

CARETAKERS

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Simon Jones kindly wrote of my work once in *fRoots*: “Authenticity is a big, big part of what he’s about”. This doesn’t concern my work as such. But let me throw that down as a gauntlet, and take things from there.

I’ve always felt the constant realignments that happen in the world of roots music do so predominantly through synchronicities, great or small. Reading Rychard Carrington’s articulate and deeply felt piece in *Songbook 3*, after I had already collated these thoughts, I was filled, not with a sense of dismay, but delight, that we should have taken so close a direction, even to the extent of shared terms. As far as I can see, we’re singing separate versions of a common song. It’s one I feel should be covered again and again. So I offer no apologies for any echoes to be heard here. This is how the song goes.

It begins with a confession of disquiet. In most of the places I look in contemporary culture I expect to find the manufactured and inauthentic. But not on the vibrant territory where I’ve spent most of my life rediscovering familiar pleasures and values. Recently – and never more so than during parts of the BBC Folk Awards a few months ago – I’ve been reminded of an ageing woman I knew who spent much of her time trying to ape the antics of her children and their friends, and succeeded only in humiliating herself, even though, in her own right, she had more natural verve than most of them put together. Something has gone awry. It disturbs me.

What generic music is may be more easily defined by what it isn’t; and while it may be like a nation in the Irish mould, which readily absorbs cultures and reforms them in its own image, it is not there to be claimed as a birthright by any who happen to be born in its territories, or show a passing familiarity with the idiom. Nor is it an escort whose favours can be cheaply bought. On the other hand, it isn’t the property of a collectors’ club who happen to share particular social inadequacies, a museum guarded by paunchy, bearded men and their simpering partners, repeatedly vilified, yet staunchly adherent to the stereotype. In contrast, it is marked by a genuine vitality, matched equally by groundedness. It is a state, companion, bond; yet it will not be hijacked or pinned down. It breathes in certain lives and spreads like a benign infection, setting fingers dancing along necks, stops and frets, and raising voices from the belly. It is political, by necessity, for it is rooted in all aspects of those lives. Much of its relentless organic activity takes place unseen. You may know it by its subtly formed leaf, its true colours.

Anathema are these. The self-conscious performer brandishing an inappropriate musical lexicon, rising from the ranks of those whose chief idea of music is a glorified aerobics class conducted by a distant figure with a daft grin, turning vinyl in the wrong direction. Abstruse arrangements weighing down often lightweight old songs, like so much matching baggage, as comical as a child on Crackerjack peering through his load of packages and cabbages, yet not without an element of the tragic: Lucky at the end of Pozzo’s whip. Home movies masquerading as artistic products, beloved of the burgeoning grants industry. The calculation of superficial image and effect: hype, posture, uniform, mannerism. They belong in those other places in the cultural landscape. Here, they constitute an invasion that can’t be accommodated, for like Blairite politics, they are deceitful, using honest material, turning it to their own advantage, then spinning it back at the people it comes from. The process is artificial, competitive. You may know it by its sheen, unnatural scale and hue. GM music. It damages your health.

To get at what it impersonates, how exactly the real regenerative forces within the tradition grow from its centre, its constant, it is always best to look at the actual, what

is felt and can be remembered. Perhaps it's no accident that I find myself drawn to the dying, and the dead, for this purpose now. Like the music itself, they harbour secrets that the inauthentic cannot penetrate. It is these secrets that preserve it.

Komedia Theatre, Brighton, January, 2004. An innovative folk band, based in Brittany, called Churchfitters, on stage, playing traditional tunes, songs and original material. At the centre, a tall, charismatic Belfastman named Anthony McCartan. Usually robust and irrepressible. Tonight, bald, skeletal, leaning against a bar stool in a trance, determinedly striking his bouzouki, eyes flicking like a sparrow in a cardboard box. Cancer in his lung, his bones, his brain. He has come, nonetheless, to do what he does best, in what for a long time was his adopted home town.

