

‘I’d better not sing that here’: Musical environments, genre stereotypes and folk singers’ performance strategies

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Abstract: This article focuses on how amateur folk singers approach performing in different live music settings, particularly those outside their regular and familiar environments. The paper incorporates personal experience, a small sample of interviews with local singers in the East Midlands of England and observational data. The interview responses indicate a range of strategies being employed by singers to balance their preferred repertoire choices – especially when the preference is for traditional song – with the circumstances of the specific event. This strategic thinking may, it is argued, reflect underlying issues about definitions of and assumptions about folk music as a genre. The discussion suggests that the situations that confront singers are complex, combining implicit stereotypes about what folk singers do (or should) sing and the multiple features that create the totality of the live music event for performers and audiences. It could, indeed, be held that relatively little about a performance event is controllable by the performer themselves. This is particularly relevant when a singer is performing in an unfamiliar place to an unfamiliar audience. Lastly, the paper proposes that, notwithstanding the challenges posed by different environments and audiences, the unclear boundaries of what constitutes folk music may provide positive opportunities for communities and performers to repurpose folk repertoire for their own objectives.

Keywords: *folk, singers, repertoire, genre, audience*

Introduction

The singing of folk repertoire in England has been associated with the phenomenon of folk clubs in the UK from the late 1950s onwards, with a particular period of growth in the number of such clubs during the 1960s, extending to the beginning of the 1980s (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 43). There is a paucity of work exploring the repertoire sung within the clubs and a similar absence of studies examining the overlap between that repertoire and the presentation of folk music in other contexts. It has, however, been posited that the club scene (and perhaps, by extension, the performance and reception of folk music elsewhere) has long been characterised by a split between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ styles of the music (*ibid.*, p. 28). Nevertheless, the extent to which this reflects actual past or current experience is unclear; some clubs certainly seem to welcome both types in an ‘anything goes’ spirit (Hield and Mansfield, 2019, p. 350). For amateur singers who prioritise traditional material – broadly speaking, the historical repertoire associated with the folk song collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – there remains the question of whether their preferred repertoire will be welcomed in other musical settings.

The initial motivation for this exploratory study arose from a personal experience of taking part in an ‘acoustic session’ in a Derbyshire pub in 2020: my singing of the traditional song ‘Lass of London City’ (also known as ‘White Copper Alley’) led to several comments

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from other performers, including the remark ‘things having gotten a bit weird’, indicating that the subject matter of the song was markedly outside what was standard material for this particular session. The song does, admittedly, involve prostitution, robbery and (implicitly) sexually transmitted disease – not unusual subject matter in an environment in which traditional song is familiar or the norm, but probably a challenge in other settings. This was an arguably gentler repeat of an experience I had almost 40 years earlier, on the north-eastern outskirts of London, when the rendition of two traditional songs in a club that I had not visited before led to the club organiser’s dismissive public remark, ‘people come here and assume that we’re *that* kind of club...’ – symbolising the apparent divide between clubs in which traditional song was acceptable and those in which more contemporary material was preferred.

I decided to investigate, via interviews, what approach was taken by other local amateur singers (for most of whom traditional song was a significant part of their repertoire) when singing outside the clubs that constitute their regular performance base. The focus is on *singers*, noting that folk instrumentalists and their performance settings constitute a different topic and set of practices (see, for example, Benford et al., 2012; Keegan-Phipps, 2013). As the work progressed, I became aware of how broader considerations relating to genre definitions and event environments might impact on performers, leading to additional themes within the research.

The study will include considerations derived from the literatures on genre, listening and other aspects of experiencing of live music. I will then discuss how singers think about and approach different musical environments and their consequent performance strategies. I introduce the idea of an implicit contract between performer and audience and offer some thoughts about the future use or reconstruction of folk music as a genre by different communities.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of nine amateur singers in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. The participants were mostly over retirement age and, in that regard, are typical of the most populous age group in local folk clubs. The age distribution of those attending the clubs is another area in which we lack robust data, but it seems likely that the phenomenon of clubs continuing to retain members who have been part of the scene since the 1960s or 1970s, discussed by MacKinnon (1993, p. 43) 30 years ago, has endured. Some clubs attract younger performers but there may be a trend for such singers to establish their own clubs (Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2015, pp. 36–38; Wilks, 2022).

