. His songs spring directly out of his socialism, whether protesting particular disasters such as the Aberfan school tragedy of 1966 ('Palaces of Gold'), social relations ('Don't Get Married, Girls'), capitalism *tout court* ('Who Reaps the Profits? Who Pays the Price?') or celebrating movements such as the Diggers⁹ ('The World Turned Upside Down') or individuals like the late Victorian socialist polymath William Morris ('Bringing the News from Nowhere'). Rosselson's songs are strong on lyrics (of which there are frequently very many) but do not fit conventional stereotypes. Some ('Who Reaps the Profits', for instance) show the definite influence of Georges Brassens and French topical song. Such political topics remain relevant, as shown by Devonian Steve Knightley's 'Arrogance, Ignorance and Greed' (2009),¹⁰ which has already travelled widely. In the 1960s, Jeremy Taylor had been working as a young teacher in South Africa, falling foul of the authorities with songs like the comedic 'Ag Pleez Deddy' which questioned acquisitive culture. Back in the UK, many of his songs raise general problems through focusing on stereotypical individuals, such as 'Mrs Harris' (with its complex plot lampooning publicity-seeking do-gooders) or 'Jobsworth'. Both Rosselson and Taylor must communicate directly – lyrics are clear, melodies syllabic and unornamented, and guitar parts straightforwardly strummed, for the most part. The greater degree of arrangement apparent in Knightley's recording of his song (with his folk duo, Show of Hands) demonstrates a shift in perspective I shall return to. While some writers pursue their politics with anger and others with (very pointed) humour, Ralph McTell's approach is more one of regret. 'England 1914' captures a beautifully delineated scene which, only at the last, points up that war has already started, while the gay ignorance of the male protagonists off to war in 'Maginot waltz' is, in retrospect, still shocking.¹¹

Indeed, the 1914–18 war often surfaces as a source for songs of social justice. Active since the mid-1960s, Harvey Andrews' 'Margarita' again contrasts a (distant) war with the last dance of a soldier off to the front. Mick Ryan's stunning 'Lark Above the Downs' contrasts the freedom of the lark with the first-person view of the execution of a young victim of shellshock, but it also illustrates another key feature of some

singer-songwriters – Ryan, as singer, most usually works with accompanying instrumentalists – Paul Downes, as on the 2008 recording of this song, or Pete Harris. Ryan is better known in folk circles as a writer of ‘folk operas’, perhaps the inheritor of the ‘ballad opera’ genre relaunched by Peter Bellamy’s influential *The Transports* of 1977. Scotland-born Australian writer Eric Bogle’s ‘Willie McBride’ (1976) is equally powerful.¹² It takes the form of a one-sided dialogue between a contemporary sitting on the grave of young war victim McBride and the dead young soldier, a discourse which angrily questions both this, and all, conflict. Again, it illustrates another general factor, for the song was for years better known in others’ versions (that of June Tabor most notably), and perhaps Bogle is not the best interpreter of his own material. Other wars are also mined for material. Martin Carthy, doyen of the Second Revival, took a set of anonymous lyrics from the Commonwealth period to create ‘Dominion of the Sword’ (1988) but, rather in the fashion of Bert Lloyd, cuts material and adds two new verses, on the politics of South Africa and Greenpeace. This may seem a strange mixture but, allied to a powerful Breton tune full of awkward cadences, they all strengthen the song’s ‘might is right’ message. Among the younger generation of singer-songwriters, Gavin Davenport’s ‘False Knight’ (2012) leans heavily on traditional balladry, while commemorating the death of his own grandfather in the 1939–45 war. Ewan McLennan’s already celebrated ‘Joe Glenton’ (2012) narrates the tale of a soldier turned conscientious objector within the recent Afghanistan conflict, and notably his guitar accompaniment is simpler in this song, whose details are so important, than in others he sings.

