

BBC radio, Local Radio and BBC Radio Merseyside's *Folkscene*

Even though in the immediate post-WWII era there was a 'clichéd perception that folkies were either communist sympathizers or community groups gathering together round their local maypole singing 'derry derry down-o' [did exist and] has taken many years to live down',¹ during the 1950s and 1960s, folk music authenticities were in fact being bolstered by British public service media structures. Such support systems contributed in no small way to changing popular musical appreciations, perceptions of musical traditions and self-directed music learning practices.

Radio: key individuals

This era was one of shifting ideas, new technologies, and different ideological standpoints and despite his disapproval of both BBC and Radio Luxembourg outputs, popular music historian Stephen Barnard states that, 'a change could be detected across the whole of British broadcasting in the 1950s, and especially after the advent of ITV'². There were even different approaches concerning how life was going to be lived (rather than perhaps how one was supposed to live one's life) and different considerations concerning how or whether the British Establishment was to be supported or opposed in this era of declining empire and the presence of the Cold War.

Certain BBC radio producers connected with both the Light Programme and Home Service networks were fascinated by the musical traditions of these islands and it would probably be true to state that the very trajectory of especially English folk revivalism was influenced by the connections between BBC radio and the Copper Family of Rottingdean in Sussex. In 1898 folk song collector Kate Lee was so fascinated by the Coppers that she returned to London and founded The Folk Song Society. By 1948, Jim Copper, after hearing a song from the family's large collection being sung so poorly on the radio, was moved to write to the BCC to inform them that he and his family could in fact do far better. Jim subsequently

¹ Larkin, Colin (1993), 'Editor's Note', in Colin Larkin [ed.], *The Guinness Who's Who of Folk Music*, Enfield: Guinness Publishing, p. 3

² Barnard, Stephen (1989), *On the Radio: Music Radio in Britain*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, p. 35 and p. 36

appeared on the *Country Magazine* radio programme and helped to convince the BBC that singing traditions in England were still alive and well – and worth broadcasting.

A shared research-based recording project therefore developed between the BBC and the English Folk Dance and Song Society, which in the early-1950s resulted in an extremely popular Sunday morning radio programme produced by Charles Parker, entitled *As I Roved Out*. Parker remains of great historical significance to the changing musical tastes and perspectives of young Britons during the 1950s and 1960s. He was based at the BBC's Pebble Mill offices in Birmingham between 1954 and 1972 and was drawn to documentary-style radio. He held strong interests in field recordings, folk music and the working traditions of Britain's labouring poor. As a consequence, the BBC *As I Roved Out* recording of the Coppers produced by Parker and presented in 1952 by Irish piper and song collector Seamus Ennis, was a truly ground-breaking moment, creating a wider interest amongst BBC listeners in traditional music. In fact, this radio series inspired countless young people looking for something musically 'different'.

It is now common knowledge amongst older folkies that during 1957 Charles Parker came into contact with folk singer Ewan MacColl and wanting to emulate the 'new' TV documentary style of social realism on the radio (perhaps in the impressionistic TV style of Dennis Mitchell), he discussed with MacColl the concept of what might be described as a 'sound picture' programme (i.e., interviews/narrative/song). The subject matter of the proposed programme dealt with the story of a train driver awarded the George Cross for bravery: John Axon. In 1958 this became the first *Radio Ballad* programme entitled 'The Ballad of John Axon'. The programme almost didn't make it to the airwaves, for with the ever-increasing popularity of TV, BBC radio was (like now) being starved of income, especially following the arrival of ITV in 1955 (for example, in 1957 the Third Programme's outputs were halved). So, when Charles Parker first discussed the 'John Axon' idea with Ewan MacColl in 1957, a lack of finances dictated that 'the original enthusiasm for allowing real people to tell their own stories had [at the BBC] diminished'.³ But Parker successfully battled with his BBC employers to get the programme made; 'The Ballad of John Axon' proved to be a great success and moves were made to produce similar programmes. According to Peter Cox, Parker was an out-and-out 'radio man' who was concerned that oral

³ Cox, Peter (2008), *Set Into Song: Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads*, Cambridge: Labatie, p. 71

testimony and social realism was destined for TV documentary-style programmes ⁴ so he usually won his internal battles with the BBC.

