What Are People Singing in Folk Song Clubs? – Reflections on songs sung in two East Midlands folk clubs 2017-2023

Hugh Miller[1]

The debate, running over more than 100 years, about the nature, definition, origins and status of that music which has been perceived as 'folk music' or 'folk song' has been wide-ranging (Sharp, 1907; Lloyd, 1967; Harker, 1985; Boyes, 2010; Roud, 2017). Ideas about folk song range from describing it as a form that has evolved through oral transmission, variation, and selection through to its being seen as a bourgeois construction which simultaneously exploits and disdains the culture of the working classes.

This reflection is not directly concerned with that debate, but takes a different and more simplistic approach to understanding folk song repertoire. It considers my experience of the nature of the music which is actually being performed in a section of the current British folk music movement. I am influenced by Lucy Wright's (2019) description of 'folk' processes: '[Folk] is what can happen when people, alone, or together, and regardless of anything, engage in cultural practices they create for themselves' (p. 1).

I would argue that singing in folk clubs is more of a 'folk activity' in Wright's sense than recording CDs, streaming, professional concerts, or festivals, that is, the other main elements of the contemporary UK folk scene. The folk club, developed during the 1950s and 60s folk revival, is today a minor, and possibly a terminally declining part, of the whole folk music scene in Britain. However, the folk club remains an important activity to those taking part, and one in which most participants are active music-makers. Therefore, I decided to investigate what songs are sung in two of my local folk clubs. Looking at repertoire is a simple and established approach to the study of folk song, but here it has the advantage of being grounded in contemporary lived experience rather than looking at recorded or transcribed historical song collections.

I gathered the titles of songs performed by the floor singers in two East Midlands folk clubs over 67 song sessions between 2017 and 2023. The songs were identified and roughly categorised as to source and date of origin to give a picture of what actively-produced folk music consists of in the lives of practitioners in the early 21st century.

The Method and Material

The project originally started with my idle curiosity to try to quantify how much of the material being performed could be described as 'folk song' in the sense that important revival figures of the past, like Cecil Sharp or A L Lloyd, would recognise it. I noted all the songs from six sessions of my most local club (Club B) in early 2020. The results from that were interesting, so I decided to extend the study. I knew there were records from another local club (Club A), where Paul Mansfield (2018) had made thorough observations in 2017, and where one of the club organisers had routinely noted singers and song titles for all the sessions that he attended for some years. Mansfield and the club organiser generously gave me access to those records (for four years, from 2018 to 2022, in the case of the club records), and I supplemented those

[1] Hugh Miller has been singing in local folk clubs for 60 years, on and off. He is an independent researcher after a career of teaching psychology and social sciences in design at Nottingham Trent University.

by noting a further seven sessions from Club A in late 2022 and early 2023. This gave me a total of nearly 1650 song performances.

The Clubs and Singers

Both clubs meet weekly for singarounds, with a guest night featuring a professional act usually once a month. The number of attendees at both clubs is variable, but generally between 10 and 30. Both have a high proportion of singers among the attendees. Often more than 80% of the attendees at Club A will perform during a singaround. Club B usually has more attendees than Club A, but a slightly smaller proportion of lead singers, so the number of performers per session is similar between the two clubs – 10-15 or so, with most singers performing two songs each during the evening. The number of songs noted for each session is between 20 and 30. The repertoires of the professional guest singers are not considered here, but club singers' songs performed in the breaks on guest nights were noted. My intention was to capture a picture of those songs that club singers wanted to sing for their own pleasure and satisfaction, and for the pleasure and satisfaction of the small local community of the club. As Hield and Mansfield (2019) have pointed out, it is not the case that 'anything goes' on the folk club scene, but both these clubs do have a relaxed attitude to repertoire, and a wide range of music is performed, as will be seen below.

The singers are predominantly male. Only around 20-25% are women. Singers are generally of retirement age, and most (but by no means all) have worked in white-collar occupations. Any visitor under 30 is viewed with surprise and given a possibly intimidating level of welcome and support. The level of experience and competence across performers is very varied. Some have been doing this kind of activity since the folk club boom of the 1960s and 70s, many becoming skilled and captivating musicians whereas others have only just started. In both clubs, all performances, even those which are technically poor or break down midway, are listened to with respect and given applause.