My participants all perform in places where I myself have performed on a regular basis, although the events described by the research participants include situations with which I am not familiar. Nevertheless, I regard myself as much more of an insider than an outsider in respect of my position in relation to the research field. Similarly, the collection sites of my observational data (The Last Post, Derby; the Black Swan Folk Club, York; the Belper Beer Festival) are settings in which I was involved as a performer, except the latter, in which my role was audience member.

As an independent researcher without institutional affiliation, my approach to ethical permission was limited to written permission being sought for participants’ responses to be quoted; this included permission to use real first names. As the interviews were conducted as far back as March 2021, renewed ethical permission was obtained from participants in August 2023 for the purpose of completing this paper. Interviews were conducted on a lightly structured, guided conversation basis; they were audio recorded and transcribed and analysed manually.

Conceptual considerations 1: Genre

Musical genres can be hard to define. Lena (2012, p. 7), for example, refers to their ‘shifting boundaries’. Finnegan found it difficult to define the limits of the music she witnessed being performed on the folk scene in Milton Keynes:

It varied not only between different groups and clubs, but even at the same clubs on different nights; and it was not fully agreed where the boundaries of ‘folk’ should be drawn (2007, p. 65).

The issues have been highlighted more sharply since efforts have been made to develop machine (i.e., automated) classification of pieces of music by genre. Writing in that field, McKay and Fujinaga provide succinct summaries of the difficulties:

Very few genres have clear definitions, and what information is available is often ambiguous and inconsistent from source to source... Not only are new genres introduced regularly, but the understanding of existing genres can also change (2006, pp. 2–3).

It might be argued that for the amateur folk singer, the understanding of genre boundaries and acceptable repertoire co-exist with two dimensions that have, to different degrees and in different ways, been present throughout the approximately 60 years of the folk club movement: the apparent conflict between traditional and contemporary material referred to above; and the difference between participatory and presentational events and performance styles (Turino, 2008). Furthermore, conventions are established over time that are specific to individual clubs (Hield and Mansfield, 2019), and perceptions of folk music moulded by professional performers and associated media coverage play an important role (Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2015). These long-term influences may amount cumulatively to ‘a deeply inscribed set of aesthetic understandings’ (Bennett, 2015, p. 148).

There are times in the history of musical genres at which various kinds of expertise are claimed or used in the cause of creating or tightening definitions of what a particular type of music is. This might be followed by a process of amendment or challenge, for example, the effort to establish the art music value of jazz alongside the classical canon (Randel, 1992, pp. 14–15), or the attempts by traditionalists or revivalists to codify popular music genres once their period of commercial success has passed (Lena, 2012, pp. 46–52). In England, there have been distinct phases to the attempts to define folk music and its performance styles, including the publication of Cecil Sharp’s *English Folk Songs: Some Conclusions* in 1907 and the club-based ‘policy’ initiatives associated with Ewan MacColl in the late 1950s (discussed critically in Brocken, 2003, chapter 3). Such attempts may have had significant influence, but we might question whether they ever affected the entire range of situations in which folk music was performed. Fabbri (1982, p. 53) stated that the concept of genre might imply ‘that a given community had agreed on a certain set of rules relative to the course of musical events’, but that such rules would only exist abstractly as a ‘manifesto’ and would be activated or amended over time through social and behavioural norms that emerge when the music is performed.

In the current era, sources of authority on genre definitions – if authority can be claimed at all in a diverse landscape – are diffuse and multifarious; one might argue that algorithms associated with music streaming services or online retailers are as significant as anything else. It appears that the mathematical and computer science issues associated with music classification are prompting a considerable body of international research: ‘music classification has turned out to be a study hotspot in recent times’ (Kumaraswamy, 2022, p. 1). It is reasonable to assume that such work would not be undertaken if the practical application of the resulting

techniques was not thought to be influential on the listening public. This in turn is suggestive of the idea that genres are fluid and malleable.