Between 1958 and 1963, and featuring (amongst others) Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, Parker produced a highly significant series of 8 programmes. These are now regarded as seminal markers of, not only how one goes about actually ‘doing’ history and music on the radio, but also how one brings **traditional** music into the mainstream airways of the BBC. Via the weaving together of songs and narratives concerning working-class lives, Parker undoubtedly produced broadcasting masterpieces. Like Parker, many of those interested in folk, blues and jazz were immersed in projects of self-directed research concerning folk and blues traditions (and concomitant record collecting), therefore, such programmes as *The Radio Ballads*, *As I Roved Out*, *Song Hunter* (featuring the work of Alan Lomax and produced by a young David Attenborough), and *Skiffle Club* (which later became the more pop-oriented *Saturday Club*) featured traditional source materials from which one might learn.

Therefore, whether the ‘grandees’ of the Corporation were aware or not, the BBC played a highly significant and highly active role in the development of the British folk scene during those decades immediately following the end of WWII. Peter Cox in his excellent text *Set Into Song* illustrates how well the BBC’s *Radio Ballads* series displayed an understanding of the peoples of the British Isles by reflecting upon their everyday lives within their own authentic localities: ‘Before these [radio] programmes were made, radio and TV in Britain rarely featured real people talking about their own lives. The *Radio Ballads* creators made listener and programme-maker alike realise that ‘ordinary’ people can tell extraordinary stories.’ As a broadcaster-cum-social/musical anthropologist, Charles Parker certainly believed in the value of working peoples’ testimony and creativity. He stated on the sleeve of *The Big Hewer* LP, a 1967 release by Argo Records of these earlier BBC recordings that: ‘we obliterate the bitterness of our past at our peril; without it we cannot grasp the defiant humanism of *The Big Hewer*, and this is the vital legacy of the coal miner, which no amount of rationalization must be allowed to jeopardize.’⁵

According to Paul Long⁶, such philosophies were fundamental to Parker’s radio work. By the time the BBC came to broadcast the third edition of Parker’s *Radio Ballad* series, *Singing the*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Parker, Charles (1967), ‘Sleevenotes’, *The Big Hewer: A Radio Ballad*, Argo RG 538

Fishing on the 13th July 1960, the radio section of the BBC was without doubt directly contributing to a truly enlarging interest in folk music; this support was to continue quite literally for decades.

Frances Line

Frances Line became the first female Controller of BBC's Radio 2 network in 1990. Following Monica Sims, who eventually became Controller of Radio 4 between 1978 and 1983, Line was only the second woman to run a BBC Radio network and she had previously worked as a clerk-typist, a secretary, and then a producer's assistant on BBC Television. Once the Light Programme had essentially 'morphed' into Radio 2 in 1967, Line was asked to produce the *Roundabout* and *Country Meets Folk* programmes, the latter of which was introduced by former member of the hit-making Vipers skiffle group Wally Whyton. Jim Lloyd, who had extensive knowledge of the folk scene via his associations with the Folk Directions PR firm was asked to join the programme as a researcher. Lloyd recalled:

Eventually, because I knew a bit about broadcasting and a bit about folk music, I was invited to join a new radio programme called *Country Meets Folk*, which was hosted by Wally Whyton. *Country Meets Folk* ran for over six years, but soon after it started the producer phoned me to ask if I could think of an idea for another folk programme. I came up with something called *My Kind of Folk*, and after a few days he came back and said that Radio 2 would take the idea, but that he wouldn't be producing it. The producer would be Frances Line – a new, young recruit who'd just come over from television. I remember him saying: 'You'll like her – she's been working on *Top of the Pops*'.⁷

The knowledgeable Lloyd became quite a hit on *Country Meets Folk* and was asked to present other folk music-related shows such as *Folk On 2*, and *Dungeon Folk*. Indeed, Lines and Lloyd worked so well together that they not only developed a range of folk programmes for all four BBC radio networks, thus placing traditional music firmly on the BBC radio agenda, but in fact married. Perhaps like Charles Parker, Frances Line's comprehension of the relationship between radio and popular music was a crucial feature of BBC Radio 2's outputs during the 1960s and 1970s, illustrating just how much radio communicated meaningful ideas to and from listeners concerning all popular music traditions.