The organisers of Club A kept a record of singers' names as well as the names of the songs. The song records from Club B were anonymised and the following personnel breakdown only concerns Club A. The record from Club A is imperfect because not all the singers were well known to the organisers and identifications were sometimes vague. However, over sessions between March 2018 and June 2022 (with a gap from March 2020 to October 2021 due to the Covid19 pandemic) 105 named performers were recorded. 18 core Club A members were present at more than 30 sessions each, with a further 11 fairly frequent attenders at between 11 and 30 sessions. 25 occasional singers appeared at between three and 10 sessions – with 51 other names appearing in the records either once or twice. This last 51 may still be an overestimate as there could be some confusion between these and the occasional singers in the records.

It is striking that such a large number of people engaged with Club A over five years, and despite the perceived stability of the community, around half the people performing at the club over this period seem to have been transient. There are several other folk clubs in the wider area, each with a collection of regulars, and some of the infrequent visitors are likely those dropping-in occasionally from other clubs who may have done so over many years.

I am clear that these two clubs are not a representative sample of all folk clubs across the country. Although the two clubs are close to each other and there is some overlap of performers between the clubs, the repertoires and atmospheres differ. Other clubs throughout the country will differ again. I do think, though, that it is worth looking at this snapshot of the material that many amateur musicians choose to perform in these settings.

The Repertoire

There were three sessions at Club A where song names were noted by Mansfield during 2017, and 52 sessions from the same club noted in whole or part by the organiser between 2018 and 2022 (online sessions during the pandemic excluded). I noted songs from 6 sessions at Club B in 2018, and from 7 sessions in late 2022-early 2023. This gave a total of 67 sessions, with the majority of records, 1252 performances, at Club A and 397 at Club B, a total of 1649 song performances.

There were some problems in identifying and categorising songs from the records available. Some performers give their preferred names of their songs, some do not, and those recording song names didn't always themselves know the songs. There were quite a few records which included distinctive lines from the song, rather than any official song title. It was usually possible to trace a title from these clues, but not always. Sometimes, the title noted is ambiguous as several songs, of different styles and eras, may share the same title. 81 songs, just under 5% of the combined material, were therefore noted as 'unclassified'. These songs don't appear in the following analysis, which is based on the remaining 1568 performances.

For my analysis, I wanted to categorise songs by date and source of origin. With a large and very diverse collection of songs, this was not a straightforward exercise. I relied heavily on community supported resources (i.e. Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, n.d), Mudcat (Mudcat Café Music Foundation, n.d), and the Folk Song and Music Hall (Baxter, n.d), and Mainly Norfolk (Zierke, n.d) websites, in particular) and managed to produce dates and origins for most songs. Although I am confident most will be correct, there will likely be some errors in these resources. Even rigorous academic sources regularly argue about composers or origins of songs.

I categorised those songs which are known to have been collected from source singers — that is, individuals whose repertoires where recorded or transcribed, either in the first folk song collecting boom or more recently — as 'traditional'. I've also included as 'traditional' some source singer material which comes from well-known nineteenth or early twentieth century commercial sources, but has passed into general usage, for example: *Take the News to Mother* (Charles Harris) and *Grandfather's Clock* (Henry Clay Work).

There were a small number of songs which dated from the nineteenth century or earlier, but had distinct 'non-folk' origins, including madrigals, and songs from sources like d'Urfey's *Pills To Purge Melancholy* or Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. I classed these as 'old composed'.

I categorised songs with identifiable authorship from 1900 or later as 'modern commercial' songs. This includes 'folk' composers of the later twentieth century – for example, Woody Guthrie, Ewan MacColl, Tom Paxton, Richard Thompson. I dated songs from when they were first published or appeared on record (or film in some cases).

I am aware that many of the nineteenth century 'traditional' songs also have commercial or literary origins, and may not be fundamentally different from modern compositions. However, I think it's reasonable to make a distinction between older and new material, as this would be meaningful to most of the club performers, and similar distinctions are made in many song books and record sleeve notes used by contemporary folk singers.

All songs from 'non-traditional' sources which could be dated to 1900 or later I grouped in 20-year categories: 1900-1919, 1920-1939, etc. Self-written songs, of which there were quite a few, I arbitrarily classed as being from 2010 (although they might have been composed at a later or earlier date).

Figure 1 expresses the distribution of performed material in terms of numerical frequency (bars) and as percentages of the total sample.