I met him here nearly thirty years ago. I'd survived my own self-willed encounter with oblivion. I was walking towards the sea when I heard a familiar tune on tin whistle from a pub called The Royal Sovereign. It reminded me at once of what I had forgotten on an arid course into despair. For this simple gift, I owe McCartan more than I can say. Yet all I can do tonight is clasp him to me in the dressing-room, making him wince in pain, to tell him that watching him go through a long set, crack jokes at his own expense and rouse his battered spirit to sing out the encores in his rich Belfast tones, was to witness one of the most stirring exhibitions of focus and commitment I have ever seen.

"See you soon," he says, as I leave. The ambivalence is deliberate. For we both know he could die in weeks. On the other hand, the kind of contact we have is what musicians work with. You meet as much, if not more, in your music. It transcends you. Whatever happens, I will see him soon.

If I had to choose a figure to represent the contemporary reinvigoration of traditional forms, the unsung or obscure forces constantly at work, it would be McCartan. It isn't because he's the uncle of two of my children; there has been much distance and enmity with the family. I knew it the moment we played together, taking a ramshackle band to Germany, called Bluebell's Anus. He had the same obsessive intimacy with the idiom I had found in the first fiddle player I worked with, another obscure figure who used to tramp the streets of Exeter lilting Michael Coleman reels when he wasn't up in London sessions, or getting himself entangled with certain Irishmen the British secret services were keeping a close eye on. There was nothing precious about either of them. McCartan treated his gifts as a singer, whistle and bouzouki player with humour and self-deprecation, as much as he lived his life with an arrogance and recklessness that combine in such characters to give them their stage-presence. He did go through a phase of wearing a blue leather jacket, but there was no need to manufacture any image, where cool lad meets mythical landscape. Lad and landscape had their own striking authenticity.

McCartan grew up on the Woodstock Road, a small Catholic enclave in Protestant Belfast, regularly spent time running from local hunting packs, had his mother and his sister beaten up (the initials UD remain in her forearm, carved there with a penknife before British soldiers prized her from the mob). He saw one brother put in Crumlin Road on trumped-up "terrorist" charges, and emerge with such a severely damaged mentality it later led to his suicide, and shortly afterwards, that of another brother. Gogi McCullough, who gave him his first whistle, was on the original version of the classic *Men Behind The Wire*, not too long before his band's transport was commandeered by "the boys" for genuine terrorist activity. On our trips across the Channel he was often pulled in and searched, on the strength of his name alone. Eventually the family had to leave Belfast, and have been beset by difficulties ever

since. When McCartan sang, “War has no conscience”, it wasn’t something he’d learned from textbooks in a student flat before he went down to the folk club to make the right noises. He’d learned it the hard way. The lyricism, innate sense of rhythm and instrumental finesse that mark so many Irish musicians combined with his personal history - itself a reflection of a wider narrative - and drove him to find new, valid means of expression. I believe this is how it works with all the truly potent figures working in the idiom. Other musicians who cross their paths are consequently inspired, and so the gifts pass on.

It certainly seemed to be the case when we travelled to the Rhineland in a big old Mercedes – a motley troupe with mandolins, bouzoukis, whistles, banjo, fiddle, guitars, and McCartan’s sisters in their traditional dancing gear. We may have lacked a certain formal delicacy, on the one hand, and weren’t prepared to play the Falls Road hit parade, on the other; but there was an energy at the heart of the music that derived chiefly from the McCartan experience. Sweeney’s Men met The Men They Couldn’t Hang. No holds barred.

However powerful the image is of the wilting figure at the Komedia, it is at Kaiserslautern in the late seventies that I choose to remember him. The gig was mighty: packed, hot, and wild. It was also cathartic. Weeks with six of us packed into a tiny flat in the red-light district of Mainz, all kinds of sexual antics within and around the band, crates of Konigsbacher, the influence of other substances, and a singer-songwriter altogether elsewhere, combined with rampant chemicals released by a set that rose notch after notch until it seemed there were demons playing in our place, so that by the end glasses were flying, struggles erupting, instruments scattered in all directions. I found myself curled under a corner table muttering incoherently how every Irish Airman Foresees His Death, while two heavily built local skinheads made their way towards me, intent on punishment. McCartan, who had stood bemusedly in the midst of it all, quietly placed himself between us, wearing the trickster’s grin that accompanied him everywhere. It wasn’t his build, or threat of violence, that stopped me getting beaten, merely a presence, which had filled the club all evening with his gifts, his inheritance, his real stature, turned into a mesmerising performance.