⁶ Long, Paul (2004), 'British Radio and the Politics of Culture in Post-War Britain: The Work of Charles Parker', *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, 2/3, pp. 131-52

⁷ Jim Lloyd in interview with Nicola Stredell; see http://nicolastredell.co.uk/Forty_Years.html - date accessed 8th April 2021

BBC Local Radio

In fact, once BBC local radio began in 1967, most of the BBC's local stations *de facto* used folk music as part of their programming; producers evidently realised that a folk scene of one sort or another pervaded practically every part of the British Isles. For example, BBC Radio Merseyside's *Folkscene* programme presented by Stan Ambrose began broadcasting that same year. In later years Stan Ambrose and I were colleagues at the station (1997 – 2007, 2014 to 2016 – Stan died that year) and in 2015 Stan informed me:

By the time *Folkscene* had commenced broadcasting, those debates about folk traditions, new ways of doing things, the counterculture and so on were all part of BBC Radio Merseyside's sphere of interest, but they could be rather hidebound by BBC philosophy and weren't sure how to proceed – especially given the problem of needle-time, which meant in those days that music on local radio was heavily restricted. It's hard to imagine now that my programme was at all 'trendy', but it most certainly was and there were even debates at the station about whether it should continue, because it was regarded by some people there as rather 'alternative'. In fact, as I recall, after the pilot went out, that was the one key discussion point. But they could see that the programme's popularity was never in any doubt. There were all kinds of folk music lovers on Merseyside – from folk club members to students, so it went ahead. As for the needle-time problems, Geoff Speed and I were able to mostly swerve it by broadcasting lots of non-copyright club nights, field recordings and of course interviews, so the editors were happy.⁸

Spencer Leigh also stated in his obituary for Stan in the *Guardian* newspaper:

My colleague Stan Ambrose, who has died aged 86, presented and produced what is thought to be the longest-running programme on UK local radio, *Folkscene*. It started on BBC Radio Merseyside in 1967, a few weeks after the station opened, and he worked alongside another stalwart of the folk community, Geoff Speed.

Martin Carthy was the guest on Stan's first show, but in recent years he featured only artists based on Merseyside and gave many musicians their first BBC session. When his programme was under threat with BBC cutbacks, the playwright Willy Russell, who had been a folk singer, was among those who argued for its retention. In recent years, Stan continued to present the programme despite failing health, but now it has been taken over by the academic Mike Brocken, who shares his view that the programme is for both the committed and the curious. It is essential listening for anyone interested in folk music. Although the BBC can have a reputation for profligacy, Stan made his one-hour programme for less than £100 a week without expenses [...].⁹

⁸ Stan Ambrose in conversation with Mike Brocken November 2014 – from the Mike Brocken archive

⁹ Leigh, Spencer (2016), 'Stan Ambrose Obituary', *The Guardian*, 16th July 2016

-<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jul/18/stan-ambrose-obituary>

As suggested by Spencer Leigh above by 1968 Radio Merseyside's *Folkscene* programme was indeed a major agent for the dissemination of folk and traditional music across Merseyside. One might even suggest that this local programme helped codify all of the somewhat disparate folk activities taking place in Liverpool and its surrounding districts, Wirral and even Chester and northeast Wales into a recognizable entity of some musical and cultural power. While the somewhat uninformed continue to 'bash on' about Liverpool as a 'beat city' it is undoubtedly true that traditional music was (and for some remains) and intensely powerful soundtrack to people's lives across Merseyside.