Conceptual considerations 2: Listening and event satisfaction

In this section, the topic of listening types and their possible implications for the reception of traditional songs is considered. It is also noted that issues relating to listening are located within a multifaceted set of features that impact on the holistic experience of live music.

It could be argued that there is a need to listen carefully to the words to fully appreciate folk song, particularly where there is a strong narrative element, as is often the case with the traditional ballad. An audience's willingness or ability to listen in this way will be affected by the event environment, individuals' typical listening strategies and their mood on the night; this is a complex combination confronting the performer hoping to generate helpful assumptions about their listeners.

Lilliestam (2013) reported on primary research that attempted to map and classify such factors, albeit not focused specifically on folk music. He referred to the various ways in which more concentrated listening has been described: e.g., active, attentive, conscious, expert/connoisseur. One of his conclusions might be judged as challenging to our hypothetical performer wondering what repertoire is acceptable:

Music listening is a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon. There are an infinite number of ways of listening, perceiving, and experiencing music. The categorizations in listener types and listener strategies or techniques fail to capture this complexity and often stand out as simplified, superficial, and permeated with values, often outdated (ibid., para. 86).

We might compare this with points from a text concerned specifically with folk music: Slobin (2011, p. 9) stated that 'many people find no problem with listening to songs without understanding the words, just for the pleasure of the music', but he also cited Gruning as follows:

A certain musical simplicity and accessible, thoughtful, understandable lyrics are the most commonly quoted reasons for interest in contemporary folk music (Gruning, 2006, cited in Slobin, 2011, p.58).

In addition to these dimensions, we might add that there is a very wide range of listening situations and uses of music in everyday life (see, for example, DeNora, 2000) – including music as background ambience – and that the use over time of headphones and the likes of the Walkman and the iPod might have changed people's listening styles, ultimately affecting what Slobin termed 'deep cultural patterns of listening' (2011, p. 9).

Past exposure to folk music might be a particularly important issue in creating an orientation to engage positively with the music on future occasions, but this predisposition may be preceded by certain attitudes towards the genre that have been acquired from media sources rather than from engagement with the music. Lilliestam listed some highly pertinent questions:

Have I heard the music before or is it new and unknown to me? Do I have memories and associations to the music that are exclusively mine or are they in some way shared by others in my culture? With which expectations and pre-understandings do I meet and approach the music? (2013, para. 87.)

The issues confronting the performer are not exclusively those connected to the music itself; how the event will play out may be affected by the way in which it is described and advertised, and the physical characteristics of the space, the acoustics, audience comfort, the availability or otherwise of alcohol etc. Such factors may perhaps be more often explicitly acknowledged by those with the greatest financial stake in the success of the event than they are by musicians and audiences, hence the interest in concepts such as ‘attribute satisfaction’ in the hospitality business literature (see, for example, Hausman, 2011); in this approach, an attempt is made to identify and measure every conceivable influence on audience satisfaction. This suggests that relatively few of the satisfaction factors might be under the performer’s control, and therefore singers’ assumptions and strategies become ever more crucial when attempting to answer the question, ‘What can I do to influence a successful reception for my songs?’

Singers’ understandings and assumptions about environments

Amateur singers make a variety of assumptions about the likely reception for folk songs when performed outside the folk club environment. Dave’s interview provided a clear example of the more negative or cautious attitude:

I always equate singing folk songs, whether traditional or not, in a non-folk environment with those street preachers who are foisting their beliefs on you, whether you want them or not, and leaving themselves wide open to ridicule. If I want to listen to a sermon then I will go to church, the same as if I want folk song then I will go to a folk club, festival or concert.