We helped clear the place up, and paid for the damage. The punch-line came a few days later. We picked up a lad hitch-hiking, and he proceeded to eulogise on what he saw, though he didn’t know a name for it then, as a new phenomenon - folk-punk - and asked how the eruption was so cleverly stage-managed, could we afford to do it every set? No one told him it was all for real. In retrospect I think no one should have. For it was one of those nights when we played what we were, a relentless expression of edge, anger, passion, and belief that had been stressed so strongly in the music it could do nothing but explode out of it. Not so many years later, people like The Pogues made a lot of money from this kind of energy. In that obscure club in Kaiserslautern, it all seemed new, almost inappropriate. It was by no means our last gig of its kind. But, of course, it was only the kind of fusion and release that has gone on for centuries, wherever the music has taken root.

Making your own folk-lore in the midst of one you work with, taking the well-trodden path of buskers and troubadours and offering experiences that will not be forgotten: this is one part of the career of the authentic roots musician. Yet it couldn’t happen without the still point such journeys start from, and return to. Surreally, I think perhaps we found that too in Bluebell’s Anus. Among the jigs, reels, and rebel rants,

at the heart of the set were some gentle rural English songs, in faithful two-part harmony. The Germans couldn't get enough of them. It should come as no surprise.

Bob Copper's death earlier this year, shortly after his state recognition, provoked the right sense of loss in all the right places, fuelled by immense resources of respect. If ever there was an emblem of the still point at the centre of tradition, here he was; an authentic link with the past, who became a highly articulate and perceptive historian and poet, though he remained, in himself, simple-hearted and plain-speaking. Unlike collectors who came down from the intellectual heights, he started from a humble position and resolutely stayed there.

Born of predominantly Irish stock, I was nonetheless lucky enough to live most of my childhood and adolescence in Rottingdean, Sussex. The particular hills, farms, lanes, valleys, village pubs and houses Bob made famous, I knew well. John Copper cut his teeth in the same village school as my sister, a stone's throw from the field where, as an eight year old, I climbed a haystack to find her having sex with a lad I'd watched disbelievingly, a few days before, decapitate a pigeon with a well-aimed flint. Yet when *A Song For Every Season* was published, with its intimate portraits of people who had lived on this land for hundreds of years, it was suddenly imbued with a living history, deepened and enriched. I started going to the Central Club in nearby Peacehaven, where the Coppers had decamped and ran a monthly folk club, and faithfully learned the songs. When I shared them with Anthony McCartan, we took them with us across the channel, as many others did, I'm sure. It felt like being armed with a secret weapon.

Musically, there are none of the pyrotechnics to be found in the Irish idiom. Bob, John, Ron et al barely sang together in any formally correct sense, but created their own medium. On club nights they made many of the professionals they booked as guests seem studied and overblown. Only certain performers - like Steve Turner, whose marked stutter magically disappeared when he launched into stunning versions of ballads like *The Isle Of St Helena*; Peter Bellamy, a tragic-comic figure to the end, who fought with his own demons before your eyes as he sang about the eyes of Nostradamus; Martin Carthy, with his deep sensitivity and courtesy, dancing his fingers through *The Famous Flower Of Serving Men* - managed to hit the right notes, in every sense. Unlike a particular cult figure of the time, who, full of drink and his own ego, could barely lift himself from the snooker table to give his lugubrious rendition of *Spencer The Rover*. In contrast, John Copper, with hunched shoulders and modestly lowered eyes, often fumbling with the words of his music hall songs, ran the club with an effortless interest in others and what they had to offer. When Bob began to accompany himself falteringly on the squeezebox, it somehow only seemed to reinforce the sense of his unique ability to communicate without self-consciousness. More often than not he had to leave early to deal with anxieties at home, and he made no secret of the difficulties it caused him. John had his own problems with the drink, but there were no histrionics. In fact the whole panoply of family life, with all its joys and griefs, was lived out among us with no vanity at all. However they were mythologised, they obstinately remained true to themselves, with a typically restrained Englishness. It was this kind of authenticity that spilled into their songs, as much as the more easily romanticised tradition they inherited from their forebears and the land they worked. Nowhere could be further from the explosive material planted on the Woodstock Road. Yet the effect on all of us who came into close contact was equally potent and unforgettable.