So, Stan Ambrose was selected in 1967 as the voice of local folk music and by drawing together at times incongruent and even oppositional scenes he helped give local folk music a singular voice. This unity was of course something of an illusion, yet *Folkscene's* social function was perhaps just as great as its musical one, for Stan and Geoff Speed (Geoff was Stan's producer and field recordist and then came to present the show every other week) brought together local performers for broadcasting purposes, rather than simply featuring folk clubs in situ. For example, at 'Le Masque' on Clarence Street in downtown Liverpool Geoff and Stan organised eclectic sessions representing a wide array of genres. One evening at Le Masque blues musicians Jim James and Raph Callaghan from blues clubs in the north of Liverpool were featured alongside Jim Peadon and John Kaneen of the highly traditionalist Calton Three, together with traditionalist Harry Boardman from Manchester (in the case of Boardman it has been stated that he had started one of the very first folk clubs in the country). Geoff Speed later informed me:

I suppose it shows how important the Folkscene programme was. Jim James and Raphael Callaghan were very blues-based. Solidly blues, in fact, but I don't think they ever had a blues club as such. It wasn't popular enough for a club to exist just for blues. They were on a compilation album of British blues called Gasoline that was recorded by Liberty. I think it was at the time that Alexis Korner was on Liberty [A new Generation of Blues, Liberty LBL83147, 1968] and he was involved. It was a one-off album [...] We set up those events at the Masque for broadcasting – a splendid place to record in and we invited an audience.

Ambrose and Speed also visited clubs in Kirkby and Runcorn run by a young Willy Russell (briefly a member of the 'Kirkby Four' group). At the Tuning Folk club in Chester Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick were recorded live in session in 1968. A raucously live ceili at the Travellers Rest in St Helens featuring Florrie Brennan and Cahil McConnell was also

broadcast. At the Hare & Hounds pub in Commutation Row in Liverpool Irish music sessions featuring Sean McCarthy (who had enjoyed a hit record in Ireland with ‘Step It Out Mary’), Bruce Scott and Frank Coran were broadcast in 1969. Ambrose and Speed even set up a special Boxing Day edition of *Folkscene* in 1968 where the King’s Shilling, clog dancer Rosemary Davies, Andy Kenner and Willy Russell were all recorded live. Geoff Speed also recorded an important evening at the Liverpool Irish Centre on Mount Pleasant in May 1971 where stalwarts such as Ann McPartlan, Billy O’Reagan, Andy O’Hanlan, Bridget Hayden and Sean Macnamara were featured.

There were so many significant *Folkscene* recordings that it would be difficult to list them, should they all have survived. However, they have not. This writer was able to digitise only a handful of reels at Geoff Speed’s Widnes home before work at Liverpool Hope University dictated that my time should be used for other purposes. When Geoff died in 2019 some of his tapes were sent to (I think) renowned folk broadcaster and accordionist John Kaneen on the Isle of Man. When Stan passed away in 2016, I was allowed by BBC Radio Merseyside to remove some of Stan’s recordings from his later years at Radio Merseyside - these are now being archived on this website. I never came across any cassette copies of *Folkscene* but what few reel-to-reel tapes remained in Stan’s house were donated to me by a relative. Unfortunately, they were very badly degraded by ‘sticky-shed syndrome’ and had to be destroyed.

I have written elsewhere that ‘in the era shortly after BBC local radio began (1967) these [...] systems, so popular prior to the advent of ILR in 1973, helped to facilitate a boom in folk music participation. It is not co-incidental that the peak period for folk music appreciation in this country (between, say, the late-1960s and the mid-1970s) was concurrent with peak listening figures for BBC local radio. So popular was folk music on Merseyside, that when [commercial station] Radio City began in 1974, this station immediately established a folk music programme in their schedules.’¹⁰ This Radio City show was presented by my then guitar tutor Bob Buckle.

Therefore via the establishment of BBC local radio in 1967 (beginning with BBC Radio Leicester, then BBC Radio Merseyside), folk and traditional music was viewed as a vitally

¹⁰ Brocken, Michael (2010, r. 2017), *Other Voices: Hidden Histories of Liverpool’s Popular Music Scenes, 1930s-1970s*, Farnham: Ashgate, London: Routledge, p. 169

important component of BBC local radio broadcasting. Literally for decades, folk music was thought by the BBC as a significant socio-musical factor in providing local listeners with home grown traditional sounds. In fact, such was BBC local radio's cultural investment in all kinds of micro popular musical scenes as representations of localised cultures that the corporation was regarded a true arbiter of local music cultures; at least until the cuts of 2020.