The implicit assumptions about likely reactions to folk music (perhaps especially of the traditional kind) might be based on past experiences (as was the case with Dave), but it might be that such expectations vary according to generation – my participants were all older individuals, and younger performers may have a different set of presumptions. The origins of the relevant expectations and stereotypes are not clear, but there could be a kind of inherited trace of the ‘policy’ debates associated with the MacColl period, although (perhaps unsympathetic) media coverage over the years should not be discounted. The folk entrepreneur Steve Heap noted a more positive attitude emerging slowly in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but contrasted this with earlier experiences:

I’ve been in and out of radio and television studios, media, saying ‘folk music’... And they’ve laughed and giggled, and said, ‘Morris dancers, and silly old men with beards and beer bellies’ (quoted in Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2015, pp. 32–33).

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for singers to participate both in multiple clubs and in acoustic music sessions and open mics in which the receptivity to traditional repertoire cannot be taken for granted. Lyn is a singer and musician who takes part in a variety of events:

I do make a point of throwing in traditional songs – they are usually received politely. [Could you say more about what ‘received politely’ means?]
There is a sort of smile and polite applause... my impression is that the underlying feeling is ‘It’s not really our thing but thank you anyway’. There is also the variation of feedback – the encouraging comment when you perform something which is more in line with their preferences. If you want your performance to be liked, you fit in with the general tone of the event. It’s down to whether you want to be a missionary or just a singer!

Hugh described to me the importance of relationships when, rather reluctantly, he contributed to an open mic session in Nottingham:

I try not to go where I am not wanted – I initially went just to support the organiser because I thought people wouldn't turn up... I felt out of place and if it hadn't been for the particular relationships involved, I wouldn't have done that.

Open mics are likely to feature repertoire closer to popular music rather than to folk and may involve a more presentational style of performance (Behr, 2012, pp. 562–563). Hugh expressed doubts about whether his contributions would be well received:

It's not the kind of thing people want to hear, really... [but] I think that's probably a bit mistaken; actually, if you do it, it can go down reasonably well.

The idea that traditional material might be received more positively than the performer expects was something I heard several times during the conversations I had with local singers. One important issue here is performers' awareness that they carry negative stereotypes about their own repertoire:

Folk singers, like Morris dancers, do tend to get made fun of, and I'm almost ashamed to say this, we can be slightly embarrassed about the label 'folk singers', and while we don't hide it, we don't shout about it. (Geoff)

Sometimes I think it's as much the perception of the singer, thinking 'Should I sing something like that?' I think there is often a perception of 'I'd better not sing it in here, I don't think it would be welcome'... Wherever we've gone, when I've sung a folk song, I'm quite surprised at how well it's gone down, and perhaps that says something – because I'm surprised. (Sue)

Audiences are not always predictable, especially if encountered for the first time: 'You can't judge [the audience] if it's somewhere you've not been before' (Geoff). However, for the duo of Geoff and Kath, there are some standard assumptions that work across most settings, such as the need to include songs with which the audience may be familiar and to mix the humorous and serious: 'I know perfectly well that some people will like the humour and not the serious and vice versa' (Kath).

Such considerations might lead singers to limit the selection of traditional material, which might be performed alongside items from Victorian/Edwardian music hall or more recent popular music repertoire. This is a familiar matter in relation to my own contributions to non-folk club contexts, and such mixed repertoires are, in any case, common to many present-day clubs (Hield and Mansfield, 2019, p. 350). The next section goes into more detail about how repertoire might be matched to events.

Singers' choices and performance strategies

The potential difficulty of knowing what an audience or session participants might like leads to performers developing relevant strategies:

You need to sing songs you feel they might like... The Last Post [a Derby micro-pub] is going to attract people interested in beer, so I'd sing 'John Barleycorn' – 'This one's in praise of beer', that sort of thing. (John L)

John L referred to an example of being in another part of England with his dance side and, in a pub environment, falling foul of not knowing who he was singing to:

I sang this song called ‘[I Wish There Were No] Prisons’, got a feeling it hadn’t gone down very well, and the landlady had to take me on one side and explain that there were three high-security prisons in the area and this was where staff went for a drink when they were off duty.