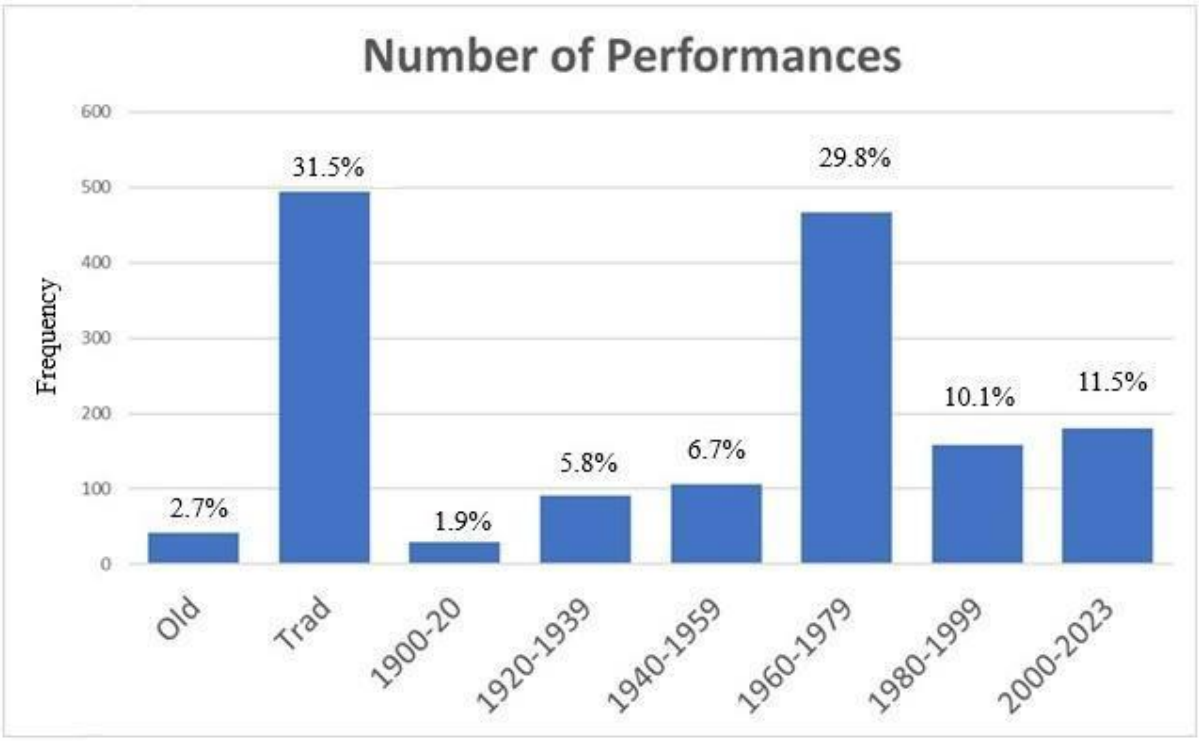

Figure 1: Date classifications of performed repertory by frequency of performance.

One could argue that this distribution shows that these *are* indeed 'folk' clubs, as the largest single category is 'traditional'. But composed songs from the whole of the twentieth century taken together are more common still, and songs from the 1960s and 70s are the second largest category. The majority of those, but not all, are singer-songwriter 'folk' songs in the style of Dylan, Paxton and others. However, the overall impression is that what people choose to sing in those folk clubs is a wide variety of kinds of music from a very wide range of periods. The songs are almost all anglophone, but not necessarily English. There were songs from many American sources, as well as Scottish, Irish and Australian.

A general judgement could be that these, mostly elderly, performers are mainly performing material which was popular in their youth – which explains the peak from the 1960s and 70s. The 'reminiscence bump' effect, whereby older people remember more of their lives between age 10 and 30 than other periods (Rubin, Wetzler & Nebes, 1986), is well known in the psychology of memory, and most people have an affinity with the music of their youth. But these performers are also willing to pick up on, and adapt, some more recent material – and to write their own songs.

The Sources

The most popular sources, composers and songwriters in the material were:

Self-Written (several authors)	72 performances
Bob Dylan	37
Tom Paxton	35
Beatles	29
Ralph McTell	21
Richard Thompson	20
Paul Simon/Simon & Garfunkel	17

Other well-known song writers credited for songs performed 10 to 14 times each include: John Denver, The Carter Family, John Tams, Bert Jansch, Linda Thompson, Pete Seeger, and Stan Rogers.