More Recent Years

Aside from the usual imbalances created at BBC Radio Merseyside between football and specialised music broadcasting (which in Liverpool always results in the latter 'magically' disappearing from the airwaves), *Folkscene* continued relatively unabated throughout the waxing and waning of the folk revival in terms of its popularity; by the time I had re-joined the station to present *Folkscene* on a bi-monthly basis in October 2014, folk music had in fact entered a new phase of attracting younger listeners and performers. In fact, prior to my return to BBC Radio Merseyside that year, young folk singer-songwriter and member of the Furrow Collective Emily Portman had replaced the retiring Geoff Speed; however, as a touring solo singer, songwriter and member of the aforementioned band, Emily simply didn't have the time to research and present the programme. Therefore, during the late-summer of 2014 I was emailed by station editor Sue Owen, who enquired whether I might be willing to re-join Radio Merseyside to alternate every other week with Stan Ambrose.

I was delighted to be asked and, after receiving permission from my employers at Liverpool Hope University to return to the station, I accepted Sue's offer. Following a brief re-training period during which I reacquainted myself with the studio desks¹¹, my first *Folkscene* was broadcast on 5th October 2014 and I then alternated with Stan over the forthcoming months. My own motivations were to present as much new material as possible, together with the occasional 'classic' and/or field recording as time might allow. My thoughts were to 'put the music first' but then to contextualise these recordings with club and concert information.

Stan fell seriously ill at the beginning of 2016 and (as previously stated) sadly died later that same year. His passing therefore did not come as a surprise and prior to his death I had been asked by Sue Owen to be 'the voice of folk music on BBC Radio Merseyside'. Over the

¹¹ It might not be generally known that practically all BBC local radio presenters have to 'drive' their own desks while presenting.

ensuing 2-3 years I was able to at least double *Folkscene's* RAJAR¹² statistics, notwithstanding an overall drop in BBC Radio Merseyside's listeners, thus removing at that time pressures from any 'Sword of Damocles' that might have been hovering over the programme's 'head'. I felt that I had achieved this by cutting down Stan's interview remit – something for which his shows were well known (and criticised by some i.e., 'too much talk and not enough music' was often the complaint surrounding Stan's later shows). Additionally, the introduction of the BBC Sounds digital platform was a complete boon to *Folkscene*, for owing to my growing connections with the folk media from across the British Isles and Ireland (also, at times in Europe) I had become aware that, via BBC Sounds, *Folkscene* was being variously listened-to at different times and in different localities.

It was a complete joy to design and present the programme and with the friendly mentoring of my line manager Andy Ball I felt incredibly empowered. When occasionally contacted by an artist, writer or promoter about joining me in the studio, I would suggest that they might like to 'co-present'. This occasional change in presentation format also proved successful. For example, on one occasion I was joined by renowned singer Jim Moray, on another by popular music historian Rick Blackman, yet another by Wirral Folk Festival promoter John Owen (and so on). On one programme I also featured the popular Wirral-based folk singer-songwriter Gerry Ffrench, following which Gerry and I corresponded regularly via email.

By February 2020 I was of course aware that, given the new ways one might listen to specific genres of popular music, together with Liverpool's changing demographics, BBC Radio Merseyside's overall listening figures had decreased. The RAJAR figures over the previous three quarters had been quite worrying. Yet, with many of *Folkscene's* listeners taking advantage of BBC Sounds, I felt that the programme's presence as a partially national (indeed **international**) show helped guarantee its continued presence. The problem was that listening figures for BBC Sounds could not at that time be accurately collated, thereby suggesting - at least in the eyes and ears of middle management - that *Folkscene* was still only regarded as a local programme, which in real terms it was not. I was therefore not altogether surprised when new station editor Andrew Bowman informed me on 11th March 2020 that programming changes were about to take place and that specialist shows such as *Folkscene* were to be axed to make way for four-hour blocks of musically generic programming dictated by the BBC's agreement with PRS/MCPS.