We should not be surprised at the dominant presence of what I am calling political songs – the roots of the revival in socialism and CND marches to Aldermaston left a long legacy,¹³ and songs which protest a situation remain common. Sometimes, the topic is profound, as in Dave Goulder’s simple ‘Easter Tree’ (no later than 1977) which does little more than note ways people are killed by ‘civilised’ society. Well known as a dry-stone waller, Goulder’s website catches the tone of so many of these musicians,¹⁴ enumerating a rich, complex identity strong on community, and within which the description ‘professional musician’ is notably absent. In this song there is no moral, no conclusion, as in the best traditional songs: that is left up to you. But politics as the protestation of inequalities, of all kinds, can become too simple a topic. Ralph McTell’s gentle ‘Streets of London’ became so well-known and widely performed in the 1970s that it has become almost unplayable now. Ralph May took his stage name from the American blues singer Blind Willie McTell, in homage to the ragtime/blues guitar style which was the bedrock of so many of the leading figures of the 1960s–80s. Roy Harper preferred a simple, strummed style as backdrop to a rich lyrical palette; his less specific ‘I Hate the White Man’ is

still too potent to be easily taken up by any other singer. To listen to Bert Jansch, however, is to be beguiled by the intricate finger style and altered tunings which contributed so much to the distillation of an English folk-guitar style by the end of the 1960s:¹⁵ his 'Needle of Death' is merely, perhaps, the best of those songs which take the side of the no-hoper. These latter songs typify what seem to be the two dominant attitudes in this repertory – the sheer commitment to a just cause which can turn to anger (in Harper's song) and compassion (in Jansch's). And, perhaps that explains why there are so very few songs within this tradition which explore the egotism of the singer/writer.

A further, much-mined political topic concerns the pace of change and/or ecological concerns. The gnomic, almost riddle-like structure of Yorkshireman Pete Coe's¹⁶ 'Seven Warnings' (2004) conveys its power through an almost necessary distancing of the narrative from reality, otherwise too grim to bear. Richard Thompson's 'Walking Through a Wasted Land' (1985) is more matter-of-fact, while his direct delivery avoids any pleasantries. The resilience, part-feminist, part-mythic, hinted at in Karine Polwart's 'Follow the Heron' (2006) offers a more poetic take (more often found in what I identified above as the third generation), while many of her songs are concerned with a range of contemporary social concerns. West Country singer Nigel Mazlyn Jones' songs are frequently activated by an infatuation with the very earth, songs such as 'Behind the Stones' (1999). This concern for the ground, and by extension a certain groundedness, leads me to a second type of subject matter.

Locality

Traditional song is often strong on a sense of place. Sometimes specific locations are given, sometimes types of location (forest, ship, field, coalmine), but we are rarely left completely to guess. A similar emphasis can be found in much of the newly written material where the location can, occasionally, mythologise the entire land. Although no writer majors on this theme, individual examples are notable, such as Maggie Holland's 'A Place Called England' (1999, and well-known through June Tabor's recording), Ashley Hutchings' 'This Blessed Plot' (2003, with its use of those resonant phrases from John of Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*) or Steve Knightley's 'Roots' (2006), which ties national identity to music. Despite the material reality of the songs' subject, the earth of England, there is also an insinuated mythic identity which few writers try entirely to deny.

More common than writing of 'England' is the presence of regional distinction. Particular writers are associated with, and often write about, regions and, in some cases, specific counties: to speak of established

writers, Northumbria for Jez Lowe and Peter Bond, Gloucestershire for Johnny Coppin, Teesside for Vin Garbutt, Derbyshire for John Tams, Wiltshire for Mick Ryan, Somerset for Fred Wedlock, etc. There is no competitive element here, more normally an attempt to display commonalities of the singer's locale, thus Jez Lowe's humorous invention of time spent in 'Durham Gaol', his sentimental recounting of pit ponies in 'Galloways' (both 1985), or his study of the Newcastle writer Jack Common in 'Jack Common's Anthem' (2007). Coppin offers an alternative approach, frequently setting the words of established Cotswold poets (John Drinkwater, Ivor Gurney, W. H. Davies) in addition to writing his own lyrics. Pete Morton's Leicester background creeps into the lament that is 'Rachel' (1987), but the specificity of a local landmark gives the song particular poignancy, as does Bob Pegg's curious transplanting of 'Jesus Christ Sitting on Top of a Hill in the Lake District' (1973). Perhaps this suggests that the local resists the global in constructions of folk song, in England at least. It is also important to note that some regional writers remain regional. As a teenager going to folk clubs in Dorset I remember how widely Mike Silver's 'Country Style'¹⁷ was taken up, and yet now common knowledge of the song seems to be restricted to Germany, where Silver has frequently worked.