John L has extensive experience of the post-dancing singaround; Morris dancers and their equivalents in the sword or rapper dance styles often perform outside pubs in the summer months, and it is common, particularly at the last pub visited that day, for singing to take place on the premises when dancing finishes. The question arises as to whether the songs are performed for the benefit of fellow dancers (e.g., when seated in a circle in a corner of the pub) or directed outwards towards other customers. John L averred that he and his fellow dancers were committed to the more outgoing and inclusive approach: ‘We’re anxious to draw people in – we’ll go out of our way to do that rather than just sing to ourselves.’ This is all of a piece with his attitude towards solo performance, in which he sees the issue of audience engagement as crucial to overcoming other barriers:

You don’t want to take the attitude of ‘This is me doing what I want and you can lump it if you don’t like it’... they [need to] get the idea that you are someone who is singing specifically to them.

The issue of singing to other singers rather than to all those present also applies to other sessions that take place in the main body of a pub rather than in a separate room, as is almost always the situation with folk clubs. The session at The Last Post in Derby (a venue that is now closed) had a particular character given the small size of the pub’s single room and the fact that patrons of the pub were used to very frequent live music – in effect, the music was unavoidable – and that many in attendance on those weekend afternoons had come specifically to listen. In other such surroundings, the musicians might be perceived as a nuisance to the other drinkers, or vice versa.

Sue reflected on her experience of singing in a club that moved to a pub in which the back room that accommodated the folk club initially had no doors; this gradually attracted the curiosity of other pub customers:

Once people started edging in, it made me think, ‘Should we be entertaining them?’ Once you’ve got a folk club in an open pub, you’ve got an open mic, or at best an open session; I think to be a folk club it needs to be self-contained. You will get people who won’t perform if it’s too noisy and they know they’ve got a quiet voice.

Sue also perceived there to be a gender difference in terms of performance and receptivity:

I think it’s very different if you’re a woman – in pubs, I can get away with singing a folk song and people say, ‘Oh, listen to that woman singing that pretty song’... if a man gets up and sings a folk song in a pub he might be more likely to be accused of being weird or [have people saying] ‘You haven’t got a beard or sandals on, what are you doing singing folk songs?’ – that kind of thing.

Rob added the thought that ‘one thing that always holds an audience is quality, and that includes traditional song’. A final example from the interviews involves a situation less likely to be

problematic, but which might still require careful choice of repertoire. Here, John B refers to family occasions such as birthdays or wedding anniversaries:

Songs that have been well received are normally from the lighter side of the canon... songs of the locality, humorous songs, well known sea songs/shanties, good old drinking songs and tongue twisters.

In conclusion to this section, it appears that the individual performer filters their performance preferences through a relatively complex pattern of assumptions about and past experiences with audiences, together with the characteristics (where known) of individual events and musical spaces.

Event type and audience: A social contract?

In this section, further dimensions of events are investigated through observation: an example of a folk group playing to the general public and an instance of a specialist folk event renaming itself. These instances, particularly the first, raise the question of what assumptions are ‘built into’ in the event type. In events frequented by a broader general public who are likely to be most familiar with mainstream popular music, there is perhaps a sharper, more problematic question of audience expectations and related demands that might be placed upon performers.

Making observations at the performance of an Irish music band at a local beer festival in July 2022 prompted the idea of a contractual relationship between the organisers, the musicians and also the audience. The Nottinghamshire band Kelly’s Heroes played in the main tent of the beer festival in Belper, Derbyshire, from 7pm on the Saturday night prior to the headline act. Given the timing of the band’s appearance, they were playing to a mixture of people who had been drinking all afternoon and those who were arriving for the evening. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the repertoire played was mainly fast tunes and well-known songs such as ‘Wild Rover’, ‘Dirty Old Town’ and ‘Black Velvet Band’; they succeeded in getting a small number of the audience to dance and a few to sing along. This might be judged as a successful performance, fulfilling the expectations of the organisers and the audience.