¹² RAJAR stands for Radio Joint Audience Research and is the official body in charge of measuring radio audiences in the UK. It is jointly owned by the BBC and the Radiocentre on behalf of the commercial sector – see rajar.co.uk.

Therefore, alongside myself, other music specialists such as Mike Shepherd (country music) and Spencer Leigh (popular music histories, most notably Merseybeat), plus others were no longer required. However, I was informed that although *Folkscene* was basically axed as a regular weekly programme, Andrew hoped to keep me as ‘part of the RM family’, presenting occasional ‘specials.’ I was not at that stage clear whether these ‘specials’ were to be folk-related (as it turned out, they were), but I readily agreed, thinking ‘why not’? although it seemed to me a little incongruous and counter-productive that a radio programme at least partly dedicated to gig and club news, new releases, etc. should appear only occasionally on the airwaves. I worked-out during that brief meeting that I had been awarded another ten weeks’ programmes and that my contract would end on 1st June 2020.

However, this meeting took place literally only a matter of hours before things started to deteriorate regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and as from week-commencing 22nd March, no pre-recorded programmes were allowed to be made at BBC Radio Merseyside¹³ (*Folkscene* had been pre-recorded for its entire existence), and part-time freelance staff such as myself were no longer admitted into the radio station building. Under these prevailing circumstances, Radio Merseyside kindly agreed to honour my contract up to the end of May, therefore my ‘final’ show, featuring recordings by Lizzy Hardingham, Thom Ashworth, the Trials of Cato, Siobhan Miller and others was pre-recorded on 15th March and transmitted on Sunday 22nd March 2020.¹⁴

Following the programme’s absence from the airwaves during late-March and early-April 2020, all kinds of social media and email enquiries emanated and email correspondence developed between local folk singer-songwriter of note Gerry Ffrench and myself. Gerry had also been partly stimulated to email me by hearing a Radio 4 *Feedback* programme in which BBC Head of Local Radio Chris Burns was somewhat taken to task over the loss of folk music programming right across the local BBC radio network¹⁵. I directed Gerry towards the

¹³ This was ostensibly to keep the number of BBC staff working in the Radio Merseyside studio down to an absolute minimum.

¹⁴ As it turned out, this wasn’t the final *Folkscene* programme, for I was later contacted by Andrew Bowman in July to pre-record another block of six programmes during August and September, together with a block of five to run between Christmas and New Year with the final show of this run ending on New Year’s Day 2021. I then pre-recorded a series of ten during the summer of 2021 followed by three shows between Xmas and New Year 2021. The final *Folkscene* was transmitted on 30th December 2021.

¹⁵ Re *Feedback* broadcast see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000h26g> - most recent date accessed 8th February, 2021

above-cited *Radio Today* article, to which she responded via email, including the following comments:

‘I read the online [*Radio Today*] article, and I understand what they are saying, but I think that they are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Folk, as you know is different to many other genres; we may laugh at some of the smaller clubs but there is a networking community out there. It is ageing, but it nevertheless functions as a community and the folk shows on local radio are an intrinsic part of that; in turn they are part of the local folk shows. The gig guide is among the things we all listen out for.’¹⁶ Subsequently, Gerry then posted what she described as a ‘well timed Tweet’, which read: ‘What is happening to Folk Music programmes on BBC local radio networks? Radio Merseyside’s *Folkscene* was last broadcast on 22 March and there has been silence since. Radio Shropshire’s *Sunday Folk* likewise. Are they cutting folk music out of the schedules???’ On the 11th April she emailed me, stating:

I tweeted what I sent you and I put a slightly longer but circumspect version on FB [i.e. Facebook] with a link to Genevieve [Tudor¹⁷]’s last programme, and it’s a sad announcement. [But] It is beginning to gather some interesting observations. Covid-19 has given the perfect camouflage of course ... most people put the changes down to lockdown. Cerys Mathews’ Blues programme was replaced on R2 with Jo Wiley! and the R2 Folk Programme has been transposed to 11pm losing its prime time spot. I think there is a bit of a groundswell of realisation, including Dave Russell (Greg Russell’s dad) [that something is going on]. Greg’s programme on BBC Sheffield has been stopped suddenly, ostensibly for the health crisis, and people are accepting this. But why would the health crisis preclude specialist music? It clearly does not make sense.¹⁸

I informed Gerry on the 12th that (to paraphrase) it might be of interest under the then current lockdown restrictions to see which folk programmes might return and which would not. I suggested that on Radio Merseyside things might have been somewhat different because of the recent poor RAJAR figures.

