

## Jeff Gillett – the survival of traditional folksong



### **It's easy to feel negative about the survival of traditional folksong.**

It's certainly true - but it's been true for a long time - that there are so-called folk clubs where you seldom hear a traditional song (although I know one such club where the appearance, independently, of two newcomers on a regular basis changed the situation considerably for the better in that respect.) Some don't even call themselves 'folk-clubs' any more: they are 'acoustic music clubs'.

(In one such club, I announced what I was going to sing as 'the first traditional song of the evening', only to hear from half-way down the room a voice proclaiming that: 'This is not a folk-club'.

My response was: 'I didn't know that that meant that traditional songs were banned!')

It's also true that there are far fewer folk-clubs than there were 50 years ago (or even 30 years ago). There are some traditionally oriented clubs still thriving, where traditional songs are welcomed, including ballads, and where the chorus singing is truly uplifting. In some such clubs, the main concern is the age demographic. However, there are more young singers around - and good young singers, too - with a genuine enthusiasm for traditional song than I can remember being the case for many years.

One anecdote is enough to reflect my reasons for optimism (although I'm well aware that this story has the potential to open another can of worms... or two!) I was at a local musicians' session some months ago. The turn-out was unusually low but included several visitors and an unusually high proportion of singers - with the result that far more songs were sung than usual (including one from a young singer who just happened to be in the pub and wasn't really part of the session).

Anyway, one of the instrumentalists - a guitarist - gave an unaccompanied rendition of the Copper Family's 'Good Ale'. It's a fine chorus song, but it does include one violent and misogynistic verse. I wondered how this (young) singer was going to handle that verse. Answer: he left it out.

What then surprised me was the response from two of the other visitors, who clearly did not know the singer, but who expressed approval at his omission of the offending verse. They knew the verse was there: they knew he'd chosen not to sing it.

What struck me in particular was that we had what was pretty much an impromptu and inter-generational gathering of singers, all of whom were interested in and appreciative of each other's contributions and all of whom were thoroughly familiar with a traditional song very much associated with the Copper family. (Of course, they may have heard it in chorus-based song sessions - but it was clear that everyone knew where it came from.)

Several other songs were sung, and not just choruses.

And all this was happening in the bar of my local pub: a pub with a reputation for live and amplified music, including occasional folk acts, but on a quiet night when probably fewer than half the people there had come specifically for music. But at times, there was definitely a sense that the whole pub was listening.

I found the whole episode rather encouraging.

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