

Writing Songs - Dick Henrywood

I am not a songwriter but I have been involved in folk music since the famous folk revival of the 1960s and have many great memories. Nick Jones in his heyday is possibly the most precious, but others include the Young Tradition, Carthy and Swarbrick, Tom Paxton, the Ian Campbell Folk Group, the Dransfields, Bert Jansch, John Renbourn and Jacqui McShee (Pentangle), the High Level Ranters, Tony Rose, and even Diz Disley. Down the years I was influenced by Cockersdale (before the untimely death of Keith Marsden), and also mourned the passing of Folly Bridge, possibly one of the best harmony groups not to have achieved real recognition (and through whom I met Melanie). Inspirational songwriters include Keith Marsden, of course, but also Graeme Miles, John Conolly and Bill Meek.

But enough of these rambling reminiscences, my own contribution began at the Imperial College Folk Song Club where I was initiated into the folk world by two fellow-freshers from the North-East and soon picked up a guitar. Yes, we all did in those days, and I trundled off to Cecil Sharp House for a few lessons.

I remain very glad that I learnt to play various finger-picking styles, clawhammer and others, and was never led down the strumming route - no hobby horses there! Fortunately it was not long before I developed an interest in the concertina. I never was any good at tuning guitars (no electronic tuners then), even my Levin Goliath. Concertinas stayed in tune and seemed a lot easier to carry around. I was lucky to pick up a decent Lachenal Excelsior in a junk

shop in West Bridgford for the grand sum of eight pounds, and even luckier to get it restored and tuned by Harry and Neville Crabb for another nine pounds. That is another fond memory, visiting the Crabbs in their ancient shop in Islington, very much a Victorian Aladdin's cave. Long gone now, of course.

I performed at the college club for six years or so, initially as a duo with my late friend Paul Steer, but with others too. I remember many of them and have recently discovered that one, Chris Flegg, has gone on to some success in jazz and blues (www.chrisflegg.com). When I look back at my early song books I am struck by the very wide range of material we chose but it was all typical of the era - Irish songs of resistance alongside the blues, traditional English folksongs, American material, protest songs from singer/songwriters, and a fair smattering of music hall and other comic numbers. It was a fantastic experience.

It was during my time at college that I wrote my first song. One Christmas I was inspired by an article in the Telegraph Magazine (December 1967) to assemble a song about a Christmas tragedy in 1847 when the frigate HMS Avenger was sunk off Algeria. The song was of no great distinction then, partly because I stole a tune from a pop song of the day called 'Seasons in the Sun'. Much later, in 1993, I decided the words were worth rescuing and wrote a new tune and chorus, so my very first

song, 'The Loss of HMS Avenger', still survives.

At that period I started to write several other songs, but never really finished any. I was, and remain, inspired to write choruses, but find it much more difficult to assemble verses. I still have fragments of songs about May Day (dating back to its introduction as a Bank Holiday in 1978), pottery workers (allied to my involvement in antique pottery), cutlers in Sheffield, and even a virtually complete monologue chronicling Albert (he of the lion at Blackpool fame) and his career as a Morris dancer. Do such fragments qualify me as a song writer? I think not!

A more determined effort at song writing dates from October 1990. I visited the Bygones museum in Babbacombe, near Torquay where they have a recreated Victorian street with various shops packed with products of the time. I remembered a similar display in the Castle Museum in York and also visited the Opie Museum of Packaging and Advertising, then in Gloucester Docks but now recreated as the Museum of Brands in Notting Hill, London. Other memories were of the corner shop in Oakdale, near Poole, where I hefted boxes of deliveries around the local area on a butcher's bike. This all came together in the song 'Soft Shoe Shopping'. I have to explain that the title refers to women being despatched to the local off-licence to fetch a jug of beer for their man, quaffing half of it and getting it refilled to take back home, all this done in their carpet slippers. The song was well-received by inhabitants of the older generation (where I now seem to reside).

This was followed by a more productive period which saw 'Pierhead Painters' written in February 1991, 'The Gleaning Bell' in December 1991 and 'Brusher Mills' in January 1992. 'Pierhead Painters' was inspired by a small collection of naive ship portraits I had assembled, and 'The Gleaning Bell' was written specifically for Melanie based on the four ages of woman, four colours, four elements and four seasons. It has been well-received now that we perform it as a family with Melanie and son Ross providing accompaniment on the handbells. 'Brusher

Mills' was inspired by old postcards (yet another of my interests) depicting the snakecatcher and his grave in the New Forest. That started off with a tune supposed to be based on a slip jig in 9/8 but ended up as a rather odd slow waltz.

'Shun the Drink' appeared in July 1994. It is a spoof temperance shanty which we then sang in the Theatre Bar at Sidmouth Festival. I didn't know it at the time but discovered much later that it had been recorded by Roger Smith who took it back to the shanty group Hanging Johnny to be featured in their act and on an album 'The Sea Quell' issued in 1996. (I still await the barrow load of royalties . . . !)

Then followed a lengthy fallow period which only ended when I finally managed to finish 'Both Barrels (NatelyScores)' in May 2008. I won't bore you with the full story of the 1994 edition of the AA Road Atlas and the long list of humorous double-barreled village names it yielded, but suffice it to say that the song has elicited quite a few laughs, which is very encouraging.

A string of half attempts has followed, choruses mainly, in my usual fashion, with one or two promising ideas. A harvest song and the story of the devil's stone seem the most promising. I find writing words really hard, and the teacher's comments in my school reports keep returning to haunt me - "This boy will never write" and "Must try harder"!

So there you have it - seven songs produced over nearly fifty years, and now eight years since my last. If you are interested you can hear them all on our family CD 'Spirits Flying High', or if a fiver seems too much, you can hear them free on SoundCloud (www.soundcloud.com/dickhenrywood). Comments would be welcome, but if you like any of them, please sing them. Like Steve Thomason I want our music to be live, and kept alive.

Dick Henrywood

The photograph shows a jug made by Bideford potter Harry Juniper. It features several of Dick's songs. Bideford Craft Pottery will be featured at Hanlon's on Tuesday, 13th September.