The re-scheduling changes were in fact taking place before the pandemic had worsened and I also reminded Gerry that I had been informed on 11th March, the very day I had watched

¹⁶ Gerry Ffrench email correspondence with Mike Brocken 10th April, 2020

¹⁷ Genevieve Tudor presented *Sunday Folk* on BBC Radio Shropshire. Genevieve has survived the cuts but probably only by virtue of the Sunday afternoon producer allowing *Sunday Folk* to make up the last hour of the preceding 4-hour block. Therefore, once uploaded onto BBC Sounds, *Sunday Folk* did not have an individual programme ‘ident’. The block of 6 programmes I presented during late-summer 2020 suffered the same fate and I would like to thank my Radio Merseyside colleague Paul Beesley for sending the BBC Sounds hyperlink to me prior to the programme being broadcast, so that I could inform both listeners and folk industry players of its whereabouts on the BBC Sounds platform.

¹⁸ Gerry Ffrench email correspondence with Mike Brocken 11th April, 2020

Lizzy Hardingham's lunchtime gig at Liverpool University and the day before I witnessed Trials of Cato perform at Telford's Warehouse in Chester. I also suggested that, if Greg Russell's programme was pre-recorded like mine, then the cancellation did make logistical sense, because studio bookings were immediately cancelled as a matter of course, with live programming and journalism prioritised. Nevertheless, I also stated that, if the BBC took the opportunity to make permanent schedule changes as one consequence of the pandemic, that would indeed appear to be a somewhat patronising move.

Covid or no Covid, it was becoming evident that the BBC's financial and cultural investment in traditional music was plummeting; the 4-hour generic programmes duly went ahead, as planned. In later email correspondence with Steph Meskell of the Bury Met venue and Minerva Arts charitable trust, both strong supporters of folk and traditional music, Steph returned the following opinions:

That's an interesting point and I think is a useful one to make. It reminded me of conversations I've had with Jim Johnson [of the Peshkar charitable trust in Oldham] over the last few months regarding the hard rock scene and the **enormous** amount of different online stations there are out there. The BBC just won't play metal and there's something to be researched about the movement of individuals who identify with a 'scene' or genre **away** from those centralised platforms and how that looks to be part of a cycle. What I mean is that the BBC would explain it away by saying 'well there isn't the audience for folk / heavy metal / hardcore Belgian trance [etc.] because everyone goes to internet radio or Spotify playlists now, so there's no point in us doing it', whereas the fans or artists might argue the opposite way round i.e. that the BBC have pushed them into finding alternative outlets through the marginalising of their music.¹⁹

Steph Meskell's line of reasoning concerning the digital radio alternative to the policy decisions of the BBC was, I thought, well made. Given its vertically integrated structure, there is little doubt that decisions emanating from the BBC were likely to have come to light extremely slowly; Chris Burns' comments on Radio 4 were probably the result of months, perhaps even years of middle-management discussions.

It would have to be stated that the BBC's active support of and engagement with any local music scenes is now (June 2023) far less perceptible. The perspicacity of modern (social) media systems underlines just how excruciatingly slow such larger media players have been in their recognition and acknowledgement of more pro-active media texts. The current surge in interactive media creativity has challenged the at times hegemonic approaches to culture as

¹⁹ Steph Meskell to Mike Brocken, email correspondence 9th February 2021

applied by supra-media players such as the BBC and ITV, leaving the BBC's local radio stations and ITV's regional TV networks – so vitally important for decades – with far fewer listeners or viewers: and the figures are still dropping. A wide variety of interventions from these multifarious media providers (such as Minerva Radio) grows on an almost daily basis - and they are increasingly regarded as being amongst the most important mediators of our modern age, each with their own semiotic systems that instantaneously identify and pertain to prevailing social interests and identities.

