Language, the Singer and the Song

The Sociolinguistics of Folk Performance

The relationship between language and music has much in common – rhythm, structure, sound, metaphor. Exploring the phenomena of song and performance, this book presents a sociolinguistic model for analysing them. Based on ethnomusicologist John Blacking’s contention that any song performed communally is a ‘folk song’ regardless of its generic origins, it argues that folk song to a far greater extent than other song genres displays ‘communal’ or ‘inclusive’ types of performance. The defining feature of folk song as a multimodal instantiation of music and language is its participatory nature, making it ideal for sociolinguistic analysis. In this sense, a folk song is the product of specific types of developing social interaction whose major purpose is the construction of a temporally and locally based community. Through repeated instantiations this can lead to disparate communities of practice, which, over time, develop socio-cultural registers and a communal stance towards aspects of meaningful events in everyday lives that become typical of a discourse community. Additional resources for this publication are available at www.cambridge.org/watts

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Language, the Singer and the Song

The Sociolinguistics of Folk Performance

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Preface

R.J.W.

The idea of writing *Language, the Singer and the Song* reaches back at least as far as the final year of my career as full professor of Modern English Linguistics at the Institute for English Languages and Literatures at the University of Bern before my retirement in the summer of 2008. I knew I was going to miss the students and the wonderful times, academic and social, that both staff and students had enjoyed during my twenty-four years at Bern. So what was I going to do with the years of retirement ahead of me?

I had a number of ideas up my sleeve, of course, and in point of fact, two writing projects have already come to fruition. Both of these provided input into what I had been dreaming of writing for years, a fusion of my great active love of the folk song of the English-speaking world with my passion for pulling down hegemonically constructed assumptions about the English language. The first (*Language Myths and the History of English*) was a deconstruction of the potent myths surrounding the history of English from a discursive, sociolinguistic perspective. The second (*Letter Writing and Language Change*) was an editorial collaboration with Anita Auer and Daniel Schreier in investigating the historical need to readjust the focus of historical study by a sociolinguistic analysis of letter writing ‘from below’, i.e. socially ‘below’, from those who rarely get a look in when it comes to reconstructing how people used and use language socially. How much do we perform when we use language? And how do we shift our identities and our social relationships when we perform consciously for others and with others? That was it! It just had to be an investigation into the performing of songs from a sociolinguistic perspective. But I could hardly do this on my own.

F.A.M.

In hindsight, meeting Richard Watts in 1974 at what was then the biggest folk festival in Switzerland at Lenzburg was nothing short of fateful. I was seventeen, a wide-eyed, wildly enthusiastic folkie, and he was a prominent figure on
the Swiss folk scene. He has never let me forget how I, obviously star-struck, opened up what was to be the first of our many exchanges about the passion we shared, folk song and folk music. We ended up working together, on the stages of Swiss folk clubs and at venues that promoted acoustic music, but I also became first his student, then his assistant and finally his colleague at Bern University. It took some persuasion on his part to get me on board this project, as I was not at all sure what I could contribute to it, but, as it turned out, the different areas of linguistics we had explored over the years complemented each other well. In short, I am deeply grateful that he kept up the pressure and that I became part of this study, a culmination of a lifelong love for this kind of music in a scholarly exploration that draws richly on the practice of performing these songs in a variety of settings. Writing this book together with Richard was probably the most pleasurable foray into academic research I have ever been involved in.

As a Duet

At this point we would like to thank the people who helped us in the exploration of the topic and of the songs. Looking back, after the mention of the 1974 Lenzburg Folk Festival, we realise that what we do and think today, including this book project, is built on contacts, friendships and experiences with people, in academia and the folk music world, made over the long course of the years.