Humour

A certain pointed humour is often apparent in traditional songs, usually directed at pomposity, wealth and advantage. Fred Wedlock's 'The Vicar and the Frog' (1973) is a contemporary take on this approach.¹⁸ Sometimes, humorous songs take the form of parodies, as in Scotsman Hamish Imlach's 'Black Velvet Gland' (c. 1967),¹⁹ while the ironic self-parody of Adge Culter's 'I am a Zider Drinker' (1976) loses nothing through its lack of subtlety. The comedy in Dave Goulder's 'The Sexton and the Carpenter' (1971) is black indeed, but with plenty of forerunners within the tradition. Many singers – McTell, Coe and Rosselson for example – have a large output of children's songs where, again, humour is often to the fore. Shows for children, whether broadcast or live, remain an important avenue for the folk writer. Other satirists, like Jake Thackray, worked at arm's length from the tradition although his starting-place mirrored Rosselson's. Writers like Mike Harding combine traditional material with humorous songs, such as 'The Number 81 Bus' (1972) which, again, relies on geographical specificity for some of its humour (Harding is now better known as a BBC radio presenter). Even mainstream comedians like Jasper Carrott are part of this story – the risqué parody 'Magic Roundabout' (1975) originated, like many of his other songs, in his own Birmingham folk club.

Compassion

I suggested above that the dominant aesthetic positions to be found in this repertoire are probably those of anger and compassion. Anger, of course, is most appropriately found in a range of political song and usually needs striking imagery, beautifully countoured melody and very careful word choice (the culminating ‘again, and again, and again, and again’ in ‘Willie McBride’, for instance) to avoid becoming an unsophisticated rant. An unconsidered compassionate tone, of course, can in turn become almost inconsequential: songs like Donovan Leitch’s Dylanesque ‘Catch the Wind’ (1965) and Ralph McTell’s idyllic ‘Kew Gardens’ (1970) demonstrate how careful a writer must be here. John Tams has had a long career as a theatre musician. In some of his songs (‘Harry Stone’ (2000), or the anthemic ‘Raise Your Banner’ (1986)), the tone of compassion for his subjects moves, by way of Tams’ commitment, close to anger. Bill Caddick spent much of his career with musicians, including Tams, originating in National Theatre productions of the 1970s. His ‘The Old Man’s Song’ (co-written with Tams in the 1980s) typifies the compassionate depth that some writers can go to in order to try to understand another’s experience – there is little doubt that it takes as its subject ‘growing old disgracefully’. As with any other first- or second-generation singer, the content, however, lies securely in the words, and to a lesser extent the melody, as we would expect from a song. A comparison with the much younger Lisa Knapp’s ‘Two Ravens’ (2013) is instructive. Knapp’s song is ‘about’ Alzheimer’s disease, according to a number of sources, and yet this reading is far from obvious. She sings with a markedly compassionate tone, and the instrumentation of her recording is gentle, if the combination of sounds is slightly unconventional. But the sounds of the recording are at least as important as the ‘song’ in enabling the listener to make sense of the experience.