The song sources featured in the material are wide ranging both in style and era. I already noted that The Beatles featured strongly, but many other popular artists and groups were also represented, including: The Kinks, Coldplay, Fleetwood Mac, Leo Sayer, Alison Moyet, Jimi Hendrix, Bobby McFerrin, Mandolin Orange, Mungo Jerry, Barenaked Ladies, Half Man Half Biscuit, Dropkick Murphys, Bono/U2, and Sting. The material also included songs by composers and songwriters such as Tim Rice, Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Edward Elgar, George & Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Stephen Sondheim.

To get a visual sense for the variety of sources, I generated a word cloud from the combined material (see Figure 2). The size of text in the word cloud is roughly proportional to the popularity of the source. "Traditional" and "own song" are among the largest with a huge number of other sources also listed in the image.

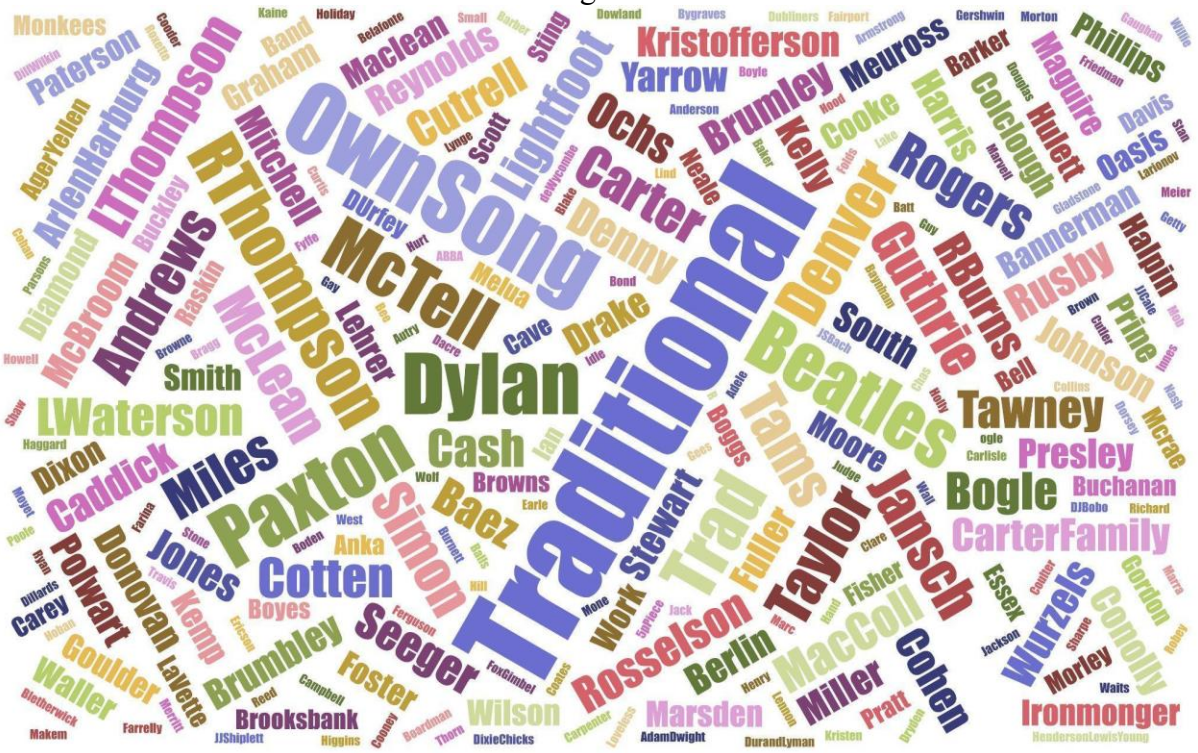

Figure 2: Wordcloud showing credited artists/origins of songs magnified by frequency of performance. Generated at jasondavies.com/wordcloud.

Around the edges, and perhaps difficult to read, are lots of composer/songwriter teams: Arlen/Harburg (*Over the Rainbow*); Ager/Yellen (*Ain't She Sweet*), Dubin/Warren (*Keep Young And Beautiful*), Rogers/Hart (*Blue Moon*), Leiber/Stoller (lots of Elvis Presley's songs), and Goffin/King (*Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*). These largely represent Tin Pan Alley and Brill Building-style material, along with hit songs from musicals like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (Rice/Webber).

The high proportion of own or self-written songs is different from that noted by Hield (2010) in her research in Sheffield folk clubs. If anything, this confirms the variety of people and clubs that make up the folk club scene, and we shouldn't treat these two East Midlands clubs alone as representative examples.