Many of those to whom we dedicate our thanks will not even be aware that we have written this book, and we have lost contact with many of them. Some of them, alas, are no longer with us. But without them, the book would have been impossible. Andy Irvine, who at the time was playing with Planxty, and R.J.W. were trying a few musical things out under a wall in the gardens of Lenzburg Castle on that ‘fateful’ day in 1974 when F.A.M. joined us. Andy’s singing and playing has been a source of inspiration to us ever since. R.J.W.’s folk ‘mentor’ at Leicester University, Roy Bailey, was instrumental in triggering his commitment to folk music, and it was Roy and Leon Rosselson who were the guests at the first festival. We would like to thank them for their support and enthusiasm.

The members of the High Level Ranters during the 1970s, Colin Ross (and his wife Ray Fisher, now, sadly, no longer with us), Ali Anderson, Tom Gilfellon and Johnny Handle, were regular visitors to Switzerland. What Roy began in terms of commitment, Johnny completed for R.J.W. with an unforgettable guest evening at the Leicester University Folk Song Club early in 1962. It was Johnny who sparked off R.J.W.’s love of the Northumbrian smallpipes and who gave him his first lessons in playing his own set. And it was Colin who made him a new chanter to give him a greater musical range. Tom invited Seamus Ennis to Switzerland for a tour after R.J.W. had first met
Seamus at his caravan home of ‘Easter Snow’ at Naul north of Dublin in 1971, and Tom also arranged for a cittern to be made for R.J.W. Both cittern and pipes are now in the capable hands of F.A.M. It was Ali who came to Switzerland for a breathtaking set of concerts with the English concertina and the smallpipes in the early 1970s. A heartfelt vote of thanks to all of you, in particular, bless his soul, to Seamus, who died in 1983.

As far as present musicians and friends go, a big thank you to the doyenne of folk song, Maddy Prior, for hosting such fascinating, inspirational workshops at Stones Barn – in particular the 2014 workshop on Child Ballads – which fundamentally rekindled F.A.M.’s interest, for being so generous with her time and her insights in allowing him to interview her at length, but also for having given so much great singing to the entire community. Without her work our musical tastes might have gone in a very different direction forty-five years ago. Thanks also to her daughter Rose Kemp and Rose’s father Rick for their insights into song-writing and performing when F.A.M. met them at the Stones Barn workshops, as well as for acting as sounding boards for some of our ideas.

No expression of thanks would be complete without mentioning Martin Carthy, guest at one of the Lenzburg festivals in the early 1970s and co-presenter at the Child Ballad workshop, but, most importantly, a wonderful person. He has been an inspiration since F.A.M.’s teenage years and R.J.W.’s late twenties, in making us realise how as performers, without having to follow the ‘tradition’ slavishly, we can be true to the spirit of a song and keep the music alive. F.A.M. also owes a debt of gratitude to ‘The Barn Stoners’, alumni of the Stones Barn workshops; in particular, Suze, Ella-Joy Hunton and Kevin Wilkins, sadly missed, for songs and friendship; Siobhan and Chris Nelson for great music, great songs and discussions about how we stylise our singing; to Peter Little for his company and his ability to galvanise an audience with his voice and his repertoire; and Lynn Goulborn for organising song gatherings and forays to clubs that have proved so useful for our understanding of current folk practices.

Will Kaufman has been a great help to us with his perceptive work on the American folk scene, in particular his way of bringing the music of Woody Guthrie to life. Thanks are also due to Norman Blake for his generosity in letting us use his song ‘Billy Grey’ and to Scott O’Malley for establishing contacts with Norman and answering so many of our questions. Eric Bogle was very generous in allowing us to present and discuss ‘No Man’s Land’ just as long as we used his first printed version of the song. We hope the interpretation of the genesis of the song is along the right lines. Thanks to Alexandra Burton, a librarian in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House, who was kind enough to send us her own photographs of the entrance to Cecil Sharp House and Kennedy Hall, the venue of the Maddy Prior performance.
On the academic side of the fence, it is not often that one encounters colleagues who are also ‘into’ folk music, but one such, for whom we have an abiding affection, is Paul Simpson of Queen’s University, Belfast. Thank you, Paul, for supporting us and thank you for an absolutely unforgettable Poetics and Linguistics Association meeting at the Åbo Akademi in Finland many many years ago, which we turned into a succession of three folk gigs reaching far into the small hours of the morning. Back in Bern, this work could not have been undertaken without the support and encouragement of F.A.M.’s old colleagues Simon Hicks, Dewi Williams and Margaret Mace-Tessler, and his new colleagues, Dave Britain and Crispin Thurlow, who all gave him the feeling that this work mattered. Thanks also go to Britta Sweers for conversations about folk music and folk singing that left F.A.M. buzzing with enthusiasm.