Personal experience

The degree of personal experience apparent in traditional song is moot. Where songs take a personal perspective, it is normally an anonymous, or anonymised, one. New songs often take this line, but are enabled to appear convincing because of the apparent life experience of the author. The career of Cyril Tawney is a case in point. Joining the Royal Navy immediately after the war, he became the first English ‘professional folk singer’ by the late 1950s. While his songs are written from personal experience, because so many of them speak of the life of many a sailor (‘Oggie Man’, ‘Sally Free and Easy’, or ‘The Grey Funnel Line’), they retain a usability absent from the songs of some revivalist singers. This raises another issue

particular to this repertory – the quality of a song is sometimes judged by the degree to which other singers take it up and modify it. Too personal and it fails this test. Many of Sydney Carter's²⁰ songs count here: 'The Crow on the Cradle', for instance, which at first hearing appears almost a lullaby (a tone most performers emphasise), turns out to be a vicious anti-war song. 'Lord of the Dance' is widely known, and widely used in some schools. The tune is taken from an old Shaker hymn,²¹ and yet in its rewriting, mythologising aspects of the life of Christ, it clearly belongs in the folk tradition. Martin Simpson's 'Never any Good' (2007), essentially a personal biography of his father, but sung with great compassion, is sufficiently vague about its narrative that, combined with the wealth of rich imagery it offers, it becomes possible for amateur singers to pick it up. Other writers manage to catch this self-effacing tone, even in a folk rock context, particularly Richard Thompson ('Down Where the Drunkards Roll' (1974), 'I Misunderstood' (1991)) and Sandy Denny ('Who Knows Where the Time Goes?' (1968), 'One More Chance' (1975), 'Solo' (1973)). Both Thompson and Denny rose to notice with the band Fairport Convention: while Denny perhaps convinces a listener that her personal experiences have a core commonality, and while the same can be said of the experiences recounted in Thompson's songs, the consistent life failures of his protagonists suggests it is less likely the experiences are Thompson's own.

Mention of Thompson and Denny introduces yet another distinctive feature of these musicians. While some operate as soloists, or with a small number of backing musicians, as would be expected from 'singer-songwriters' in any other genre, the birth of folk rock in the late 1960s – an approach which remains current to the present – means that some singer-songwriters work in a band context. This was true of Thompson and Denny, of Ashley Hutchings, and later of Dave Swarbrick and Chris Leslie, all particularly with Fairport Convention. It became the case for Maddy Prior, particularly when working outside the band Steeleye Span (such as the songs on *Lionhearts* (2003) concerning Henry II and his sons). With a new (post-punk) folk-rock generation, it became the case for the Oysterband, with usual lyricist Ian Telfer, and for Joseph Porter's pointed history lessons for Blyth Power. Subsequently, it's become the case for Little Johnny England, for writers Gareth Turner and P.J. Wright.

The new tradition

Most writers who have come out of the tradition seem, at one time or another, to have felt a need to make that lineage explicit. Not only does this seem to be the best explanation for the plethora of faux traditional

songs produced, but it explains why a very large majority of singer-writers still include traditional songs in their repertoire. Sometimes, the inauthenticity of faux trad songs is blatant for humorous effect (such as Paddy Roberts' 'The Ballad of Bethnal Green' from 1959), but equally historically located. Only rarely, I suspect, is there any attempt by a writer to pass off a newly minted song as a true traditional. The motive almost always appears to be one of homage to a canon consisting, in free-reed virtuoso John Kirkpatrick's words, of 'captivating stories told in beautiful language and extraordinary melodies.' A singer like Steve Tilston has made something of a speciality of this mode of working: 'The Naked Highwayman' (1995) pictures a narrative which could so easily have had an eighteenth-century origin, but probably didn't. 'Nottamun Town Return' (2011) takes off from the old evergreen 'Nottamun Town', adding a powerful contemporary slant. Richard Thompson's 'The Old Changing Way' (1972) invents a plausible travelling life with a final moral of what happens when you fail to 'share with your nearest'. Thompson's songs, while frequently alluding to the tradition in tone or musical arrangement, sit a little apart in being drawn so often from the mis-turnings of contemporary life. Chris Wood sometimes sets the lyrics of Hugh Lupton: their joint song 'One in a Million' (2005) completely rewrites a traditional tale, bringing it into the present – the narrative of a lost ring eventually recovered does not give the easy optimism of popular song, but the outcome is positive nonetheless.