BBC reflections of localities and identities have now been placed under extreme social and cultural pressures. New social media platforms contravene expectations that have historically emerged from state-owned communicators concerning popular music aesthetics, social-cultural functions, and target audiences. Consequently, a kind of 'free will' has been created from which our personal choices have become far less 'decreed'; hence social media and digital radio audiences feel genuinely supported and 'amongst friends'. Across these platforms are offered different identity-giving cultures, rather than the indolently branded 'othernesses' invented by monolithic media discourses. Such genuine expressions of popular culture are truly in perpetual motion and continuous transition and can longer be pinned-down by mono-discourses.

Summary

The political economy of traditional music cyberspace is advancing and in due course corporate entities such as the BBC will be faced with the inevitable decision of whether to catch-up with such players or accept the prospect of their own partial disappearance from specialist music-based airwaves (my current feeling is that they have conceded to the latter). Music is relatively free to move across all international boundaries. Therefore, those radio stations able to offer such global services are now establishing themselves in ways that monolithic players cannot. One might even risk theorizing that (e.g.) *Minerva Radio* is one small part of an important, perhaps even revolutionary creative space which has identified and can in turn be identified by a truly global countercultural emancipatory project. A stance such as this might help create a transcendent disjunction to the nationalistic tendencies inherent within formal broadcasting systems such as the BBC. Such new 'places' inscribe new possibilities for the establishment of authentic virtual communities surrounding the advancement of traditional music. It is hoped that such creative thinking becomes part of an ongoing phenomenon: learning via participation and digital music platform knowledge-

enhancement. Digital radio may well become a liberation-based system, and by its presence suggest that: ‘The headline structure of managed vertical [...] environments produces a sense of boundaries to knowledge. There is a kind of (false) security in being able to think the headlines tell us what we need to know or what is most important. [...] Cyberculture in its multiplicity of sources and perspectives offers incitements to leave that false sense of security behind, to move away from complacency to a more curious and critical proactive stance.’²⁰

We should certainly no longer presume that large listening or viewing audiences equals greater cultural significance or influence. It is arguable, but also probably fair to suggest that quests for generic audience sizes actually limits cultural significance and loses influence. Therefore, the current BBC initiative to save money via reactive genericism lacks a culturally creative knowledge base concerning audience interests and genre fascinations. The BBC’s decreasing market share regarding popular music specialisation will, via the domination of its 4-hour generic local radio programming and dictated by the pre-paid PRS music ‘core’ worsen, rather than improve listening figures. The PRS/MCPS core is already literally stylistically and historically out-of-date, with royalties only being paid to those who seem to need it the least.

In contrast, digital media music platforms and processes addressing the needs of the popular music enthusiast appear to be gaining, rather than losing, ground. Repetitive adverts can be annoying but so too are passive-aggressive BBC presenters who presume they are ‘educating’ the listener. In fact, the listener already knows a great deal – hence the searching for platforms offering alternative music experiences, indicating that in popular music terms creative consumption continues unabated. Specialist digital platforms are less prescriptive, less in need of administrative echelons, and are able to influence via engagement in self-directed music learning and knowledge-gathering. They are currently replacing what has become a hackneyed vertically integrated mono-narrative of popular music traditions into a multifarious process of new ways of listening to and learning about (in this case) traditional music.

All musical texts can be seen and heard differently when presented via different ecologies. The conventions surrounding the narrative of a (say) BBC Radio 3 music history programme in fact compel us to ruminate on what constitutes such musical ‘knowledge’. Questions might be asked: for example how such ‘knowledge’ has been constructed and then framed to fit only

²⁰ Youngs, Gillian (2002), *Virtual Communities*, in Chris Newbold, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, Hilde Van Den Bulk [eds.], *The Media Book*, London: Arnold, p. 398

a limited range of often biased meanings; how we are supposed to listen to music via apparently identity-giving cultural representations, etc. BBC broadcasting traditions have been built upon institutionally constructed narratives based on models created within the era of colonial imperialism; therefore, such structural conventions require at the very least a serious critical overhaul if they are to compete with our new cyberspace platforms.