I felt this most keenly the night they celebrated John's wedding. The club, like Kaiserslautern, in its own English way, was heaving. At the height of the evening,

when the family sang *Come Write Me Down*, public and private lives simply merged into one vociferous commemoration. After all the handshakes and farewells I decided to meander back over the hills to Rottingdean. It was a long and unsteady journey. The songs not only kept turning in my head, but echoing across the fields as I made my way, by instinct, towards the lap of lights a couple of valleys to the west. I reached a moonlit field on the crest of the last hill about one in the morning, and lay down in the long grass to stare up at the stars. Whether we were all characters from a traditional song, or fragments of the communal voice that gave it life, I no longer knew nor cared. The past, with all its certainties, stretched round me, fused with the uncertain present, breathing gently. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, a brindled cow was peering down at me. I laughed till tears wet my cheeks, for I had rarely known a moment when I had felt so close to a true centre, an indelible scene where all sense of self disappeared, with appropriate absurdity, into otherness. It was the Copper family, and how they redefined the territory I already knew as mine, who made it happen.

I saw Bob Copper last on St Patrick's Day, not so many years ago, in a pub called The Geese Have Gone Over The Water. It was a fleeting moment. Standing with Mark Chadwick, cooing over the small child he dandled in his arms. Bob came past us on his way out. When greeted, his worn face broke into what was truly a seraphic smile, piercing the public mask with inner warmth and candour. Introduced to Mark, well aware of all he had achieved with The Levellers, on the other flank of the campaign, he turned the beam on him and nodded vigorously. For a few seconds, both forces at work in the tradition coalesced, in mutual recognition. It was a privilege to witness.

To his funeral, at St Margaret's Church, Bob was driven in a horse-drawn carriage, followed by hundreds of mourners. The service was punctuated with Copper songs, anecdotes and tributes from across the folk world. It was sincerely meant, and in keeping with all the man stood for. It so happened, for very personal reasons, I didn't want to be there. Instead I went later, as I have for many years, to Coppers' Corner in the graveyard, to sit quietly. My brother's ashes are buried just over the flint wall, in the memorial garden, where the same pair of goldfinches, it seems, have raised brood after brood each spring. I was overwhelmed there, not simply by a sense of personal and shared history drawn together, but by some force which transcends both, making us all inevitably part of the other, which initiates the urge to sing, to make, to offer and receive on the one collective territory we have been given.

This is as close as I can come to explain what it is that, at the deepest level, supports the structure of this music and the traditions which are built around it. Its power and cohesion are rooted here. It is transcendent. That's why it resists all shallow and ephemeral imitations. And that's why, perhaps, the dying and the dead most safely hold the key to its doors.

If – when – Anthony McCartan's funeral comes round, I doubt if I'll be there either. But I mean to mark it in my own way with a small wreath inscribed simply, Take Care. For it strikes me that what we are in all this are caretakers, in every sense of the word. If we have musical or lyrical gifts, and are fortunate enough to hit a vein where some form of history flows deeply, we are entrusted with a duty to preserve them. We must take care of them and in doing so, ourselves and each other. Take care to learn, to listen, absorb and reform the subtle idiom we are immersed in. To have the ingenuity to add to it, as unselfconsciously and exuberantly as those who have gone before us, with the most penetrating lyrics we can fashion, the keenest tunes; and yet take care to respect the simple core of what we work with, leave it as it

is. If we make records, in its name, take care they are produced with sensitivity, keeping the textures of all that is acoustic, the edge and fallibility of live performance, and not hide behind the clever, or contrived. Take care of those who trespass, not by opposing them, but by letting them pass through as insignificantly as they have come, to other places where they are in their element.

Take care, for we belong in this place, it is our element, though it is accessible to anyone across the world who enters with their own true gift and sense of history. It's a place of integrity, and celebration, a boundless wake for what has gone, and yet constantly returns. However filled with disquiet we may be now and then, I don't think it will be over for a long time yet. Take care, and we will make sure of that. For when it all comes down, that's why we're here, isn't it?

www.burbridgearts.org

For more on Anthony McCartan see www.churchfitters.com.