Kate Rusby first rose to prominence in the mid-1990s, at the start of the latest generation. Known originally for her approach to traditional songs, some of her own songs could almost pass as traditional, with their slightly archaic language and narrative ('I Courted a Sailor', 'Matt Highland' (both 2001)), although the effortless virtuosity of her working band perhaps belies this. The same goes for the younger Bella Hardy's celebrated 'Three Black Feathers' (2007), her own take on the night-visiting song (less a genre in its own right than a group of genres). Mastery of both language and melodic contour is necessary to bring off such songs: it is tempting to identify them as pastiche, since they work against existing models, but this seems unfair in that the best of them certainly have an identity in their own right. This mastery is, perhaps, even more important for singers who adapt, in Lloyd fashion, pre-existing songs. I have already referred to Martin Carthy in this context, and shall do so again. Nic Jones, whose musical tastes went far and wide, and who insisted he became a folk singer 'by accident', was well known for rewriting lyrics and tunes ('Musgrave', 'Annan Water' (both 1970), 'Canadee-i-o' (1980)), to make them usable, or even simply to assuage his boredom at singing the same song the same way for gig after gig. Sometimes, the relationship between new and traditional material is more tangential – Bella Hardy's 'Mary Mean' (2009)

takes just one verse from the song ‘The Water is Wide’, but it brings a striking sense to its new context.

The supernatural

Many traditional songs incorporate aspects of the supernatural, often in the guise of resurrected or reincarnated corpses, or of other-worldly beings. While there seems to be some resistance to incorporating such elements overtly in new songs, they do nonetheless appear in other guises. Dave Goulder’s ‘January Man’ (1970) personifies the months of the year in the same way that a traditional song like ‘John Barleycorn’ personifies the process of beer-making. Martin Carthy’s ‘Jack Rowland’ (1982) draws from a number of sources, including the traditional tale ‘Child Rowland and Burd Ellen’, but does not stint in its shape-changing climax. Interestingly, although details make clear that Jack’s journey is into Elfland, this is not actually stated in the song. Some of Chris Wood’s songs disport a wary wonder as he reworks this tradition in the context of a stark socialism: ‘England in Ribbons’ (2007), which takes its cue from mummers’ plays before bringing the narrative up to date – the ‘ribbons’ are something England is both bedecked in, and torn into; or ‘Walk this World’ (2005), the beginnings of a modern-day wassail; or ‘Come Down Jehovah’ (2007) with its affirmation of the sacredness of everyday life, aligned to a love of the land to which I have already drawn attention. Among younger writers, Emily Portman’s ‘Hatchlings’ (2012) takes as its topic the myth of Leda, but in a manner far from straightforward, and with a concern for musical arrangement more typical of contemporary writers than of previous generations.

Contemporary approaches

The most recent generation of folk singers seems to have developed a new relationship to tradition, in that their own intervention in the narratives they sing is far more marked than among earlier singers. Seth Lakeman has become emblematic of this approach, in his rewriting of widely known songs, an approach which seems to sit mid-way between MacColl’s and Lloyd’s. His ‘The Setting of the Sun’ (2006) revises the song sometimes known as ‘Polly Vaughan’. He turns it from a third-person to a first-person perspective, in the process shearing the narrative of its branches and turning it into a streamlined account of disaster. Alasdair Roberts goes further, dismembering songs in order to create new situations. His ‘I Fell in Love’ (2003) seems to draw images and narrative elements from traditional songs ‘The Elf Knight’, ‘Pretty Polly’, and ‘The Bows of London’ without settling on any of them. In his narrative, the protagonist sings of

dismembering his lover's body to create music, a metaphor for Roberts' own process, perhaps. Gavin Davenport's recent 'From the Bone Orchard' (2013) explicitly refers to the body of traditional song in a moment of lucid self-awareness, as had Richard Thompson's 'Roll over Vaughn [sic] Williams' four decades earlier (1972).