The Songs
The six most popular songs, performed 7-8 times each, were:

Midnight Special (Traditional)
Rose of Allendale (Traditional)
Last Thing on My Mind (Tom Paxton)
Rolling Home (John Tams)
Leaving of Liverpool (Traditional)
I'll Fly Away (Traditional/Albert E. Brumley)

These songs might have appeared frequently because several people sang them independently, or because a frequent performer sang them repeatedly. Since some of the data was anonymised, it's not possible to be definite about which of those it was. From my experience in both clubs, I can say that *Midnight Special*, *Rose of Allendale*, and *Rolling Home* were personal favourites of core performers (two performers in the case of *Rolling Home*), while *Last Thing on My Mind* and *I'll Fly Away* were popular with several singers.

I believe that most of these songs are popular because they are good rousing chorus songs to round the evening off. I suspect that some may also speak to life experiences of the largely male and older group of performers. For example, *Last Thing on My Mind* is a gently rueful song about a failed love affair – something that old men think about a fair deal. Another song in a similar style, Bob Dylan's *Don't Think Twice, It's Alright,* was just outside the top 6 songs.

A selection of other popular modern songs in the material includes: *Everything Stops For Tea* (Goodhart/Hofmann/Siegler), *Paloma Blanca* (Bouwens), *I'm Henry the Eighth* (Murray/Weston), *Tiptoe Through The Tulips* (Dubin/Burke), *Paperback Writer* (Lennon/McCartney), *Bring Your Sweet Loving* (Cooke), *It Was a Very Good Year* (Drake), and *When a Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square* (Maschwitz/Sherwin).

Even though some songs and sources might seem to crop up endlessly they really represent a small proportion of this very large body of performances. Indeed, the most striking thing about the records, after the preponderance of songs from the 1960s and 70s, is the great variety of songs and sources that singers draw on for their performances.

Conclusion
Overall, the music performed in these folk clubs is drawn from much wider sources than the folk tradition as defined by the Victorian and Edwardian collectors, or by the late twentieth-century folk-song revival. The impression I have is that although there is a canon of traditional sources that people use, the singers that frequent these clubs prefer to sing a much wider range of material than that. So, what does this mean for the folk club repertoire?
I argue that any song is a *candidate* for becoming 'folk club music' if it:

- has interesting and meaningful words;
- has a tune the performer likes;
- is capable of being performed with a simple, or no, accompaniment;
- can be performed by someone without specialised or professional skills.

Just being performed in a folk club doesn't make a song a 'folk song' nor does it mean that it will become a 'folk song' in the long run. Regardless of a song's background it is necessary for the performers to take the song and adapt it to their ends to make it folk club music. I think it would be better to call this material vernacular music rather than folk music. Singers sometimes do say 'I'm not sure if this is the right kind of thing to do here…' but then bash on and do it anyway, and it should be clear by now that there is quite a large latitude of

acceptability in these two clubs. I got the impression that 'folk-ish' versions of unlikely material in particular are welcomed in both clubs, on the basis of the creativity they show and the novelty they provide. Those people who enjoy music and want to perform in these settings are prepared to appropriate and adapt a very wide range of music for their own purposes. And, it turns out, perhaps unfortunately, that most things can be arranged for a simple strummed ukelele accompaniment.

Thirty years before I began thinking about the repertoires in folk clubs and folk song as vernacular music, Niall MacKinnon conducted extensive research on activities in British folk clubs. In his 1993 book *The British Folk Scene* he says:

> The insertion of certain **vernacular** values into the modern British folk revival is as important as the content of the song texts and melodies. **It is the mode of their production we that we should look at** and is the reason why I have deliberately moved away from a **concentration on textual analysis which bedevils so much literary and musical analysis**. (p. 68, my emphasis)

So, MacKinnon was way ahead of me, and many of my ideas here are not original, but it is encouraging that MacKinnon came to his conclusions by concentrating on the structure and organisation of the folk club scene, while I started, 30 years later, at the other end, with the outputs of a limited part of the system (the repertoire), and we converged on similar judgements. I would say that the music of the modern singaround folk club is produced, selected and developed in much the same way as the music produced by other non-professional groups, performing informally for themselves and each other, in the last century and before. As Lucy Wright (2019, p. 1) suggests, it is 'what can happen when people, alone, or together, and regardless of anything, engage in cultural practices they create for themselves'.

Acknowledgments
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