A more formal sense of a contract in the beer festival context arises from the fact that the band would have been paid for their performance, but in the amateur context, we might still posit an implicit contract between performer and audience based on assumptions about what musicians *should* play (e.g., based on genre stereotypes) and what audiences are *likely to* appreciate (based on other stereotypes, but also past experiences).

As we have seen above, a crucial factor for performers in making repertoire choices is whether they are performing at a club or other event environment in which they have performed before. The situation is more difficult if the venue or event is new to the performer; there are comparable uncertainties for first-time audience members. Given the plethora of ways in which folk or folk-adjacent evenings accessible to amateurs might be described (singers’ nights, singarounds, acoustic sessions, open mics) – and the fact that the same label might mean different things at different venues – prior information is of significant value. It might be noted here that in many singers’ nights or singaround versions of the folk club evening, most (sometimes virtually all) of those present perform, so the idea of a separate ‘audience’ barely applies, with the event tending thus towards Turino’s participatory type, in contrast to presentational approach associated with open mic events.

An example of the ambiguity of labels – and thus the limited utility of certain types of advance information – is that in 2021 the Black Swan folk club in York changed the description of its amateur singers’ evenings from ‘singers’ night’ to ‘open mic’. It is true that at the time a microphone and amplifier were introduced for those who wanted to use them, but in every other respect, including who attended the evening, nothing changed. One effect of introducing

amplification is that it may make quieter songs (and/or songs sung by people with quiet voices) more audible and accessible to the audience. The amplification might or might not have other effects of ‘permitting’ audiences to talk during performances (usually frowned on in folk clubs – see Hield and Mansfield, 2019, pp. 353–354), although my observations at the Black Swan noted no particular behavioural effects. If the Black Swan’s relabelling had brought in a different audience, some different expectations associated with open mics as opposed to folk clubs might have come into play, but in fact, as with the conduct of the evening, no significant change seems to have occurred.

Another issue that relates to assumptions about musical acceptability is that of instrumental accompaniment. For the general public, it is likely that ‘folk song’ connotes singing with guitar accompaniment; indeed, that same, almost quasi-contractual, equivalence of folk and guitar applies in some clubs. Sue put the matter rather pithily in her interview when she said, ‘You put folk music on now, people expect Ed Sheeran’. For those who prefer to sing traditional song unaccompanied (which includes several of my interview participants, and myself) this is a further aspect that might make singing outside of the most ‘trad-friendly’ clubs intimidating, or something to be avoided altogether.

As Brian observed in an online Traditional Song Forum meeting that discussed my early findings:

Unaccompanied singing in an environment like a pub is a much harder sell than turning up with a guitar or even another instrument. I think people are so unaccustomed to the sound of the unaccompanied voice that you’re quite a brave person if you want to go and do that in a pub. (Traditional Song Forum, 25th April 2021, time mark 27.10–27.28)

My interview data indicated that singers are very aware of the potential mismatch between performer preferences and audience expectations. The assumptions that they make might be seen as subconsciously reflecting the idea of an implicit contract between performer and audience that is specific to each event. For singers whose main performance outlet is a club – meeting perhaps as frequently as weekly – that accepts the performers’ choices (which may have, in turn, been adjusted to club norms over a long period), to step outside into quite different environments is clearly a complex business. It would be understandable if individuals were not motivated to take that step.

Genre and community – new possibilities?

Without empirical research it is difficult to know by what means the current and future audiences for music events are developing their sense of what folk is, and where traditional music sits within that. This might be another complicating factor for our beleaguered performer trying to gauge the likely reaction of audiences, but the lack of authoritative definitions and changing patterns of expectations may have the positive aspect of opening new possibilities for the re-purposing of the music.

Fabrizi (1982, pp. 59–60) has argued that ‘the structure of a musical community is typical of a genre’, but in asking ‘with what purpose do musical communities form?’, a different scenario is implicitly raised: the relationship between music and pre-existing communities. These might include a community that becomes *associated with* a genre; another angle would be to consider the ways in which communities can *use* genre rather than *forming around* genre. One example might be the use of folk music by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament marchers and other political activists in the 1960s (see, for example, Boyes, 2010, pp. 232–234).