Perhaps the most notable recent development in this tradition concerns the distinction between singers and writers. In the 1950s, the early writers would also sing many traditional songs, indeed ones they themselves may well have collected or unearthed from nineteenth-century (or earlier) collections. From the early 1960s through at least to the 1980s, either one tended to be a singer-songwriter majoring on singing one's own songs, or one did not openly write. The current generation of singers, however, have frequently turned to writing (usually having made an impact as a singer). There are two different stories to tell here, too. Some major performers – Eliza Carthy and Jon Boden, for instance – seem to become serious songwriters at the point at which they produce albums which seem a long way from the tradition (respectively *Angels and Cigarettes* (2000) and *Painted Lady* (2006), for instance), bringing that writing experience back to folk performance. Earlier singers who became writers and moved away from folk (such as Al Stewart, Roy Harper, Richard Digance) did not generally return.²² More recent singers who became writers – I have already mentioned Knapp, Polwart, Portman, MacLennan, Davenport, but many others too – work from within accepted approaches and standard 'folk' venues (folk clubs, arts centres, folk festivals).

In this chapter I have tried to identify the major features of songwriting within the tradition set by the Second Revival: the writing of complete songs and the intervention in pre-existing songs; the presence of singer-songwriters not only as soloists, and as not necessarily the best singers of their own material; the dominance of anger and compassion as modes of emotional expression; some degree of continuity of subject matter with traditional songs and the avoidance of the confessional, personal tone; both continuity and generational distinction across six decades of writing. Of these, it is perhaps the distinctive tone of the current generation of writers which might be regarded as most marked: in their emphasis on arrangement, on the ways these songs sound in rendition, found within this current generation, we may suspect that the practice of writing new folk songs will not remain unchanged for much longer.

Notes

1 The First Revival, also known as the late Victorian/Edwardian revival, is dated to (approx.) 1890–1920. While it was, perhaps more extensively, concerned with a

revival of folk-dance practices, the Second Revival was far more concerned with re-utilising and re-imagining folk song.

2 By this I mean performing at venues and events for folk music, a continuity with traditional topics, manners of articulation and instrumentation, an unusually high level of accessibility to fans, participation in the virtual community of performers, etc.

3 More space would have enabled me to cover the Scots and Irish revivals specifically too – I have tended to be a little cavalier in not entirely excluding them from this chapter.

4 I.e. those working in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s.

5 I.e. the songs emanating from cultures with new, post-rural, working practices, from the late eighteenth century onwards.

6 The earliest English collections of folk songs date to the sixteenth century, while individual songs could be found in print a century earlier, even though this is considered an essentially oral tradition.

7 Broadcast in 1962–3.

8 Active c. 1959–62.

9 A group of English agrarian socialists, active in 1649–50, far more influential through their historical memory than their actual activities.

10 Where I cite dates, they are dates of the first (available) recording rather than of writing, since the latter are not normally made known (and, in this genre, with its emphasis on live performance, the ontological distinction between writing a song and recording a track can broadly be maintained).

11 McTell's location of the Maginot Line in World War I well exemplifies the fictionality which operates between song and experience.

12 Sometimes known as 'The Green Fields of France' and 'No Man's Land'.

13 The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament dates to 1958, and marches to the site of British nuclear weapons production in Berkshire. Fears of nuclear annihilation were rife throughout Europe during the 1950s and 60s and membership of CND came from all sections of society.

14 Available at: www.davegoulder.co.uk (accessed December 2014).

15 Other major contributors to the style included Davy Graham, John Renbourn, Dick Gaughan, and Martin Carthy. Jansch was, and Gaughan is, a Scot.

16 Coe is a veteran of the 1980s folk movement which tried, with little success, to argue against Margaret Thatcher's brand of politics.

17 I can find no precise date for this, a song which was long unrecorded, but memory situates it in the early 1970s.

18 I have in mind traditional songs like 'The Friar in the Well'.

19 This takes off the Anglo-Irish standard 'Black Velvet Band'.

20 A major writer of important songs coming out of the 1950s/60s movement, Carter himself rarely performed.

21 Many first-, and some second-generation writers would take established melodies as the basis for a new song. This practice is far rarer in the new millennium.

22 Digance plays annually at Fairport Convention's Cropredy Festival.