F.A.M. thanks the University of Bern for giving him a sabbatical in the spring term of 2015 to concentrate fully on this undertaking. And of course his thanks go to all those students whose feedback in related seminars and discussions helped set him straight on more than one occasion. We thank all those at Cambridge University Press for even being interested in this project, and in particular Helen Barton for showing the professional patience to get us to redo it and broaden its scope in the wake of justified criticism from the reviewers. With a vote of deep thanks and love for putting up with us over the period of writing, we now give two short a cappella performances for our families.

F.A.M. a cappella

As far as family is concerned, I am deeply grateful to this day to my mother Irène, whose love of music was the wellspring of musical enthusiasm in my childhood and in my family. She would have loved to see this book, a testimony to all the ‘old’ songs she had been so fond of all her life. Thanks also to my sister Suzanne, my partner in singing, talented multi-instrumentalist, arranger and vocalist performer, the other harmony voice in the polyphonic singing of our youth, and to my Dad and my brother Peter, lusty singers both. But the most profound gratitude is due to my wife and best friend Caroline Morrissey for her encouragement and her patience, especially when songs, in the interest of research, of course, were played over and over again. She was always there to support our work, and just as importantly during gigs, she was always that friendly face in the crowd that takes so much pressure off a performer.

I am also grateful to my daughters Corrina, Astrid and Frances for being such avid singers and musicians and making us realise how much the practice of singing in the family is to be valued. And lastly thanks to my son Andri, apparently a classic chip-off-the-old-block, who insisted – against his teachers’ advice – in his college finals on tackling the power of sung protest as his
Preface

independent study project. Many ideas were tossed back and forth in our discussions, helping to shape his work and some of my concepts.

R.J.W. a cappella

When discussing new ideas with my wife, Anne-Marie, I immediately detect her registering the ominous fact that I might be thinking of writing another book, and imagining all the hours spent behind the computer, reading up new material and getting more than a little frustrated. She is, of course, absolutely right in thinking, ‘Oh no! Here we go again!’ But this time she has been not only thoroughly cooperative; I think she has also secretly enjoyed seeing me do what I always wanted to do.

We have had lots of discussions about this book, from which I have profited immensely. My heart goes out to her for setting me right most of the time and, in particular, for being so patient with me. She also likes having Franz round at our place and lets us get on with our discussions. It’s probably a case of ‘Well, if I can’t set him right, Franz will.’ My daughter-in-law trained to be an opera singer, so it was great fun to explain to her (and my not particularly musical son) what the book was all about. We do not see one another all that often now as they live abroad. But my son, when he was a boy, thoroughly enjoyed coming to the Lenzburg festivals and having folk musicians staying at our flat through the 1970s. We also had a dachshund called Lotti, who insisted on barking right in the middle of Planxty’s rendering of the Donegal reel ‘The Dogs among the Bushes’ at Lenzburg. Imagine the keying-out comments from the band! Our granddaughter, Jenny, has also shown a keen interest in England and its music. My love goes out to them all and my thanks for being so understanding about my passion. It goes without saying that none of those mentioned in this preface bears any responsibility for the errors of judgment and interpretation that readers might find in the book.