

13th February 2024

Folk

“All music is folk music. I’ve never heard a horse sing a song.”

Louis Armstrong, *attributed*

Every second week I share with musicians in a jam-session in the local pub – fiddlers, flute-players, accordions, penny whistles, guitars, harmonicas, banjos, bodhrans and the occasional song – in a sharing of traditional music. It’s fun, uncompetitive, creative and, most of all, relaxing.

I’m fascinated by “the folk process”, how a tune or words of a song changes over time. Rhythms are adjusted; grace-notes added; keys and timings altered; new verses included. There’s often “no definitive version”, with a song or melody remaining fresh and new as it’s passed on. “The folk process” is constantly in use, as folk material is readapted in transmission from person to person, place to place and generation to generation. The phrase was originally coined by musicologist, Charles Seegar (father of the legendary folk singer Peter Seegar). In 1954, the International Folk Music Council wrote: “The folk process is the product of a musical tradition ... evolved through ... oral transmission.” In other words, material is given new life because people share it with one another.

An example is a new song I’m learning: *The Bonnie Shoals o’ Herrin’*. It’s a fishing ballad written by Ewan MacColl and first broadcast on BBC Radio in 1960. MacColl said the song was based on the life of a fisherman and traditional singer from Norfolk. Another theory suggests that MacColl “tape recorded all the old fisherman along the east coast of England and never used one word of his own. He just rhymed the lines the fishermen had given him and made it into a song.” It’s been recorded by The Spinners, The Dubliners, The Clancy Brothers, The Corries, Martin Carthy, and even in Dutch, used as a film soundtrack, and, among some Irish singers, the refrain and title have been altered to, “The Shores of Erin”.

All this matters because the “oral tradition” matters. People listen to each other, and share, and take new things on board, and make them their own. “The folk process” works because folk share, and folk sing, and folk tell stories, and folk do it together. Thank God for folk, who do all that, and more, to bind themselves round things that are sustaining – and even share enjoyment in the local pub with other folk every second week.

A prayer for today

If “all music is folk”, then all folk are music, especially when they help me sing. Amen