Such purposes do not have to be so explicitly political, however; examples might include the use of folk music – perhaps especially traditional music – in museums and heritage centres, such as the Tyneside band Lowp’s involvement in Bede’s World (Lowp, n.d.) and the

initiative by local folk musician Chris Morris to organise events for the Nottingham Industrial Museum (Nottingham Industrial Museum, 2023). In such circumstances, singers circumvent some of the problems of event uncertainty by working with a narrowly defined, not exclusively musical, environment and/or by organising the event themselves. This would not, of course, remove all the uncertainties about what an audience might appreciate, but at least a reasonable assumption that the relevant public would be interested in the museum's exhibits and activities (and related historical events) could be made. The duration of such relationships and the frequency of performances would determine whether a type of community builds around such initiatives.

We might also note here that following Roud's (2017, p. 4) precept that 'understanding the social context of traditional singing is key to understanding its nature', folk song has always had a purpose, whether that be relaxation and entertainment, celebration of community events, commemoration of historical phenomena or other motivation. If the social contexts change, it is likely that new purposes may be involved, as with the politicisation of folk in the era of Ewan MacColl alluded to above.

Prominent (and more obviously political) strands in contemporary folk include the engagement with traditional folk by feminist and LGBTQ+ communities (see, for example, Wright, 2021; Folk Radio UK, 2022; Queer Folk, 2023). These are examples of individuals and communities engaging in a constructively critical way with traditional material and practices without necessarily being constrained by past attempts to define genre. Such community-generated initiatives might be a positive pathway for the future of folk music, in the same way that the clubs were a new channel for the music from the late 1950s onwards. The fact that in these contexts there is some collective debate about repertoire makes the consideration of song choices something more than the personal choice of the individual performer. In these emerging environments, questions about what to sing in which setting are likely to apply rather differently and might constitute new research subject matter in the future.

Conclusion

For those singers who prefer their performances to be exposed only to the known territory of folk clubs and similar specialist events, there might be little incentive to explore other possibilities. This will be even more the case – and entirely rational – if such 'outside' singing has met with indifference or ridicule. There seems to be a mixed record, from my small sample, in terms of the reaction to presenting traditional music in broader live music environments, albeit with a proportion of 'it went better than I expected' responses. The folk clubs themselves might, by now, be deemed a tradition in their own right, with rules that are not derived intrinsically from the music performed therein, even if such rules might have emerged from thoughtful consideration of how best to present the music and ensure participation. Such cumulatively generated norms have the advantage of making it easier for assumptions to be made about individual clubs once there is some familiarity with or information about them. This contrasts to the challenges posed when a singer is trying to make assumptions about a less familiar setting.

Singers who perform in a wider selection of settings deploy various strategies to maximise the chances of a good reception, including tailoring their repertoire choices (e.g., selecting songs related to the local context, balancing humour and seriousness) and thinking about how to engage audiences. These strategies are, however, limited by the degree of prior experience or knowledge of the event at which they are singing. This article has indicated that a wide range of factors impinge on events and audience expectations and experiences. It might never be the case that performers will know all they would wish to know about the likely reaction to their music. In recognising the complexity, drawing on different bodies of literature,

it may, nevertheless, be possible to help performers identify what they can and cannot control and thus be able to focus their preparatory efforts appropriately.

While the uncertainty about folk as a genre and what it means to varied and unpredictable audiences can be viewed as a difficulty for performers, it might, by contrast, be an opportunity for individuals and groups to reconstitute folk music for contemporary contexts and community purposes, unconstrained by the conventions established by previous generations. These might be seen constituting forms of bottom-up enterprise in comparison to the top-down influence of, for example, music streaming algorithms. Whatever the future course of such developments, the diversity and shapeshifting of modern music scenes may be taken to imply that the performers of the future will need to have a flexible mindset and be ready to ‘step outside’ their familiar environments.

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