



Norma Waterson: English Folk Singing

Becoming a folk singer

NORMA WATERSON:

Well I was born in Hull, which was a fishing town, big big fishing town, it was the number 3 whaling port when whaling was, you know, acceptable. And I was brought up by my grandmother because my mum and dad had died early, I think my mum... I was seven when my mum died and nine when my dad died and our uncles and aunties all wanted to separate us. But my grandma said no, they've lost their mum and dad so I'll bring them up together.

So, she was a Victorian lady and my grandma absolutely loved music, she loved everything, there was nothing that we weren't allowed to listen to... and all the family... I'm very fortunate in this that all the family in either sang or played some kind of instrument.

It didn't have to be fancy instruments, I mean we had an uncle who played the one-string fiddle and I had an uncle who also played the musical saw. And if they didn't play anything they would stepdance and do things like that.

So I was brought up in this extended family and during the War it was mostly by women because all the men had gone off to war so I was brought up in a household of my grandmother and all her cronies and my aunt and all the aunties. They all lived together in one house, there were about fourteen or fifteen of us lived together, my grandmother, she liked her tribe around her. I mean they all had houses but she wanted them all with her.

And so I was brought up that every birthday, Christmas, New Year, Halloween, all the celebrations of the year, whether it was Christian or pagan, we celebrated by having a party and a singsong. And my grandmother loved the music hall. And she sang parlour ballads and things like that – "If I were a Blackbird" and she also loved music hall songs

In 1957 I came down to London, it was the first time I had ever been down to London and came down with a then boyfriend who then became my then husband. He was very interested in jazz and we went to Ken Collier's jazz club and in the interval an old lady and an old man got up and started singing. She started singing and he played the fiddle and that lady was Margaret Barry, that wonderful gypsy singer from Ireland and that was it. I won't say I was lost in that I would say I was found in that. She had a voice like my grandmother for a start so it was very very, you know, it wasn't foreign to me, it was very, I knew what that was about.

She also sounded like a lot of the women in the pubs, you know when I was a girl, there was always a piano in the pubs, pubs weren't like they are now. There was always a piano and some couple of women would get up and starting singing 'Daisy daisy' or whatever. And they had the most strident voices, wonderful voices: which has all been bred out of them now because you if you want to sing pop music now you have to sing with an American accent. You can't sing with your own accent because it's not done. I remember when my record, the Mercury record... I remember Tony Parsons being interviewed about it and them saying did he like it and he said oh yes the record's fine "but she's got a folky voice". Now the voice I've got, it's me own voice, I don't put on any accent, it's what I sing with. So what he was saying then was that you can't be successful if you sing in your own voice, you've got to put another voice on.

Well, I'm 67, it's an old voice. But, usually you'll find that the singer will start off learning the song and by the time 30 or 40 years have gone by, she's into the song or he's into the song and can see all the different things that could be in that song. I have one or two songs I've been singing all my life and suddenly when you're singing them you see another thing, you see something else. It's like watching a really good film and you want to see it again and

immediately when you see it again you say "ooh I didn't remember that bit that time", you know you see all the little extra bits.

We don't ever arrange anything really. We learn a song that we like or find a song that we like and we use all sorts of sources, what we use as manuscripts, we come here into Cecil Sharp House, use the library, all sorts of sources but if I then learn a song out of a book what I do then is I go to the traditional singers and see how they've done it before I would ever even think of singing it myself.

But the Watersons, we learnt a song and then we sat down and we sang it until we knew it and until we had a nice harmony which might change the next night but we'd got the basis of it inside. And we would just sit and sing until we were satisfied with it but we never did arrange anything.