

***'All things are quite silent' – but not quite – her songs live on***

*Reflections on English folk music and the life of Norma Waterson (1939-2022)*

Hari Kumar, February 10, 2022

*What is folk music? Is it different from other genres of popular music? How does it relate to working peoples's struggles?*

A great singer has recently died. Perhaps Norma Waterson was one of the last of a particular generation of traditional English folk singers. Things might indeed really become *'silent'* - but only if it was solely her voice that rang out those songs. Indeed we are deprived of the great pleasure of hearing her live again. But fortunately, Norma Waterson herself stressed the continuity of the songs that she loved and excelled at. For she said of folk music that it was the working people's library and history, 'deserving respect':

"The official history of people is usually written by historians that are well-lettered and they write it from a different aspect - from 'oop' (*'up' and here she gestures over her head*) and they're looking down on it. But traditional music particularly and protest music and union music – it's written by the people, it's our oral history, it's what made us do things, what made us sing. What made us happy. I feel it deserves as much respect and dignity as any of those history books high on a shelf." <sup>1</sup>

Other great folk singers agree fully. For example A.L.Lloyd (Bert), said:

"Songs that are so close to the heart of the common people may have a functional quality that goes far beyond mere diversion. Many of them were made up not so much to decorate life as to make it bearable... these songs arose spontaneously in working-class communities and in the main were transmitted orally." <sup>2</sup>

One of the great ones who is still alive, Peggy Seeger said:

"Folk songs originally expressed the experience and values of those at the bottom of the social heap; those who take home a weekly wage, not a salary; those who can be dismissed with little or no notice, in short those who walk an economic tightrope insecurely fastened at both ends.... Folk songs were originally hewn in memory. Their pared-down-to-the-bone texts are unpretentious, close to spoken language. Their melodies are so reminiscent of the rise and fall of colloquial speech that they are often regarded as an elemental ingredient – embryonic, therefore belonging to nobody, the property of everybody." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Moving on Song'; "Official history" music and conversation with Norma Waterson;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEnq8mYVtOM>

<sup>2</sup> A.L.Lloyd, "Come All Ye Bold Miners – Ballads and Songs of the Coalfields"; London 1978; p.13-18

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Seeger, "First Time Ever"; London 2017; p.407

The definitions of folk-music provided by these three great exponents, reminded me of the songs collected by Georg Weerth (1882-1856). Frederick Engels called him “the German proletariat’s first and *most important* poet”.<sup>4</sup> While Weerth lived in Bradford during the grounding of the English Industrial Revolution, he collected “Songs of Lancashire”, including “**There Was Once a Poor tailor**”

There was once a poor tailor  
Who stitched himself stupid and wry;  
He stitched for thirty long years  
And did not know why.

And when again Saturday  
Saw yet another week go by  
He began to weep bitterly  
And did not know why....

Then many strong threads  
Round his throat he did tie –  
Hanged himself from a beam  
And did not know why...

The tailor died at half past seven  
And no one knew why.<sup>5</sup>

Just as for Weerth, many of the world’s great poets and musicians were fed by the history of the class as recorded in their songs and poetry. These may have lifted them into the realm of ‘high art’, but their origins lie in the people. But this is not the place to review those in detail.

Waterson hailed from Hull, Yorkshire, where she was brought up by her maternal grandmother, who was in part of Irish Gypsy stock. She and her brother Mike Waterson, and sister Elaine (‘Lal’) Waterson – all learnt that music was a social art early on, in their family:

“It was a time, Norma said, when “most people had a piano in the parlour. We didn’t have a telly, but my grandma knew all the music hall songs and we listened to pop music on Radio Luxembourg”.<sup>6</sup>

The details of Norma Waterson’s career are easily found in two obituaries,<sup>6, 7</sup> and a superb long video from the BBC entitled ‘Travelling for a living’<sup>8</sup>. I do not recapitulate

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Engels, “Song of the Apprentices” by Georg Weerth (1846); in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*; Moscow 1976 p. 404; & at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/05/georg-weerth.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Georg Weerth, in “A Young Revolutionary in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England”; Berlin 1971; p. 171.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Deneslow, Jan 31, 2022; ‘Norma Waterson Obituary’; *Guardian*; at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jan/31/norma-waterson-obituary>

<sup>7</sup> Jim Farber, ‘Norma Waterson, a Key Figure in Britain’s Folk Revival, Dies at 82’; *New York Times* February 8, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Travelling for a living’; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Vrszb4w318>

those, and the facts of her life. But in brief, she together with Mike, Lal and a cousin John Harrison; and then with her husband Martin Carthy - all helped revive the English folklore tradition. Their daughter Eliza Carthy ploughs the same soil, but turns up new elements, and integrates them.<sup>9</sup>

Such handing on has been endless, accounting for the words 'oral tradition'. It ensures that indeed – 'All things are quite silent' – remains only the words of one song and not the state of affairs after Norma Waterson's death. Recent history can attest to the handing down in meticulous detail, of even just one song 'Scarborough Fair'. The chain (in modern times) can be traced from Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger, through to the real source – an English lead miner called Mark Anderson, collected by Alan Lomax the American folklorist relayed to Martin Carthy – gifted onwards to Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez etc<sup>10</sup> - and the chain goes on.

The last words go to the words that Norma Waterson, Martin Carthy and their daughter sang exposing a heartless world:

Born in a horse drawn carriage on the old A5,  
You can't stay here the policeman said,  
You better get born someplace else,  
Move along, Get along, GO – MOVE – SHIFT.<sup>1</sup>

Like Eliza Carthy, Norma's daughter – who makes the old modern, the working class is not just going to move aside.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Interview with John Peel'; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXMB07JM6Mw>

<sup>10</sup> Ross Altman, *Martin Carthy: The Ghost In The Attic*; Folkworks Concert review April 2015; at <https://folkworks.org/review/martin-carthy-the-ghost-in-the-attic/>